
People
Places
Projects
Ideas



LET'S EXPLORE MAGAZINE

empowerment

CURIOSITY DRIVEN INSPIRATION



Breaking the masters' grip

Slavery is not a thing of the past: it continues to afflict millions of people worldwide. In Mauritania, one campaigner has inspired a movement to break the chains of enslavement – as Matthieu Dandoy explains.



< Biram Dah Abeid, Leader of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA). Founded in 2008, this anti-slavery NGO still has not been recognised by the Mauritanian state. A UN Human rights award recipient in 2013, Biram ran for the Mauritanian presidency in 2014 and 2019.

Follow the obeli (†) in the margins to the essay starting on page 125, to find out how concepts and events introduced in Biram's story are connected with Matthieu's personal journey.

“I call on all justice lovers around the world to revolt against the perpetuation of slavery!”

~ BIRAM DAH ABEID

A slave's grandson

Biram Dah Abeid is a slave's grandson. His father was freed while still in his mother's womb – his freedom given as a kind of sacrifice by his master, who hoped it would help a relative recover from illness. Even so, Biram's grandmother still had to do chores.

At the age of 10, Biram saw a man collapse in fear: a runaway slave whose legs had weakened at the sight of his master. Biram had grown up surrounded by slaves, but that incident triggered something in him. Not knowing where this decision would lead him later in life, he swore to his father that he would end slavery in Mauritania.

If you thought slavery was a thing of the past, think again. There are more enslaved people living today than at any point in human history: the Global Slavery Index estimates that around 40 million people live in slavery. But it may look different from the historical forms familiar to anyone who has heard of the transatlantic slave trade. Today, slaves don't usually wear chains — but mental chains persist.

Mental chains

There is a record of a conflict that broke out between two slavers in the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade: they claimed ownership of the same slave, but only one had a title deed. A court ruled in favour of whoever could assert his dominance over the slave. Then, as now, one person's ability

to dominate and control another is what defines the subjugated person's status as being enslaved. **It has always been the sovereignty that characterizes the propriety** – not a legal formality like a title deed, or a physical restraint like a chain. † 125 & 128

Mauritania formally abolished slavery in 1981, the last place on earth to do so. But slavery persists, and Mauritania remains one of the countries with the highest number of slaves relative to its population. The Haratine caste, which comprises slaves and former slaves, is still marginalised. Often denied identification papers, they have no access to education, and find themselves in a cycle of exploitation. Unborn babies already 'belong' to their masters, in a system of descent-based slavery – entire generations are born and bred like cattle by their masters.

When exploitation is this rampant, it surrounds you like the air you breathe, and can become internalised. Even though there are laws in Mauritania that punish slavery, until they are enforced, it is illusory to rely only on masters' goodwill to restore people's freedom to them.

And mental chains are the hardest to break. >



^ The fishing industry is one the most important area resorting to slave labour. in Mauritania, there are approximately 600,000 slaves. They also work in fields, herding, or household chores.

Blasphemy

Biram has been relentless with his efforts to end slavery in Mauritania, ever since the day he saw the runaway slave collapse in front of his master. Schoolfriends remember how he used to walk, barefoot, along the 10-kilometre road between his home and the town centre, leaflets in hand, speaking to whoever would listen.

A student of law and history, Biram learned the value of non-violent struggle from the social movements that preceded him. He knew that a symbolic action is sometimes enough to wake up a population. So, on a fateful day in 2012, he gathered a crowd after Friday prayers and burned the writings of Malik ibn Abas in front of them. Imam Malik's 8th-century writings dictate the rights and conduct of a master over

his slaves, and are an authoritative legal text in Mauritania, more important than the constitution itself. Burning them was perceived as blasphemy: state ministers went on TV calling for Biram to be hanged.

Biram dodged the noose, but was jailed. He has been imprisoned four times since then; only his commitment to non-violence, and awards from the international community, offered him the protection that can come with notoriety for some prisoners of conscience.

A movement takes shape: Haby's ordeal

Seven years later, many of Biram's supporters still cite the day he burned Imam Malaki's writings as the starting point of their engagement in the anti-slavery movement.



^ Biram's house from the inside. His home is now more of a social assistance centre. Open 24/7, there are always people waiting for counselling. And sometimes, fleeing slaves come here under cover of nightfall.

Bilal Ould Rabah has a story that would read well in Hollywood. Born a slave, he fled his master with one goal in mind: to free his sister, Haby. The pair had been separated in their childhood, but he knew where she was held. He had contacted the authorities, but no one acted. He heard about Biram on the radio, so he went to meet him in Mauritania's capital city, Nouakchott. Thanks to Bilal's report, the IRA mobilized lawyers and journalists to fight Haby's cause.

