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Haratin activism in post-slavery Mauritania: Abolition, emancipation and the politics of identity

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Introduction: Post-slavery and citizenship struggles in West Africa

The history and legacies of African slavery and contemporary social and political mobilizations have received increased scholarly attention in recent years.¹ These studies are often situated in the context of ‘post-slavery’, a conceptual approach comparable to that of postcolonialism in that it equally stresses the resilience and legacies of ideologies, mentalities and social hierarchies of slaveholder societies in a chronological ‘after’, despite the legal abolition and official ‘end’ of slavery. Benedetta Rossi (2015: 304) has criticized this field of scholarship for its linear historical view when considering the transition from slavery to emancipation and the tendency to define the moral illegitimacy of slavery (and other extreme forms of dependency) as a universal norm – a normative stance not reflecting the reality of many post-slavery societies, notably in Africa. In certain contexts, legal and normative pluralism account both for the partial perpetuation and reactivation of master–slave relations despite abolitionist legislation and for conflicting understandings and discourses of emancipation.

This conceptualization of post-slavery conforms with the situation that can be observed in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, where slavery and hierarchical distinctions among descent-based status groups seem particularly unaffected by colonial rule and abolitionist policies. Whereas ‘traditional’ forms of slavery have gradually receded due to extensive ecological, economic and social transformations, descent-based status hierarchies largely persist in the country. The same holds true for many other states in the extended region. Eric Hahonou and Lotte Pelckmans (2011) take a comparative perspective on West African anti-slavery movements and interpret them as ‘citizenship struggles’ of slaves and slave descendants in the context of the conflicting political ideologies of democracy and aristocracy, which can be mutually contextualized within such plural legal landscapes. They therefore propose a social

movement theory perspective – an approach that has been developed and used mainly in the context of Western societies, although it has been increasingly (and fruitfully) applied in African contexts in recent years (Ellis and van Kessel 2009) – applied to abolitionist and emancipatory struggles. Based on this comparative perspective, they argue ‘that social movements such as anti-slavery struggles concerning identity are not replacing struggles over material issues, as observed by social movement theorists in European contexts, but are closely interlinked’, as ‘in West African contexts of political and institutional reform implementation, demands for recognition of new identities are a way of accessing resources’ (Eric Hahonou and Lotte Pelckmans 2011: 141). The anti-slavery movements they analyse emerged in francophone West Africa in the late 1970s, but they have grown in scale since the 1990s, thanks in part to the democratization and decentralization policies that have been increasingly advanced since that period.² These political processes have created new possibilities of participation and organization for formerly marginalized status groups in the region and had an impact on local notions of social identity, resulting in renegotiations of traditional hierarchies, religious normativity and the (attempted) creation of new ethnicities (Pelckmans and Hardung 2015: 19).

The renegotiation of identity and status among the various groups of slave descendants in West Africa thus exhibits certain parallels with what has come to be known as ‘identity politics’ in the context of multicultural Western democracies, as they often strive to transform the stigmatized social identity that has historically been ascribed to them by the dominant strata of their respective societies into a source of positive group identification and collective mobilization.³ In this sense, they use the affirmation of difference and pursue strategies associated with the ‘politics of recognition’ (Taylor 1994) as a means of emancipation and of claiming collective rights as citizens. However, the explicit claim to be recognized as a distinct ‘ethnic group’ seems to be a peculiar feature of some of these West African anti-slavery movements, which might well be related to the special nexus of ethnicity and citizenship created through colonial rule in Africa (see Keller 2014; Mamdani 1996).

This chapter focuses on the development of an abolitionist and emancipatory social movement among the Mauritanian *Ḥarāṭīn*, from its emergence in the late 1970s to the present. In particular, it examines the ways in which the members of this socio-ethnic group, usually defined as hassanophone⁴ slave descendants of Black African origin in the Mauritanian context,⁵ have challenged the hierarchical social model that is largely acknowledged in the region, attempting to remove the stigma still attached to their (supposed) slave ancestry and formulating demands for civil rights, political inclusion and positive discrimination on the grounds of their specific socio-ethnic identity. In this context, I argue that the question of ‘ethnogenesis’ in relation to the profound socioeconomic transformations experienced by the extended hassanophone society and political activism among the Mauritanian *Ḥarāṭīn* since the 1970s constitutes a gap in the scholarship devoted to the region. Furthermore, the observation of distinctive identity politics in relation to the Mauritanian and other West African anti-slavery movements may also be linked to debates on culturally defined (ethnic) minorities and collective rights in international human rights law (Thompson 1997) and to a global shift in the articulation of social movements and political demands from class

issues to cultural identities (Hechter 2004), a process that is rarely discussed in non-Western contexts. As globalization has now reached even the remotest corners of the Sahara (Choplin 2009; Hill 2012; Scheele 2012), these developments also deserve to be considered in such supposedly 'peripheral' African contexts as the Mauritanian one. In order to fully grasp this phenomenon, we must pay attention to larger political conflicts related to identity issues, which have been engendered by colonial and postcolonial state-building and nationalist ideologies.

Constructivist anthropological perspectives on ethnicity help to shed light on the current renegotiation of traditional social designs and identities in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.⁶ Whereas the primordialist conception of ethnicity has largely been abandoned due to its analytical flaws (primordial notions of ethnicity cannot serve as an explanation, but rather require explanation themselves), purely instrumental accounts of ethnic phenomena as resulting from the strategic mobilization of certain identities for contemporary political or economic purposes have often tended to neglect history and 'culture' as deeper sources of group dynamics in the *longue durée*. Although ethnic identities are continually re-elaborated in response to changing circumstances, they cannot be 'invented' arbitrarily in short periods of time for purely instrumental reasons and without the necessary 'historical material' to work with. In the context of African politics, primordialist and instrumentalist approaches to ethnicity alike have tended to focus on ethnic phenomena related to the notion of 'political tribalism', as an obstacle to modern statehood, inclusive citizenship and a driver of 'ethnic conflict' (see, for example, Alumona and Azom 2018). More nuanced constructivist approaches to ethnicity and nationalism that have been developed since the 1980s can help us to make sense of Mauritania's postcolonial history and the claims voiced by Ḥarāṭīn activists.⁷ Based on his research on ethnic politics in Africa, Lonsdale (1994) argues that the language of ethnicity came to serve as a vehicle for disputes within groups regarding the normative basis of political community, a development that he describes as 'moral ethnicity'. In this sense, he argues, contemporary African ethnicity should not be directly equated with 'political tribalism' and should instead be understood 'as a form of nationalism, an intellectually imaginative political project of liberation that makes modern claims on behalf of civil rights, directly comparable with European nationalisms, if also sharing their Janus-faced potential for exclusive, jealous evil'. He urges us to think of ethnic nationalism in Africa 'as, in large part, a moral struggle with all the complexities of social change that our previous analyses had barely begun to understand' (Lonsdale 1994: 136). This notion of 'moral ethnicity' resonates with what Hahonou and Pelckmans describe as 'citizenship struggles' of slave descendants in francophone West Africa. Post-slavery societies in Africa are strongly characterized by such moral struggles, as different ideologies concerning the normative basis of community and political authority coexist and wage a 'war of position'.

Slavery, race and social order in precolonial Biḍān society

Like many other West African and Saharan populations, the Biḍān have historically adhered to a hierarchical model in which genealogical bonds and institutionalized

relations of patronage and dependency served to legitimize and stabilize social stratification, including slavery.⁸ Biḍān culture and society developed after Arab ‘tribes’⁹ migrated from North Africa towards the western fringes of the Sahara from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, successively subjecting the local population of Amazighs and Black Africans to a tributary position and eventually Arabizing the region following their victory over a Amazigh coalition in the religiously inspired rebellion of *Shurbubba* (c. 1644–1674; see Norris 1986).¹⁰ The formally acknowledged social order of the larger hassanophone sphere distinguishes the ‘noble’/‘free’ status groups of the ‘warriors’ (*ḥassān*) and ‘marabouts’ (*zwāya*) from their tributaries and dependents: tributary herders of Amazigh origin (*znāga*); ‘blacksmiths’ (*m’allemīn*) specialized in craftsmanship; ‘griots’ (*iggāwen*); the descendants of manumitted slaves (*ḥarāṭīn*); and slaves (*‘abīd*). These kinship and status groups were integrated into a ‘segmentary’ system of dynamic alliances based on the principle of patronage and protection in return for submission and tributes, which gave rise to the four precolonial Moorish emirates of Trarza, Brakna, Adrar and Tagant in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bonte 2008; Ould Cheikh 2017). The historical existence of slavery among the Biḍān, as in most parts of Muslim Africa, was regulated by local traditions of Maliki Islamic jurisprudence (Oßwald 2016, 2017). It has been argued that local *zwāyā* scholars strove to sacralize the institution of slavery and the larger social order of descent-based status groups as a God-given natural order by instrumentalizing their proficiency in Islamic knowledge and excluding those of slave descent from religious education (Esseissah 2016). They undoubtedly asserted a cultural hegemony that continues to reverberate in contemporary society.

The Biḍān share an ethno-linguistic identity vis-à-vis neighbouring Sub-saharan African populations (Halpulaaren, Soninké, Wolof and Bambara, collectively referred to as *kwār* in Hassaniyya Arabic) that is based on their nomadic cultural heritage (whereas the Black African communities were largely sedentary agriculturalists)¹¹ and the Hassaniyya dialect of Arabic (also referred to as *klām al-biḍān*, ‘language the Biḍān’, which additionally differentiates them from neighbouring populations like the Tuareg and North African Arabs). One might therefore argue that Biḍān identity has no racial connotations, as in its broader ethno-linguistic sense it includes hassanophone black slaves and Ḥarāṭīn and because, after centuries of intermarriage and blending between the various ethnic groups of the region,¹² skin colour does not necessarily correlate with alleged genealogical origins. However, historians Bruce Hall (2011) and Chouki El Hamel (2013) have convincingly argued that indiginous concepts of race developed in the West African Sahel well before the arrival of the European colonizers and formed an integral part of the way in which precolonial social identities and hierarchies that legitimized the large-scale enslavement of Black Africans were constructed, as ‘blackness’ became deeply associated with non-Muslim/pagan origins and therefore with a generalized eligibility for slavery.

