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Colonizing the Mahadra: Language, Identity, and Power in Mauritania Under French Control

Erin Pettigrew

Abstract

With its ancient cities renowned for their private libraries filled with manuscripts with content reflecting the history of the trans-Saharan realm, the territory once known as *Bilad al-Shinqit*, now Mauritania, was home to a rich history of scholarly tradition. As contact between the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) officers and the people of Mauritania increased, the French colonial administration continually defined and redefined the ways in which it would approach education as a means of inculcating the population with a pro-colonial discourse. This paper examines how the French colonial education system altered the traditional social framework in the region the French defined as *Mauritania* by deepening and institutionalizing ethnic divisions and disrupting long-established systems of power. The AOF first accommodated the Arabic language and its important place in Mauritanian religious and academic culture but later demoted it as French was enforced as the language of instruction. Starting with educational and political policy reforms in the 1940s, Mauritanian leaders struggled to define their educational agenda and the country in a way that appeased the diverse voices of the country's euphony.

Introduction

With its ancient cities renowned for their private libraries filled with manuscripts with content reflecting the cultural, symbolic, and economic histories of the trans-Saharan realm, the territory once known as *Bilad al-Shinqit*, now Mauritania, was home to a rich history of scholarly tradition.¹ Most children initially attended some type of formalized schooling in the religious-based *kuttab*², or Qur'anic schools, established in even the smallest encampment. In the only territory where nomads constituted the majority of the population, other students pursued higher education of Islamic learning, traveling to different towns or territories to study with specific teachers and gathering certificates attesting to their intellectual accomplishments along the way. As contact between the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) officers and the people of Mauritania increased, the French colonial administration continually defined and redefined the ways in which it would approach education as a means of inculcating the population with a pro-colonial discourse. Essentially applying a racist Muslim policy to a multicultural territory, colonial bureaucrats succeeded in dividing the population into two distinct categories: the *Bidan*, or "Moors", and the "*Noirs*", or Wolof, Soninké, and Halpulaar.³

This paper examines how the French colonial education system altered the traditional social framework in the region the French defined as *Mauritania* by deepening and institutionalizing ethnic divisions and disrupting long-established systems of power. In the first part of the survey, I set the context by giving an overview of the pre-colonial history of the territory with its migrations and gradual adoption of Islam. I will

explore the formation of social and ethnic divisions and the place of Qur'anic education in the territory during this period. I describe the traditional Islamic education that existed before colonization. From this historical perspective, I then show how the AOF administration approached an eventual political and military conquest of the territory. I look at what the administration hoped to accomplish through education in the region and how they pursued these goals. Then, I turn to personal narratives, poetry, and historiography to show how Mauritians themselves resisted or accommodated French attempts to both organize and modify the Qur'anic education system. Mauritania shaped the ways in which the AOF organized its education curriculae in the territory- first accommodating the Arabic language and its important place in Mauritanian religious and academic culture, later demoting it as French was enforced as the language of instruction. French policies changed as colonial objectives shifted post-World War Two. I argue that an effect of the colonial school system was to allow those from slave lineages and Wolof, Soninké, or Halpulaar ethnic groups to gain access to positions of power to which they might not have had access before. Finally, in conclusion, I reflect upon the last two decades of colonial rule with its successive reforms, failures, successes, and uncertainties. Starting with reforms in the 1940s preferring French over Arabic, Mauritanian leaders struggled to define their educational agenda and their country in a way that appeased the diverse voices of the country's euphony.

The Origins of the Kuttab

Mauritania has long been divided ideologically

into *Trab al-Sudan*, or the Wolof, Soninké, and Halpulaar, sedentary south, and *Trab al-Bidan*, the Saharan, nomadic, "White" north. From the fifth to sixteenth centuries, the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires⁴ extended as far north as southern Algeria. However, as transport by camel increased in the eighth and ninth centuries, Berber groups progressively migrated south from the Maghreb, pushing the *Bafours*, or Black hunters, farmers, and fishermen, south. An aggressive rivalry resulted from the continued expansion of nomadic Berbers, or *Sanhadja* and *Znaga* Amazigh groups, into the regions of the sedentary *Bafour*, who begrudgingly migrated toward the Senegal River.⁵ Between the seventh and eighth centuries, Arab⁶ tribes coming across North Africa began the slow process of Arabization as they encountered the *Sanhadja* in the North and the *Bafour* further South. From this point onward, these multiple groups, the Arabs, *Sanhadja*, and *Bafour*, were in permanent contact with each other as trans-Saharan trade in gold, ivory, slaves, cotton, salt, horses, dates, and other goods intensified.

