

Font Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

The New York Review of Books

The Last Slaves in Mauritania

Alexander Stille

NOVEMBER 23, 2017 ISSUE

Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie [Preaching in the Desert: Political Islam and Social Change in Mauritania]

by Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem

Paris: Karthala, 327 pp., €28.00

You can both see the desert and feel its presence in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, which goes months at a time without rain. Although it is a city of one million people, rivulets of sand collect along the main paved thoroughfares of the city center, in front of a handful of government buildings and small hotels. The backstreets and peripheral neighborhoods are a mix of dirt and sand. Chickens, donkeys, and goats wander the streets as if their owners had recently packed up and moved in from the countryside, which, in fact, they often have. Barely five thousand people lived in Nouakchott when Mauritania was granted its independence from France in 1960, some 70 percent of whom were nomadic pastoralists, and more than 90 percent lived in rural areas. A fierce drought during the 1970s drove most of the desert nomads toward the cities. Now more than a quarter of the country's nearly four million inhabitants live in Nouakchott and 60 percent of the country's population is urban.



Luca Catalano Gonzaga/Witness Image

Noura, an elderly *haratin* woman in front of her house in the village of Tejala, Mauritania, 2013

The place has a recent, improvised feel: there is no older, distinctive architecture; the streets are long stretches of mostly single-story cement and concrete buildings, like the strip malls at the edge of many American cities in the Southwest. Many people in Nouakchott still have strong ties to their original villages and return during the rainy season. The city's residents—whether rich or poor—generally wear traditional Mauritanian dress. The men sometimes wear Western-style clothing but often prefer flowing blue and white robes, called *boubous*, over baggy pants, with their heads wrapped in cloth, an outfit that manages to be both elegant and well suited to the desert climate. The women almost always dress in long, light, loose-fitting fabrics, known as *mulafa*, which wrap around their bodies and cover their heads, in deference to Islamic custom. Unlike the dull gray and black garments common in the Gulf States, the Mauritanian *mulafa* are often brightly colored and allow women to move freely on the streets.

The one thing most people know about Mauritania—if they know anything at all—is that it was the last country on earth to abolish slavery, in 1981. Slavery was not actually made a crime until 2007, suggesting that it was still widely practiced, and it persists on a clandestine basis although it is believed to involve a very small percentage of the population. Less well known is that in the same year that Mauritania declared its intention to abolish slavery (encoded in law the following year), it also announced that it would become a sharia nation, making Koranic precepts the law of the land.

These parallel developments—the push against the slave system on the one hand and the rapid Islamification of Mauritanian public and political life on the other—are at the center of an excellent recent book, *Prêcher dans le désert* (*Preaching in the Desert*), by the Mauritanian political scientist Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem. He is himself a product of the changes Mauritania has undergone since its independence from colonial rule. For the past fifteen years Salem has had a professorship at the University of Nouakchott, the country's first university, which was created in 1980.

Salem's book opens with an incendiary scene in which these two developments collide. On April 27, 2012, the prominent political figure Biram Dah Abeid held a demonstration near his local mosque and, before a stunned crowd of followers, burned a set of Islamic religious-legal texts that had been used for centuries to justify slavery in Mauritania. Abeid fully intended to challenge and provoke Mauritania's religious and political authorities. Quite predictably, he was arrested the next day and crowds of demonstrators demanded that he be put to death for blasphemy, a serious crime under Islamic religious law.

The book burning produced an intense debate among religious scholars about the status of slavery in Islam and inspired counterdemonstrations by former slaves who supported Abeid. After a few months in prison, he was released. This auto-da-fé, in Salem's view, reflects not only the bold self-confidence of a new generation of abolitionist leaders but also the degree to which social conflicts in Mauritania tend to invoke the language of religion. "It is extremely significant," Salem told me at his house in Nouakchott, "that Biram carried out his book burning after Friday prayers and with the blessing of an imam."

Near the beginning of his book Salem tells the story of a former French colonial official who, during the transition to independence, suggested to his Mauritanian colleagues that they might want to build a mosque in the newly created capital of Nouakchott. His interlocutors dismissed the idea: "We don't need a roof over our heads to pray to God," they responded. Mauritania is almost entirely Muslim and was initially created as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, but the nature of worship in the country has evolved. In predominantly nomadic Mauritania, people generally worshiped in their own tents; religion was largely a private matter. Today, according to Salem, there are 7,643 prayer sites in Mauritania, including 1,834 large mosques. Many of these were created with help from benefactors from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, which have also had a leading part in religious education in Mauritania. And so in recent decades Mauritanian Islam has grown stricter, even as the country has become more urban and connected to the rest of the Arab world.