The Arabic ethnonym *biḍān* literally translates as ‘the whites’. In the context of the Sahara, this colour terminology refers to Arab-Muslim origins. When applied internally to Biḍān society, the term *biḍān* has a statutory meaning and refers exclusively to the free/noble (*ḥurr*) status groups of the *ḥassān* and the *zwāya*, whereas slaves and Ḥarāṭīn are subsumed under the label *sūdān* (‘the blacks’) (Brhane 1997, 2000).¹³ Although skin

colour alone is not a definitive marker of social status and alleged patrilineal descent, there is undoubtedly a strong overlap between 'blackness' and inferior social rank in Arab-Muslim social and cultural history (see also Lewis 1992). Race must therefore also be considered an important element of social identification and stratification in the Sahara, although individuals and groups were historically considered 'white' or 'black' because of their (alleged) genealogical origins and associated status categories, not because of their skin colour or other phenotypical features. Only with the advent of French colonial rule were earlier indigenous conceptions of social identity supplanted by the modern 'scientific' European concept of race (Villasante-de Beauvais 2007b), which exerted an important influence on their subsequent transformations. Based on European conceptions of racial difference, the French categorized the hassanophone population into 'black Moors' (slaves and Ḥarāṭīn) and 'white Moors' (Bīḍān) based on skin colour.

The etymological origin of the term *ḥarāṭīn* (sing. *ḥarṭānī*) is disputed. A popular version claims that it derives from the Arabic words *ḥurr* ('free') and *tānī* ('second') and conveys the meaning 'freemen of second degree'. Others trace it to the Arabic verbal root *ḥ-r-th*, which means 'to cultivate', and translate *ḥarāṭīn* as 'cultivators'. Linguist Catherine Taine-Cheikh (1989) in turn refutes the thesis of an Arabic etymology and argues that it most likely derives from the Berber lexeme *āḥarḍān*, which denotes a mixture of races (of animals or humans) and colours, especially in the sense of 'becoming darker/black'. Corinne Fortier (2020) recently argued that in Hassaniyya the term *ḥarr* can also carry the meaning of 'pure' and that *ḥarṭānī* translates as 'unpure' in opposition to it. Ḥarāṭīn populations can be found throughout the entire western Saharan region and the Sahel, in a region that includes (apart from Mauritania) southern Morocco, northern Mali and southwestern Algeria (the precolonial *Trāb al-Bīḍān*, 'land of the whites'). The Islamic Republic of Mauritania, however, is the only contemporary state with a Hassaniyya-speaking majority population, in which the Ḥarāṭīn form the largest demographic group (approx. 40 per cent), ahead of the Bīḍān (approx. 30 per cent) and the Halpulaaren, Soninké and Wolof (together approx. 30 per cent).¹⁴

As membership in a *qabila* in the Arab-Muslim world is generally expressed symbolically in terms of genealogy (*naṣab*) and kinship (Bonte et al. 1991), the case of the Ḥarāṭīn is a curious one: they are considered part of their respective Bīḍān *qabila*, but only as subordinate clients who are excluded from genealogical affiliation with the constitutive kinship groups.¹⁵ Their attachment to the *qabila* is generally based on the Islamic legal concept of *walā'* – which designates a contractual clientelist relation of mutual solidarity with their former masters into which former slaves automatically enter following their formal manumission – and not on reciprocal kinship, as men of slave origin generally were (and to a large extent still are) forbidden to marry women from the higher social strata.¹⁶ According to the locally acknowledged conception of social status, which is based on supposedly inherent moral qualities grounded in genealogical credentials (Klein 2005), and, in the case of *zwāya* lineages with divine blessing (*baraka*), those of slave origin, although nominally free Muslims, remain inferior to those of freeborn status.¹⁷ This stigma can attach to them indefinitely, even if their ancestors were manumitted generations ago, as long as the collective

memory of their slave origin is kept alive. Furthermore, contrary to more common interpretations of this institution, certain Bīḍān scholars have argued that the concept of *walā'* justifies legal discrimination against the subordinate *mawālī* (Ould Cheikh 2020: 119–21). Most Ḥarāṭīn were obliged to pay tribute (in the form of shares of their annual harvest or occasional unremunerated labour) to their respective Bīḍān patrons and in this sense continued to suffer from economic exploitation despite their liberation from slavery.¹⁸

Revolutionary times: Historicizing the emergence of Ḥarāṭīn activism in Mauritania

When the French began to establish colonial rule in the western regions of the Sahara at the turn of the twentieth century, slavery was soon formally abolished, as it had been in the rest of French West Africa.¹⁹ Razzias and the slave trade were banned; as the French colonial administration had limited resources to control the vast desert territory and depended on the support of the Bīḍān nobility for their project of 'pacification', however, they opted to accommodate them by preserving their local sovereignty and autonomy, including their control over the 'servile population', as slaves and slave descendants were now called in official reports, largely untouched (Klein 1998; Robinson 2000). Hereditary slavery was tolerated because it was considered an essential pillar of the local social fabric that could not simply be abolished 'from above' without causing the collapse of traditional authority and jeopardizing the strategy of indirect rule. Therefore, it was still widespread when Mauritania became independent in 1960,²⁰ although French colonial policies during the first half of the twentieth century also gave way to important changes in the statutory mobility of slaves and Ḥarāṭīn (McDougall 2007). It was only after the devastating droughts of the late 1960s and 1970s had severely undermined the traditional pastoralist economy that a genuine abolitionist movement emerged in Mauritania. Slaves and Ḥarāṭīn left their masters and patrons in large numbers and settled in segregated agricultural hamlets (*adwābe*, sg. *adabay*) or on the outskirts of the developing cities. Ould Cheikh (2020) argues that the spatial separation between former slaves and masters during this period played a key role in the re-formulation and re-creation of Ḥarāṭīn identity out of this new experience of a certain amount of autonomy.

In addition to this process of sedentarization and urbanization, the war in the Western Sahara that broke out after the chaotic decolonization of the Spanish colony in 1976 also had an impact on the situation of the Ḥarāṭīn in Mauritania (and likely those in the Western Sahara), as enrolment and service in the Mauritanian army provided men of slave origin with another opportunity for individual emancipation and the cutting of ties with their former masters (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009: 160). Perhaps more importantly, the emergence of the 'Frente Polisario' independence movement in the colony of the Spanish Western Sahara was itself related to the proliferation of revolutionary socialist ideologies in the region, which radically questioned the traditional model of society based on hierarchical principles.²¹ The ideology of socialist Pan-Arabism that emanated from the Middle East (notably

Egypt, Syria and Iraq) also took roots in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in the 1960s. Nasserist and Baathist political currents among the *Biḍān* opposed President Ould Daddah's unitary party government due to its initial proximity to France and the idea of a multicultural Mauritanian nation that would function as a 'bridge' between the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, opting instead for ideological commitment to the superiority of Arab-Islamic civilization and Arabization policies.²² Given the socialist orientation of those Pan-Arab ideologies, Baathists criticized statutory and racial discrimination against the *Ḥarāṭīn* and invited them to join their ranks and thus affirm their identity as 'black Arabs' (Freire and Taleb Heidi forthcoming). In addition to socialist Pan-Arabism, a local movement of communist-Maoist inspiration called '*Kādiḥīn*' attracted many followers among Mauritania's nascent urban 'working class' and 'progressive' intellectual circles between the late 1960s and early 1970s. Simultaneously, with neighbouring Senegal's President Léopold Senghor embracing and prominently representing the Pan-Africanist '*Négritude*' movement (Villasante 2007b), anti-colonial revolutionary ideologies also poured into Black African political milieus in the Senegal valley. In reaction to the establishment of a new territorial and political border by the French, the Black African communities living on the northern bank of the Senegal River strove to retain their local autonomy and started to organize on a regional and ethnic basis, as they had suddenly become 'national minorities' (Abdoul 2004).²³

Against the background of these revolutionary times, a small elite of *Ḥarāṭīn* educated in French colonial schools founded the clandestine movement *El-Hor* (Ar. *al-Ḥurr*, 'the Freeman', short for 'Organisation pour la libération et l'émancipation des Haratines') in 1978. The *Ḥarāṭīn* intellectuals behind *El-Hor* felt that the problem of slavery had not yet been adequately addressed by the Baathists and the *Kādiḥīn*, as these movements were framed in more 'global' terms that tended to neglect locally specific mechanisms of domination and oppression. In their founding charter, they stated their motivation as follows:

Fondamentalement inspirés par la religion, aggravés par une interprétation abusive de cette même religion par les couches sociales privilégiées, entretenues par l'ambiguïté, voire le silence quasi complet de la législation du pays, les inégalités dont souffrent les Haratines sont non seulement d'ordre économique, social, politique et religieux, mais elles sont aussi, et surtout, inhérentes à une mentalité puissamment ancrée par des siècles de conditionnement psychologique. Lutter contre tout ceci constitue la raison d'être de *El-Hor*.

(*El-Hor* 2004)

The critique of anchoring slavery in local Islamic traditions and the goal of reforming respective mentalities and juridical-religious norms in *Biḍān* society were thus at the core of this abolitionist movement. In this reformist vein, *El-Hor* called for the removal of 'all the contradictions that exist between Muslim and modern law, in particular those having to do with the slave status, namely: the problems related to the incapacitation of slaves (property rights, testimony, inheritance) and to matrimony (marriage, concubinage)' (*El-Hor*, cited in Ould Ahmed Salem 2009: 162).

