

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)



“The main role one can ascribe to slavery today, looking at the society as a whole, is as a political catalyst”

Marta Scaglioni interviews Ann McDougall¹

Marta Scaglioni: *Professionally, you trained as historian, then you developed an interest in African history, and lately you experienced what we may call “an ethnographical turn”. This was when you felt that you could answer your research questions only by a combination of conventional historical sources and oral ones. Which is the impact of this background on your research and teaching?*

Ann McDougall: I was an honors history undergraduate. But in my first year, I had Martin Klein as a teacher in a large ‘Third World’ history course. I got the opportunity of doing a reading-tutorial with him and I was very influenced by his approach to history. He taught me that history was about asking questions – preferably ones that pushed the boundaries eventually. He also taught me that it was about people – and the best way to understand people was to talk with them. I have to say I followed both ideas with enthusiasm and I think some natural instinct (if not talent). Then, in my third year (again with Martin Klein’s encouragement), I spent a year at the Centre for West African Studies in Birmingham. This meant a full year of multi-disciplinary courses (most at the graduate level), with a West African geographical focus. It was there that I began to think about and work with oral history – both David Henige and Elizabeth Tonkin were teaching at the Centre then. Even before I began my PhD, interdisciplinarity was part of who I was (and probably why I never became the lawyer my parents dreamed about). To be totally unscientific about it all: it just felt right.

¹ Ann McDougall joined the University of Alberta, Canada, in 1986, having received her PhD from the University of Birmingham, U.K. (1980) and a BA (1975) and MA (1976) from the University of Toronto. Her main research areas are history of French West and North-West Africa (with a long-term field research in Mali, Mauritania, and Morocco), economic, social, and political history of Sahara, and slavery. She currently teaches courses on History of Africa, Slavery in Africa, and Middle Eastern History at the University of Alberta, Canada.



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Literally, when I first set foot in West Africa (Dakar, then Bamako a few days later), I knew I had made the right choice, and that I was in the right place. The impact of this on my research consisted in the belief that although I was ‘doing’ economic history with the person who had defined the field for West Africa, Anthony Hopkins,² my fieldwork would not only be about archives and answers but it would lead me to people and questions. It did. And the people helped me change not only my questions, but my focus of research. Ironically, Mauritania and Ijil had not been part of the original research plan at all. I was supposed to have compared the colonial development of the desert salt from Tawdeni, Mali with the sea-salt of Kaolack, Senegal. Much to the concern of Anthony Hopkins, suffering from my long silences back in Birmingham (this was the pre-email era), I was following where the people I interviewed in Bamako and then Banamba (a desert-edge town north of Bamako), led me – which was to Mauritania and Ijil, not Tawdeni. Much to Marty’s disappointment as well, I never returned to the Senegal part of the project.

While I did not (honestly) think of the combination of the archival and oral as ‘methodology’ at the time – it was just the best way to get to what interested me – it has become the core of how I think of myself and my research over subsequent years. This tends to make me, in the eyes of some of my non-Africanist historian colleagues, as ‘exotic’ as the places and people I study – and as marginal. But, so be it. I teach the way I research: question focused, multi-disciplinary in the materials I draw upon and the methodologies/theories I reference, essentially ‘people’-oriented. The few graduate students I have had (our Department has not been especially keen on developing Africa as an ‘area of expertise’) have shown varying levels of comfort with the approach – but none have disappointed in their amazing individual contributions.

Marta Scaglioni: *Your started by focusing on power and trade in Western Saharan Africa. How did the trans-Saharan trade influence the power relationships of this area, and to what kinds of powers do you refer? Can we draw some parallelism with the contemporary situation of Morocco and Mauritania, two countries that are experiencing democratic adjustments?*

Ann McDougall: Power and Trade. Exactly. It was only after I had finished writing my thesis and after I undertook to write the conclusion that I realized that this relationship is what I had been talking about all along.

Let me reverse the question somewhat. The ‘power’ I was referring to was authority as recognized in the Sahara, by different Saharan clans and classes. During the period/s of time my thesis (and subsequent pre-colonial work) explored, there was no recognized state authority in the Sahara. There were, however, struggles for control over resources and people. There was a sense of the ‘political’ but it morphed between more traditional understandings (groups with the ability to fight, to protect others) and less-traditional

² A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*, Longmans, UK, 1973; reprint Routledge Oxford/New York, 2014.



