

# **Marine Corps Intelligence Activity Cultural Field Guide**

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## **Mauritania Cultural Field Guide DOD-2630-MRT-012-07**

### **Introduction**

Mauritania is the western-most country in the Sahel region. Its location between Arab-influenced North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa has created some ethnic divides and tensions between people of Arab origin and the indigenous populations. In other cases, the population has become united under a common belief; nearly all Mauritians are Muslim.

Most of the country is desert, making life in Mauritania difficult. In the past, northern populations were nomadic herders and the southern populations were sedentary farmers. Many continue these lifestyles today, but desertification and droughts have severely reduced the amount of fertile land in Mauritania. This has hurt herders and farmers. Many have had to abandon their lifestyles to attempt make a living in the cities. As a result, most Mauritanian cities are overcrowded and have high unemployment rates.

While lifestyles may be changing in Mauritania, the hierarchical social structure is the same as it has been for centuries. In addition to the social divides, there are also significant ethnic divides. Ethnicity is complex in Mauritania and is also a source of tension. The White Moors control the country and other groups are resentful.

In Mauritania's short history as an independent nation, it has experienced periods of political instability and periods of long rule under one leader. A military coup in 2005 isolated Mauritania from the United States. Before the coup, the United States was providing military training under the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) and planning a robust training program under the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI). As a result of the coup, training has been suspended until a democratic election is held. Elections are scheduled for 2007.

### **Cultural Geography**

#### **Environment**

Life in Mauritania is affected by the country's terrain and geography. Occupations and lifestyles are determined by where one lives. In Mauritania there are four distinct geographic zones: the Sahara, Sahel, Senegal River Valley, and Coastal Zone.

(U)The Sahara covers the northern two thirds of Mauritania. It one of the world's harshest desert environments. The little precipitation the Sahara receives usually occurs between July and September. There are few seasonal temperature changes in the Sahara, but the daily temperature variation is

approximately 30°C (86°F). The Sahara also experiences blinding sandstorms. Because of the harsh environment, few people live there. Those who do are nomadic.



Mauritania Desert



Mauritania

The Sahel region is below the Sahara. It receives a little more rain than the Sahara and can support small vegetation and grasslands. Most inhabitants of the Sahel are nomadic herders. They depend very much on the annual rainy season (between June and October). Late rains or drought affect the people in the Sahel.



Mauritanian Nomads

The Senegal River Valley is the narrow strip of land north of the Senegal River. This region receives the most rain. People in the Senegal River Valley are sedentary farmers and fishers. Most of Mauritania's agricultural production comes from this region.

Mauritania's approximate 754-kilometer (470-mile) long Coastal Zone lies entirely on the Atlantic

Ocean. Its environment is humid with little rain and moderate temperatures. Mauritania's largest cities are in this region. Many people living in the coastal zone fish for a living.

Desertification is changing the environment in Mauritania and the lives of the Mauritians. Desertification is causing the desert to spread farther south every year, destroying farmland, and limiting the amount of farmland available for herders. People who want to continue farming and herding have been forced to move south to find usable land. Others have given up their traditional lifestyle to try to make a living in urban areas. Both the southern regions and the cities are becoming overcrowded. Desertification is expected to continue. The growing population competing for shrinking land space is a major issue facing Mauritania.

### **Understanding the culture...**

#### ***Adjust training schedule for the seasons.***

During the summer season, training stops between noon and 1600 due to the severe heat.



Nouakchott Street

## **Mauritanian Cities**

### **Nouakchott**

Nouakchott (pronounced new-wok-chot) is the capital and largest city in Mauritania. Most foreign visitors travel through Nouakchott because it is the only city with a major international airport.

When Nouakchott became the nation's capital, it was a small fishing town. It has grown tremendously. One in three Mauritians lives in Nouakchott. During the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, people from all over the country began traveling to Nouakchott in hopes of finding jobs. Not only were there not enough jobs, but the infrastructure could not support this type of growth.

Today the city has expanded well beyond the original city boundaries and lacks basic amenities like water in many areas. The population growth in Nouakchott is expected to continue, causing more problems.

The gap between the few wealthy and the many poor is highly visible in Nouakchott. Most of the city's million residents are housed in cramped living conditions, while the few wealthy live in enormous gated mansions. Nouakchott is a fairly safe city. Most of the crime is petty theft.

### **Nouadhibou**

Nouadhibou is the second largest city in Mauritania with approximately 90,000 residents. It is a port city located only a couple kilometers south of the Western Sahara. Mauritania's two major natural resources,

fish and iron ore, are both exported from the port in Nouadhibou, making it the country's economic center. Nouadhibou has a diverse population compared to most other Mauritanian cities. This is because people from all over Africa have tried to come to the city in hopes of making it to Europe, specifically the Canary Islands. There are landmines left over from the war over the Western Sahara in areas surrounding Nouadhibou. Demining efforts are underway but visitors should use caution.

## **Chinguetti**

Chinguetti is considered the most significant cultural site in Mauritania. The city dates back thousands of years and is known as a religious center, not just for Mauritania, but for all Sunni Muslims. Today, hundreds of Islamic texts dating back to the 11th century are located in Chinguetti.