The second essential aspect of El-Hor's emancipative project concerns the need for the development of a collective consciousness among hassanophone slaves and Ḥarāṭīn in order to enable collective action and to effectively push for such a social revolution. Until El-Hor's attempt to shift its meaning, the term *ḥarāṭīn* (sg. m. *ḥarṭānī*, f. *ḥarṭāniyya*) generally applied to legally manumitted former slaves and their descendants – those nominally free but dependent clients (*mawālī*) who were distinguished from other such groups within extended hassanophone society by their association with a slave background and Black African origin. By contrast, the *'abid* formed another category of people who were seen as the mere 'property' of their masters, frequently compared to livestock in the local legal literature.²⁴ El-Hor wanted to erase these distinctions and unite all 'black Moors' under the Ḥarāṭīn label. This was no easy task; at the time, the attachment of the Ḥarāṭīn to the *qabila*-centred social and political structures of the Biḍān was not yet contested, apart from those few civil servants with a 'modern' French education who initiated the movement. In general, the territorially dispersed Ḥarāṭīn communities depended on their affiliation with local Biḍān lineages for protection in case of conflict and for land use rights and therefore primarily identified with their respective *qabila*, not with other 'black' hassanophones. In addition, many 'established' Ḥarāṭīn (those who managed to distance themselves from their slave past or completely denied that their ancestors had ever been enslaved) most likely opposed being lumped together with slaves in a single category, as this would have diminished their actual social status.²⁵ The founding members of El-Hor therefore stated the 'necessity of raising their collective awareness and of their unified struggle' and strove for the 'radical elimination of particularisms among the social class of the Ḥarāṭīn'. Independent of their current social status and tribal affiliations, they aimed to integrate all hassanophone slaves and Ḥarāṭīn within a supratribal 'imagined community' capable of organized, collective action. The Ḥarāṭīn, the El-Hor charter claims, are a 'people' characterized by a distinct hybrid culture, which is the result of their forced assimilation into Biḍān society through the historical experience of slavery:

La double appartenance des Haratines au monde négro-africain dont ils sont originaires d'une part et au monde arabo-berbère qui constitue leur milieu « d'adoption » détermine leur spécificité culturelle qui apparaît à travers divers aspects de leur vie ... « El-Hor » s'engage également à *reconstituer l'histoire authentique des Haratines* afin de fournir aux générations futures la somme des souffrances que *leur peuple* a endurées durant les siècles. Par ailleurs, *la revalorisation de la culture des Haratines implique nécessairement qu'elle soit considérée sur le même pied d'égalité que les autres cultures nationales et bénéficie comme elles des mêmes préoccupations de l'Etat.*

(El-Hor 2004, emphasis added)

This clearly shows that El-Hor's agenda also had an ethnopolitical aspect; official (state) recognition of the Ḥarāṭīn as a distinct 'national community' on equal footing with the Biḍān, the Haalpulaaren, the Soninké and the Wolof was a stated goal. The cultural elements that Ḥarāṭīn activists draw on to substantiate these claims are certain

musical genres, notably *medḥ* (religious music in praise of the Prophet Muhammad) and *benj* (popular music performed by Ḥarāṭīn women on the occasion of weddings and other profane festivities), musical instruments (the *nayffāra* flute, among others), or the *la' b al-dabbūs* (a ritual stick fight performed by Ḥarāṭīn men). These traditions were created by slaves and Ḥarāṭīn within the distinct social spaces they inhabited and historically served to express a moral subjectivity that subtly or overtly contested their representation in the dominant Biḍān culture (Baba Ahmed 2017; N'gaïde 2008). In the context of the Ḥarāṭīn movement's political project, however, these traditions were now put to a different and distinctively 'modern' use, meaning that they can be understood as 'invented traditions' in Hobsbawm and Ranger's sense (Leservoisier 2004). Given the diverse historical and cultural background of slavery among Black African ethnic groups, El-Hor did not aspire to include all Mauritanian slave descendants in their abolitionist movement and instead focused exclusively on hassanophone spheres. In this context, they defined the new Ḥarāṭīn community they were striving to bring to life in a double contrast with the other 'Black African' ethnic groups and the 'white' Biḍān.

Emerging as an underground movement, they spread their message and attracted followers in the rural *adwābe* and in the rapidly growing suburban slums (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009: 163). When Moktar Ould Daddah's unitary party regime was overthrown by the military in 1978, El-Hor's leaders seized the opportunity to present the movement on the national political stage, publicly declaring their support for the junta. Although state authorities continued to repress El-Hor's anti-slavery mobilization, the new military rulers realized the necessity of responding to the public outcry against slavery voiced by the movement.²⁶ On 5 July 1980, president Ould Haidallah announced the abolition of slavery in a national radio broadcast (Ruf 2000: 243). This declaration was followed by a formal decree the following year. Despite the ambiguities involved in the government's political reaction,²⁷ this was a big success for El-Hor, as the legitimacy of the Ḥarāṭīn's emancipatory aspirations was officially acknowledged. The abolition decree was followed by an important land reform in 1983, which abrogated traditional land tenure systems based on collective ownership of locally established kinship groups and supplanted it with new regulations inspired by Islamic law that enabled individual ownership (Ould Cheikh and Ould al-Barra 1996). This was meant to assist the Ḥarāṭīn in acquiring the land they had cultivated for generations without holding any property rights, thereby creating material conditions under which emancipation and economic development could proceed.²⁸

Despite these concessions, the Ḥarāṭīn activists of El-Hor were not incorporated into the political system until president Ould Haidallah was overthrown in another coup d'état in 1984, which brought long-time authoritarian ruler Colonel Maaouya Ould Taya to power. The following year, he appointed Messaoud Ould Boulkheir (one of El-Hor's most prominent leaders) as Minister of Rural Development. This strategy of appeasement led to a decline in El-Hor's mobilization efforts at the grassroots level in the following years. The expansion of Ḥarāṭīn activists' involvement in official politics would only gain way when Ould Taya announced, under increasing internal and external political pressure, the democratic opening and decentralization of the political system at the beginning of the 1990s. Before that, however, Mauritania went

through the darkest chapter of its recent history, when the salience, politicization and racialization of the country's multi-ethnic make-up reached a tragic peak. This chapter would have a profound and lasting impact on intergroup relations and the hardening of communitarian boundaries.

Rising ethno-racial tensions: FLAM and African counter-nationalism

While El-Hor denounced the persistence of slavery and statutory discrimination, another conflict developed between Black African ethnic minorities and the Biḍān dominated regime. In the late colonial period, the sedentary Black African communities of the Senegal River valley had formed political alliances on an ethnic basis and rallied around demands for local autonomy, as they feared being marginalized in a nation-state with a hassanophone majority, in which political and military power was in the hands of the Biḍān (Abdoul 2004; Ba 1998). Paradoxically, whereas the Biḍān were recognized as the culturally and politically dominant majority population by the French, the indigenous colonial administration was largely made up of Black Africans who profited from their enrollment in French schools, whereas the Biḍān remained mostly committed to a nomadic lifestyle and traditional Islamic education (Ciavolella 2014: 336).²⁹ This contradictory state of affairs, resulting from French colonial policy, prevailed when the country became independent under Ould Daddah and his 'Parti du Peuple Mauritanien' (PPM), which managed to integrate various political factions under the umbrella of his nation-building project. Ould Daddah initially stressed the country's role as a 'bridge' between the Black African and the Arab world in his nationalist rhetoric, while retaining close ties with France. Lacking administrative structures in the interior and a feasible alternative, his government initially adopted the French school system and continued to rely on the francophone functionaries from the Senegal valley. As the anti-colonial Pan-Arabist ideologies of Baathism and Nasserism began to take root among the political elite, however, Ould Daddah's regime was put under pressure to cut its ties with the colonizer. Arab nationalism and the anti-colonial sentiments it fostered were soon translated into concrete policies.³⁰

Conflict emerged when Ould Daddah's government reformed the colonial education system and the state's language policies. This involved the introduction of Arabic as a compulsory subject in secondary education (in 1966) and its elevation to an official langue alongside French (in 1968). Although this may seem justified in a country with an arabophone majority population, Black African civil servants and intellectuals perceived this as cultural repression and a first step towards an imposed Arabization, with the ultimate aim of displacing them from the state administration and marginalizing them culturally, politically and economically. In response to the 1966 decree, Black African pupils from the college in Rosso went on strike, and a group of Black African functionaries published a document entitled 'Manifeste des 19', in which they expressed their fears and demanded a federalist reform of the nation-state order. The signatories of the 'Manifeste' were subsequently arrested. After this incident, the conflict around language and education policy and the distribution of power

and state revenues between Black African communities and the Biḍān continued to deteriorate, especially after Ould Daddah was deposed and the military came to power in 1978. Eventually, Black African intellectuals and functionaries hostile towards their subordinate inclusion in an Arab nation-state formed a clandestine organization – mainly made up of Haalpulaaren, the largest Black African minority in Mauritania – called the ‘Forces de Libération Africaines en Mauritanie’ (FLAM) in 1983. In 1986, they published the ‘Manifeste du Négro-mauritanien opprimé’, in which they rearticulated and intensified the discourse of the collective cultural, political and economic marginalization of Black Africans in a nation-state dominated by a ‘white’ Arab-Berber elite, and called for an armed uprising against Ould Taya’s authoritarian regime.³¹ FLAM’s discourse framed oppression and inequality (including slavery) exclusively in racial terms and questioned the basic legitimacy of the nation-state in its present form:

On se demande comment on peut donc parler d’Unité Nationale en Mauritanie, alors que les principes directeurs de l’Etat Unitaire sont bafoués par un Système (le système beydane) qui s’est toujours préoccupé de défendre les intérêts d’une *nationalité racio-culturelle (arabo-berbère) au détriment des autres* (...) Le refus de résoudre correctement les problèmes de la coexistence politique et économique des deux communautés raciales, sous le prétexte de préserver une “Mauritanie Unitaire” engendre petit à petit dans la conscience des Négro-mauritaniens un doute sur le principe même de l’Etat Unitaire.

(FLAM 1986, emphasis added)

The publication of this manifesto was followed by strong repression. When a group of Black African army officers affiliated with FLAM mounted a failed coup d’état in 1987, resulting in the execution of three of them, tensions were at a maximum. The regime used this move as a reason to further purge the administration and the armed forces of Black Africans deemed disloyal, replacing them with hassanophones.

As FLAM’s Manifesto states, Black African nationalists considered the Ḥarāṭīn to be part of a ‘Afro-Mauritanian’ (Fr. *Négro-Mauritanien*) community, which they defined in racial terms as opposed to the ‘Arab-Berber’ Biḍān. In this sense, they also embarked on a project to unite wider parts of the Mauritanian population politically while creating a new ‘imagined community’ explicitly based on race, under the label and narrative of the ‘oppressed Black Mauritanian’. With the Baathists already appealing to them to join the ‘Arab’ camp, FLAM directly addressed the Ḥarāṭīn in their underground newsletter and demanded their political cooperation by appealing to ‘racial solidarity’:

La lutte que je mène est celle de *la communauté négro-mauritanienne à laquelle tu appartiens*. Je lutte contre le racisme d’État mauritanien, je lutte contre l’esclavage, je lutte pour la libération de notre pays ...