After 35 years of bondage, Haby was reluctant to be freed. She did not feel that she was a slave, and claimed to be free. Since the age of five, she had

had to take care of her master's livestock. Even so, she had somewhere to sleep, and something to eat. She felt free because her movements were. But she knew full well that after a day of toil, if a goat was missing, or if her master was in a bad mood, she would suffer the consequences. She lived in fear, facing rape or beatings every night.

Haby had tried to flee, but, owning nothing but her body, what could she have done to survive? She always returned to her master. In her mind, there was no horizon to reach for – nothing conceivable, outside of slavery. Today, Haby's only regret is that she was afraid to leave her master. >




“African and African-American elites want to make the crime of slavery the sole crime of the white man. But intra-African slavery remains and is ignored.”

~ BIRAM DAH ABEID

^ Haby mint Rabah. So how do I do her justice in a picture? I am a photographer, master of my frame, and I am aware that every picture is a lie. Moreover, it would be absurd to believe that the power relationship, deeply rooted in our modern society, could be absent here. Suddenly a neighbour appears out of nowhere, and forces the interview to end. It seems that not everyone is comfortable when she speaks.

determine how you see yourself, and therefore how you want to be seen, can you begin to get rid of the master's grip.

Masters use a common rhetoric based on their victims' dependence on them: “We provide food and shelter to those poor souls; without us, they would be homeless and destitute. We are here to protect them.” They try to legitimise their abuses as being nothing more than a rightful retribution. But this attitude is a byproduct of centuries of racial theories that assign inferiority to people based on the colour of their skin. As Frantz Fanon  observed: “The Black is not a man [...] the Black is a Black man.” †† 127

In 2018, Haby ran for a seat at the national assembly. She did not win, but she sent a message: she wanted all the girls in Mauritania, including her own, to know they were not fated to remain enslaved. In Haby's view, there is no need to be a prisoner of your past: only when you can

Persecuted for defending freedom: Moussa's imprisonment

Moussa Bilal Biram's story shows another way Biram dah Abeid has inspired people to fight against slavery. In his prime, Moussa ran a successful business in Nouakchott and was a karate master. Recognised for his open mind and easygoing attitude, he was a role model for many young people.

Moussa joined the IRA after Biram burned Imam Malaki's writings. That day, new ideas started rushing through Moussa's mind. He had never really believed in Mauritania's social order that, despite his best efforts, prevented him from ever being more than a second-class citizen. He now felt that he could play a part in the struggle for Black

From page 10 of Frantz Fanon, “Black skin, white masks”: curious.letsexplore.org/MD01



^ Moussa (far right) leads the Peace Committee, a group of unarmed volunteers who sworn to protect Biram's life. Most of them were tortured and imprisoned. Yet they all support non-violence in the face of a repressive state.

Africans' dignity; that, he thought, would put his life into a broader context. ††† 125

Quickly, the boundaries between his personal life, politics and business started to blur. Moussa supported Biram with everything he had, until he was left bankrupt. In 2016, police forces raided Moussa's house as the government cracked down on IRA members. It was only when he was put on trial that he understood the accusation against him: without evidence, he was charged with leading a riot that broke out in a slum. He would go on to experience the worst of what humans can do to each other.

Moussa was detained in a secret prison. For 11 days and nights he faced torture, humiliations and mutilations. He still suffers from memory loss, and has lost sensation in his right hand, after his jailers severed the nerves — a serious outcome by any measure, but especially for someone for whom the martial arts were so important. He was then moved to a prison near Zouérate, 1200 kilometres away from his home, deep in the Sahara Desert. His fellow inmates were on death row, waiting for their fate.

He would not see a familiar face for the next two years. >

The Mauritanian government's main charge against IRA activists has always been that they disrupt social peace. Members are also charged with belonging to an illegal organisation. While Moussa was being tortured, his guards wanted him to sign a confession stating that Biram was trying to stir up tensions between communities, for personal gain. Moussa refused.

Thanks to campaigns led by Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders, Moussa was freed in 2018. Since his only crime was to demand an end to slavery, today he feels that every day behind bars reinforced his determination. His struggle is against a state that allows slavers to prosper, not against an ethnic group. (Of course, when anti-slavery activists are jailed instead of slavers, one is free to wonder who is in charge.)

Biram ran for Mauritania's presidency in 2019, and came second to the official candidate, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. I met Moussa in Nouakchott, ten days after the election. Internet and

communications were shut, the military patrolled the streets, and news abounded of arbitrary arrests. Fear was in the air.

Moussa had just returned from Dakar. He had fled to Senegal on election night, in fear for his life, after hearing men break in to his house while Ghazouani claimed victory. Without thinking, Moussa escaped through a window and ran through the neighbourhood.

