Culture Profile: Mauritania

El Hacen Moulaye Ahmed
a professor of English Linguistics at the University of Nouakchott.
ORCID record is https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0251-595X

DOI : https://doi.org/10.63939/JAAS.2025-Vol8.N24.350-364

Abstract

Culture is a turban under which people hide from the wind and shade from the sun. Culture expunges commonalities and celebrates differences. This paper, thereby, delineates some cultural traces of present-day Mauritania, a country that is tucked between two worlds, "Arab" North Africa and "black" West Africa. These practices are ethnically structured. Bedan's (Moors) culture is a blend of Arab and Amazigh influences. The African heritage is seamlessly manifested in the practices of Kwr (afro-Mauritanians). This study maps out some of these ancient and enduring customs and beliefs of the two cultures namely the beliefs and customs of clothing and cuisine (drinks).

Keywords: *culture, tradition, Mauritania, Moors, afro-Mauritanians*

Introduction

Diverse as races are, cultures most of the time stand unimpaired, yet some aspects of these cultures may either get vanished or modified as a result of several internal and external factors the most prominent of which are assimilation and globalization. Indeed, hundreds of years ago, Mauritania hosted several races most of which had different cultures namely, Arab, Imazighen and African. However, after the battle of Sharr Babba (1671-1677) between the tribes of Beni Hassan and those of Sanhaja, the latter's culture, which if not Imazighen in origin was marked by it, fused into that of the former. The reason behind such assimilation was that Sanhaji people embraced Islam before the coming of Beni Hassan. Because the Prophet of Islam was an Arab, they might favor the Arab culture. Moreover, Beni Hassan and Sanhaja mingled with each other to the extent that intermarriage became a common habit between them. Additionally, the fact that their skin color was the same as that of the newcomers, the tribes of Beni Hassan, led them to identify with them. More importantly, as already discussed, the Sanhaji people were descendents of Yemeni tribes. Thus, their cultural identification with their cousins was natural.

In contrast with the culture of the Sanhaji people, the culture of Kwr survived the ages. Such cultural survival may be due to two main factors. Firstly, the Kwr people are "black" African people while the other groups are white and brown Arabs. Such difference was celebrated in the behaviors, habits, and generally the way of life of the two parties. Although the Kwr added the Arabic dialect, Hassaniya, to their linguistic repertoire, they tuned out the other Arabic customs and traditions. Secondly, the geographical distribution of the two parties in today's Mauritania is different. For instance, the Kwr people lived mainly in the south along the Mauritania-Senegal River while the Arabs dwelled in the north, center, northwest and east of the country. This fact

might play a crucial role in reducing the possibility of the overlap between the two cultures.

In addition to assimilation, the phenomenon of globalization has had impacted the Mauritanians' diverse cultures. Even though Mauritanians, as all other people, have always interacted with other units, say, tribes, nations, and states, modern technology such as transportation means (e.g. airplane), commerce (e.g. clothes), and communication tools (e.g. television), has remarkably modified the vibrant social tapestry of some customs and beliefs of the Mauritanians. Nevertheless, the majority of these traditions and beliefs remained untouched. This study, thereby, maps out some of these ancient and enduring customs and beliefs of the two cultures particularly those that set the Mauritanians apart from their cousins in both the Arab and African worlds. These features include, but, not limited to the beliefs and customs of clothing and drinks.

Clothing

Apart from the people of the Moroccan Sahara who are affiliated ethnically (racially, linguistically, culturally, and religiously) with the Mauritanian Arab community, no other people share the Mauritanians' type of dress. The rationale behind having these clothes is twofold. First, Mauritanian Arab community is conservative. They consider all female body apart from the face, hands, feet and arms as awrah, Arabic term that denotes the illegal unveiling of parts of the body. Second, Mauritania is situated in the desert where the harsh climatic condition is prevailing almost all the year. Due to these two factors, Mauritanians have had a type of clothes that fulfil their religious and climatic needs. These clothes are gender-oriented. That is, whereas daraa, serwal and hawli are man's dress, melhfa is particular to women.

