



"Mauritania"

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Located in northwestern Africa, Mauritania is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean on the west, with Senegal to the southwest, Mali to the east and southeast, Algeria to the northeast, and the Moroccan-annexed territory of Western Sahara to the northwest. Since 1904, when France recognized it as an entity separate from Senegal, it was managed as a French protectorate, and later became a civil territory. In January 1921 the name was further changed to the Colony of Mauritania under the leadership of French lieutenant-governors. During the era of decolonization, the country became fully independent as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in 1960.

The enslavement of black Africans has existed in Mauritania since the 12th century during the Islamization of the country. The black population, mostly sedentary farmers from the Tukulor, Fulani, and Wolof tribes were brought north after being captured by raiding Arab-Berber tribes. This slaving activity both predates and postdates the Atlantic slave trade.

Mauritania was the last country on earth to abolish slavery. In 1905, a French decree forbade slavery even if the colonial authorities tolerated the slaveholding within the Moorish community. Under the nation's first constitution in 1960, a second abolition law was passed, but it, too, had little effect. A third abolition came in 1981, following a protest against the public sale of a woman, and made this practice illegal, but like the previous abolition decrees, the last one has never been applied, because the release of slaves was made conditional to the payment of compensation to the slave owners. Thus, the institution of slavery continues today unabated, especially in the rural areas, and is deeply embedded in Mauritanian society.

The complex interconnection between social class and ethnic divisions in Mauritanian society constitutes an obstacle to the eradication of slavery. In the Hassaniya Arabic-speaking communities, the white Moors, known as Beydanes, hold the political power, while the black Moors, because they have previously had servile status (Haratines) are still victims of their condition or maintained in slavery ('abd). The non-Hassaniya-speaking peoples, comprised of different black communities, the Soninké, the Wolof, the Bambara or the Halpulaar, are socially graded in groups of nobles, casts and slaves. In the Beydane and the Afro-Mauritanian communities, nobles or members of the craftsman cast are permitted to possess slaves. In its traditional form, the slaves are frequently offered as wedding presents and transmitted from generation to generation. They do not have the right to marry without permission, and any refusal to obey their masters' commands can result in tortures. In the other more modern form, the slaves carry out domestic work without being paid.

The *El Hor* movement, founded in 1978, agitated for the emancipation of the Haratines. President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla's government tried to tackle the problem, by allowing the visit of Marc Bossuyt, an expert from the UN *Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities* in January 1984. But the December 1984 coup d'état set up the Ould Taya's regime, with a more ambiguous position on the slavery issue. By appointing some members of the Haratine community in its government and by creating in July 1998 the Commission on Human Rights, Poverty Alleviation, and Inclusion, Taya's regime wanted to demonstrate its attempt to tackle what it called the "aftereffects of slavery". Despite this apparent posturing, the Commission had never followed up on any cases of slavery brought to its attention.

Many human rights organizations, forbidden by the government, have shed light on the persistence of this practice in the entire Mauritanian society and the discrimination that persists against the descendants of the former slaves.

The Mauritanian parliament enacted a law in 2003 against the trade of persons and organs, but it did not mention slavery.

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“See also”: ‘Abd; SOS Esclaves (Mauritania), Action pour le Changement, Hassaniya-Berbers.

Further Reading:

Cotton, Samuel, *Silent Terror: A Journey into Contemporary African Slavery*, New-York: Harlem River Press, 1998.

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Ould Maouloud, Mohammed and Bä, Boubakar. «L'esclavage en Mauritanie : mythes ou réalité », *Revue Société africaine et diaspora*, n° 11, L'Harmattan, 1999.

El-Arby Ould Saleck, *Les Haratins : le paysage politique mauritanien*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003.