Moussa could have fled to France long ago; he has family there, and his notoriety as a prisoner of conscience would surely ease an asylum claim. But he stayed in Mauritania. **He has not chosen non-violence because he cannot fight back; it is rather a conscious decision not to respond to provocation. Violence would leave slavers with the freedom to justify and maintain their grip.** †††† 127

But Moussa has no desire for revenge. Just justice — and freedom for people who have struggled for too long under their masters' grip.

“I want to create an international coalition to fight against slavery. Bring together political or public figures, artists, athletes, et cetera — unite all lovers of freedom! We must support the awakening of populations of servile ancestry. They find themselves more than ever confronted by the sometimes–murderous resistance of the slavers’ elites.”

~ BIRAM DAH ABEID

Biram Dah Abeid had a big impact on Matthieu Dandoy's life, work and philosophy. Here, in a frank and unfiltered essay, Matthieu explains what he has learned from Biram and the activists his courage inspired.

Learning from courage

Biram, Haby, Moussa — and many others — have helped me to realise that behind a moral value, there is a conscious decision. And this choice, under certain conditions, can confer an unexpected power to the value. It takes courage to cherish emancipation; that's why I write about these activists.

Ideologies trouble me because they can rationalise slavery just as well as the Rights of Man. But these activists show that it is possible to struggle against oppression without resorting to ideology; it is, perhaps, the original struggle, that of the oppressed person who says “no!” and makes a conscious decision to cherish emancipation. This is something that extends far beyond the borders of Mauritania.

In February 2020, the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy gave Biram the Courage Award for his commitment to non-violence and the rule of law. I took this opportunity to seek a common denominator shared by the courageous men and women who have received the same award. Regardless of their culture and background, from Venezuela, Mauritania or Russia, they all seem to share something in common: they defend a concept of justice at the risk of their own lives.

The clarity of this courage can seem hard to grasp, at a time when the world seems so chaotic and senseless. But

“The price to be paid for empowerment is at the height of the entrenchment of the supremacist mentality, of the objectification of man by man.”

~ BIRAM DAH ABEID

they do not give up. In a letter to a friend, Alexey Navalny wrote that dictators need people to believe courage is worthless.

What, then, are the values that can give us the strength to resist oppression? To answer this question, [we should first understand where values come from.](#) ↗

According to the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, [each culture gives its members a sense of belonging inside a meaningful world. They also provide a means to achieve immortality, either literal or symbolical.](#) ††† Together, this helps reduce the anxiety caused by the awareness of our inevitable demise. In this way, cultures can be understood as death denial mechanisms. ↗

This presentation explores one of Friedrich Nietzsche's great systematic works, *The Genealogy of Morals*. It focusses on the first essay: “Good and Evil”, “Good and Bad”. In this section of the work, Nietzsche discusses the origin of the notion of *Good*, and distinguishes between an original, noble, self-asserting valuation of Good vs. Bad, and a reactive, common/slave, denying valuation of Evil vs. Good. curious.letsexplore.org/MD02

Watch this lecture by Sheldon Solomon, psychologist and professor of social psychology on the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker who received a Pulitzer Prize for his book “The denial of death”. curious.letsexplore.org/MD03



^ Ahmed Hamdy, Biram's long-time friend, holding evidence of electoral fraud. Ahmed and Biram met at school and went to prison together. Ahmed is one of the last founding members of the IRA still living in Mauritania.

Learn more about the book
"The Rebel" by Albert Camus:
curious.letsexplore.org/MD04.

Or watch the "Introduction to Camus:
The Absurd, Revolt, and Rebellion":
curious.letsexplore.org/MD05

Watch the opening sequence of
Chris Marker's 1977 documentary
"Grin Without a Cat":
curious.letsexplore.org/MD06

But as we have seen, some cultures put people in a position of servitude. Slaves are told that their places in heaven depend on their loyalty to their masters. Notions of good and evil are entirely dependent on the entity that formulates them.

But Biram and other activists push moral dissent to the point of rejecting the dual position of master and slave, refusing to participate in either role. They seek to emancipate themselves from it, not to replace it.

Today, Biram is the undisputed leader of the Mauritanian opposition. After a decade of effort, and as many sacrifices, slavery is an issue addressed at the top of the state, as well as in the entire population. Although much remains to be done, Biram's constancy in his pursuit of peace brings him respect, even from his fiercest opponents.

Following the 2019 presidential election, Biram could have called for a revolt; indeed, many people expected him to do so, and he would have been assured of a wide following. But although he protested against the result, he never called his followers out to the streets. As Camus wrote: "What the rebel rejects for himself, he refuses to impose it on others". 📖

"Disobey! It's an order" is a double bind — clearly an absurd statement, as the spirit of dissent cannot be imposed without losing its core value. An abolitionist does not want to create followers. Even as a leader, he rather works on creating conscious partisans. The example of the individual struggle provides the inspiration to move on with the collective.