To start with man's dress, daraa, as it is known in Hassaniya, is an ankle-length robe-like garment with deep vents on both sides and flowing wide sleeves that he pushes up and positions upon his shoulders while he walks or works. It sports a wide triangle-shaped front pocket that is placed slightly to the left of the chest. This pocket has sometimes ornate designs and made of yellow twine. Daraa is white, green or blue and made from cotton and other fabric that is called in Hassaniya, azbi and which is brought from Germany. Based on the age and length of the person, daraa takes its size. For instance, whereas adult's daraa is made of about ten meters of azbi, 5 years old child's daraa is made of three meters. The price of daraa correlates positively with the type of its fabric, its length and the sewing of its pocket. For adults, its price ranges from 350 ouguiya (the local currency) (10 US dollars) to 15000 (430 US dollars).



Mauritanian men featuring in the traditional ensemble, daraa, srwal and hawli.
(Ouwerkerk, n.d.)

As the above picture shows, to complete the ensemble, a Mauritanian man dons baggy pants, known as serwal in Hassaniya, underneath daraa, and wraps his head or nickel with a turban. To start with, the serwal has two pockets on each side. Like daraa, it is made from cotton. It is black, white, green, or blue, and its size depends on the length of the person. The serwal is wrapped around the waist by a leather belt, known locally as lekchat. There are three types of srawil (plural of serwal), serwal guchat, serwal seintir, panteloh. The first one is designed as along rectangle. As such, it requires a long kchatt (a leather belt) that can stick it together around the waist. Part of it falls down the legs till the ankles. The serwal seintir is baggy and clinched with a normal belt around the waist. The panteloh resembles the widely known trousers. The only difference lies in its fabric. More colors are used for the serwal than for the daraa. The serwal can be white, green, blue or black. The price of serwal depends on the type of its fabric and its length. For adults, it starts from 150 ouguiya (3.34 US dollars) and reaches 4500 ouguiya (130 US dollars).

Besides, man wraps his head and/or nickel with a strip of cloth. It is called hawli in Hassaniya and litham in Arabic. As previously mentioned, today's Mauritania was named after litham (turban) as the Land of Al-Moulethamin (the turbaned men). This fact led several historians to dedicate their time to study this piece of cloth. According to Houssein, the custom of wrapping one's head dated back to the ninth century. Houssein also listed different views which historians have given as the main reasons behind such custom. For instance, alongside the harsh weather of the desert, Ibn Lethir reported another reason in the form of a story.

A neighborhood of the tribe of Lamtouna used to be raided by its enemy whenever the men went outside. In order to end these raids, one day, the men disguised in turbans and sent their women featuring in men's dresses outside the neighborhood. When the enemy came, the

turbaned men killed almost all of them. From that day on, the turban became a means of defense. Additionally, Ibn Hawqal asserted that the tribes of Sanhaja considered the mouth and the nose as awrah since what comes out from them is nastiest than what comes out from the genitals. Cheikk Rabwa also attributed the donning of the hawli to the magical beliefs that were common before the arrival of Islam. The members of the tribes of Sanhaja believed that jinn spread diseases in the space. These diseases entered the body through the mouth and/or the nose. As such, the tribe members particularly men had to cover their faces. According to Ibnu Charqi, because "women had links with evil spirits," they were safe from the diseases which men were exposed to if they did not cover their faces up (Ibn Lethir, Ibn Hawqal, Cheikk Rabwa, and Ibnu Charqi cited in Houssein, 2000, pp. 100-102).

The above cited reasons make it impossible to argue which one(s) was or were the main reasons behind the use of the hawli in the first place. This paper, however, asserts that the Mauritanians in modern-days wear the hawli as a cultural heritage and/or means of protection from the harsh weather condition. The hawli is wrapped in several ways according to weather condition. If the day is sunny and/or dusty, the man veils himself leaving the eyes only uncovered. The man would also bare his nose and/or his chin when the day is not too hot. In a relative cold day or at night, the hawli is wrapped around the neck. While its size is about 25 centimeters, the hawli's length is between 1.5 meter and 3.5 meters. It is always made from cotton. The hawli's price differs based on its color, length and fabric. It ranges from 150 ouguiya (4 US dollars) to 700 ouguiya (19 US dollars). The hawli usually takes one of the four following colors, green, white, blue or black. Beside its timeless uses, the black hawli is worn in special occasion. It is donned in weddings by the groom and his friends to match the bride's melhfa which is always black.