Qur'anic education in Mauritania, as it is known today, originates when Ibn Yasin founded the first *ribat*, or Islamic school, in Morocco in the eleventh-century.⁷ Those that studied the Maliki religious law tradition taught by Ibn Yasin and became teachers in their own right were known as *murabit* and assumed the responsibility of spreading their faith and teachings to the people of the Western Sahara.⁸ In the meantime, social divisions materialized. Out of what had been separate *Sanhadja* and Arab groups, the *Bidan* ethnic group emerged and divided along vocational lines.⁹ A scholarly lineage class developed and took shape as the *Zwaya* who participated in cattle-breeding, commerce, teaching, and, most importantly for this paper, educational, and religious

activities.¹⁰ The *Banu Hassan*, a warrior lineage from the North, forced its way and language into the region.¹¹ Hassaniya, the language of the *Banu Hassan*, generally unified the aforementioned groups. The *Banu Hassan* sold its protective strength to a scholarly lineage, the *Zwaya*, so that *Zwaya* could trade and caravan freely. Hierarchically below the *Hassan* and *Zwaya* were the *Znaga*, who acted as their tributaries to the *Hassan*. To the south, Soninké, Halpulaar, and Wolof populations were among the first to adopt Islam, living pastoral and sedentary lives along the Senegal River with the Halpulaar *Torobés* as their Muslim defenders and scholars.

By the time the Portuguese landed on Arguin, an island off the coast of Mauritania, in 1445, the vast majority of the people in the region were devout Muslims following Maliki tradition and adhering to different Muslim brotherhoods.¹² Muslim scholars from the *Zwaya* lineage traveled far in search of more knowledge, bringing back books and new ideas from other North African learning centers and the Middle East.

Two kinds of *madrasa* developed, one fixed in towns and cities such as Wadan, Shinqit, Walata, Tijikja, Atar, and Tishit that had become home bases and destinations for Muslim scholars and another that developed as a nomadic institution. Both kinds were the second of a three-tiered formalized educational system that began in the home. A fascinating description of this domestic education appears in *Al-Wasit*, one of the first works written by a Mauritanian on the history of Mauritania. The author, Sidi Ahmed ibn Alamin (1863-1913), was born into a *Zwaya* family in the Trarza city of Mederdra. In his book, he describes how mothers, aunts, and grandmothers initiated their children into religious education in the home.¹³

Mothers taught their children to count to ten, how to read and write the letters of the alphabet, and the order of the orthodox khalifas and genealogy of the Prophet, Mohammed. Both boys and girls learned the *sira al-nabi*, or Prophet's life, and, around the age of four, the first *surah* of the Qur'an.¹⁴ When not learning about the Prophet, his companions, or his life and teachings, children were socialized to life in their family, clan, village, and region. Other than learning the proper times and way to pray, children were also taught social rules and etiquette such as avoiding looking older people in the eyes, speaking as little as possible, not talking about *matnal'ayn* (improper topics), and abstaining from smoking in front of anyone older than oneself.¹⁵

Depending on the region,¹⁶ boys left the maternally-dominated educational realm around the age of seven for the *kuttab*. Studying under one teacher, or *murabit*, boys such as ibn Alamin studied monotheism, theology, and reasoned faith, religious sciences, and the Qur'an. They studied grammar and played games called *az-zarg* to practice what they learned. In a region with rare access to paper and wood, students worked incredibly hard to memorize the entire body of the Qur'an and the *Hadith*, or life of the Prophet.

Moktar Ould Daddah, the first president of Mauritania, gave a detailed description of his own Qur'anic education from the early 1930s. Even though his experience took place during colonialism, it is reflective of much older methods of teaching and learning originating in the pre-colonial period. He explained that he followed his teacher around as they herded camel. As they walked in the desert, a student would recite his lesson to his teacher who would listen, correct, and give explanations or commentary on what the student

recited.¹⁸ In this way, a religious education could take place in both urban and rural spaces, essential when the majority of the region's inhabitants were nomadic or semi-sedentary. Whether climbing sand dunes or sitting in a *murabit's* home, students recited the same Qur'an and studied the same *tawhid*, or religious practices. Most students stopped their education somewhere along this path and, by late adolescence, entered the world of adults where they focused on marriage, work, and civic life.

After the Kuttab: the Mahadra system

There were those, however, who continued past the *kuttab* system to the higher echelons of Islamic learning, the *mahadra*, primarily reserved for the intellectual elite among the *Zwaya*. Before joining a *mahadra* of their choice, students first had to memorize and recite the Qur'an in its entirety and show that they acquired the fundamentals of Islamic knowledge. Once they found a *murabit* under whom they wanted to study, students left home to follow this teacher for as many years deemed necessary. Not only were students expected to feed themselves while under this system of intense tutelage, but custom demanded that they bring livestock as a payment for their studies with the *murabit*. According to ibn Alamin, students normally brought their teacher one or two camels or cows depending on what the teacher already owned¹⁹. Students could pool the livestock and share the milk produced by the cows, camels, or goats. Mohktar Ould Hamidoun writes that his father gave sixty sheep in payment for his son's education, symbolic of the sixty *h'izb*, or groups of text, in the Qur'an that his son would learn.²⁰ Teachers depended on their students to act as assistants in domestic and scholarly chores.

