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Mauritania

In 1960, Mauritania, a French colony along the Atlantic Coast in West Africa, achieved independence under the name of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The name 'Mauritania', once used as the name of the Roman colonies of North Africa (*Mauretania*), was reintroduced by the colonial administration to designate this western part of the Saharo-Sahelian zone, which was called in Arabic literature *bilād Šinqīṭ* 'country of Šinqīṭ', *trāb al-bīṣān* 'land of the Whites' (Taine-Cheikh 1990), or *bilād as-sayba* 'country of anarchy'.

The borders of the country are as arbitrary as its name. Indeed, they do not follow at all the territorial limits of the Moorish Arabic-speaking country, which extended far beyond those borders, especially in the north, in the region of the Rio de Oro and of the Saga el-Ḥamra, occupied by the Spanish. The Senegal River, chosen as the southern border, is inhabited on either side by the same black African populations, which have Pulaar, Soninke, or Wolof as their mother tongue.

Originally, Mauritania was conceived as a 'transition' country between 'arabity' and 'africity' (Badel 1990), hence the situation of Arabic is particularly complex but also, as in other places, subject to ceaseless change.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE RELIGIOUS 'ARABIZATION'

A variety of Arabic (Ḥassāniyya) is currently the mother tongue of a majority (usually estimated between 70 and 80 percent of a total of 2.9 million people) of the Mauritanian population. This is the consequence of the abandonment of the Berber language (Zenaga), at the end of a very long process of Arabization, which seems to have begun at the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th century but has not yet been completed even today. The first contacts with the Arabic language took place at the end of the 1st millennium, through the Islamic religion, and concerned all the ethnic groups of the region.

For all societies concerned, Islamization represented a global cultural phenomenon, but

its linguistic effects were variable. Although a perfect command of Classical Arabic is strongly recommended for every good Muslim, this perfect command was (and still is) often much more limited than expected. The ancient populations of Mauritania were no exception to this rule, although a relatively large number of people apparently became literate. This is probably due to the history of the region and the social organization of the different ethnic groups.

The Islamization of the Saharo-Sahelian part of West Africa was linked with the Almoravid movement, initiated in the 11th century by the Berber tribes of the region, according to local traditions, somewhere between the Adrar and the Senegal delta. This movement was to be very successful in Morocco and Spain (Norris 1972, 1986). The name 'Almoravid' is supposed to have come, through the Spanish language, from *murābiṭūn*; it probably does not signify 'those from the *ribāt* "fortified monastery"', as has been supposed for a long time, but rather 'those who wage a holy war' (participle of the verb *rābaṭa*).

Nevertheless, the penetration of Islam does not begin with the armed fighters of Yahyā ibn 'Ibrāhīm al-Gdalī. In fact, conversions had already taken place since the middle of the 8th century, especially among the Lemtuna Berbers and the Soninké of the Ghana empire. This peaceful Islamization was linked with trade (in particular with the Kharijite Mzab) but remained quite superficial. The local sources do not always distinguish it from the traditions concerning the Bafour, the mysterious population from the Adrar that is sometimes associated with the breeding of dogs. The preaching of Ibn Yāsīn, spread by the Almoravid troops, was a message of faith, but it also aimed at eradicating the strong influence exerted until then by Ibadite Kharijism in the Sahara and on its southern (and northern) borders. Henceforth, the aim was to attain a deeper knowledge of the sacred texts and a more orthodox practice of religion, in particular through the banishment of the pleasures of music and dance.

Apart from the Almoravid episode (and, later, some Peul Jihadist movements), the conquests

did not play a very important role in the diffusion of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, the numerous conflicts, between the communities as much as between the tribes, and even within the tribes, resulted among other things in social fissure and tribal or ‘lineage’ specializations. Some tribes chose to relinquish their arms and dedicate themselves entirely to the study and teaching of the religious sciences, particularly at the end of the Šurubba war that in the 17th century opposed two tribal coalitions in southwest Mauritania. The ‘learned’ tribes are the *zwāya* among the Arabic speakers and the *gusayn* (literally ‘*qadis*’) among the Zenaga speakers. In addition, among the neighboring Pulaar speakers, the influence of the Torobe group, representing the majority, relies partially on its religious status.