In addition to Mauritanian Arab men' clothes, their female counterparts are distinguished by their long garment, known in Hassaniya as melhfa. Before describing this dress, it is important to mention that melhfa is dressed also by some Sudanese women. The melhfa is 2 meters-wide and 4 to 5 meters-long piece of fabric wrapped around the body twice and around the head once. It shrouds all the body but the face, hands and feet. Underneath melhfa, the woman wears a long robe. Some young modern women tend to wear pants, instead of robes, underneath their melhfas. The melhfa is made of cotton and nylon. The cost of the melhfa differs based on the type of its fabric and embroidery. Whereas the cheapest melhfa costs 130 ouguiya (4 US dollars), the most expensive one charges 25000 ouguiya (700 US dollars). Unlike the man's dress, malhfa is colored in all existing colors. Sometimes it takes one single color, and other times it is embroidered by two, three or more colors. The choice of color is optional.

In the wedding day, the bride, however, has to don a transparent black melhfa. It is transparent because it would allow the groom, his family, and other attendants to see the bride's jewelries such as golden nickels and bracelets. The bride's melhfa is also black because blackness is attractive and lovely, a widely given explanation. This explanation, nevertheless, is not reasonable, for if this is the case, why would the groom wear a white daraa? Additionally, why would the bride wear white melhfa one or two days after her marriage? This paper opts for a gender-oriented explanation. That is, the Mauritanian Arab woman, in particular, is oppressed whenever love relationship is concerned. For instance, she must cry in the night of her marriage and even two days before to show to her family as well as the community that she does like neither the marriage nor the groom. Furthermore, she can neither talk with her groom nor show her face during the wedding celebration. In contrast, she must drop down her melhfa over



Mauritanian bride and her relatives featuring in melhfa
(Limam, 2011)

her face and remain speechless to show decency. Based on these facts, it can be said that the blackness of the bride's melhfa is the family's way to show that their daughter is not happy by marriage and that she is afraid of men. These messages would let across that the bride has never been involved in love relationship. Besides, she will never betray her husband, for as long as she disapproves legal love relationships (marriage), she would definitely avoid any future haraam (illegal according to Islam) relationships.

Drinks

Some of the most distinctive patterns of the Mauritanian cuisine are zrig (sour milk mixed with cold water) and tea. To begin with, there is no record of the time of the adoption of zrig as a traditional drink. However, by looking at the main impulse of making zrig, one can infer that Mauritanians have been drinking zrig for millennia. The lack of food was the main reason of making zrig. Until recently, despite the fact that the desert cuisine contained limited dishes, rice, meat, milk and

self-made bread, known in Hassaniya as kesra, not everyone was able to provide his family with these different dishes. In fact, the majority of Mauritanians was not able to buy rice or millet. Therefore, the people of today's Mauritania, particularly the Arab community members, depended primarily on the milk and secondarily on the meat of their goats, cows and/or camels. What is more, the majority of these people had few cattle and thus small amount of milk (Lalla Meriam, May 18, 2016, personal communication). Since the amount of milk of their cattle was too little to be served to the members of a family or possible guests, they had to find an alternative. Hence, they added some water to sour milk to multiply its quantity, so every member of the family could have his/or her share. As such, this blend was added to the desert cuisine beside its parent, milk, and cousin, meat. Even in the recent days, some poor families, particularly in the rural areas, still use zrig as either a lunch or dinner, for they cannot afford cooking twice a day. In a nutshell, the rationale behind the invention of zrig indicates that it is a long lived traditional drink, for whenever one goes back in history, s/he finds that today's Mauritanians' economic and living condition were low.