The persistence of pockets of clandestine slavery in Mauritania tempts outside observers to see the country as stuck in a remote past. But little is archaic about the problems Mauritania faces now: struggles for power and control of resources; income inequality; systemic discrimination; tension between authoritarian control and demands for popular participation; negotiations between identities of race, religion, language, and ethnicity. And while the idea of widespread socially sanctioned slavery in the twenty-first century—as opposed to criminal human trafficking—may seem shocking, it is useful to remember that Jim Crow was alive and well in the United States in 1960, when Mauritania gained its independence.

Located below Morocco and above Senegal, along the Atlantic Ocean, Mauritania shares a long border in its interior desert with Mali, Algeria, and Western Sahara. A little under a third of its population is made up of Arab-Berber people known as *beydane* (whites), who came down from the north and captured large numbers of dark-skinned people from sub-Saharan Africa. Thus there is a racial component to Mauritanian slavery, although it is a complicated one: after centuries of intermarriage and concubinage, some *haratin*—as former slaves are called—are lighter-skinned than their former masters. Slavery was also practiced by the dark-skinned sub-Saharan groups who live in southern Mauritania along the Senegal River. Moreover, the *haratin*, having lived among the *beydane* for centuries, have much in common with them: they speak the same Mauritanian version of Arabic called Hassaniya, while most of the Afro-Mauritanians of the south speak Wolof, Pulaar, and Soninke, languages also spoken in neighboring Senegal and Mali. Some refer to the *haratin* as "black Moors." These racial, linguistic, and cultural complications have been obstacles for the antislavery movement. When Mauritania and Senegal fought a war between 1989 and 1990, *haratin* troops were sometimes used against Afro-Mauritanians, who

suffered purges, deportations, and land confiscation.

Slavery had an important place in Mauritania's nomadic rural life. Slaves generally lived on close terms with their masters, often as virtual members of the family. Some were treated kindly, some with cruelty, but they were always in a position of inferiority, doing most of the hard labor, herding goats, tending crops, and performing domestic service. The system was sanctioned by religious authorities and reinforced by a pervasive caste system. At the top were the *marabouts*—the religious caste, a bit like the Brahmin in Hinduism—and the *guerriers*, the warrior caste, both consisting of major slave owners who considered manual labor dishonorable. Below these were castes often linked to specific professions, such as the *griots* (musicians and entertainers), and artisans such as the *forgerons* (metal workers). Near the bottom of the totem pole were the *haratin*, former slaves who had been granted their freedom, and below them, at the very bottom, the slaves.

It was—and to some degree still is—a form of slavery without chains, reinforced by every class of society. When I visited Biram Dah Abeid this past May, I also interviewed three young, recently liberated slaves, none of them more than twenty-five years old. They all explained that the fiercest resistance they encountered when they began to push for their freedom came from their own families. Having a family member leave his or her master and go to the authorities was seen as a betrayal, a social disgrace that would harm the rest of the family and possibly damn the former slave's soul to hell. "If you leave you will no longer be my son," one boy says his mother told him.

The slave system began to come apart when a severe drought in the late 1960s pushed most of the country's people from the desert into the cities, much as Jim Crow began to weaken when the cotton industry collapsed in the first decades of the twentieth century and black former sharecroppers moved to cities of the South and the industrial cities of the North. During the drought, which lasted between 1968 and 1974, slave owners began killing their livestock and were no longer able to feed their large extended families, particularly their slaves. About 100,000 people died of famine in the Sahel region—the strip of land that stretches between the Sahara desert and sub-Saharan Africa. Arab nomads went to the city in search of new opportunities and many slaves were left to fend for themselves. Some became wage laborers in the country's iron mines, which replaced livestock as the country's chief industry. Others joined the military or did odd jobs in the growing cities. Many searched for their former masters in order to get them to sign their freedom papers, which would allow them to qualify for certain jobs or educational opportunities. In a matter of about two decades, Mauritania transformed from a country in which two thirds of the population was nomadic to one, in 1988, in which only 12 percent was.