In all ethnic groups (including the Soninke and the Wolof), the learned men had at their disposal a unified corpus of reference, based on the triad of Mālikism, Aš‘arism, and Sufi brotherhood, and applied largely similar methods to transmit knowledge. These methods made a strong demand on memory and used all possible memorization techniques: repetitions and recitations (supported by rhythmic movement of the body), poetry (even about abstract topics such as grammar), and copying of texts. Writing was at the center of learning, but transmission took place from the master’s voice to the student’s ear. The performance was less an oralization, corresponding to a real command of Classical Arabic as a language of oral communication, than an auralization, meaning the recitation of literary Arabic (Taine-Cheikh 1998; Ould Cheikh 1998). Over the years, however, teaching has diversified and deepened thanks to a more frequent recourse to the mother tongue in order to explain the meaning of the text. Altogether, the level of Arabo-Islamic culture was significant, especially but not exclusively in the traditional schools (*mahās̄r*) of the desert.

2. THE DIALECTAL ARABIZATION

The four major Mauritanian caravan cities of the 2nd millennium (Wadān, Šingīti, Tišit, and Walāta) were founded around the 12th and 13th centuries, as the decline of Āwdāgust (probably to be identified with modern Tāgdāwəst, in southeast Mauritania) was already sealed. At

that time, the Islamic religion had already reached an important breakthrough in the region, paving the way for a certain adaptation to the Arabic language. The only Arabic-speaking communities, though, still seem to have been made up by small groups of traders coming from the Maghreb. In all cities with a Berber majority, whose destiny was unquestionably linked to the road taken by the trans-Saharan trade, the Azer language – probably a variety of Soninke as spoken by Zenaga speakers – may have played a key role as lingua franca, despite the weakening and finally the disappearance of the Ghana empire.

The influence of Arabic-speaking groups only began to be felt in the Sahara from the 15th century onward. At the end of the 14th century, Ibn Xaldūn had pointed out the presence of the Banū Ḥassān in the Dra wadi (*wād dar’a*) in the south of Morocco. In constant rivalry with their cousins, the Šbanāt, they oppressed their neighboring Berber tribes (Ould Cheikh 1995:43). Ibn Xaldūn traced back the genealogy of their chief, Ḥassān, to a certain Ma‘qil, but he did not specify the relationship between the latter and the Banū Hilāl. One should be careful not to take at face value a history of the Banū Ma‘qil, even if certain authors tend to present them as a group distinct from both the Banū Hilāl and the Banū Sulaym.

The testimony of Arabic and Portuguese travelers provides some information about the migration of the Banū Ḥassān to the south and their slow penetration into the Sahara. Nevertheless, there is, unfortunately, a lack of data for the reconstruction of the history of this ‘dark age’, during which the dominance of the Arabs over (part of) the local Berber populations was established. Although the traditions and the local denominations encourage simplistic equations – ‘warlike tribes = Arabs’ vs. ‘maraboutic tribes = Berbers’, or more recently, ‘aristocratic = Arabs’ and ‘those who pay tribute = Berbers’ – there is some evidence that history has given rise to a complex society whose culture probably achieved some kind of symbiosis between ‘arabity’ and ‘berberity’, even though generally speaking, only the Arabic part of the heritage is claimed.

As regards the language, the name Ḥassāniyya (or *klām ḥassān* lit. ‘the language of Ḥassān’), assigned to the spoken Arabic of Mauritania, clearly suggests that this dialect is a legacy from

the Ḥassān tribes. In view of what is known about Arabization in the Saharo-Sahelian zone, this identification is not surprising in itself. Because all Arabic-speaking groups that came to settle in this area claim to be of the same origin, it is not too far-fetched to think that the fundamental characteristics of the Mauritanian dialect were already present in the 15th century. This is all the more plausible since even today for Ḥassāniyya speakers mutual comprehension seems to be easiest with the Bedouin in the whole Arabic world, not only from the Maghreb but also from the Middle East (especially Jordanians). Besides, the Ḥassāniyya language shows a remarkable homogeneity from east to west and from north to south (and even beyond the Mauritanian borders). This fact would seem to support this theory, although it does not explain one of the rare important regional differences, the occlusive or fricative pronunciation of /g/.