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(groups with the ability to teach, to exploit resources) as articulations of 'political'. What I wanted to understand was how the latter, taking one religious clan who controlled a particular salt mine, was able to exercise that 'authority'. Economic history said that profit alone explained -- or at least implied, that 'power' (of the political nature) should be able to be exercised. Profit equaled power. There was no obvious connection in this Saharan society between the two. On the contrary: the religious clan I looked at, like any good Islamic people, would have denied vehemently that they 'profited' from their involvement in the salt trade at all, let alone 'used' it to support secular power. Both were well hidden - embedded - in the complex class/client network they set up, and that I argue was best unveiled through an anthropological approach to social history. A former graduate student, Mohamed Nouhi, was later able to integrate the 'religious' factor more firmly back into this analysis through his grasp of Arabic textual rhetoric.³

How did the trans-Saharan trade influence these power relationships? It had long been understood that the so-called 'warrior' clans benefited from taxing those who traded (otherwise known as 'protection') and this economic benefit allowed them to build areas of political authority -- areas where their ability to protect (or alternately, if taxes were not paid, to attack). How the religious clans who were recognized as 'exploiting' resources (people, animals, minerals) were able to use that purely economic wealth to compete with 'warrior' political authority, however, had not been looked at or really even questioned in this way. Charles Stewart's seminal work⁴ (and I use the term precisely) was at the time the only research that suggested this kind of questioning was not only needed but it could be explored as the resources were there to do so.

As to parallels with the contemporary situation in Morocco and Mauritania *vis-à-vis* their attempts to become 'democratic', I am really struggling with that question. The presence of a recognized monarch 'King' and his dynasty (the Alawites, in power since the 17th century -- interestingly, having its initial base in the Sahara) in Morocco compared to Mauritania's lack of any central authority -- or indeed even defined region -- it was totally a creation of the French. Also, while there is a fairly distinct difference between Northern and Southern Morocco, it has not faced the struggles Mauritania did (and still does) with respect to secessionist tendencies: an Eastern region long a part of what has become Mali (in economic, cultural, and even family networks), a Southern region identical in every sense to its counterpart on the other side of the Senegal River, and a Saharan North/North West tied to the Sahara and very strongly to Morocco itself. Around independence, there were political parties representing each of these 'concepts' of nationality. And in many ways, their separate 'visions' made more sense historically than the one the French and a small ('White') elite from the religious, economically powerful segment of society eventually realized. So while I will keep the question in mind, right now I am not quite seeing enough of a similar context to begin to push ideas of power, religion and economy any further than this 'observation': in each instance, the 'power' that took each country into independence was associated with

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⁴ Charles C. Stewart (with Elizabeth K Stewart), *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973.



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Islam (and was therefore an overlay of French authority on indigenous Saharan religious power). And that just as each had long used its religious credentials to claim rights to resources – being put in the position of ‘secular control’ opened up ways to use the wealth to which they had traditional ‘rights’ in very new and modern ways – mostly to undermine any competing basis of power.

Marta Scaglioni: *Your first encounter with Morocco coincided with the interest in the commercial relationships created between this country and Mauritania by the Trans-Saharan slave trade. At the same time, your “ethnographical turn” was marked by the fortuitous and luck encounter with a former concubine, Fatma.⁵ What kind of slavery are we talking about in this region, and how did the study of slavery fit in your previous research on the economy of the Western Sahara?*

Ann McDougall: Again let me reverse the question. I met Fatma in the course of tracing the history of her former master’s family/business interests.⁶ Here is an example of where the flexibility of movement between the written and the oral can ‘find’ a question otherwise invisible. Fatma was not visible in any of the written materials I looked at (and in Morocco they were not ‘archival’ but family retained papers, account books – sources very fully explained and explored by Ghislaine Lydon). Fatma was ‘identified’ through an interview that was otherwise directed at knowing more about an important trans-Saharan merchant family. Fatma’s story was what pulled me (as it turns out, irreversibly) into a study of slavery. She was a person, with a history. And one that – at least the way she told it challenged some of our assumptions about ‘slavery’. This was not the experience we knew (at the time) from West African slave narratives (Hunwick’s and Powell’s edited collection which reflects similar perspectives, though not from women, was many years later in the making⁷). It also did not quite fit with the prevailing Klein and Lovejoy theoretical approach to what they called ‘Islamic Slavery’. She was not ‘absorbed’ into a kinship group, but she also did not fit into the ‘emancipation’ paradigm – the then prevailing choices.

