Expeditionary Culture Field Guide

MAURITANIA

U.S. AIR FORCE

About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of 2 parts:

Part 1 introduces "Culture General," the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment (Photos courtesy of Pro Quest 2011).

Part 2 presents "Culture Specific" Mauritania, focusing on unique cultural features of Mauritanian society and is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ or contact AFCLC's Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil.

Disclaimer: All text is the property of the AFCLC and may not be modified by a change in title, content, or labeling. It may be reproduced in its current format with the expressed permission of the AFCLC. All photography is provided as a courtesy of the US government, Wikimedia, and other sources as indicated.

PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and

economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as "cultural domains" – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors Across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for

universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard.

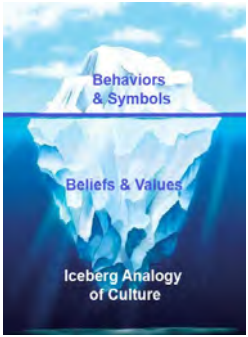
As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

This collective perspective forms our worldview– how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the

deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout the African Continent, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common among most African countries. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

Africa has a history that spans the entire existence of humankind. In ancient times prior to the emergence of written languages, history and wisdom were preserved across generations and

ethnic boundaries through oral folk legends or myths. Most early human evolution began as hunting and gathering cultures in East and South Africa, with countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa renowned for their early human sites. In the last several millennia, the development of agriculture and pastoralism (animal herding) replaced hunting and gathering lifestyles.

Ancient civilizations evolved in all corners of Africa, inspired in part by peoples from the Middle East bringing trade, beliefs, customs, language, and on occasion, colonization. Far from being isolated empires, the African civilizations were intimately connected by commerce and marriage throughout various regions of the continent, and when confronted by outsiders, managed to adapt to their influences. Eventually, Arab traders introduced Islam to Africa and also instituted the Trans-Saharan African slave trade that lasted from the 7th to 19th Centuries.

The “golden age” of European exploration, which lasted from the 18th to mid-20th century, prompted the wholesale exploitation of Africans resources – first human assets through slavery, followed by natural resources such as minerals, precious gems and metals, and wildlife, thereby diminishing most of what was traditional and African.

The introduction of the European Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade altered the slave trade through both the sheer number of Africans enslaved and through the cementing of a racist ideology of Black inferiority to legitimize the institution of slavery. Slavery decimated the African continent for over 400 years through the forced relocation of an estimated 25 to 30 million Africans worldwide. This figure does not include those Africans who died aboard ships or during capture. While abolition of the slave trade dissolved the institution of slavery, it did not end the European

presence on the African continent nor did it drastically alter their attitudes towards Africans.

Starting in the mid-19th century, European colonialism served to redefine African ethnic relations on a large scale; however, as African societies began to resist colonial rule and seek their independence, widespread ethnic conflict and genocide occurred. Sustained westernization and globalization continue to shape the continent through poverty, disease, and social reform. A history still to be recorded, Africa's future identity faces many challenges in critical areas such as environmental change, ethnic strife, women's health and security, and education.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. Traditional African political organizations in the form of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms have existed for several millennia and continue to influence contemporary African governments. Uncommon in modern society, bands are limited to hunting and gathering economies, such as the !Kung of the southern African Kalahari Desert and foragers of central African forests.

Tribes are still represented today across the African political landscape, although the use of the word "tribe" is sometimes misinterpreted due to its western notion of "primitiveness" and oftentimes substituted with the term "ethnic group." Lacking centralized authority, tribes are organized around segmented descent groups or in some cases age groups.

Everyday governance is discharged through councils of respected elders and sanctioned through ritual and other means. East African pastoralist groups such as the Maasai,

along with some West African tribes and the Berbers in North Africa, represent this type of organization.

Chiefdoms or kingdoms are ruled by kings or queens from a royal clan and generally incorporate millions of subjects. Kingdoms such as the Zulu or Swazi in southern Africa developed through conquest, while others like Ghana's Ashante developed through an association of related traditional states. However, colonialism eventually diluted the power and reach of these empires, whose leaders were often retained as indirect rulers or figureheads.

Today, all three of these political organizations still exist, although in the confines of modern African nation-states created by colonial powers who had little regard or understanding of African cultures. This juxtaposition of modernity with tradition has caused severe conflict throughout the continent.

Challenged to construct their respective "national" identities, regional leaders attempt to do so by diluting the traditionally cohesive power of ancestry. These national ruling elites, who derive their power from wealth and commerce rather than tribal affiliation, feel threatened by loyalty to these traditional organizations, labeling their rule as "tribalism."

This "class versus descent" scrimmage for power has resulted in conflicts across the continent and a dramatic divergence of interests. As a means to overcome these and other issues on the continent, a 55-nation federation, the African Union (AU), was formed in 2002. AU's charter is to promote "greater unity and solidarity between African countries and peoples" by building partnerships in all segments of "civil society."

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer

individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. Prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the African continent consisted of orally transmitted indigenous religious practices. As in many societies, African indigenous beliefs influenced diet, subsistence patterns, family structures, marriage practices, and healing and burial processes. In essence, Africans constructed their worldview through their indigenous religions.

Today, the African continent is primarily either Muslim or Christian. Other faiths such as Judaism and Hinduism exist as pockets in different regions of the continent, primarily in urban areas. The historical trajectories of Islamic and Christian expansion in Africa offer intriguing commonalities in how Africans across the continent initially reacted to the introduction of each of those religions. For example, it is common throughout the continent to find a blending of many elements of indigenous religious practices with local Islam and Christianity (Photo a courtesy of Wikimedia).

Consequently, many African native religions share similarities with religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in their understanding of God as the creator and ruler of all life, although He is considered untouchable by humans.

However, unlike Christianity and Islam, many African indigenous religions believe that God is not directly involved in people's lives. To them there is a spirit world populated with former good and bad human beings. The good spirits intercede with God on behalf of their living families to whom they then relay God's will through dreams and acquired possessions. The bad spirits work to bring misfortune through sickness,

death, or natural disasters to those who behave inappropriately.

Many indigenous African religions revere "nature" spirits living in the sky, water, and forests. These impersonal spirits help protect people from harm and provide them with life's essential ingredients such as water, sun, and wildlife. This belief system is commonly referred to as animism.

Just as spirits mediate relations between God and humans, religious specialists act as mediators between spirits and humans to provide protection from harm.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin"). The traditional African family with respect to marriage, family structure, and descent is a much different arrangement than is found in most American families. Likewise, there are several components of the traditional African family that are common to all African cultures.

First, perhaps the most difficult feature to reconcile to Americans is that of polygyny – the practice of a husband having more than one wife. A benefit of this arrangement is that it promotes societal alliances through marriage, procreation, and family wealth through female labor.

Second, due to polygyny, the family in most African cultures has historically consisted of an expanded set of kin or relatives that extends well beyond the American notion of a nuclear family. This arrangement created a family environment where children considered all siblings as "brothers and sisters" and all of the wives/mothers as "mother."

Third, the extended African family traces descent through either the male or female side of the family, a practice which differs considerably from the American family. Patrilineal descent (through the male side of the family) is the more common approach and usually features polygyny. The matrilineal (through the female bloodline) marriage pattern is more uncommon and almost always features monogamy – it is rare to encounter a wife having more than one husband.

Lastly, it is common for two or more blood lines (lineages) to share a common ancestor and collectively form a clan, which is the largest social unit. Clans do not have formal leaders or organizational structures. Membership is transferred from father to child and cuts across ethnic and social boundaries.

The dramatic social changes in Africa during and after colonialism in the last 4 decades have obviously affected the traditional family, and variations on these 3 features can be found across the continent.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles. Gender roles in Africa follow no single model nor is there a generalized concept of sex and common standard of sexual behavior.

Prehistorically, gender role differentiation in Africa's hunting and gathering cultures was based on a division of labor featuring different, yet complementary, sets of responsibilities for males and females, adults and children. Females gathered over half the caloric needs from natural vegetation, while also reproducing and raising offspring. Males were primarily hunters but also assisted with gathering.

These gender patterns continued as agricultural practices advanced.

Females shared in farming while continuing to provide for the family's subsistence, and males produced the cash crops. Pastoralists like the Maasai of Kenya traditionally have featured males involved in cattle-raising and females in food production.

The 19th-century European colonial period introduced a cash economy into Africa, with female labor used to produce the cash crops. By inserting male authority over females, colonial administrators disrupted the distinct yet complementary male/female relationship that had been traditionally African.

More recently, western influence across the continent has dramatically altered the traditional gender roles. Educational and professional opportunities for females, along with increased family migrations to urban areas, have radically altered traditional male and female gender roles.

Likewise, the number of singles parents and even child- or other relative-led families has increased with the predominance of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and warfare, further altering traditional gender responsibilities. Additionally, ethnic conflicts involving abuse of women are prevalent in many unstable countries, and while the rubric of traditional African gender generally remains, the forces of change are gradually ripping it away.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. America is predominantly a monolingual society, where traditionally, fluency in a second language has been considered a luxury rather than a necessity. Conversely, national survival for many societies in Africa required them throughout their existence to adopt multilingual

practices, if for no other reason than to preserve their native heritage.

You may find it challenging to comprehend the scope of Africa's linguistic diversity. There are over 2,000 African languages (many spoken-only) from 6 major language families, and perhaps 100 of these languages are used to communicate among the more dominant ethnic groups such as Berber, Swahili, Yoruba, and others.

Official languages of African nation-states are few, yet the linguistic diversity expressed across the continent (Nigeria has 250 languages) has prompted an awareness of the value of Africa's linguistic traditions. While most areas of the continent speak the adopted language of their colonial past – such as French and Portuguese in West Africa, French and Arabic in Morocco, and English in Kenya and South Africa – the majority of people also speak one or more traditional "indigenous" languages of their and other ethnic groups. As African independence spread throughout the continent, ethnic groups continued to depend on their indigenous identifiers, such as language, to celebrate their "release" from colonial rule and to preserve a sense of indigenous identity.

While communication styles tend to vary by ethnic or social groups, Africans generally are friendly and outgoing people although they tend to communicate with reserve to avoid confrontation. As in most kin-based societies, Africans believe that saving face or protecting one's honor and dignity are of utmost importance; therefore, they avoid public criticism and controversial topics at all costs – even to the extent of withholding their honest opinion or modifying the truth.

Africans admire and even expect extended greetings and small talk, and to attempt to rush or avoid social graces is considered disrespectful. Similarly, Africans avoid direct eye contact when communicating with new acquaintances and people of status,

particularly elders. They also are fond of non-verbal gestures, and it is common throughout African societies for members of the same gender to hold hands or touch while conversing.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

The contemporary African educational system hardly resembles the traditional pre-colonial structure, whereby community elders were primarily responsible for preparing youth for adulthood. Their instruction included fundamentals of ethnic ritual and ceremony, along with customary protocol for their distinctive gender roles. A rite-of-passage commemorating their successful journey from childhood to adulthood served as a form of graduation.

European colonialism brought a more structured, formal educational system that catered to a small group of African elite who demonstrated potential to administer expanding colonial territories. Following independence, many African nations adopted the European system because they believed it would prepare them to be more competitive in intra-continental and global marketplaces, thereby enhancing their quality of life.

However, progress in developing and maintaining reliable educational institutions has been slow for a variety of reasons. Since most Africans live in rural environments, they continue to rely heavily on child labor for family survival, resulting in decreased school enrollments or early withdrawals. Likewise, widespread HIV/AIDS epidemics, ethnic conflict, teacher and resource deficits, and inaccessibility to remote rural areas also hamper progress. According to 2017 statistics, only 80% of the

continent's children were enrolled in primary school, leaving over 33 million African children without any schooling at all.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In low-context western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, most African cultures are traditionally high-context societies, whereby people center their activities on socializing and establishing close associations, having little regard for the passage-of-time.

Only after establishing trust and honor will your typical African counterpart agreeably proceed with business. In his worldview, time is a precious commodity used to establish relationships and form alliances. Any attempt to accelerate the tempo at the expense of social pleasantries will likely result in deadlock.

To an African, close physical proximity between individuals encourages cooperative trust, and for centuries they have viewed human linkage as a core element to survival. This closeness is best represented in a traditional African village where strong kinship connections are evidenced by a display of close interpersonal relations among family members.