Mosque in Chinguetti

## **Rosso**

Rosso is the largest city in southern Mauritania. It is located on the Senegal River. It is a predominately Afro-Mauritanian city and the people of Rosso have many links with the people of Senegal. In many ways Rosso is more similar to Senegal than to the rest of Mauritania. For example, the environment in Rosso is suitable for agriculture, much as it is in Senegal.

## **History**

Beginning early in Mauritania's history, there has been a division between the indigenous populations and the populations that originated from North Africa. The arrival of the North African populations began as early as the 3rd century with the Berbers, followed by the Arabs in the 8th century. When the Berbers and Arabs arrived the local populations were forced to move farther south or become subservient.

The southern portions of Mauritania were part of several powerful West African Empires (including the Ghana, Songhai, and Mali Empires) that held power between the 8th and 15th centuries. During that time, the northern regions were ruled by confederations and empires run by North African populations.

The different empires and confederations frequently fought each other and there were no defined borders. The only unifying factor among the many groups was Islam. Islam originally spread to Mauritania through the Trans-Saharan trading routes used to transport goods and slaves through the desert. This was a gradual process by which Islam was spread through interaction with Islamic traders. People generally fused portions of Islam with their indigenous beliefs.

The spread of Islam became more rapid in the 11th century with the arrival of the Almoravids who declared a holy war on the non-believers in the north. The Almoravids forced all those living under their rule to submit to a more orthodox form of Islam. At the height of the Almoravid rule, they controlled an area that stretched from Spain to Senegal.

After the fall of the Almoravid Empire, a group of Yemeni Arabs moved into northern Mauritania. They disrupted the trading routes that led to a decline in Mauritania's trading cities. They also clashed with the Berber population. The tensions between the Arabs and Berbers resulted in Mauritania's Thirty Years War (1644-1674). The Arabs won and the Berbers became their vassals. These two groups combined to what we now call the Moors. Over the next several centuries Mauritania experienced the arrival of several European powers including the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French. The French presence in Mauritania increased throughout the 19th century; by the early 20th century Mauritania was a French colony. The colonial administration relied on local leaders and Islamic leaders to handle local affairs, which allowed for the traditional social structure to remain intact during colonial rule. France provided very little development to Mauritania. Mauritania received its independence in 1960.



Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla and Moktar Ould Daddah



Demonstrators During the 2005 Coup Courtesy of AFP

Moktar Ould Daddah became the first Mauritanian Head of State. He had been educated in France and had just returned to Mauritania, thus missing much of the ongoing internal power struggles. Daddah's biggest challenge was to unite the many different groups in Mauritania. Most of the population was nomadic, with their own ethnic leadership. Daddah made Mauritania into a one-party state, outlawing any opposition parties. This increased tensions between the different ethnic groups. Things worsened when Hassaniyya Arabic was declared an official language and became a public school requirement. The southern black populations were especially resentful of the ruling party because they feared the White Moors were forcing their Arab influence onto the other indigenous populations. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s there were regular protests, which were harshly put down by the government.



President Ely Ould Mohamed Vall

In the mid 1970s Mauritania went to war with Morocco over the north region, now called the Western Sahara. Both countries claimed this territory and relations between them deteriorated over the next decade as a result. This war further divided Mauritania. Many of the Moors had ethnic links with the people in the Western Sahara, but even among them there was no clear consensus on what should be done. Some Moors wanted to annex the region into Mauritania while others wanted to give the region its independence. The black southern populations saw this as an Arab war and did not want an increase in the dominant Moor population.

During the war, Mauritania increased its military's size from 3,000 in 1976 to almost 17,000 by 1978. This increase hurt the already poor economy and threatened the civilian government. Despite its larger size, the military could not protect Mauritania from rebel attacks from the Western Sahara.

By the end of the 1970s, Mauritians were very unhappy, and blamed Daddah for the war and the poor economy. In 1978, Daddah was overthrown in a bloodless coup led by Colonel Mustapha Ould Salek and a group of junior officers. Salek tried to bring peace to Mauritania, but the military was not satisfied with his attempts and he was ousted by two army colonels 1 year after taking power. The pattern continued and 4 years later another coup put Maaouya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya in power.

Taya, another White Moor, ruled Mauritania from 1984 to 2005. During this time, Taya angered most groups in Mauritania. The Islamists were angry over the relationship Taya formed with Israel, the southerners were angry with his discrimination against the black populations, there were constant accusations of corruption, and fraudulent elections.

On the other hand, the country was no longer at war and the economy made some improvements under Taya. After numerous coup attempts, Taya was finally ousted by the military in 2005. Since then, the country has been run by a military council and elections are expected to be held in 2007.

Since Mauritania gained its independence, no leader has ever been able to build a strong sense of national

unity. The country is still hindered by its ethnic divisions. Most people in Mauritania have spent their entire lives under unpopular leaders who have been seen as doing little to help the average citizen. Most of the coups have been welcomed by the local populations. There is a sense of hope in Mauritania that the 2007 election could be the first free democratic election for the nation. Yet there is also suspicion due to the corruption of past leaders.