In exchange for students' contributions, teachers imparted knowledge on an impressive array of subjects to their students, who continued their studies of the Qur'an but added *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, studies on Sufism, ethics, language, literature, history, grammar, algebra, theology, and logic.²¹ Most scholars memorized entire books by heart, reciting the contents to their students. If they were so lucky to have books, teachers read from them aloud while students listened, copied passages, and received explanations about the readings. Pupils would also read texts in front of their teacher and fellow students, present texts in groups, and discuss certain passages at length.²² Upon memorizing and comprehending increasingly difficult texts, students received an *ijaza*, or certificate, marking their accomplishment and ability to teach others what they learned to that point.

Worthy of note is the freedom a student acquired to choose his own intellectual path. A pupil chose his own teacher, the books he wanted to read, and the length of his studies. If he earned an *ijaza* and wanted to stop tutelage under a *murabit*, he was free to do so and even establish his own school. The example of ibn Alamin serves to illustrate the extraordinary heights to which Mauritanian scholars reached in pursuit of knowledge. Excelling in school and studying in several *mahadra*, ibn Alamin eventually studied at the most prestigious *mahadra* in the region in Boutilimit. Never marrying, he stayed in school for thirty years, traveling to Mecca, Turkey, Egypt, and Russia to study with other scholars and visit famous Islamic libraries, ultimately dying in Egypt after having written *Al-Wasit*, an anthology of poetry and biographies of important religious and political figures in Mauritania.²³

Another illustrious figure, Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabir (1775-1868), studied under the *murabit*, Sidi Mohammed al-Bakkay, for fifteen years near Timbuktu, serving as both secretary and counselor to his teacher. There are many reasons that Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabir would have chosen Sidi Mohammed al-Bakkay as his teacher but an initial reason may have been that al-Bakkay was a follower of the Qadiriyya *tariqa*, or religious brotherhood.²⁴ Sheikh Sidiyya al-Kabir, as a member of the Qadiriyya, would be expected to study under a Qadiriyya teacher versed in the religious rituals and litany of prayers practiced by the brotherhood. Sheikh Sidiyya al-Kabir, for example, might identify himself as Muslim, then Sufi, then Qadiriyya. Hence, *mahadras* in Mauritania all fell under the larger banner of Sufism but were further divided according to the Sufi orders in the territory. Leaving his mother's tutelage at the young age of thirteen, Sheikh Sidiyya al-Kabir continued his formal studies under various teachers for the next thirty-six years in what are now Mali, Mauritania, and Morocco.²⁵ In the years directly preceding the colonial incursion, Sidiyya al-Kabir filled a library in Boutilimit with all of the books he collected during his journeys.²⁶

The pervasive presence of learning at all levels in Mauritania is unique compared to other Islamic regions. Qur'anic schools in many other parts of the Maghreb and the Middle East were subsidized by ruling powers or *al-waqf*, religious endowments from individuals. The financial support maintained teachers' salaries, stipends for students, and the general care of the school. Normally considered an urban institution, these schools housed students and were frequently attached to mosques.²⁷ However, in Mauritania, the *kuttab* and *mahadra* systems were primarily a rural experience. Often called *l'école*

à dos de chameau,²⁸ Islamic education among rural populations knew no boundaries to its access. Whether sitting under a tent in the middle of the desert or herding cattle in the Sahel, students sought knowledge from their teachers, contributing to a singular tradition of learning. As Chouki El Hamel explains,

The student was self-motivated and the society made him feel that he was independent and responsible for his intellectual life and taught him that diligence in his studies was the symbol of his maturity, consciousness, and access to power in Moorish society.²⁹

The Colonial Encounter and Influence

Nearly two centuries after the French settled Saint-Louis, Senegal as a trade base³⁰ and began expanding their realm of commercial and political influence, *Bidan* tribes north of the Senegal River threatened to restrict French access to a highly prized product, gum Arabic. Under Louis Faidherbe (1818-1889), the French established themselves as a liaison between the *Bidan* and the Walo kingdom along the river who controlled the trade in gum Arabic. This strategic maneuvering meant that the French ensured themselves a place in trade relations. As the *métropole* politically and economically invested itself in colonization, French traders gradually stopped all pretense of fair commercial exchange with Senegalo-Mauritanian populations and moved to assume direct military control over the region. Faidherbe was convinced that it was in the colonial power's best interest to keep the *Bidan* emirates' influence north of the Senegal River and he worked to convince them of the same philosophy.³¹

Despite the fact that most of Mauritania offered very little in the way of natural resources and economic interest, colonial objectives gradually expanded from the material to the cultural. The realm of education became a central focus because of its role in cultural socialization.