While conventional African concepts of time and space remain intact, throughout the continent western influence and globalization have stepped up the pace of African living, mostly in urban areas. Consequently, rural-to-urban migrations have reshaped traditional social and subsistence patterns.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Prior to 19th-century European colonization of Africa,

recreation served a vital subsistence role, whereby adolescents and adults alike participated in intellectually stimulating leisurely activities that concurrently served to develop essential hunting and pastoral skills.

Games of chance and skill were important to early childhood development, providing social outlets within and outside their community. Featuring wrestling, jumping and running; traditional African sport was steeped in religious ritual.

Along with colonialism came the introduction to Africa of western sports such as soccer, cricket, rugby and track and field. This emphasis on western sport continued to thrive with African independence and globalization, as seen in sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cup.

Leaders such as Nelson Mandela skillfully employed sport to promote a unified South African nation. Importing the predominantly “white” game of rugby, Mandela used it to fuse a racially divided country following his election in 1992. This event is the theme of the motion picture “Invictus,” exemplifying how sport can serve to create national identities and overcome ethnic division. His efforts have inspired many other African nations to follow suit.

Likewise, East African countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have produced the world’s dominant male and female distance runners, and South Africa, Cameroon and Nigeria emerged as strong contenders in the 2010 World Cup. African nations are now competing in leagues such as the International Basketball Association (FIBA) World Championships, and there is also a

growing number of African basketball players on US college campuses and in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Despite having only 17% of the global population, Africa is a victim of many of the world's debilitating health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, 70% of the global HIV/AIDS cases and 92% of malarial diseases occur in Africa.

These and other medical conditions are attributed primarily to viral infection and widespread poverty caused by extreme climatic conditions and civil unrest, coupled with inadequate preventative measures. While extensive drought generates widespread famine, civil disturbances generate millions of displaced persons. Likewise, with only 63% of the Sub-Saharan African population having access to safe drinking water, water-born bacterial diseases such as cholera and schistosomiasis are common.

Many people in Africa lack access to western medicine, and as a result depend on traditional health practices to combat disease. In addition, some traditional beliefs run counter to western medical practice and perhaps discourage individuals from utilizing those services even when they are available. This problem is further intensified by lack of federal regulatory healthcare management.

While modern healthcare procedures are more common in urban areas, many rural people rely on traditional practitioners who use a variety of plants and herbs to treat patients. Similarly, many families have their own secret remedies. While in some cases traditional medicine proves effective with fewer side effects than modern drugs, traditional practices do not adequately treat many of the more serious conditions.

On a positive note, western influence has stimulated some progress in combating Africa's health crisis. More resources are devoted to achieving basic human security by assessing disease symptoms early and with scientific accuracy.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Traditionally having an agrarian-based economy, Africa today remains predominantly agricultural, featuring less industrialization than most other parts of the world. Post-colonial adversities such as civil war, disease, poverty, and unstable dictatorships posed unusual hardship on several young African nations; however, Africa currently stands at the cross-roads of economic development with many nations becoming some of fastest growing regions in the world.

Colonialism institutionalized the exploitation of Africa's mineral resources, resulting in today's oil industry dominating the economic market in several coastal regions. A surge in global oil prices; a growing African middle class; and reduction in civil wars, foreign aid, and inflation collectively promise a more positive outlook for the future.

Countries such as Botswana, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and South Africa are economically the wealthiest on the continent, with regions such as East Africa showing signs of economic stability. Despite the economic upswing, much of sub-Saharan

Africa's future economic prosperity is held hostage by devastating diseases such as AIDS, particularly in areas of southern Africa, and the growing effects of climate change and man-made environmental degradation throughout the subcontinent.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Africa lags far behind most of the world in manufacturing capacity and output. Even the more economically-developed nations such as South Africa are competitively weak when compared to non-African industrialized nations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Africa experienced some growth in raw exports although this increase did little to boost long-term manufacturing capacity.

Today, Africa is experiencing an actual decline in manufacturing capacity due primarily to a lull in the global economy, along with other indigenous issues such as environmental stress, poor physical and organizational infrastructure, and a shortage of skilled personnel. Likewise, African manufacturing capacity is no match against global powers such as China and significant Southeast Asian markets.

International aid from both governmental and non-governmental organizations has helped African nations establish preliminary economic footholds. For example, many of them have dedicated industrial developmental zones to attract foreign investment and increase export-related manufacturing capacity, although Africa is far removed from having a significant role in the global marketplace in the foreseeable future.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize African society at large, we will now focus on specific features of Mauritanian society.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Historical Overview

The pre-colonial history of the West Saharan region [which in contemporary times consists of Mauritania, Mali, and the Maghreb (coastline and mountain areas of Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian)] and was transmitted through the generations mostly as oral legends and is somewhat vague and incomplete. Archaeological findings indicate that the indigenous Black African Bafour tribe constituted Mauritania's original inhabitants who supported a flourishing yet loosely-connected society consisting of hunters, pastoralists, and fishermen. There are also indications of Roman commercial activity, particularly in western and northern parts of the country.

The Bafour are considered the ancestors to coastal Imraguen fishermen and Soninke agriculturalists and traders who, sometime around the 8th century, founded West Africa's earliest known civilization, the Ghana Empire (discussed below). Similarly, the Bafour coexisted alongside valley cultivators who were likely the indigenous ancestors of West Africa's riverine Toucouleur and Wolof ethnic groups. (The Riverine region is a narrow belt along the Senegal River valley in the South, where soil and climatic conditions permit settled agriculture).

Moor Migration

Climatic changes and excessive grazing and cultivation are believed to have resulted in the Sahara's gradual desert-terrain formation, forcing the Bafour to begin migrating southward to the Senegal River Valley (photo courtesy of Pro Quest 2011). Between the 3rd and 7th centuries, Moors, who were a blend of Arab and Berber

lineages, migrated from North Africa into the northern West Sahara region. Originating along North Africa's Mediterranean coast in present-day Morocco, the Berbers coexisted with Arabs who invaded the North African region in the 7th century despite having a long history of bitter rivalry. Moor infiltration further accelerated the southward migration of many remaining Bafour inhabitants, although the Moor migrants absorbed some of the remaining Bafour population as vassals.

In their own language, Moors call themselves Bidhane (Bidhany, singular), meaning "Bedouin" or desert nomads. Also existing as traders, they traveled by camel caravans carrying West African slaves, gold, salt, and ivory north to present-day Morocco and Algeria in exchange for goods such as copper and cloth. Important trading posts were established in Chinguetti, Wadan, Walata, and Tichitt.

The Ghana Empire

The Moors formed the Sanhadja Confederation, a lucrative trading operation which reached its height during the 8th century. In the 10th century, however, the Sanhadja Confederation succumbed to the Kingdom of Ghana. This vast society extended from southwestern Mauritania, western Mali, and along the eastern border of Senegal. The rise of the Ghana Empire (depicted left in green at its greatest extent) marked a shift in West Africa from small political organizations grounded in village life to large political institutions that controlled vast geographic regions. The Empire capitalized upon the Moorish merchant industry, gaining wealth from the sustained exportation of gold, ivory, and salt. Market surpluses allowed urban centers to develop, where inhabitants could live comfortably through specialized occupations.

Berber Invasion

In 1076, the Almoravids, a group affiliated with a rival Islamic Berber dynasty in the North, conquered much of the West

Sahara region, dismantled the Ghana Empire, and introduced Islam to the region. While the indigenous Black African civilizations continued to dominate the South for a time, the Almoravids eventually conquered southern Mauritania, displacing much of the indigenous population to other parts of West Africa. The map, courtesy of Wikimedia, depicts the Almoravid Dynasty at its greatest extent. Archeological ruins indicate that the southernmost oasis town of Aoudaghost was part of southern Mauritania.

While Islam became the singular external influence that actually unified the country, Islamization was a gradual process which spanned more than 5 centuries (see *Religion & Spirituality*). Similarly, this gradual Islamization was accompanied by Arabization, as the Berber masters of Mauritania would eventually relinquish power to Arab warlords.

Arab Invasion

Consequently, over the next 500 years, the Arabs challenged Berber dominance and during the Mauritanian 30-Year War (1644-74), the Berbers succumbed to Maqil invaders (a collection of Arab Bedouin tribes of Yemeni origin) led by the Beni Hassan tribe. The descendants of Beni Hassan warriors became the upper stratum of Berber society who retained influence by producing the majority of the region's marabouts – West African scholars of the Sufi tradition (see *Religion & Spirituality*). Hassaniya, an oral Arab dialect having Berber influence, derived from the Beni Hassan tribe and became the dominant language among the largely nomadic population (see *Language & Communication*). Within Berber society, a social hierarchy emerged, yielding a "white" Arab aristocracy and indigenous “black” slaves (See *Political & Social relations*).

Colonial Era

From the 15th to 19th centuries, the Europeans established commercial relations with Mauritania – the Portuguese were

the first Europeans to arrive. Their explorations involved exchanging their commodities for gold, slaves, and gum arabic (a natural gum harvested from indigenous trees and used as a stabilizer in the food industry). Ensuing competition for regional control among various European powers allowed Mauritania to maintain its independence throughout much of the colonial era.

Eventually, France gained sovereignty over the Senegal River and the Mauritanian coast, an action which the Congress of Vienna (the post-Napoleonic War settlement authority) acknowledged in 1815. Penetration beyond the coast and the Senegal River began in earnest under Senegal's French Governor Louis Faidherbe (pictured, courtesy Wikimedia) in the mid-19th century, although European conquest of Mauritania did not actually occur until the early 20th century.

France established a protectorate over present-day Mauritania, recognizing it as a separate entity from Senegal in 1904. In 1920, France declared Mauritania a colony and one of six official territories belonging to the French West African Federation. Although the history of French colonialism in Mauritania is closely tied to the other French colonies in West Africa, the French did not apply a strict policy of assimilation and direct rule in Mauritania.

The French tended to pattern their approach by the British model of indirect rule where Mauritania remained a colony under a French caretaker force with some functions of governance delegated to local indigenous leaders. Similarly, since direct European engagement began late in Mauritania's history, its traditional social structure was perpetuated with little disruption through the colonial period and beyond.

Independence

During colonization the French imposed legal prohibitions against slavery and curtailed inter-ethnic rivalries.

Consequently, indigenous Black Africans whose ancestors were expelled during previous conquests began to trickle back into southern Mauritania. France granted the country its independence in 1960. The nation elected Moktar Ould Daddah (pictured) as its President and positioned the capital city Nouakchott in a small colonial village. For the most part, the country's population remained mostly nomadic.

With independence, larger numbers of ethnic Sub-Saharan Africans (Haalpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof) entered Mauritania, occupying the area north of the Senegal River. Educated in French, many of these new arrivals pursued professions as clerks, soldiers, and administrators in the new state.

Daddah held office for 18 consecutive years, during which time he nationalized the iron mines and created Mauritania's own currency (*ouguiya)* to replace the French franc. Daddah also acquired the southern third of Western Sahara (Morocco claimed the northern two-thirds) in 1975, after Spain withdrew from the territory.

The Polisario Front, a guerrilla force favoring independence for Western Sahara, soon began attacking the Mauritanian capital city Nouakchott (pictured, courtesy Wikimedia) and the country's railroad. Costs associated with the war, combined with severe droughts and lower global demand for iron ore, undermined Daddah's popularity. Overthrown in 1978 and imprisoned until 1979, Daddah left the country, followed by Mauritania relinquishing its claim to Western Sahara.

Ethnic Conflict

Maayouia Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (pictured next page, courtesy Wikimedia) came to power in 1984 via a bloodless coup and

established military rule. Taya's initial actions proved popular: he normalized relations with Morocco, expressed neutrality in the ongoing Western Sahara conflict, and held elections for municipal councils. The Moors reacted to this array of post-independence events by attempting to insert Arab influence in much of Mauritanian society, particularly legal affairs and language. Conflicting interests developed between those who considered Mauritania an Arab country (mainly Moors) and those who promoted a dominant role for the Sub-Saharan indigenous groups.

In April 1989, this inter-ethnic discord eventually erupted into violent outbreaks known as the "1989 Events." In response, Taya's regime supported the killing or torture of Black Africans in the Riverine region. Furthermore, since many of these native Mauritanians shared ethnic ties with Senegalese inhabitants, Taya's administration expelled many of these perceived "foreigners" from their homeland. Many fled to Senegal to escape the violence.