## Religion and Holidays

Almost all Mauritians are Sunni Muslims. Islam originally was spread to Mauritania by Muslim traders. It was later spread more forcefully through holy wars. Islam in Mauritania is often different than the Islam practiced in the Middle East. Many Mauritians practice Sufism. Sufism has no one originator or leader, and therefore, traditions vary among regions. Sufism is a mystical form of Islam and emphasizes direct knowledge and personal experiences with Allah. Sufis use a loose, allegorical interpretation of the Qu'ran. They often use a variety of practices to worship, such as singing, dancing, meditation, poetry, and saint worship.

Mauritanian Muslims also mix aspects of indigenous religions with their Islamic practices. For example, they may believe in spirits, magic, or charms.

An important aspect of Islam in Mauritania is the concept of brotherhood. Muslim brotherhoods began to spread into Mauritania in the 13th century, but became much more powerful and influential during the colonial era when the local population became increasingly resentful of the French administration.

Muslim brotherhoods unite Muslims from many different ethnicities. The brotherhoods are very hierarchal. Leaders are called sheiks or *marabout*. They are believed to have special powers, called baraka. The two most popular brotherhoods in Mauritania are Qadiriya and Tijaniya.

### Understanding the culture...

When training or traveling with Mauritians, respect their religion by allowing time to stop and pray.

Friday is a holy day for Muslims. Most places close around noon on Friday in Mauritania.



Mosque

Mauritania is an Islamic Republic and laws are based on Shari'a. All Mauritians must be Muslim, but

foreigners are free to practice other religions. Christian churches can be seen in the larger cities but it is illegal for non-Muslims to prophesy outside of the church. It is illegal for Mauritians to buy or sell alcohol (although it is legal for foreigners) and the law is often enforced.

Much like in the United States, the level of religious worship varies from person to person. Some people stop activities for the call to prayer while others do not. Mauritians tend to be more relaxed about their practices than many Muslims in the Middle East. They do not eat pork or drink alcohol, however, although officially banned, alcohol is available in cities. Gambling is very popular among the Moors. Women in Mauritania generally dress conservatively. Most Muslims are tolerant and moderate, but there has been an increase in more fundamentalist practices. There has been a recent growth in the number of Islamic NGOs, Qu'ranic schools, and foreign Islamic leaders preaching in Mauritania.

## National Holidays

1 May Labor Day  
25 May Africa  
28 November Independence Day

## Muslim Holidays

Four major Islamic holidays are observed in Mauritania.

(U) **Ramadan:** lasts a month. During this time Muslims fast during the day.

(U) **Eid al Fitr:** the culminating celebration of Ramadan; often lasts several days.

(U) **Tabaski:** also called Eid al Adha, honors Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son.

Muslim holidays are based on the lunar calendar and therefore the dates vary year to year. Below is a chart of the estimated dates of future holidays.

Year	Lunar New Year	Maoloeud	Beginning of Ramadan	Eid al Fitr	Tabaski
2007	1-20	3-31	9-13	10-13	12-20
2008	1-10	3-20	9-2	10-2	12-8
2009	1-7/ 12-27	3-9	8-22	9-21	11-28
2010	12-8	2-26	8-11	9-10	11-17

## Ethnicity

Ethnicity in Mauritania is very complex and often confusing for outsiders. It involves larger ethnic groups broken into sub-groups, tribes, and clans. People are very loyal to their ethnic groups and feel an obligation to look after each other, whether or not they actually know each other. When people move to a new city they usually seek out members from their ethnic groups to help find housing or jobs. Members of ethnic groups living outside the primary location of that ethnic group usually form councils, which, although informal, are responsible for resolving disputes or handling issues involving that specific group.



There are many different ethnic groups in Mauritania, but they can usually be tied into two larger groups: the Moors and the Afro-Mauritians. There is no accurate census data for Mauritania so it is difficult to determine the ethnic break down. When the French left it was estimated that two-thirds of the population were Moors and one-third were Afro-Mauritanian. With the Afro-Mauritanian population growing faster than the Moors, it is now likely that the Afro-Mauritians outnumber the Moors, which could become very problematic considering the Moors hold most of the power.



Afro-Mauritanian Fisherman

## **Moors**

The Moors (also written Maures or Maurs) are ancestors of the Arabs and Berbers who came from North Africa and the Middle East. There are two groups of Moors, White Moors and Black Moors. In general the White Moors have lighter skin while the Black Moors are darker, though there are exceptions. The division is one based on social class. The White Moors are considered to be of a higher social class than the Black Moors.

The division between the White Moors and Black Moors dates back hundreds of years and is still strong today. There is disagreement over where the Black Moors came from, but it is known that the White Moors enslaved them. Today the Black Moors, often referred to as Haratines, are the poorest ethnic group in Mauritania and some are still considered slaves. They are underrepresented in the military, government, and politics. The White Moors, however, are among the wealthiest and most powerful in the country.