But to the extent that any case study can be useful (and yes, this is part of my methodology, too), Fatma’s story cried out to us to look beyond the disciplinary boundaries and disciplinary methodologies as our starting points and look first to what an oral life-history was really saying. She was a concubine, she was Muslim (as was her master), she remained attached to her former ‘family’ – because she benefited from that relationship, including relations with other former-family slaves. She proudly attached her identity to that previous

⁵ Fatma Barka. Her story is told in Ann McDougall, “A Sense of Self: the life of Fatma Barka”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* Vol. 32, No. 2 (1998), pp. 285-315.

⁶ Mohamed Barka. He was a major Trans-Saharan trader in a wealthy commercial family from Goulimine (southern Morocco) who had worked the Timbuktu sector of their network until his partner-brother’s death. Not long thereafter, he returned to Goulimine to take charge of the family business and brought with him the young slave Fatma.

⁷ Eve Trout Powell, John O. Hunwick (eds.) *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam*, Princeton Series on the Middle East (Marcus Weiner Publishers, 2002). This is for the most part a document collection but the selection chosen illustrates a different experience of slavery than that commonly discussed in the 1980s.



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enslavement; the Goulimine community confirmed this status – her son’s own elevated position drew upon it as well. This was not an ‘imagined identity’.

What kind of slavery are we talking about? Not sure other than ‘Islamic slavery’ is not the answer. I think we are talking about how an understanding of slavery as explained in a particular religion (here, Islam) guided people over centuries (guided, not dictated). If this is not Islamic slavery it is because such a thing does not exist, and the understanding of how to be a good Muslim and a good Slave Master/Mistress changed over time and space. I don’t know any other way to express it.

Where this piece of an otherwise straightforward economic history project fit with my previous research was exactly the question that subconsciously began to shape how I looked at the ‘economic history’ material. What did my data on economic history reveal about social history? How often, for example, had I spoken with former slaves (*haratine*) as I was exploring the trans-Saharan salt trade (during a post-doctoral fellowship research trip in 1983- four years before I even met Fatma)? Once again, the oral interviews suggested that the trans-Saharan trade had a connection with Saharan slavery that was *not* about the trade in slaves *per se*. Yet it was still a connection with the regional economy.

Marta Scaglioni: *So far, the study of the legacies of slaveries has been spelt mainly in terms of culture, society and politics. Should not we include the economy in our understanding of the shadows that slavery and the slave trade cast on the present of African societies?*

Ann McDougall: As it happens, I think we need to re-integrate what we have learned through ‘slavery studies’ back into African labour (economic) history. There are several large projects – first and foremost your own, looking at different aspects of this integration. Others are focused on global labour history and how to incorporate Africa, others on African labour history and how to incorporate ‘slavery studies’, and yet others on how to incorporate modern-day slavery with contemporary labour issues. It is a hugely important moment for bringing research together. Not just in the usual academic dialogue but in a way that allows us to have some kind of policy impact, or at least ‘loud voice’!

Marta Scaglioni: *Your last project, “The Invisible People of Southern Morocco and Mauritania: the haratine” concludes that the category of haratine is a social construct and that the haratine have an idea of themselves as a fluid and dynamic class. Could you explain the origins and peculiarities of this social category?*

Ann McDougall: Great question: I wish I had a succinct answer (or any at all). In all seriousness, the collection I hope will soon be forthcoming from the project asks exactly this question (among others). There is no universal definition of *hartani*, *hartaniyya*, *haratine* (male, female, plural anglicized transcriptions). The term seems to have been used differently over time and space (here referring to North/West Africa). The most significant



