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Mauritania--They Live In Slavery

Garba Diallo reports on the last country to abolish slavery.

Shocking, incredible, but true

1996

Don't worry; I am not planning to kidnap you 200 years back in history. What I want to tell you about is now, 1995. It is the story about a black Mauritanian slave whose name is Abdi.

Abdi is not an ordinary name which free people choose for their children. Abdi means slave in Arabic and the name is typically reserved for black slaves. Even though slavery was officially abolished in 1980, for the third time in independent Mauritania, slavery and slave trade are still a living reality.

Because of the massive sexual exploitation of female slaves by white male masters, the slave population has increased to become the largest single ethnic group in the country.

Mauritania's population consists of about two million inhabitants: 32 per cent free black Africans of Fulani, Soninke and Wolof ethnic origins, 28 per cent white Moors of Arab-Berber origin, and 40 percent black slaves known as Abid or Haratin. The slaves belong to the white Moors, who have monopolized the government in the country since the French colonial regime transferred political power to them in 1960. The white Moors have no intention or interest in abolishing slavery, because this may incite the slaves into challenging Moorish supremacy.

New dimension of slavery

In cultural clashes between the Moorish regime and free black Africans, slaves have been used by the regime as buffer and death squads against the Africans. Slaves like Abdi still identify with, and blindly obey their masters. Thus, slavery has assumed a new and deadly, dimension. The current military regime of colonel Taya is aware of this and is exploiting slave power to settle old scores with the free blacks who resist and challenge Moorish hegemony.

Since the Afro-Arab conflict exploded into violent clashes in 1989, slaves have been organized into militia groups, which the government uses to massacre and deport blacks to Senegal and Mali. Like in the apartheid days of South Africa, they are being manipulated into black-on-black mutual destruction.

Slave economy

I met Abdi in his master's shop near Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar on August 3, 1994. Dakar is not just the capital of Senegal, but also one of the busiest

urban centers in West Africa. Here, one can meet West African students, academics, elites and officials, who are there to study or to take part in endless regional forums. Dakar is also the meeting point for micro and macro business men and women coming to make or lose money. More colour is added to the urban chaos by all the foreign tourists who come by the thousands in their red, bare legs every year.

Established in 1958, the university is one of the oldest and most prestigious education centres in West Africa. Obviously Abdi did not end up here to learn in order to join the few elite of the region. He was brought here from Mauritania by his master, who was seeking profit. The master can work him to death with impunity and then send for another slave.

Shockingly, no one seems to notice that a black slave is still being kept in bondage, right in the heart of Dakar by his Moorish enslaver. The modern chaos brings certain freedoms to the rapidly growing informal business underworld.

Like in many other parts of the continent, the colonially created state of Mauritania is withering away. The role of the state has been reduced by the IMF and World Bank conditions that ensure the dictator's protection from being lynched by the hungry and angry urban masses.

The Moorish master is not worried at all that this capital crime might be discovered, or that people passing by his shop might hang him in the tree growing just outside. Decidedly, the university students who are regular customers of the slave shop must have learned that slavery was abolished in the former French colonies already in 1905.

Prior to the 1980 abolition, slavery had been declared illegal in 1960 and 1966, but only on paper. The slave holders have become so accustomed to exploiting blacks as slaves for the last thousand years, that they cannot give up living on the backs of their slaves just like that. Both slaves and enslavers have internalized the slave-master status quo in such a way, that it would take more than just official decrees to eradicate slavery in the country.

Slave soldiers

The latest abolition was motivated by different factors. After a decade of catastrophic drought, most of the nomadic masters became so poor that they were no longer able even to feed themselves, not to mention to keep and feed a large number of slaves. Thousands of slaves were therefore released into the already overcrowded urban centres, where their masters hoped they would be able to collect a living for the masters' households. Masters are not supposed to do manual labour. While some slaves were recruited as menial soldiers to fight in the West Sahara War from 1976 to 1979, others hung around and hustled, stealing or selling basics like water. When Mauritania withdrew from the Sahara War, the slave soldiers were demobilized and sent to the streets.

Aborted liberation struggle

Enlightened slaves organized themselves and established an emancipation movement called "El Hor" meaning freedom. El Hor's aim was the total abolition of slavery and effective and concrete measures to help the slaves become economically independent.

This was the only way to cultivate self respect and psycho-social emancipation. Although the methods El Hor chose were peaceful and mild, this nevertheless created panic within the white Moorish community and its military regime. The organization was challenging both the traditional social order and the military dictatorship.

Their liberation campaign was about to paralyse the slave market and make it impossible for the masters to sell human beings on the open market. Outside Mauritania, El Hor managed to draw the attention of international media and human rights groups to the persistence of slavery in the country. The result was embarrassing pressures on the regime from abroad.

To prevent a full scale slave revolution leading to real emancipation and the demise of minority rule, the regime of colonel Ould Haidalla decreed on July 5, 1980 abolition and the imposition of the Islamic Sharia Law. Sharia gives masters the right to compensation for setting their slaves free. Thus, the abolition decree stipulated that slavery was abolished throughout Mauritania, and that a national commission composed of Muslim legal experts, economists and administrators would be established to assess how much the masters would be compensated for each slave lost by the abolition.

Nothing was done to free the slaves in any meaningful sense of the word. But the regime managed to achieve its objectives, which were to deflect both external and internal pressures, while satisfying the masters at the same time. The masters are the same white Moors who control the state machinery for their own exclusive benefit. In this way, real emancipation was aborted.