(quoted in Ould Saleck 2000: 259, emphasis added)

In the light of these developments, Ḥarāṭīn activists found themselves between two competing nationalist camps. In this period of intense political tensions, the El-Hor

movement split into two opposed tendencies (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009, 2018a). Some of their members took up positions within Ould Taya's administration and joined the Arab nationalist camp, now arguing for the closure of the debate around slavery and stressing the historical and cultural bonds between the Ḥarāṭīn and the Bīḍān.³² The adherents of the other tendency, associated with Messaoud Ould Boulkheir and Boubacar Ould Messaoud, kept their distance from the regime and refused ideological alignment with either side. While criticizing the government for its racist policies, they also rejected the appropriation and instrumentalization of the abolitionist cause by FLAM activists (see Ould Ahmed Salem 2018a: 138).

Ḥarāṭīn activists accused the Black African intelligentsia of silencing and denying the problem of slavery in their own ranks and misrepresenting the abolitionist cause of the Ḥarāṭīn. FLAM's framing of slavery in Mauritania as a purportedly purely racial problem restricted to the 'white'/'Arab-Berber' community was clearly refuted as a misleading political manoeuvre by El-Hor:

Slavery is not a racial problem. There are in Mauritania black-skinned slave-owning feudal potentates, just as there are white ones. Likewise, there are democrats and opponents of slavery both among the white Moors and among the Poulars, Wolofs and Soninkes ... The conservative elements among the Poulaars, Wolofs and Soninkes are trying to sidetrack it [the emancipation movement] in order to use it in their struggles against the Arab-Berbers for the sharing of power.

(quoted in McDougall 2005: 967, emphasis added)³³

These statements from El-Hor's leaders exemplify the complex interconnections between the issues of slavery, race and ethnicity/nationality within postcolonial Mauritania and the Ḥarāṭīn activists' dissatisfaction with the Black African nationalists' attempt to interfere with their emancipatory project by associating the problem of slavery with the marginalization of the Black African ethnic minorities and framing both in terms of race.

The ethnic tensions that had built up in the Senegal valley finally escalated following an incident in the Mauritanian-Senegalese borderland in 1989, resulting in pogroms on both sides of the border and the subsequent expulsion of around eighty thousand Black Africans from the southern regions of Mauritania to Senegal and Mali.³⁴ These pogroms were to a large extent supported by local Ḥarāṭīn, instigated by security forces and local officials. Members of the military carried out extrajudicial executions of several hundred Black African officers and soldiers accused of having ties to FLAM.³⁵ The conflict eventually calmed down in 1991, not least due to the increasing international isolation of Ould Taya's regime, but also because he had achieved his goal of expelling FLAM's leadership from the Senegal valley. Although most of these refugees have now returned to Mauritania, either on their own or in the framework of a UNHCR resettlement programme between 2008 and 2012, the underlying conflicts around arable land and national belonging remain unresolved (Fresia 2009). The crimes committed by members of the armed forces during this period at the orders of military leaders and President Ould Taya have not been punished or dealt with and were instead covered up by an amnesty law in 1993.³⁶

Entering institutional politics and advocacy

Because of its dependency on foreign financial aid and the isolation of its main ally, Iraq, in the wake of the Gulf War (1991), Mauritania's government came under increasing pressure to address criticism from the international community concerning its suppression of oppositional political voices and its ethnic cleansing policies towards Black African communities in the Senegal valley in the early 1990s. Once the threat of FLAM had been neutralized, Ould Taya therefore announced the political liberalization of the country towards a pluralist democracy in 1991 and initiated constitutional reform. The Ḥarāṭīn activists of El-Hor now saw a chance to advance their cause through active participation in the electoral process.

In preparation for the first pluralist presidential elections, scheduled for 1992, the various political opponents of Ould Taya's regime united as the 'Union des Forces Démocratiques' (UFD). Although the results were highly contested, the incumbent Ould Taya managed to claim victory and remained in place. The El-Hor faction associated with Ould Boulkheir eventually left the UFD and finally created the 'Action pour le Changement' (AC) party in 1995. The AC was legalized by the state authorities, forming the first Ḥarāṭīn-controlled political party.³⁷ Even though the party clearly wanted to represent the Ḥarāṭīn population and the political goals of El-Hor (which included ending racial discrimination and the repression of Black African communities), it did not explicitly refer to identity, as this was criminalized by the new Constitution of 1991. The first article stated: 'Toute propagande particulariste de caractère racial ou ethnique est punie par la loi.' The decree regulating political parties stated: '[A]ucun parti ou groupement politique ne peut s'identifier à une race, à une ethnie, à une région, à une tribu, à un sexe ou une confrérie.' In practice, these regulations were applied quite selectively and mainly served to discredit the political opposition among the Ḥarāṭīn and the Black Africans as racist, segregationist and particularistic, where most other parties were controlled exclusively by Bīḍān (and often had a regional or tribal base), and (Pan-)Arabism had been adopted as the official state ideology. The AC also supported the creation of the union 'Confédération libre des travailleurs de Mauritanie' (CLTM), under the presidency of El-Hor member Samory Ould Beye, in order to back the political organization of the urban working class, largely constituted by Ḥarāṭīn (Ould Ahmed Salem 2018a: 128).³⁸ Whereas the Ḥarāṭīn activists associated with Ould Boulkheir chose to engage in party politics (as the circumstances of relative democratic liberalization allowed for this), Boubacar Ould Messaoud opted instead to anchor the fight against slavery and discrimination in a developing 'civil society' and an international human rights framework by creating the NGO 'SOS-Esclaves'. Although his organization was denied legal recognition by the government, Ould Messaoud and his fellow activists managed to reach out to human rights organizations like Amnesty International and quickly became the principal interlocutor for Western governments on the issue of slavery. SOS-Esclaves essentially aimed to provide victims of slavery with the support and protection the government had failed to supply, despite its official commitment to fighting against the 'vestiges' of slavery. For this purpose, they set up a network of activists throughout the country who approached victims when they discovered cases of slavery and spread

awareness about the illegality of such practices in order to facilitate self-emancipation on a broader scale.³⁹

In the wake of this ambiguous process of partial democratization during the 1990s, slavery came to be debated more publicly. Despite lacking authorization SOS-Esclaves published annual reports on slavery and discriminatory practices against slave descendants in cooperation with their international partners. Whereas the activists affiliated with Ould Boulkheir and Ould Messaoud insisted on the recognition of slavery as a contemporary reality that must be tackled by the judicial system and specific programmes targeting the Ḥarāṭīn population, the government maintained that slavery had been abolished and now needed to be addressed only in terms of its economic and social 'aftermath'. Abolitionist activists were accused of instrumentalizing an outlawed 'historical' practice for political purposes and threatening the fragile 'national unity'. To support this official narrative, Ould Taya's regime set up the 'Comité national pour l'éradication des séquelles de l'esclavage en Mauritanie' (CNESEM) in 1997 and staffed it with former El-Hor members who had joined Ould Taya's 'Parti Républicain Démocratique et Social' (PRDS).⁴⁰ After the opposition boycotted the 1997 presidential elections and Ould Taya was re-elected for another six-year term, he began to severely cut back on democratic liberties and finally banned the AC in 2002. The dissolved party's leadership and members then eventually joined the small Arab nationalist party 'Alliance populaire progressiste' (APP), which led to an unlikely coalition of Arab and Black African nationalists under the leadership of Ḥarāṭīn activists, held together under the umbrella of a socialist political agenda.

At this stage, the Ḥarāṭīn movement had made its way into both organized party politics (both in the government camp and in the opposition) and into a nascent 'civil society' that developed in the cities.⁴¹ Although the 'abolition decree' and the land reform of the early 1980s and the political liberalization of the 1990s had not brought forth the collective empowerment of the Ḥarāṭīn as full-fledged citizens, their demographic weight now made them a central bargaining chip in the electoral process. Sedentarization, urbanization and democratization had allowed the Ḥarāṭīn to renegotiate their position vis-à-vis their tribal patrons and towards the state.⁴²

Political change and the revitalization of the Ḥarāṭīn movement after 2005

Ould Taya was re-elected for a third term in 2003, but the legitimacy of his dictatorial regime had already been seriously damaged. After two attempted coups, he was eventually ousted by the military in 2005. The junta pledged to lead the country back to a democratic path and announced free presidential elections for 2007. Ould Boulkheir, who stood as a candidate but placed far behind with only 9.79 per cent of the vote, decided to support the independent candidate Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in the second round, who was eventually victorious. In exchange for his support, he negotiated four ministerial posts for the APP and the presidency of the National Assembly for himself. What is more, he insisted that the new parliament immediately

pass a law criminalizing slavery so that the abolition decree of 1981 could finally be enforced in practice.⁴³

Despite general satisfaction with the democratic character of the transition, the newly formed government of Cheikh Abdallahi did not remain in power for long. He was deposed by another coup under the leadership of General Ould Abdel Aziz in 2008, which led the country into a deep political crisis. Together with other political parties who remained loyal to Cheikh Abdallahi, Ould Boulkheir vigorously opposed the coup and assumed the leadership of the coalition 'Front National pour la Défense de la Démocratie' (FNDD). After an agreement was reached under international mediation, new elections were held in 2009, and Ould Boulkheir stood as the joint candidate of the FNDD coalition. He was clearly defeated by Abdel Aziz, placing second with 16 per cent of the votes. Despite the political turmoil, Ould Boulkheir remained president of the National Assembly until the 2013 parliamentary elections, which the APP and other oppositional parties had decided to boycott. As a result, the APP lost its grip on the political institutions. Although he remains a respected political father figure and a symbol of the fight against slavery, Ould Boulkheir and the rest of the El-Hor generation lost their appeal among many Ḥarāṭīn, especially its disaffected youth. As El-Hor increasingly lost its coherence as a movement and split into various political factions,⁴⁴ and as the marginalization of the Ḥarāṭīn continued under the new regime of Abdel Aziz, a new generation of militants stood up to revive the Ḥarāṭīn cause.

