

**The Double Challenge of Education in the Haratin world
(Slaves and former slaves in Mauritania)
Social ideology and bad official will**

Communication presented by:

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Introduction

I am myself a victim of the inequality of opportunities concerning access to education in my country, as I was able to start my graduate studies only ten years after my secondary studies. Here, I would like to draw from the experience of my community, but also from the spirit of the recommendations contained in the draft that I received, and modestly contribute to the effort of generating conclusions that can be the basis for the fulfillment of the right to education of minorities in the world.

The definition and categorization of the concept of minority remains risky, and thus should still be open, given the different aspects that can take the expression of identity; I would try to take on this problem from the case of an identity or a class community that represents the Haratin in the Islamic republic of Mauritania.

A – The Haratin: a class identity facing inner and hidden slavery in Africa.

Firstly, I hasten to mention that this servile population shares the language, religion, and culture of the dominant Arab-Berber community despite some differences in the way of life, work tools, musical instruments, and folklore. It must also be underlined that the racial difference between the two groups is not systematic. However, the Haratins have acquired their identity in their historical, daily, and perpetual confrontation with the ideology and practice of slavery and a merciless caste system, a system whose spine is endogamy. In this system, Islam is the fuel and legitimization of this ideology, and many practices keep the Haratins in their roles of physical endurance, manual labor and labor in the sun, and that hold them carefully outside the educational system.

B – The slave education

Traditional enslavement and the slavery-like practices still persist in Mauritania in a climate of impunity and concealment maintained by the authorities of the country. From unofficial sources, we figure the number people born as slaves between 300 and 500 thousand. This against the categorical refusal by the state to authorize statistics or to conduct an official survey on the phenomenon. Indeed, according to the Mauritanian code of slavery, these slaves, like their ancestors, are born slaves. And like every good Muslim, to please god and be worthy of paradise, a slave must strictly obey the master, otherwise he is threatened with a curse and hell. Consequently, all domestic work, the care of livestock, and land work are the responsibility of the slave. Moreover, it is formally prohibited for the slave to learn to read or write, or to touch the holy book

(Quran). Thus, after 48 years of independence, such a large group remains deprived of any kind of schooling.

C – Slaves: a population of women and children.

The situation of this part of the population looks even more dramatic when one realises that mostly women and children are slaves. Men often manage to escape captivity during or after adolescence. In this context it should be noted that women slaves are attached to their master and their land from an early age through their offspring, as the Arab-Berber slavery code legalizes for the master to sexually use all his female slaves, without any restrictions, and without taking into consideration the opinion or preliminary consent of the latter. Slavery is transferred through the matrilineal line, and hence children are not recognised any father, they automatically become slaves of their genitor and master. Living examples of this ordeal are placed before the courts of Mauritania, and courts perceive this sexual practice as legal and even sacred. Therefore, children of slaves have no chance to go to school. Those freed by the National Commission of Human Rights in Mauritania, SOS esclaves and the AFC in the course of the year 2008, amounting to 43 people, all women and children, largely prove this sad reality that public authorities do their best to hide.

D- Public authorities and education of slaves and emancipated slaves (former slaves).

Slaves, just as their children, have no civil status. For this reason, and another fundamental reason, which is the request of their masters to do domestic work – manual labor and labor under the sun, as such tasks are perceived as degrading by the dominant groups – their enrollment in school is a tremendous achievement. To illustrate this reality, we would like to tell the case of a director of the school of Nwar in the region of Tagant (Mohamed Ould Medellahi (case of the slaves of Ehel Saka) and the case of a director of the school of Ehel Nana in the region of Gorgol Abdou Ould Isselmou, among other testimonies.

It should be noted that both witnesses have suffered threats from the masters and persecutions by the authorities for having testified before the press and organizations that defend human rights.

The large slums or populous and impoverished ghettos surrounding the big cities of Mauritania, as well as the Adwaba (villages of slaves) in rural areas, are composed of former slaves who managed to leave their masters. But this numerous population, amounting to more than a million people according to estimations, is confronted with innumerable difficulties, including the disdain and stigmatization that are inherent to their status and go back to enslavement. This part of the Mauritanian society, despised by the social ideology of dominant groups is also marginalized by State policies, since it is a State where dominant groups hold the levers of political, economic, social, and cultural control without sharing them.