Of course, even if the Ḥassāniyya language has retained many characteristics from the dialect once spoken by the Banū Ḥassān, this does not mean that it has gone through the centuries without changes. Even without mentioning the most recent evolutions, the numerous borrowings from local dialects, especially Zenaga, show the lexical enrichment produced by the contact with the Berber substrate language.

Various morphosyntactic innovations are particularly characteristic of the Ḥassāniyya language, especially the passive voice, the diminutive, and the elative (→ Ḥassāniyya Arabic). Despite certain similarities with Zenaga, the neologisms of the Ḥassāniyya language cannot be interpreted as a simple calque but must be regarded as an internal evolution of the Arabic dialect. Although it is even harder to understand the general uniformity of innovations than the permanency of conservatism, the successful innovations must have corresponded to particularly important needs of expression for the Moorish society.

3. WRITTEN LITERATURE IN THE CLASSICAL AGE

The dispersal of the Banū Ḥassān and their settlement in Saharan Mauritania led to new relations between the Arabic speakers and the

(former) Berber speakers. Between the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century, four emirates (Trarza, Brakna, Adrar, and Tagant) were established, which corresponded to the early stages of political concentration, when a family of warriors (coming from the Banū Ḥassān, except in the case of the Tagant) exerted their authority on the tribes of the region. Starting at the end of the 18th century and flourishing above all in the 19th century, an era ensued that seems to have been propitious for the development of culture and literature.

Inscriptions in *tifnağ* characters seem to have ceased around the 15th/16th centuries. Between the arrival of the Banū Ḥassān and that of the European colonizers, virtually all writing was done in Arabic characters, probably most of it in Classical Arabic because there are few traces in Mauritania of Berber manuscripts written in Arabic characters (did they disappear?), although there did exist literary productions in Soninke and Pulaar, some of which, such as the *beytol*, were written with an Arabic alphabet.

Broadly speaking, the concept of written literature is applicable to all intellectual productions recorded in the familial libraries. These were extremely numerous, even if they were often limited to the contents of a trunk. In the case of the literate Moors, the trunk was carried around on camels when the camp was moving. The Ḥassāniyya speakers of the western Sahara take a lot of pride in the fact that they were one of the rare nomadic societies in the Arab world to be strongly attached to the book and to the study of Muslim Arabic culture (Bonte and Claudot-Hawad 1998).

In the last few decades, some collections have been institutionalized, for both material and political reasons. The attention of the institutional power and the public was focused on this small number of libraries, particularly in the ancient cities of the Sahara. Such sedentary establishments may not have been the general rule, but the inventory of their contents gives an idea of the texts that were bought or copied most frequently.

Between Šingīti and Wadān, for example, twelve family libraries can be counted. The contents are variable in size, from several pages to hundreds of pages, and the 1,106 documents are unequally shared between the libraries. The library of the 'Ahl Ḥabāt from Šingīti alone contains more than half of these documents,

most of them purchased. Founded by Sīdi Muḥammad wəll Ḥabāt in 1845 upon his return from his Mecca pilgrimage, the library is said to have contained up to three thousand books. As in most libraries, the great majority of the books date from the 19th century, but a considerable number date from the 17th and 18th centuries. Some are even more ancient; indeed, five copies of manuscripts made prior to the end of the 15th century are listed, with ten copies realized in the 16th century. The oldest document kept in Mauritania can also be found here, a copy (made in 480/1087–1088) of a commentary on the *Qurʾān* written by the Iraqī author ʾAbū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī (d. 395/1004–1005).

The books contained in the libraries of Šingīṭi and Wadān are mainly about religion and jurisprudence: about 40 percent on theology (*fiqh*, *ʾuṣūl*, *qawāʿid*, *nawāzil*) and almost 30 percent on the Qurʾānic sciences (copies of the *vulgate*, the exegesis, the words of the Prophet, and the hagiographical stories) and mysticism (*taṣawwuf*). Among the remaining 30 percent, mathematics (1.70%) and logic (2.78%) are relatively well represented, more so than history, astronomy, and medicine. But linguistic topics (*naḥw*, *ṣarf*, *luḡa*, and *ʾadab*) are particularly popular (23.77%). The great lexicographical corpus *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, for instance, gathered by the scholar from Širāz, Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb al-Firūzābādī (d. 817/1835–1836), was written in calligraphy for the library of the ʾAhl Ḥabāt over the course of several years (the copy of the two first volumes dating from 1251/1835–1836 and of the last two from 1260/1844).

