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## CHAPTER 1: PROFILE

### Introduction

Increasing Islamist terrorist threats from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and ongoing ethnic violence between Africans and Arab-Berbers threaten the stability of Mauritania, a military-directed and mineral-rich nation. This impoverished and mostly desert country in northwest Africa gained its independence from France in 1960 and is one of the continent's newest oil producers.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Vast desert

The majority of Mauritania, the world's first Islamic republic, lies within the Sahara.<sup>4, 5</sup> Mining operations and coastal fishing drive the country's economy. Agriculture is confined mostly to narrow strips of land along the Sénégal River in southern Mauritania. Most of the country's 3.4 million citizens reside in this region, except for the two major coastal cities of Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou.<sup>6</sup> To grow its economy, the country intends to exploit offshore reserves of oil and natural gas.<sup>7</sup>

Mauritania has been somewhat stable since the 2008 military ouster of the nation's first democratically elected government; it has experienced at least five successful military coups and numerous failed attempts since 1960.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup>

### Geography

#### Area

Located in northwest Africa, Mauritania has a total land area of 1,030,700 sq km (397,956 sq mi). Slightly less than three times the size of New Mexico, it is bordered by four countries: Western Sahara in the northwest, Algeria in the northeast,



© Christine Vaufrey  
Coast of Mauritania

<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania," in *The World Factbook*, 3 May 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>2</sup> BBC News, "Country Profile: Mauritania," 4 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881985>

<sup>3</sup> Sara Ghasemilee, "Protests Stun Mauritania," *Al Arabiya News*, 25 April 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/25/146709.html>

<sup>4</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania," in *The World Factbook*, 18 April 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>5</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Introduction: The First Three Decades of Independence," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 7–11.

<sup>6</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania," in *The World Factbook*, 18 April 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>7</sup> BBC News, "Country Profile: Mauritania," 4 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881985>

<sup>8</sup> BBC News, "Troops Stage Coup in Mauritania," 6 August 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7544834.stm>

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, "Mauritania," 22 July 2009, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/mauritania/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> Associated Press, "Coup Leader Wins Election Amid Outcry in Mauritania," *New York Times*, 19 July 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/20/world/africa/20mauritania.html?ref=mauritania>

Senegal in the southwest, and Mali in the southeast and east. Mauritania's western border is formed by more than 400 miles of coastline along the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>11, 12</sup>

### *Climate*

Mauritania has a desert climate. Although the northern desert regions are hot and dry, the southern region along the Sénégál River has a humid rainy season from August to October.<sup>13</sup> Near-constant winds blow throughout northern Mauritania, making the area exceedingly dry. The *harmattan*—a hot, dry wind that blows in autumn and winter in the western Sahara—increases the dryness of the area and blows sand in shifting dunes across the landscape.<sup>14, 15</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Sahara Desert in Mauritania

The vast area of the Sahara receives less than 20 cm (8 in) of rain annually, with some areas seeing no rainfall for years at a time. The aridity of the area is exacerbated by generally high temperatures, which average over 43°C (110°F) during the summer months. In southern Mauritania near the Sénégál River, the Sahelo-Sudanese climate prevails. Rainfall can measure as high as 63.5 cm (25 in) in the extreme south. Summer temperatures usually hover around 38°C (100°F).<sup>16, 17</sup>

## Geographical Divisions and Topographical Features

### *Saharan Zone*

The Saharan zone is a vast desert making up about two-thirds of northern Mauritania. The physical landscape comprises sand dunes and occasional granite outcroppings. In the northwest, massive sand dunes, oriented from northeast to southwest, extend for long distances. Northern sand dunes shift frequently in the constant desert winds. In



© manu25 / wikipedia  
Saharan plateau

<sup>11</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania," in *The World Factbook*, 3 May 2012,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>12</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Mauritania: Climate," 2012,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>13</sup> Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Mauritania," 1 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5467.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Mauritania: Climate," 2012,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>15</sup> Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania," Food and Agriculture Organization, 25 November 2011,

<http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Mauritania: Climate," 2012,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>17</sup> Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania," Food and Agriculture Organization, 25 November 2011,

<http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm>

the southern Saharan zone, the clay content of the soil prevents the dunes from shifting as frequently. The clay also holds water within natural depressions, facilitating vegetation growth that slows erosion and shifting sand. Generally flat, the Saharan zone contains plateaus of crusted bluish sands. Although they are generally low plateaus under 500 m (1,640 ft), Mount Ijill—Mauritania’s highest point—rises 915 m (3,002 ft).<sup>18, 19, 20</sup>

### *Sahelian Zone*

The Sahelian zone forms an east-west band across southern Mauritania. Consisting of savannah, the zone also has sand plains. The sparse grass and scrub of the area keep the sand dunes fixed. Herders pasture their cattle, goats, and sheep in this area. But desertification has narrowed the Sahelian zone, forcing some herders southward to find enough pasturage for their livestock. Precipitation is higher in the southern region than in the north, with narrow temperature variations between day and night. Plus, the southern Sahelian zone supports heavier vegetation, including date palm production.<sup>21, 22, 23</sup>



© Oxfam International  
Drought in Sahel region

### *Sénégal River Valley Zone*

The Sénégal River valley is the most fertile area of Mauritania and the most densely populated outside of the two major cities of Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou.<sup>24, 25</sup> This narrow band lying south of the Sahelian zone follows the course of the Sénégal River, which forms the southern border of Mauritania. Droughts and desertification from previous decades have reduced the size of the area and forced nomads in the region into urban centers.<sup>26, 27, 28</sup>

<sup>18</sup> LaVerle Berry, “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 43–45.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Hakawati, “Islamic Republic of Mauritania: Terrain, Geography,” n.d., <http://www.al-hakawati.net/english/states/mauritania.asp>

<sup>20</sup> Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, “Geography: Geographic Zones,” in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2009), 9–11.

<sup>21</sup> LaVerle Berry, “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 45.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Hakawati, “Islamic Republic of Mauritania: Terrain, Geography,” n.d., <http://www.al-hakawati.net/english/states/mauritania.asp>

<sup>23</sup> Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, “Geography: Geographic Zones,” in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2009), 9–11.

<sup>24</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Mauritania,” in *The World Factbook*, 18 April 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>25</sup> Brad K. Blitz and Maureen Lynch, eds., *Statelessness and Citizenship: A Comparative Study of the Benefits of Nationality* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2011), 143.

<sup>26</sup> LaVerle Berry, “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 43–45.

Cool temperatures prevail in the region with little daily variation. High precipitation and annual flooding supports the settled agriculture that is the foundation of the zone's economy. Grains, vegetables, and legumes are common crops. But plagues of locusts and other insects occasionally destroy crops, and occasional droughts reduce agricultural productivity and livestock pasturage. Fishing is part of the livelihood of the area. Because the Sénégal River is the only permanent river between Morocco and central Senegal, farmers rely on its waters for irrigation far from the river.<sup>29, 30, 31</sup>



© Christine Vaufrey  
Senegal River Valley

### *Coastal Zone*

Forming a north-south band along the entire Atlantic coast of Mauritania, the coastal zone remains humid for most of the year. Continually buffeted by hot and dry winds from the desert and trade winds from the Canary Islands, the zone is temperate. Mauritania's capital, Nouakchott, is in the southern part of the coastal zone. The important trade and shipping city of Nouâdhibou is in the northern part of the zone on the Ras Nouâdhibou Peninsula. Its natural harbor allows clear access for shipping vessels and is connected to the mining operation of the interior by a railroad.



© Kokopelado  
Coast of Mauritania  
32, 33, 34

Although much of Mauritania consists of flat, sandy terrain, a number of important topographical features punctuate the landscape. In the Sahara in west central Mauritania, the Adrar Plateau rises abruptly from the desert sands, reaching approximately 500 m (1,640 ft). Numerous gorges cut the plateau, funneling the limited precipitation to its base where it collects in small oases of

<sup>27</sup> Al-Hakawati, "Islamic Republic of Mauritania: Terrain, Geography," n.d., <http://www.al-hakawati.net/english/states/mauritania.asp>

<sup>28</sup> Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "Geography: Geographic Zones," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2009), 9–11.

<sup>29</sup> LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2, The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 43–45.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Hakawati, "Islamic Republic of Mauritania: Terrain, Geography," n.d., <http://www.al-hakawati.net/english/states/mauritania.asp>

<sup>31</sup> Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "Geography: Geographic Zones," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2009), 9–11.

<sup>32</sup> LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Physical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 43–45.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Hakawati, "Islamic Republic of Mauritania: Terrain, Geography," n.d., <http://www.al-hakawati.net/english/states/mauritania.asp>

<sup>34</sup> Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "Geography: Geographic Zones," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2009), 9–11.

slight vegetation. Increased desertification over the years has caused many towns to be abandoned.<sup>35, 36</sup>

To the east of the Adrar Plateau lies an anticlinal dome named the Guelb er Richat. Approximately 40 km (25 mi) in diameter, this feature can be seen from space. Called “The Eye of the Sahara,” the circular formation has eroded over many millennia, exposing the sedimentary rock that once held a lake.<sup>37, 38</sup>

Mauritania’s highest point is Kediett Ijill. Located near the northwestern border with Western Sahara and close to the town of Zouérate, Kediett Ijill rises 915 m (3,002 ft). The hill is rich in magnetite and hematite (an iron ore), which gives it a distinctive bluish color.<sup>39</sup>

The Tagânt Plateau is in eastern Mauritania within the Sahelian Zone. It receives enough precipitation to support date palm plantations and is home to the oasis of Tidjikja. Underground springs feed vegetation around the sheer faces of the plateau that rise up to 600 m (2,000 ft). Desertification has destroyed much of the savannah and grasslands that once thrived in the area. Rock carvings and paintings in the area depict plant and animal life that no longer exists locally, leaving a pictorial record of life in the area before desertification.<sup>40, 41, 42</sup>



© Christine Vaufrey  
Plateaus and desertification

## Rivers and Lakes

### Sénégal River

The Sénégal River is the only permanent river between Morocco and central Senegal. It forms the southern border of Mauritania, flowing north and west out of the African interior to the Atlantic Ocean. Flooding during the rainy season



© Christine Vaufrey  
Donkeys and boys at the river

<sup>35</sup> Marco C. Stoppato and Alfredo Bini, *Deserts* (Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, Ltd., 2003), 156–157.

<sup>36</sup> Sahara Territory, “Mauritania Geography,” 2011, <http://saharateritory.webs.com/mauritania%20geography.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Marco C. Stoppato and Alfredo Bini, *Deserts* (Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, Ltd., 2003), 156–157.

<sup>38</sup> Sahara Territory, “Mauritania Geography,” 2011, <http://saharateritory.webs.com/mauritania%20geography.htm>

<sup>39</sup> Keith Lye, “Mauritania,” in *Firefly World Factbook* (Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, Inc., 2003), 218–219.

<sup>40</sup> Marco C. Stoppato and Alfredo Bini, *Deserts* (Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, Ltd., 2003), 156–157.

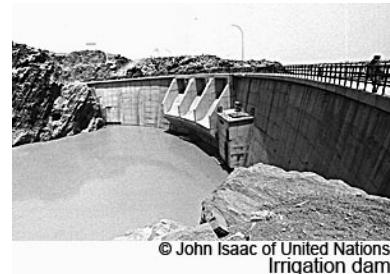
<sup>41</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Climate,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 111–112.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Tagant,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 502.

provides fertile soils for cultivation once the river's floodwaters recede. Cultivation depends upon the location along the river and the amount of annual precipitation. Common crops are millet, sorghum, and peas. Fishing and cattle herding also support the local economy.<sup>43, 44</sup>

### *Gorgol River*

Flowing southward in south central Mauritania, the Gorgol River is a tributary of the Sénégal River. The Gorgol begins as two rivers—the White and the Black Gorgol rivers—converging midway through its course. A dam built where the two branches of the river converge helps to increase irrigation for farming and livestock herding, extending the circumference of arable land in the area.<sup>45, 46, 47</sup>



© John Isaac of United Nations  
Irrigation dam

### *Karakoro River*

A major tributary of the Sénégal River, the Karakoro River flows south along Mauritania's southeastern border with Mali. The Karakoro River supports the local fishing industry and outlying woodlands, which provide habitat for other local animals and fuel for people living within the river basin.<sup>48, 49</sup>

### *Lake Rkiz*

Located in the southwest corner of Mauritania, Lake Rkiz is a semi-permanent lake fed by small streams that emerge after annual rains. The lake drains into the Sénégal River. During its permanent state, the lake is usually no wider than 5 km (3 mi), although during the rainy season it can extend 34 km (21 mi) and reach a width of 8 km (5 mi).<sup>50</sup>

## Major Cities and Towns

### *Nouakchott*

<sup>43</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Sénégal River: Agriculture and Irrigation,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBCchecked/topic/534498/Senegal-River>

<sup>44</sup> Peter D. Coats, “Chapter 3: The Economy: The Rural Economy,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 98–101.

<sup>45</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization, “The Senegal River Basin,” n.d., <http://www.fao.org/docrep/W4347E/w4347e0h.htm>

<sup>46</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Gorgol,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 229–230.

<sup>47</sup> Peter D. Coats, “Chapter 3: The Economy: The Rural Economy,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 98–101.

<sup>48</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization, “The Senegal River Basin,” n.d., <http://www.fao.org/docrep/W4347E/w4347e0h.htm>

<sup>49</sup> R. H. Hughes and J. S. Hughes, “Mauritania,” in *A Directory of African Wetlands* (Cambridge, UK: International Union for Conservation of Nature/World Conservation Monitoring Centre; Nairobi, Kenya: United Nations Environment Programme, 1992), 54.

<sup>50</sup> R. H. Hughes and J. S. Hughes, “Mauritania,” in *A Directory of African Wetlands* (Cambridge, UK: International Union for Conservation of Nature/World Conservation Monitoring Centre; Nairobi, Kenya: United Nations Environment Programme, 1992), 50.

Nouakchott is in southern Mauritania near the Atlantic coast. Lying along the main north-south highway, Nouakchott was built up from a fortified village to become the capital when Mauritania achieved independence in 1960. Originally built to support a population of 15,000 inhabitants, the city is currently home to almost 750,000 people, about one-quarter the total population of Mauritania. Mass migration occurred during the 1970s because of serious droughts in the interior. The result is that the city sprawls approximately 5 km (3 mi) in from the coast. The original city center—built according to a grid—is now surrounded by poorly laid-out streets with a weak infrastructure. Wealthy Mauritanians inhabit the city; their plush mansions rest near hastily built shantytowns. The capital city has an airport and a fairly well developed road system connecting it to other cities through the country.



© Initsogan  
City of Nouakchott

The city exports copper and petroleum from its seaport, which is second only to the northern port at Nouâdhibou. Its industrial center continues to develop.

The name Nouakchott translates to “the place of winds” and suits a city that is continuously buffeted by trade winds from the Canary Islands as well as *harmattan* blowing from the Sahara. During heavy rains, the coastal flats tend to flood, forcing the citizenry to live inland from the coast. Until recently, the city received water from an aquifer 50 km (31 mi) inland. Today, hydrological projects supply the city with water from the Sénégal River; however, a faulty water distribution network has waterlogged the ground underneath the city, increasing its risk of flooding.<sup>51, 52, 53, 54, 55</sup>

#### *Nouâdhibou*

Located in northwestern Mauritania, Nouâdhibou is the country’s second-largest city with a population of about 95,000 people. The city lies halfway down Ras Nouâdhibou, a peninsula that extends south from the joint border of Western Sahara and Mauritania. The two countries share administration of the peninsula.

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<sup>51</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Nouakchott,” 2012,  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/420822/Nouakchott>

<sup>52</sup> Catherine Taine-Cheikh, “The (R)urbanization of Mauritania: Historical Context and Contemporary Developments,” in *Arabic in the City: Issues in Dialect Contact and Language Variation*, eds. Catherine Miller et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 35.

<sup>53</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Nouakchott,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 369–372.

<sup>54</sup> Lonely Planet, “Introducing Nouakchott,” 2011,  
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/mauritania/nouakchott>

<sup>55</sup> Med Abderrahmane, “Mauritania Could Lose Capital City to the Ocean,” *Africa Review* (Kenya), 29 June 2011,  
<http://www.africareview.com/Special+Reports/Nouakchott+plunges+into+the+sea-/979182/1191336/-/eh5qynz/-/index.html>

Nouâdhibou grew out of a fishing village, and with its special pier built in 1964 became the economic center of Mauritania. Fishing continues to support the local economy, yet the export of iron ore to the United States and Europe plays the central role in the city's economy. The city is connected to the capital by road, to the iron ore mining sites of Zouerate and Fdérik by railway, and to the rest of the world through its shipping port and international airport.<sup>56, 57</sup>

### *Kaédi*

Kaédi is situated along the north bank of the Sénégâl River near the confluence of the Gorgol River in southern Mauritania, within the river valley made fertile by annual flooding. Agriculture and livestock herding are key elements of the local economy. The Mauritanian government subsidizes large farming ventures here, where local herders export animal hides. Because of its proximity to Senegal, a great deal of trade exists between the two countries.

The city supports a population of about 35,000 people. The region has the greatest population density in the country. Kaédi has a hospital that serves the local population. The city houses a library of Islamic books and manuscripts that date back centuries. A network of basic roads ensures communication between Kaédi and the rest of the country.<sup>58, 59, 60</sup>

### *Kiffa*

From the capital city of Nouakchott on the Atlantic coast to Néma near the Malian border runs a trans-Mauritanian highway. The provincial capital Kiffa in south-central Mauritania marks the halfway point along this highway. The population of the city totals about 33,000, ethnically split between Maure and Black Africans. The city is a commercial and agricultural center for the region. A domestic airport west of the city operates weekly flights to Nouakchott.<sup>61, 62</sup>



© Christine Vaufrey  
Fishing in Nouadhibou



© Christine Vaufrey  
Livestock in river near Kaédi



© bobrayner / flickr.com  
Morning market in Kiffa

<sup>56</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Nouâdhibou,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/420820/Nouadhibou>

<sup>57</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Nouâdhibou,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 366–369.