Because of Taya's human rights violations, a number of Western governments threatened to suspend foreign aid, which in 1991 influenced him to repatriate some of the expelled Black Africans. He further sponsored democratic reforms to help him get elected to the Presidency in 1992, although opposition parties disputed his victory. Full multiparty elections for the National Assembly were held in 1996, with Taya's Democratic and Social Republican Party (PRDS) winning nearly every seat. In December 1997, Taya was reelected President, capturing 90% of the vote, although once again major opposition groups refuted his election. He won the 2003 presidential elections with 67% of the vote.

In August 2005, Taya was disposed in a bloodless military coup while attending the funeral of Saudi Arabia's King Fahd. Opposition parties and Taya's own PRDS voiced support for his removal. Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall established the ruling Military Council for Justice and Democracy as the country's ruling body. The council dissolved the Parliament and

appointed a transitional government, which quickly adopted a 2-year timetable to establish democratic rule. Successful parliamentary elections were held in November 2006 and free and transparent presidential elections occurred in March 2007. A new democratically elected government under President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (pictured left, courtesy Wikimedia) – the first in 29 years – was inaugurated in April 2007.

In August 2008, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (pictured below, courtesy of Wikimedia) seized power in another bloodless coup d'etat after President Abdallahi dismissed him and three other senior military officers. Aziz had Abdallahi placed under house arrest, while the country was officially administered for 8 months by a 12-member High State Council composed of military officers. The Africa Union condemned the coup and demanded the return to constitutional order and legality. For the first time in Mauritania's history, the coup encountered considerable national and international governmental opposition.

In April 2009, Aziz resigned from the government and the army and announced his presidential candidacy in upcoming elections, which were boycotted by main opposition leaders and ultimately rescheduled. A Government of National Unity was instituted in June 2009, followed by President Abdallahi's voluntary resignation in compliance with the Dakar Accord, an act which officially served to restore constitutional rule. Aziz scored a first-round victory in July 2009 elections, which was officially recognized by the international community.

Folklore and Myth

Folk tales traditionally were passed through the generations orally and used to reinforce moral values and perpetuate history and traditions (see *Learning & Knowledge*).

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

- Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Capital

- Nouakchott

Political Borders

- Western Sahara: 970mi
- Algeria: 288mi
- Mali: 1390mi
- Senegal: 505mi
- Atlantic Ocean: 469mi

Features

- Situated in West Africa, Mauritania covers close to 398,000 square miles and is about the size of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas combined – the world's 30th largest country.
- Most of the population is concentrated in the coastal cities of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou and along the Senegal River.
- The Senegal River and its tributaries are the only inland waterways.
- Fishing grounds along the coast are among the richest in the world, and along with iron ore mined in the North, comprises one of the country's two primary natural resources.
- The terrain is generally flat with an indented coastline and divided into three distinct geographic regions:
  - The Riverine is a narrow agricultural belt along the southernmost Senegal River Valley.
  - North of the Senegal River valley lies the semiarid Sahel, a broad east-west bank characterized by vast sandy plains and fixed dunes anchored by sparse grass and scrub trees. This area is most suitable for herding.

- Encompassing 2/3 of the country, the northern Saharan region consists of a variety of terrain features, from arid desert to rugged mountainous plateaus rising over 1,500 feet.

- Climatic conditions are mostly hot and dry with daytime temperatures reaching over 100°F in May (the peak month). Similarly, dusty harmattan winds (West African trade winds) from the Northeast are common in these areas. Coastal areas are cooler although more humid than other parts of the country. Winter temperatures are also noticeably cooler.

Flag

It consists of a green background with a yellow five-pointed star above a yellow, horizontal crescent. The color green and the two symbols traditionally represent Islam, while the gold color symbolizes the sands of the Sahara Desert.

Political Power

Mauritania's Constitution provides for a multi-party Republic containing three branches of government – executive, legislative, and judicial – with a legal system anchored in its French colonial structure or Code of Law. It subsequently was modified to include Islamic (shari'a) institutions and practices.

Formerly under single-party rule from 1960 independence until 1978, the government drafted the existing Constitution in 1991 and transitioned to a democratic government in 1992 (see *History & Myth*). The Constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, expression, assembly, press, and affiliation with any political or trade union organization.

Regional Dynamics

Modeled after the French system of local administration, the central government's Ministry of Interior appoints governors and prefects to oversee the 13 respective regions (***wilaya***) including the capital district, Nouakchott. Nouakchott is subdivided into 3 sections – making 15 regions in total. Control is tightly concentrated in the executive branch, although since the 1992 democratic reform, a series of national and municipal elections have produced some decentralization. For example, villages elect their own community councils who govern local matters.

Executive Branch

Chief-of-State: the President serves as both chief-of-state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces; he is elected by popular vote for a 5-year term and eligible for a second term – currently, Mohamed Cheikh El Ghazouani (elected to his first term in 2019).

Prime Minister: functions as head-of-government and appointed by the President – currently Ould Bedda Ould Cheikh Sidiya (since 2019).

Cabinet: a Council of Ministers is appointed by the Prime Minister and chaired by the President.

Legislative Branch

The Legislature consists of a one-chamber Parliament.

Senate (Majlis al-Shuyukh): was abolished by referendum in 2017.

National Assembly (Al Jamiya Al Wataniya): consists of 157 seats; 113 members are elected by majority vote, 4 are directly elected by the diaspora, and 40 are directly elected in constituencies. Members serve 5-year terms.

Judicial Branch

The Judiciary consists of a Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, and lower courts.

Defense

Mauritania's defense force is estimated to consist of about 15,850 personnel with an additional 5,000 paramilitaries. About 15,000 strong, the Army encompasses battle tank, armored reconnaissance, motorized infantry, commando, and artillery capabilities among others. The Navy (Marine Mauritanienne) has just over 600 personnel to include naval infantry and a small fleet of patrol and coastal combatants with ports at the country's two largest cities, Nouadhibou and Nouakchott. The small Air Force (Force Aerienne Islamique de Mauritanie, FAIM) consists of about 250 personnel and a small fleet of multi-role (fighter, reconnaissance, transport, and trainer) aircraft. The paramilitaries report to the Ministry of the Interior and are divided in the National Gendarmerie (3,000) and the National Guard (2,000).

Equipment Upgrades: Historically, Mauritania has invested little in weapons systems procurement despite a need for major systems' overhaul. Equipment in all military segments remains outdated. Prior to 1991, Libya and Iraq were Mauritania's major arms suppliers, and during the 1991 Gulf War, Mauritania was allegedly the custodian for some of Iraq's military inventory. The current status of that equipment is unknown.

The primary source for defense acquisitions since the 1990s has been through European suppliers, mostly in the form of naval patrol vessels used to protect offshore fisheries. China and India also have emerged as suppliers of cheap, basic equipment for the Air Force and the Navy. While the bulk of Army's battlefield equipment was acquired in the 1970s and 1980s, in 2005-06 a large delivery of Al-Thalab long-range patrol vehicles from Jordan has helped to enhance land mobility and firepower.

Mauritanian Army Rank Insignia

Relations with the US

The US was the first nation to recognize Mauritania officially upon its independence in 1960, although relations between the two countries have undergone several transformations since then. From 1960 to 1967, the US maintained cordial relations with Mauritania, providing some economic assistance. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Mauritania broke diplomatic and consular relations with the US for aligning with Israel, although connections were restored and maintained until the late 1980s. The violent "1989 Events" (see *History & Myth*) again brought strained US-Mauritanian relations, along with Mauritania's suspected alliance with Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War.

By the late 1990s, relations with the US improved and US support was reinstated as Mauritania assumed a moderate stance to include favoring the West over Iraq (see *History and Myth*). However, the partnership was disrupted when in 2005 and again in 2008 military coups led to unconstitutional assumptions of power in Mauritania (Photo: Mauritanian officers attend opening ceremony of the Africa Endeavor 2011, which is USAFRICOM's primary communications interoperability exercise).

Eventually, democracy and bonds with the US were once again restored in 2009 with the signing of the Dakar Accords (see *History & Myth*). Thereafter, the US has partnered with the Mauritanian government on a variety of initiatives such as counterterrorism cooperation, food security, commerce exchange, and a strengthening of democracy and human rights.

Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP)

The TSCTP is a US government interagency initiative to combat terrorism in Trans-Saharan Africa. The military component of TSCTP is executed through Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans Sahara. The goal of TSCTP is to "counter terrorist

influences in the region and assist governments to better control their territory and to prevent huge tracts of largely deserted African territory from becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups."

Capitalizing on the successful 2003 Pan Sahel Initiative to neutralize terrorist safe havens in Africa, the TSCTP officially commenced with Exercise Flintlock 2005, with US special operations forces training counterparts in 7 Saharan countries on regional security and stability practices. Its primary objective is to deny terrorists the ability to move freely throughout the sparsely populated Saharan region (Photo: Mauritania Army Captain and Dan Hatcher, project manager at the Gendarme Training Range in Bamako, Mali prepare for Exercise Flintlock 2007).

Similarly, TSCTP aims to facilitate cooperation among the Pan-Sahel countries – Mauritania, Mali, Chad, and Niger – as well as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Nigeria and Senegal and its Maghreb partners – Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia – in combating terrorism.

Security Issues

Opposition Groups: Previously known as Group Salafist for Prayer and Combat (GSPC), the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is an Islamic terrorist group with ties to Al-Qaeda. Notorious for kidnapping Western tourists and holding them hostage in the barren Sahel region (predominantly in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Algeria), AQIM initially organized in an attempt to overthrow the Algerian government and establish a Muslim state. A highly publicized event occurred in 2003 when the former GSPC transported 15 European tourist-hostages into northern Mali – one died while the other 14 subsequently were released to Malian authorities.

In September 2009, amid increasing concern about the activities of AQIM, military leaders from the four Sahel countries agreed on a plan for cooperation in combating terrorism and cross-border crime. They established a joint military command headquarters in the southern Algerian town of Tamanrasset, where the army chiefs from the four countries agreed to coordinate intelligence-gathering and patrols in border areas. Following further abductions of foreign nationals in Mali and Mauritania, in January 2010 the two countries agreed to strengthen further their security cooperation.

In late July 2010, Mauritanian troops, supported by the French armed forces, conducted an operation against AQIM militants who were allegedly plotting an attack against Mauritania. Several militants were killed in the raid, along with a French hostage, who in April had been abducted in Niger.

In February 2011, another suspected AQIM plot was preempted in Mauritania when soldiers detected a car packed with explosives outside the capital of Nouakchott. Military forces had been tracking the faction's three-car convoy as it traveled from Mali to Mauritania. The Mauritanian soldiers fired upon the convoy, resulting in injuries to seven soldiers and the deaths of three suspects. Consequently, the continued presence of AQIM in the isolated northern desert region of both countries poses a threat to Western travelers.

Tensions with Senegal: The "1989 Events" with Senegal provoked a crisis that resulted in the two nations suspending long-standing diplomatic relations (see *History & Myth*). Hopes for a speedy settlement were undermined in late 1990 when Mauritanian authorities accused Senegal of complicity in an alleged attempt to overthrow Mauritania's Taya administration.

While this situation was subsequently resolved with the repatriation of refugees who had fled to Senegal, another dispute

between the two neighbors developed in 2000 over joint Senegalese River water rights. The dispute escalated when Mauritanian authorities recalled all of their citizens living in Senegal. Similarly, they issued a 15-day deadline to the estimated 100,000 Senegalese nationals living in Mauritania to leave the country – both demands were later rescinded. The two countries' heads-of-state settled the water rights issue and have since reestablished strong bilateral relations.

Tensions with Mali: In the 1990s, Malian authorities asserted that Malian Tuareg (desert nomads) and Moor refugees residing in Mauritania were launching raids on Malian territory. Malian troops had, in turn, crossed into Mauritania in pursuit of the rebels. Consequently in 1993, the two countries established a demarcation of their joint border, followed by signing an agreement for the eventual voluntary repatriation of Malian refugees from Mauritania. The Tuareg refugee camp in Mauritania closed in mid-1997, following the repatriation of about 42,000 Malians. In January 2005, the two nations' Presidents signed an agreement on military co-operation intended to strengthen border security. Positive relations between the two nations have been cemented further by their cooperative efforts in combating Trans-Saharan terrorist activities.

Relations with Libya: Former Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi (pictured) was known to have patronage networks with rebel groups in neighboring African countries. From the time he gained power in 1969, Qaddafi used Libya's oil revenues to promote himself as heroic defender of the repressed and prospective leader of a unified Africa.