Influenced by the colonial experience in Algeria, the West African colonial administration approached its subjects following the directives from officers trained in Algeria. Defining Islam as "a power of inertia, hostile to Western civilization... immutable and unable to evolve,"³² the *politique musulmane* called for a tutelage, whether forced or not, "to provide [Muslims] with the order they themselves are incapable of instituting."³³ Muslim policy called for detailed and accurate knowledge of Islam and its followers.³⁴ Once this was accomplished, the colonial administrative officers had the responsibility to assure Muslim subjects that France would protect the aspects of Islam it found "reasonable" and that it considered integral to Muslims' "*mentalité*."³⁵ Outspoken Orientalists such as Paul Marty and Xavier Coppolani, who both spent considerable time in Algeria and came to the West African administration speaking and writing fluent Arabic, perhaps most shaped the Muslim policies of the colonial power. An administrator and a military leader respectively, they arrived in West Africa bearing notions of a racial, religious divide that placed *l'islam maure* above that of *l'islam noir*.

French Muslim policy thus treated *Maure* and *Noir* populations as different entities. Because the *Bidan* were the more "natural" Muslims, the administration viewed them as less penetrable and less able to be converted to pro-French sentiment. The colonial power defined the *Noirs* as only very recently and superficially converted to Islam. As such, the Halpulaar, Soninké,

and Wolof were the targets of much earlier attempts at enculturation through a formalized, colonial education system.

When the colonial administration applied such religious theories to policy, they found that their subjects were drawn in greater numbers than before to Islam. Nonetheless, administrators continued to believe that Muslim subjects would "hate" the colonizer less once they acquired enough French culture and access to the West.³⁶ With the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth-century, French policy in Mauritania turned more forceful and direct. Resolute in its desire for control of the region, the colonial administration planned to infiltrate Mauritanian land and minds.

From 1901 to 1905, Coppolani led a "peaceful penetration" north of the Senegal River. Allied with the powerful religious leader and Sheikh Sidiyya al-Kabir's grandson, Sheikh Sidiyya Baba, Coppolani confronted resistance fighters in the north of the country. This military campaign continued after Coppolani's death (1905), labeled subsequently "military pacification" and then "police operation"³⁷, ending with the signing of the Fort Trinquet treaty in 1934 when French forces finally completed an administrative and military campaign for control over a territory they had named *Mauritania*.³⁸ In most of West Africa, the 1870s through the 1890s were a time of aggressive French colonial conquest, reaching its apogee in 1895 with the establishment of the formal organization of the AOF territories under the control of the office of *gouverneur général*. What makes Mauritania's situation unique, however, is that parts of the territory successfully resisted French control until the 1930s when the territory ultimately became a colony. French political, cultural, and physical presence was

limited in the region for primarily two reasons: 1) Intense local opposition from emirates, the northern *Hassan* warrior groups, and portions of the general population made the French wary of venturing too far into the daily lives of Mauritians and 2) the region offered very little of economic interest to the *métropole*. France claimed Mauritania without investing itself in this ownership as it had in other colonies, where the *mission civilisatrice* and *mise en valeur* campaigns encouraged heavy investment in infrastructure building, education, and a centralized bureaucratic system.³⁹

During this same time period, the administration was also aggressively pursuing a campaign to control education in the region. Governor Jules-Gaston Henri Carde wrote that, "The penetration of all races through the school is an invaluable part of our civilizing work. In these circumstances, school plays a political role that is at least as important as its educational role..."⁴⁰ School, in the administration's eyes, became a place not only for the development of technical skills but also a stage for a cultural and linguistic indoctrination that would benefit colonial interests.

Ever since the first incursions into the Mauritanian territory, the sons of local chiefs had already been sent to the *Ecole des Fils des Chefs* in Saint-Louis, where it was hoped that the new generation of political and religious leaders would identify with French civilization and claim loyalty to the colonial endeavor. However, with growing resistance to colonial incursions and control, the AOF initiated projects to construct schools in regional capitals. The goals of the colonial education system were three-fold: to train students to fill positions in the colonial bureaucracy, spread the use of French, and teach students about the *métropole* while allowing

the population to keep most of its traditions and religious practices.

At the same time the colonial administration constructed its first school in Kaédi in 1905, there were an estimated eight hundred *kuttabs*, forty-five of which were *mahadras*, in Mauritanian territory.⁴¹ However, these “native” schools failed to introduce the French language and French culture to their students. Perhaps extolling anti-French rhetoric and presumably inadequate in their content, these *mahadras* were deemed insufficient and divergent to the colonial needs. The previously existing religious learning centers remained but plans were made to introduce schools based on French models of education. These new schools would “civilize” by providing a French model of style, attitude, values and organization. Then, students so groomed would be selected to serve the administration, having been French-influenced or “franco-cized”. As Governor Carde explains, “Circumstances have put civilized France into contact with a less evolved race and she (France) is responsible for directing (this race) on the path of progress.”⁴² A second school was built not long afterward in the capital of the Brakna region, Boghé (1912), with the same goals in mind.