And entire lives have been revealed in the struggle. 📖 There are many things

that it has brought, including self-knowledge and openness to the world, that could never have existed without it.

But perhaps the collective is only a chimera, in search of which our hope for a better future falls flat. How many revolutions have led to greater massacres? How many crimes have been committed in the name of the greater good?

Once again, we must consider the moral values, fruits of a time and a place, of a culture. Since cultures are death denying mechanisms, the existence of other beliefs puts our own in peril. They refer us to our own appreciation of this illusion.

†††† That's why we strive to label some things "evil". Labelling it allows us to fight it, and the eradication of evil strengthens the conviction of the "good" of our views. ↗

†† So for each of these activists, the struggle is primarily for themselves.

The struggle is not about setting an example; it happens because, after reassessing their initial conditions, they have perceived life as a perpetual struggle between will and fate. They are fighting for something they may never achieve, and that makes the struggle more compelling than would be the case if they had the certainty of achieving it. These abolitionists seek to move mountains.

Despair can make us act with unimaginable courage (only love can defy this affirmation), but for these activists it is freedom that gives them their strength. Freedom to assert oneself does not have that sweet taste of something long desired; it burns out of love and despair.

Kierkegaard wrote about the dizziness of freedom and called it anxiety. ↗ This anxiety, in principle, is mitigated by a belief in values as established by a

More on Ernest Becker's "Escape From Evil" - a continuation of book, "The Denial of Death" in this New York Times article: curious.letsexplore.org/MD07

Further reading on "The Concept of Anxiety": curious.letsexplore.org/MD08



^ Biram speaks at the Geneva summit. The same award has been given to Leopoldo Lopez in 2016, or Alexei Navalny in 2021. All three have been jailed, and all three have agreed to surrender themselves to the authorities, knowing they may never get out alive.

For further exploration, have a look at Heidegger's concept of "Being-toward-death", which maps the path to a life of authenticity:
curious.letsexplore.org/MD09

For more on this, political philosopher Hannah Arendt can be an inspiration. For an introduction to her work:
curious.letsexplore.org/MD10

cultural order. But for those who have had to emancipate themselves from the shortcomings of their culture, is it possible that they have found the power to create new values? Humans know themselves to be insignificant in comparison to the universe. So, there is a huge threshold of natural guilt to cross.

Making choices can create value, when you decide to do something in spite of the odds facing you. Making this choice is enough to overcome the fear of failure; and that's the meaning of faith. The decision to rebel is what makes it meaningful. In refusing to be in the master's position, each of the activists recognises that the other is capable of this same appreciation.

Once emancipated from the death denying mechanisms, the rebel discovers a landscape of opportunities, filled with compassion for his peers. He recognises the potential of those who are still struggling. But above all, he lives

his life as an adventure from which he derives the certainty of making it his own. ✉

In the end, the only danger is conformism: obedience to the rules, in absence of critical thinking. Unless this one has been repressed by a desire to belong. From the fear of what it costs to deviate from the norm... which ultimately leads to voluntarily abandoning our individual responsibility. To better hide behind the complacency of only following orders. ✉

There is no absolute belief without an ultimate solution. We should remember where this road leads.

I grew up In France. There, as in many other countries, we take our values, with all the universalist ideals that they summon, for granted, without ever taking the time to think critically about the meaning behind those values and the words surrounding them. Wouldn't the prevalence of slavery in the 21st century have something to do with the belief that we are necessarily good?

† The renunciation of thought creates the perfect slave. The acceptance of evidence as such, whether for or against the established order, anesthetises the critical mind. Reevaluating values often mean thinking against oneself. It is hard but otherwise the emptiness of thought creates evils. Certainties are restful, but an active reevaluation awakens.

Fortunately, in some, perhaps too dissatisfied to obey the contradictory injunctions of an endangered order, or too impatient to count on the promise of post-mortem redemption, but most certainly, too preoccupied with the here and now to wait for the march of history, I found one same aspiration to revolt. ●

“We cannot emancipate ourselves without engaging in social subversion. The subversion of values, of the code of honor, of religious customs, these are necessary steps towards empowerment.”

~ BIRAM DAH ABEID



“And the slave who is not able to assume his revolt, does not deserve to be pitied on his fate. He alone will answer for his misfortune, if he has any illusions about the suspicious condescension of the masters who claim to liberate him. Only the struggle frees.”

~ THOMAS SANKARA – FORMER PRESIDENT OF BURKINA FASO

▼ Biram Dah Abeid (back) at a meeting in the IRA headquarter of his hometown of Rosso.