The Moors are very proud of their history and closely identify with Arab culture. They feel a closer tie to North Africa than sub-Saharan Africa. The primary language for both White and Black Moors is Hassaniyya, which has its roots in Arabic.

Though the Black Moors had been, and in some cases still are, enslaved to the White Moors, their loyalty remains. During the conflicts between the White Moors and Afro-Mauritians, Black Moors generally took the side of the White Moors.

Historically the Moors have been nomadic, but over time many have become sedentary. The Moor population lives throughout Mauritania, but in general, both White and Black Moors have a larger presence in north Mauritania than in the south.

## **Afro-Mauritians**

The term Afro-Mauritanian is used to describe several black African ethnic groups, most of which live in southern Mauritania. The term *kewri* is also used to describe the Afro-Mauritanian population. The

largest Afro-Mauritanian ethnic groups are the Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof, and Bambara. They are located primarily along the southern border and Atlantic coast. Most of the Afro-Mauritanian ethnic groups are also located in neighboring countries.

During the colonial period, the French favored the Afro-Mauritanians, particularly the Pulaar, and gave them civil service and French language training. Soon after the French left, the White Moors took power. Today there are still tensions between the Afro-Mauritanians and White Moors.

The **Pulaar** (also called Fulani, Peul, or Fulfulde) are a group that extends throughout most of the Sahel countries. They speak the Pulaar language. In most areas the Pulaar are nomadic and known for being cattle herders. Although there are nomadic clans of Pulaar in Mauritania, the Pulaar also hold many government jobs. They are known as intellectuals in the government, but do not hold many positions of high power. The Pulaar and the White Moors view each other with suspicion and distrust. Much of the racial conflicts of 1989 were centered on the White Moors and Pulaar.

**The Soninke** is a group that extends throughout West Africa. In Mauritania, they live primarily in Guidimakha, Kaedi, and a neighborhood of Nouakchott known as Basara. They primarily engage in agriculture and trading. They speak the Soninke language.

**The Wolof** are primarily located in Senegal and The Gambia, but there is a small Wolof population in southern Mauritania. They live mostly along the Senegal River and are fishermen and merchants. They speak the Wolof language.

**The Bambara** are Mali's primary ethnic group and there are some communities that live in Mauritania. Most live near the Mali border. They speak the Bambara language and engage in agriculture and trading.

The different Afro-Mauritanian groups generally live and work peacefully with each other.

## Racial Tensions

There are racial tensions between the Moors and the Afro-Mauritanians. The conflict dates to the time the Moors moved into Mauritania and pushed the Afro-Mauritanians farther and farther south. More recent events have exacerbated the tensions.

Soon after Mauritania became a free nation, there was a push to formally adopt the Arab culture into the country. The Afro-Mauritanians, who are not of Arab descent, were offended by this and saw it as a threat to their culture. They also resented that the White Moors controlled most of the government.

### Understanding the culture...

Avoid conversations about ethnic divisions and animosities.

In the 1970s, severe droughts caused fierce competition for land for farming and herding. The farmers and herders along the Senegal River had always had a cooperative relationship, but in 1989 a dispute between Mauritanian herders and Senegalese farmers over land rights led to violence throughout both countries. Citizens were deported back to their country. While the leaders of Mauritania said they were deporting Senegalese, many felt that they were actually targeting Afro-Mauritanians in an attempt to rid the nation of this population. An estimated 75,000 Afro-Mauritanians were expelled from their homes.

Racial tensions worsened the following year when Mauritanian officials claimed they had discovered a coup plot. As a result they executed more than 500 Mauritanians, most of whom were Afro-

Mauritanians. Another 3,000 Afro-Mauritanians within the military and civil service were arrested without charge.

Throughout the 1990s, the governments of both Mauritania and Senegal made small concessions to the groups affected by the events of 1989. Many Mauritanians were able to return to their land, but the events are still fresh in their minds.

There has not been major racial violence since 1989, but racial tensions still exist. The White Moors still hold most government power and the other ethnic groups feel marginalized.

The events of 1989 are a major issue between the Moors and Afro-Mauritanians, particularly at the political level. Afro-Mauritanians want the events reinvestigated and retribution for the victims. Moors strongly oppose this.

## **Social Structure**

Mauritania has a rigid social hierarchy hundreds of years old. The different social classes are often called castes. The caste system is complicated and differs between ethnic groups and clans. Membership in a certain caste is based on one's occupation or the status of one's ancestors. Mauritanians can usually determine someone's class based on last name.

The social structure differs between the ethnic groups. Generally speaking, among the Moors there is a noble class, a vassal class, and a servile class. The noble class is made up of warriors and religious leaders. Prior to the colonial period these two groups worked closely together. The warriors provided protection to the religious leaders; in turn the religious leaders provided moral support to the soldiers.

Since the country gained its independence, these roles have changed and many of those who were once warriors have had to find other jobs. Even though many people in the upper-class are no longer warriors or religious leaders, the fact that their descendents were keeps them in a higher class.