With regard to Mauritanian scholars, no writings are known before the 18th century (al-Bartalī 1981; Ould Bah 1981; Ḥāmidun 1990; Rebstock 2001). With the apparent exception of a Wadian scholar of the 16th century who left a written commentary on the *Qurʾān*, the most ancient Moorish author known is the great *faqīh* of Šingīṭi, Muḥammad wəll al-Muxtār wəll Billaʿmaš (1625–1695). This major figure of the cultural history of the western Sahara wrote, among other things, a commentary on a book about the foundations of the dogma and one on astronomy.

It is precisely because the Moorish books are so recent that the middle of the 18th century appears as the beginning of a new era. However,

in a strictly literary sense, Mauritanian cultural production was of variable value. Indeed, there is not a lot of prose literature, and it is often badly represented. Globally, works on *ʾadab* are rare. The only real prose writer seem to have been aš-Šayx Sīdi Muḥammād al-Kuntī (d. 1826), who wrote a biography of his father (the great mystic aš-Šayx Sīd al-Muxtār) and a number of treatises.

On the other hand, poetry is both abundant and of high quality, as demonstrated by ʾAḥmad ibn al-ʿAyn aš-Šingīṭi. In Cairo, he wrote from memory a book on his country of origin, *al-Wasīṭ fī tarājim ʾudabāʾ Šinqīṭ* “the best [book] on the work of poets and men of Šinqīṭ” (Miské 1970), including no fewer than 4,500 lines of verse. This anthology brings together 82 poets, divided into 18 tribes (all maraboutic), most of them from the 19th century, testifying to the vitality of the classical *qaṣīda* of the Moorish literate elite and of their high level in literary Arabic (Ould Bah 1971:26–48; Ṭulba 2000).

Since Classical Arabic poetry belongs to the domain of written (or ‘auralized’) literature, presumably the entire oral literature in Arabic is expressed in dialect. Indeed, despite the numerous isomorphisms between the written and the oral spheres, the separation between the two fields coincides almost exactly, at least until the 20th century, with the distinction between the two varieties of Arabic in use in Mauritania.

The first resemblance to note is the preeminence of poetry as literary genre (Martin-Granell a.o. 1992; Bariou a.o. 1995). Even though Classical Arabic poetry is called *šīʿr*, in Ḥassāniyya it has the generic name of *gnā*. The metrical system of oral poetry (Taine-Cheikh 1985) presents many common points with the classical meters in its general principles (regularity of the number of syllables per meter, quantitative distinction between short and long syllables, constant presence of a rhyme). More precisely, there may even be a fundamental common opposition between ascending rhythms (with a metrical accent on the long second syllable of the *watid majmūʿ* ‘rising foot’: short + long) and descending rhythms (with a metrical accent on the long first syllable of the *watid mafrūq* ‘descending foot’: long + short).

Despite the obvious resemblance between the two metrical systems, there are important differences as well. The first of these is the

general tendency to simplify in the *ġnā*, through a reduction of the number of syllables per meter and through an increase of the proportion of short syllables compared to the long ones, the latter tending to remain only in rhyme. The second one is the adaptation of the principle of quantity to the vocalic system of the dialect. Open syllables of the CV type having almost disappeared in Ḥassāniyya, closed syllables CVC or long vowels CV are counted as short in contrast with the ‘extra-long’ syllables CVCC (twice closed) or CV:C (closed with a long vowel). The third difference concerns the use of rhyme in a verse unit that seems peculiar to the dialect, even if it shows some similarities with other forms of poetry expressed in dialect. On the one hand, the *gav* is made up of four hemistichs with alternating rhymes *ab-ab*, and on the other hand, the *ṭal’a* is made up of six hemistichs (*aa-ab-ab*), differing from the quatrain through the two first identical rhymes.

