Bare-foot activists: 
Transformations in the Haratine movement in Mauritania*

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Slavery was a widespread phenomenon in much of pre-colonial Africa but Mauritania stands out as one of the few African countries where it persisted as an entrenched institution even in post-colonial times. Mauritania also offers a rare example of an emancipation movement founded and run by slaves, ex-slaves and descendants of slaves.¹ This pioneering social movement enabled people of servile origins to carve out a place for their protest actions in the public sphere. Previously, there had been isolated cases of slave revolts but El-Hor, an organization founded in March 1978 by activists of slave descent, developed into a social and political movement that ultimately entered the corridors of political power. El-Hor (‘freeman’ or ‘emancipated’ in Arabic) aimed to further the ‘liberation and emancipation’ of the ‘heirs of slavery’.²

This chapter does not intend to primarily document the history of this struggle as such, even though it is not widely known. Instead, it analyzes the transformations undergone by the Haratine movement since its first actions in 1980. To this end, I describe the trajectory of the collective action as it developed at the interface between society, politics and the struggle for civil

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* Article translated from French by Noal Mellott (CNRS, Paris).
and human rights. The focus is on the movement’s origins and the successive changes in its form of organization, types of actions and the outcome of its activism.

Context and origins

Located between the Western Sahara to the north and the Senegal River to the south, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania has a population of about three million. Its geographical position between the Arab world of North Africa and Black Africa explains some of the ambiguities in Mauritania’s complex national identity: Arab or/and African? Mauritanians are divided along lines of race and ethnicity as well as social status. In terms of race, the main division is between Black African Mauritanians or Afro-Mauritanians and so-called ‘White’ Arab-Berbers or Moors. Given the lack of official up-to-date statistics, it is assumed that nearly 30% are ethnic Black Africans (in particular, Haalpulaar, Soninke and Wolof). Arab-Berber Moors make up the majority of the population and refer to themselves as bidhân (‘Whites’) even though more than half of them are, in fact, Black Moors.

In terms of social status, the legacy of slavery is still a crucial factor in the social hierarchy of Mauritanian society today. Among both the Afro-Mauritanians and the Moors, there is a clear divide between the masters and the slaves or people of slave descent. Although this social division is often expressed in racial terms – white masters and black slaves – race and class do not fully coincide. More than half of the Moors are Black Moors or Haratine, a group primarily made up of slaves (âbid; singular: ‘âbd) and of persons freed from slavery (hratîn, singular: hartâni) and their descendants. In Afro-Mauritanian society, masters and slaves have the same skin colour and servitude is less visible than in Moorish society. Activists claim that more than half of the total population is of servile origins, but this remains disputed.

Moorish society has always practised ‘chattel slavery’, usually based on racial differences (Black slaves with Arab-Berber masters) and covered by a conservative interpretation of Islamic law. The considerable number of former slaves is evidence that slavery prevailed on a large scale and for a long time. This chapter focuses on the emancipation movement among the Haratine. Moor slaves and ex-slaves have no common cause with the Afro-Mauritanian slaves and although they share the stigma of servile status, they are divided by language and historical experience. Among Afro-Mauritanians, slavery is less

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