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point you raise is class: to what extent can the *haratine* be considered a 'class' in the traditional sense of the term. I am going to disappoint here – I honestly am not sure. My 'read' of our data says – maybe a 'class in the making' in Thompson terms.⁸ I see the *haratine* as being pushed, politically, into a particular self-identification that not all (maybe not even the majority) would accept. But you raise the point of the need to re-think what looks like a very 'particular' situation back into a larger discussion. One point I think I can make in relation to 'origins and etymology' is that the term, in its evolution, has been adapted by different groups in different regions largely because of how it can be understood to mean 'mixed' – not necessarily or even primarily in terms of skin-colour, but in a generic sense that includes ethnicity, status (including occupation) and purity. Examples in the collection⁹, for example, note the use of the root term to refer to descriptions for horses of 'mixed' breed to distinguish those of 'pure' blood and a comparable usage among blacksmiths to refer to 'mixed' metals. Both examples are specific and shaped by their own historical depth. The point being here that if this is the essence of the 'word' *hartani/haratine*, then one can envisage how the people who come to be known by this term can in fact differ in their origins and evolution.

Consequently, in Southern Morocco *haratine* today are associated with Black cultivators with unknown origins (and therefore socially inferior to 'freed slaves' and their descendants who know the families to whom they belonged and who retain a long-term right to be associated with them because of this former relationship enshrined in Islam as *wala*), whereas in Mauritania most (though not all) are regarded – and regard themselves – as freed slaves or their descendants. These same situations did not always pertain. *Haratine* in Southern Morocco almost universally use other terms to describe themselves. Although some *haratine* in Mauritania do exactly the same, others have created a major political and social movement around their *haratine* self-identification. If something similar emerges in Morocco, in my opinion, it is more likely to coalesce around former slaves and an '*abid* – not *haratine*, identity.

The following summarizes the two major 'points' with which I discuss the issue of race. First: while the translation of *haratine* (and other words people use for this status) may appear to remain static over time (from an etymological perspective), usage clearly does not. In this instance, it would seem 'usage' has become pejorative over time – therefore being replaced with these 'other terms'. It is not purely a linear process: two of the studies carried out in the frame of this project show that those usages can have different meanings even in the same moment in time, depending on context (who is present) and upon who is 'using' the term and who is 'listening' to it.

Second: clearly, *haratine* cannot be defined (even over time) purely in terms of skin-colour. Yet, it also cannot be denied that skin-colour has long been and remains a social factor. The question is how it is acknowledged and why, at any given moment. Several contributors to the collection (including my own) address the highly racialized discourse of colonialism –

⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Victor Gollancz, Vintage Books, 1963, 1966, 1980 (rev. ed.)

⁹ I mean by 'collection' the one currently with Karthala Press that derived from our SSHRC Project based Workshop, Paris (2011)..



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but even here, the reports themselves often stated clearly that even as they spoke of 'Black' and 'White', they were not speaking of race *per se*. Even as we argue that social organization is not racial in that it is not based on skin-colour, it must be remembered that skin-colour does exist – it simply does not define 'race' in all instances. Understanding the evolving meaning and use of *haratine*, therefore, provides a useful commentary on the evolving meaning and use of 'race' itself.

Marta Scaglioni: *The development of an equation between blackness and slavery has marked the history of slavery in North Africa and Mauritania. This justified the enslavement of fellow Muslims, a controversial issue from the Quranic point of view. Does the haratine issue fit in or circumvent this dominant paradigm?*

Ann McDougall: If you want a 'Black and White' answer to a 'grey' question - - the *haratine* do not fit into the recently developed paradigm by Chouki el-Hamel, to a lesser extent Bruce Hall¹⁰ that associates blackness, racism and slavery/enslavement. I am not sure I would agree 'blackness' justified the enslavement of fellow Muslims (it was certainly directly addressed by Timbuktu's Ahmad Baba in the 16th/early 17th century) but I think I understand how this argument is being made today.

To backtrack, I disagree that a whole society can be described as becoming so racist as to enslave in complete disregard of religious (or for that matter 'legal') norms. A particular leader or political party, in a particular moment in time – yes. But even in the Moroccan case that forms the basis of el-Hamel's argument, for example, I have argued that Moulay Ismail was cognizant of a racial difference between slaves (Black) and *haratine* ('dark', 'copper-coloured') and that he based his debate with the religious authorities (who opposed his attempts to re-enslave Fez *haratine*) on class, not colour. Moreover, if one follows through on subsequent attempts by different Sultans to reconstitute this 'Black army', the evidence shows that *haratine* continued to be differentiated from 'Blacks'. With due respect, el-Hamel's conclusion that the formation of the '*abid al-bukhari*' (black slave) army marked the moment when 'slave equaled Black and equaled *hartani*' and Moroccan racism was formalized, is to me, doubtful.