<sup>58</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Kaédi,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 283–284.

<sup>59</sup> Aga Khan Development Network, “Kaedi Regional Hospital,” 6 August 2005, [http://www.akdn.org/architecture/pdf/0327\\_Mau.pdf](http://www.akdn.org/architecture/pdf/0327_Mau.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Kaédi,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/309505/Kaedi>

<sup>61</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Kiffa,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 287.

## Zouérate

The northwestern town of Zouérate lies in the Sahara, has 34,000 people, and exists solely to support iron ore mining operations in the nearby hills. East of the town are two important iron ore reserves: el-Rhein and M’Haoudat. Iron ore is shipped by train to Nouâdhibou for export.

Desertification has been an ongoing problem in the region for decades. No perennial rivers exist. Groundwater reserves have been exploited to provide water for mining operations and for use by the city. Groundwater has collected over the centuries from limited rainfall. But since 1970, annual rainfall in the region has diminished by 35%.<sup>63, 64, 65</sup>



© Christopher Andre  
Zouerate Nouadhibou Railway

## Néma

Néma is in the southeastern corner of Mauritania near the border with Mali. The town of about 14,000 inhabitants receives a steady flow of traffic from Mali. Most traffic is for the transportation of goods. Néma connects to the capital Nouakchott by a 1,102-km (685-mi) paved highway that was opened in 1978. The town also operates an international airport. Although Néma is the administrative capital of the Hodh Ech Chargui region, the town is in a state of disrepair.<sup>66, 67, 68, 69</sup>



© Hugues / flickr.com  
Paved highway to Nouakchott

## History

### *Early History*

Around the fourth century C.E., Berber tribes from North Africa moved south into the region that is modern Mauritania, displacing hunter-gatherers who had lived in the area since the end of the

<sup>62</sup> Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, “The Far Southeast,” in *The Rough Guide to West Africa*, 4th ed. (New York: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2003), 124.

<sup>63</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Zouérate,” in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 552.

<sup>64</sup> Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, “The North,” in *The Rough Guide to West Africa*, 4th ed. (New York: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2003), 137–138.

<sup>65</sup> François Bertone et al., “An Assessment of the Groundwater Resources in the Western Margin of the Taoudenni Basin, Mauritania,” in *Aquifer Systems Management: Darcy’s Legacy in a World of Impending Water Shortage*, eds. Laurence Chery and Ghislain de Marsily (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 149–160.

<sup>66</sup> Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, “Economy: Transportation,” in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2009).

<sup>67</sup> Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, “The Far Southeast,” in *The Rough Guide to West Africa*, 4th ed. (New York: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2003), 129.

<sup>68</sup> City Population, “Mauritania,” 21 March 2010, <http://www.citypopulation.de/Mauritania.html>

<sup>69</sup> Edith Hodgkinson, “Mauritania: Economy,” in *Africa South of the Sahara*, 33rd ed., ed. Katharine Murison (London: Europa Publications, 2004), 705–709.

last ice age. Berber tribes dominated the northern region, making vassals of those who did not flee south. In turn, the Berber were displaced by invading Arabs beginning in the eighth century.<sup>70, 71</sup>

From the 8th through the 16th centuries, the region witnessed the rise to power of numerous empires. The Sudanic Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and the Songhai succeeded one another along the southern reaches of today's Mauritania. They warred frequently with the Berbers but were finally laid to ruin by the Moroccan Saadi Dynasty in the late 16th century.<sup>72, 73</sup> The invasions of the Beni Hassan Arabs from the north proved too strong for the Berbers of Mauritania. After fighting a war known as the Char Bobha from 1644 to 1674, the Arab invaders gained sovereignty over Mauritania, establishing the social order that remains to this day.<sup>74</sup>

### *European Involvement*

European contact with the peoples of Mauritania began in 1455 when the Portuguese established the first European trading post at Arguin Island. Originally built to trade gold, fish, and gum Arabic, the trading post eventually became a major trading area for African slaves. The post fell under the control of numerous European countries until France gained exclusive colonial rights to the region through the Treaty of Paris in 1814.<sup>75, 76, 77</sup> France implemented a formal policy of "pacification" for Mauritania, which it accomplished in 1912.<sup>78</sup> As part of French West Africa, Mauritania was neglected but remained firmly under French



© Richard L. Smith  
Sultan of Saadi Dynasty



© Courtesy of Wikimedia  
French Colonel Henri Gouraud

<sup>70</sup> Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 6–11.

<sup>71</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Berbers," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 98–99.

<sup>72</sup> Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 6–11.

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Michel, "The Invasion of Morocco in 1591 and the Saadian Dynasty," University of Pennsylvania African Studies Center, 1 December 1995,

[http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/morco\\_1591.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/morco_1591.html)

<sup>74</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Beni Hassan," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 96–97.

<sup>75</sup> Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 11–12.

<sup>76</sup> Marco Ramerini, "Arguin: A Portuguese Fort in Mauritania, 1455–1633," n.d.,  
<http://www.colonialvoyage.com/eng/africa/mauritania/arguin.html>

<sup>77</sup> Hugh Thomas, "Chapter 17: Slave Harbors I," in *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1870* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 332–352.

<sup>78</sup> Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 14–15.

control until 1960, when the country gained its independence to become the world's first Islamic republic.<sup>79</sup>

### *Independence*

Mauritania's independence has been fraught with internal conflict. Disagreements over the contested territory of Western Sahara led to Mauritania's first coup in June 1978. By 2005, five coups had occurred, as well as countless changes in political, governmental, and military leadership. In 2009, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz was elected president of the Islamic republic. Although economic, ethnic, and political problems continue to plague Mauritanian society, the nation has reached a modicum of stability.<sup>80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86</sup>



© Voice of America  
President of Mauritania

### **Government**

As a presidential republic, Mauritania is governed by a president who is elected by popular vote. The president appoints a prime minister to aid government administration. A bicameral legislature has a Senate and a National Assembly. Senators are elected by municipal leaders and serve 6-year terms. Those serving in the National Assembly are elected by popular vote for 5-year terms. Administration of the country follows the French model. Mauritania is divided into 12 administrative regions—*wilaya*—overseen by local governors. A 13th region is the



© Carlos Reis  
Government building, Nouakchott

<sup>79</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Introduction: The First Three Decades of Independence," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 7–11.

<sup>80</sup> Rachel Warner, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 23–38.

<sup>81</sup> Rawiya Tawfiq, "Mauritania: Another Coup d'Etat," *International Politics Journal*, October 2005, <http://www.mafhoum.com/press9/254P8.htm>

<sup>82</sup> BBC News, "Mauritania's New Military Leader," 8 August 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4746387.stm>

<sup>83</sup> Lydia Polgreen, "Army Officers Seize Power in Mauritania," *New York Times*, 6 August 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/world/africa/07mauritania.html?\\_r=1&ref=mauritania](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/07/world/africa/07mauritania.html?_r=1&ref=mauritania)

<sup>84</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: Struggle for Post Independence Stability," 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/283211/Struggle-for-postindependence-stability>

<sup>85</sup> Associated Press, "Coup Leader Wins Election Amid Outcry in Mauritania," *New York Times*, 19 July 2009,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/20/world/africa/20mauritania.html?ref=mauritania>

<sup>86</sup> Sara Ghaseemilee, "Protests Stun Mauritania," *Al Arabiya News*, 25 April 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/25/146709.html>

capital district, Nouakchott. Protests have occurred to decentralize control of the executive branch and to spread power more equally throughout the nation.<sup>87, 88, 89</sup>

## Media

Although Freedom House designates Mauritania's press as only partly free, the country enjoys some of the most liberal media laws in the sub-region.<sup>90, 91</sup> Television and radio are state-run, but private ownership of these media are allowed by law.<sup>92, 93</sup> Of the two news agencies, one is state-run while the other—Maurinews—is privately held. State and private daily and weekly newspapers abound. The tabloid-like *Peshmergas* are particularly popular in Mauritania.<sup>94</sup> Although they operate freely, their content is self-censored because libel is a criminal offense, subject to jail time. Criminal libel laws in Mauritania also make it difficult to cover politics, the military, religion, and corruption.<sup>95</sup> Although internet usage is unrestricted, in 2009 a website editor was imprisoned for “undermining good morals.”<sup>96, 97</sup> Less than 3% of the population uses the internet.<sup>98, 99, 100</sup>



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
Internet café

<sup>87</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Mauritania: Government and Society,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55010/Transportation-and-telecommunications>

<sup>88</sup> Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Mauritania,” 1 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5467.htm#gov>

<sup>89</sup> BBC News, “Mauritanian Protests Against President Adelaziz,” 3 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17606002>

<sup>90</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom of the Press: Mauritania,” 2011, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/mauritania>

<sup>91</sup> Reporters Without Borders, “Mauritania,” March 2010, [http://en.rsf.org/report-mauritania\\_31.html](http://en.rsf.org/report-mauritania_31.html)

<sup>92</sup> BBC News, “Mauritania Profile: Media,” 22 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13882165>

<sup>93</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Mauritania: Communications,” in *The World Factbook*, 3 May 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>94</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom of the Press: Mauritania,” 2011, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/mauritania>

<sup>95</sup> BBC News, “Mauritania Profile: Media,” 22 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13882165>

<sup>96</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom of the Press: Mauritania,” 2011, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/mauritania>

<sup>97</sup> Reporters Without Borders, “Mauritania,” March 2010, [http://en.rsf.org/report-mauritania\\_31.html](http://en.rsf.org/report-mauritania_31.html)

<sup>98</sup> BBC News, “Mauritania Profile: Media,” 22 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13882165>

<sup>99</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Mauritania: Communications,” in *The World Factbook*, 3 May 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>100</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom of the Press: Mauritania,” 2011, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/mauritania>

## Economy

Together, industrial and service activities employ about 50% of the labor force in Mauritania and contribute about 80% to its annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Much of the work in these sectors involves fish processing, oil production, and mining for iron ore, gold, and copper.<sup>101</sup>

Mauritania's greatest mineral resource is iron, which accounts for about 40% of exports.<sup>102</sup> Its large reserves make it the second-largest exporter of iron in Africa. The country's only railway was built for the mining communities of the interior to ship their minerals to the coast for export. The Tasiast gold mine in the Inchiri region produces about two-thirds of Mauritania's gold. Copper is extracted from a massive open-pit mine beyond the town of Akjoujt.<sup>103</sup>



© Carlos Reis  
Fertile land at oases

In 2006, oil exploration and drilling began. Reserves located in the Chinguetti oilfield failed to yield the volume that was projected. The output of offshore oil operations has declined rapidly since 2006. Mauritania continues to develop its oil infrastructure; it is the only energy resource that contributes to the country's economy.<sup>104, 105, 106</sup>

Although less than 0.2% of Mauritania's land is suitable for food production, about 50% of the population work in agriculture, which contributes about 20% of GDP.<sup>107</sup> The majority of these people engage in livestock herding, while the rest grow rice, corn, sorghum, millet, wheat, and dates at oases in the interior.<sup>108, 109</sup> Fees paid by foreign fishing boats help support Mauritania's

<sup>101</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 3 May 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>102</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 3 May 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>103</sup> Mowafa Taib, "The Mineral Industry of Mauritania," in *2009 Minerals Yearbook*, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior, March 2011, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2009/myb3-2009-mr.pdf>

<sup>104</sup> Neil Ford, "Mauritania Bounces Back," *International Communications*, 21 May 2008, <http://www.gasandoil.com/news/africa/7f3cb56a050a2ee3ad8d0bf21395a7fc>

<sup>105</sup> Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy, "International Energy Statistics," 2011, <http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/IEDIndex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=53&aid=1>

<sup>106</sup> Jane's, "Natural Resources (Mauritania)," 2 June 2010, <http://articles.janes.com/articles/Janes-Sentinel-Security-Assessment-North-Africa/Natural-resources-Mauritania.html>

<sup>107</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania: Geography, Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 3 May 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>108</sup> Ahmedou Ould Soule, "Country Pasture/Forage Resource Profiles: Mauritania," Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations, August 2006, <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/mauritania/mauritania.htm>

<sup>109</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Mauritania: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 3 May 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

economy—at the expense of overharvesting the country’s coastal waters and threatening the marine environment.<sup>110, 111, 112</sup>

## Ethnic Groups

In the larger sense, the ethnic makeup of Mauritania is divided between the Maure (Moors) and Black Africans. The Maure make up almost 75% of the population and occupy virtually the entire country north of the Sénegal River. They share traditions, a nomadic history, and a language. Hassaniya, a dialect of Arabic, is a mixture of Arabic and Arabized Amazigh (Berber).



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Harantine girl servants

The Maure are divided into two classes. The *beydanes* are “White Maure” who have always ruled Mauritania and claim lineage from the Arabs and Berbers who settled Mauritania in the north.<sup>113</sup> The *haratines* are the “Black Maure” who are descendants of slaves and trace their lineage through the Sudanic tribes of Africa. Although they are considered Maure, they were once the slaves of the White Maure. Slavery has been banned on numerous occasions in Mauritania’s history. The most recent law banning slavery was ratified in 1981; however, human rights groups believe Mauritanians continue the practice.<sup>114, 115, 116, 117, 118</sup>

Black Africans in Mauritania predominantly live along the Sénegal River. They comprise the Pulaar, Soninké, and Wolof ethno-linguistic groups. Pulaar is spoken by more than one ethnic group. The language is native to the Toucouleur, who call themselves Haalpulaaren (“Speakers of Pulaar”). With a population of approximately 150,000, they maintain a close-knit society of

<sup>110</sup> International Trade Centre, “Trade Performance HS: Exports of Mauritania (2009, in USD Thousands),” 2011,

[http://legacy.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP\\_EP\\_CI.aspx?RP=478&YR=2009](http://legacy.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_EP_CI.aspx?RP=478&YR=2009)

<sup>111</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “Country: Mauritania: Annex 4: Summary of DTIS (2001) Concerning Commodity Development,” 2001, [http://content.undp.org/go/cms-service/stream/asset/:jsessionid=aeHIYJhx0SYg?asset\\_id=2208737](http://content.undp.org/go/cms-service/stream/asset/:jsessionid=aeHIYJhx0SYg?asset_id=2208737)

<sup>112</sup> Marie-Martine Buckens, “The Controversial Example of Mauritania,” *The Courier*, April/May 2008, <http://www.acp-eucourier.info/O-exemplo-controve.280.0.html%3F%2526L%3D0>

<sup>113</sup> BBC News, “Mauritania’s New Military Leader,” 8 August 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4746387.stm>

<sup>114</sup> *The Estimate*, “The Attempted Coup in Mauritania: Mauritania’s Social Structure,” 13 June 2003, <http://www.theestimate.com/public/061303.html>

<sup>115</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Political Transition in Mauritania: Problems and Prospects,” *Middle East Journal* 53 (Winter 1999): 56–58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329283?seq=1>

<sup>116</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>117</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, “Mauritania: People: Languages,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>118</sup> Tore Kjeilen, “Mauritania: Peoples,” LookLex.com, n.d., <http://looklex.com/e.o/mauritania.peoples.htm>

farmers along the central portion of the Sénégal River.<sup>119, 120</sup> Pulaar also is spoken by the Fulani, an ethnic group closely related to the Toucouleur. Numbering approximately 250,000 in Mauritania, the Fulani are partly nomadic. They care for cattle, goats, and sheep.<sup>121, 122</sup>

The Soninké live in south-central Mauritania along the eastern section of the Sénégal River. They are an agricultural and trading people whose language is heavily influenced by Amazigh (Berber). Exact population figures do not exist for the Soninké, but they are estimated to number about 150,000 in Mauritania. Their society is strictly stratified into social classes with nobles at the top and slaves at the bottom.<sup>123, 124</sup>

The Wolof live along the Sénégal River in southwestern Mauritania. They are the dominant ethnic group in neighboring Senegal, yet they make up only a small percentage of Mauritania's population, numbering about 350,000 or roughly 10% of the population.<sup>125, 126, 127</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Tore Kjeilen, "Toucouleur," LookLex.com, n.d., <http://looklex.com/e.o/toucouleur.htm>

<sup>120</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups," 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>121</sup> Tore Kjeilen, "Fulani," LookLex.com, n.d., <http://looklex.com/e.o/fulani.htm>

<sup>122</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups," 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>123</sup> Tore Kjeilen, "Soninke," LookLex.com, n.d., <http://looklex.com/e.o/soninke.htm>

<sup>124</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups," 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>125</sup> Tore Kjeilen, "Wolof," LookLex.com, n.d., <http://looklex.com/e.o/wolof.htm>

<sup>126</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, "Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups," 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania>

<sup>127</sup> LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 58.

## Chapter 1 Assessment

1. The government of Mauritania has been stable since the country gained its independence in 1960.

**False**

Mauritania has been somewhat stable since 2008, when the country's first democratically elected president was removed from office in a military coup. Since 1960, the country has experienced at least five military coups and numerous attempts.

2. The most heavily populated area of Mauritania is along the country's southern border.

**True**

Except for the two major coastal cities of Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou, most of the country's 3.4 million people live along the Sénégal River in southern Mauritania. High precipitation and annual flooding supports settled agriculture, the foundation of the regional economy.

3. Mauritania is an important U.S. ally.

**True**

U.S. Special Forces have trained troops in Mauritania, which has been an important U.S. ally in global counterterrorism.

4. Mauritania is bordered by Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, and Western Sahara.

**False**

Mauritania is bordered by four countries: Western Sahara in the northwest, Algeria in the northeast, Senegal in the southwest, and Mali in the southeast and east. Western Sahara separates Mauritania and Morocco, which do not share a common border.

5. Nouâdhibou is the capital of Mauritania.

**False**

Nouakchott, in the southern region near the Atlantic coast, is the capital of Mauritania. Nouâdhibou lies in northwestern Mauritania and is the second-largest city.