Below the warriors and religious leaders are those who were once vassals to the upper class. They are basically the general working class of farmers and herders.

At the bottom of the social structure are the descendants of slaves, freed slaves, or servants.

Afro-Mauritanians have a similar social structure, but there are more castes and tend to be a little less hierarchical. For example, there are castes for woodworkers, blacksmiths, cloth makers, herders, farmers, fishers, warriors, and administrators. Both Moors and Afro-Mauritanians hold blacksmiths among the lowest class.

The rigidity of the social structure in Mauritania is problematic. In some cases, despite a person's hard work or type of education, he is still unable to achieve a higher class. Some fear that this will create a sense of hopelessness that will make people susceptible to extremist propaganda.

The social hierarchy is slowly beginning to fade as society becomes more exposed to other cultures and as more people are forced to take on different jobs to make a living. The divisions between classes are not often seen by outsiders and there is no government-sponsored discrimination against any one class.

## **Centers of Authority**

## **National**

The military is the national center of authority in Mauritania. They have been behind all major changes in the country. A military council has been in control of the country since the 2005 coup, but it is expected to hand over power to a civilian after the 2007 elections. Threatening to take power away from the military could threaten the stability of the nation.

## **Religious**

In the past, religious leaders had power equal to that of the warriors. Today the religious leadership still has influence, but not at the political level, although there are times when the political leadership will ask for help from religious leaders. Religious leaders, particularly leaders within brotherhoods, can be very influential at the spiritual level. Members of brotherhoods usually wear necklaces or pendants with pictures of a particular leader they follow.

## **Family**

Authority is split within a household. Men typically make decisions regarding money, but women, particularly Moors, hold more power than in most Muslim societies. They make many household decisions and have a certain say over their husband's actions, for example they have the right to deny him a second wife.

## **National Issues**

### **Education**

Prior to attaining independence, Mauritania had virtually no public education system. Although not up to Western standards, the public school system in Mauritania has made major progress over the past several decades. In 1960, almost the entire population was illiterate; now around 55 percent of the population is able to read. Both Arabic and French are taught in Mauritania's public schools.

Primary school is required for all Mauritanian children but this is rarely enforced. The lifestyle of nomadic children makes attending school difficult. Other families feel that formal education is not relevant to their lifestyles. It is common for children, particularly boys, to attend private Islamic schools.

### **Population Trends**

Mauritania has a small population in relation to its size. It has a population of around 3.1 million and is about the size of Texas and New Mexico combined. Mauritania has a high population growth rate of 2.88 percent (the U.S. rate is 0.91 percent). This will become problematic if the economy does not improve.

As desertification makes farming and herding harder, more people are moving to the cities. The cities and government are unable to handle this type of growth. The growth has led to large areas of slums surrounding cities and increased unemployment. This type of city growth is common in all of Africa, but Mauritania is one of the most severe cases. In 1969, the capital city of Nouakchott had a population of only 20,000 people, and today there are approximately 1 million.

The average age in Mauritania is 17. This means that a disproportionate percentage of the population is youth. This could soon lead to significant problems for the country when these children reach working

age and there are no jobs available. There are concerns that they will turn to criminal activity or extremism, or that Mauritania will lose its educated young to better opportunities abroad.

## **Economy**

Historically, Mauritania has had very limited resources, with approximately 90 percent of its land being desert. Although it remains one of the world's poorest countries, the government has strived to settle the population and make it more urbanized and market-oriented. This was difficult because, in 1960, the year Mauritania achieved its independence from France, 85 percent of the population was still nomadic.



Mauritanian Children

Half the population still depends on agriculture and livestock for a living, but recurrent droughts in the 1970s and 1980s forced many of the nomads and subsistence farmers into the cities. About 20 percent of the country's GDP still comes from agriculture, but the country's industry and service sectors are growing.

Mauritania has extensive iron ore deposits, which account for nearly 40 percent of total exports. The coastal waters are among the world's richest fishing grounds, and the country benefits from a fishing agreement with the European Union. As a result, Mauritania's main sources of foreign revenue have been from exporting fish and iron ore.

In the 21st century, Mauritania's hydrocarbon sector will become a major player in the economy. Since the discovery of offshore oil in 2001, there has been considerable interest in hydrocarbon exploration. Oil began to be pumped in 2006 and is expected to peak in 2010. The sale of oil has brought a lot of hope for the nation's economy. There is also a fear that the oil could cause problems for Mauritania. Money from the oil has not been well distributed. A small number of people, mostly White Moors, are growing wealthier, while others continue living in poverty, widening the gap between the few rich and the many poor.



Shanty Town in Nouakchott

In the past 15 years, Mauritania has reduced poverty from 56 percent to 46 percent and modernized its economy. Still, with most people subsisting on the land, Mauritians often live from season to season with little to spare. Droughts or locust plagues affect people throughout the country, often forcing them to rely on foreign aid.

## Health Care

Mauritania has an inadequate health care system. There is a lack of trained medical professionals and supplies. Most medical facilities are located in the cities; residents in rural areas rarely have access to medical attention. Medical care is slowly improving in Mauritania and there are several new clinics in the capital and other major cities, yet they are not up to Western standards.