Originating in poor families as a means to compensate the lack of food, the zrig gained popularity among the riches. That is, the zrig was widely drunk across the Mauritanian society, most commonly by the Arab community members. It was culturally assigned three main properties: holding off thirst, alleviating tiredness and welcoming guests. As such, Mauritanians prepare zrig on several occasions. It is the first to be drunk in the morning before tea, bread or any other dish. This is because people have just woken up after a long night sleeping, need a cold beverage that cools down their hot stomachs and quenches their thirsts. The zrig is also prepared to anyone of the family members who has just returned to the house from the intense heat of the sun in order to quench his or her thirst and alleviate his or her exhaustion. As

such, it is most certainly served whenever a guest comes into the home as a sign of hospitality.

Based on the type of recipe, four main types of zrig can be prepared. First, the most common type of zrig is the one prepared from fermented milk. To get this product, a fresh goat, cow or camel's milk is put in a basin and left for at least four or five hours until it sours. Then, it is poured in a goatskin, shaken several times and poured back in a jar. Some of the shaken concentrated milk is mixed with cold water and sugar. The tree recipes are poured back and forth between big glasses or basins to blend the ingredients, especially the sugar. The second type of zrig is called senguetti. In order to prepare senguetti, an amount of ungrounded millet is grinded in a traditional mortar called elmehraz. When it is grounded, it is poured in a basin. After that, grains of millet are poured in a pot placed on stove and stirred till they become brown. These brown grains are mixed with the grounded millet to give it a sweet flavor. This blend is called senguetti and is a typical drunk in the eastern part of the country particularly the region of Al-Hawdh Charqi. This senguetti is mixed with cold water and sugar. The last type of zrig is prepared from powdered-milks known as selya and mew. Two or three tablespoons of selya or mew and a good helping of sugar are added to cold water in a basin. The beverage is stirred or poured back and forth between glasses to blend the ingredients.

In addition, tea, known in Hassaniya as *attai*, is a traditional drink which cuts across all ethnics and tribe-based identity. It is widely believed that drinking tea alleviates exhaustion, digests food and invigorates the assembled group. The drinking of tea is also considered a revered pastime. Because of these several benefits, the tea ceremony almost does not halt. However, even though it might be served any time of the day, it is customary to drink tea five times per day. It is served with breakfast, in the morn, after lunch, in the afternoon and after

dinner. It is customary also to serve tea whenever a guest or a friend arrives to the home. That is, serving the tea is one of the bases of hospitality and friendship. The frequent recurrences of making tea make one adventures and says that tea is a way of life in Mauritania. However, although being a way of life might lead one to assume that the Mauritanians have been drinking tea for ages, Richardson argued that it is a relatively recent tradition in the region.

> When the British were unable to deliver their tea from China to the Baltic ports during the Crimean war in 1854, Morocco truly became a tea-drinking nation. Due to the embargoes, English ships had to find new ports to deliver their tea. The tea landed and was unloaded at the trading posts of Tangier and Mogador along the Moroccan's Atlantic cost. In Morocco, it was very common to drink herbal infusions. The most popular was a mint tisane called na'na that grew in the country…. The newly imported Chinese gunpowder tea…was added to the sweet mint tisane. This blend soon became Morocco's national drink. (Richardson, 2010, p. 56)

This citation shows that tea arrived first in Morocco as a result of happenstance, geopolitics and economic opportunism. Then, it becomes part and parcel of the Moroccan's traditional drinks. Since Morocco and today's Mauritania have been geopolitically (Almoravids), economically (trans-Saharan trade), religiously (Sunni Maliki) and socially (Sanhaja, Beni Hassan and Chouraffa) tied over the ages, one can argue that a newly adopted drink in Morocco was likely to cross freely across the desert to the people of today's Mauritania. On these bases, this paper argues that tea infiltrated today's Mauritania in the second half of the nineteenth century, and from that time on, drinking tea became a celebrated tradition. However, the spread of this culture

remained common only between the wealthy families (Lalla Meriam, May 2, 2016, personal communication). The cesarean birth of the state of Mauritania in 1960 singled out the rebirth of tea culture. That is, the newly born state imported goods, subsidized prices and provided job opportunities. Accordingly, the number of people who were able to afford sugar and green tea was likely to increase. Indeed, in the present day, it is impossible to find a house or a tenet that does not have a tea set.