## CHAPTER 2: RELIGION

### Overview of Major Religions

Mauritania is an Islamic republic. It has near 100% adherence to Islam. The majority of Mauritians are Sunni Muslims of the Maliki rite.<sup>128, 129</sup> Christians exist in the country, but nearly all practicing Christians are not Mauritanian citizens.

Approximately one-quarter of 1% of the population is Christian, enough to support the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches located in some of the more populous cities. Judaism is also practiced in Mauritania, though no synagogues exist within the country.<sup>130, 131</sup>



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Mauritanian imams

### Role of Religion in Government

Mauritania is an Islamic republic with laws based on the Islamic holy text, the Quran; the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad contained in the *hadith*; and rulings of Islamic scholars known as *fatwas*. These three sources form what is known as *shari'a* law, which was instituted in Mauritania in 1980. Today, *shari'a* law provides the legal basis for most matters in the country, except in cases relating to "nationality law and litigation involving corporations, automobiles, and aircraft."<sup>132, 133,</sup>  
<sup>134</sup>



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
Mauritanian Islamic Scholar

According to the Islamic law, the fate of a murderer is up to the victim's family, who can pardon, accept monetary compensation from, or put to death the offender.<sup>135, 136</sup> In addition, homosexuality is a criminal offense punishable by death according to *shari'a* law.<sup>137</sup> The *shari'a* prohibition of alcohol has been strictly enforced in

<sup>128</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, "Mauritania: July–December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report," 13 September 2011, [http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168419.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168419.htm)

<sup>129</sup> LaVerle Berry, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Religious Life," in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 58–59.

<sup>130</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, "Mauritania: July–December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report," 13 September 2011, [http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168419.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168419.htm)

<sup>131</sup> The Voice of the Martyrs, "Mauritania," persecution.net, 2012, <http://www.persecution.net/mauritania.htm>

<sup>132</sup> BBC, "Sharia," 9 March 2009, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/sharia\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/sharia_1.shtml)

<sup>133</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, "Mauritania: July–December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report," 13 September 2011, [http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168419.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168419.htm)

<sup>134</sup> Robert Winslow, "A Comparative Criminology Tour of the World: Mauritania," n.d., <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/rwinslow/africa/mauritania.html>

<sup>135</sup> Abu Zayd, "The Face of Mercy in Islamic Law," 2005, 3,

<http://islamicstudies.islammassage.com/panel/media/file/The%20Face%20of%20Mercy%20in%20Islamic%20Law.pdf>

<sup>136</sup> Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "Mauritania: Treatment of Men Who Have Fathered a Child Out of Wedlock," 17 September 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e02ef8c2.html>

<sup>137</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Submission in the UPR Review of Mauritania," n.d., [http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session9/MR/JS1\\_JointSubmission1.pdf](http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session9/MR/JS1_JointSubmission1.pdf)

Mauritania since 1986.<sup>138</sup> National campaigns against secularism have become routine and spread by the internet in recent years, leading to the cancellation of the “Miss Mauritania” beauty pageant in 2006.<sup>139</sup>

At the cabinet level of national government, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education works with the High Council of Islam to advise the government on how educational systems and government organizations can conform to the precepts of Islam. The Ministry of the Interior registers nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and humanitarian groups with religious affiliations. Religious freedom is formally restricted in Mauritania. The government prohibits the printing and distribution of non-Islamic materials, but it is legal to possess them.<sup>140, 141</sup>

Although the practice of slavery was abolished in 1981, it was not formally criminalized until 2007, making Mauritania the last country in the world to outlaw slavery. Despite criminalization, 10–20% of Mauritians continue to live in various degrees of slavery, which is permitted under Islamic law. Some Islamic leaders within the country have advocated slavery. They claim that for some the submission of slavery is necessary to achieve paradise in the afterlife.<sup>142, 143, 144</sup>

### Influence of Religion on Daily Life

Religion pervades every aspect of life in Mauritania. As a Muslim nation, nearly 100% of its citizens practice Islam and are required to adhere to the five pillars of the faith.<sup>145</sup> The five pillars are *shahada* (the Muslim proclamation of faith)—that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is His prophet; *salat* (prayer), which is performed five times daily; *saum* (fasting), conducted for the entire month of Ramadan when the faithful must not eat, drink, smoke, chew gum, or have sexual relations during daylight hours; *zakat* (charity), where the faithful help the poor, which is considered an act of worship; and *hajj* (pilgrimage)—all Muslims are required to take the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives if they have the financial and physical health to



© Ferdinand Reus  
Young boys with Quran lessons

<sup>138</sup> Robert Winslow, “A Comparative Criminology Tour of the World: Mauritania,” n.d., <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/rwinslow/africa/mauritania.html>

<sup>139</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (IRIN), “Mauritania: Fears of Rising Religious Extremism in Tolerant Democracy,” 1 February 2008,

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report/76536/MAURITANIA-Fears-of-rising-religious-extremism-in-tolerant-democracy>

<sup>140</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: July–December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report,” 13 September 2011, [http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168419.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168419.htm)

<sup>141</sup> UNICEF, “Too Often in Silence: Addressing Violence in Schools: Selected Initiatives from West and Central Africa,” May 2010, [http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/VAC\\_Report\\_Directory.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/VAC_Report_Directory.pdf)

<sup>142</sup> John D. Sutter, “UN: There Is Hope for Mauritania’s Slaves,” CNN, 17 March 2012,  
<http://theCNNfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/17/un-there-is-hope-for-mauritanias-slaves/>

<sup>143</sup> John D. Sutter, “Slavery’s Last Stronghold,” CNN, March 2012,  
<http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slavery.last.stronghold/>

<sup>144</sup> BBC, “Slavery in Islam,” 9 July 2009, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery_1.shtml)

<sup>145</sup> Ali Aldosari, “Mauritania,” in *World and Its Peoples: Middle East, Western Asia, and Northern Africa* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2007), 1383.

do so.<sup>146</sup> From a young age, Mauritians receive Islamic training to help them understand the application of religion on their lives.<sup>147</sup>

Because the country has near-total adherence to Islam, religion helps to maintain cultural rapprochement. Differences become apparent only through the Islamic brotherhoods. Two brotherhoods—Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya—dominate the cultural landscape. The Shadiliyya brotherhood holds only marginal importance. Numerous Sufi brotherhoods exist as well. Islamic brotherhoods attract adherents because each focuses on specific aspects of Islam. The Sufis, for example, focus on the mystical elements of the relationship between Allah and Muslims. Although Islamic brotherhoods have their differences, they all support shari'a law because it allows the state to enforce moral prescriptions against behaviors that are contrary to Islam, such as homosexuality, adultery, gambling, and alcohol consumption.<sup>148</sup>

## Religious Conventions and Gender Roles

In Mauritania, religion relegates women to second-class citizenship. In shari'a courts, a woman's testimony carries half the weight of a man's testimony; the testimony of two women equals that of one man.<sup>149, 150</sup> Women and young girls are often kept home by their family members. Some young girls are educated at home so that they can remain under the watchful eye of the family and not succumb to negative influences outside the home.<sup>151</sup> According to Islam, men may take up to four wives provided they can afford to support them equally. Although polygamy is not prevalent in Mauritania, it is practiced among the middle and lower classes of black Africans. The Maure seldom practice polygamy, instead favoring serial marriage.<sup>152, 153, 154</sup>



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Women in Mauritania

In mosque life, women occupy a lower position than men. Although women are allowed to attend services in the mosque, many are encouraged to conduct their prayers in the home. Many of the Sufi brotherhoods do not constrain women's participation so severely. In some brotherhoods, women may hold positions as scholars and leaders, although this is rare. Even

<sup>146</sup> Matt Slick, "The Five Pillars of Islam," CARM, 13 May 2012, <http://carm.org/five-pillars-of-islam>

<sup>147</sup> Ettagale Blauer and Jason Lauré, "Religion," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2009), 99.

<sup>148</sup> Kevin Boyle and Juliet Sheen, eds., "Mauritania," in *Freedom of Religion and Belief: A World Report* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 40–46.

<sup>149</sup> The Christian Institute, "Use of Sharia 'Courts' Increasing in UK," 8 January 2012, <http://www.christian.org.uk/news/use-of-sharia-courts-increasing-in-uk/>

<sup>150</sup> Embassy of the United States in Nouakchott Mauritania, "Mauritania," 31 March 2011, <http://mauritania.usembassy.gov/media/pdf/160133.pdf>

<sup>151</sup> J. Henry, "Mauritanians: Family Life," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life* 1, 2nd ed., eds. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby (New York: Gale, 2009), 385.

<sup>152</sup> Cumorah, "Mauritania," n.d., [http://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=missiology\\_articles&story\\_id=118](http://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=missiology_articles&story_id=118)

<sup>153</sup> J. Henry, "Mauritanians: Family Life," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life* 1, 2nd ed., eds. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby (New York: Gale, 2009), 385.

<sup>154</sup> Kevin Boyle and Juliet Sheen, eds., "Mauritania," in *Freedom of Religion and Belief: A World Report* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 40–46.

though the Tijaniyya Brotherhood encourages women to participate in mosque life, women are required to sit behind the men and children.<sup>155</sup>

Religious leaders across Mauritania try to lessen the burdens of many women. In 2010, 34 Mauritanian religious leaders meeting in Nouakchott issued a *fatwa* against the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), commonly known as female circumcision. Although the *fatwa* is not legally binding, religious leaders issued it to help Mauritanian Muslims understand that FGM is not required by the Quran. Despite these efforts, FGM still occurs in Mauritania, where about 72% of women have undergone the surgical procedure; many believe that FGM is cleansing and allows the prayers of women to be heard.<sup>156, 157, 158</sup>

## Religious Events

Two of the most important religious events in Mauritania are Ramadan and the hajj. Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, takes place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Based on Islamic custom, the holy month is a period of reflection for Muslims when they devote themselves to God and to self-control. Unable to eat, drink, smoke, or indulge any appetites from dawn until sunset during the month, Muslims study the Quran, pray, and exercise charity to those less

fortunate. Families gather in the evenings to break the fast and celebrate until they begin the fast again at dawn the next day. Fasting is mandatory for all Muslims during Ramadan, although children are exempted. The ill and the elderly also are exempted from fasting when it becomes too strenuous for them, but they must feed at least one person for each day they don't fast. Travelers and pregnant and nursing women may defer their fast during Ramadan until a later time.<sup>159, 160, 161</sup>



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
Ramadan shopping

### Exchange 1: When does Ramadan start?

|          |                          |                       |
|----------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Soldier: | When does Ramadan start? | RamaDaan aynta yibda? |
| Local:   | Tomorrow.                | SubH                  |

<sup>155</sup> Kevin Boyle and Juliet Sheen, eds., “Mauritania,” in *Freedom of Religion and Belief: A World Report* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 40–46.

<sup>156</sup> Alertnet, “West Africa: ‘Mauritanian Muslim Imams Initiate Rare Ban on Female Circumcision,’” Women Living Under Muslim Laws, 1 January 2012, <http://www.wluml.org/news/west-africa-mauritanian-muslim-imams-initiate-rare-ban-female-circumcision>

<sup>157</sup> Islam Today, “Mauritanian Muslim Scholars Move End Female Circumcision,” 22 January 2010, <http://en.islamtoday.net/artshow-233-3484.htm>

<sup>158</sup> World Health Organization, “Sexual and Reproductive Health: Female Genital Mutilation and Other Harmful Practices: Trends in Female Genital Mutilation,” 6 May 2011, [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/fgm\\_trends/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/fgm_trends/en/index.html)

<sup>159</sup> Rania El Gamal, “Celebrating Ramadan away from Home,” *Kuwait Times*, 16 September 2007, [http://www.kuwaittimes.net/read\\_news.php?newsid=MTQ1MzM1MzMy](http://www.kuwaittimes.net/read_news.php?newsid=MTQ1MzM1MzMy)

<sup>160</sup> Colorado State University, “Islamic Holidays and Observances,” n.d., <http://www.colostate.edu/orgs/MSA/events/Ramadan.html>

<sup>161</sup> Ishaq Zahid, “Ramadan Rules and Regulations,” Islam for Today, n.d., <http://www.islamfortoday.com/ramadan01.htm>

Another important religious event is the hajj—the holy pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, “the spiritual center” of Islam for the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims. Occurring annually during the 12th and final month of the Islamic lunar calendar, the hajj commemorates the blessing of Abraham from the Angel Gabriel while he searched for water in the desert. The Prophet Muhammad led the first official hajj to Mecca in C.E. 630. Completing the pilgrimage demonstrates the highest faith in God and creates Muslim unity. It helps Muslims to define and understand their relationship to God. When Muslims properly perform the rituals of the hajj, they are absolved from sin. But not everyone is required to attend. Those who are financially incapable of making the trip and those physically unable to endure the rigors of the pilgrimage are exempted in accordance with Islamic law.<sup>162, 163, 164</sup>

## **Religious Holidays**

### *Eid al-Fitr*

One of the more important religious holidays in Mauritania is Eid al-Fitr, referred to as Korité within the country. Beginning the first day after the holy month of Ramadan, this “festival of fast breaking” celebrates the end of Ramadan and lasts for 3 days. During this time, ministries and other government offices shut down. People dress up in new clothes, engage in community prayers, and visit with friends and relatives. Eid al-Fitr is a time of togetherness and community. Neighbors are invited for meals, and donations of money and food are given to local mosques for charity. Restaurants, cafés, and bakeries see an upsurge in business as people flock to them for celebratory meals and dishes.<sup>165, 166, 167, 168</sup>

### *Eid al-Adha*

Mauritanians celebrate Eid al-Adha—which they call Tabaski—as an important religious holiday. Eid al-Adha occurs each year the day after the Day of Arafat—a ritual on the hajj. Eid commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son to God. The holiday lasts 4 days and begins with families going to



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
Celebrating Eid al-Adha

<sup>162</sup> Alyssa Fetini, “A Brief History of the Hajj,” *Time*, 25 November 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0.8599.1864624.00.html>

<sup>163</sup> Islam.com, “Hajj: Pilgrimage to the House of Allah in Mecca,” n.d., <http://www.islam.com/hajj/hajj.htm#1.%20%20Introduction>

<sup>164</sup> Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, “Issues: Hajj,” 18 November 2008, <http://www.saudiembassy.net/issues/hajj/>

<sup>165</sup> Colorado State University, “Islamic Holidays and Observances,” n.d., <http://www.colostate.edu/orgs/MSA/events/EUF.html>

<sup>166</sup> World Travel Guide, “Mauritanian Public Holidays,” 2012, <http://www.worldtravelguide.net/mauritania/public-holidays>

<sup>167</sup> Global Post, “Saudi Arabia Announces Tuesday Start of Eid al-Fitr Holiday,” 29 August 2011, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/culture-lifestyle/world-religion/110829/eid-al-fitr-2011-uae-dubai-mubarak-egypt-ramadan-ends>

<sup>168</sup> Eid Mubarak, “Eid-ul-Fitr Traditions,” 22 July 2011, <http://www.theeid.com/eid-ul-fitr-traditions/>

public prayer wearing their finest holiday clothing. Families visit with friends and neighbors, exchanging gifts and feasting. Those who can afford it sacrifice a sheep, donating one-third of the meat to the poor and dividing the remaining two-thirds among family and friends. Charity is obligatory on Eid al-Adha.<sup>169, 170, 171</sup>

### *Mawlid*

Mauritania holds a national holiday on the 12th day of the third month of the Islamic lunar calendar celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. On this day, Muslims gather to hear a sermon in honor of the Prophet. They decorate their homes and mosques, hold processions, and give charity to the poor. It is customary for families to read the story of Muhammad's life to their children during this holiday. In some communities, children recite mawlid poems. Muslims hold feasts in the Prophet's honor. Although mawlid is widely practiced by both Sunnis and Shi'ites across the Muslim world, some Muslims consider mawlid idolatrous.<sup>172, 173, 174, 175</sup>

### Buildings of Worship

The mosque is the recognized place of worship in Mauritania. The nation supports about 8,000 mosques.<sup>176</sup> More than being places of worship, mosques in Mauritania function as mahdaras: Islamic schools that attend to the spiritual and practical education of the citizenry.<sup>177</sup> Because mosques fulfill both spiritual and practical roles, they are ubiquitous. Almost all public buildings and institutions operate their own mosques. Investments from Islamic NGOs and foreign countries help to build an ever-increasing number of mosques. Densely populated poorer areas contain the greatest number of mosques, while more affluent areas have fewer mosques. Neighborhoods with high populations of black Africans receive little investment and therefore



© Nataraja / wikipedia  
Mosque in Chinguetti

<sup>169</sup> Middle Tennessee State University, “What is Eid al-Adha,” 24 March 2004, <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~msa/aladha.htm>

<sup>170</sup> BBC, “Eid-ul-Adha,” 19 September 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/islam/eid\\_haj.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/islam/eid_haj.shtml)

<sup>171</sup> APA News, “Mauritania to Celebrate Tabaski Feast Sunday,” 2011, <http://www.apanews.net/photo/en/photo.php?id=160453>

<sup>172</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, “July–December 2010 International Religious Freedom Report,” 13 September 2011, [http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010\\_5/168419.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168419.htm)

<sup>173</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Mawlid,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370339/mawlid>

<sup>174</sup> Muhammad Abduh Yamani, “The Mawlid: A Time to Celebrate,” 30 December 2008, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/mawlid.htm>

<sup>175</sup> University of Kansas Medical Center, “Mawlida Al Nabi or Am’uled Al-Nabi (Islamic, Moslem, Muslim),” 2009, [http://www3.kumc.edu/diversity/ethnic\\_relig/mawlid.html](http://www3.kumc.edu/diversity/ethnic_relig/mawlid.html)

<sup>176</sup> Raihaneh, “Mauritania Spreads Moderation through Mosques,” International Network of Muslim Scholarly Women, 19 March 2012, <http://raihieneh.com/news/230/Mauritania-spreads-moderation-through-mosques->

<sup>177</sup> Mahdara, “Classical Curriculum and Schooling: Mauritania,” n.d., <http://www.mahdara.com/curriculum.php>

have few mosques.<sup>178</sup> Some of Mauritania's mosques have a long history. The famous Chinguetti Mosque—which dates from the 13th century—survives, although it is constructed of primitive materials and has a sand floor. It is home to a library of old Islamic manuscripts that witness its history as a center of Islamic learning in West Africa.<sup>179</sup> The tradition and prestige of Islamic learning in Mauritania has led to the construction of ever more mosques there. Of varying degrees of sophistication and size, they serve to educate the masses and to promote Islam in the nation.<sup>180</sup>

### **Behavior in Places of Worship**

Visitors to mosques in Mauritania are required to exercise modesty in dress and behavior.<sup>181</sup> Mosque etiquette is simple, but rules differ for men and women.