In the wake of the renewed commitment to democratization following Ould Taya's ouster, younger Ḥarāṭīn activists again began to organize and mobilize at the grassroots level. An example of this is the 'Front uni pour l'action des Haratines' (FUAH), a group that published a document entitled '50 ans de marginalisation et d'exclusion systématiques des Haratines' in 2008 (Ould Ahmed Salem 2018a: 132). Like El-Hor's charter, this manifesto insists on the Ḥarāṭīn's distinctive cultural identity and additionally stresses their 'autochthone' history, clearly defining them as an ethnic group alongside the Biḍān and the other Black African communities:

Les Haratines sont donc un peuplement noir descendant des aborigènes, autrement dit, la première population de la sous-région et que trouvèrent sur place respectivement les berbères et les arabes. Ils se définissent comme une communauté nègre d'origine et arabo-berbère de langue (Hassania), mais qui n'est, par-dessus tout ni nègre ni Beïdane; car ils ont leur spécificité socioculturelle propre et partant une identité qui a su résister à toutes les adversités sociales et temporelles: les tentatives de phagocytose, de dissolution et d'aliénation.

(Front uni pour l'action des Haratines 2008, emphasis added)

The organization that would become the spearhead of the revitalization of the Ḥarāṭīn, however, was the 'Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste' (IRA), founded in 2008 by the former secretary general of SOS-Esclaves, Biram Dah Ould Abeid. Like many younger Ḥarāṭīn militants, he was displeased with the conciliatory and pragmatic stance adopted by many El-Hor leaders and Ḥarāṭīn politicians who had become 'part of the system'. Ould Abeid now argued for the

necessity of (re-)radicalizing the Ḥarāṭīn movement. IRA's goals are stated as follows in the movement's charter:

Le but de l'Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste en Mauritanie (IRA-Mauritanie) est d'interpeller et de conscientiser les pouvoirs publics et les partenaires sur la situation sociale, économique et politique du pays. Elle devra à terme constituer une plateforme et un forum réel d'expression, de contestation, de dénonciation et de concertation en vue de diagnostiquer les problèmes des citoyens et de proposer des solutions optimales. IRA-Mauritanie s'inscrit dans une dynamique de défense des droits humains, de dénonciation et de lutte contre l'injustice pour la *déconstruction du système de domination érigé en mode de gestion de l'Etat mauritanien*.

(IRA, Statuts et Règlement Intérieur, Arts. 3 and 4, emphasis added)

A decisive strategic novelty that distinguished IRA from its predecessors was the young militant's skilful and large-scale use of social media. IRA quickly attracted a large number of followers, especially among the youth, and vehemently attacked the government and traditional authorities for their alleged compliance with the persistent practice of hereditary slavery. They helped victims escape from their 'masters', organized sit-ins at police stations to compel the authorities to take action on their complaints and mobilized for public demonstrations that frequently led to clashes with the police. As a consequence of this militant anti-slavery activism, Ould Abeid was discharged from his position as senior adviser to the president of the National Commission for Human Rights in Mauritania in 2010. In early 2011, he was sentenced to a twelve-month jail term for his 'illegal activities' but quickly received a pardon from President Abdel Aziz.

IRA's strategy crucially relies on its relations with Western governments, international NGOs, and UN and EU institutions, from whom the association gathers significant moral and political support. The Black Mauritanian diasporas in the USA and Europe constitute an important pool of activists, underscoring the transnational nature of contemporary social movements, even when they spring from very specific local issues.⁴⁵ IRA has skilfully used the Mauritanian state's relations with foreign governments to draw attention to human rights violations and to mobilize international support against internal repression (Freire 2019: 497–501).

Breaking with the earlier stance taken by El-Hor's leaders, who had distanced themselves from FLAM's political discourse during the 1980s, IRA adamantly stressed the racial nature of both slavery in the Biḍān community and the country's overall power structure. In this spirit, Abeid adopted the African nationalists' narrative of 'racial oppression' and called for an end to 'Biḍān hegemony' and the collective marginalization of Black Africans in Mauritania, going so far as to compare the situation of the country to the apartheid system. Although IRA did not call for an overthrow of the regime (as FLAM had in its day), instead committing themselves to non-violent means of protest and claiming the status of a apolitical human rights organization, their discourse represented a declaration of war against the status quo upheld by the political and religious establishment, pairing the fight against slavery

with a demand for the rearrangement of ethno-racial power relations in the nation-state.

Notwithstanding the cultural sensitivity of this endeavour, Biram Ould Abeid fiercely challenged the local tradition of Islamic scholarship and the country's established '*ulamā*' (Islamic religious scholars), whom he accused of 'obscurantist' religious teachings that distorted the true essence of Islam. In April 2012, Ould Abeid and other IRA activists publicly burned books on classic Islamic jurisprudence, among them Khalīl ibn Iṣḥāq's *al-Mukhtaṣar*.⁴⁶ IRA activists argued that these classic legal standard compendiums should no longer be used in the country's religious educational institutions because they were outdated and presented slavery as a legitimate institution, comparing them to the 'code noir'. This act of rebellion against traditional religious normativity was a national scandal and prompted the religious establishment, state authorities and members of the public to accuse him of blasphemy, resulting in his temporary imprisonment. The imam of Nouakchott's central mosque delivered a sermon in which he called Abeid and IRA militants 'devils ... criminals who will also burn Korans, the '*ulamā*' and the whole country if nothing is done to stop them' (BBC 2012). IRA subsequently issued an apology for this controversial act of protest, and, under national and international pressure to release Abeid, the case was eventually dismissed. This controversy exemplifies the difficulties faced by abolitionist activists in their attempts to shift the boundaries of Islamic normativity without transgressing them.⁴⁷

With the multiplication of religious schools (*maḥāẓir*, sing. *maḥẓara*) and the opening of advanced religious education beyond traditional statutory boundaries, the Ḥarāṭīn have striven to gain access to religious knowledge and to demonstrate the immorality of slavery and descent-based discrimination from an Islamic perspective (see the chapter by Baba Ahmed and Horma in this volume). In light of the growing 'democratization' and globalization of Islamic religious education and knowledge, a process that is also connected to the increasing availability and use of new types of media,⁴⁸ some Mauritanian scholars have managed to establish themselves as part of a new generation of religious teachers and preachers who are critical of many aspects of local Islamic traditions and are putting forward arguments connected to the internally diversified reformist movement in contemporary Islam (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013).⁴⁹ As an overwhelming majority of Mauritians self-identify as devout and pious Muslims, any strategy that relies on a discourse of emancipation and social change that is overtly critical of locally acknowledged sources of Islamic normativity faces great challenges. It is notable that a growing number of Ḥarāṭīn have attained positions as Imams of small neighbourhood mosques, tackling their community's discrimination from an Islamic religious angle rather than arguing from a human rights perspective, the proponents of which are easily accused by conservative circles of being under the influence of a Western, anti-Muslim ideology. Against this background, Ḥarāṭīn activists are confronted with the task of developing paths and narratives of emancipation that resonate with popular religious and cultural values and achieve what Bruce Hall (2020) calls 'Muslim citizenship'.

On the formal legal level, SOS-Esclaves and other human rights organizations have continued to advocate for changes to the 2007 anti-slavery law, notably to enable third

parties to represent victims in court and to introduce higher sentences. The anti-slavery law was eventually tightened according to their demands in 2015, and the government set up three specialized regional courts (in Nouakchott, Nouadhibou and Nema) which were assigned the task of handling slavery-related crimes.⁵⁰ A constitutional revision in 2012 additionally raised slavery to the status of a ‘crime against humanity’. Notably, there were also signs of growing solidarity and cooperation between the revived Ḥarāṭīn movement and Black Mauritanian activist groups. In 2014, IRA militants and the NGO ‘Kawtal’ organized a ‘*caravane contre l’esclavage foncier*’ in the Senegal valley.⁵¹ The purpose of this campaign was to denounce the increasing appropriation of arable land by rich Biḍān businessmen from the northern regions to the detriment of the local Ḥarāṭīn and Black African communities, who actually cultivate the land since generations. In a small village near the border town of Rosso, an area particularly ridden with land conflicts, the police violently stopped the march and arrested Abeid and IRAs then Vice President Brahim Bilal Ramdhane, several other IRA militants and Kawtal’s President Djiby Sow. In early 2015, the two IRA leaders and Sow were sentenced to two years in prison for ‘non-authorized assembly’ and the former two additionally for ‘membership in an illegal organization’. Despite the protests of foreign governments and human rights organizations, the sentence was upheld by the court of appeal, and Abeid and Ramdhane had to serve their prison sentences (Sow was released a couple of months later). This was clearly meant to deter the activists, but Abeid’s repeated imprisonment had the opposite effect and instead boosted the IRA leader’s image as a staunch and courageous human rights militant.

Biram Abeid’s reputation as a radical and adamant anti-slavery militant resisting threats and repression eventually propelled him to embark on a political career. As the state authorities did not recognize IRA as an NGO, however, they also refused to accredit Abeid’s IRA-affiliated political party ‘Parti radical pour une action globale’ (RAG). When the opposition, now regrouped as the ‘Forum national pour la démocratie et l’unité’ (FNDU), largely boycotted the elections, Biram Ould Abeid participated as an independent candidate and gathered 8.7 per cent of the vote, which placed him second after the incumbent Abdel Aziz. In his campaign to the elections, Abeid styled himself primarily as the candidate of all ‘oppressed Black Mauritians’ and vowed to end the ‘Arab-Berber hegemony’ in the country:

Il faut d’abord rétablir l’équité. Pourquoi sur 35 ministres, il est de coutume d’en placer 30 Arabo-Berbères? Pourquoi les 18 banques du pays appartiennent aux Arabo-Berbères? Pourquoi sur les 13 gouverneurs de région, 12 sont Arabo-Berbères? Pourquoi sur 54 préfets, 52 sont Arabo-Berbères? *Les Harratines et les autres ethnies noires* doivent se réapproprier leur place.

(Abeid in Spiegel 2014, emphasis added)

For Abeid and his fellow IRA activists, there are no ‘black Moors’; this was merely an invention of the Biḍān, he states, supported by French colonial policies to justify their vision of an Arab nation, which the Ḥarāṭīn should refuse to support (Maimone 2018). This argument fuelled allegations of extremism and racism against Abeid, making

him very unpopular among the Bīḍān population. But despite Abeid's rapprochement with non-hassanophone Black African activists and the African nationalist camp, IRA activists continue to insist on the recognition of the Ḥarāṭīn as an ethnic group. On the occasion of a hearing session in the European Parliament, the (then) head of the European section of IRA, Abidine Ould Merzough, demanded that the Mauritanian state 'recognize the Haratin's identity, as the majority group, as a separate ethnic group, independent of the Arab-Berbers, with whom they share a language as a legacy of slavery relations' (Diagana et al. 2016).