Until the 20th century, the great themes of the *ġnā* (Taine-Cheikh 1994) were very close to those of the *šīr*, in spite of the difference in name. Put simply, one might say that there were eulogies (*madīḥ* or *ṭanā’* for the *šīr*, *šākr* for the *ġnā*) and satire (*šātm* or *hijā’* in Classical Arabic, *šātm* or *‘ayb* in Ḥassāniyya), on the one hand, and elegies and love poems (respectively *nasīb* and *ġazal*, although these apply mostly to *šīr*), on the other. The last two themes, very frequent, were practiced by authors (*mġannyīn*) who belonged more or less to all social classes. Many anonymous poems belong to common culture, even if they sing about a particular region, the one of the poet (Sīdi Brāhīm 1992). Others have well-known authors (Ould Zenagui 1994), sometimes very famous, including, in certain cases, those known for their knowledge or for their poetry in Classical Arabic. The verses may be purely elegiac or only about love, but very often they are both simultaneously. The expression of feelings of love always respect the laws of decency (Tauzin 1982, 1990) and often are limited to mention of places formerly frequented by the loved one (always a woman, as the men traditionally kept for themselves the right to compose *ġnā*, leaving to women only the minor, and historically more recent, form of the distich called *tābrā’*).

The writing of eulogies and criticism was subject to even more constraints. If the recitation

of poetry took place in a context of rhymed exchanges between people of equivalent status, they assumed the form of sparring matches (the *ġtā’*, which imposed certain rules of meters and rhymes). As these matches often played a role in the rivalries between the tribes, certain warriors, including the chiefs, distinguished themselves in it. However, more generally (and with the exception of the very particular case of the *madḥ an-nābi* ‘the praise of the Prophet’, which was composed and sung only by the former slaves and the *ḥrāṭīm*), eulogies as well as satire were inseparable from the very closed social group of the musician-singers (Norris 1968; Guignard 1975). It was their role not only to sing the *ġnā* (which is not necessarily sung, despite the meaning of its root *ġ-n-y*), but to do and undo reputations. According to certain local traditions (Ould Bah 1971:14), their ancestors, in the 18th century, were responsible for the most ancient verses known in Moorish poetry. The long poems with epic accents that some *griots* like Sāddūm wəll Ndyartu or ‘Alī wəll Mānu composed in honor of their warrior chiefs constitute a particular genre (*thāyḍīm*) of Moorish poetical heritage, quite esoteric but also highly regarded.

Nonpoetic genres exist, of course, but not all are represented. In the field of the narrative forms, there are mainly fairy tales and stories. Of great variety, they are not limited to wisdom fairy tales and marvel stories intended for children (Tauzin 1993; Ould Mohamed Baba 2000–2001; Ould Ebnou n.d.). In the discursive field, mainly short forms can be noted. Among the dialogic, playful, and/or didactic forms, there is the one, quite common, of the riddle (*thāḏī*) – often around wordplay – and the more specific one of the pastoral enigma (Taine-Cheikh 1995) in which the playful rivalry between shepherds expresses itself (this is called *zārg*, like the riddles students of Classical Arabic posed to one another). Finally, proverbs and sayings (*‘amtāl*) are also found in large numbers (Ould Ebnou n.d.), which demonstrates the strong fondness of Ḥassāniyya speakers for gnomic speech.

4. ORAL LITERATURE

Mauritanian Arabic literature peaked in the 19th century, but the seeds of change were already present before that time. The influence

of France began to develop in the south in 1857 and soon led to a tight control of the whole Senegal River valley. The beginning of the colonial conquest itself took place at the beginning of the 20th century. As of 1920, Mauritania was officially regarded as a French colony, governed from Saint-Louis in Senegal. The effects of colonization were felt for a long time after the granting of independence.