Therefore the reason I see it as 'grey' is that I actually do see the *haratine* as fitting into the situation as I understand it – in fact, I see the fascinating ambiguity around their class and colour as lying at the heart of the issue. But this is not the 'received wisdom' at the moment. From a different angle, I see the creation of a 'Black' *haratine* as a combination of French colonial discourse (the 'Black Moor') and contemporary politics (specifically Biram Dah Abeid's Initiative for the Resurgence of Abolition movement)¹¹. The former had less impact

¹⁰ Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: a history of slavery, race and Islam*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013; Bruce S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600-1960*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014.

¹¹ *Initiative pour la Resurgence du mouvement Abolitioniste*, founded in Mauritania (2008) by radical activist Dah Abeid, is technically illegal but operates openly as an anti-slavery organization engaged in both assisting those claiming to be enslaved and battling those who claim there is no slavery – especially the government. His politics are



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on *haratine* identity *per se* (as distinct from ‘outside’ understandings of that identity) than the latter: Biram Dah Abeid’s politics have totally ‘racialized’ the environment in which one self-identifies as *hartani/hartaniyya* these days. The question as I see it is: who chooses to accept the ‘Black = slave = *hartani*’ identity (interestingly, the exact same ‘association’ el-Hamel saw in Moulay Ismail’s Morocco) and why, alongside its opposite, who does not and why. To be honest, little in my own research (including the recent project) suggests that ‘being Black’ figures significantly (or indeed, at all) in many *haratine*’s sense of their place in Mauritanian society. ‘Blacks’ suggest for most *haratine* (and I suspect for most Mauritians, Biram Dah Abeid notwithstanding) the Soninke, Wolof and Peul/Fulani - sometimes referred to as ‘African Mauritians’ (a term I have great difficulty with, as all Mauritians are Africans).

Marta Scaglioni: *After focusing your studies on the relationship between power and economic structures such as the salt mine Ijil, you seem to be looking for power relationships in your current research on the haratine in Morocco and Mauritania, as well. How have the haratine been affected by Moroccan and Mauritanian social changes and how have they got involved in the process of democratization?*

Ann McDougall: For this question not only is there no single answer, the dual ‘answers’ are hugely divergent. First of all you are correct that I seem to have been searching for understandings of ‘power’ that do not fall neatly into political science or even political economy categories. This positioning is entirely a reaction to my research as distinct from an approach. There is an imbalance to my research that needs to be acknowledged in this context: more work was done in Southern Morocco on the subject of Saharan trade than *haratine per se*. I think the circumstances of the Mauritanian research on the same Saharan trade as in Morocco, led me more - and earlier - into the *haratine* question. ‘Finding’ Hamody (and his family) was probably the game-changer, although I did not realize it until several years later when I found myself preoccupied with questions of slavery (Islamic and otherwise), freed-slaves (and the ambiguity of their role) and variations of ‘dependents’ (clients and concubines, for example). In Southern Morocco, the *haratine* are known by their Berber name *issuqqiyn* (or in relation to their role as agriculture workers in irrigated date-palm groves, *khammas* – from Arabic ‘five’, referring to their traditional ‘fifth’ payment). They are seen as (and see themselves as) distinct from both those of Berber ‘noble’ backgrounds and those of Sudan ‘slave’ backgrounds. They collectively trace their backgrounds to an undefined time when their ancestors cultivated in a wet Sahara. In reality, individual interviews suggested vague recollections of clientship relations with Berber desert nomads. What is not questioned is their distinction as *issuqqiyn/khammas*, workers whose hard work developed the South of Morocco. They are politically in charge of the Southern

confrontational and therefore, divisive; he also recruits on the basis of race: if you are black, you are the equivalent of a ‘slave’ and should unite with other blacks (whether technically freed or freed-haratine).



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regions: they comprise the large majority here and those of Berber nobility in senior administrative positions are very conscious of this.