#### **Exchange 2: May I enter the mosque?**

|          |                         |                        |
|----------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Soldier: | May I enter the mosque? | in-gid nKhush lemseed? |
| Local:   | Yes.                    | eheeh                  |

Modest, clean clothing free of images of living creatures is a must. Women should wear pants or ankle-length skirts that are neither tight-fitting nor transparent. Shoulders must be covered, the arms must be covered to the wrists, and the neckline should fit up to the neck. Tops should neither be tight-fitting nor transparent. A woman's hair also must be covered completely while she is in the mosque.



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
Outside a mosque

#### **Exchange 3: Do I need to cover my head?**

|          |                             |                            |
|----------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do I need to cover my head? | yaaltee ndeeR 'ila Raassi? |
| Local:   | Yes.                        | eheeh                      |

For men, pants are preferred, but shorts that cover the knees are acceptable. Shirts should have sleeves no shorter than a standard T-shirt. Men and women should avoid shaking hands with members of the opposite sex.<sup>182</sup>

<sup>178</sup> Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, "Islam in Mauritania between Political Expansion and Globalization: Elites, Institutions, Knowledge, and Networks," in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin Soares and René Otayek (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 27–46.

<sup>179</sup> Cyril Glassé, ed., "Chinguetti," in *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 102.

<sup>180</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (IRIN), "Mauritania: Fears of Rising Religious Extremism in Tolerant Democracy," 1 February 2008,

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report/76536/MAURITANIA-Fears-of-rising-religious-extremism-in-tolerant-democracy>

<sup>181</sup> Johnathan Lorie and Amy Sohanpaul, "Mauritania," in *The Traveler's Handbook: The Insider's Guide to World Travel* (Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 2006), 388.

<sup>182</sup> Hounslow Jamia Masjid and Islamic Centre, "Etiquettes of Visiting a Mosque," 2009,

<http://www.hounslowmasjid.co.uk/page2/page10/page30/page30.html>

If prayers are in progress, visitors should remain silent; otherwise soft speaking is allowed. Mobile phones and pagers should be silenced or shut off, and food and drink should never be brought into a mosque. Shoes should be removed upon entering a mosque. Visitors may photograph inside the mosque, but do not photograph worshippers while they are praying or performing their ablutions.<sup>183,184</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
A Quran over 900 years old

#### **Exchange 4: Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque?**

|          |                                             |                                            |
|----------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque? | yaaltee nafsaKh in'aaylee daaKhel lemseed? |
| Local:   | Yes.                                        | eheeh                                      |

<sup>183</sup> Hounslow Jamia Masjid and Islamic Centre, “Etiquettes of Visiting a Mosque,” 2009, <http://www.hounslowmasjid.co.uk/page2/page10/page30/page30.html>

<sup>184</sup> Istanbul Trails, “Mosque Rules and Etiquette,” n.d., <http://www.istanbultrails.com/2008/06/mosque-rules-and-etiquette/>

## Chapter 2 Assessment

1. Although Mauritania is an Islamic republic, the government constitutionally guarantees religious freedom for all citizens and residents.

**False**

Islam is the official religion of Mauritania, which is an Islamic republic governed by Islamic law. The practice of other religions is formally restricted. The government also prohibits the printing and distribution of non-Islamic materials.

2. Under Islamic law in Mauritania, women have less rights than men.

**True**

In Mauritania, religion relegates women to second-class citizenship. In Islamic courts, a woman's testimony carries half the weight of a man's testimony; the testimony of two women equals that of one man.

3. Religious extremism has been on the decline in Mauritania since 2005.

**False**

An increase in religious extremism since 2005 threatens the future of the historically tolerant Islamic Republic of Mauritania. A military coup in 2005 brought Islamic reformers to power.

4. Most Muslims in Mauritania follow the Sunni branch of Islam.

**True**

The overwhelming majority of Muslims in Mauritania (almost 100%) follow the Sunni branch of Islam.

5. Of all social groups in the country, Mauritanian youth are the most accepting of Western values.

**False**

Mauritanian youth have been increasingly radicalized by Salafi ideology, which stresses strict conformity to Islamic commandments and ritual purity. A campaign in 2006 led to the cancellation of the "Miss Mauritania" beauty pageant.

## CHAPTER 3: TRADITIONS

### Introduction

The descendants of Arab warriors who conquered northwest Africa in the 17th century continue to use their historical position as slave-owners and their authority as teachers of Islamic traditions to rule the descendants of African slaves in Mauritania. Within Moorish society, which began to develop during the Arab conquest more than 300 years ago, a “white” aristocratic class arose to rule the enslaved “black” indigenous Africans of Mauritania. With the arrival of the French at the beginning of the 20th century came many black Africans whose ancestors had been expelled by the Arabs centuries earlier. Many of these Africans and their descendants, educated during French colonial rule, now hold Mauritanian government jobs. Yet strife between the “white” and “black” ethnic groups continues to threaten the country’s stability, just as it brought civil war in 1989.<sup>185</sup>



© Ametba / flickr.com  
Mauritanian family

Despite international efforts to encourage the development of democracy, the Maure of Mauritania continue to exist in a highly stratified culture. Age, status, and gender determine the roles that individuals play within their families and society.

Since gaining independence from France in 1960, many Maure have struggled to maintain their traditional ways, and adhere to values that at times seem out of place in the urban areas that have grown rapidly since the 1980s.<sup>186</sup> Many traditions that suited the Maure’s once-nomadic lifestyle have recently come under scrutiny. Long-held concepts of beauty, women’s rights, and diets have been slowly changing. Though some welcome these changes, others criticize them and claim that they jeopardize the purity of Maure culture.<sup>187, 188, 189, 190</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Mauritania,” 1 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/>

<sup>186</sup> LaVerle Berry, “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Changing Social Patterns,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 65–66.

<sup>187</sup> Mohamed Yahya Abdel Wedoud, “Women Fight Mauritania’s Fattening Tradition,” CNN, 12 October 2010, [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-10-12/world/mauritania.force.feed\\_1\\_women-fight-tradition-girls?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-10-12/world/mauritania.force.feed_1_women-fight-tradition-girls?_s=PM:WORLD)

<sup>188</sup> Sharon LaFraniere, “In Mauritania, Seeking to End an Overfed Ideal,” *New York Times*, 4 July 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/04/world/africa/04mauritania.html?\\_r=1&ex=1188446400&en=7756b4361b881f10&ei=5070](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/04/world/africa/04mauritania.html?_r=1&ex=1188446400&en=7756b4361b881f10&ei=5070)

<sup>189</sup> Amina Barakat, “Taking the Weight of Tradition Off Women,” InterPress Service News Agency, 24 May 2007, <http://ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews=37893>

<sup>190</sup> Pascale Harter, “Mauritania’s ‘Wife-Fattening’ Farm,” BBC News, 26 January 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3429903.stm>

## Honor and Values

Among the Maure's highest values is solidarity. This community collectivism develops a sense of individuality that is second to the community. Personal development and gain rank low in the Maure value system. Maure society fosters a community of cooperation in which everyone contributes all they have to the family. People share everything. The Maure also place a premium on harmonious relationships. Spending time together is one of their great pastimes. Harmony is often achieved in Maure society by adhering unquestioningly to social protocols based on status. Elders are revered by society, and people of high status command respect from all. The Maure conception of status is both firmly entrenched in society and unbending.<sup>191, 192</sup>



© Ametxa / flickr.com  
Mothers and children

## Formal Codes of Politeness

To show politeness, the Maure observe customary greeting rituals. Men exchange handshakes when they meet. They don't pump hands but hold them throughout the greeting; sometimes one man will hold another man's hand in both of his throughout the greeting. Handshakes are initiated by the eldest person present. Women greet each other in much the same way. They will clasp and hold hands, sometimes kissing each other on the cheek. When members of the opposite sex meet, acknowledgment by a nod of the head is common because Maure men and women almost never touch each other. Men visiting the country should follow the lead of women when they are introduced. If she offers her hand, it is acceptable to shake. If not, it is acceptable for both to place their right hands in the center of their chests during the greeting. Greetings are always extended with the right hand and take a long time, accompanied by customary small talk about a person's health, family, and general well-being. Such questions are rarely answered but are responded to with similar questions.<sup>193, 194, 195, 196</sup>



© Christine Vaufrey  
Family makes tea for visitors

<sup>191</sup> Jay Davidson, "Peace Corps Cross-Culture Manual: Islamic Republic of Mauritania," 2005, 14–17.

<sup>192</sup> Best Country Reports, "Greetings and Courtesies," in *Mauritania: Society and Culture* (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 3–6.

<sup>193</sup> Culture Crossing, "Mauritania: Greetings," n.d.,

[http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=7&CID=131](http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=7&CID=131)

<sup>194</sup> Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, "Mauritania," in *The Rough Guide to West Africa* (New York: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2003), 113.

<sup>195</sup> Dean Foster, "Mauritania," in *The Global Etiquette Guide to Africa and the Middle East: Everything You Need to Know for Business and Travel Success* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2002), 95–96.

<sup>196</sup> Best Country Reports, "Greetings and Courtesies," in *Mauritania: Society and Culture* (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 2.

### Exchange 5: May peace be upon you.

|          |                        |                       |
|----------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Soldier: | May peace be upon you. | as salaamu 'alaykum   |
| Local:   | And upon you be peace. | wa-'alaykum as salaam |

The Maure extend invitations frequently. When in the home of a Maure, visitors should expect to receive total hospitality. Guests are never allowed to do anything for themselves while they are visiting. Hosts will take care of even the smallest of a guest's needs. Guests never say "please" and "thank you" to their hosts; however, it is customary to bring a token gift when invited into a Maure home. Gifts should be wrapped in green paper, and offered and accepted with the right or both hands. Gifts of fruits, nuts, and objects that represent the visitor's home country are appropriate. Avoid bringing gifts of alcohol; the government forbids bringing alcohol into the country.<sup>197, 198</sup>

### Male/Female Interaction

Traditional Maure believe that women are degraded when they perform physical labor. Traditionally, female labor is performed by slave women.<sup>199</sup> But as these Maure continue to urbanize, changes continue in the interactions of men and women. Many Maure women continue to observe the traditions of seclusion and reliance on men. But younger generations of Maure women have begun to create economic opportunities for themselves by starting home-based businesses.<sup>200</sup>



© Christine Vaufrey  
Young girl

Political reforms in Mauritania have led to a minimum marriage age. Girls were once betrothed as young as 8 or 9 years old, but current law requires that girls be 21 years old and that marriages are conducted by imams only after the couple has received the proper state licenses.<sup>201</sup> Although women's rights have improved since the country gained independence, Maure women remain bound by Islamic customs. Many women are allowed to travel only if they are escorted by a male family member, or at least if a male family member made the travel arrangements in person. Women are required to cover their heads in the presence of men.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>197</sup> Culture Crossing, "Mauritania: Communication Style," n.d., [http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=8&CID=131](http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=8&CID=131)

<sup>198</sup> Best Country Reports, "Gift Giving," in *Mauritania: Society and Culture* (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>199</sup> Garba Diallo, "Mauritania: Gender Roles and Statuses: Division of Labor by Gender," Everyculture, 2012, <http://www.everyculture.com/Ma-Ni/Mauritania.html>

<sup>200</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Women," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 544–549.

<sup>201</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, "Women," in *A Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 544–549.

<sup>202</sup> Culture Crossing, "Mauritania: Gender Issues," n.d., [http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=12&CID=131](http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=12&CID=131)

## Changing Social Norms

A centuries-old custom that has come under fire in recent years is *gavage*—force-feeding young girls to make them fat. In Maure culture, obesity equals beauty. Men have traditionally desired overweight women, so women have gone to great pains to overeat. To increase the marriage prospects of their daughters, many parents make efforts to ensure their daughters grow fat. They beat them and force them to eat against their wills, send them to special homes where “governesses” force-feed them, and even resort to torture to force them to eat.



© Ferdinand Reus  
Mauritanian woman

Although in recent years the government has instituted campaigns to slim women, these have had only marginal success. Surveys show that about 70% of women who were force-fed as girls have no regrets about *gavage*. Reports vary about how widespread the practice might be. Some government ministries and NGOs report that as many as one-third of girls are force-fed, while others claim 1 in 10. The Social Solidarity Association claims in a 2007 study that 7% of urban girls and 75% of rural girls are force-fed. Local and national governments continue to combat the practice, but it is an uphill battle. In Maure culture, a woman’s physical size is equated not only with beauty; the larger the woman, the higher her socioeconomic status. Her size shows how well her husband takes care of her. The Maure have a saying: The larger the woman, the more space she occupies in her husband’s heart.<sup>203, 204, 205, 206, 207</sup>

## Eating Habits/Types of Food

The main meal of the day in Maure culture is supper, which is usually eaten at home with family members, who often eat from communal dishes using their right hands. The process of eating can be elaborate.

### Exchange 6: This food is very good.

|          |                         |                         |
|----------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Soldier: | This food is very good. | haaTha eT'aam zayn Hata |
| Local:   | It's "rice and meat".   | haaTha maaRo wa il lHam |

<sup>203</sup> Mohamed Yahya Abdel Wedoud, “Women Fight Mauritania’s Fattening Tradition,” CNN, 12 October 2010, [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-10-12/world/mauritania.force.feed\\_1\\_women-fight-tradition-girls?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-10-12/world/mauritania.force.feed_1_women-fight-tradition-girls?_s=PM:WORLD)

<sup>204</sup> Sharon LaFraniere, “In Mauritania, Seeking to End an Overfed Ideal,” *New York Times*, 4 July 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/04/world/africa/04mauritania.html?\\_r=1&ex=1188446400&en=7756b4361b881f10&ei=5070](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/04/world/africa/04mauritania.html?_r=1&ex=1188446400&en=7756b4361b881f10&ei=5070)

<sup>205</sup> Amina Barakat, “Taking the Weight of Tradition Off Women,” InterPress Service News Agency, 24 May 2007, <http://ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews=37893>

<sup>206</sup> Pascale Harter, “Mauritania’s ‘Wife-Fattening’ Farm,” BBC News, 26 January 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3429903.stm>

<sup>207</sup> Lama Hasan, “Mauritania Tries to Reverse Obesity Tradition,” ABC News, 21 February 2008, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=4322187&page=1#T8aQ7fkzLTP>

When eating from a common dish, the senior member at the table or the host will begin eating first, a sign that others may begin eating. It is considered rude to reach across the dish while eating. Alternatively, diners should eat only what is in front of them. The women will stir up the dish with their hands from time to time to evenly distribute the food in the dish. The host will often toss bits of meat or other delicacies in front of guests for them to eat. Meals are followed with the tea ceremony.<sup>208</sup>,  
<sup>209</sup>



© zz77 / flickr.com  
Traditional dining

#### Exchange 7: What is the name of this dish?

|          |                                |                              |
|----------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Soldier: | What is the name of this dish? | shinhwa asim Thee il wazhba? |
| Local:   | This is “Attajeen”.            | haaTh aTaazheen              |

The Maure have retained much of their nomadic way of life, despite increased urbanization. Their diet has changed little, and many urban Maure continue to subsist on a simple diet. Food is influenced by season, geography, and socioeconomic status. Their three daily meals—breakfast, lunch, and supper—consist of a grain base, usually couscous. Meat is routinely served for lunch and supper. Goat, sheep, and camel are the available meats.

#### Exchange 8: What type of meat is this?

|          |                            |                            |
|----------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Soldier: | What type of meat is this? | haaTha ey no' min il lHam? |
| Local:   | It's lamb.                 | ilHam in'aazh              |

Milk and other dairy products from these animals are served regularly at meals. Vegetables are not regularly served in traditional nomadic families because they violate the purity of nomadic living, although they grace the meals of more sedentary Maure.<sup>210</sup>,<sup>211</sup>,<sup>212</sup>,<sup>213</sup>

<sup>208</sup> Garba Diallo, “Mauritanians: Food and Economy,” Everyculture, 2012, <http://www.everyculture.com/Ma-Ni/Mauritania.html>

<sup>209</sup> Jay Davidson, “Peace Corps Cross-Culture Manual: Islamic Republic of Mauritania,” 2005, 25–27.

<sup>210</sup> Jay Davidson, “Peace Corps Cross-Culture Manual: Islamic Republic of Mauritania,” 2005, 27.

