



A Freed Slave's Son Fights Against Slavery

Biram Abeid: "The UN's Conventions Protect Slavery"

- HYPOCRISY -

Because this allows them to clear their conscience, many governments prefer to make it known that slavery through ancestral lineage – being a slave because your parents were – no longer exists. But this isn't true. Today, in Mauritania, the lives of the Haratin¹ slaves is a life led outside of the Universal Declaration for Human Rights".

Biram Dah Abeid, president of Mauritania's organization for the fight against slavery – IRA (Initiative pour la Resurgence du mouvement Abolitioniste) – is he himself a descendant of slaves. He is on a European tour, spreading his story and making his fight known. We met with him.

Contrary to popular belief – *"and to the idea spread by the Mauritanian authorities"* – slavery is not part of the past or present only in archaic rural areas. *"We fight in the capital, Nouakchott, in the rich, residential and administrative neighbourhoods where the ruling class lives. Those we have managed to lead before the courts are part of this dominant bourgeoisie who has studied in Europe"*, underlines Mr Abeid. He insists, *"The latest case IRA worked on is a business man, cousin of the President, whose house is 30 metres away from the President's palace... How can we say that slavery is present only in rural areas? Slavery continues in these well-off circles. There are more cases of slavery in the cities than in the rural areas"*.

Nouakchott ratifies without applying

The anti-slavery militant underlines that, despite the UN system, despite international norms and conventions, nothing has changed in Mauritania even though Nouakchott has signed and ratified these conventions. Despite slavery being illegal on its territory since 1981, and criminal since 2007 (a law punishes those who practice slavery with 5 to 10 years in jail), there has been but one case of condemnation. *"Slavery is even inscribed as a crime against humanity in the Mauritanian Constitution since 2012. In the end, these conventions only serve to protect those countries that practice slavery, like Mauritania: they sign but they violate this signature with no consequences because there is no international coercive system. Coercion only exists when there are economic or strategic issues at stake"*.

A 9th Century Code

According to him, the only ones applying pressure are human rights defence organizations. *"When these organizations get involved then some governments write letters to Nouakchott"*. Nothing more? A disgusted look. *"No"*, replies the militant. Biram Dah Abeids explains that international conventions and national laws are not applied in Mauritania because she prefers an ancestral code – *L'Abrégé*, of Cheikh Khalid Mohammed Ibn Ishagh – written in the 9th century from which several exegesis have been drafted, up until the 15th century. *"In Mauritania, this code is seen as the interpretation of the Quran, and therefore just like the Sharia (Islamic law). The Islamic Republic of Mauritania considers, through the preamble of its Constitution, that Sharia is the source of law. This is the exact book that*



divides Muslims into two categories: free men and slaves, the black men” – even though the Quran forbids making Muslims slaves.

Slaves – who represent around 20% of the Mauritanian population – are goods ready to be sold, who have no right to education and over whom masters have the right of life or death. *“This code also says that female slaves are the sexual objects of their master, whatever their age. It also says masters must castrate male slaves to avoid mixing blood. This is why slavery is inherited through the mother’s side: her children will automatically be slaves. The code also says that women in general, not only slaves, do not have the capacity to choose their husband and that they lie more than men do... This code is an incorrect and macho interpretation of the Quran, but this is the one applied in Mauritania”,* says the militant.

Apartheid

The lives of freed slaves are also of grave concern. Like Biram Abeid, about one third of Mauritania’s population are freed slaves. *“Their liberty is only theoretical. They have easily recognizable names and are the victims of harsh discrimination regarding school, ownership of property and public authorities. This is an apartheid”,* Biram accuses.

ⁱ Descendants of the Balfour (indigenous people living in the region before the Arabo-Berber invasion in the 15th Century) as well as slaves brought in from other regions.

He fights against the religious justification of this crime: he risks the death sentence

- RAGE AND COURAGE -

His voice is low and slow, his diction precise, his vocabulary well-chosen and sharp, accompanied by a direct gaze. Biram Abeid, 48, a freed slave’s son, does not accept the world’s indifference in the face of slavery still existing in his country – as well as in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Brunei, according to anti-slavery organizations.

Biram, facing the impossibility of studying in Mauritania because of the cost, *“worked as an employee for 10 years; keeping what I had saved to leave for Senegal to pursue my studies”*. After returning to Mauritania, he became a militant for “SOS Esclaves”. Founded in 1995 (the first NGO of this type, “El Hor” (the Free Man) was founded in 1978), the organization *“focuses on denouncing slavery through the press”* and remains a rather *“high class”* organization. *“With 7 friends, we left SOS Esclaves in 2008 in order to create IRA because we found the two other groups too soft. We wanted an organization of popular struggle”*.

For IRA, combating slavery *“cannot go forward without questioning the Mauritanian code, l’Abrégé, which precludes reducing the clergy’s (all Arab-Berber) power over Mauritanian society. We have to question their authority because they are the main stakeholders in the slave system, which they justify through religion”*.

This is what prompted IRA to publicly burn a copy of the *Abrégé*, on April 27th, 2012 – a political message which led Biram Abeid to be arrested and dragged to court, where he risks being sentenced to death for apostasy, shaming Islam’s precepts and state security. Several



protests took place to demand IRA's punishment and imams called for the leader's execution. President Aziz, in office thanks to a military coup-d'état, *"has said publicly that we deserve the death sentence. This was the spark that led the Haratin community to massively protest in the street, for months on end, to make its voice heard against such a sentence. The government then accepted to release us on bail, but only temporarily"*.

Marie-France Cros