

22 April 2009

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 Guerres 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 ~~plateau~~ Wassick 1999,

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

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