COMMENTARY

Slahi: An African Story

Abbass Braham

Mohamedou Ould Slahi is arguably one of the most famous contemporary Mauritanians worldwide. This is largely owed to his *Guantánamo Diary*, a bestseller that he penned while he was an inmate in Guantánamo prison. The memoir appeared in January of 2015, reflecting on Slahi's plight as a wrongly incarcerated detainee in the (in)famous jail. Prosaic and sincere, the book, so far the only voice of a Guantánamo detainee, depicts the wretched life within a Kafkaesque oubliette, an impersonal, yet rationalized and inhumane, castle where legality is suspended in a state of exception. Slahi's story is about the inside humane oscillations of a *homo sacer*, struggling to come to terms with his difficult situation. Ever since the book appeared, and after Slahi's release and return to his home country of Mauritania in October 2016, Slahi's post-Guantánamo life has attracted attention from communities of readers worldwide. This aggregate interest is now accumulating in a forthcoming Hollywood movie based on Slahi's story. Various factors conspire to encourage this interest, much of which involves the politics of reading, imagination, and hermeneutics of the respective readers. Yet I will argue that the story should interest Africanists as well. First, Slahi's is a Mauritanian story, telling us numerous facts about African culture and politics in the region and how they coalesce in Slahi's story. Second, even from a theological perspective Slahi's intellectual and personal profile reflects a story of African post-Islamism, a theology of forgiveness rarely outlined in the literature. Third, Slahi is also a public intellectual, contributing to the debates in Mauritania, which gives his story a reflexive dimension and an agency lacking in other obscure Guantánamo detainees. In short, Slahi tells a story that is

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distinct from the typical Guantánamo and terrorism-linked profiles, a story that is situated in a specific African context.

Guantánamo Diary is in many ways an African story. It is best understood within the social context of Mauritania in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Ruminating on his story, Slahi is well aware of this. He muses over his antebellum life in southern Mauritania in the early 2000s and how it caught up with globalization through the new knowledge economy, namely computer science, that Slahi studied abroad. He finds jobs at fishing and computer companies, and it is an idyllic social life in which he finally settles down after a prolonged period of studying in the West. He finally lands a job in a new rising computer company and sets out to make ends meet. This is told against the background of a post-socialist Mauritania, run by Maouiya Ould Taya's (president 1984–2005) new world of economic opportunity. Slahi is briefly more equivocal on the politico-technocratic activities that punctuated regional life in Trarza. It is a brave new world of rapid change, free enterprise, and mushrooming entrepreneurism. Slahi, a computer professional who retained his passion as a geek, and who is once compared to a magician, is now hired by a new Nouakchott-based company belonging to entrepreneurs from Tijikja in central Mauritania. Social relations pervade this new familial business, and Slahi finds himself doing political jobs on the side as the political patrons involve him in their native reception of president Taya in Tijikja.[1] Even though brief and marginalized, Slahi's narration, as such, is one of the rare memoirs on social life in 1990s Mauritania.

This Mauritanian story unveils travelogue anecdotes about culture, habits, and social life. Slahi's personal story reveals how real people find themselves in this world of rapid historical changes. As we move from the general to the personal, Slahi is involved in preparations for the wedding of his niece. He is not completely satisfied with the pace of things as they are in the country. He still sees Mauritania from the gaze of an expatriate, critical of his own culture: "In Mauritania we have the bad habit of organizing everything on the whim, a heritage of rural life that all Mauritanians still deal with today."[2]

This is Slahi's chance to contemplate Mauritania's most deeply cultural of activities, the wedding. In his usual, or rather unusual, combination of humor and accuracy, Slahi cogitates over the preparation for marriage ceremonies in Mauritania, giving a popular history of the institution, its regional specificity, civil nature, age restrictions, financial consequences, and the pervasive modernization that has both twisted and complicated traditions.[3] He goes over the gendered dating and nuptial roles, including, for one, the convoluted background check of the would-be husband:

> Most of the work is usually done by the guy. He investigates the would-be wife's background by unleashing the female relatives he trusts the most. The report of this "committee" will produce an assessment of the technical data of the girl, her attitude, her intellect, and the like; sometimes this investigation step can be skipped when the girl already has a good reputation.[4]

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This brief story of culture and people is soon interrupted, as security forces storm in and take Slahi in what we soon learn is the onset of a long tribulation. In the same manner that security belligerence interferes with Slahi's novelistic voice in *Guantánamo Diary*, extracting him from a halcyon life and throwing him in a modern Orwellian ordeal, his narration moves from the peaceful to the precarious. This represents, first and foremost, the consequences of the capitulation and involvement of Taya's security strategy in the new demands of the international *state of exception* of the post-9/11 world. It is, furthermore, a story of how helpless individuals, such as Slahi, are wreathed in those fluctuations of the new world order. Slahi is particularly embattled with the paradox of legal security he enjoyed in the West as opposed to the *homo sacer* that he became in Mauritania. It seemed that the legal deprivation of Mauritania was specifically dictated by the very democratic Western world that guaranteed his legal rights Slahi when he lived in Germany and Canada. As such, it is a story of the transformation of the security apparatus under Taya, and the role Taya played within the new American security impositions. This story of the political cave of the post 9/11 world is largely underrated.

Slahi's post-Guantánamo life is in many ways a continuation of this Mauritanian *ad hoc* context, its unseen responses to subconscious legal requests from imperial centers. While his release from Guantánamo might be read, with a pinch of upbeat exaggeration, as a revocation of George Bush's state of exception that brought him in the first place to the belly of the beast at Guantánamo Bay, his release, in fact, was marred by the same limitation of freedom he experienced under Taya, as Mauritania continues to deny him a passport.[5] In fact, passport denial was Slahi's last experience with the Mauritanian security authorities before he was handed over to the U.S. investigators.[6] The same Kafkaesque feature of his *Guantánamo Diary* resurged in his return to a country that has meanwhile politically, but not institutionally, changed. The same encounter with the West-North African state bureaucracy resurges as Mauritania's director of Security informs Slahi that the government will suspend his right to a passport for two years, after which he will regain his full freedom of movement. Accepting the suspicious condition, Slahi realized, upon the conclusion of the term, that the government intended to perpetuate his state of limbo. Again, no clarifications were introduced. In an escapist *langue de bois*, the government spokesman affirmed Slahi's right to his passport, yet, in a more Orwellian world, his lawyer tripped in securing the handover.[7]

Slahi's is also a story of the local Mauritanian reception and perception of Slahi, a dimension usually neglected in the western covering of the ex-Guantánamo experience. In fact, the struggle for Slahi's right to a passport came to the fore first in the local activist resentment of the restriction of his freedom. In December 2018, Mauritanians in social media largely subscribed to hashtags and other forms of thematic posting, including petitions, dedicated webpages and the like, calling for Slahi's total freedom, foremost of

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which was his right to a passport.[8] Activists and social media savvies from across the political spectrum joined efforts to sympathize with Slahi. Indeed, Slahi's awareness of the strategic role that local sympathy might play was behind the appeal he made to the court of the people when he wrote an open letter demanding support for his freedom.[9] As Mauritania's government felt the need to respond to the pressures, its spokesman came up with an Orwellian retort, stating that the government will hand Slahi's passport to him under one condition: he assumes responsibility for the aftermath.[10] Only few months later, in February and March of 2019 did this popular scramble for Slahi's right to a passport gain more Western media coverage.[11]

Slahi's African story confounds some of the received wisdom about Guantánamo, which is usually seen as an inferno of ill-fated Islamists. Slahi's take on Islamism, with which he was once associated, moves beyond this representation. His post-Guantánamo interventions are particularly crucial in this regard. In a talk he gave in 2017 in Mauritania, for example, Slahi mused over the ideological conditions in 1980s Mauritania, and particularly the Islamism of the period, in which he was steeped at the time. While he defended an inclusive democracy that brings together an otherwise disharmonious ideological spectrum, he expressed a disillusion about the caliphate and the invoked myth of the golden age of Islam that misguided his generation, particularly the Islamists.[12]