It is important to note, however, that both of these schools were home to a majority Halpulaar, not *Bidan*, population. Because the French deemed *Islam noir* more penetrable than *Islam maure* or *blanc*, the administration focused its energies on educating the black populations instead of the *Bidan*, who would have their religious practices and beliefs left alone, as long as they did not conflict with French interests. As Governor Carde explained once again,

as an attentive mother guides the first hesitant steps of her child, France should let the black race walk next to her guiding it, supporting its efforts without aspiring to put [the black race] at her level faster than normal social evolution calls for...⁴³

Hence, the French administration viewed itself as a maternal figure responsible for directing its children in a suitable direction through colonial-controlled education.

As the Halpulaar, Soninké, and Wolof populations along the Senegal River came into more frequent contact with the colonial power through education and because of geographic proximity to the center of colonial power in Senegal, the colonial administration tentatively dealt with the *Bidan* populations. The nature of crossing Saharan regions made colonial penetration difficult but French policy makers were also hesitant to force the nomads to do anything, lest they violently resist and launch a new *jihadist* movement.⁴⁴ Paradoxically, as the French claimed to respect Islam, Islamic education, and *Bidan* culture, official policy outlawed the use of Arabic in 1911 in every realm, save that of religion. Muslim policy was full of contradictions. Sometimes outwardly favorable toward Islam, more often hostile, frequently changing, and unreliable,⁴⁵ French Muslim policies increasingly restricted Islamic practices even as they assumed the role of a secular *Awqaf*, founding and subsidizing *mahadras* in more regional capitals. In 1913, the governor built a *mahadra* in Boutilimit with the support of the Sidiyya family⁴⁶ and subsequently in Mederdra (1920), Atar (1937), Wadan, Tidjikja, Tishit, and Kiffa (1940).

Whereas in the southern schools amidst Halpulaar,

Wolof, or Soninké populations, French was the language of instruction and class subjects tended toward the secular⁴⁷ and were modeled after other schools in West Africa, the colonial *mahadras* in *Bidan*-dominated regions remained Islamic in nature. In Boutilimit, for example, the school week included twelve hours of Arabic, thirteen of French, and many classes pertaining to Islamic knowledge. Instead of teachers coming as *coopérants* from France as they did in most West African schools, teachers in *mahadras* were initially recruited from Algeria. Thinking that students would relate more to fellow *arabes*, as the French classified them, who presumably had also studied the same religious texts as they, education administrators preferred hiring Algerian teachers and directors over Halpulaar, Wolof, or Soninké. The ultimate objectives of these *mahadras* were to create centers that attracted *Bidan* populations and instilled pro-French sentiments in the minds of children groomed to work for the colonial administration.⁴⁸

With school seen by the French as a ground for a moral conquest, more efforts were directed toward increasing enrollment of children and assuring parents of the legitimacy of the colonial *mahadra* effort. Parents and communities viewed the new schools with skepticism, fearing that the schools were places where students would be converted away from Islam and toward Christianity. As the following poem illustrates, some parents rigorously opposed sending their sons to French schools:

O, scholars of the country, how
To respond to he who asks
The status of the law just imposed
In regard to putting our young

Children in French schools?

(...)

Mohammed Lemine ibn Mohammed Mawlud responds:

Learning the Infidel's writing is authorized

For adults, according to the scholars,

But they forbid that they (adults) send their child

To an unbeliever so that he be sent to school.

The sin, if the child becomes Christian,

Is that of the father who put his son there.

Opinions differ on the rule

For teaching our alphabet to the Infidel.⁴⁹

Parents sent their children first to their own Qur'anic schools before sending them to the French schools. They hoped that, with a good Qur'anic education, their children would not be easily converted.⁵⁰

Colonial officers on the ground noticed that many of the *Bidan* resisted sending their children to school. One officer noted in 1934, "I do not think that we can count on filling these jobs with the *medersas* youth. They do not want to participate except to become subordinate officers..."⁵¹ He continues that the populations near the River were more open-minded toward the colonial path.⁵² When the *Bidan* refrained from sending their children to the *mahadras* system, lower caste *Bidan* or *Hartani*⁵³ and Wolof, Soninké, and Halpulaar populations filled their spot on the school benches, gaining access to colonial bureaucratic positions. French officers even went so far as to approach *Bidan* populations, telling them that if they continued to prevent their children from attending French *mahadras*, their children would be marginalized and those of the *Noirs* elevated. The *Bidan* would then lose their traditionally high place in the societal hierarchy.

Changing Perceptions of Education

As some parents and communities rejected the colonial education establishment, others saw that these schools provided a key to accessing the colonial framework. If a child succeeded in the colonial *mahadra* system, he had a chance to work for the administration, earning good, reliable pay, and influential power in the name of his family and larger community. Eventually, the administration limited the number of hours of Arabic, pushing for full-French school curriculae and an expansion in the number of secular primary and secondary schools. Because the French schools cost parents virtually nothing when compared to the traditional *mahadra* system and because of the new opportunities possible in the colonial schools, the traditional *mahadras* emptied.