In 2007, Mauritania established bilateral relations with Libya, followed by the acceptance of Mauritania's application to join the Libyan-sponsored Community of Sahel-Saharan States at the organization's 10th summit in 2008. Several bilateral agreements were signed during a February 2010 meeting of the joint committee on cooperation in Nouakchott. Similarly, Mauritanian President

Ould Abdel Aziz undertook a three-day state visit to Libya later that month.

Crime: Mauritania's moderate crime rate has been steadily increasing in recent years. Theft is fairly prevalent in its urban centers along with incidences of rape and assault.

Ethnicity

Mauritania has been described as a bridge between the continent's Arabic North and its Black African South. Consequently, most Mauritanians identify themselves as either Arab or African. With an annual 2.1% growth rate, Mauritania has a population of about 4 million or 12 people per square mile, and is one of the world's least densely populated countries. Traditionally an agrarian society, a majority of the population continues to subsist from agriculture and pastoralism.

The Arab-speaking Moors are descendants of North African Berbers and Middle Eastern Arabs who migrated to the present-day Mauritania and, in effect, controlled the region (see *History & Myth*).

Of mixed Arab and Berber descent (see *History & Myth*), most Moors remain desert herders in the North's Sahara Desert. Collectively, they form a majority of the population (70%) – White Moors (Bidan) comprise 30% and Black Moors (Harratin, which are a mixture of Moor and Black African heritages) make up the remaining 40%.

Of note, this Moor division is based as much or perhaps more on socialization and descent as actual skin color (see *Status* below). For example, the Black Moors were largely of servile origin because of their partial non-Arab indigenous Black African heritage, while the aristocratic White Moors became their slave masters.

The country's indigenous Black African inhabitants form the remaining 30% of the total population. They consist largely of the Wolof and Pular (which are Senegal's two largest ethnic groups) and a few Soninke, Fulani, and Bambara from Mali and other neighboring countries. These and other kin-based groups occupying the Senegal River Valley all share various ethnic and linguistic traits. They are mainly sedentary cultivators or herders concentrated in the southern Riverine region (depicted shaded area, courtesy of Wikimedia).

Social Relations

Moors tend to be serious and reserved, while Black Africans generally are more vibrant and out-going. As a society, Mauritanians value friendship, kinship bonds, honesty, politeness, modesty, and respect for elders. Social status, which is largely determined by family lineage, often takes precedence to material wealth.

Mauritanians are genuinely loyal to their respective ethnic or kin group, and the needs of the community overshadow those of the individual (see *Family & Kinship*). Poverty and a low living standard are offset by communal sharing. Muslims are generally fatalistic, which means they accept their destiny as Allah's (God's) will, assuming they have little control over world events. They tend to accept hardships in their lives without question or intervention. Similarly, they typically associate modernization with Westernization, which many elders consider a threat to traditional Islamic values.

Mauritanians value interpersonal relations and are generally friendly and approachable. They admire small talk, whether with close friends or new acquaintances, and to a Mauritanian, it is

imperative to get to know his colleagues personally prior to conducting business with them (See *Time & Space*).

Status

Traditionally, the ethnic groups occupying West Africa were integrated parts of one or more indigenous empires which basically shared a common class structure. Social status was pre-determined and sustained through heritage (race) with occupations assigned accordingly. At the top of the spectrum were free nobles and commoners to include warrior clans (Hassanes) and pious religious leaders (Marabouts, Zouaya, or Tolba). Next were casted people or craftsmen (M'allmin), artisans, and entertainers (Griots or Igawen), followed by freed people (former slaves) and slaves. In some areas fishermen, salt miners, and nomadic hunters and cultivators (Zenaga) fell at the lower end of the spectrum – even below freed slaves.

Unlike many Western cultures where personal achievement is possible and even encouraged, a Mauritanian's ascribed social standing traditionally has been unalterable. However, with Western influence, social boundaries have become blurred in contemporary society, particularly in urban areas where modern trends have redefined some traditional professions (see *Family & Kinship* and *Sex & Gender*).

Slavery: Functioning as an inherent feature of the caste structure and racial divide, slavery has been a persistent issue in Mauritania for centuries. The local Arab elite (Berbers or White Moors) have maintained their dominance over Mauritania's Black Moors and indigenous Black African or non-Arab inhabitants by enslaving them.

Traditionally, the maintenance of African chattel (move with the owner) slaves (EHrateen) has been viewed as fundamental to the Arabs' continued social and economic dominance and the stability of their social institutions. The term "A'beed" is used to refer to "current slaves," although it is a sensitive term banned

by law though not by religion. While legislation to abolish slavery exists in Mauritania, it has been loosely enforced in some areas. Even today, slavery remains an inherent element in some Mauritanian households, with an estimated 1-10% of the population currently enslaved.

Social Etiquette

Visiting: In most kin-based societies, visiting is fundamental to maintaining social harmony within the family unit and the community-at-large. Consequently, Mauritanians have a relaxed view of time compared to Westerners (See *Time & Space*) and value relationship-building.

Mauritanians visit each other regularly, for several hours, and oftentimes unannounced, particularly in rural areas where telecommunications are not widely available. Much visiting occurs in the cooler outdoors. Similarly, house guests are known to remain for several days and will bring gifts from their home region.

Invited guests: When invited to a Mauritanian's home, guests commonly remove their shoes before entering. Following initial greetings, the host offers them refreshments. Guests usually present their host with an inexpensive gift in appreciation for the hospitality. Later, the host serves the traditional mint tea in three ceremonial servings (see *Sustenance & Health*). Guests are obligated to graciously accept refreshments as to decline could be offensive. Although many Mauritanians may live in poverty, they are charitable people whose hospitality is a genuine gesture (Photo: A Moor man uses a charcoal burner to brew tea, courtesy of Pro Quest 2011).

Greetings: Socially, greetings express genuine respect for the other person. A handshake and warm wishes for the health and wellbeing of a counterpart and his family are common when meeting someone (see *Language & Communication* and *Time & Space*).

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

As the world's first declared Islamic Republic, Mauritania is predominantly an Islamic nation (100%) although about 5,000 Roman Catholics, mainly non-nationalists, reside in the country. There is a single Catholic diocese located in the capital city of Nouakchott. While a 1991 constitutional provision granted the establishment of political parties, they are prohibited from opposing Islam. Similarly, the government considers any religious practitioner who attempts to convert Mauritanian Muslims to another faith as a threat to society. Consequently, Islamic institutions and practices continue to dominate Mauritanian society.

Muslim Faith

Origins of Islam

Islam dates to the 6th century when God's final prophet, Muhammad, was born in Mecca in the current country of Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or the "Holy Book," to guide their everyday life. Comparable to the Holy Bible for Christians and the Torah for Jews, the Qur'an represents a core belief that helps shape Muslims' lifelong values (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: Chinguetti Mosque – see description below).

Meaning of Islam

Islam means "submission to the will of God" and acceptance of His wisdom. As with the other dominant faiths, Islam is more than a religion to its adherents – it is a way of life.

Muslim Sects

Islam is divided into two divisions: Sunni and Shi'a. Mauritanian Muslims are predominantly Sunni of the Maliki School (the second largest of four Sunni religious law schools) and are distinguished by their belief that the leader (*Caliph*) of

the Muslim community (*Ummah*) should be elected. Conversely, the Shi'a believe the Muslim leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

Five Pillars of Islam

There are five basic principles of the Muslim faith that all Muslims accept and follow.

- **Profession of Faith (*Shahada*):** "There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger."
- **Prayer (*Salat*):** Muslims pray five times a day facing toward the Ka'aba in Mecca. The Ka'aba is considered the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship.

- **Charity (*Zakat*):** Involves an obligatory tithe or donation of alms to the poor.
- **Fasting (*Sawm*):** Involves abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during holy month of Ramadan (30 days).
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (The *Hajj*):** Every adult Muslim who is physically and financially able is expected to perform at least one in a lifetime.

Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel the other two major world religions, Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews "people of the Book," referring to biblical scriptures, because they share their monotheistic belief in one God.

Abraham: All three faiths trace their lineage back to Abraham, known as *Ibrahim* in Islam. However, Christians and Jews trace their line back to Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims believe that they descend from Abraham and his Egyptian concubine, Hagar, and their son Ismail.

Scriptures: Much of the content in the Qur'an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible's Old and New Testaments. However, Muslims believe Christians distorted God's word and that Muhammad received the true revelation of God (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: Qur'an collection in a Chinguetti Library – see description below). Consequently, Muslims view Islam as a completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets.

Jesus: The three religions differ significantly regarding the role of Jesus. While Christians consider Him the divine Messiah who fulfills the Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as having been a prophet, but do not acknowledge the Christian view of His divinity. They do not believe in the Christian Trinity.

View of Death: Muslims, like Christians, strongly advocate the afterlife. Muslims believe that the time of death, like birth, is determined by Allah. Thus old age, illness, or accident are not considered the real causes of death. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death itself as a negative event. As with Christians, Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven.

Concept of Jihad

The concept of Jihad, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit of God's will to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with the publicized violence often associated with Jihad. Most Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism, considering it contrary to Islamic beliefs.

Ramadan

Ramadan is a month-long time for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time, Muslims who are

physically able are required to fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger tempers them to learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal – by fasting, one learns to appreciate the good in life. It is common for Muslims to break their fast at sunset with a light meal of dates followed by prayer and then dinner.

Ramadan occurs during the 9th month of the Islamic calendar (see *Time & Space*) and observes 3 Islamic holy days.

- **Lailat ul-Qadr:** Known as "The Night of Power," it commemorates Muhammad receiving the first verses of the *Qur'an*.
- **Eid-al-Adha (Tabaski):** It is the "Festival of Sacrifice" and acknowledges Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (Isaac according to the Christian faith), as proof of his loyalty to God. It is celebrated on the day the Hajj ends.
- **Eid-al-Fitr (Korité):** It is a 3-day "Festival of Fast-Breaking" celebrated at Ramadan's end.

Islam in Mauritania

The Almoravid Berbers introduced Islam on a large scale to the West Saharan region in the 11th century (see *History & Myth*). Since its infusion, Islam has functioned as a unifying influence. Defined as a Muslim nation, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania depends on its singular religious belief system for its national identity (Photo courtesy of Pro Quest 2011: an ancient Qua'ran manuscript found in a Chinguetti library – see description on next page).

Sufi Tradition: In contemporary Mauritanian society, most Muslims continue to claim affiliation with a Sufi order, which ranks among the country's major institutions. Characterized by mysticism and ritualistic prayer, Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqas*) spread into West Africa from Morocco in the 16th century and

have traditionally exerted signifcant political influence. Of note, Sufis are not fundamentalists.

Believed to hold divine powers, brotherhood leaders (*marabouts*) serve as spiritual intermediaries between God and the common populace. A marabout is usually a direct descendant from an order's founder and is therefore heir to his forefather's divine grace (*baraka*). By spanning ethnic and cultural boundaries, these brotherhoods contribute to the development of a broad communal identity. By the 1980s two brotherhoods, the Qadiriya and the Tijaniya, accounted for most brotherhood membership in Mauritania. Both groups basically hold similar beliefs, although dissimilar practices.

Chinguetti: Known as the 7th holy city of Islam, the desert town of Chinguetti was a 17th and 18th-century religious and intellectual center whose libraries today house hundreds of Islamic manuscripts. Similarly, Chinguetti was a waypoint for Muslims conducting their spiritual pilgrimage to Mecca. While the desert's shifting sands have all but buried the city, a few buildings still remain uncovered – most notably a famous 13th-century mosque. Today the Chinguetti Mosque is on the World Monuments Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: Hamoni Library in Chinguetti).

Indigenous Religions

Islam in Mauritania is greatly influenced by traditional indigenous religious practices which existed long before the Muslim faith was introduced to the African continent in the 7th century (see *History & Myth*). Often referred to as "Africanized practices," a blending of indigenous African religious beliefs with fundamental Islamic or Christian customs is common throughout Africa. This traditional belief system is rarely based on sacred doctrine but mostly on oral traditions passed

through several generations. It embraces nature worship and the existence of ghosts, spirits, and supernatural powers.

Animism

Some Mauritanians practice animism or the belief that natural forces have power over human existence. This concept embodies the notion that natural objects such as trees and animals are sacred and must be respected – a conviction that closely connects them to the natural environment.