The question of their role in the process of democratization is therefore very region-specific. In parts of the South, they are the political power; in other parts they are actively agitating for more voice especially on land issues. One man we spoke with made it very clear that locally (Akka-Tata), for example, the large *issuqqiyn* population had long comprised members of local village committees and were elected to regional political forums. He identified the early 1990s as the birth of a 'new era' not because *issuqqiyn* were newly part of politics but because a particular new generation was elected: as he put it, a 'younger generation' who had worked in the North, in the cities and was aware of human rights. They had pushed the administration to allow for 'freer' meetings, protests, and elections. Where this new era had first seen an impact was in a local dispute over so-called 'public' (state-owned) land: that which was claimed by the *issuqqiyn* (and had been worked, planted with the approval of the local nobility in recent years) was now being reclaimed by that same nobility. The point here is that *haratine* (by status but who do not use the term) are not fighting for a role in politics that they have. They are fighting specific battles in which they feel caught between the 'state' (that would be the national one, one dominated by the 'noble' Arab/Berber elite) and the local traditional Berber elite families. On a larger scale, however, *haratine* (call them *issuqqiyn* or *khammas*) are not seen even today (remembering that this work is now four years old) as 'game players' in the North. The question of the 'role of the *haratine*' remains for the moment, completely regionally defined.

This is not the case in Mauritania. To simplify what I think is much more complicated: there was no one region in which *haratine* were in control and/or could build up any power (however limited or fragile). *Haratine* were seen as extensions of the '*bidan*' nobility so historically, contestations over power meant that *haratine* won or lost according to the outcome of their masters' political conflicts or in contemporary times, political victories. There were two political streams here to look at: one that was trying to identify with a 'class-based' *haratine* in the late 1970s (and in which slaves were embraced) and a second that identified with *bidan* who were in opposition to the military dictatorship of *ould Ta'aya* (who had seized power in a coup in 1984). We are so obsessed with the 'slavery' issue that we often forget that for Mauritians of all ethnic groups/classes, democracy was first and foremost about getting rid of a 20-year military dictatorship, not fighting racial politics. So to speak of how *haratine* became involved in the process of democratization is *really* about looking at the role they played in Mauritanian politics from the 1990s onwards and most specifically since the post-2005 coup. Today, they have become famous because of the notoriety of their self-proclaimed leader, Biram dah Abeid. However, his is only the most recent phase of *haratine* involvement in Mauritanian democracy. It is yet to be decided whether it becomes the determinant one.

Marta Scaglioni: *Mauritania is often pointed at as a country where slavery is still a reality. You claimed that Mauritanian slavery is a social and political issue, with*



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contemporary consequences. What does slavery mean in 2015 Mauritania, and why do you think it is such a difficult task to eradicate it?

Ann McDougall: There are two evident questions here but also a third (implied in the 'introduction' to the questions). Let me rephrase in these terms. On the one hand, there is the question of the 'reality' of slavery; on the other, the question of the 'politics' of slavery in 2015. The issue of 'eradication' is clearly dependent on how one understands the first two issues.

I have revised my position on the reality of people living in slave-like conditions since my first work in the country post-1980/81 abolition, largely as a consequence of shifting regions of research and specific interests. When you are looking at the history of business families in the major commercial centers (as small as some of those may be), some things are just not as apparent as when you begin to look more at social history, life histories and so on. It is significant that it was studying the history of a major trans-Saharan business that led me to Hamody, himself descended from a slave, and into a whole 'world' of non-elites (slaves, freed-slaves, clients). The second part of studying that business took me to Morocco and Barka and Fatma, an interesting parallel, now that I think of it.