The first child to ever receive his baccalauréat in 1951 from the French school system, Moktar Ould Daddah was a product of this system. In an auspicious year, 1924, Ould Daddah's father enrolled his son for the first time in the colonial *madrasa* in Boutilimit. Ould Daddah writes, "My father, who had an exceptionally open spirit for his age, traditional formation and religious milieu, understood very early the use of this school and its belonging to Islam..."⁵⁴ Even though his mother's family opposed this education but that his father reassured them, promising that the colonial *mahadra* would provide an excellent Qur'anic education. In a society where reputations were often based on such attributes as lineage descent, level of Islamic learning, and adherence to a specific brotherhood, Ould Daddah had already earned a significant amount of social capital. However, his father foresaw a change in the way individuals under colonial rule were to gain access to more social capital. This path

included a French-based education which opened doors to private enterprise and the civil service in the colonial bureaucracy.

Ould Daddah's school was directed by bilingual Algerian teachers but staffed by both *Bidans*, who taught Arabic and the subjects pertaining to religion and Arabic literature, and Senegalese teachers who taught French and more secular subjects. Ould Daddah finished his studies at the *mahadra* in Boutilimit in 1939 and considered his choices for his future. He could return to traditional life, continue studying Islam, and become an *ulema*; however, he worried about his capacity to earn a living as a religious leader. He could enter the colonial administration, which would be an easy and profitable path. Finally, he chose a third option: continuing his studies in Saint-Louis and possibly pursuing higher education near Dakar. Obviously, Ould Daddah benefited from the colonial education as he later studied in France and finally became the first president of a newly independent nation (1960), but his descriptions of the *mahadra* system support the argument that the colonial education system altered the ways in which Mauritians could access power. Many in the younger generations of scholarly lineages no longer viewed Islamic learning as the sole tool for economic and cultural success. Study of the Qur'an did not lose its value but Mauritians adapted as the French added other criteria through which power was accessed.

Conclusion: Educational Reform in the Last Years of Colonialism

Over the last two decades of colonial rule, the French West African administration standardized its approach to education and intensified its involvement

in Mauritania. By 1940, most Mauritanian classes were conducted solely in French and, in 1949, education in the colonial system became obligatory if one lived in a regional capital. The preference shown to chiefs' sons was then considered undemocratic and the French moved to officially open the doors of French education to all ethnic groups and castes. At the same time, the administration introduced a new project to extend education to nomadic populations through camp schools that traveled with the nomads. By introducing education to nomadic societies through their young children, the colonial regime anticipated that this initial contact would somewhat reassure these communities of the harmlessness of colonial education. The best students from these nomadic schools would attend a preparatory school in a regional center. Despite what the French thought would be an appealing, less expensive option for nomadic families, they found it difficult to ensure the cooperation of religious leaders. As one French school director writes, "...we cannot count on the collaboration of religious heads. Studies, exercises in piety, agricultural work, ties to caravans...prevent students from showing interest in the French language. Despite some promises, no 'marabout' decided to open his doors to the French schools."⁵⁵ Even though the expected path to economic and social success often depended upon participation in the colonial school system, large segments of the Mauritanian population were still loathe to send their children to French schools.

The last educational goals of the colonial administration in the remaining years were to increase enrollment and centralize the system with a uniform curriculae throughout the territory. The administration continued efforts to reinforce positive sentiments toward

the soon-to-be ex-colonial power and to spread the use of French at the administrative and cultural level. At the same time, however, students' hours studying Arabic were increased to six hours a week to the detriment of French in the classroom. In 1952, the French instituted a reform introducing an Arabic exam as part of the standardized education syllabus. Southern elites feared that this initial arabization of the education system would limit their access to positions of power and they aggressively protested the change over the next two years.⁵⁶

Confusing matters even further, the administration subsidized the construction of an Islamic Studies Institute in 1953 in Boutilimit. Watching as families sent their sons to study abroad in Islamic centers of higher learning in Tunisia and Egypt, colonial officers feared a growth in Islamic nationalism and the possibility of terrorism on Mauritanian soil. Building Mauritania's own center of Islamic learning might prevent students from being indoctrinated with anti-Western notions in schools that the administration did not control. The colonial administration anticipated the building of the Institute would placate the population and earn the French credit as a Muslim power.