The pioneers of Mauritania's antislavery movement belonged to a small *haratin* elite. They had been educated in French colonial schools that still taught the Republican dogma of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. One of the movement's most important figures is Boubacar Messaoud, the seventy-two-year-old founder and president of an abolitionist group called SOS Esclaves who was born into slavery in 1945. "I ended up in school almost by chance," Messaoud told me in his home in Nouakchott. (An architect, he designed his house and the surrounding neighborhood himself.) "I happened to be coming in from the fields when I saw a crowd of kids heading toward school. I wanted to go too." He later won scholarships to study architecture in both Mali and the Soviet Union. Messaoud was a member of a small group of slaves or former slaves that got a leg up from the French schooling system. "Many of the Arab-Berbers," he said, "didn't want to send their children to the French schools," fearing they would subject students to religious conversion and cultural and



Julien Behal/Press Association/AP Images

Biram Dah Abeid, president of the abolitionist organization IRA-Mauritania, receiving a human rights award in Dublin, May 2013

linguistic colonization, and so “some of them would send their slave children instead” to create the appearance of cooperation with colonial authorities.

The colonial French administration had an ambiguous, contradictory attitude toward slavery. Officially, France abolished slavery at home and in its colonies in 1848. But it took a more hands-off approach in Mauritania, which it had not really colonized until the early twentieth century; even then, it ruled at a remove, from nearby Senegal. In Mauritania it adopted a policy of “indirect rule,” not wanting to anger the Arab-Berber tribal leaders whom it needed to keep some control. It banned the sale of slaves but not domestic slave ownership, purportedly out of respect for local religious customs.

Living in a slave family, Messaoud quickly came to loathe the institution: “I saw terrible situations under slavery, people being beaten, a woman practically raped in front of me. The master could come into the room of a female slave and do whatever he wanted.” Messaoud’s schoolmates called him Boubacar *abid*, the slave, to distinguish him from another boy with the same first name.

Messaoud began to see a political opportunity toward the end of the 1970s. Mauritania’s failure to win a war with Morocco over the Western Sahara led to a coup d’état that brought in a regime somewhat more open to political opposition. He was among the founders of a new party called El-Hor (The Freeman), which appealed openly to the *haratin*. Messaoud and his associates organized a series of antislavery protests—the first in Mauritania’s history—in early 1980, after a slave girl of fifteen was sold off in a semipublic auction. Instead of investigating the auction, the Mauritanian authorities arrested Messaoud and eight other El-Hor leaders and placed them on trial in a town in the south of the country. The government hoped to portray them as political schemers trying to divide Mauritania by promoting the *haratin* as a separate ethnic group. The trial proved to be a public relations fiasco for the government. Messaoud and his codefendants were released after several months in prison, and in July of that year the government issued a decree officially abolishing slavery, which was enacted into law the following year.

The law was hailed as an important victory—the government had previously been reluctant to recognize that slavery even existed—but it changed very little. It contained a stipulation that slave owners should be paid for the loss of their property, as if they, and not those who had been deprived of their freedom, should be the ones compensated. The authorities shrewdly brought some *haratin* leaders into the government, dividing the antislavery movement. The military junta’s leader, Mohamed Kouna ould Haidallah, conducted a complicated balancing act: while abolishing slavery he also played to his Arab-Berber base, reaffirming sharia as the law of the land and making Arabic the official national language, which did not sit well with the non-Arab-speaking peoples in the country’s south.

During the same period an Afro-Mauritanian movement arose called FLAM (Forces de Libération Africaines de Mauritanie) with which few *haratin* identified; its leaders were mainly Pulaar speakers from southern Mauritania. Further racial violence erupted after a border dispute between Senegal and Mauritania brought the two countries to war in 1989. The Mauritanian government deported at least 75,000 Afro-Mauritanians to Senegal and confiscated their land on the pretext that they were Senegalese. The Mauritanian army also conducted a purge of its black troops, murdering several hundred Afro-Mauritanian officers and soldiers. In one of the most infamous incidents, in 1990 the army celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the country’s independence by hanging twenty-eight black soldiers who had been abducted from the barracks in the town of Inal.

The government now took the position that, since slavery had been abolished, it no longer existed and should not be spoken of. Boubacar Messaoud founded SOS Esclaves in 1995 to bring new attention to the issue, but he was arrested in 1998 and again in 2002 merely for giving interviews in which he discussed slavery. Some, like Abeid, believe that the antislavery law of 2007 led traditional *haratin* advocates to let down their guard. A very few Mauritanians still do own slaves, and the effects of the caste system remain apparent. The country’s government, military, clergy, business elite, and university system are all dominated by high caste Arab-Berbers.