Having worked on and off in Mauritania since then, most extensively during the recently completed *haratine* project, I have seen that the condition of servile labour remains an issue. But my impression is that there is no one generalized 'condition' that can/should be called slavery, and that this has always been the case in this expansive colonial construction called Mauritania; it varies significantly according to region. Most if not all of the cases of 'domestic slavery' that Biram Dah Abeid's organization has brought to light (if not to justice) are from Nouakchott, but Nouakchott is not a center of domestic slavery as much as it is a center of domestic labour in which the majority are women and girls. To employ children is problematic, to employ them for little more than food, clothing, accommodation sometimes some education, even more so. Slavery? Their parents are happy to have them looked after and often they bring food, gifts on the occasion of *eid* and so on back to the rest of the family. Or they are children of women working as domestics either in the same or neighboring households. This allows them to keep children close. Even if remuneration is minimal, in at least a couple of situations I encountered in interviewing, these small amounts went towards helping the mother set up some form of business, like couscous preparation. Calling it slavery actually masks that this is about acute poverty, not the other way around. Of course, there are always exceptions and some of these have been illuminated in recent years. We simply need a better understanding of the larger picture in order to situate these examples. At the moment there is no agreement as to whether that larger picture will reveal the exceptional to be the norm – or not. For the moment, I support the 'not' read of the situation. I am more convinced that the very poor and underdeveloped Southern (e.g. Guikimakha, Assaba) and Eastern regions (the Hodhs) in particular have retained a 'traditional' social structure in which both former master and former slave still see themselves tied into a 'servile' relationship. The so-called 'slave villages' are important here. Some were created as early as the late 19th century, many more during the early colonial era; desert nomads settled their *haratine* in Southern agricultural regions to cultivate grain for the 'tribe'. They are



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often described as ‘freedom villages’ or places where slaves fled to in escaping nomadic masters. In reality, what happened during the colonial era is that slaves trying to escape relations with masters in the wake of French abolitionist policies, often ‘joined’ these populations. There was increasingly a mixture along the whole desert-edge region (which straddled Mauritania and Soudan) in which *haratine* still involved in various relations with former masters, and slaves seeking ‘freedom’ under French law from such masters, lived together. Both became swept up in the new colonial economy, oriented between Soudan (Mali) and Senegal.

Back to the question, this is a tiny piece of an explanation as to why there is no one answer to “what does slavery mean...”. It really depends upon where you live and how you have understood your relationship to a former master or to a former ‘slave village’. When we interviewed a group of young men in a heavily *haratine* populated region (Kankossa, Assaba), they simply did not care about that ‘past’. They knew who they were – and they were not slaves. What they wanted were opportunities for education and jobs. Most had already had some experience in a larger town. They were very political and saw themselves becoming part of the system in order to assure that their region, town and families were no longer ‘marginalized’. Are they today followers of Biram Dah Abeid? I honestly do not know. But in 2011, for them ‘politics’ and ‘democracy’ were not about slavery.

It seems to me that the main ‘role’ one can ascribe to slavery today, looking at the society as a whole, is as a political catalyst: Biram Dah Abeid has succeeded where predecessors (like Boubacar Messaoud and Messaoud ould Boulkeir) did not in rousing people to ‘take a position’. On the one hand, it has pushed/pulled those who would not be comfortable signing on to the IRA’s radical, provocative platform to create an alternative: the *haratine* movement for social justice (2013) in which the battle against remaining ‘vestiges’ of slavery is important but one only issue, led by people like the late Said ould Hamody, son of the ‘Hamody’ I studied in my research (mentioned above). On the other, it has racialized the struggle to the extent that ‘slavery’ – seen today as being about both exploitation and discrimination – has been clearly defined as a ‘Black’ experience. While not all Blacks can by any means claim even the possibility of a slave past (and certainly not a slave past tied to the White elite – throughout the Soninke, Wolof and Peul societies in the South, many were slaves of Black masters), all Blacks can be convinced to see discrimination when it comes to their under-representation in high (paying) economic and administrative positions.

The ambivalence implicitly created between understanding ‘slavery’ (and its legacies, including ‘being *haratine*’) as an issue of status or of race, is one I believe the government is good at exploiting. Many of Biram Dah Abeid’s actions are either dismissed as ‘not serious’ or taken so seriously that he is imprisoned because they can be interpreted as ‘racist’ and ‘generating racial violence’ and/or ‘racism’ itself. Biram Dah Abeid and his IRA have garnered not only international attention but many awards; he has been compared to Nelson Mandela. Government commissions like *Tadamoun* for eradication of the *consequences* of slavery, social inclusion and fight against poverty by definition will find people living in some form of servility and poverty as a consequence of slavery (like Nouakchott domestics and Eastern cultivators) – a status like slavery but not slavery itself. Even the criminalization of slavery law of 2007 is slippery in this respect: with legal slavery abolished (1980-81),