When independence arrived in 1960 for the Islamic Republic of Mauritania with Moktar Ould Daddah as its president, the formal, government-subsidized education system was incredibly limited in scope and strength. Without a university in the country and very few high schools, students' prospects at receiving more than an elementary-grade education were negligible. Further complicating matters, the leaders of the country tended to come from the *Bidan* population and, claiming to represent the interests of all, began orienting the country culturally, economically, and politically toward

the Maghreb and Middle East. Those in the South who had, for the most part, considered themselves members of francophone West Africa and more children of French culture, protested the growing arabization measures, especially in the realm of education where language was the primary battleground for power struggles. French Muslim policy deepened pre-existing ethnic divisions as it institutionalized linguistic and cultural differences through its educational policies. Southern populations who had participated with greater success in the colonial education system, expecting prominent positions in the government bureaucracy, suddenly found their languages and skills demoted by those favored by the politically dominating *Bidan*. At the same time, members of the ruling *Bidan* ethnic group found that pursuing only a religious education as their forefathers' had done was no longer sufficient in a capitalistic world. Mauritians, whether *Bidan*, *Hartani*, Wolof, Soninké, Halpulaar, or Bambara, looked back at the past in an effort to define themselves in a post-colonial context.

Endnotes

- ¹ Ghislaine Lydon, "Inkwells of the Sahara: Reflections on the Production of Islamic Knowledge in *Bilad Shinqit*," in *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, Scott S. Reese, ed., (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 39-71, 41.
- ² When studying the *kuttab* in West Africa, one often finds the French transliteration of the general *madrasa* (Qur'anic school), *médersa*, used instead.
- ³ It is increasingly difficult to find one term that refers to the Wolof, Soninké, Bambara, and Halpulaar populations. Whereas the "White Moors" refer to themselves as *Bidan* and the "Black Moors" refer to themselves as *Hartani*, the aforementioned black, sub-Saharan, generally sedentary

groups who are *not* "Moor" do not seem to have one term to define themselves as different from the "Moors". I am open to any suggestions as to the best way to refer to these groups in English or in another language. In this paper, I refer to them using all three group names for lack of a better alternative at this point.

- ⁴ The Ghana Empire roughly dates from the fifth to the eleventh-centuries. The Mali Empire extends from the thirteenth to the fourteenth and the Songhai from the fifteenth to the sixteenth.
- ⁵ Francis de Chassey, *L'étrier, la houe, et le Livre : Sociétés traditionnelles au Sahara et au sahel occidental*, (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1977), 24. On a different note, the nomenclature of the « Berber » groups is also problematic since many of the people now refer to themselves as *Amazigh* (meaning free people) and their languages as *Tamazight*.
- ⁶ I use the term *Arab* to refer to those people originating in the Arabian Peninsula, speaking the Arabic language, following Islam, and considered "white" by their own and French definitions. The word "tribe" has also been problematized, though the *Bidan* use a word *qabiila*, often roughly translated as "tribe" and referring to their clan or lineage groups. I use "tribe" to mean a group of people somehow related by blood with a similar vocation.
- ⁷ Supposedly, the powerful Almoravid movement originates from the same place. Catherine Belvaude, *La Mauritanie*, (Paris: Karthala, 1989), 13.
- ⁸ For an excellent explanation of the Maliki school of law as practiced in the Maghrib, see David S. Powers, "Introduction", *Law, Society, and Culture in the Maghrib, 1300-1500*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 1-22.
- ⁹ Lydon, 47.
- ¹⁰ Chouki el Hamel, "The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society from the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, v. 29, 1, (Feb. 1999), 62-87, 64.
- ¹¹ The general understanding in historical literature is that the

- Banu Hassan* descended from the Yemeni Banu Maqtil group. See Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, *Éléments d'histoire de la Mauritanie*, (Nouakchott: IMRS, 1991), 41.
- ¹² The four major brotherhoods in Mauritania are: the Koufyia, the Qadiriyya, the Shadiliyya, and the Tijaniyya. See A. Leriche, "l'Islam en Mauritanie", *Bulletin de L'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire*, v. 11, 3-4, July-October 1949, 458-470, 458.
- ¹³ Ahmed-Baba Miske, *Al Wasit: Tableau de la Mauritanie au début du XXe siècle*, (Paris: Klincksiek, 1970), 21.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21. The term *surah*, roughly translated into chapters of the Qur'an, is further divided into smaller chapters, or *ayat*. For further discussion on the role of women in educating their children at home, see Miske, *Al Wasit*, 21 and Corinne Fortier, « Une pédagogie coranique ». Modes de transmission des savoirs islamiques (Mauritanie), *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 169-170, 2003, <http://etudesafriaines.revues.org/document198.html>.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ¹⁶ In some regions, counting to ten meant that a boy was old enough to leave the home for school; in others, one had to recite a certain number of *surahs* from the Qur'an. Yet, in other regions, boys went to study outside the home when they could touch one ear with the opposite arm flung over the crown of their heads.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ¹⁸ Mokhtar Ould Daddah, *La Mauritanie, contre vents et marées*, (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 44.
- ¹⁹ Miske, 123.
- ²⁰ Mokhtar Ould Hamidoun, *Précis sur la Mauritanie*, (Saint-Louis: Centre IFAN, 1952), 59.
- ²¹ El Hamel, "Transmission of Islamic Knowledge...", 66.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 72.
- ²³ Miske, 25.
- ²⁴ The introduction and spread of the Sufi *turuq* (pl. *tariqa*) in Mauritania in the eighteenth-century are attributed to Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti.