A traditional Mauritanian tea ceremony requires an appointed or a volunteer tea maker, ingredients and the tea set. To begin with, the tea maker is the servant of the house. If the house does not have a servant or s/he is busy doing other assigned works, one of the family members is appointed by either the father or the mother or volunteer to prepare the tea. In this case, there are two main factors which determine who will prepare the tea, namely: age and gender. If the tea is prepared for the family members, the youngest family member is likely to be the one who will prepare the tea. If the tea is prepared for a female guest, the tea maker is female. By the same token, if the guest is male, the tea maker is likely to be male. In the absence of young brothers, the youngest sister prepares the tea but far from the guest's eyes. The tea maker needs the ingredients and the tea set to carry out the ritual. The ingredients of tea consist of green tea (imported from china), sugar, fresh mint leaves and water. The tea set (lemaain in Hassaniya) encompasses tray, small glasses, small tray, teapot, kettle, sugar pot, mint pot, portable gas stove or charcoal ember on a small stove, tea caddy and towel.

The tea maker usually spends one or two hours in preparing the tea. In some cases, the duration of preparing tea, nevertheless, depends on the type and the situation of the person the tea is made for. For instance, if the person is a friend, the tea ceremony should take as much

time as possible. Otherwise, the friend may think that his or her host is busy or does not give him or her much importance. This is because the end of the ceremony suggests his or her departure. If the person is a guest who was travelling, the ritual of preparing tea should take the shortest time possible. This is because the guest needs the tea to alleviate his or her travel fatigue.



Mauritania's tea
("Olamma: Chai Yahmi min Al-Issaba bi Soukari," 2015)

The basic preparation of the tea requires several steps. First, water is poured from the kettle into the teapot, and the teapot is set over charcoal embers on a small stove next to the tea set to boil. When the water boils, the teapot is put on the tray and green tea is added to the water. After one minute, the tea-maker pours the tea into the glasses leaving small amount of it inside the teapot. S/he shakes the teapot and pours out the tea in the basin. This process is called "teshlila" and is meant for rinsing the green tea from possible bitterness. Then, the already full glasses are poured back in the teapot, and more water is added to recompense the water that was poured out in the basin. The

teapot is boiled again over the stove and placed back on the tray. Sugar and mint leaves are added to the teapot, and the tea is poured into glasses then poured back and forth from glasses to the teapot in order to blend the ingredients. The tea-maker tastes the tea seeking optimal flavor, an activity called “rawza.” Then, s/he starts another process referred to as “traghwi,” creating foam. That is, the tea is poured into one glass from the teapot. S/he then pours that glass from two to three feet above the tray into the next glass(s). This practice is done several times in order to generate a thick frothy head in each glass. Then, the glasses are washed out from outside and dried out with the towel. Finally, the tea maker places the glasses on the small tray, half fills each one of them and serves each one of the assembled group a glass. The tea is served in three rounds. That is, the assembled group sits down for three glasses at a sitting.

Conclusion

Mauritanians are not only distinguished by their entire adherence to Islam but also by their faithfulness to their early unique customs and beliefs clothing, drinks and women status. For instance, the custom of force-feeding is still operative and crucial to the Mauritanians. In addition, Mauritanians are known by their traditional clothing and drinks. Whereas men, particularly Arabs, wear loose sleeveless clothing called “daraa,” their female counterparts feature in “melhfa”. Furthermore, while zrig (sour milk, powder-milk or grounded milt mixed with cold water and sugar) is more common among the Arab community members, tea cuts across all ethnics and tribe-based identity.

References

Limam, A. (2011). "A Wedding in the Land of White Moors." Retrieved May 11, 2016 from http://ahmedsuniverse.blogspot.com/2011/07/wedding-in-land-of-white-moors.html

Ouwerkerk, L. (n. d.). "Travels and Advantures along Mauritania's Ancient Caravan Routes." Retrieved May 8, 2016 from http://www.transitionsabroad.com/listings/travel/articles/travel-in-mauritania-africa.shtml

Richardson, L. B. (2010). The World in Your Teacup: Celebrating Tea Traditions, Near and Far. Oregon: Harvest House Publishers.