A year after the passage of the penal slavery law, Biram Dah Abeid, who had been secretary general of SOS Esclaves, broke away from Messaoud and formed his own, more radical group called IRA (Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste), which the Mauritanian government has refused to recognize as an NGO. Abeid told me that the group has so far carried out four protests he calls *coups d'éclat*, or “acts of rupture,” directed at “the symbols of Arab-Berber domination.” These included a march to commemorate the massacre of black soldiers at Inal and a public protest at a police station in Nouakchott over the police’s failure to arrest a woman—an executive working at the state bank—who kept two domestic slaves she had received as a wedding present. When they refused to disperse, Biram and some of his followers were arrested, put on trial, convicted, and imprisoned for several months before being released; the woman in question was later arrested.

Abeid is also exploring the possibility of uniting Mauritania’s *haratin* with Afro-Mauritanians from the country’s south. He earned his longest prison sentence for leading a relatively small and peaceful march in 2014 in the south of Mauritania, aimed at protesting what he called “land slavery,” after the failure of land reform. He was not alone in this effort; other resistance groups, including Touche Pas à Ma Nationalité (Hands Off My Nationality), are also organizing the country’s Afro-Mauritanians.

“It was the idea of uniting the *haratin* and the Afro-Mauritanians,” Salem told me, “that really worried the government.” When Abeid ran for president of Mauritania in 2014—an election that most opposition parties chose to boycott because they were denied the freedom to campaign—he officially won only 8 percent of the vote. “There was a great deal of fraud,” he says. But the country’s *haratin* make up roughly 45 percent of the population and the Afro-Mauritanians another 25 percent. If they voted together in the 2019 election, in which Abeid says he plans to run, they would constitute a clear majority.

The most surprising of Abeid’s coups so far has been the 2012 book burning with which Salem’s study begins. The famous medieval Islamic legal text Abeid destroyed, he told me, “continues to be used to train judges in Mauritania and justifies the buying, selling, and beating of slaves, the rape of women.” According to Abeid “the *haratin* community was perplexed initially” but came to his defense when they heard members of the Arab-Berber community demand his execution. Abeid spent three months on death row before his sentence was commuted. *Haratin* prison guards signaled to him that the battle for public opinion outside prison was going well. “It was an affirmation of our kind of Islam,” Abeid now says. “With this act, the religious authorities lost control of society.”

The response to Abeid’s book burning suggests the extent to which political and social issues are being worked out now in the religious sphere, using religious language. The first generation of abolitionists, like Boubacar Messaoud, had a much more secular approach to politics. Messaoud was influenced by the popularity of Marxism across Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, something that has largely vanished. A recurring theme in *Prêcher dans le désert* is that Mauritania’s antislavery movement has increasingly come to benefit from the public predominance of Islam.

Slaves were traditionally prevented from receiving a religious education, which placed them at a severe disadvantage in a country where knowledge of Islam is a form of power. As Salem’s book shows, many *haratin* after the abolition of slavery were unsurprisingly eager to receive religious training, build their own mosques, and have their own *haratin* imams. *Haratin* women did not traditionally cover their heads, since they were workers and not granted the protection and respect traditionally accorded women in Muslim society; now, most do. But many Salafist preachers consider the *haratin* community’s expressions of freedom—including its rich musical tradition, in which men and women played music and danced together—impure and corrupt.

Abeid is anticlerical: he points out that until very recently, the country’s religious authorities have been almost entirely of Arab-Berber origin, many of them major land and slave owners. “They have made slavery the sixth pillar of Islam,” he said during a recent interview. But he is careful to show that he is not anti-Islam. At a certain point, he paused our interview and explained that he and his followers needed to pray. I waited for several minutes while he and a dozen or so IRA members

gathered in the middle of their meeting room.

When we resumed our talk, I asked Abeid if his battle with the Muslim clerics had changed his view of religion. “Not at all,” he answered. It is not clear what separation of church and state would look like in a society as religiously conservative as Mauritania. But it is precisely this kind of separation that Abeid wants to establish. “The book burning was an affirmation of our form of Islam, a democratic, egalitarian Islam, the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him—and of the Koran. It is an Islam *laïque*,” he said, using the French word for “secular.”

© 1963-2018 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.