AIDS Campaign Sign

HIV is not as much of a problem in Mauritania as in other African nations, but it is likely this could change soon. It is still a taboo subject and many people lack the basic knowledge about the disease. Mauritania also has several significant port cities where people from other countries come to work, and there is a fear that they could spread HIV into Mauritania.

## Slavery

There are often reports that slavery is still practiced in Mauritania. This is a complicated issue. Slavery had been practiced for hundreds of years in Mauritania. When the French colonized Mauritania they outlawed slavery, but did not enforce the policy. Slavery was again outlawed in 1981 when the constitution was rewritten.

Slavery is still not an issue that the government spends a lot of time or resources to eradicate. Many of those considered slaves are technically free to leave their masters. But since their ancestors have worked for the same family for generations, they own no land, no animals, have no education, and have no place to go. They are not paid for their work and receive usually only the basics to live. With the rigidity of the caste system it would be very difficult for them to leave their current situation.

In more rare cases, people are kept against their will and used as slaves, both as manual labor and as sex slaves. The government has done little to enforce anti-slavery laws and most of the pressure to take action comes from international organizations. Much of the population is nomadic and there are not enough security forces to monitor the country. The government has not charged anyone for owning slaves in the 25 years since it has been illegal.

### **Understanding the culture...**

Slavery is a controversial and sensitive topic.

Be aware of how it shaped Mauritania's culture, but avoid the topic among locals.

## **Customs and Behaviors**

### **Language**

The primary languages in Mauritania are Hassaniyya Arabic and French. Other common languages include Soninke, Pulaar, and Wolof. English is rarely spoken in Mauritania.

Both Hassaniyya Arabic and French are taught in schools so most people in Mauritania speak two or more languages. Hassaniyya Arabic is very close to classical Arabic, but may be difficult for those who speak other African dialects of Arabic to understand.

French is used more in business and in the government and Hassaniyya Arabic and ethnic languages are for daily use. Many of the Afro-Mauritanian groups have their own ethnic languages.

Language has become a tense and controversial issue in Mauritania. When the government made Hassaniyya the official language, the Afro-Mauritanians felt that it put them at a disadvantage for jobs because Hassaniyya is the first language for Moors, but not one typically used by Afro-Mauritanians. Many Afro-Mauritanians want French to be the primary language as a way to create equality among the ethnicities.

### **Greetings**

Greetings in Mauritania are very important. Whereas in the United States, a simple "hello" or handshake is sufficient, this is not the case in Mauritania. Greetings last much longer and take on a more personal tone. Greetings are not only for social situations; they are an important tradition in commercial situations as well (for example, before making a purchase in the market).

## **Understanding the culture...**

Very few people in Mauritania speak English.

- It is necessary to travel with a French speaker.
- When traveling outside of the cities it may be necessary to have someone who also speaks Hassaniyya.

## **Understanding the culture...**

Mauritanians have a small, close-knit society. Outsiders are often viewed with suspicion. It is, therefore, very important to earn their trust to successfully complete a mission or meeting. Being open, friendly, and patient during the initial greeting is the first step to building trust.

It is appropriate to shake hands with each person, always using the right hand. Handshakes are gentler than in the United States. Elders should be greeted first. A small bow of the head or a hand on one's heart is used to symbolize respect. To clasp someone's hands with both hands while handshaking is also a sign of respect. Small talk about family, health, weather, and news usually follows the greeting.

When a man is greeting a woman, take her lead, some more conservative women may find it inappropriate to shake hands with a male. If she does not offer her hand, bowing your head or placing your hand over your heart is appropriate.

When leaving, it is appropriate to say goodbye to each person individually with a shake of the hand.

## **Dining**



Dried Fish

It is customary for people to wash their hands with water before beginning a meal. Often the host will pour water over the guest's hands. Mauritanians typically eat from a communal bowl, always with the right hand. Each person eats the portion directly in front of him. It is also common for people to drink from one cup. People usually eat sitting on the floor.

Guests are encouraged to eat a lot. It is courteous to accept several servings, but acceptable to indicate when one is full. It is always polite to compliment the food and the chef.



Meals in Mauritania tend to be on a different schedule than in the United States. Since the climate can be so hot, everything starts later, including meals. Breakfast is served midmorning and lunch is in the afternoon (usually between 1400 - 1600). Dinner is served very late by U.S. standards, usually between 2000 and 2300.

## **Food**

A typical meal consists of a starch (rice, couscous, pasta) and a meat (goat, sheep, camel) served with a sauce. Fish is also common and often mashed into a ball or dried. In general, vegetables are more commonly used in the south. Potatoes, yams, and onions are popular and often cooked into a stew. Afro-Mauritanian dishes tend to be spicier than Moor dishes.

Tea is the most common drink, but milk (from goats or camels) is also popular.

## **Tea Ceremony**

The tea ceremony is very important in Mauritanian culture. Almost every meeting or gathering will start with tea. Tea is even served at informal times. The tea is sweet and made from mint leaves. It is served very hot in small shot glasses in several rounds. It is polite for visitors to accept tea.