<sup>211</sup> Michael Y. Park, “Eating Camel in Mauritania,” *Gourmet*, 12 November 2011, <http://www.gourmet.com/food/gourmetlive/2011/101211/eating-camel-in-mauritania?currentPage=1>

<sup>212</sup> Garba Diallo, “Mauritanians: Food and Economy,” Everyculture, 2012, <http://www.everyculture.com/Ma-Ni/Mauritania.html>

<sup>213</sup> Learn Mauritania, “As with Many Cultural Topics in Mauritania,” 26 February 2009, <http://learnmauritania.blogspot.com/2009/02/as-with-many-cultural-topics-in.html>

## Dress Codes

The Maure dress conservatively. Women wear what is called in Hassaniya a *Mulafa*, a long piece of fabric that wraps first around the body, then around the head. Maure women do not normally cover their faces. Under the *Mulafa* women wear full-length skirts that ensure their legs are covered completely. Even showing the outline of a woman's leg is taboo in Mauritania.<sup>214, 215</sup>

Men wear long flowing robes, *boubou*, over baggy pants, *sirwal*.<sup>216</sup> The *boubou* is white with large embroidered designs. When the robe is blue, it is called *dara'a*.<sup>217</sup> Western-style dress is becoming more common, yet many adhere to traditional dress codes. It is customary for men and women to keep their legs completely covered. This ensures modesty as dictated by Islam.<sup>218, 219</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Girls wearing mulafa

## Hospitality and Gift-Giving

Islam strongly encourages hospitality from all Muslims. They are required to make guests feel comfortable and happy and to provide for their needs by offering food and drink.<sup>220</sup> One way of showing hospitality is through the ritual of making tea. Mauritians drink a strong-flavored and heavily sweetened tea with mint. They engage in the tea ritual many times each day, and it is considered rude and bad luck to turn down offers of tea. Hosts make the tea, pouring it back and forth between different glasses to create a thick froth. Served in three rounds, the first glass is bitter like death; the second glass is sweet like love; the third glass is bitter and sweet like life.<sup>221, 222, 223</sup>



© zz77 / flickr.com  
Hospitality tea

<sup>214</sup> Culture Crossing, "Mauritania: Gender Issues," n.d.,

[http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=12&CID=131](http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=12&CID=131)

<sup>215</sup> Learn Mauritania, "Dress," 23 September 2008,

<http://learnmauritania.blogspot.com/2008/09/dress.html>

<sup>216</sup> Garba Diallo, "Mauritanians: Clothing," Everyculture, 2012,

<http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Mauritania-to-Nigeria/Mauritanians.html>

<sup>217</sup> Dean Foster, "Mauritania," in *The Global Etiquette Guide to Africa and the Middle East: Everything You Need to Know for Business and Travel Success* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2002), 96.

<sup>218</sup> Richard Trillo, "Mauritania: Gender Issues and Sexual Attitudes," in *The Rough Guide to West Africa* (New York: Rough Guide, Ltd., 2008).

<sup>219</sup> Learn Mauritania, "Dress," 23 September 2008,

<http://learnmauritania.blogspot.com/2008/09/dress.html>

<sup>220</sup> Ipaki, "Islam: Hospitality Toward Guests," 12 September 2005,

<http://ipaki.com/content/html/29/1097.html>

<sup>221</sup> Peace Newspaper, "Hospitality in the RIM," 2 February 2012,

<http://www.peacenewspaper.net/?p=1540>

### Exchange 9: I really appreciate your hospitality.

|          |                                       |                                            |
|----------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | I really appreciate your hospitality. | gaaR Veyye The ilee 'adalt lee min laHsaan |
| Local:   | It is nothing.                        | The maho shi                               |

Gift-giving is a social protocol in Mauritania. Most commonly, gifts are given between family members and close friends on numerous occasions, such as birthdays, weddings, and holidays. Gifts are usually practical items, such as holders for Qurans and household items. Gifts of alcohol or perfumes and cooking items that contain alcohol are taboo. Gifts are always wrapped beautifully, and recipients will wait until the giver has gone to open them, unless the giver insists that a gift be opened immediately.<sup>224</sup> Traditionally among the Beydane—the white Maure—slaves were given to family members as gifts under various circumstances. Although slavery was criminalized in 2007, many believe the practice continues.<sup>225</sup>

### Non-Religious Celebrations

The majority of celebrations in Mauritania are religious, although the secular holiday of Independence Day is popularly celebrated. Mauritania won independence from France on 28 November 1960. Mauritanians celebrate this day (also called National Day) each year as a national holiday. They raise the Mauritanian flag, take a day off from work, and celebrate with family and friends by enjoying home-cooked meals. The military and citizens parade for the president, who then delivers a speech on the development of the nation.<sup>226, 227, 228</sup> Some

Mauritanians celebrate Western holidays, such as New Year's Day. Other secular holidays include Africa Day on 25 May and Constitution Day on 12 July. But these are not national holidays, and few people celebrate them.



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
National Day festival

<sup>222</sup> Terre Mauritanie, “The Way of Life in Mauritania: Mauritanians,” n.d., <http://www.terremauritanie.com/news-the-way-of-life-the-way-of-life-in-mauritania-news-54.html>

<sup>223</sup> Terre Mauritanie, “Customs of Mauritania: Ceremonies,” n.d., <http://www.terremauritanie.com/news-customs-ceremonies-news- 108.html>

<sup>224</sup> Best Country Reports, “Gift Giving,” in *Mauritania: Society and Culture* (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>225</sup> John D. Sutter, “Slavery’s Last Stronghold,” CNN, March 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slaverys.last.stronghold/index.html>

<sup>226</sup> Garba Diallo, “Mauritania: Secular Celebrations,” Everyculture, 2012, <http://www.everyculture.com/Ma-Ni/Mauritania.html>

<sup>227</sup> A Global World, “Holidays Around the World: Mauritania Marks National Day,” n.d., <http://aglobalworld.com/holidays-around-the-world/mauritania-national-day/>

<sup>228</sup> J. Henry, “Mauritanians: Major Holidays,” in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life* vol. 1, 2nd ed., eds. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby (New York: Gale, 2009), 384.

## Dos and Don'ts

### *Do*

- Dress conservatively, making sure that arms and legs are covered in public
- Always use the right hand when greeting anyone
- Avoid giving alcohol as a gift or bringing it into the country
- Treat your guests with absolute hospitality

### *Don't*

- Make lengthy or excessive eye contact with women if you are male
- Offer to shake a woman's hand
- Ignore a greeting from anyone
- Never engage in public displays of affection
- Men should never lie on their stomach, and women should never lie on their backs

## Chapter 3 Assessment

1. Today the descendants of Arab warriors continue to rule the descendants of African slaves in Mauritania.

**True**

Within Moorish society, which began to develop during the Arab conquest more than 300 years ago, a “white” aristocratic class arose to rule over the enslaved “black” indigenous Africans of Mauritania. Strife between the two groups led to civil war in 1989.

2. Mauritania is no longer socially stratified.

**False**

Despite international efforts in the northwest African state, the Maure of Mauritania continue to exist in a highly stratified culture. Age, status, and gender determine the roles individuals play within families and society.

3. The Maure value individuality.

**False**

Individual development and gain rank low in the value system of Mauritania, where people are encouraged to work for the welfare of the entire community first.

4. Many Maure families force-feed young girls to fatten them for marriage.

**True**

According to traditional Maure culture, a woman’s physical size is equated with beauty and social status—the larger the woman, the higher her socioeconomic standing. The large size of a woman also shows how well her husband takes care of her.

5. Gift-giving is not important in Maure culture.

**False**

Gifts are given between family members and close friends on numerous occasions. Gifts are usually practical items, such as holders for Qurans and household items.

## CHAPTER 4: URBAN LIFE

### Introduction

Urbanization that began during French colonization rapidly expanded in the 1980s, creating numerous social and economic problems for Mauritania. Although cities were initially built on the French model, rapid growth resulted in urban sprawl, and many unskilled and impoverished migrants found themselves living in slums and shanty towns without basic services. Because urban economies have not been able to support the rising influx of people, unemployment continues to increase.



© Brendan van Son  
Children in Nouadhibou city

Cholera, malaria, and other diseases threaten cities in Mauritania, where healthcare remains substandard. A high percentage of children in the urban areas do not complete secondary school and lack relevant job training. Unable to integrate into the formal economy, they are forced underground to earn a living informally.

### Urbanization Issues

Mauritania occupies vast tracts of land mostly within the Sahara. The principal urban areas lie along the Atlantic Ocean on the west coast. Others support the mining industry in the north, and the rest are in the south near the Sénégal River. All suffer similar problems.

The first is rapid urbanization. Between 1962 and 1999 severe droughts instigated a series of rural-to-urban migrations that increased urban populations nationwide from 4% to 55%.

Rural-to-urban migrants who cannot afford commercial housing in the city set up substandard housing within shanty districts. These areas suffer from poor hygiene and a lack of sanitary facilities and potable water supplies. Cholera and chronic malnutrition have become norms in urban life.<sup>229</sup>



© LenDog64 / flickr.com  
Water delivery in Nouakchott

Access to sanitary water supplies is generally limited in Mauritania, where water-delivery services are too expensive for the urban poor.<sup>230, 231, 232</sup> Low wages and high unemployment

<sup>229</sup> Pascale Harter, “Mauritania’s Deadly Daily Poverty,” BBC News, 8 September 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4219104.stm>

<sup>230</sup> Mike Auret and Gerry Jackson, “Poverty and Poverty Reduction in Mauritania,” Afrol News, n.d., [http://www.afrol.com/Countries/Mauritania/backgr\\_poverty.htm#urban](http://www.afrol.com/Countries/Mauritania/backgr_poverty.htm#urban)

<sup>231</sup> Everyculture, “Mauritanians: Living Conditions,” 2012, <http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Mauritania-to-Nigeria/Mauritanians.html>

<sup>232</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees, “Chronology for Black Moors in Mauritania,” Refworld, 2004, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/type,CHRON,,MRT,469f38bb14,0.html>

make it impossible for many to meet more than their minimum water needs. Even the flow of pumped water to well-to-do neighborhoods is regularly interrupted.<sup>233, 234, 235</sup>

## Work Problems in Urban Areas

Soaring unemployment rates have accompanied the heavy influx of people into the urban areas.<sup>236</sup> In 2009, the nation's unemployment rate hovered around 32%, climbing to 51% in 2011 among ages 15 to 24.<sup>237</sup> High unemployment in the official sector has forced about one-quarter of the country's population to earn their living in the informal economy.<sup>238, 239</sup> In urban areas, the rate is much higher, accounting for as much as 90% of all jobs in the capital.<sup>240</sup> Nouakchott, which monopolizes jobs in the formal economy, holds 80% of construction jobs, 60% of manufacturing jobs, and more than 50% of public-sector jobs.<sup>241</sup>

Mauritania's labor force has developed slowly in part because the



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Tailor in central market

<sup>233</sup> Nico Colombant and Ebrima Sillah, "Residents of Poor Areas in Mauritania's Capital Struggle with Water," Voice of America, 27 October 2009, <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2008-06-23-voa45-66821107/374411.html>

<sup>234</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (IRIN), "Mauritania: Desert Capital Struggles with Water Crisis," 15 April 2004, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/49537/MAURITANIA-Desert-capital-struggles-with-water-crisis>

<sup>235</sup> Ebrima Sillah, "Government Needs to Invest," Inter Press Service News Agency, 7 July 2009, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=47560>

<sup>236</sup> Mike Auret and Gerry Jackson, "Poverty and Poverty Reduction in Mauritania," Afrol News, n.d., [http://www.afrol.com/Countries/Mauritania/backgr\\_poverty.htm#urban](http://www.afrol.com/Countries/Mauritania/backgr_poverty.htm#urban)

<sup>237</sup> Afrique Avenir, "Mauritania Records 32% Unemployment Rate, According to a Study," 9 April 2010, <http://www.afriqueavenir.org/en/2010/04/09/mauritania-records-32-unemployment-rate-according-to-a-study/>

<sup>238</sup> International Monetary Fund, "Mauritania: Joint Staff Advisory Note on the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper," August 2011, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2011/cr11253.pdf>

<sup>239</sup> William Lawrence, "Symptom of Crisis or Engine of Development? The Mauritanian Informal Economic Sector," 10 February 2003,

<http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Praxis/Archives/~/media/Fletcher/Microsites/praxis/xv/Lawrence.pdf>

<sup>240</sup> William Lawrence, "Symptom of Crisis or Engine of Development? The Mauritanian Informal Economic Sector," 10 February 2003,

<http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Praxis/Archives/~/media/Fletcher/Microsites/praxis/xv/Lawrence.pdf>

<sup>241</sup> UNHABITAT, "The State of Maghreb Cities," in *State of Arab Cities* (Nairobi, Kenya: United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2012), 93,

[http://www.unhabitat.org.jo/en/inp/Upload/1431727\\_Pages%20from%20StateofArabCities\\_high-13.pdf](http://www.unhabitat.org.jo/en/inp/Upload/1431727_Pages%20from%20StateofArabCities_high-13.pdf)

majority of employable individuals have little or no training. Nomads migrating from the desert bring no relevant job skills with them. A mere 30% of professionals have any job training, and nearly 70% of young urbanites have no formal training.<sup>242</sup>

Compounding the employment problems is that women make up the majority of heads of households in economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Urban jobs are often forbidden to women because of religious proscriptions. Although a micro-credit program sponsored by a French NGO helped many women create self-employment opportunities, the impact on unemployment has been negligible. Government red tape has stymied public works projects.<sup>243</sup>

### **Urban Healthcare**

Waterborne diseases contribute to the general poor health of urban Mauritanians. Slums and shanty towns suffer the greatest because residents rely on unsanitary water from public taps and water delivery.<sup>244</sup> Unsanitary water supplies lead to malaria outbreaks and diarrhea, which can be life-threatening to youngsters.<sup>245</sup> Polio is problematic in Mauritania.<sup>246, 247</sup>



© Ametxa / flickr.com  
Hospital in Nouakchott

### **Exchange 10: Is there a hospital nearby?**

|          |                             |                              |
|----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a hospital nearby? | hon maafeeh Tab<br>egReeyib? |
| Local:   | Yes, in the center of town. | eheeh, ev nuS ed dashRa      |

<sup>242</sup> Mike Auret and Gerry Jackson, “Poverty and Poverty Reduction in Mauritania,” Afrol News, n.d., [http://www.afrol.com/Countries/Mauritania/backgr\\_poverty.htm#urban](http://www.afrol.com/Countries/Mauritania/backgr_poverty.htm#urban)

<sup>243</sup> World Bank, “Urban Development Program Helps Improve City Infrastructure and Build Capacity of Public Service Providers,” 5 May 2010, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/MAURITANIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22569768~menuPK:362346~pagePK:2865066~piPK:2865079~theSitePK:362340,00.html>

<sup>244</sup> Urban Health Updates, “Mauritania: Need for Investments in Urban Water,” 7 July 2009, <http://urbanhealthupdates.wordpress.com/2009/07/07/mauritania-need-for-investments-in-urban-water/>

<sup>245</sup> Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, “Section 7: Environment, Society, and Health Systems,” 21 December 2004, [http://www.sti.ch/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Pdfs/rreport7.pdf](http://www.sti.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Pdfs/rreport7.pdf)

<sup>246</sup> Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, “Travel Report: Mauritania,” 7 June 2012, [http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries\\_pays/report\\_rapport-eng.asp?id=180000](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries_pays/report_rapport-eng.asp?id=180000)

<sup>247</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information: Medical Facilities and Health Information,” 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#medical](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#medical)

Modern clinics and hospitals are only available in the capital Nouakchott and some of the larger towns.<sup>248</sup> Hospitals and clinics may demand immediate payment in Euros or U.S. dollars. Foreign insurance may not be accepted.<sup>249, 250</sup> Pharmacies carry few medications.<sup>251</sup>

### Exchange 11: My arm is broken, can you help me?

|          |                                    |                                      |
|----------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | My arm is broken, can you help me? | zindee medegdeg, maa tgid t'aawinee? |
| Local:   | Yes, I can help you.               | eheeh, en-gid in'aawnak ba'd         |

### Education and Schools in Cities

In years past, two educational systems existed in Mauritania. Along the Sénégal River, the Pulaar, Soninké, and Wolof peoples learned subjects taught mostly in French, but the Maure attended schools where Hassaniya Arabic was the language of instruction. In 1999, the government instituted a single educational system. Hassaniya Arabic became the language of instruction during the first year of primary school, and French was introduced during the second year. Today, scientific subjects—math, computer science, and natural sciences—are taught in French, and the remainder of subjects are taught in Hassaniya Arabic. English-language studies became compulsory beginning in the first year of high school. Pre-primary schooling, from ages 4 to 6, focuses on Quranic study and basic Hassaniya Arabic reading and writing. From ages 6 to 12, students attend primary school. Students who continue to secondary school choose from two tracks. One is college, a program lasting 4 years and concentrating on scientific studies in French, and humanities and fine arts courses in Hassaniya Arabic. The second option—Lycée—promotes a 3-year, specialized course of study in one of four “series.” Post-secondary education takes place at either technical schools or universities.<sup>252, 253</sup>



© Zain A.B / flickr.com  
Boys at Quranic school

<sup>248</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information: Medical Facilities and Health Information,” 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#medical](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#medical)

<sup>249</sup> British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 7 June 2012, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/middle-east-north-africa/mauritania#health>

<sup>250</sup> Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, “Travel Report: Mauritania,” 7 June 2012, [http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries\\_pays/report\\_rapport-eng.asp?id=180000](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries_pays/report_rapport-eng.asp?id=180000)

<sup>251</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information: Medical Facilities and Health Information,” 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#medical](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#medical)

<sup>252</sup> Szeged University, Klebelsberg Library, “Profile of the Education System in Mauritania,” 5 April 2005, [http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/oseas\\_adsec/mauritania2.htm](http://www.bibl.u-szeged.hu/oseas_adsec/mauritania2.htm)

<sup>253</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, “Mauritania: Education,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55013/Education>

**Exchange 12: Is there a school nearby?**

|          |                           |                                      |
|----------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a school nearby? | maaveeh madRasa<br>egReeyib min hon? |
| Local:   | Yes.                      | eheeh                                |

Because of high rural-to-urban migration, many cities and large towns have exceeded their capacity to provide quality basic education and job training to Mauritania's children and youth.<sup>254, 255</sup> Urban areas have few schools and enrollment remains low, despite programs to modernize educational delivery and to increase educational opportunities. Primary school enrollment rates are 75% and 74% for boys and girls, respectively. Secondary school enrollment rates drop to 16% and 13%, respectively.<sup>256</sup>



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Dining in Nouakchott

**Restaurants**

Although Mauritanians prefer to eat meals with their families at home, many restaurants in Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou feature an array of cuisines, including French, Lebanese, Moroccan, and Chinese.<sup>257</sup> Alcoholic beverages are forbidden in the country, but restaurants that cater to foreigners often circumvent the laws against alcohol. Soft drinks, bottled water, and tea are readily available.<sup>258</sup>

**Exchange 13: I would like tea.**

|          |                   |                      |
|----------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Soldier: | I would like tea. | aana Raaf 'ila etaay |
| Local:   | Sure.             | walaahi              |

**Marketplace and Street Vendors**

Street vendors sell fritters, doughnuts, meats, nuts, and other simple foods.<sup>259</sup> In Nouakchott, numerous street markets exist. Vendors specializing in fish, fruits, meats, tea, and arts and crafts sell their goods on the dusty streets of the city throughout the day.<sup>260</sup>

<sup>254</sup> World Bank, "Mauritania: World Bank Approves Support for Mauritania's Cities and Schools," 25 October 2001, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/PROJECTS/0,,contentMDK:20016504~menuPK:64282138~pagePK:41367~piPK:279616~theSitePK:40941,00.html>

<sup>255</sup> Osei Tutu Agyeman, "ICT in Education in Mauritania," InfoDev, June 2007.