For several decades, colonization, which was carried out essentially from the strategic perspective of pacifying the region, remained superficial. Its impact was especially weak on the nomadic world, which only experienced indirect administration (enlistment in the *goums*, particular groups of military nomads, taxes imposed on the tribes, etc.). During that time, the sedentary black Africans of the earlier colonized valley were already subject to conscription and scheduled taxes. The Moors offered a particularly tenacious resistance to the French education system, and the most aristocratic people did not hesitate to send the children of their slaves or their dependents to school instead of their own children, when pressure became irresistible. As the backwardness of Ḥassāniyya speakers increased, the colonial authorities agreed to open special schools, known as *medersas*, for the sons from good Moorish families, in which Arabic was given an important place. These schools were abolished in the 1940s, but as compensation a few hours of Arabic were introduced in all schools attended by Ḥassāniyya speakers. This measure tended, however, to be withheld from the black Africans, under the pretext of making a distinction between the Arabic language as a 'language of culture' (reserved for speakers of Arabic) and as a 'language of religion' (excluded from the French state school system).

One of the effects of the colonial policy was that of modifying social relations, weakening the power of the warriors and supporting the position of the marabouts (*zwāya*). It is no accident that the first president of Mauritania, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, and most of the Moorish executives of the young state belonged to the literate tribes, in particular those of the Southwest, who had been schooled before the others. However, the securing of the latter's loyalty was realized to the detriment of traditional education, and, in the course of the 20th century, the influence of the *mahāsār*

and the number of students attending them continued to diminish.

The nascent republic was qualified as 'Islamic', based on the idea that religion was the common denominator of the entire population of Mauritania, but the language of administration and the education system were French, even if at the time this concerned only a small minority of children. Very soon, this official predominance of a foreign language was denounced by the Moorish community.

Ever since its creation, Mauritania has belonged to various organizations uniting the black African countries formerly colonized by France. Its recognition by the other Arabic countries and its entry into the Arab League were less immediate because of the opposition voiced by Morocco. Only by the end of the 1960s did the Moroccan claims cease, opening the possibility for a readjustment between Arabic and the black world, more in accordance with the wishes of the Moorish community (Ould Cheikh 1995:32–33). However, the changes were fought by the black African communities of Mauritania, who regarded them as harmful to their vested benefits, inherited from colonization, and perceived them as contrary to their elementary political rights.

If one considers the education system of Mauritania, which is usually the first stumbling block in contacts between the ethnic groups, it becomes clear that the country has never ceased to Arabize since its independence. The first measures were directed at the whole student body: Arabic was imposed on all secondary school students, at least as a second foreign language, and before the primary cycle a first year was added, entirely in Arabic, under the pretext of introducing Qur'ānic Arabic. Soon, the influence of Arabic nationalist movements, affected by events in the Middle East, was reinforced by the massive settlement of nomadic people. Ruined by years of severe drought, Moorish cattle breeders were asking for schools for their children and possibilities of employment in the administration for those who were educated in the *mahāsār*. Under these circumstances the number of hours of Arabic were increased considerably, facilitating the integration into the state education system of teachers coming from the traditional system. One of the two curricula put in place – the one dominated by the Arabic language – was then

invaded by students who were total beginners in the French language. In the 1980s, the contrast deepened between the 'Arab' course of study, compulsory for all Ḥassāniyya speakers and with a minor place for French, and the 'bilingual' one, leading generally only to a master's degree in French and attended by a majority of the black African population.

This system, which through two different courses of study was supposed to lead to Arabic/French bilingualism, was finally abandoned because of the costs involved and the inefficiency (Taine-Cheikh 2004). The balance of power became extremely unfavorable to the black Africans after the ethnic conflict of 1989, the most violent since independence. Consequently, the government decided to abolish the bilingual course of study. The effect of the measure was softened by the existence of a private educational system that was increasingly successful. Additionally, the French language was not removed entirely from the educational system, although the precedence of the Arabic language was affirmed. This was facilitated by the adoption of Arabic as the only official language as early as 1991, one of the consequences being a significant Arabization of toponyms, often to the detriment of French and Berber names, which had long been in use (Ould Cheikh 1995:33-34).

The 21st century seems to have opened a new era in which Arabization will once again experience considerable progress, probably being marked as much by education as by the Arabic media (in particular satellite television). The future will tell what the result will be for the practice of literary Arabic, of the Ḥassāniyya dialect, and of its 'modernized' version, the local version of standard Arabic (Taine-Cheikh 2002, 2004).

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