Consequently, their reverence towards nature drives their methods for adapting to their surroundings. For example, some animists suggest that nature spirits use their divine sense of the cosmos to guide their agricultural lifestyle and thereby enhance crop growth.

Ancestor Spirits

Similarly, most traditional African religions also promote the notion of a supreme being who is creator of the universe. There also exist other lesser Gods and Goddesses. Embodied in this faith is the conviction that ancestor spirits occupy certain places (particularly shrines) and have great power and influence on the daily lives of family members. They in turn seek mediation with the spirit world through ordained ministers empowered with mystical insight.

While many ancestor spirits are believed to bestow blessings, others render curses instead. Bad spirits are believed to be the authors of environmental disaster such as drought and epidemic diseases (see *Sustenance & Health).* In order to protect themselves from these evil spirits, clan members rely on psychics or traditional healers such as a Sufi marabout to intercede with the spirit world and use their divine powers to relieve people of hardship. Similarly, some inhabitants wear sacred charms or amulets to dispel evil spirits (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: a Kiffa bead believed to have magical powers – see text box below).

Supernatural Powers

Mauritanians are known to blend their traditional myths and beliefs with their Muslim religious practices, producing an interesting hybrid of spirituality and philosophy. Many Mauritanians practice Sufism, a branch of Islam that promotes mysticism and the supernatural power of the spirit world. Mauritanians rely on *zawya* or *marabouts* (holy men) to bridge the gap between the human element and Allah or the spirit world. These *marabouts* are endowed with *baraka* (divine grace) and are able to shield others from harm or bless them with prosperity.

Similarly, inanimate objects such as Kiffa beads, named after their city of origin, traditionally have been used both for aesthetic purposes and for their magical powers. Intricately formed from powdered glass, Kiffa beads are believed to protect a wearer against the evil eye (a glance believed to cause injury or bad luck and directed at another person based on envy or distaste). Especially effective are those of a triangular shape (locally known as *selkrass* and *bouzrem*) because they represent a stylized “good” eye having the power to provide protection from the “evil eye” or harm. Some kiffa beans are believed to produce water for desert dwellers and others promote fertility.

The colors of the beads have symbolic meanings. White means purity, which is appropriate for young girls. Similarly, yellow symbolizes friendliness, while blue represents blessings from heaven. Colors combined with certain geometric forms convey certain meanings. A light blue bead symbolizes the infinite universe; a green circle is expected to bring hope or prosperity; and a yellow bead represents the sun.

Mauritanian women frequently wear these beads as hair ornaments, with triangular kiffa beads traditionally worn in groups of threes portraying a combination of blue, polychrome, and red colorations.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Family Organization

The family unit remains the singularly most important institution throughout many African societies. Mauritania is a kin-based society, implying that social and political connections and obligations derive from family ties. Similarly, group wellbeing takes precedence over individual achievement, and decision-making is reached through group consensus. Traditionally, the Mauritanian family unit functions as an informal welfare system that ensures all its members are sustained to include cousinages or close inter-ethnic relations.

In rural areas, extended family units are large, consisting of 10 or more persons. These units typically include parents, their male offspring and families, any remaining unwed siblings, and other members of the husband's family (elderly parents, uncles, and aunts). Large families are considered a benefit in agrarian societies and foundational for providing a dependable work force and building cohesive communities. Conversely, in urban areas single nuclear (parents and offspring) households are more common and tend to be physically segregated from the extended family – a lifestyle that generally reflects the urban environment's wage labor, educational opportunities, and entrepreneurship. Despite geographical separation, extended family bonds remain intact.

Male Authority

Mauritania is a patrilineal and patrilocal society, which means authority and inheritance occur through the male bloodline and the extended family resides near or with the elder male head-of-household. The father is considered the head of the family, followed by the eldest son. The male leader, normally the oldest, is considered the most competent and therefore manages communal property and affairs. In Muslim societies, the elderly (both male and female) generally enjoy great respect. It is common for two or more lineages to share a common ancestor, collectively forming a clan. Clans within a

village exist as clusters of single-family households sharing a compound (described below). Clan members interact by sharing land and engaging in inter-clan marriages.

Motherhood Reverence

Motherhood is revered in Muslim society, where a woman's status is determined by the number of children she bears, especially sons (see *Sex & Gender*). Mothers symbolize peace and harmony, and elderly women in particular are consulted regarding communal decisions.

Dating

Courtship is uncommon in rural Muslim societies where arranged marriages remain customary – a couple typically accepts parental judgment in coordinating their union with partners from within the kin group or clan. Consequently, individual choice of spouse is hardly a concern, nor is romance. In urban areas, Western-style dating, romance, and marriage are more popular practices particularly among the youth.

Marriage

Under the prevailing value system, all adults are expected to marry and procreate; however, it is not unusual to find unmarried women, particularly among the white Moors. Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men, although Muslim men are known to marry women of other faiths. At marriage a woman joins her husband's paternal kin group.

Mauritania is known for some rather unique marriage customs. For example, it is common for family and friends to hide the bride from the groom during their first or second evening of marriage. Similarly, the new bride and groom tend to display reserve when in the presence of elders. It is also forbidden for women to refer to their husbands by their first name. Instead, the woman usually refers to her husband as "he."

Rural: As in most kin-based cultures, marriage in rural Mauritania traditionally represents family alliance and serves as

a social contract to ensure the continuation of family traditions. Marriages between cousins are a preferred method for preserving ethnic lineages. It also facilitates communal support, particularly under harsh living conditions.

Urban: With Western influence, some urban marriages generally occur between two consenting adults who have reached a more mature age and are likely more educated than their rural counterparts (see *Learning & Knowledge*). While the couples choose to marry, they normally seek parental permission to preserve extended-family unity.

Bridewealth: Unlike a dowry, in which the woman brings material value to the marriage, a bride price is compensation from the prospective groom to the bride's family for loss of her and her forthcoming children's labor. Because it could be reimbursable in a divorce, bridewealth tends to discourage marriage dissolution.

Female Beauty: In traditional Mauritanian society, obese women are considered attractive. Particularly in rural areas, parents are known to force their young daughters to gain weight in order to render themselves acceptable candidates for marriage. Some girls have been forced to drink significant amounts of fat-rich milk daily to gain weight. This custom is infrequent in urban areas, where the health risks associated with overeating are highly publicized and tend to discourage the practice.

Polygyny: According to Islamic law, a husband is allowed to have up to four wives although he is required to equally provide for them all. Similarly, each wife must consent to any additional wives. While polygyny remains customary among Mauritania's Black African community, most Moor marriages are monogamous. Conversely, polyandry or the practice of a woman having more than one husband is prohibited.

These traditions are anchored in the notion that historically men had a higher mortality rate than women, many of whom remained unwed or were widowed. Consequently, polygyny

became a necessary means of providing for women and producing large families (work force). Similarly, a man with multiple wives is considered to rank among the elite, as only the wealthy can afford large households.

Still common in rural areas, polygyny is less popular in contemporary urban society where sustaining multiple households is cost-prohibitive. Similarly, some urban women refute the status of secondary spouse, although rural women tend to appreciate the mutual support from multiple wives.

Divorce

Divorce is more common in Moorish relationships than in the traditional Black African communities. If a divorce is the fault of the husband, it is common for the wife to keep the bridewealth. According to Muslim tradition, the father is granted custody of the children, although smaller offspring remain with the mother. Under this latter circumstance, the husband is obliged to support the mother and children until they are grown.

Housing

While rural northern homes typically are constructed from rock with a clay roof, most rural homes in the South are made of mud bricks and thatched roofs. Nomadic families live in large camel-hair tents, which are elaborately decorated on the inside. In the South, Fulani herders live in *ruga*, temporary dome-shaped huts. Urban homes tend to have more concrete.

Throughout the country, a high wall usually surrounds the family compound. While a home typically has at least three rooms, the size usually conforms to that of the extended family. Running water is rare in rural areas, and even in urban areas, its availability can be irregular during the hot season. Cities have electricity, although power outages are common.

Rites-of-Passage

The following rites-of-passage ceremonies mark life's various stages.

Birth & Infant Care: Newborns in Muslim societies represent the family's future and are traditionally the primary interest in a marriage. Elders typically provide childcare within the extended family, with the first born child usually tended by the grandmother and aunts. While women usually care for children during infancy, the men become more involved in nurturing children as they mature. Infants are rarely separated from adults and are nearly always carried.

Of note, it is taboo in Mauritanian society to inquire about a woman's pregnancy or when her baby is due, as public acknowledgement of her condition could bring a curse which might harm the baby (see *Religion & Spirituality: Indigenous Religions*). It is acceptable to inquire about the woman's health in general.

Circumcision: The village marabout (religious leader) usually circumcises rural boys around age 3 or immediately after birth when it occurs in an urban hospital. Female circumcision is a common method for recognizing womanhood, although this practice is known to be medically risky and is less popular in urban areas (see *Sex & Gender*).

Adulthood: Traditionally, male and female passage from childhood to adulthood is marked by initiation, which typically involves marriage and the symbolic passing of knowledge from the old to the new generations.

Death: Muslims customarily bury their dead within 24 hours. The women of the immediate family usually prepare the body for burial, which is performed by the men of the household. The women remain at home to pray and grieve during the burial. Members of the family and close friends pray through the night to ensure safe spiritual passage into the afterlife. In urban areas, the male family members and friends pray at the mosque together. If a prominent person has passed away, prayers are sometimes broadcast over the mosque's loudspeaker. In the days following the death, people who knew the deceased offer condolences and gifts to the family.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Sexual Relations

Largely as a result of Western influence, sexual perspectives are changing in many African societies. In these traditionally male-dominated cultures, sexual relations primarily have served to produce offspring, although gradually as gender roles have altered (particularly as a result of social advancements for women), so have perspectives regarding romance and marriage (see *Family & Kinship*). Similarly, urbanization and educational opportunities have stimulated a rise in monogamous marriage patterns, particularly among youth and the elite who tend to view status as based on professional achievement rather than family size.

Gender Roles

In traditional Mauritanian families, labor generally is divided by gender, with men considered the breadwinners and women the domestic caretakers. It is not uncommon for the male head-of-household to commute to urban areas for employment. Consequently, many women are also responsible for conducting agricultural activities or helping earn portions of the family income.

Children

Young children are assigned duties, whereby girls typically care for younger siblings and perform household chores, while boys work as farm laborers and tend livestock. Traditionally, only males received an education as females were considered to be mentally inferior (see *Learning & Knowledge*).

Female Freedom

Some of the more conservative Islamic societies believe it is imperative for women to live nearly secluded lives. When in public, they are to wear a full-body covering to protect their honor and purity. Conversely, many West Africans societies do

not conform to this traditional practice. Mauritanian women in particular enjoy a degree of freedom which permits them to openly conduct business in the marketplace and influence family decisions in the home. As they age, women gain greater respect and authority, both at home and within the community.

Gender Issues

While Mauritania's Constitution prohibits sexual discrimination, in practice the country remains a male-dominated culture where a variety of social prejudices work to undermine enforcement of gender equality. Traditionally, men have dominated the economic, political, social, and religious realms.

Equal Employment: In general, women are less represented than men in professional occupations, although urban women have more opportunities to gain an education and advance professionally. Women are underrepresented in the formal sector and therefore do not have access to some of the more prestigious positions within the judiciary and civil service, among others. Overall, women are significantly more involved in the economy than they were 30-40 years ago, resulting in their improved standard-of-living.

Childhood marriages: While many African countries have enacted laws to limit marriage to a minimum age of 16-to-18 (depending on jurisdiction), traditional customs allowing children to marry at a premature age remain widespread. In 2017, the share of Mauritanian women married prior to their 18th birthday was 37%.

In many African tribal systems, particularly in Muslim societies, a family oftentimes forces a young girl into marriage prior to reaching puberty in order to earn her bridewealth (see *Family & Kinship*). Many of these forced marriages involve polygynous relationships and are usually poverty-related; therefore, the parents use the bridewealth to help support the extended family. Unfortunately, these practices commonly lead to serious medical and social issues, most notably complicated

pregnancies due to underdeveloped reproductive organs and sexually-transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Despite the gravity of this situation, many African governments have ignored the implications.