<sup>256</sup> Osei Tutu Agyeman, "ICT in Education in Mauritania," InfoDev, June 2007.

<sup>257</sup> Annie Goldberg, "Mauritania," in *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia*, ed. Ken Albala (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), 118.

<sup>258</sup> Anthony Ham, "Mauritania: Food and Drink," in *Lonely Planet: West Africa* (Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet Publications Pty. Ltd., 2009), 548.

<sup>259</sup> Annie Goldberg, "Mauritania," in *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia*, ed. Ken Albala (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), 118.

<sup>260</sup> American International School of Nouakchott, "Living in Mauritania," 19 September 2011, <http://www.aisnmauritania.com/styled/styled-7/>

**Exchange 14: Is the bazaar nearby?**

|          |                               |                               |
|----------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is the bazaar nearby?         | il maRSa maahee<br>igReeyib?  |
| Local:   | Yes, over there on the right. | eheeh, 'ila eydak il 'aRabiya |

Other than food stuffs, many of the goods in the marketplaces are utilitarian goods that reflect the nomadic heritage of the people. Vigorous bargaining and bartering are the accepted ways of ensuring decent prices from vendors.<sup>261</sup> Music vendors are a unique feature of urban marketplaces. The long tradition of musician poet-storytellers known as *griots* in Maure nomadic culture has become a feature of the sedentary modern urban world.



© Bertramz / wikipedia  
Nouakchott street market

Music shops, stalls, and vendors provide a location for people to listen to music. Instead of selling records, the music vendors more commonly charge customers for recording music onto cassette tapes for them. Keeping up with the time, vendors have begun to record digitally.<sup>262</sup>

**Exchange 15: Do you have any more of these?**

|          |                                |                                      |
|----------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you have any more of these? | maa 'indak shee oKhaR<br>min haaTho? |
| Local:   | No.                            | abdey                                |

**Urban Traffic and Transportation**

Poor quality roads, low local driving standards, shifting desert sands, and shared usage with cyclists, pedestrians, and animals make driving in Mauritania dangerous—especially at night. Drivers routinely ignore traffic signs and regulations, cutting in and out of congested traffic and making motorized travel hazardous.<sup>263</sup>

Mauritania, which is larger than Texas and New Mexico combined, has about 2,070 km (1,286 mi) of surfaced roads and 710 km (441 mi) of unsurfaced roads. Its climate has made road repair and maintenance difficult. Security checkpoints are common along the asphalt roads.<sup>264</sup>

Public transportation and taxis are unsafe because of the threat of kidnapping and crime. Western women are susceptible to sexual assaults on public transportation and in taxis, which are shared

<sup>261</sup> eDiplomat, “Mauritania,” 22 March 2004,

[http://www.ediplomat.com/np/post\\_reports/pr\\_mr.htm](http://www.ediplomat.com/np/post_reports/pr_mr.htm)

<sup>262</sup> Sahel Sounds, “Saphire D’Or,” 14 January 2012, <http://sahelsounds.com/?p=887>

<sup>263</sup> Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 24 April 2012, <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/Mauritania>

<sup>264</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information,” 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#traffic\\_safety](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#traffic_safety)

for transportation and considered unsafe by the U.S. State Department for Western visitors.<sup>265</sup>,  
<sup>266</sup>

### Exchange 16: Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?

|          |                                       |                                            |
|----------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a good auto mechanic nearby? | hon maafee mikaanisyaan maThbooT igReeyib? |
| Local:   | Yes.                                  | eheeh                                      |

All but essential travel has been discouraged throughout most of Mauritania. Public unrest in Nouakchott has triggered violent clashes between demonstrators and police.<sup>267</sup> Those traveling in the Western Sahara should not stray far from the main road. Unexploded landmines have been reported in the area and are known to shift during sandstorms.<sup>268</sup>

Although a paved road connects Nouakchott to Nouâdhibou, many travel along the beach at low tide as an alternative route, which is dangerous and sometimes used by smugglers.<sup>269, 270, 271, 272</sup>



© Brendan van Son  
Few cars or roads

### Exchange 17: Can you take me there?

|          |                        |                         |
|----------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Soldier: | Can you take me there? | itgid itgees beeya huk? |
| Local:   | Yes, I can.            | ehey, an-gid ba'da      |

### Street Crime and Solicitations

The majority of reported crimes in Mauritania occur in urban areas. Sexual assaults are a real threat to women, especially Western women using public transportation and taxis. Violent crimes

<sup>265</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information,” 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#traffic\\_safety](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#traffic_safety)

<sup>266</sup> Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 24 April 2012, <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/Mauritania>

<sup>267</sup> British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 8 June 2012, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/middle-east-north-africa/mauritania>

<sup>268</sup> Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 24 April 2012, <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/Mauritania>

<sup>269</sup> Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 24 April 2012, <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/Mauritania>

<sup>270</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information,” 20 March 2012,

[http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#traffic\\_safety](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#traffic_safety)

<sup>271</sup> British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 8 June 2012, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/middle-east-north-africa/mauritania>

<sup>272</sup> Bureau of Diplomatic Security, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania 2012 OSAC Crime and Safety Report,” 29 February 2012,

<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=12092>

are increasing. Carjackings, robberies, and assaults have been on the rise in recent years. Most take place in public areas in the evening hours.<sup>273, 274, 275</sup>

### Exchange 18: Give me money.

|          |                   |                                |
|----------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Local:   | Give me money.    | y'aTeenee shee min il<br>vaTHa |
| Soldier: | I don't have any. | maa 'endee shi                 |

Petty crime also is commonplace throughout urban Mauritania. Pickpockets and thieves target unwary people in marketplaces and break into cars that have valuables in plain sight.<sup>276</sup> The threat of terrorism ranks high in Mauritania. Numerous Western governments warn their nationals to exercise great caution and situational awareness when in Mauritania. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have operated in the Sahara in Mauritania for years, taking more than 25 European hostages since 2008.<sup>277</sup>



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
Al-Qaeda suspects captured

<sup>273</sup> Bureau of Diplomatic Security, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania 2012 OSAC Crime and Safety Report,” 29 February 2012,

<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=12092>

<sup>274</sup> British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 8 June 2012,

[http://m.fco.gov.uk/travel;/letter=M/travel-advice/full\\_results?c\[\]=mauritania](http://m.fco.gov.uk/travel;/letter=M/travel-advice/full_results?c[]=mauritania)

<sup>275</sup> Peace Corps, “The Peace Corps Welcomes You to Mauritania,” March 2009,

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/welcomebooks/mrwb682.pdf>

<sup>276</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information,” 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#crime](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#crime)

<sup>277</sup> British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 8 June 2012,

[http://m.fco.gov.uk/travel;/letter=M/travel-advice/full\\_results?c\[\]=mauritania](http://m.fco.gov.uk/travel;/letter=M/travel-advice/full_results?c[]=mauritania)

## Chapter 4 Assessment

1. Mauritania's largest cities lie within the Sahara.

**False**

Although some large towns lie within the Sahara and near the Sénégal River, the principal cities of Mauritania are located along the Atlantic coast. Other urban areas support the mining industry in the north.

2. Unemployment is problematic in urban Mauritania.

**True**

Many who have migrated to the urban areas of Mauritania have lacked the job skills and training needed to survive. In 2009, the nationwide unemployment rate hovered around 32%, climbing to 51% in 2011 among ages 15 to 24.

3. Schools suffer from overcrowding in Mauritania.

**False**

Urban areas have few schools and enrollment remains low, despite programs to modernize educational delivery and to increase educational opportunities.

4. Access to water in Mauritania is problematic.

**True**

Access to sanitary water supplies is generally limited in Mauritania, where water-delivery services are too expensive for the urban poor. Even the flow of pumped water to affluent neighborhoods is regularly interrupted.

5. Mauritanian roads are generally dangerous.

**True**

Poor quality roads, low local driving standards, shifting desert sands, and shared usage with cyclists, pedestrians, and animals make driving in Mauritania dangerous. All but essential travel has been discouraged throughout most of the country.

## CHAPTER 5: RURAL LIFE

### Introduction

Droughts and desertification in the 1970s and 1980s forced most nomadic herders in the northwest African nation of Mauritania to move south and settle in the Sénégal River Valley. But those Maure who remain in rural areas continue to employ traditional methods of land use and distribution based on tribal lineages. The system perpetuates ethnic strife. Poverty inhibits rural development. Although small gains in farming techniques have been made, families often keep their children out of school to help earn a living.

Despite economic efforts, chronic malnutrition affects large numbers of children, medical facilities lack basic medicines and staff, and the country generally lacks infrastructure, which is a particular problem in rural areas because some remain contaminated with landmines. Other areas have seen increasing terrorist activity waged by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Slavery, hidden behind government denials, also remains a way of life in Mauritania.



© Ferdinand Reus  
Village in south Mauritania

### Tribal Distribution

The Maure of Mauritania make up approximately 60% of the population. Except for small pockets of Soninké, Wolof, and Pulaar along the Sénégal River in the southern region, the Maure dominate the ethnic makeup of Mauritania. They are divided into two groups. The Beydane, known as the “white Maure,” are the majority group. The Haratine, known as the “black Maure,” make up the minority and are the descendants of slaves once belonging to the Beydane. Although slavery was abolished in 1981, it was not criminalized until 2007, and the master-slave relationship continues in rural areas.<sup>278, 279, 280</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Nomadic family

The Maure trace descent through the male offspring of a male ancestor. This patrilineage is important to the Maure for establishing relationships between kinship groups. Social structures

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<sup>278</sup> Minority Rights, “Mauritania Overview: Peoples,” 15 March 2011, <http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=5184>

<sup>279</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Slavery,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 477–486.

<sup>280</sup> John D. Sutter, “Slavery’s Last Stronghold,” CNN, March 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slaverys.last.stronghold/index.html>

are also valued for preserving a hierarchy that ranges from royalty at the top to various servant castes at the bottom.<sup>281, 282, 283</sup>

Two groups make up the noble class of the Beydane. The Hassani, descendants of the Lebanese Beni Hassan, rank highest in the Maure caste system. Previously a warrior caste, the Hassani defeated the Zawiya, a Berber group of religious scholars (called *marabouts* by the French) who occupy the second-highest social caste in Maure society.<sup>284, 285, 286</sup>

The Znaga are tributary vassals who serve the Hassani and the Zawiya. They are known to intermarry with black Africans, something the Hassani and Zawiya rarely do.<sup>287, 288, 289</sup>

Below these three castes exist a series of occupational castes. Comprising tailors, weavers, carpenters, and other skill sets, these castes' members live with and serve the practical needs of the top three castes.<sup>290, 291, 292</sup>

The lowest of the Beydane castes is the Ighyuwa, who are feared and looked down upon because they are rumored to possess mystical occult knowledge. Functioning as poets, musicians, and

<sup>281</sup> LaVerle Berry, “The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 50–55.

<sup>282</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55000/Climate>

<sup>283</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–354.

<sup>284</sup> LaVerle Berry, “The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 50–55.

<sup>285</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55000/Climate>

<sup>286</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–354.

<sup>287</sup> LaVerle Berry, “The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 50–55.

<sup>288</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55000/Climate>

<sup>289</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–354.

<sup>290</sup> LaVerle Berry, “The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 50–55.

<sup>291</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55000/Climate>

<sup>292</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–354.

bards, they act as companions and advisors to the Hassani and Zawiya, providing them protection as well.<sup>293, 294, 295</sup>

The Haratine, or black Maure, resemble black Africans in appearance but identify as Maure. Although the Haratine can no longer legally be held as slaves, they continue working for their former masters. Their status is vague, and they lack the skills and the capital to create opportunities for their survival.<sup>296, 297, 298</sup>

### Land Distribution/ Ownership

After independence from France in 1960, a series of droughts in the 1970s and 1980s forced nomadic herders, who numbered about 75% of the population in the mid-1960s, to move south and settle. By the end of the 1980s, only an estimated 12% of the population continued the traditional nomadic existence.<sup>299</sup> The same series of droughts depleted herds and increased desertification. Today, roughly 80% of the population lives in southern Mauritania.<sup>300, 301</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Tenant-farmer

### Exchange 19: Do you own this land?

|          |                       |                                 |
|----------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you own this land? | inta hoowa moola Thee it tRaab? |
| Local:   | No.                   | abdey                           |

Ethnic and tribal relations define traditional Maure land distribution and ownership. Although tribal groups did not necessarily own the land, they maintained access to it. The rights of access

<sup>293</sup> LaVerle Berry, “The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 50–55.

<sup>294</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55000/Climate>

<sup>295</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–354.

<sup>296</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Mauritania: People: Ethnic Groups,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55000/Climate>

<sup>297</sup> LaVerle Berry, “The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 50–55.

<sup>298</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, “Moor/Moorish,” in *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 351–354.

<sup>299</sup> John W. Bruce, “Country Profiles of Land Tenure: Africa 1996,” Land Tenure Center, December 1998.

<sup>300</sup> Peter D. Coats, “The Economy: The Rural Economy,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 98.

<sup>301</sup> John W. Bruce, “Country Profiles of Land Tenure: Africa 1996,” Land Tenure Center, December 1998.

and use extended to dependents of the tribal leaders, who controlled particular lands. Even when land was left unused, those of different ethnic groups or tribes were forbidden from using the land. Today, the Maure-majority government continues this system of land distribution. Lineage rights define ownership, yet agricultural land may be worked by those outside the lineage.<sup>302</sup>

These confusing “double-ownership” policies were introduced in the 1990s to quell ethnic conflict as well as to improve food security and encourage investment.<sup>303</sup> In reality, traditional tributary relationships between tribes, castes, and ethnic groups have been maintained. In the case of the Haratines, their tenant-farmer status on Beydane land continues the master-slave relationship that has defined them for centuries.<sup>304</sup>

## Rural Economy

### Agriculture

Although traditionally a nomadic herding people, many Maure were driven by economic necessity to the Sénégal River Valley, where they took up the settled lives of farmers. These Maure farmers now grow diverse crops, such as corn, sorghum, millet, and rice.<sup>305, 306</sup> In an effort to boost agricultural output and to ensure food security in the country, the government has instituted aggressive irrigation plans north of the Sénégal River.<sup>307, 308</sup> Still, the agricultural area of Mauritania, which is less than 1% of the total land, remains susceptible to drought and desertification.<sup>309</sup> Irrigation schemes rely on annual rainfall for their success. On numerous occasions, entire yields have been devoured by plagues of locusts.<sup>310, 311, 312</sup>



© World Bank Photo Collection  
Village farmer

<sup>302</sup> Alice Wilson, “Background Paper: Anthropological Studies of Land Tenure in Muslim Settings,” University of Cambridge, 30 April 2011, [http://www.cjb.ma/images/stories/Alice\\_Wilson.pdf](http://www.cjb.ma/images/stories/Alice_Wilson.pdf)

<sup>303</sup> Economic Commission for Africa, “Land Tenure Systems and Their Impacts on Food Security and Sustainable Development in Africa,” December 2004, [http://www.uneca.org/eca\\_resources/publications/sdd/land\\_tenure\\_systems.pdf](http://www.uneca.org/eca_resources/publications/sdd/land_tenure_systems.pdf)

<sup>304</sup> FAO, “Land Tenure Policies in the Near East,” n.d., <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/Y8999T/y8999t0f.htm#TopOfPage>

<sup>305</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Mauritania: Economy,” in *The World Factbook*, 20 June 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>306</sup> Jamie Stokes, ed., “Moor,” in *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East* (New York: Infobase Publishing, Inc., 2009), 470.