### **Understanding the culture...**

#### **Do not refuse an invitation of tea from your counterpart.**

- Meals and tea ceremonies offer opportunities to improve your situational awareness, gain credibility, and strengthen friendships.

#### **Traditional food preparation and sanitation do not always meet Western cleanliness standards.**

- Visitors will likely eat in a traditional style with their hands from a communal bowl.
- Although Americans often want to wash their hands or use hand sanitizers, be discreet as to not offend the hygiene standards of others.

## **Clothing**

Mauritanians typically wear traditional clothing. Men wear wide pants, a tunic shirt, and long robes, called *boubous*. For Moor men the *boubous* are usually white or blue, while Afro-Mauritanians' *boubous* are a variety of colors. Women wear long pieces of fabric wrapped around their body called a *mehlafa*.

Women typically cover their hair but not their faces. Men wear turbans or embroidered skullcaps. Moor women often decorate their hands and feet with henna. Women in some Afro-Mauritanian groups have tattoos around their mouths. Afro-Mauritanian men from particular tribes have tribal scars on their faces. Jewelry is very important for both Moors and Afro-Mauritanians.

## **Gender Roles**

Men and women in Mauritania have very separate lives. Men spend their time with other men, and women interact with other women or children. It is not common for people to have close friendships with members of the opposite sex. Although women in Mauritania have more rights than other Muslim nations, visitors should still be cautious when interacting with the opposite sex because it may be seen as a romantic or sexual gesture.

## **Personal Contact**

It is common to see men walk arm in arm or hold hands. This is a sign of friendship, not homosexuality. Avoid backing away from physical contact because this can be seen as offensive.

It is considered offensive for people of the same sex to show public displays of intimacy. It is inappropriate for couples to hold hands, hug, or kiss in public, even if they are married.

### **Understanding the culture...**

At meetings or meals with both males and females attending, it is appropriate for men to sit together and women to sit together.

## **Family**

Family is significant to Mauritians. They have an obligation to help all relatives no matter how distant. Family obligations are more important than other responsibilities in Mauritania.

Mauritians do not see a division between nuclear families and extended families. Words used in the West, such as “brother,” “parents,” or “aunt” have different meanings in Mauritania. What Westerners call cousins, Mauritians call brothers and sisters. The term “parents” can be used to refer to anyone older, while “aunt” and “uncle” are often close family friends, not necessarily relatives. The term “cousin” is often used to describe anyone from the same clan. These interchangeable terms show how family is used in a much wider sense than in the West.

The honor of a family is very important and based on the actions of its members. Any inappropriate behavior of an individual can bring shame to the entire family. Families are especially protective of its female members.

There is a family hierarchy based on age. The oldest male and female in a family are usually considered the head of the household and treated with the most respect. The rest of the family is often much more formal in their presence. Children are expected to obey anyone older than them, even if it is a sibling or someone who is not a member of the family.

Polygamy is legal in Mauritania. It is only considered acceptable to have multiple wives if they are well provided for. With the poor economy in Mauritania, many men cannot afford to have more than one wife. Polygamy is more accepted and common among the Afro-Mauritanian populations than the Moors.

### **Understanding the culture...**

Be aware that family loyalty often comes above military obligations and can affect training missions. For example, military personnel may miss training for family issues.

## **Visiting**

Visiting family and friends is a key part of Mauritanian culture. It is perfectly acceptable to stop by someone's house unannounced. Hosts are expected to provide refreshments to guests.

## **Gift Giving**

It is appropriate to give a gift to someone when formally invited to their house or a family event. Something small, such as an item of food or tea leaves, is a suitable gift. After working with an individual for an extended period of time, it is appropriate to present a small gift upon departure. It would be a good idea to bring a number of small gifts with a U.S. or military logo to give on such occasions. It is likely that the recipient will then give a gift in return.

## **Collectivism**

Mauritanian society is more collective than many Western cultures. What is good for the group is considered more important than individual achievement. People are expected to make personal sacrifices to improve the situation of the group or community. Decisions are often made through a group consensus.

This collectivism also applies to possessions. Objects are often seen as belonging to a group and it is common to borrow or take items without asking.

## **Business Meetings**

Meetings in Mauritania are often different from those held in the West. The Western style is to get down to business. In Mauritania, it is as important to get to know the person with whom you will be working. Meetings begin with long greetings and small talk.

There is often no set agenda and business topics will be intertwined with non-business talk. It is acceptable to spend a significant amount of time talking about non-business matters.

Meetings in Mauritania often seem chaotic to Westerners. It is common for people to answer their phone or for several conversations to occur in one room. People regularly show up late and will interrupt the meeting to greet everyone.

## **Oral Communication**

Mauritania's culture depends on oral communication. Conversation and storytelling is an important pastime. As a result, news and gossip travels quickly through informal networks throughout the nation.