Camel torture

For Abdi it was safer to remain with his master, who is morally responsible for his household and animals. Abdi is not responsible, nor is he a human being with feelings or the right to make a family. He is a machine that works like hell without pay or rest. Like the machine, Abdi needs only to be fed to oil his black muscles from cracking. His master can take him anywhere and make him carry out any task. He can be legally sold, given away, used to pay a bride price, or castrated to avoid mating with the master's harem.

The master's right comes before that of God, and he has the right to sleep with any of Abdi's female relatives, as they are by law his concubines. Abdi is not even allowed to go to the mosque if his master needs him. If he tries to escape, the master applies the dreaded camel torture on him. Abdi is mounted on a thirsty camel with his legs tied under the belly. Then the ship of the desert is allowed to drink. As the huge belly expands, Abdi's legs crack and he will never be able to run away again.

If Abdi uses his head "too much", the master sends insects down his ears. A large belt around his head blocks his ears, while both his hands are tied behind his back. As the insects struggle to get out, Abdi is driven to insanity. The vast majority of the slaves are so brain-washed, that they would consider it a sin to escape from their masters. Their ancestors were kidnapped into slavery long ago, and their offspring have been brought up to believe that Allah created two groups of people: slaves and masters, each playing specific and eternal roles in society.

Slave and master go to Dakar

Abdi, another slave and their master had come to Dakar some years ago. Perhaps the master intended to use his slaves as starting capital for his business. Small businesses thrive and bring quick profit, especially for a foreigner with free slave labourers who can melt in as Senegalese in Dakar.

There are no state controlled opening hours, so the two slaves work almost 24 hours a day, and eat and sleep inside the shop in shift. I coincidentally stopped by the shop to buy a drink. Abdi was busy selling basic items to customers from the university. There was another man helping Abdi. I recognized them as Mauritanian slaves, because they were black and spoke the Arabic dialect of the white Moor community of Mauritania.

This made me curious to want to talk with the two men about their business in Dakar. Without telling them that I was actually a black Mauritanian like them, we conversed across the counter of the shop. But they were hesitant to my inquiries concerning their life in Dakar and the situation in Mauritania. After a while though, they said that they were running the shop “together” with their master.

I wondered where the master was.

Abdi smiled and pointed behind the counter. There he was, a little shabby looking white Moor, sleeping (see photograph) while his two black slaves toiled for him. Before he woke up, I was able to steal a couple of shots of him and his two slaves.

The silent North

The UN and diplomatic missions are well aware of the situation in Mauritania. (See box). So, what are the reasons behind the international community’s silence toward slavery in Mauritania?

It is definitely not because of any economic or strategic considerations, that the rest of the world does not help to eradicate this evil practice.

In my opinion, the most relevant factors are:

- ?? There is little inter-African communication on cultural or political issues. Otherwise, Africans would have realized that the slaveholders consider all blacks to be either tamed or potential slaves.
- ?? This problem is a part of the Afro-Arab cultural conflict, which ranges from the Sudan by the Red Sea to Mauritania on the Atlantic Coast. This conflict has a clear racial element which has been going on for more than a thousand years. Both African and Arab leaders prefer not to talk about this dirty and deadly north-south conflict within the south, because this would suggest a lack of solidarity within the Third World. The traditional “imperialist North versus exploited poor South” attitude in international relations could not be sustained.
- ?? The legacy of trans-Atlantic slavery has left a collective and eternal guilt in the European mind, which makes it difficult for European nations to take a moral stand on condemning Arab slavery in Mauritania.
- ?? Most European writers who have been to Mauritania belong to the romantics who worship the magic of the desert and its rough and violent social order. This love for the desert and the feudal system helps to preserve the evil system in its racist form.

The Danish connection

One of the leading supporters and lovers of the Mauritanian desert society was Henrik Olesen of Denmark. Olesen was the local UN boss, who preferred to be called 'Le Patron'. He closed his eyes, ears and conscience to the most brutal violation of human rights until one afternoon in June 1989, when Mauritanian security police stormed the UN offices to arrest, undress, torture and deport his black Mauritanian finance director, Mr. Abdoul Diallo, and his personal secretary, Miss Roukhaya Ba, to Senegal.

When Henrik Olesen protested in a letter to the government, he was told to withdraw the letter and shut up – or get the hell out of the country. He left without delay. Was there any reaction from the UN or Denmark? Nothing, but silence.

Another Dane who has been deeply involved with the Mauritanian regime is Poul Sihm of the World Bank. When Norway threatened to cut development aid to Mauritania in 1991, because of the racist violation of human rights, Mr. Sihm sent a fax to the Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs with the following plea for the slaveholders:

“To stop this development [aid] would, in the eyes of someone who has been intimately involved in the [Arab owned] livestock sector of Mauritania since 1983 and as such has visited the country at least two times a year, and be a great mistake.” (Fax number 2791/1, October 24, 1991, by Mr. Poul Sihm).

Liberation struggle

What all this means is, that Abdi and his 800,000 fellow slaves should not expect much solidarity and support from the Danes, nor other world leaders. As another slave called Bilal told *Le Monde* in 1990, the slaves have to carry out their own liberation struggle to the inevitable victory of justice over injustice. Time, history, demography and justice are on the side of the victims of this brutal practice. In the meantime, Abdi will work with no pay and without complaining, while his master sleeps deeply into the middle Ages.