<sup>307</sup> University of Minnesota, “The Status of Human Rights Organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa: Mauritania,” Human Rights Library, 17 February 2005, <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/africa/mauritan.htm>

<sup>308</sup> Med Abderrahmane, “Mauritania Makes a Fresh Attempt to Boost Agriculture,” *Guardian* (UK), 2 September 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2011/sep/02/mauritania-attempt-boost-agriculture-farming>

<sup>309</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Mauritania: Geography,” in *The World Factbook*, 20 June 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

### *Oasis Farming*

Some Maure operate farms located at desert oases, growing date palms and mint, although desertification and diminishing underground water sources threaten their existence. In response, aid programs have helped oasis farmers better utilize their scant resources, which have resulted in increasing yields. The aid programs also have helped oasis farmers grow subsistence crops—such as turnips, carrots, wheat, and eggplants—that have improved the nutrition and standard of living of oasis farmers.<sup>313</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Date palm tree

### *Herding*

Nomadic herders face stark conditions. Although annual rainfall is high enough near the Sénégal River Valley to support grazing lands to feed cattle and sheep, government irrigation programs have forced herders north. The arid conditions of the Sahara complicate the lives of herders and animals, and increase the cost of survival.<sup>314</sup> The farther north herders range, the greater their hardship. Because rainfall in the north is insufficient to support grazing land, some herders rely on bought grain to feed their herds. Although lack of access to markets has forced herders to sell to brokers for lower prices, Mauritanians recently have invested in nomadic camel-herding communities to establish a regulated market for collecting, processing, delivering, and selling camel milk and its byproducts. The success of the ventures has contributed to food security, poverty reduction, and improved health for rural Mauritanians.<sup>315, 316, 317</sup>



© Tobias Mandt / flickr.com  
Herdsman

<sup>310</sup> Pascale Harter, “Locusts Invade Mauritania Capital,” BBC News, 2 October 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3710704.stm>

<sup>311</sup> John D. Sutter, “In Mauritania, Sunny with a Chance of Locusts,” CNN, 2 February 2012, <http://whatsnext.blogs.cnn.com/2012/02/02/in-mauritania-sunny-with-a-chance-of-locusts/>

<sup>312</sup> One World, “Climate Change in Mauritania,” May 2010, <http://uk.oneworld.net/guides/mauritania/climate-change>

<sup>313</sup> UN Webcast, “Mauritania Oasis Farmers,” 28 September 2011, <http://webtv.un.org/news-features/watch/mauritania:-oasis-farmers/1555953799001#full-text>

<sup>314</sup> Michele Nori, Jason Switzer, and Alex Crawford, “Herding on the Brink: Towards a Global Survey of Pastoral Communities and Conflict,” International Institute for Sustainable Development, 27 July 2005, [http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2005/security\\_herding\\_on\\_brink.pdf](http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2005/security_herding_on_brink.pdf)

<sup>315</sup> USAID, “Mauritania Food Security Outlook,” 15 April 2010, [http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Mauritania OL 2009\\_09\\_English.pdf](http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Mauritania OL 2009_09_English.pdf)

<sup>316</sup> UNDP, “Invest in Removing Market Constraints,” 13 August 2008, [http://web.undp.org/gimlaunch/docs/GIM%20Report\\_Chapter%204\\_Aug2008.pdf](http://web.undp.org/gimlaunch/docs/GIM%20Report_Chapter%204_Aug2008.pdf)

<sup>317</sup> Phuong Tran, “Camel Milk Transforms Mauritania’s Herding Lifestyle,” Voice of America News, 1 November 2009, <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2007-08-20-voa44/404350.html>

## Rural Transportation Issues

Road conditions are poor in rural Mauritania. Unimproved tracks outdistance the combined surfaced and unsurfaced roads throughout the country. Paved roads connect the capital Nouakchott in the south with Nouâdhibou in the north and Nema in the southeast. Travel can be dangerous in rural areas because of the lack of gas stations, roadside assistance, and poor road conditions. Travelers are encouraged to carry extra fuel, water, food, and the tools to repair vehicles. For safety, traveling in convoys also is recommended.<sup>318</sup>



© Brendan van Son  
Means of transportation

### Exchange 20: Is there a gas station nearby?

|          |                                |                           |
|----------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a gas station nearby? | maahoon istaSyon igReyib? |
| Local:   | Yes.                           | eheeh                     |

The continually blowing desert winds shift sand dunes, creating hazards on paved roads and blurring unimproved roadways.<sup>319</sup> Numerous governments have advised against travel to the remote regions of eastern and northern Mauritania. Reports abound of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operating in the region, where many Europeans have been kidnapped over the past decade.<sup>320, 321, 322</sup>

## Health Issues

Rural areas of Mauritania suffer chronic shortages of drugs, vaccines, nurses, and healthcare services. Technical innovations in healthcare are not reaching rural areas, where hospitals and clinics have not modernized. The majority of doctors and midwives work in the capital, leaving a shortage of qualified health professionals in poorer regions.<sup>323</sup>

<sup>318</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information,” 20 March 2012,

[http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#traffic\\_safety](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#traffic_safety)

<sup>319</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, “Mauritania: Transportation and Telecommunications,” 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370109/Mauritania/55010/Transportation-and-telecommunications>

<sup>320</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Mauritania: Introduction,” in *The World Factbook*, 20 June 2012,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>321</sup> British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 14 May 2012, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/middle-east-north-africa/mauritania>

<sup>322</sup> Cédric Jourde, “Sifting through the Layers of Insecurity in the Sahel: The Case of Mauritania,” in *Africa Security Brief*, no. 15 (September 2011),

<http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/Africa-Security-Brief/ASB-15.pdf>

<sup>323</sup> World Bank, “The Mauritania Health System and Implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy: Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (2002–04) for Improving the Efficiency and

Health organizations exist in some areas to provide impoverished and malnourished families medical care to offset the effects of malnutrition, which is widespread throughout Mauritania. Feeding centers have been established to help children receive the needed nourishment. Throughout Mauritania, chronic malnutrition affects an estimated 200,000 children. In the most severely affected areas of central Mauritania, acute malnutrition afflicts an average of 19.5% of children. Although post-harvest periods see a reduction, 32% of the nation's children under 5 are stunted.



© European Commission DG ECHO  
High malnutrition rate

324, 325, 326, 327

#### **Exchange 21: Is there a medical clinic nearby?**

|          |                                   |                                          |
|----------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a medical clinic nearby? | hon maaveeh'eeyaada<br>Tubeeya egReeyib? |
| Local:   | Yes, over there.                  | eheeh, ivTheyk ezheeha                   |

Malaria is common in Mauritania. Some of the highest concentrations of malaria outbreaks occur in eastern Mauritania along the border with Mali.<sup>328</sup> Travelers to Mauritania should make sure that they have taken the appropriate anti-malarial drugs. They also should decrease their chances of infection by using insect repellents.<sup>329</sup>

#### **Exchange 22: Is Dr. Muhammad in?**

|          |                     |                      |
|----------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Soldier: | Is Dr. Muhammad in? | edektoR muHamad hon? |
| Local:   | Yes.                | eheeh                |

Infectious Rift Valley Fever also has become cause for concern since late 2010. The virus, which primarily affects animals but can be transferred to humans, is potentially life-threatening.

Equity of Public Health Expenditure," January 2004,

[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/AFRICAEXT/Resources/no\\_39.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/AFRICAEXT/Resources/no_39.pdf)

<sup>324</sup> Yves Willemot and Brahim Ould Isselmou, "Mauritania," UNICEF, 4 May 2006,

[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mauritania\\_33777.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mauritania_33777.html)

<sup>325</sup> World Bank, "Nutrition at a Glance: Mauritania," 26 April 2011,

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/NUTRITION/Resources/281846-1271963823772/Mauritania42611web.pdf>

<sup>326</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (IRIN), "Mauritania: Malnutrition Has No Season in Nouakchott," 4 November 2009,

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report/86874/MAURITANIA-Malnutrition-has-no-season-in-Nouakchott>

<sup>327</sup> Alisha Rodriguez, "Mauritania: Malnutrition in the Crisis," Counterpart International, 8 May 2012, <http://www.counterpart.org/blog/malnutrition-in-the-crisis>

<sup>328</sup> World Health Organization, "Country Profiles: Mauritania: Epidemiological Profile," 2010, [http://www.who.int/malaria/publications/country-profiles/profile\\_mrt\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/malaria/publications/country-profiles/profile_mrt_en.pdf)

<sup>329</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "Mauritania: Country Specific Information," 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#medical](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#medical)

Mosquito bites are the most common method of transmission, and exposure to blood, body fluids, and tissues of infected animals also can transmit the virus to humans.<sup>330, 331, 332</sup>

### Available Schooling

Rural areas lack school facilities and teachers. Where facilities exist, the cost of books, supplies, and food are prohibitive for many families. Approximately 25% of children who do not attend school have to work to help support their families.

Another 22% of children do not attend school because of the lack of adequate roads.<sup>333</sup> On average, boys generally study for 7 years, compared to 2 years for girls.<sup>334</sup>



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School children

Because poverty has prevented school attendance for a large population of rural children, relief organizations have paired up with the Mauritanian government to create incentives for teachers in rural schools. They also have created school feeding programs and programs designed to increase school enrollment for girls and women.<sup>335</sup> Despite good intentions and the implementation of many educational reform programs, the status of the education system in rural Mauritania remains dire. Although some areas have seen great improvements in the education system, rural Mauritania continues to lack the infrastructure, money, and staff to educate its rural children.<sup>336, 337</sup>

### Exchange 23: Do your children go to school?

|          |                                |                               |
|----------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do your children go to school? | awlaadak yigRaaw fil madiRsa? |
| Local:   | Yes.                           | eheeh                         |

<sup>330</sup> Rudy Ruitenberg, “Mauritania Reports 3 Outbreaks of Rift Valley Fever,” *Bloomberg*, 16 December 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-12-16/mauritania-reports-3-outbreaks-of-rift-valley-fever-update1-.html>

<sup>331</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information,” 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#medical](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#medical)

<sup>332</sup> NASA, “NASA Study Predicted Outbreak of Deadly Virus,” 13 February 2009, [http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/riftvalley\\_fever.html](http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/riftvalley_fever.html)

<sup>333</sup> Bureau of International Labor Affairs, U.S. Department of Labor, “The Department of Labor’s 2005 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor,” 22 January 2007, 310–313, <http://www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/tda2005/tda2005.pdf>

<sup>334</sup> J. Henry, “Mauritanians: Education,” in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., eds. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby (New York: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009), 386.

<sup>335</sup> Bureau of International Labor Affairs, U.S. Department of Labor, “The Department of Labor’s 2005 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor,” 22 January 2007, 310-313, <http://www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/tda2005/tda2005.pdf>

<sup>336</sup> Madrassa Aid, “Campaign Launch for Leksseiba Primary School,” 6 December 2011, <http://madrassaid.wordpress.com/2011/12/06/leksseiba/>

<sup>337</sup> Madrassa Aid, “Failed Education Reform in Mauritania,” 12 December 2011, <http://madrassaid.wordpress.com/2011/12/12/failed-educational-reform-in-mauritania/>

## Village Life

Traditionally, members of the Maure nobility, the Hassani and the Zawiya, ruled over nomadic groups of Maure, who have become more settled and pacified. Today, the Hassani and the Zawiya function as political and economic leaders and continue to exercise a great deal of influence and control over the people who fall below them in the social hierarchy.<sup>338, 339, 340</sup>

### Exchange 24: Does the Imam\* live here ?

|          |                          |                     |
|----------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Soldier: | Does the Imam live here? | leemaam saakin hon? |
| Local:   | Yes.                     | eheeh               |

\*government appointed village leader

The tributary vassals, the Znaga, care for livestock and noble families. They also provide goods and services to the nobility as tribute for their patronage. The artisans, carpenters, and blacksmiths of the lower castes produce utilitarian goods, such as jewelry and weaponry, household items, tents, cooking utensils, saddles for camels, and any items to sustain life in the desert.<sup>341, 342</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Village near date farm

### Exchange 25: Respected Imam, we need your help and advice.

|          |                                              |                                                           |
|----------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Respected Imam we need your help and advice. | HaDRat leemaam neHna miHtaazheen leelmusaa'da win naSeeHa |
| Local:   | Yes.                                         | walaahi                                                   |

Unskilled manual labor is performed by the slave class. Many claim that slavery does not exist, yet evidence persists that groups of slaves, or former slaves, continue to live on land controlled by the nobility. They continue to labor without pay, performing any menial task that is asked of them. Their conditions are dire. Freeing the slaves of the Maure has been largely unsuccessful.

<sup>338</sup> LaVerle Berry, “The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 50–55.

<sup>339</sup> Catherine Taine-Cheikh, “The (R)Urbanization of Mauritania: Historical Context and Contemporary Developments,” INRIA, 2007,

[http://hal.inria.fr/docs/00/54/03/46/PDF/CTC\\_R\\_urbanization\\_Mie.pdf](http://hal.inria.fr/docs/00/54/03/46/PDF/CTC_R_urbanization_Mie.pdf)

<sup>340</sup> Cédric Jourde, “Sifting through the Layers of Insecurity in the Sahel: The Case of Mauritania,” in *Africa Security Brief*, no. 15 (September 2011),

<http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/Africa-Security-Brief/ASB-15.pdf>

<sup>341</sup> Makhtar Diouf, “Study on the Elaboration of Indicators of Ethnic and Cultural Minorities in Mauritania,” UNESCO, 20 September 1982,

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0005/000507/050754eb.pdf>

<sup>342</sup> Barbara Abeille, “A Study of Female Life in Mauritania,” USAID, 1979,

[http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNAAH436.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAH436.pdf)

The Beydane continue to see them as property, and the slaves see themselves as part of the noble family. Culture demands that they work for the support of their family.<sup>343, 344</sup>

### Border Crossings and Checkpoints

To obtain visas to enter Mauritania, one needs a sponsor or an invitation. The law no longer allows travelers to purchase visas at checkpoints entering the country. Visas must be obtained in advance through legal channels.<sup>345</sup> Border crossings have become better monitored in recent years in response to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operating in the area.<sup>346, 347</sup>



© Jurgen / flickr.com  
Crossing the border in Rosso

The border between Senegal and Mali has particularly received attention because Mauritania has become a transit hub for Africans trying to illegally reach Europe.<sup>348</sup> Between Mali and Mauritania, only one legitimate border crossing exists, connecting the Mauritanian town of Néma in the southeast to Bamako, Mali. The entire eastern border with Mali is a desert no-man's land. The region is sparsely populated, and the border is porous.<sup>349</sup>

### Exchange 26: Where is the nearest checkpoint?

|          |                                  |                                    |
|----------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Where is the nearest checkpoint? | wayn-heeyya egReb nuqTit tafteesh? |
| Local:   | It's two kilometers.             | keelayn min hon                    |

The main Mauritania-Senegal border crossing is located at Rosso in southwestern Mauritania near the mouth of the Sénégé River, which forms the border between the two countries. Car ferries and small, flat-bottomed boats called pirogues provide transportation across the river. Numerous other border crossings exist along the Sénégé River, but the terrain requires sturdy

<sup>343</sup> LaVerle Berry, “The Society and Its Environment: Ethnic Groups and Languages,” in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, ed. Robert E. Handloff (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990), 50–55.

<sup>344</sup> John D. Sutter, “Slavery’s Last Stronghold,” CNN, March 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slaverys.last.stronghold/index.html>

<sup>345</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Mauritania: Country Specific Information,” 20 March 2012,

[http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#traffic\\_safety](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#traffic_safety)

<sup>346</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Mauritania: Introduction,” in *The World Factbook*, 20 June 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>

<sup>347</sup> British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Travel Advice: Mauritania,” 14 May 2012, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/middle-east-north-africa/mauritania>

<sup>348</sup> Global Detention Project, “Mauritania Detention Profile,” February 2010, <http://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/mauritania/introduction.html>

<sup>349</sup> Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, “Mauritania,” in *The Rough Guide to West Africa* (New York: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2003), 95–96.

vehicles, such as those with four-wheel drive. Other border crossings along the river are not equipped to handle automobile crossings. Passengers cross these border areas using pirogues.<sup>350</sup>

### **Exchange 27: Show us the car registration.**

|          |                               |                           |
|----------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Soldier: | Show us the car registration. | i'Teenaa veeneyet il weta |
| Local:   | Right away.                   | Haalan                    |

### **Landmines**

Landmines are known to exist along the country's border with Western Sahara and in the central and coastal areas of Mauritania, where they still injure unwary travelers.<sup>351, 352</sup> Landmines in desert areas move as the sand dunes shift in the winds.<sup>353</sup>

### **Exchange 28: Is this area mined?**

|          |                     |                                  |
|----------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is this area mined? | haaThee liblaaSa veehaa il meen? |
| Local:   | No.                 | abdey                            |

Mauritania has been a ratified signatory to the International Mine Ban Treaty since 2000. Since then, the country has destroyed its stockpiles of antipersonnel mines, retaining fewer than 1,000 for training purposes.<sup>354, 355</sup> Nonetheless, because of territorial disputes between Western Sahara and Morocco, numerous areas in northern Mauritania also remain contaminated. The Adrar region in the central area of the country and the Bir Moghrein in the Tiris Zemour region are mined. The Moroccan government provided Mauritania with detailed maps of the mined areas, but all the landmines have yet to be identified. Landmines also have been reported along the coast in the region of Dakhlet Nouâdhibou. The government continues to clear contaminated areas but claims it will not be able to meet the 2016 treaty deadline for eradicating all antipersonnel mines within its territory. Despite financial limitations, the country has identified specific clearance



© Niko Viramo  
Using train to avoid landmines

<sup>350</sup> Jim Hudgens and Richard Trillo, "Mauritania," in *The Rough Guide to West Africa* (New York: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2003), 95–96.

<sup>351</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Mauritania: Country Specific Information," 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#traffic\\_safety](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#traffic_safety)

<sup>352</sup> Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, "Mauritania," 2 November 2011, [http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region\\_profiles/print\\_profile/527](http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region_profiles/print_profile/527)

<sup>353</sup> Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, "Travel Report: Mauritania," 28 October 2011, [http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries\\_pays/report\\_rapport-eng.asp?id=180000](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/countries_pays/report_rapport-eng.asp?id=180000)

<sup>354</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Mauritania: Country Specific Information," 20 March 2012, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_966.html#traffic\\_safety](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_966.html#traffic_safety)

<sup>355</sup> Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, "Mauritania," 2 November 2011, [http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region\\_profiles/print\\_profile/527](http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region_profiles/print_profile/527)

targets and is working with numerous NGOs to get the necessary funding to fulfill its treaty obligations.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, “Mauritania,” 2 November 2011, [http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region\\_profiles/print\\_profile/527](http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region_profiles/print_profile/527)

## Chapter 5 Assessment

1. Drought and desertification have forced many nomads in Mauritania to settle down.

**True**

Drought and desertification during the 1970s and 1980s forced many nomads to move south and settle in agricultural and urban areas in the Sénégal River Valley. Only about 12% of the Maure population continues the traditional nomadic lifestyle.

2. Travel in the rural areas of Mauritania is generally safe.

**False**

Travel can be dangerous in rural areas because of the lack of gas stations, roadside assistance, and poor road conditions. Landmines are known to exist along the country's border with Western Sahara and in the central and coastal areas of Mauritania.