Indeed, public authorities have no willingness to take specific measures in social and educational affairs to help this disadvantaged group, who are decaying under the weight of the stigmas of slavery. They are little inclined to seek to abolish

discrimination in the administration of education which the Haratin ghettos and villages face.

And even if ghettos have several schools, these suffer from a cruel lack of infrastructure. Even more serious is the fact that teachers, predominantly from the dominant community, often refuse to teach in Haratin areas, both in the Adwaba (slave villages) or in ghettos with a concentration of enslaved populations. They show their refusals through absenteeism, which endangers children's schooling. In addition, teachers make children work for their own account during school hours, doing domestic work, working in market gardens or taking care of their livestock.

But in some local areas with both Haratins and Arab-Berbers, teachers cultivate the systematic discrimination against the Haratins whom they require to do private chores, but also for the benefit of the school (cleaning classes for example) while exempting the children from dominant groups from these same chores. These blatant differences of treatment are very normal to us, but are in fact bullying of our children. The children of the dominant groups learn from such unjust behaviors and in turn humiliate and mock Haratin children, with all the harmful consequences it implies on the psychology of the children and on their personality being shaped.

Another problem, and not the least, that accentuates the the gap in schooling in this country is the total absence of any reference to human rights in school curricula.

On the contrary, slavery is still being taught in religious school programs as a normal practice in the usual behaviour in the Muslim society. Teachers of this discipline reiterate all day long the religious obligations of slaves which are largely separate from those of the free man in terms of Islamic law. Clearly, students of this so-called noble strain, by learning this, do not hesitate to disdainfully recall their Haratin classmates their place in society anytime the smallest confrontation happens.

E. The schooling failure

All these unfortunate circumstances, together with the multidimension of poverty and ignorance, have led to an extraordinary exacerbation of school failure among the Haratins, in the sense that many children undertake very early on low-skilled jobs at the expense of their education. This is a constraint for them as they need to contribute to decrease the state of extreme poverty in which their families find themselves. All these circumstances lead to the fact more than three quarters of Haratin schoolchildren do not go beyond primary school.

Moreover, this phenomenon paved the way to children trafficking, including children labour from a very early age. Those who manage to cling to school until the end of secondary education and could attend higher education (there are not many) are automatically blocked by the official system of grants.

This system is discriminatory in more than one way. It is an absurd and continuous form of cooptation of children from dominant groups for educational grants and for the access to universities around the world through quota, to the detriment of the poorest, among which the Haratins are the first. This policy leads to the *de facto*

disqualification of enslaved groups from positions in the public and private sectors which require qualification and competence.

Therefore, and despite the number (between 45% and 50% of the total population of the country), the Haratins are conspicuously absent and “invisible” in the political, economic, military and technical decision-making processes of the country, and continue at this pace to “produce” servants.

Recommendations:

Through the situation of the Haratins of Mauritania which we tried to describe, we believe that the following recommendations, among other conceptual framework propositions, can serve to develop a set of practical conclusions that can be implemented to correct situation of violations of the rights of minorities to education and to the respect of their specificities.

- Slavery, being a vehicle of profound discrimination, especially at school, should be criminalised, and laws should be implemented that are strong enough to have a deterrent effect on pro-slavery groups who jeopardize the education of children and young people through their practices.
- To recommend to all States to introduce compulsory school education for all children up to 16 years.
- To abolish the traditional and feudal land tenure in order to enable traditionally marginalized communities to build schools to prevent the dependence towards dominant groups in this domain.
- To establish a system of school canteens and of boarding to enable groups that suffer extreme poverty to send their children to school.
- To adopt specific measures for groups and disadvantaged or marginalized regions to equip them with school infrastructures, teaching personnel, and their own programs in the case of linguistic, cultural, or religious particularities.
- To provide teaching staff with training on the principles of human rights and the rights of minorities in particular.
- To include culture and universal principles of human rights in the school curricula.
- To establish language and cultural institutes in all multicultural, multilingual, and multi-faith countries.
- To develop, under the responsibility of the State, research on minority cultures and education in their languages.

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