Despite this insistence on ethnic boundaries, Abeid sharpened his profile as representative of all 'oppressed Black Mauritians' by strengthening his cooperation and demonstrating solidarity with political parties and civil society associations representing Black African minorities. Most notably, he vigorously denounced the amnesty pertaining to the massacres of Black African soldiers during the years of violent ethnic conflict under Ould Taya's rule and, together with other human rights activists and civil society associations, initiated a commemorative event at Inal.⁵² Against this background, the electoral alliance between his unrecognized RAG party and the Baathist 'Sawab' party (whose leaders had expressed worries about the increasing 'negrification' of Mauritania some years ago), forged in the run-up to the municipal, legislative and regional elections of 2018 and the presidential elections of 2019, surprised observers and estranged many Black Africans who sympathized with Abeid.⁵³ IRA and Sawab presented the alliance as a sign of rapprochement between historically antagonistic political camps and affirmed their commitment to common political goals. This alliance allowed IRA/RAG members to appear on Sawab's electoral list in the upcoming elections, and Abeid himself was elected deputy to the National Assembly from his prison cell, after he had again be arrested on dubious charges of having threatened a journalist. In the presidential elections of 2019, he again placed second, this time with 18.6 per cent of the vote (more than doubling his 2014 results). Abdel Aziz respected the constitutional limit of two mandates, and it was the candidate of his ruling UPR, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, who came out victorious and took over the presidential office.⁵⁴ Since his election to parliament, Abeid has markedly moderated his political discourse and reached out to Ghazouani's new government, who in turn broke with his predecessor's strategy of repression and entered into dialogue with IRA's leader. Although they have yet to be legalized, IRA's and RAG's activities are presently tolerated. Abeid's rapprochement with Ghazouani, however, earned him heavy criticism from the movement's militant base. This change of course led to many defections within IRA's ranks, which left it significantly weakened.

Alongside the militant approach pursued by IRA during the last decade, a coalition of activists formed a joint committee in 2013 and published a document entitled 'Manifesto for the political, economic and social rights of the Haratin within a united Mauritania, egalitarian and reconciled with itself'. The 'Manifeste des Haratines', as this coalition came to be known, subsequently initiated an annual march to be held every 29th April (the date of the documents publication) in Nouakchott that has attracted huge crowds. The document describes the Bīḍān and the Ḥarāṭīn, again, as 'two entities [which are] increasingly different' and holds that the Ḥarāṭīn should be recognized as a 'socio-ethnic category' of its own. In addition to demanding the

effective implementation of existing anti-slavery legislation, the manifesto urges the government to resort to 'positive discrimination' in favour of the Ḥarāṭīn in order to help overcome the long-term socioeconomic effects of their historical marginalization. The manifesto claims to represent a new historical stage of the Ḥarāṭīn movement initiated by El-Hor and restates the need for a 'social and political revolution':

[L]a présente initiative a pour ambition de traduire une nouvelle prise de conscience de la communauté Haratine pour capitaliser les acquis des luttes menées depuis la création *du Mouvement El Hor* en mars 1978, tirer les leçons de ces combats et concevoir un nouveau projet à la fois fédérateur et en rupture franche avec le système des hégémonies particularistes, tribales en particulier, et ce dans le but de servir les intérêts supérieurs de la nation. Le grand mouvement civique que ce Manifeste voudrait susciter et animer, s'inscrirait à contresens de l'ordre ancien, esclavagiste et féodal, pour créer les conditions d'une *révolution sociale et politique* portée par une forte mobilisation citoyenne, pacifique et démocratique, associant toutes les forces, issues de toutes nos communautés nationales et transcendant les appartenances partisans de culture, d'opinion ou de couleur.

(*Manifeste des Haratines* 2013)⁵⁵

Whereas in the beginning these activists faced difficulties convincing larger segments of society to participate in a march for the rights of the Ḥarāṭīn, they have managed to broaden their mobilization base in recent years. In 2019, members of the ruling UPR party participated for the first time, and in 2020 representatives of the 'Coalition Vivre Ensemble' (CVE), which spans the most important political factions of the Black African opposition (among them former FLAM leaders), also expressed their interest in participating.⁵⁶ At the same time, these recent initiatives still suffer from perpetual internal divisions. Dissension in the committee behind the manifesto led to a split in the organizational structure. As a result, as of 2018, two separate meetings and marches now take place simultaneously every year. Despite these constant fissions into conflicting camps and political factions, what seems to have increasingly crystallized with the revival of the Ḥarāṭīn movement by IRA, the manifesto and other small groups and organizations that have multiplied in recent years is a demand for official recognition of the Ḥarāṭīn's specific 'socio-ethnic' identity as a basis for claims to collective rights and positive discrimination, full and equal citizenship, and representation in national politics and institutions.⁵⁷ Boubacar Messaoud describes the social change since the early days of El-Hor to the present as follows:

À l'époque, tu ne pouvais pas dire à un Mauritanien que les *Ḥarāṭīn*, c'est une nationalité ... Ça, c'était en 1980. Aujourd'hui, nous sommes en 2018, ce n'est pas la même chose. Il y a des *Ḥarāṭīn* qui disent qu'ils veulent être des *Ḥarāṭīn*, ils sont nombreux. Il y a des *Ḥarāṭīn* qui ne sont même pas instruits, qui ne veulent pas être des Maures, ils sont déjà nombreux. Et c'est pour cela donc, aujourd'hui, c'est ça qui explique l'essence du Manifeste.

(Interview with Boubacar Messaoud, April 2018)

This new attitude is pronounced among the Ḥarāṭīn whom I met and spoke to during my fieldwork in Nouakchott (March–April 2018; October 2021), whether or not they were engaged in militant activist circles. Most of them clearly refused to be included in the Bīḍān category, and the pervasiveness of tribal affiliation is often criticized as a relic of the past impeding the country's development. The growing cultural self-consciousness among the Ḥarāṭīn is a central element of the proliferation of NGOs and activist groups during recent years. An example of this 'cultural turn' in the Ḥarāṭīn movement is the success of the NGO 'Teranim', founded in 2014 by Mohamed Ali Bilal, which promotes *medh* and other artistic genres associated exclusively with the Ḥarāṭīn as a hitherto neglected part of the national cultural heritage. In this way, he seeks to contribute to the recognition and valorization of a distinct 'Ḥarāṭīn culture' in the Mauritanian public sphere:

I pondered how I could add something to the struggle that started in 1970s ... The identity problems are [always] there—some Ḥarāṭīn say that we are not like the white Moors, others say no. We all drink tea, we eat couscous, we wear the boubou, we speak Hassaniyya—what is so different? What is it that in fact distinguishes us from others? The white Moors, the Peuls, the Wolofs, the Soninkés—we are all different. We are different through our culture ... Therefore, there is a difference, but this difference was always downplayed; it was actually downplayed by ourselves, the Ḥarāṭīn.

We have been working [on the Ḥarāṭīn identity] for 10 years now ... so if Ḥarāṭīn public officials, politicians, and human rights activists now want to tackle the question of Ḥarāṭīn cultural identity, there is something tangible they can refer to. If you look on our website, on our YouTube channel, there is something that says—here it is, this is the difference between ourselves and the others! The other thing concerns Ḥarāṭīn artists. Before, if you said that this was Ḥarāṭīn music, people would have felt ashamed. We have done workshops with those artists so that they can say: Hey, this is our song, this is our music, this is our dance! This is your culture, and it is different from the culture of the griots; it is different from the culture of the Moors ... You should be proud of your music; you should be proud of your culture!

(Interview with Mohamed Ali Bilal, October 2021)

Another interesting new actor within the Ḥarāṭīn activist scene is the 'Movement of the Supporters of Change' (*ḥarakat anṣār al-taḡhyīr*), created in 2018 by a group of young militants who had left IRA due to their disagreement with Abeid's leadership. Their discourse equally professes a growing ethno-racial self-consciousness and their goals include the recognition of the Ḥarāṭīn as a separate 'national community' in the Constitution:

Nous voulons que les Ḥarāṭīn soient reconnus comme communauté séparée dans la constitution Mauritanienne. Ils nous disent encore, vous êtes Maures blancs, nous, nous sommes Maures blancs?! Je ne suis pas Maure blanc, je suis Africain comme tous les Africains. Je suis Ḥarṭānī mauritanien! Il faut alors reconnaître [les

Ḥarāṭīn] comme communauté nationale. La constitution Mauritanienne reconnaît les Biḍān, les Peuls, les Wolofs, les Soninkés ... pas les Ḥarāṭīn. Ils te disent que tu n'es pas Ḥarṭānī, mais que tu es Biḍānī ... [Les Ḥarāṭīn] ne sont pas des Biḍān. Nous ne sommes pas des Maures noirs (*khaḍar*). Nous sommes des nègres Mauritaniens, nous sommes des Africains comme les Congolais, les Togolais, les Ivoiriens, ou et les Gambiens ...

(Interview with Mohamed Lemine Seck, October 2021, emphasis added)

Conclusion: Remaking Ḥarāṭīn identity in post-slavery Mauritania

The renegotiation of Ḥarāṭīn identity in terms of ethnicity and nationality, and of the region's traditional social model more broadly, is a dynamic and controversial process that deals with innovative forms of sedentarization and urban life, and with the consolidation of the state- and nation-building. Its sensitivity is related not only to the emotional and socioeconomic legacies of slavery but also to the intricate political and identity-based conflicts that resulted from the uneven integration of different ethno-linguistic constituencies in the Mauritanian nation-state, giving rise to the formation of new 'imagined communities' on the basis of ethnic and racial identities. Notions of ethnic or racial differentiation – both indigenous as well as colonially imported – and traditional statutory hierarchies have interfered with postcolonial state- and nation-building in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and have hardened into ideological cleavages between conflicting nationalist projects. A distinguishing feature of the Mauritanian case, when compared to other anti-slavery movements in West Africa, is its standing as the only nation-state in which slave descendants constitute a demographic majority, thus rendering the process of emancipation all the more potentially threatening for former masters. The development of the Mauritanian Ḥarāṭīn movement confirms Hahonou and Pelckmans' (2011) assessment that the turn towards questions of identity in West African anti-slavery movements didn't replace the struggle against material inequalities but is instead closely related to it. Although the country suffers from generalized poverty, which also affects large swathes of the traditional 'noble' class, the Ḥarāṭīn constitute the bulk of the country's most vulnerable and marginalized population (McDougall 2015) and largely depend on physically demanding and poorly paid labour in the vast sector of the informal urban economy and agriculture, remaining largely excluded from the country's religious, political and economic institutions, which are still dominated by people with Zwāya or Ḥassān descent. For Ḥarāṭīn activists, the goal of more equality in terms of representation within these institutions can only be reached by first recognizing their difference from the rest of society.