Female circumcision: Traditionally practiced throughout Africa, female genital mutilation (FGM) remains common in rural Mauritanian society, although less so in urban areas. About 67% of Mauritanian women aged 15 to 49 have undergone FGM and 54% of those under age 14. Regarded as a rite-of-passage initiation into adulthood, FGM is considered necessary for rendering a young woman an attractive candidate for marriage and perhaps her only means of securing a viable future. Unfortunately, traditional FGM practitioners generally lack medical training, sometimes resulting in severe complications or death.

Domestic Violence: While men are legally prohibited from physical violence against their wives, spousal abuse does occur. These instances often go unreported likely because of the wife's financial and social dependence on her husband. Similarly, rape and other forms of sexual abuse are prevalent.

Overeating: An Arab tradition promotes the notion that heavyset women represent feminine beauty (see *Family & Kinship).* Consequently, Moorish families are known to force their daughters to overeat. An estimated 20% of young girls are still subjected to this abuse, although reduced by half in recent years through publicity of harmful effects.

Other Issues: Other concerns include slavery, trafficking of persons, child labor abuses, and prostitution. While these practices are illegal in Mauritania, they still exist predominantly in urban areas.

Polygyny: (see *Family & Kinship*).

Inheritance: While Mauritania's constitution upholds the inheritance rights of women, Islamic (shar'ia) law normally establishes a female's entitlement as less than a male's. Daughters, for example, inherit only half the share of sons.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Official Language

Mauritania's 1991 Constitution designates Hassaniya Arabic (a mixture of Arabic and Berber which is spoken by the Moorish majority) as the official language. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is a language for instruction (along with French) in the public school system. Similarly, the national languages of the respective indigenous Black African ethnic groups include Pular, Wolof, and Solinke. Theses indigenous groups are also French-speaking, with French widely used in commercial and business circles among the educated elite.

Language Barrier

In the decades following Mauritania's 1960 independence, language became a barrier to establishing a national identity. A sizeable number of Mauritania's Black African population protested what they perceived as a Moorish scheme to hamper Black African advancement by mandating Hassaniya Arabic as the language for secondary education. While Arabic is the language of choice among the Moors, many Black Africans gained their primary-level instruction in their respective indigenous languages and French. Consequently, they had minimal exposure to Arabic prior to entering secondary school. Consequently, school dropout rates mounted, resulting in a 1999 national reform program that established an equitable standard of instruction (see *Learning & Knowledge*).

Communication Style

Mauritanians generally are outgoing and friendly people who enjoy engaging in conversation, both with acquaintances and strangers. They interact with dignity and respect for the other person, avoiding confrontation and display of anger in most situations. As in other societies, Mauritanians commonly express themselves using a variety of both verbal and non-verbal gestures. For example, a Mauritanian typically makes a clicking sound with the tongue to

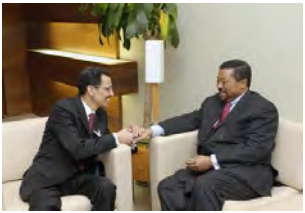
acknowledge he is listening attentively or agrees with the speaker. To disagree, he draws air through the teeth with pursed lips.

Greetings

Mauritanians value greetings, and neglecting or rushing the welcoming process is considered disrespectful. While a simple "hello" is usually adequate in Western cultures, throughout Africa and Mauritania in particular, the greeting process is more elaborate and lengthy.

Verbal: The most common initial greeting is *Salaama alaykoum* (Peace be with you), with a response of *Wa alaykoum salaama* (And peace be with you). Moors typically say *Lyak labass* (On you no evil), and the response is *Labass* (No evil). The Soninke greeting is *An moho* (hello) and the response is *Jam* (I am fine). For the Wolof, it is *Nanga def*, and the response is *Jam rekk*. Among Pulaar speakers, the first speaker says *M'bda* and is responded to with *Jam tan*. Throughout Mauritania, *Il humdu li'llah* (Praise be to God) is a standard response to good news. Members then exchange details regarding each other's health and wellbeing and that of respective family members.

Nonverbal: When meeting each other, Mauritanians of the same gender commonly shake hands gently and then place their right hand over their heart. In most kin-based societies, personal space is normally closer that in many Western cultures (see *Time & Space*). Consequently, Mauritanians tend to stand much closer while conversing than you may be accustomed to. Similarly, they often hold hands while conducting extended conversations.



In most Muslim cultures, members of the opposite sex do not normally shake hands or touch and typically remain publicly segregated. In more contemporary urban areas, it is more common for a woman to extend her hand to a male counterpart, particularly in professional settings. Of note, Moor women normally do not

shake hands with foreign men. Rule of thumb for a male counterpart in this situation: assume a passive approach, responding in kind with reserve and modesty.

It is proper protocol for the elderly or a person of status, such as a village chief, to initiate the handshake. In response it is proper to slightly bow the head as a sign of respect. When greeting an elder or a person of status, a Moor may place the elder's right hand on his own head as an act of respect and submission. Mauritanians do not establish eye contact with elders nor do they usually address them by name.

Gestures

- In Islamic societies, the left hand is reserved for hygienic purposes and considered unsanitary (although with Western influence, this restriction has declined in importance in urban areas).
  - It is best to use the right hand in social settings.
- Pointing with the index finger is perceived as impolite – it is proper to point with the entire hand.
- As a gesture of respect, it is customary not to establish direct eye contact with an elder or person of status.
  - Direct eye contact is appropriate among members of the same status or age and friends.

Titles

While friends normally converse on a first-name basis, new acquaintances exchange greetings using title and surname (last or family name). When introducing yourself as a US military member to a host-nation counterpart for the first time, it is appropriate to use rank along with first and last name, for example, Major Shawn Smith. Thereafter, use rank and last name. Similarly, when establishing a social relationship with the local people, it is best to wait until invited before using only their first name.

Discussion Topics

After the initial greeting, Mauritanians will often inquire about each other's health, job, or family; thereby spending a few minutes in "small talk." Asking about family members indicates sincerity and is an important part of the greeting process. For a newcomer, it is considered proper to show interest in your counterpart's background. Mauritanians are proud of their heritage and honored to share their history, which they are known to convey using oral traditions, riddles, and proverbs (See *Aesthetics & Recreation* and *Learning & Knowledge*).

It is best to avoid discussing potentially sensitive or controversial topics such as politics, religion, status, and sex-related themes. While some Mauritanians are open to discussing some of these topics, it is difficult to gauge in advance their views about them. In all situations, a foreign national should not debate opposing views with a host national.

Criticism and Humiliation

The concept of constructive criticism is not viewed positively in much of African society. It is therefore best to avoid giving public criticism – if you need to approach an issue critically, it is best to do so privately. Individual criticism in the presence of a person's peers could result in a loss of face – a serious insult to a host national.

Friendship

It is important for US Forces to understand that forging relationships is a complex and refined process, and it may require several visits to gain mutual understanding and trust (See *Political & Social Relations* and *Time & Space*). Mauritanians value friendships and honor guests with warm hospitality. However, it is important to be mindful that in Muslim cultures, men and women do not normally socialize together.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

Useful Translations

English	Hassaniya	French
Do you speak English?	Wash tatehder inglizia?	Parlez-vous anglais?
Where are you from?	Anta min fayn	De quell pays ètes-vous?
I'm from …	Ana min …	Je viens de …
Hello	Salam alaykoum	Bonjour
Good-bye	Mah salaama	Au revoir
Good morning	Sabah elkhir	Bonjour
Good afternoon	N/A	Bon après-midi
Good night	Messa elkhir	Bonsoir
Welcome	Merhba	Bienvenu
Yes / No	Ahey/Abdei	Oui / Non
OK	Wakha	OK
What is your name?	Smitek?	Comment vous apelez-vous?
My name is__	Ismee __	Je m'appelle __
How are you?	Ishtaree	Comment vas tu?
How is your family?	Kidayra La'aila	Comment va la famille?
I'm fine	Bikhir labass	Je vais bien
And you?	Wa anta?	Et vous?
Sorry (forgive me)	Afwan	Pardon
You are welcome	Hada wajib (Afwan also works)	Je vous en
Please / Thank you	Layhefdek/Shukraan	S'il vous plait /Merci
When?	Emta?	Quand?
Yesterday	Yaames	Hier
Today	Ilyom	Aujourd'hui
Tomorrow	Subh	Demain
Next week	Semana jaya	La semaine prochaine
Later	Hta Lmenba'ad	Plus tard
Excuse me	Smeh li	Excusez-moi
I don't understand	Ana mush fahim	Je ne comprends pas
What time is it?	Waqt shin hoo?	Quelle heure est-il?

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy: Age 15 and over who can read and write

- Total population: 53.5%
- Male: 63.7%
- Female: 43.4% (2017 estimate)

Traditional Education

Prior to the introduction of formal school systems, children were educated at home where they learned a variety of occupational skills devoted to supporting the family unit. Children would become apprentices to their parents or other adult family members. Even today in rural areas, some children remain at home to learn family-related skills and help support the family.

Traditional Islamic Education

With the introduction of Islam in the 11th century (see *History & Myth*), traditional Islamic centers began to emerge in nomadic communities where students were taught traditional religious doctrine among other subjects. Many of the centers developed sizable manuscript collections through the efforts of prestigious marabouts (see *History & Myth* “Arab Invasion” and *Religion & Spirituality* “Islam in Mauritania”).

The tradition of religious learning centers continued through the late colonial period. The Institute of Islamic Studies, founded in 1955 at Boutilimit (located about 100 miles southeast of the capital city Nouakchott), became the only Islamic institution of higher learning in West Africa where it provided instruction in traditional Islamic doctrine and teaching methods. After independence in 1960, it was moved to Nouakchott, where it continued to draw upon Boutilimit’s manuscript collection as well as other libraries of traditional Islamic literature in Chinguetti, Kaédi, Mederdra, Oualâta, and Tidjikdja (see *Religion & Spirituality*).

Modern Education

The French colonial administration established the public education system in Mauritania which was largely concentrated in sedentary communities located in the Senegal River Valley. Because public schools were concentrated in the South, the Black African community eventually dominated the nation's secular educational community. The few French schools that were established in northern nomadic areas initially failed to attract notable participation. The Moors in particular were reluctant to acknowledge public schools as credible and continued to favor purely Islamic instruction. Gradually, they began to enroll their children in public schools, realizing that traditional religious training alone would not sufficiently prepare them for 20th-century modernization (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: young Mauritanian boys taking Qur'an lessons from wooden tablets).

Following independence, the government institutionalized secular education as a means of promoting national unity and advancing a modern economy. Since school attendance initially was not mandated as compulsory, enrollment rates remained low (about 35%) through the mid-1980s – male attendance far outnumbered females.

Education System

A uniform system of compulsory education was introduced in 1999. The system is based on the French model with classes taught in a combination of French and Hassaniya Arabic (see *Language & Communication*). Hassaniya Arabic is the language of instruction for first-year primary school students, with French added for second-year students.

Primary and Secondary Education: The system provides for 6 years of primary education beginning at age 6, followed by 7 years of secondary education where students start learning English during their first secondary year. Secondary education is divided into two segments based on the French model: the

first is referred to as "College" (4 years) and the second is known as "Lycée" (3 years). During their 3rd year, students have the opportunity to learn an additional foreign language. They also take a qualification exam to determine if they will continue the additional 3 years of secondary school (Lycée) or pursue a vocational track. In their last year of secondary school, students specialize in either the arts or sciences and take a Baccalaureate exam to determine their qualifications for university attendance.

Attendance: About 80% of all children enter primary school with only about 31% enrolling in secondary school. The sharp decline in attendance at the secondary level is primarily because many predominantly rural residents consider school as irrelevant to their daily activities. Attendance is also affected by the need for children to help support the family and a distrust of secular education, among other factors. The gap between female and male literacy has narrowed in recent years as a result of government campaigns encouraging families to keep their girls in school. For example, in 2018, enrollment of girls in primary school slightly outnumbered that of boys.

Higher Education: Established in 1981, the University of Nouakchott is renowned for its superior academic standards to include its strict admission criteria and is known to attract students from abroad. Areas of instruction include both the humanities and technical fields.

Oral History

African folk legends traditionally were the first media used to reinforce moral values and perpetuate traditions – they continue to thrive particularly in rural areas. A unique occupation popular in West Africa is that of the *griot (géwél* in the Wolof language). Considered skilled craftsmen, *griots* recite history through songs, stories, dances, or poems for their community or clansmen. Similarly, the town *griot* records memorable events and is therefore responsible for preserving and teaching history.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Concept of Time and Space

As in most African societies, Mauritanians have a relaxed view of time compared to Westerners and do not have a strict regard for time management and punctuality. Most African kin-based societies tend to be more concerned about human interactions and relationship-building and are generally patient and tolerant.