## **Attitudes**

### **Sense of Time**

Mauritanians have a more relaxed attitude toward time than Westerners. Few events follow a strict schedule and it is common for meetings to start late, although meetings with government and military personnel are often prompt.

### **Understanding the culture...**

The quick movement of information can have a negative effect on operational security because the local populations often know more about us and our movements than we believe they do (and the information is not always accurate).

## **Fate**

Whereas Westerners are often very focused on bettering their future, Mauritians don't always have this view. They tend to live more in the moment and believe their future is controlled by a higher power. They often don't take precautionary measures, believing instead that their future is sealed no matter what they do.

## **Saving Face**

Mauritians should not be embarrassed in public. They will often talk in an indirect manner or make agreements they cannot keep in order to save face or help someone else save face.

## **Attitudes Toward the United States**

Mauritians have mixed feelings toward the United States. On the one hand, they admire the United States for being hard working and a world power. On the other hand, many resent U.S. policy toward Arab nations. Mauritians are friendly toward visitors from the United States, but there have been protests against the U.S. involvement in Iraq.

# **Military Culture**

## **Military History**

Much of Mauritania military culture derives from its history during colonialism and early independence. During the French colonial period, Mauritians joined the African troops under French control. The African troops were originally separate from the regular French forces; but after World War II, Africans were eligible for most of the same benefits as French soldiers and were admitted into French military schools. The African soldiers were used primarily in overseas missions, rather than regional security.

In the 1950s and 1960s France encountered violent resistance from the Algerians. As a result, a deal was made with Mauritania that allowed French troops to be stationed in the country. In return, France would transfer the military installations to Mauritania and would also provide them with equipment and training. By 1960, Mauritania had a small, but well trained corps of experienced officers. By 1966, all French soldiers had left the country and France handed over the military installations to Mauritania.

When the French troops left, Mauritania's forces numbered only 1,000. The government planned to keep it small to prevent a military coup. During the war in the Western Sahara in the 1970s, it was necessary to increase the military's size. Mauritania experienced a period of rapid growth during the 1970s, going from only 3,000 troops in 1976 to 17,000 in 1978.

Troop morale in the 1970s and 1980s was low. The war was unpopular and a series of coup attempts led to many arrests and executions of military members. Regardless, the military had more volunteers than it could use. This was largely because the economy was so poor and the military was a well paying job.

Since 1960, Mauritania's military was largely focused on the war in the Western Sahara. In 1979, after

the war ended, attention turned to internal matters.

## **Military Doctrine**

In its early years as an independent nation, Mauritania followed Soviet doctrine. It was also influenced by Libya and Iraq. Mauritania supported Iraq during the first Gulf War. Soon after Iraq's defeat, Mauritania began to build stronger relationships with Western powers, such as France and the United States. Mauritania uses a Western-style doctrine.

## **Military Concerns**

Today, the military's mission is to provide internal security. With only approximately 16,000 troops, the Mauritania military is understaffed and unable to monitor the country or its borders. Its effectiveness is also hindered by the poor economy. Equipment is often obsolete and there is no regular maintenance performed. The infrastructure of military facilities is poor. Barracks often lack the basic amenities. These factors can negatively impact morale.

The Mauritania military has similar ethnic problems as seen in the civilian population. Most officers tend to be White Moors. The Afro-Mauritians often feel discriminated against and have difficulty advancing within the military. This causes a lot of resentment between ethnicities and ranks.



Mauritanian Soldiers Courtesy of AFP

The Mauritania military experienced a historical low point in 1998. Then-president Maaouya Taya claimed he uncovered a coup plot. Almost all the suspects were Afro-Mauritians, specifically of the Pulaar ethnic group. After severe purges, approximately 500 members of the military were executed. Afro-Mauritians were outraged and declared that this was an extreme attempt to rid the military of Afro-Mauritians. Years later, small concessions were made to some of the families affected by the killings. Still, the government never admitted to any wrongdoing and this event has led to a deep seeded resentment and suspicion of the White Moors by the Afro-Mauritians in the military.

## **Training**

The United States has trained a small group of Mauritians under the TSCTI. This training was suspended after the coup. Although a few soldiers have trained in foreign schools, the military lacks

common overall training. U.S. trainers noted that individuals trained in different tactics at different schools, often had difficulty working together.

The average enlisted soldier in the Mauritanian military is in his early 20s. Many have not completed their high school education and literacy rates in the military are estimated to be around 70 percent. Hassaniyya Arabic is the primary language used by the military. French is also used although many Mauritanian soldiers do not speak French. There is a major divide between the officers and enlisted. The two groups rarely interact. By Western military standards the enlisted are often treated very poorly by the officers.

## **Military Politics**

The Mauritanian military has always been involved in politics. Almost every major political change in Mauritania's history as an independent nation has involved military action. The military has ousted leaders and held power for several periods during Mauritania's history. A military council is currently ruling the country but is set to hold elections in 2007. There had been questions as to whether the military would actually hand over power to the elected officials. The military in many ways is seen as protecting the state. Its last coup was welcomed by the local population. By handing over power to an elected civilian, the military will gain more respect from Mauritians.

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