Slahi's testimony is therefore important for Africanists who study political Islam and post-Islamism. The recent forgotten past of Mauritanian Islamism has been recently revisited by scholars such as Francesco Cavorta and Raquel Garcia, who sought to unveil the genealogies of contemporary political Islam in Mauritania, namely through an investigation of the movement in the 1980s.[13] Slahi's fieldwork expertise and personal testimony from this foundational period remain central in revisiting those poorly historicized moments. In the ASA Conference in Atlanta in November 2018, I asked him to elaborate on the revisionism and critique he had expressed elsewhere. He reiterated disillusionment with his old temporality and ideology. Furthermore, he remembered how the Islamists of the time were ideologically split between sympathizers with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and those who opted for the Saudi model, a dimension now forgotten or deemphasized.[14]

A recurrent theme in Slahi's post-Guantánamo talks in Mauritania is his emphasis on the cultural shock that he faced in Germany and the "cognitive dissonance" that, in his view, undermines the average perception of young Muslims. He talks about the cultural myths that solidified the binaries on which terrorism stands. And he believes in a more open world, unlike the "dark" age in which he grew up. The ideal representations of an Islamic history devoid of the social antagonism that legitimized the Islamism of his time quickly fell apart in his real encounter with the West, namely when he was a student in Germany.[15]

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This story of post-Islamism should not overlook the power of Slahi's faith and even his theology. Although no evidence was found to substantiate the accusation that led to his fourteen-year ordeal, Slahi impressed his audience when he announced his forgiveness for his captors and his disinterest in suing them. This has theological as well as narrative consequences. On the theological level, Islam has, no doubt, a clear discourse of forgiveness. This ideal, however, has been threatened with new theologies that de-emphasize forgiveness in favor of a more activist ideal of assertiveness, revenge, and resistance. Slahi, who is a pious and cosmopolitan Muslim seeking to establish a debate between his cosmopolitanism and his faith, is very aware of the theological moment here. For him, forgiveness is associated with love. On this particular point, he emailed back to me emphasizing how he "benefitted from traditional religious and literary education outside the French system." He provided two reasons for his action: "I don't need to tell you that *musamaha* [forgiveness] is closer to Allah than seeking vengeance or even compensation," he added. Far from posturing in a moral clash of civilization, Slahi's act of *musamaha* was also directed toward his own people, when he offered a forgiveness of Mauritania's former dictator, Maouiya Ould Taya, who illegally ordered his extradition in 2002. The second reason Slahi adduced to his morality here was rather philosophical: "There's also the philosophical ingredient in that I need to live in peace and forgive myself first and foremost and others by extensions."

Slahi's act of *musamaha* that surpasses antagonisms and offers an unlikely engagement and social contract between belligerents drew attention first when Slahi's former Guantánamo guard, Steve Wood, rejoined him in Mauritania to continue the unlikely friendship they surreptitiously developed when Wood was assigned to keep watch over Slahi in 2005. For ten months, the two became soul mates, watching movies, playing cards, and gossiping about the interrogators. The reunion attracted world attention and became a media story. While this was a story of abstract friendship that transcends reason, Wood could also easily see the relevance of Mohamedou's faith in their relationship. In fact, his friendship with Mohamedou encouraged him to inquire about and convert to Mohamedou's faith, Islam. Wood's reunion with Mohamedou in Mauritania took place in the holy month of Ramadan, where the two broke fast and worshiped together. It was both a story of secular friendship, punctuated by Guantánamo memories of playing Risk and Monopoly and engaging in long talks, as well as a religious relationship, illuminated by prayer, fasting, and forgiveness.

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