3. The "black Maure" of Mauritania are known as the Haratine.

**True**

The Maure of Mauritania are divided into two groups. The Beydane, known as the "white Maure," are the majority group. The Haratine, known as the "black Maure," make up the minority and are the descendants of slaves once belonging to the Beydane.

4. The southern border between Mauritania and Senegal remains closed.

**False**

The southern border between Mauritania and Senegal is not closed. Car ferries and small, flat-bottomed boats called pirogues provide transportation across the Sénégal River at the main border crossing located at Rosso. Other border crossings exist along the river.

5. Tribal groups in Mauritania maintain access to land they do not own.

**True**

Ethnic and tribal relations define traditional Maure land distribution and ownership. Although tribal groups do not necessarily own the land, they maintain access to it. The rights of access and use extended to dependents of the tribal leaders, who controlled the lands.

## CHAPTER 6: FAMILY LIFE

### Household and Family Structure

The basic household unit in Mauritania is the extended family, which comprises related men, their wives, sons, and unmarried daughters. Because divorce is high among the Maure, patrilineal extended families provide stability. Groups of related extended families constitute a clan, and groups of related clans form tribes. Lineage groups are not concrete and change over time, resulting more in groupings of people of similar social class rather than ancestors.<sup>357, 358, 359</sup>



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
Mauritanian family

### Exchange 29 : How many people live in this house ?

|          |                                     |                                        |
|----------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | How many people live in this house? | kam min aRgaazh saakin ivThee id daaR? |
| Local:   | Six.                                | sita                                   |

It is not unusual for a Maure man to have his unmarried or divorced sisters living in his household. A Maure man often has his elderly parents living with him and his family too. But female heads of household are increasing. Many men have been forced by lack of employment to work elsewhere. Poverty for households headed by women is higher than for households headed by men. Roughly 50% of rural households are headed by women.<sup>360, 361</sup>

### Exchange 30: Are you married?

|          |                  |                |
|----------|------------------|----------------|
| Soldier: | Are you married? | inta mezawazh? |
| Local:   | Yes.             | eheeh          |

Men rarely help with housekeeping duties, which historically have been done by women. Wives and their daughters cook, clean, launder clothes, and care for the home. Men and young boys make tea and take care of any chores that the women don't traditionally perform. If the family has enough wealth, servants from the Haratine class perform household labor.<sup>362, 363</sup>

<sup>357</sup> J. Henry, "Mauritanians," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., eds. Timothy L Gall and Jeneen Hobby (New York: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009), 385.

<sup>358</sup> Barbara Abeille, "A Study of Female Life in Mauritania," USAID, July 1979, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNAAH436.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAH436.pdf)

<sup>359</sup> Learn about Mauritania, "Family Units," 25 March 2009, <http://learnmauritania.blogspot.com/2009/03/family-units.html>

<sup>360</sup> Best Country Reports, "Family and Parenting," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>361</sup> UN, "Mauritania," April 2004, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/MAURITANIA-English.pdf>

<sup>362</sup> Learn about Mauritania, "Family Units," 25 March 2009, <http://learnmauritania.blogspot.com/2009/03/family-units.html>

<sup>363</sup> Karl P. Kirsch-Jung and Winfried von Urff, "Background Information: Mauritania," in *User Rights for Pastoralists and Fishermen: Agreements Based on Traditional and Modern Law Contributions from Mauritania* (Heidelberg, Germany: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit [GTZ] GmbH, 2009), 50–56.

*Shari'a* law gives husbands near-total authority in the home. Exceptions to this are child custody, which traditionally goes to the mother in divorces. Criminalized behavior, such as physical abuse or spousal rape, is seldom reported or prosecuted.<sup>364</sup>

## Status of Elders, Adolescents, and Children

### Elders

Elders are highly respected in Maure society. Out of respect for them, young mothers are not allowed to show affection to their own children when their elders are present. Although this custom is relaxed around female elders, it is never relaxed in the company of male elders. Families and clans take care of the elderly.<sup>365</sup>



© Ferdinand Reus  
Elderly man

### Adolescents

In rural areas, adolescents are responsible for helping their families earn a living. Teenage boys often work outside the home. A small percentage migrate illegally to Europe to earn a living for the family in Mauritania.<sup>366</sup> By comparison, young women help their mothers at home by taking care of younger children, cleaning and cooking, and generally helping run the household. This role teaches young women to care for a home, in preparation for marriage.<sup>367</sup>

Although many adolescent boys continue their schooling, especially in urban areas, girls are usually kept home and closely supervised.<sup>368</sup> Dating is not permitted, but love marriages are becoming more common, although parents still continue to arrange marriages for their children.<sup>369</sup>



© Magharebia / flickr.com  
Jihadist websites tempt teens

In urban areas, internet cafes are becoming increasingly popular. Teenage boys are actively recruited by religious extremists through internet sites and campaigns.<sup>370</sup>

### Children

Female children spend their early years free from responsibilities and surrounded by close relatives within their encampment or household. Later, they learn and practice the chores they will need upon marriage. Nomadic girls learn to break down and move a tent, and to choose sites

<sup>364</sup> Social Institutions and Gender Index, "Mauritania," 2012, <http://genderindex.org/country/mauritania>

<sup>365</sup> Barbara Abeille, "A Study of Female Life in Mauritania," USAID, July 1979, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNAAH436.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAH436.pdf)

<sup>366</sup> Fabienne Tanon and Abdoulaye Sow, "Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from Africa: The Case of Mauritania," December 2010, [http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/66/31/90/PDF/Tanon-SowIUSSPi\\_Briggs.pdf](http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/66/31/90/PDF/Tanon-SowIUSSPi_Briggs.pdf)

<sup>367</sup> Best Country Reports, "Birth," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>368</sup> Best Country Reports, "Birth," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>369</sup> Best Country Reports, "Birth," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 1

<sup>370</sup> Jemal Oumar, "Mauritania: Jihadist Websites Tempting Young Boys," *Eurasia Review*, 1 August 2011, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/01082011-mauritania-jihadist-websites-tempting-young-boys/>

for encampments. They begin to actively participate in these duties at about age 12, when they also begin to learn to command servants.<sup>371</sup>

### **Exchange 31: Are these your children?**

|          |                          |               |
|----------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Soldier: | Are these your children? | THoo tRiktak? |
| Local:   | Yes.                     | eheeh         |

### **Married Life, Divorce, Birth**

#### *Married Life*

Maure consider marriage to be the height of a girl's life. Traditionally, Maure girls are married off by their families between the ages of 8 and 15. The majority of these girls marry men who are significantly older because only older men have the social and financial security to support a wife and children. Marriage typically occurs between members of the same lineage, preferably cousins. Shari'a law allows men to take up to four wives. Polygamy has seldom been practiced in Maure culture, but it is on the rise. Maure men take the institution of marriage lightly. Approximately 28% of girls between ages 15 and 19 are married, widowed, or divorced.<sup>372, 373, 374, 375</sup>



© Ametxa / flickr.com  
Young wife and mother

#### **Exchange 32: Is this your wife?**

|          |                    |                  |
|----------|--------------------|------------------|
| Soldier: | Is this your wife? | haaThee zozhtak? |
| Local:   | Yes.               | eheeh            |

#### *Divorce*

Divorce rates among the Maure are quite high. Men can divorce their wives for almost any reason. Women retain custody of children when they divorce. Unless Maure women are truly wealthy and are given a support settlement from their former husbands, they have no means of support when they are divorced. They must return to their families and hope to be supported by them. Some women find work in the informal economy, but this is not the norm.<sup>376</sup>

#### *Birth*

The birth of a child is cause for celebration in Maure society. Two sheep are sacrificed at the birth of a boy, one at the birth of a girl. Within one week of birth, children are named by their

<sup>371</sup> Barbara Abeille, "A Study of Female Life in Mauritania," USAID, July 1979, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNAAH436.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAH436.pdf)

<sup>372</sup> Social Institutions and Gender Index, "Mauritania: Discriminatory Family Code," 2012, <http://genderindex.org/country/mauritania>

<sup>373</sup> Best Country Reports, "Family and Parenting," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>374</sup> West Africa Democracy Radio, "Rape, Domestic Violence Rising in Mauritania," 10 February 2012, [http://wadr.org/en/site/news\\_en/3021/Rape-domestic-violence-rising-in-Mauritania.htm](http://wadr.org/en/site/news_en/3021/Rape-domestic-violence-rising-in-Mauritania.htm)

<sup>375</sup> Brahim Ould Isselmou, "Mauritania Observes Day of Zero Tolerance on Female Genital Mutilation," UNICEF, 14 February 2008, [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mauritania\\_42859.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mauritania_42859.html)

<sup>376</sup> Barbara Abeille, "A Study of Female Life in Mauritania," USAID, July 1979, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNAAH436.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAH436.pdf)

fathers in a ceremony called *al-Tasmiya*. The father and other male relatives recite Quranic passages over the child and provide its name. Family members come from near and far to witness the naming ceremony and to take part in the celebration feast that accompanies the ceremony.<sup>377, 378, 379</sup>

Despite a 2010 Islamic decree banning female genital mutilation (FGM)—also known as female circumcision—more than one-half of girls are circumcised before their first birthday, and many of those are circumcised within the first 6 months of life.<sup>380</sup>



© Ametba / flickr.com  
Mothers with their babies

## Family Social Events

### Weddings

Weddings are costly in Maure society. Prospective grooms must provide money and gifts to a girl's parents. The amount of money and gifts depends upon the groom's and the parents' wealth and socioeconomic status.<sup>381</sup> Often a sheep or goat is sacrificed at the ceremony.<sup>382</sup> Wedding ceremonies usually last for days. The bride is dressed in fine clothing and her hands painted with henna. At the ceremony, a marriage contract known as an *aqd* is signed by bride and groom—who both must consent to the marriage for it to be legal, although women are rarely consulted in marriage decisions, especially first marriages. After the marriage contract is witnessed and announced, celebrations and banquets begin. After they end, the bride leaves her parents' home to live in her husband's home.<sup>383, 384, 385</sup>



© Radoslaw Botev  
Guests dance at wedding

<sup>377</sup> Best Country Reports, "Birth," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>378</sup> Social Institutions and Gender Index, "Mauritania: Discriminatory Family Code," 2012,

<http://genderindex.org/country/mauritania>

<sup>379</sup> White Sapphire, "New Births and Naming Ceremonies," n.d., <http://whitesapphire.hubpages.com/hub/New-Births-and-Naming-Ceremonies>

<sup>380</sup> Frank Imhoff, "Mauritania: It Is Not Circumcision," FGMNetwork, 20 July 2007, [http://fgmnetwork.org/news/show\\_news.php?subaction=showfull&id=1185020043&archive=&start\\_from=&ucat=1&](http://fgmnetwork.org/news/show_news.php?subaction=showfull&id=1185020043&archive=&start_from=&ucat=1&)

<sup>381</sup> Barbara Abeille, "A Study of Female Life in Mauritania," USAID, July 1979, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNAAH436.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAH436.pdf)

<sup>382</sup> Ettagale Blauer, "Lifestyle: Marriage," in *Cultures of the World: Mauritania* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2009), 121.

<sup>383</sup> Social Institutions and Gender Index, "Mauritania: Discriminatory Family Code," 2012, <http://genderindex.org/country/mauritania>

<sup>384</sup> Best Country Reports, "Family and Parenting," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>385</sup> Barbara Abeille, "A Study of Female Life in Mauritania," USAID, July 1979, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNAAH436.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAH436.pdf)

**Exchange 33: Congratulations on your wedding!**

|          |                                  |                              |
|----------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Congratulations on your wedding! | mabRook 'ila il 'uRs         |
| Local:   | Thank you, God bless you.        | shookRan, alaah ibaaRak feek |

**Exchange 34: I wish you both happiness.**

|          |                            |                                        |
|----------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | I wish you both happiness. | Raajee ilkum is sa'aada intum lethnayn |
| Local:   | We wish you the same.      | wi anta amolee                         |

*Funerals*

Funerals function as family reunions in Mauritania.

Marabouts recite the Quran in its entirety to purify the soul of the dead. The body is washed seven times and wrapped in white. The deceased's personal possessions are given to the poor, and the body is buried in a cemetery, facing Mecca. If the person died from an infectious disease, the body is cremated.<sup>386, 387</sup>



© John Spooner / flickr.com  
Desert cemetery

**Exchange 35: I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.**

|          |                                                             |                                       |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | I would like to give my condolences to you and your family. | aRaanee m'azeek wim'azee ehil id daaR |
| Local:   | Thank you.                                                  | Jazaake alaaho KhayRa                 |

**Exchange 36: Please be strong.**

|          |                               |                                      |
|----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Please be strong.             | il waa'iR alaa iS SabeR              |
| Local:   | We don't have another option. | maa 'andnaa ilee laahi inwaasoo gaa' |

*Rites of Passage*

For boys, circumcision is a rite of passage. Although they are routinely circumcised before their 10th birthday, circumcision signals the beginning of their journey into manhood.<sup>388</sup> Marriage and having children are both rites of passage for Mauritians, especially girls, since they marry at such young ages.<sup>389</sup>

<sup>386</sup> Best Country Reports, "Family and Parenting," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>387</sup> Garba Diallo, "Mauritania," in *Countries and Their Cultures*, vol. 3, eds. Melvin Ember and Carol R. Ember (New York: MacMillan Reference USA, 2001), 1431–4432.

<sup>388</sup> Best Country Reports, "Family and Parenting," in *Mauritania: Lifecycle*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>389</sup> J. Henry, "Mauritanians," in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., eds. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby (New York: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009), 384.

## Naming Conventions

The Maure of Mauritania speak Hassaniya Arabic. Although this dialect is not mutually intelligible to other Arabic speakers, naming conventions remain similar. Names usually take four parts: a first name, father's name, grandfather's name, and family name. The family name is sometimes a tribal name, which makes it common to a large number of people. Honorific names can be used. These names show that one is the father (usually of the eldest son) or mother (usually of the eldest daughter) of someone. Personal names follow, but they are not used commonly. People receive a descriptive name. Usually religious, it relates to a quality the person has or wants to have. Family names derived from the name of a father or male ancestor indicate descent. In Modern Standard Arabic, such a name begins *ibn* or *bin*, which means "son of." In Hassaniya, it is replaced by *ould* ("son of") or *mint* ("daughter of"). The tribal or geographical name follows and lets people know the tribe or region one comes from.<sup>390</sup>



© Save the Children  
Boy of ten years

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<sup>390</sup> Bankers Online, "Naming Conventions," n.d., <http://www.bankersonline.com/tools/namingconventions.pdf>

## Chapter 6 Assessment

1. The basic Maure household is the nuclear family.

**False**

The basic household unit in Mauritania is the extended family, which comprises related men, their wives, sons, and unmarried daughters.

2. Female heads of households are increasing in Maure society.

**True**

Many men have been forced by poverty to work elsewhere. Poverty for households headed by women is higher than for households headed by men. Roughly 50% of rural households are headed by women.

3. The birth of a child in Mauritania is celebrated by sacrificing chickens.

**False**

The birth of a child is cause for celebration in Maure society. Two sheep are sacrificed at the birth of a boy, one at the birth of a girl. Family members come from near and far to take part in the celebration feast.

4. The Maure do not routinely practice polygamy.

**True**

Shari'a law allows men to take up to four wives. Polygamy has seldom been practiced in Maure culture, but it is on the rise.

5. Cremation is the preferred funeral rite for most Maure.

**False**

After being washed seven times and wrapped in white, the deceased is usually buried in a cemetery, facing Mecca. If the person died from an infectious disease, their body is cremated.

## FINAL ASSESSMENT

1. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb threatens the stability of Mauritania.  
**True / False**
2. The Pulaar, Soninké, and Wolof ethno-linguistic groups are *beydanes*, or “White Maure”.  
**True / False**
3. Prior to independence in 1960, Mauritania was a colony of Portugal.  
**True / False**
4. Libel is a criminal offense in Mauritania that is punishable by imprisonment.  
**True / False**
5. Oil has been the most valuable source of wealth for Mauritania in the last decade.  
**True / False**
6. The terrorist organization al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has been linked to religious-based killings in Mauritania.  
**True / False**
7. The government of Mauritania instituted Islamic law following a military coup in 2005.  
**True / False**
8. Slavery, which is permitted under Islamic law, continues to be practiced in Mauritania.  
**True / False**
9. The number of mosques in Nouakchott have dramatically increased in the last 30 years.  
**True / False**
10. Most Christians in Mauritania are not Mauritanian citizens.  
**True / False**
11. The traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Maure has been declining since urbanization began expanding in the 1980s.  
**True / False**
12. Traditional Maure women do not perform physical labor.  
**True / False**
13. The legal age for women to marry in Mauritania is 12 years old.  
**True / False**
14. Maure men and women dress conservatively.  
**True / False**

15. The Maure do not celebrate secular holidays.  
**True / False**
16. The population of Mauritania has rapidly urbanized during the last 50 years.  
**True / False**
17. Mauritania's government provides housing for urban migrants.  
**True / False**
18. The informal economy has flourished in urban Mauritania.  
**True / False**
19. Malaria and other waterborne diseases, although not completely eliminated, no longer seriously threaten public health in Mauritania.  
**True / False**
20. Violent crime is not a problem in Mauritanian cities.  
**True / False**
21. Some farmers cultivate dates and mint in the Sahara.  
**True / False**
22. The Zawiya rank highest in the Maure caste system.  
**True / False**
23. In recent years, border crossings in Mauritania have become better monitored.  
**True / False**
24. Rift Valley Fever has been eradicated in the rural areas of Mauritania.  
**True / False**
25. Lack of infrastructure continues to undermine development efforts in rural Mauritania.  
**True / False**
26. Divorced women in Mauritania most often return to their parents' home.  
**True / False**
27. A person's name in Maure society has three parts: a first name, a middle name, and a family name.  
**True / False**
28. Maure girls are routinely married to older men.  
**True / False**

29. Maure boys are not circumcised.

**True / False**

30. Breaking down and moving tents are some of the most important chores performed by young nomadic girls in Mauritania.

**True / False**

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