The Ḥarāṭīn embody several intersecting identity traits that account for their particularly contested position in Mauritania: although they are 'racially' defined as black, they are linguistically and culturally described as Arab/Biḍān, and within the traditional *qabila*-centred model they are collectively ascribed to the inferior social status of slave descendants (*mawālī*). The constant debates around these issues in

the context of abolitionist and post-slavery emancipation efforts and postcolonial conflicts regarding national political integration in the last few decades have led to the progressive ethnicization of the Ḥarāṭīn category in Mauritania, independently of the strong internal divisions and divergent opinions concerning their 'Arab' or 'African' identity. Ḥarāṭīn activists consistently argue that such a unifying and class-transcending collective identity is a necessary basis for claims to recognition and joint political action towards effective emancipation from their historical marginalization. The 'ethnic turn' of the Mauritanian Ḥarāṭīn movement was likely fostered by the decisive role that ethnicity played in the colonial administrative order and the subsequent construction of postcolonial state- and nationhood, which effectively took the path of informal power-sharing on an ethnic basis but structurally favoured groups within the extended Biḍān society who claim a 'white' (that is, Arab) identity. It may also be related to the fact that 'ethnic minorities' occupy a special place in the global human rights discourse, to the effect that they can claim certain 'collective rights' and measure such as 'positive discrimination' on the grounds of their cultural difference from the majority population.

Against this background, it stands to reason that Ḥarāṭīn activists use strategies associated with the concept of identity politics in their attempts to achieve a twofold goal: getting rid of the social stigma associated with slave ancestry by proudly embracing it as part of their identity, on the one hand, and asserting their claim to equal citizenship and political participation by resorting to ethnicity as a historically and structurally favoured path for negotiating national integration and moral subjectivity on the African continent, on the other. To acknowledge the potential influence of such structural and political factors on Ḥarāṭīn ethnogenesis is not to say, however, that Ḥarāṭīn activists and politicians are acting in a purely instrumental, manipulative way in working towards the creation and recognition of a new 'imagined community'. Like all nationalists and 'ethnicists', they are seriously convinced of the historical and sociological accuracy of their claims, and their arguments are no less valid than those put forward by the proponents of the Ḥarāṭīn's 'Arabness', who advocate for their integration within the Biḍān community. The constructivist approach to ethnicity I advocated holds that it is exactly this kind of social engagement and political struggle that can lead to changes in ethnic identification.

Today, forty years after the abolition of slavery, relations between the descendants of slaves and their masters have undergone major transformations, but many Ḥarāṭīn – especially in the rural hinterland – remain integrated within the hierarchical socio-cultural framework of the *qabīla* as subordinate clients, at times re-enacting those social bonds with their respective Biḍān 'patrons' through various forms of symbolic and economic exchange (Brhane 1997; Wiley 2018). Despite the profound socioeconomic and political transformations of the postcolonial period, which have shaken its material basis in the past few decades, the social order of statutory stratification and its religiously imbued ideological framework continue to prove their resiliency and to thwart initiatives for social change. Because of its historical and cultural embeddedness, the notion of hereditary social status and associated moral qualities survived legal abolition and remains an important aspect of social differentiation in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, defying the concept of equitable citizenship in a

state-centred and democratic political order. Nevertheless, the effects of the changes that have swept the socioeconomic and ideological basis of the traditional social order cannot be overlooked, as disadvantaged groups are articulating their claims and fierce social critiques in an increasingly concerted manner, garnering never-before-seen levels of public acknowledgement, both internally and globally. The Ḥarāṭīn's quest for emancipation, recognition and political participation and the reinvention of traditional social and cultural identities in the context of political modernity and globalization remain central issues for Mauritania's future as a nation-state.

Notes

- 1 For an overview of the field, see Pelckmans and Hardung (2015). Villasante (2000) and Rossi (2009) have edited collective volumes dealing with the evolution of slavery, servility and dependency in the region from a comparative perspective.
- 2 For the effects of democratization and decentralization policies on the emancipation of slaves and slave descendants in the Sahara and the Sahel during the 1990s, see Botte (1999).
- 3 For an exploration of various cultural expressions of political resistance and dissidence in the western regions of the Sahara, see Boulay and Freire (2017).
- 4 Speakers of the Hassaniyya dialect of Arabic.
- 5 In southern Morocco (and possibly also in southern Algeria), where Haratin populations also live, the situation is different. There, the Ḥarāṭīn are seen not as slave descendants but as indigenous black populations who are distinguished from black communities who are known to have been enslaved by Berber and Arab groups, who are still called 'slaves'/ *ʿabid* (McDougall 2020).
- 6 For a concise recapitulation of different normative approaches within social constructivist theories of ethnicity and their appreciation of ethnic politics in Africa, see Yeros (1999).
- 7 See notably Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983).
- 8 For a historical overview of the development of 'caste systems' in West Africa, see Tamari (1991).
- 9 The notions of 'tribe' and 'tribalism' have received much well-founded criticism in anthropology. In order to avoid misleading associations in relation to these concepts, I will refer to these units of social and political organization by using the original Arabic term *qabila*, which generally denotes a kinship group constituted around a patrilineal genealogy connecting its members to a common ancestor (Bonte et al. 1991).
- 10 This includes not only the supersession of the Amazigh by the Arabic language but also the imposition of an Arabo-centric Islamic historiography that excludes the history of earlier populations indigenous to the Western Sahara (Freire 2011) and supports the superiority of groups who claim genealogical links to the Arabian Peninsula and the early Muslim community.
- 11 This dual representation of 'white' nomads and 'black' sedentary agriculturalists (with each group settled in its respective 'ecological habitat') that developed with French colonial policies is not fully adequate, however (Ciavolella 2014). The Biḍān

- also relied on oasis agriculture (although they assigned this work exclusively to slaves and Ḥarāṭīn), and some Halpulaaren groups traditionally practised nomadic pastoralism as well.
- 12 Whereas the widely acknowledged rule of female hypergamy (*kafā'a*) prohibits marriage between men of lower status and 'noble' women, *concubinage* and marriage between 'freeborn' men and female slaves (the latter case implying the woman's formal manumission) were common.
 - 13 I will use the term 'Bīḍān' mostly in this statutory sense, referring only to the *ḥassān* and the *znāya*. The *znāga*, the *m' allemīn* and the *iggāwen*, who like the Ḥarāṭīn are relegated to subordinate positions in the traditional social hierarchy and equally lack prestigious genealogical connections, tend to identify themselves as 'Bīḍān' in the cultural sense and are usually also included in this category. Whenever I use the expressions 'extended/larger Bīḍān society', I am referring to the whole/Hassaniyya-speaking population of the western Saharan region, independently of statutory differences.
 - 14 There are no official statistics on ethnic proportions, as the government refuses to collect such data because of its political sensitivity. The given proportions are therefore based on estimates, conservatively extrapolating from the last available census data and group-specific rates of population growth. Many local activists claim that the Ḥarāṭīn account for even more than 50 per cent of the whole population.
 - 15 The incorporation of 'exogenous' elements (who lack genuine genealogical affiliation with the constitutive kinship groups) such as the *znāga* or the Ḥarāṭīn into a *qabīla* is locally conceptualized as *dkhīla*.
 - 16 Many official and symbolic representations nevertheless convey the image of kinship between Bīḍān and Ḥarāṭīn in order to gloss over the statutory barrier and the rule of female hypergamy. Local interlocutors often present the Ḥarāṭīn as 'cousins' of the Bīḍān (see Bonte 1998). Another way of representing kinship bonds and reciprocity despite the boundary of social status is the Islamic tradition of 'milk kinship' (*riḍā'a*), which establishes significant bonds between children who were breastfed by the same woman, independently of their respective inherited social status (Fortier 2001; see also Ould Cheikh's chapter in this volume).
 - 17 A model not exclusively targeted at the Ḥarāṭīn but associated with all other dependent status groups within the larger Bīḍān sphere. For the persistence of negative stereotypes and social boundaries concerning the *m' allemīn* and the *znāga*, see Villasante-de Bouvais (2004) and Freire (2014), respectively.
 - 18 There were exceptions to the rule, however, with certain Ḥarāṭīn communities associated with ruling *ḥassānī* families enjoying high standing, as Ould Cheikh (2020: 111) shows.
 - 19 France formally abolished slavery in its West African colonies in 1905 but largely abstained from implementing the decree. For abolitionist policies and their effects on slavery in colonial West Africa, see Klein (1998); Klute (1998) and Roberts (1988).
 - 20 When the Islamic Republic of Mauritania became independent in 1960, it implicitly confirmed the abolition of slavery in its Constitution and by subscribing to various international legal norms. Again, this did not have much effect on the local level due to the lack of effective state structures.
 - 21 The Polisario's socialist and nationalist political project, aimed at creating a unified 'Sahrawi' people in the territorial boundaries of the former Spanish colony, starkly objected to the segmentary and statutory divisions traditionally acknowledged among the Bīḍān (Caratini 2003).