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'labelling' the status of someone who, even if their conditions look to be 'slave-like' – an actual 'slave', is difficult. There are so many other options, all of which address status (exploited or underage worker, victim of sexual harassment, 'poor-cousin' from the country). I am not so cynical that I do not think there are those in/near government who genuinely would like to see these laws and commissions have true impact. But there are so many facets of the question that go beyond the simple 'Islamic Racist Slave Masters' that eradicating all of them simultaneously is an enormous challenge. At the moment a number of important questions, including social and racial discrimination *vis-à-vis* the so-called African Mauritians, extreme poverty – experienced in terms of class, gender and region, broader human rights issues around public expression for example (concerns the Government has to address before the UN), not to mention the real political challenges of 'Islamic Terrorism' and the Malian refugees who continue to live in Mauritania, can conveniently be hidden behind the public focus on 'slavery'. Rather reminds me of the Western Sahara issue in neighboring Morocco, although I would not want to push this too far. The rhetoric of the public face of the issue remains one of the Polisario Front's struggle and resistance in the face of the oppressive Moroccan state¹², all of much concern to the international UN community. The reality is that the situation has become so entrenched, different interests so invested in that entrenchment (even refugees in the Algerian camps are recipients of education and work opportunities others in the region are not) that the will to bring about fundamental change may in fact be wanting.

Marta Scaglioni: *Your next project seems to be linked to your experience with Fatma, since it focuses on the concept of constructed kinship and concubinage. Can you tell us briefly how it was conceived, what are your goals and your main topics?*

Ann McDougall: You are correct that I am interested in issues around 'constructed kinship and concubinage' and had thought about how to pursue that in a specific project within that framework. A few years ago, I had organized a panel on the topic at the ASAUK, and I have addressed aspects of it in a couple of recent publications (one in a collection on 'Sex, Power and Slavery', the other in a book on 'Forced Marriage').¹³

¹² Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (former Spanish Sahara). The late 1970s war over the former Spanish Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania generated the Polisario movement. Mauritania withdrew from claims to the territory, leaving the Polisario (largely based in northern Mauritania and Algeria) continuing to resist Moroccan claims. While Morocco has basically colonized the region, negotiations over its future remain at a stalemate in spite of various attempts by the United Nations to mediate a referendum.

¹³ "To marry one's slave is as easy as eating a meal": the dynamics of carnal relations within Saharan Slavery" in Gwyn Campbell & E. Elbourne (Eds.) *Sex, Power and Slavery: The Dynamics of Carnal Relations under Enslavement*. (Ohio Univ. Press, 2013) and "Concubinage as Forced Marriage? Colonial *jawari*, contemporary *hartaniyya* and marriage in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania" in *Marriage by Force? Contestation over Consent and Coercion in Africa*, Edited by Annie Bunting, Benjamin N. Lawrance, and Richard L. Roberts.



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However, the nature of that project has shifted ground somewhat, partly because my colleagues on the panel for various reasons cannot commit to such a project at the moment and partly because of a workshop I was invited to last spring in Amsterdam. I am now thinking about how to put much of what we have learned about slavery and post-slavery over the past few decades *back into Labour Studies*, and how to connect both to contemporary public discussion of modern-day slavery and poverty. I am not alone in thinking along those lines but as I have looked at what people are doing in several different projects (including yours), it seems to me there is a niche for a specific West African case study that speaks to and with the 'global labour' and 'modern-day slavery' people. I am currently developing a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant proposal along these lines with the collaboration of Stefano Bellucci, Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh, Benadetta Rossi and hopefully others.

I see my interest in constructed kinship/concubinage now being furthered within the context of labour reproduction. As we acknowledge that so many in the contemporary (especially urban) labour force are of slave descent, that question of how a system that depended in some significant way on kinship, defined in a variety of relationships one of which was concubinage, has made/is making the transition - becomes important.

When I think of Fatma, she in fact provides a case study for this question as well: her first 'job' outside of the Barka household was as a paid worker in the fish-packing factory in Agadir. This is what gave her the money to build a house to which she then returned, continuing to engage with the Barka's as 'family'. Now that I think of it, I may revisit Fatma yet again as I begin this new journey. She has guided me well so far, hopefully she will stay with me in the future.



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