- ²⁵ Charles Cameron Stewart, *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania: A Case Study from the Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 34.
- ²⁶ Lydon, 53.
- ²⁷ El Hamel, "Transmission of Islamic Knowledge...", 65.
- ²⁸ "School on a camel's back", referring to riding on a camel while studying through recitation and discussing with one's teacher. Essentially, these were the schools of nomads. See El Ghassem Ould Ahmedou, *Enseignement traditionnel en Mauritanie: La mahadra ou l'école 'à dos de chameau*, (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ³⁰ Saint-Louis is also known as Ndar to Senegalese and Mauritanians. It was founded in 1638.
- ³¹ In 1858, France and the Trarza and Brakna emirates signed a treaty to this affect. Charles Toupet and Jean-Robert Pitte, *La Mauritanie*, (Paris: PUF, 1977), 62.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 17.
- ³³ [My parenthetic addition] *Ibid.*, 17.
- ³⁴ "Il faut d'abord connaître l'Islam et les musulmans avant d'en parler et surtout d'agir à leur endroit." , *Ibid.*, 42.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ³⁷ [My translation of French labels]
- ³⁸ In a town known as Bir Moghreïn near the Mauritano-Western Saharan border a treaty was signed.
- ³⁹ For more information on the *mission civilisatrice* and *mise en valeur* campaigns, see Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997). She defines *mission civilisatrice* as the idea that the French "had a special mission to civilize the indigenous peoples now coming under its control." Conklin, 2. *Mise en valeur* refers to a rational, progressive, and conservative "exploitation rather than more expansion," in French colonies. Conklin, 41.
- ⁴⁰ Governor Carde, 1924, qtd. in Francis de Chasse, *Mauritanie 1900-1975*, (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1984), 103. See also

Denise Bouché, "La création de l'AOF : un nouveau départ pour l'école," in Charles Becker, Saliou Mbaye, and Ibrahima Thioub, eds., *AOF : réalités et héritages. Sociétés ouest-africaines et ordre colonial, 1895-1960*, (Dakar: Direction des Archives du Sénégal, 1997), 1055-1070.

⁴¹ Scholar Ould Ahmedou also notes that the *mahadras* were "at university level and had no reason to be envious of other Arab universities of the time." [My translation] Ould Ahmedou, 61.

⁴² from Circulaires Brevié, 1933. qtd. in de Chasse, *La Mauritanie*, 105.

⁴³ [My parenthetical additions] *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁴ Pierre Boilley, "Les sociétés nomades aux franges de L'AOF: intégration ou marginalisation?" in Becker, 900-906, 900.

⁴⁵ Alphonse Gouilly qtd. In A Traoré, "L'Islam en Mauritanie," in D.G. Lavroff, préface, *Introduction à la Mauritanie*, (Paris: CNRS, 1979), 155-166, 161.

⁴⁶ See David Robinson. *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920*, (Athens: Ohio P, 2000), 191.

⁴⁷ For example, excluding mathematics, science, and literature, syllabi included the history of "les noirs", what they are today, what they owe to the French, general classes on France and the French, the history of the AOF, history of the invasions of black Africa by Whites, and the major points of "their" history. Circulaire Carde, 1924 qtd. in de Chasse, 107.

⁴⁸ See Paul Marty, *Etudes sur l'Islam au Sénégal*, (Paris : E. Leroux, 1917).

⁴⁹ [My parenthetical addition] Mohammed ibn al-Mustafa in Yaya wuld al-Bara, "Les théologiens mauritaniens face au colonialisme français : étude de *fatwas* de jurisprudence musulmane," in David Robinson, Jean-Louis Triaud and Ghislaine Lydon, eds., *Le temps des marabouts : Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française v. 1880-1960*, (Paris : Karthala, 1997), 85-117, 105-106.

⁵⁰ De Chasse, 144.

⁵¹ Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Culturally linked to the *Bidan*, since they speak Hassaniya and follow similar practices, the *Hartani* (meaning freed slave) are typically of a darker skin color and of a lower social rank.

⁵⁴ Ould Daddah, 62.

⁵⁵ Marc le Noble, « Les premières écoles de campement en Mauritanie (1950-1954) in Jean Clauzel and Jean-Louis Tiraud, eds. *Nomades et commandants : administration et sociétés nomades dans l'ancienne AOF*, (Paris : Karthala, 1993), 139-144, 140.

⁵⁶ Cédric Jourde, "Rivalités inter-(intra) ethniques et luttes symboliques dans la vallée du fleuve Sénégal avant l'indépendance," in *Les trajectoires d'un état-frontière : espaces, évolution politique, et transformations sociales en Mauritanie*, ed. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004), 66-89, 70-71.

⁵⁷ "Mauritania", [Map/Still] *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, Retrieved 20 March 2007, Online, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/art-61949>.

Appendix I: Map of Mauritania⁵⁷