- 22 Some of the Pan-Arab nationalist factions within the Islamic Republic of Mauritania even supported the claims of sovereignty over the whole western Saharan region voiced by Moroccan politicians, notably by the leader of the Istiqlāl-party, Allal al-Fassi.
- 23 Whereas the *al-Nahḍa al-Waṭaniyya* ('National Renaissance') party, which was based in the northern regions of Mauritania, supported the claims of the Moroccan Istiqlāl party and wished to become part of 'Greater Morocco' in the 1950s, the 'Union Nationale Mauritanien' (UNM), based in the Senegal valley, at the same time campaigned for the attachment of Mauritania's southern region to a union of Senegal and Mali (Du Puigauveau 1961).
- 24 There were further differentiations according to slaves' occupations and their relative status. The term *khādim*, for example, designated female domestic slaves. Slaves who had been inherited within a single Biḍān family for generations were called *nānma*, implying a deeper emotional bond with their masters and likely a higher social status than recently acquired slaves. The term *khaḍara* (pl. of 'greenish/blueish', somewhat avoiding the inferiority in social status associated with 'blackness') was used, especially in the eastern regions of Mauritania, to designate slave descendants who had been manumitted and emancipated over many generations, or communities of hassanophone blacks who claimed that they had never been enslaved. The label *ḥarāṭīn* in turn tended to carry the connotation of recent liberation and emancipation. Though they were obviously still considered inferior to Biḍān 'nobility' because of their slave origin, *khaḍara* and *ḥarāṭīn* were legally free and sometimes even possessed slaves themselves.
- 25 As Ann McDougall (1988) has demonstrated, individual Ḥarāṭīn managed to attain high social standing, economic power and political influence during the colonial period and acquired numerous slaves themselves.
- 26 After El-Hor organized demonstrations against the sale of a slave girl in Atar in early 1980, eighteen of the movement's leaders were put on military trial (known as the 'trial of Rosso'), accused of threatening the security of the state (punishable by death), before being finally acquitted (Messaoud 2000: 296).
- 27 The text of the decree provided for the compensation of slave owners by the state and thereby implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of slavery as it was practised in accordance with the local Maliki legal tradition. Although most local Islamic scholars who were consulted for their legal opinion concerning the possibility of abolishing slavery by the government approved of the plans, some also expressed their opposition to this move as they considered the institution of slavery an undisputed provision of Islamic *sharī'a* (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013: 202–6). Because those slaves who were still in a formal servile relationship with their masters had been proclaimed free by the government without the latter's consent to the manumission, and because the promised 'compensation payments' for expropriated slave owners were never realized, there was mocking talk about 'Haidallah's Ḥarāṭīn'.
- 28 In reality, those who profited most from this reform were rich Biḍān businesspeople close to the regime in power, who increasingly appropriated arable land in the southern regions mainly populated by the Black African communities, rather than the Ḥarāṭīn, who were now simply employed as cheap tenants (Ould Cheikh 2004: 295).
- 29 Until its independence in 1960, Mauritania shared most colonial services with neighbouring Senegal and was administrated from the post of Saint Louis in Senegalese territory. The new capital, Nouakchott, was created from scratch on the eve of decolonization.

- 30 Notably the nationalization of the MIFERMA (now called SNIM), the French consortium that extracted iron ore from the mines of Zouérat (which accounted for roughly 80 per cent of Mauritania's export trade at the time), and in the introduction of the Ouguiya as a national currency instead of the CFA franc.
- 31 That these claims of economic and politic marginalization had a solid basis was demonstrated by Phillipe Marchesin (1992) in his study on Mauritania's postcolonial political system.
- 32 This group prominently includes Sghair Ould Mbarek and Mohamed Ould Haimer, who both became influential figures in national politics.
- 33 On the legacy of slavery and the current situation of slave descendants among Black African ethnic groups, see Leservoisier (2008) (on the Halpulaaren) and N'Diaye (2016) (on the Soninké). Concerning the Wolof, the smallest of Mauritania's minorities, to my knowledge no significant works have yet been written on the contemporary relevance of traditional statutory hierarchies.
- 34 The expulsions mainly targeted Halpulaaren communities, who constituted the driving force behind FLAM and who the government perceived as the greatest danger to 'national unity' because of their demographic weight in southern Mauritania and because of the 1987 attempted coup, which had apparently been orchestrated by Halpulaaren officers. On the other hand, 160,000 Mauritanian nationals were also expelled from Senegal. See also Fresia (2009) and Ciavolella (2014).
- 35 An especially heinous event took place on Mauritania's national Independence Day on 29 November 1991, at the prison of Inal, a remote village located in the Dakhlet Nouadhibou region of northwestern Mauritania. In a macabre symbolic act, twenty-eight Black African soldiers who had been arrested in the previous weeks for their alleged ties to FLAM were tortured and hanged by members of the military at the local police station. This event continues to figure prominently in the discourse of Black African activists and politicians.
- 36 The abrogation of the amnesty law and the criminal investigation into the acts committed by security forces during this period of ethnic cleansing is still a central theme among opposition parties dominated by Black Africans and led by former FLAM members, such as the 'Alliance pour la justice et la démocratie' (AJD) and the 'Forces progressistes pour le changement' (FPC), which united in the 'Coalition vivre ensemble' (CVE) in the run-up to the 2019 presidential elections.
- 37 Although the AC's base was mainly made up of Ḥarāṭīn, the new party also incorporated some Black African nationalists, which led to accusations of creating a 'Black racial party' (Ould Ahmed Salem 2018a: 128).
- 38 While the abolitionist movement of the Ḥarāṭīn had to situate its fight in a political context that was increasingly polarized around identity issues, this step can be interpreted as an attempt to recalibrate attention and activism with regard to class inequalities as well.
- 39 For a firsthand account of the organization's approach, see Messaoud (2000).
- 40 Among them were Mohamed Salem Ould Merzough (who later became Minister of Hydraulics and Energy), Sid'Ahmed Zahaf, Breika Mbarek and Daha Ould Teiss.
- 41 This internal diversification may justify speaking of Ḥarāṭīn movements in the plural. With this noted, I will use the term 'Ḥarāṭīn movement' in the sense of a broader 'identitarian' movement aimed at the social and legal recognition of the Ḥarāṭīn as a distinct 'national community', in contrast to other Ḥarāṭīn groups and most Biḍān, who have instead opted for a strategy of assimilation within the hassanophone majority population.

- 42 For the evolution of statutory hierarchies and slavery in *Biḍān* society in the late twentieth century, see Bonte (1989, 1998, 2002); Botte (1999, 2005); Ould Cheikh (1993); Ruf (1999, 2000); and Villasante (1991).
- 43 The practical effects of this new anti-slavery law were quite limited, however. On the Mauritanian state's failure to implement its abolitionist legislation, see Ould Ciré (2014). To my knowledge, there have only been four convictions for slavery in the Mauritanian courts thus far. Dozens of cases filed with the police in recent years are pending in the Mauritanian courts, apparently stalled. Reports on slavery and related forms of discrimination and exploitation are regularly published by international NGOs such as Anti-Slavery International, Minority Rights Group and the Society for Threatened Peoples, who cooperate with Mauritanian anti-slavery and Human Rights NGOs (especially SOS-Esclaves and IRA) to obtain data on the phenomenon and to implement projects aimed at its eradication and victim support. For an overview, see for example the joint report by ASI, IRA, MRG, SOS-Esclaves, STP and UNPO (2015). The concrete number of actual 'slaves' is a highly controversial issue, based on estimates that depend on disputed definitions of slavery.
- 44 A new political split in El-Hor's ranks occurred in 2010, when Samory Ould Beye and Mohamed Bourbos were expelled from the APP for their opposition to Ould Boulkheir's plan to fully integrate the movement into the party. They created their own party, 'al-Mustaqbal' ('The Future'), which remains a small group without real political influence but, unlike the APP, openly speaks in the name of the original El-Hor movement (Ould Ahmed Salem 2018: 132).
- 45 Kawtal, which has been legally recognized as an NGO since 2010, has defended positions and claims similar to those voiced by TPMN and advocates for the civil rights of Black African Mauritians, especially the rural, agricultural communities in the Senegal valley, who are facing land expropriation to the benefit of national and international investors.
- 46 On Maliki jurisprudence and its significance in the western Saharan region, see Ould Bah (1981).
- 47 Another example of this is the 'Mkhaitir affair' involving a young blogger who was accused of blasphemy; see Freire's chapter in this volume.
- 48 For an exploration of this development and its manifestations in different African religious contexts, see Hackett and Soares (2015). For a perspective on Muslim societies, see Eickelman and Anderson (1999).
- 49 The pioneer of this trend is Cheikh Mohamed Ould Sidi Yahya, who was the first Mauritanian preacher (*dā'ī*) to record and spread his sermons on cassettes in the local Hassaniya dialect rather than classical Arabic, which is not understood by many Mauritians. He is extremely popular among the *Ḥarāṭīn* population because of his anti-racist, egalitarian stance.
- 50 This amendment allows legally recognized NGOs such as SOS-Esclaves to legally represent victims of slavery, who are often deterred and discouraged from pressing formal charges due to social pressure (by state agents, traditional religious authorities and their 'master's' families) and informal offers of compensation (far below the financial compensation prescribed by law) in return for dropping the accusations and settling the case. Penalties were doubled to ten to twenty years' prison.
- 51 Besides the Mauritanian mother organization, IRA has branches in Senegal, Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, the USA and Canada.
- 52 The ceremonial event has taken place two times thus far, in 2011 and 2019. Its coincidence with the national holiday adds to its symbolic weight.

- 53 After IRA Mauritanie sealed this political alliance, the regional American chapter of IRA, which has many Halpulaaren members who went into exile during the ethnic clashes of the late 1980s, announced a split from the Mauritanian mother organization.
- 54 On the populist style of ‘democracy’ implement by President Abdel Aziz during his time in office, see Ould Mohamed Baba’s chapter in this volume.
- 55 The document is available on the homepage of the ‘Association des Haratine de Mauritanie en Europe’ (AHME): <https://haratine.com/Site/?p=6291>.
- 56 Following this announcement, however, the 2020 march had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 57 These ‘Harāṭīn NGOs’ include the Fondation Sahel, Elawassir, Flambeau de Liberté, Maison de la Liberté, and the Association Ennour pour l’Éducation et l’Engagement Social. Fondation Sahel and Elawassir were founded by former IRA members who left the organization because they disagreed with its increasing politicization under Abeid’s leadership. Flambeau de la Liberté was founded by a cousin of Messaoud Boulkheir, an El-Hor and former SOS-Esclaves member. The latter two organizations are close to the Islamist Tawassoul party. In addition to these established and officially recognized NGOs, there are many other small organizations and informal activist circles, especially among young Harāṭīn with a higher education.

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