Flexibility: Similarly, Mauritanians are flexible when unforeseen circumstances such as no transportation or family illness result in a delay or extended absence. This attitude does not mean they are not committed to their occupations – it just signifies that in many African societies, personal issues often take precedence over all other commitments.

Personal Space & Eye Contact: When speaking with a casual acquaintance, Mauritanians typically maintain a closer personal space than you may be accustomed to and tend to avoid direct eye contact (see *Language & Communication*).

Space between Friends: Similarly, close friends of the same gender are considerably more affectionate with one another, have closer spatial relations, and usually touch while conversing. It is normal for them to hold hands or walk arm-in-arm. These gestures signal friendship and to back away could cause offense. Mauritanians value relationships, and close friends have great influence on situational outcomes, more-so than in American culture (see *Language & Communication)*.

Taking Photos: Mauritanians generally value their privacy and expect outsiders to respect this privilege. It is therefore wise to ask permission to photograph local citizens, landmarks, and government sites.

Conducting Business

Mauritanians prefer to build relationships prior to conducting business so that the needs of both sides are well understood and mutually beneficial outcomes are easier to achieve. This

approach can be a time-consuming process, so consequently, foreign nationals should demonstrate patience, humility, and an interest in local culture in order to foster relationships.

Negotiations

- It is best not to expect immediate decisions, as reaching agreement usually requires follow-on discussions and negotiating for mutual benefits.
- Disagreements should be handled in a calm, diplomatic manner void of emotion.
- It is helpful to find ways to compromise, even if it results in delays, and seek mutual outcomes.
- It is good to remember that most Africans are patient and tend to consider time on their side.
- If the negotiation involves cost for an item, you may have to bargain (a common practice in shopping markets), so it is advisable to initially name a lower price than you are willing to pay.

Mauritanian Work Week

As in Western cultures, the Mauritanian work week begins on Monday and ends on Friday, although many retail businesses are open every day. Business hours typically are from 0800-1930 hours and includes an extended lunch break. Hours may vary in the summer, particularly in cities, and during the holy month of Ramadan. Since Friday is the Muslim worship day, most businesses have a longer lunch period to accommodate prayer time. Government offices and banks are usually open from 0800-1600 Monday-Thursday and 0800-1300 on Friday.

The Islamic Calendar

The Islamic calendar is used to determine the proper day to celebrate religious holidays and festivals. It is a lunar calendar and contains 12 months, although it is 11 days shorter than the Western or Gregorian calendar. As a result, from one year to the next, Islamic holidays fall 11 days earlier on the Western calendar than the previous year.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Mauritania's artistic and cultural heritage developed in four ancient cities: Ouadane and Chinguetti in the North and Tichit and Oullata in the Southeast (see *History & Myth*). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated these cities as World Heritage Sites to be preserved and protected. Among the treasures housed in these locations are about 33,000 manuscripts containing the nation's written history (see *Religion & Spirituality*). Similarly UNESCO also seeks to preserve various ruins which represent the traditional nomadic lifestyle of those ancient times. The World Bank created the Mauritanian Association for Art and Culture and the Festival of Nomadic Music to sustain traditional art forms.

Attire

Moorish men typically wear a long, draping white, black, or blue robe (*boubou*, or *dara'a*) usually decorated with intricate embroidery over a long-sleeve shirt and baggy pants (*seroual*). Similarly, they tend to wrap a turban (*cheche*) around their head (and their face in desert areas to protect against the sun and blowing sand). Black African men are more likely to wear brightly colored or even Western-style attire. Of note, western wear is more common in urban areas, particularly among young adults. They are known to mix Western and traditional fashions, although older adults tend to wear more traditional clothing (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: camel market in Nouakhott).

Moorish women typically wear a skirt and shirt underneath a large cloth wrap (*mulafa*) which is draped over their shoulders and head. They usually cover their heads in keeping with Muslim tradition, although unlike many fundamentalists, they do not veil their faces (see *Sex & Gender*). Black African

women usually wear a wraparound skirt (*pagne*) along with a colorful *boubou* and head wrap. Mauritanian women commonly favor gold jewelry. Some women are known to decorate their skin with henna (a plant dye) as a status symbol.

Recreation

Sport: Known as football, soccer is popular in Mauritania (as in many African nations) whose team, known as the "Mourabitounes," participates in the African Cup of Nations. Similarly, Mauritania belongs to the International Rugby Union and participates in the Rugby World Cup. Mauritania also competes in the last leg of the international Dakar Rally (starts in Europe and ends in Dakar, Senegal), which is a demanding road race through the Sahara Desert.

Board Game: Mauritanians of all ages enjoy *golorgal* (*kraur* in the Hassaniya dialect), a popular board game known throughout other African societies as *wari*, *aware*, *ayo*, and *mancala*. It is played on a rectangular wooden board with cups and playing pieces consisting of pebbles, beads, or seeds. The game's objective is to win the opponents pieces by maneuvering them through the cups.

Land Yachting

The sweeping winds of the Sahara Desert promote a popular sport known as land yachting. Similar to sailing, the activity occurs on sand rather than water. Participants race across the desert terrain in the wake of 50-80 MPH winds riding wheeled vehicles propelled by lofty canvas sails. The first yacht race occurred in 1967 and involved crossing the Sahara from Algeria through Mauritania (which took 3 weeks to cross) concluding at Nouakchott. Competitors typically do not distance themselves from each other for fear of getting lost in the sprawling desert terrain.

Other Pastimes: Men enjoy camel racing, land yachting (see text box above), golf, and card games (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: Land Sailing). Women do not normally participate in sports, but rather, enjoy socializing while embroidering. Mauritanians of all ages enjoy dancing, particularly on special occasions. Similarly, families often gather together to listen to a visiting musician-storyteller (*griot* or *igaeuen*, see *Learning & Knowledge*) or holy man (*marabout*, see *Religion & Spirituality*).

The Arts

Steeped in Arabic tradition, poetry and song are favored pastimes which some people believe have magical powers. Islamic celebrations are the most popular settings for traditional music and dance. Instruments such as a four-string lute (*tidinit*) and the harp (*ardin*) accompany vocalists in traditional musical performances.

Contemporary Musicians: A descendant of artisan *griots*, Aicha Bint Chigaly is an internationally acclaimed Mauritanian singing star who performs in Arabic accompanied by the *tidinit* and shallow drums. Singer Malourna Mint Moktar Ould Meidah, popularly referred to as Malouma, is known for blending traditional Moorish music with more contemporary rhythms – a genre known as “Saharan Blues.” Other renowned performers include Dimi Mint Abba, who dances and plays the *ardin*, and Khalifa Ould Eide, who sings and plays the *tidinit*.

Artisans: As a traditionally class-oriented society, Mauritania promotes special castes whose members function as artisans for their wealthy Moorish patrons (see *Political & Social Relations*). *Griots* sing praises and recite oral histories and poetry, while craftsmen traditionally produce handicrafts from wood and precious metals such as gold and silver. Women work leather, form pottery, weave, and sew. Many artisans sell their wares in markets.

Architecture: Traditional architecture is found in the ancient Saharan villages of Adrar and Oualanta – the latter is also known for its elaborate paintings.

Cinema: While Mauritanian cinema remains in its infancy, producer Abderrahmane Sissako was recognized at the Cannes International Film Festival for his productions of *Bamako* and *Heremakono* ("Waiting for Happiness"). Sissako's themes include globalization, exile, and the displacement of people.

Festivals

Mauritanians traditionally enjoy celebrating secular events such as harvest-time, which is also the season when many Mauritanians choose to marry. A prosperous harvest ensures plentiful food for the wedding guests. In the North, July and August is the season for harvesting dates which includes the popular *Guetna* date festival. During this event, families travel to various desert oases to enjoy a variety of activities. The *Festival International des Musiques Nomades* is a week-long Mauritanian and African music festival held annually in April.

Mauritanians also commemorate religious milestones such as the end of the month-long Muslim Ramadan celebration which also coincides with the return from *hajj* – the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia (see *Religion & Spirituality*). The head of the household usually slaughters a lamb for the family to share in commemoration. Births and funerals are also festive rites-of-passage (see *Family & Kinship*).

Public Holidays

- New Year's Day (January 1)
- National Reunification Day (February 26)
- Labor Day (May 1)
- African Liberation Day (May 25)
- Constitution Day (July 10)
- Independence Day (November 28)
- Ramadan (Islamic – see *Religion & Spirituality*)*
- Islamic New Year*

*Dates vary based on Muslim Lunar calendar.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Dining Etiquette

In traditional nomadic society, Mauritanian families typically eat while sitting on floor mats made from animal hides. Prior to dining, they usually wash their hands in a water basin. Using the right hand, Mauritanians share food from communal bowls although adult men and women seldom eat from the same bowl and may even dine in separate rooms. It is customary for participants to dine from the portion of the bowl directly in front of them. Black Africans normally consume their main meal at noontime, while Moors typically share their primary mealtime in the evening.

Diet

The Mauritanian diet retains notable French influence, particularly in urban areas where French presence was most profound. For example, baguettes of French-style bread remain popular. Most meals are served in the form of a stew, which is usually a mixture of meat (generally lamb, goat, camel, and chicken – Muslims traditionally do not consume pork) mixed with rice or *couscous*, which is similar to a dumpling.

Couscous is made from sorghum flour (a form of grain) carefully sifted and rolled into small balls, steamed, and usually served with butter-like *idhin*. In the South, a typical diet also includes fish and millet (a local grain). When in season, corn and vegetables (such as carrots, lettuce, potatoes, and onions) are included. With negligible agriculture in the northern desert region (see *Economy & Resources),* most fruits and vegetable are imported (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: *couscous* with vegetables and chickpeas).

Standard Cuisine: Many Mauritanians generally eat porridge or bread and butter in the morning, rice with stew in the afternoon, and steamed millet flour with beans or milk in the evening. A

Mauritanian national specialty is *Mechoui*, which is a whole roast of lamb.

The southern cuisine basically mirrors that of neighboring Senegal and offers more variety than in the North. Two of the more popular dishes are rice with dried fish (*chep-bu-jen*) and Senegalese peanut-based stew (*mafè*). Along the Senegal River, mangoes, guavas, limes, and other citrus fruits are abundant in season. Dates are grown in the northern oases.

Beverages: Local specialties such as baobab juice from the indigenous African tree or *zrig* (a whipped combination of camel or goat's milk, water, and sugar) are popular.

Restaurants

Fine-dining establishments normally do not thrive outside of the major cities such as Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, although there are chop houses in many sizeable townships. While Muslims do not normally consume alcohol, it is available in urban dining facilities but is known to be expensive.

Tea Ceremony

The brewing and serving of green tea is a popular social custom throughout West Africa, particularly among desert nomads, and involves a large degree of pomp and ceremony. The event is considered a dignified way to welcome a newcomer or socialize with close friends.

Traditionally, three glasses of very sweet tea follow the main meal, with the same teabag used to brew all three servings. The freshly brewed first glass is said to be "strong as death," the second "mild as life," and the third "sweet as love."

They serve tea by suspending the tea pot high above the cups (the size of shot glasses), allowing the hot tea to flow through the air and form a froth when it reaches the cup. This action also serves to cool the tea for drinking. Many Africans commonly spice their tea with mint.

Health Issues

As with many developing countries, Mauritania suffers from extreme poverty, widespread disease, and a poor healthcare system. A variety of parasitic and contagious infections and childhood diseases, such as measles, and malnutrition are prominent throughout the country. Unlike some other African countries, only 0.2% of Mauritania's adult population is infected with the HIV/AIDS virus, which is among the lowest rates throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Diseases: Because of poor sanitation and an insufficient potable water supply, infectious and parasitic diseases are common. These include meningitis, cholera, hepatitis, typhoid and yellow fever. Malaria and Rift Valley fever are found in the southern tropical areas along the Senegal River. Contagious diseases such as measles and tuberculosis and respiratory disorders are more predominant in northern areas.

Fertility and Mortality Rates: Mauritania's fertility rate is about double that of the US (the average Mauritanian woman births 4 offspring compared to 2 in the US). Primarily in Mauritania's rural areas, 48/1000 children die within one year of birth compared to 5/1000 in the US – many rural women give birth unattended by skilled medical personnel. The average adult life expectancy rate is 62 for men and 67 for women.

