

**MARIAMA OUMAROU's VOICE**

"My name is Mariama Oumarou and I am 25 year-old. Eight years following the World Conference Against Racism, in which I had participated in the framework of the VOICES event, I am honoured to be with you again in order to share my painful personal experience of racism.

Born in 1984 Tambaye Jano (Department of Madaoua, Tahoua Region in the Republic of Niger), in a family of slaves, my destiny had in fact been decided for decades. I had actually no other choice but to inherit the statute of slave from my mother. My mother had also inherited this status from my grandmother.

I was only a child when I started to understand that I belonged to the Black Touareg. The Touareg community is hierarchical and distinguishes between two groups, according to the skin colour: the majority belongs to the black group, and the minority, to the white group.

My master, Mr. Igdas, was a white Touareg, belonging to the Kel-Gueres subgroup. He was the master of my mother Nola and of my grandmother Amina. I was therefore also Mr. Igdas' slave and was, as such, doing all the domestic work and other chores, according to his desire. I had to herd the goats, feed them, I had to gather dead wood for the cooking, to prepare food for the whole family, to clean the house, etc.

For years, I thought that this family was mine. But as I grew older, I realised that the tasks I was entrusted with, were different from the tasks of other girls of my age. I was treated differently, slept in different places and was regularly insulted and beaten. I remember that in 1999, I fell sick at Mr. Igdas', in Tambaye Jano. I had remained in bed without care for a long time, in spite of my poor health condition. My master had refused to give me medical care and a village inhabitant eventually informed my mother, who was living in Madaoua, of my health condition. She came to Tambaye Jano and asked my Master to allow her to take me back to Madaoua to take care of me.

I also remember that one day, my master Igdas presented himself to my mother Nola to tell her that he had found me a husband. He gave 20'000CFA to my mother saying: "It is necessary for you to come to Tambaye Jano for the wedding of your girl...". My mother and I went to Tambaye Jano. We waited for seven days and the wedding ceremony never took place. We therefore had no choice but to return to Madaoua. A few

days after our return, my master Igdas and two other men went back to my mother. They had decided to give me to the envoy of the husband I had never seen.

I was not entitled to a traditional wedding with a religious ceremony, with henna, dance and tam-tam. My situation was different. I was sold as an "object" to this envoy who brought me to Elhadj Adamou, in Birni-Lalé, Nigeria. This supposed husband had already four wives: Hassia (the first wife), Dadi (the second wife), Houssei (the third wife) and Rachida (the fourth wife). These four wives were legally recognised and admitted. In the local tradition, a man can legally marry up to four wives, but can take as many slave "wives" as he wants to serve him. These "wives" are commonly called as "Wahaya" and they are in reality slaves used to undertake all the domestic work, as well as to satisfy the sexual desire of the master, abusively called "husband" by some malign spirits to legitimate this "dirty task". I had therefore been sold as a "Wahaya", a slave woman who is sold as an object and who does not deserve a traditional wedding, like any other free woman.

During my whole life with my new master, I was regularly forced to have sexual relations with him, but only during the day, since the nights were devoted to his legitimate wives. Of course, I could not ask him all questions I had on my mind, such as "why do you always do this thing with me during the day? Why don't you ever do it with the others?" This act was repeated to the same hour of everyday and always under the same conditions, i.e. without my consent. Several months went by like that.

The daughters of my pretended husband were talking about me as "slave of our father, bought in Madaoua, Niger". When I was asking questions about that, they would quickly change the topic of their discussions. The children and wives of my master, as well as the other persons who knew about my status in the family were threatening me every day and they regularly insulted me as "dirty slave", "illegitimate child", etc. I still remember the day when I was beaten by the children of my master, at the request of their mothers, under the pretext that I had refused to undertake the domestic work, since I had fallen sick. The wives of my master had torn the clothes I was wearing. I had cried the whole day in my room, without anything to drink or to eat.

I was seventeen when I was freed from my slave condition. I owe my liberty to the efforts of the Timidria association. Their local and national officers had been alerted by my previous master, who had been left unsatisfied with the money received from my sale and who had eventually told the Timidria association about my situation as slave woman in Nigeria. The Timidria association managed to negotiate my freedom with my new master. The latter got his money back he had given to Mr. Igdas, my previous master.

It was during my first moments as a freed slave that I was invited to the conference in Durban, South Africa. It was during this conference that I discovered the outside world and that I was able to experience the life of a free woman.

Upon my return from Durban, I married Mr. Issoufou Mohammed, resident in Birnin Konni. We lived together happily for almost four years during which I gave birth to a beautiful child. My child unfortunately died of malnutrition at the beginning of his third year. We were actually very poor. We finally divorced. I would like to specify that this divorce was not due to my former condition as slave, but rather to the kind of difficulties that can occur in any couple.

The elder women that had gone through this system before me had told me that “the happiness of a woman in a polygamous environment cannot last for long”. During four years spent with my husband, I was able to realise how much it was difficult and complicated to share the love of a man with other women. We were three wives for one husband. Polygamy is hard to live, even more so, when the husband explicitly manifests his preferences for certain wives of his, thereby ignoring the values of balance and equity on which relies the harmony of polygamous households and couples. Before such a situation, I preferred asking for divorce. After having been repudiated, I felt relieved.

I would like sincerely thank the Timidria association for its support, as well as for the numerous advice I have received since I was freed. Let me also tell you that I am very happy to have been invited to the VOICE event in order to talk to you as a freed woman, with the same rights than any other person.

The elements I mentioned are part of my painful former slave life, which was a real nightmare in its totality and which I wanted to share before a United Nations institution for the second time.

In conclusion, it must be noted that significant progress have been made in the fight against contemporary forms or slavery and discriminatory practices in Niger, through awareness-raising of the population and through the implementation of appropriate legal reforms. Civil society must continue its awareness-raising action and education measures, so that these people suffering from ignorance may fully participate to the socio-economic and cultural progress of the country. The fight for freedom and equality between human beings is a long-lasting challenge. That is why all men and women who believe in peace and justice, as well as young generations, who care about respect for human dignity, must contribute to the creation of better conditions so that each victim of slavery can regain one’s freedom and can enjoy life.

I thank you for your attention.”