Inadequate Facilities: Concentrated primarily in urban areas, medical facilities are understaffed and void of modern equipment and treatment. Consequently, a majority of the population does not have access to proper healthcare.

Traditional Practices: As part of their indigenous belief system, many Mauritanians rely on traditional healing practices, particularly those members residing in rural areas who do not have access to modern healthcare (see *Religion & Spirituality*). Local traditional practitioners use a variety of plants and herbs to treat patients, and most families also have their own secret remedies.

Of note, some traditional African remedies have performed well in initial laboratory experiments, proving to be non-toxic in test animals. For example, Gawo (a herbal extract from the native African *Faidherbia albida* tree) has proven successful in reducing fevers, diarrhea, and inflammation (Photo on previous page a courtesy of Wikimedia: a *Faidherbia albida* tree branch). Similarly, the tree bark is used for dental hygiene, particularly the treatment of toothache. The extract is also used to treat optical infections in farm animals. While in some cases traditional medicine proves effective with fewer side effects than modern drugs, traditional practices are not proven effective in treating many of the more serious conditions.

Tradition of the Kola Nut

Since ancient times, the kola nut has had social significance throughout West Africa. Renowned as a "quick fix" energy booster, some people describe it as the "poor man's friend" for its high caffeine content. In fact, the first Coca-Cola recipe contained the kola nut thus coining the "cola" label.

Among local tribesmen and even in professional settings, chewing the kola nut is a popular social pastime. Because of its stark bitter taste, the kola nut typically is not swallowed when chewed. However, it has been consumed in traditional household remedies used to treat digestive disorders, nausea, and diarrhea. Its high caffeine content is believed to suppress anxiety, migraine headaches, and hunger.

Among some ethnic groups, it is customary for the prospective husband to deliver a few kola nuts to his future in-laws, whose acceptance indicates marriage approval. Similarly, exchanging kola nuts between rivals signifies a peace accord, with the nut halved between the two parties to signify goodwill.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Economic Overview

Traditionally, Mauritania was a nomadic society where owning livestock was a key measure of success. Today, Mauritania is among the world's poorest and least developed countries, with about 42% of its population (mostly rural) living on the brink of poverty. In 2018, Mauritania received roughly $446 million in foreign aid. The largest contributors were the Arab Fund and Kuwait.

Income: Its gross domestic product (GDP) is divided among three sectors (2018 est.): industry (26%), services (40%), and agriculture (26%). With about 2/3 of its land mass consisting of non-arable desert, Mauritania depends on only a few sources of income – primarily mining, fishing, some agriculture, and more recently oil production. Its economy is particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in world commodity pricing and adverse climatic conditions. Consequently, Mauritania imports more than 70% of its staple food requirements.

Natural Resources

Iron Ore: Previously Mauritania's principal source of income, iron ore deposits accounted for only 34% of Mauritania's total exports in 2018 due to falling prices. Its primary iron mine, the Societe Nationale Industrielle et Miniere (SNIM), is located in the county's Northwest region.

Fisheries: The nation's coastal waters hold one of the world's richest fishing reserves, although overexploitation threatens this second major source of revenue for Mauritania. The fishing industry supplies roughly 41% of the nation's total exports and 17% annual GDP. This industry is also a major supplier for Mauritania's domestic food consumption. The country opened its first deepwater port near Nouakchott in 1986.

Oil Reserves: Offshore crude oil reserves were discovered in 2001 with subsequent oil production and exportation commencing in 2006. The oil industry's first production year more than doubled the country's real GDP growth rate from 5.4% in 2005 to 11.4% in 2006. Since then, production has leveled out at 4,000 bbl/day with 20 million bbl in reserves.

Other Assets: Mauritania also has access to copper, diamonds, gold, salt, phosphate, cobalt, and gypsum (a soft mineral used to manufacture plaster products) deposits.

Migrant Workers

Limited job opportunities, particularly among unskilled Black African laborers, have influenced a number of young men to seek employment opportunities abroad. A popular destination is the Canary Islands off the coast of Spain. For some families, this journey serves as a rite-of-passage for their boy's transition from youth to manhood as he seeks to prove his merit.

For others, it turns tragic when young men fall prey to human smugglers and ultimately drown when overloaded and non-seaworthy vessels capsize – literally thousands of young men have become victims. Those who do survive the journey experience similar difficulty finding jobs in a society that thrives predominantly on tourism. Similarly, those traveling as illegal aliens face potential deportation.

Industry

One of the world's least mechanized nations, Mauritania's industrial base is anchored in iron-ore processing. Other significant activities include a fish-processing plant and an oil refinery in Nouadhibou. Similarly, there is a sugar refinery in Nouakchott, a meat-processing factory in Kaedi, and a textile factory in Rosso. Traditional crafts are produced in Nouakchott.

The manufacturing sector contributed close to 7% of the GDP in 2018, although it employed hardly 11% of the labor force. Similarly, mining contributed about 11% of the GDP and engaged about 5% of the workforce, while construction added another 9% GDP and employed 3% of the workforce.

Commerce

Exports: Mauritania exports close to 30% of its $1.8 million in products to China. Other key partners include Switzerland and Spain. Livestock, processed meat, and hides are exported to neighboring countries while iron ore, fish, petroleum, copper, gold, and gypsum are distributed internationally.

Imports: Mauritania imports $2.6 million in machinery and equipment, petroleum products, foodstuffs, and consumer goods primarily from the South Korea, UAE, and Norway.

Services

Showing a growth of about 8.4% in 2018, Mauritania's services sector engages about 34% of the workforce. This sector includes government employment, healthcare, education, retail sales, banking, and tourism.

Banking and Finance: The financial sector consists of a system of retail and commercial banks which collectively form the Central Bank of Mauritania (BCM). Most of these financial institutions began as joint ventures between the state and foreign or domestic investors and were progressively privatized. Despite recent improvements, Mauritania's financial system is far from efficient, as it lacks the infrastructure to promote and sustain long-term economic growth.

Currency: In 1973, Mauritania resigned from the West African Monetary Union to establish its own currency, the ouguiya (UM), which retained no linkage to the West African franc. One US dollar is equivalent to about 357 UM.

The import or export of local currency is illegal in Mauritania. Credit cards are accepted

only at a few major hotels in Nouakchott. Currency and traveler's checks can be exchanged at most banks.

Tourism: Mauritania's cultural heritage and national parks have attracted international recognition since the 1990s; however, since 2009 terrorist activities in Mauritania and other Sub-Saharan nations have resulted in a significant drop in international travel and tourism in those areas (see *Political & Social Relations*). Similarly, Mauritania's tourist industry is hampered by an underdeveloped transportation system and shortage of services facilities (see *Technology & Material*) as well as terrorist activities.

Agriculture

While agriculture comprises Mauritania's smallest economic sector, subsistence farming employs about 55% of the total labor force. Less than 1% of the land receives sufficient rainfall to sustain crop cultivation, which is largely confined to the Senegalese Riverine area in the South. Large-scale agricultural activities are limited to forestry and fishing. Similarly, livestock herding remains a primary occupation in rural areas, which contributed over 10% to the country's GDP.

In the late 20th century, the Mauritanian national government invested considerably in the Gorgol River (a Senegal River tributary) Valley irrigation system (pictured, courtesy of Wikimedia). The system along with other efforts brought an initial increase in grain production, although output has since fluctuated. Consequently, Mauritania remains dependent on international donor support.

Land Ownership

Traditionally, the community retained land ownership rights as a collective unit. The aristocracy controlled the land and rented it to the lower classes according to a sharecropping system. Legislation was passed in 1983 abolishing traditional land ownership and assigning it to the state.

Geography & Climate (see *Political & Social Relations*).

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Technology

Mauritania's industrial base primarily hinges on mining, fish processing, and oil exploitation; although construction materials and food-processing are emerging technologies (see *Economics & Resources*). Most industrial activities occur in the major cities of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou.

Energy Sources

Privatized in 2000, Mauritania's electric company, the Société Mauritanienne de l'électricité (SOMELEC), historically has supplied the country's thermal-generated electricity. Today, about half of Mauritania's power is produced by hydroelectric plants located on the Senegal River and sponsored by the Senegal River Basin Development Authority. This organization is a cooperative initiative among the neighboring countries of Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, and Guinea to promote food sufficiency and preserve the natural ecosystems. A primary source is the Manatali Dam located in Mali, which provides hydroelectric services to both Mali and Mauritania.

Transportation

Roadways: Although Mauritania has about 7,614 miles of roadway, only about 33% of it is paved and primarily serves to connect major cities. Road conditions are generally poor and travel accommodations crowded and inefficient. In 2004, a 300-mile corridor linking Nouakchott and Nouadhibou was constructed as a means of promoting tourism and trade (see *Economics & Resources*).

Of note, many people do not own cars and therefore travel by public transport such as a bush taxi (common term in West and Central Africa) which travels on established routes having variable schedules (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: a typical West African bush

taxi). Bush taxis usually are designed for small cargo transport and include trucks, station wagons, and minibuses.

Railroads: A 452-mile diesel/electric-powered rail system, the Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière (SNIM) railway, almost exclusively transports iron-ore deposits from the country's various ore mines to Nouadhibou. This system operates what is perhaps the world's longest (1.5-mile) and heaviest (over 24,000 US tons) trains. SNIM does provide limited passenger transport services, as Mauritania has no dedicated passenger train system. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia: SNIM iron ore train at Nouadhibou station).

Waterways: A 130-mile tract of the Senegal River is navigable throughout the year and includes 3 major river ports: Rosso, Kaédi, and Gouraye. Located about 6 miles south of Nouadhibou, Point-Central is the principal ocean port and a primary hub for mineral exportation. There is also a commercial and fishing port at Nouadhibou. The deep-water Port de l'Amitié at Nouakchott was built in 1986 and is maintained with assistance from the People's Republic of China. In 2009 Mauritania's merchant fleet consisted of 155 vessels.

Civil Aviation and Airports: There are 3 international airports each located at Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and Néma; 13 regional airports; and a number of smaller airstrips. Mauritania Airways International was established in 2010 as the country's flag carrier, replacing Mauritanian Airways which was discontinued the same year for operations and maintenance deficiencies.

Telecommunications

Mauritania's national telecommunications corporation (Mauritel) was privatized in 2001, although it continues to monopolize fixed-line services. Consequently, mobile cellular networks have replaced much of the fixed-line connectivity in urban areas. Similarly, a satellite telecommunications system connects

Nouakchott with other regional capital cities. Fiber-optic and Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line networks provide internet access primarily in urban locations where internet cafés have gained popularity. Approximately 21% of the population utilized the Internet in 2017. Telecommunications are mostly exclusive to the larger cities.

Broadcast Media

Mauritania has one each state-owned television (Television de Mauritanie) and radio (Radio Mauritanie) networks. The television network includes six regional stations which provide local programming in Arabic and French.

Print Media

The state-run Mauritanian News Agency publishes in dominant indigenous languages, Arabic, and French via a variety of print and web-based media to include newspapers, journals, and news portals. Other private news services such as the Portuguese News Agency (Panapress) and the African Press Agency publish in a wider variety of languages including Portuguese, Arabic, French, and English. Of note, both broadcast and print media are government-censored and prohibited from publishing material that "undermines" Islam or is perceived to threaten national security.

Environmental Issues

Mauritania's major environmental concerns include desertification, deforestation, and soil erosion caused primarily from overgrazing, drought, and shortages of fresh water. Of note, various international humanitarian organizations have promoted extensive projects to help secure safe water resources in the Sahara region. For example, in 2006 the United Nations sponsored a "need for water" campaign consisting of a team of international distance runners who embarked on an ambitious 5,000-mile journey across the Sahara. Covering much of Mauritania, the runners ran the equivalence of 2 marathons-per-day for 111 days. This event was captured in a documentary "*Running the Sahara"* which was produced by Academy Award-winning actor Matt Damon.

AFCLC

For more information on
the Air Force Culture and Language Center visit:
airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC

For more information on
United States Air Forces Europe & Africa visit:
http://www.usafe.af.mil

CULTURE GUIDE

Access all of the AFCLC's expeditionary culture field guides in our mobile app!

GET IT ON Google Play

Available on the iPhone App Store

DoD Enterprise Mobility Personal Use Mobile Apps