The (r)urbanization of Mauritania. Historical context and contemporary developments

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1. Introduction

The population of Nouakchott numbers around 745,000 inhabitants, and accounts for approximately one quarter of Mauritania's total population. It is the capital city of one of the multi-ethnic countries of the Sahelo-Saharan region, and was created almost *ex-nihilo* in 1957, three years before the independence of Mauritania. Its growth is symptomatic of the recent transformation of the Mauritanian way of life, which particularly affected the demographically dominant Moorish ethnic group (the *Bīḍān*). This Arabic-speaking population, which was still 95 percent nomadic at the down of the twentieth century, is now 80 percent sedentary. Thus the urbanization of Mauritania is almost contemporarneous with the birth of a multi-lingual nation, the establishment of a modern state and the entry of Africa into the global world.

To understand the sociolinguistic impact of these recent changes, I shall briefly describe pre-modern Moorish society and examine the historical factors that may account for its impressive linguistic and cultural homogeneity. I shall then discuss the relevance of the notion of urbanity and urban spaces in the pre-modern and modern Mauritanian context and highlight some of the most recent sociolinguistic changes.

The (r)urbanization of Mauritania raises the issue of the relationship between bedouinity and urbanity in the Arabic speaking world. It also involves the questions of diversity versus homogeneity, mixing versus boundaries, deviance versus form, and humor versus state-control.

2. Bedouinity and linguistic homogeneity in the Moorish context

With around three million people (three quarters of whom live within Mauritania's borders), the Moorish ethnic group represents a small community inside the Arabic-speaking world. Its linguistic homogeneity may therefore seem normal, but it must be noted that the Moorish territory covers almost two million square kilometers. Low population density and nomadism, the traditional Moorish way of life, seem to go along with a certain linguistic conservatism, as attested in other nomadic Arab societies (Ingham 1979:25). But a number of other historical and social factors might also account for the quite remarkable homogeneity of the Moorish Hassaniyya dialect (*ḥassāniyya*).

2.1 A slow and gradual arabization

For millennia, the West African sahelo-saharan region has been in a contact zone between black populations of sedentary farmers and white populations of nomadic herdsmen. Despite the proximity of the Atlantic coast, no significant contribution came from the coastal environment and thus there were no important differences between West and Central Sahara. The Berber population was, for a long time, common to both regions. Traditional Arabic sources mention the presence of Zenete groups (Tuareg) in Central Sahara and of Zenaga (also now of Ṣanhāja) in West Sahara. Despite a nomber of commun features, each groups seems to have developed independently and had its own specific vernacular.

Until the beginning of the fourteenth century, contacts with Arabs remained limited. The islamization that began in the ninth century went further in the eleven century under the influence of the Almoravid movement. But in this case — quite exceptional in the history of the region — the expansionist movement started from the Berber Sahara and spread to the northern regions, some of which being were already arabized.

The arabization of West Sahara was an indirect consequence of the arrival in North Africa of the Banū Sulaym, Banū Maʿqil and Banū Hilal Arab nomads. The Banū Ḥassān, who gave their name to the Arabic dialect of Mauritania (*ḥassāniyya* or *klām ḥassān*), are a branch of the Banū Maʿqil which was to the begin its slow migration to the south at the end of the thirteenth century leaving significant traces in Morocco. Travellers' reports dating from the four teenth to sixteenth centuries portray a relatively peaceful coexistence between the Berbers and the Arabs, with some cases of interpenetration. No further population influx

followed that of the Banū Ḥassān, and the history of the past five centuries is one of internecine fighting, inter-tribal conflicts and alliances and tribal reconstructions. It resulted in the almost total extinction of the Zenaga language (probably at some time during the nineteenth century, although there is no reliable information on this) and the virtual disappearance of the Berber identity (no one claims to be of Ṣanhāja any more).

Linguistically speaking, a dialect quite closely related to that spoken by the Banū Ḥassān had prevailed. It has of course evolved since the fourteenth century, under the influence of the Berber substrate, but the interesting question is how this evolution has failed to lead to greater internal divergences within such a large geographical area.

The "conservatory" Hassaniyya dialect shows features common to most Arabic Bedouin dialects (/g/ realization of the *qāf*; preservation of interdentals; maintenance of synthetic constructions; imperfective without verbal prefix; simple negation; etc) as well as features peculiar to North African dialects (first person of the imperfective sg. with *n-*; a tendency to reorganize the syllabic structure by dropping the short vowel when in non-final open syllable; the opposition /z/-/ẓ/, etc). But Hassaniyya also has its own specific features such as the use of the particles *lāhi* to express the future, *bīhälli* "because" or *kīv əlli* "as if"; a passive form in *u-* and elative forms in *a-* for the quadriliteral roots and the derived verbs; the creation of a factitive in *s-* for certain derived verbs in *st-* (cf. Taine-Cheikh 1991).

Whatever the origin ot these specific features (whether calques of Zenaga substrates, parallel innovations or original Hassaniyya creations), it is important to note that they are found among all Hassaniyya speakers. This implies a social and cultural setting which favors both the maintenance of the whole linguistic system and the propagation of punctual change. Beyond the geographical isolation factor mentioned above, several points are worth exmining in attempting to explain this linguistic uniformity.

2.2 Social cohesion and cultural identity

The natural environment and the material culture have undergone very few modifications since the arrival of the Banū Ḥassān. Many zenaga words, referring to local cultural practices have been integrated into Hassaniyya, without disrupting the system. The same continuity seems to apply at the social level. The Moorish society had (and still has) a very strong social hierarchy, with the aristocrats at the top and the slaves were at the bottom, while the *ḥrāṭīn* (freed slaves and others) would have a superior status to the dependents, even if the former were

generally 'black' and the latter 'white'. This major opposition was supplemented by two castes: the musicians-singers (the griots *iggāwən*) and the craftsmen-blacksmiths. The Ṣanḥaja society may well have been organised along very similar lines, with the exception of the tributary category (known as *aẓnāgä*) which clearly dates from after the arrival of the Banū Ḥassān. The distinction between warriors (*ḥassān* or, more prestigious, *ˤṛab*) and marabouts or learned (*zwāyä*) establishes a secondary hierarchy within the aristocracy which also follows the arrival of Arab Bedouins.

These hierarchical relationships could have led to a fracturing of the dialect and a limited acquisition of the masters' idiom, particularly in the case of black slaves (and griots, often but not always of former southern "black" origin). It has to be stated however that the nomadic social unit, the camp, included all classes of society, in particular aristocrats, slaves and blacksmiths (as well as griots in the case of the most prestigious warrior tribes). Even if the *ḥṛāṭīn* were relatively independent (and often more sedentary), their villages fall, both economically and politically, within the tribal sphere of influence.

The grouping in sub-groups, groups, and tribes was (and still is) based on (frequently revised), genealogies linked to common ancestors. This could well have brought out linguistic diversification, but uniformity has prevailed, within as well as between the tribes[1]. Tribal entities, sometimes spread across the whole territory, have continually split and recomposed, but have always maintained numerous neighborhood relationships, including the exchange of women in accordance with the rule of female hypergamy)[2]. The rule of competitive equality that reigns between 'aristocrats' of a same group could also have contributed to the limitation of innovations (isn't it abdicating a little bit of one's independency than to adopt 'for free' the way of speaking of someone else?[3]).

Culturally speaking, the total religious unity of the Moorish Sahara (based on the trilogy: Malekism, Ashˤarism (theological theory) and

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[1] Linguistic differentiation can be observed at the margins of Moorish society, either through the more recent arabization process or through the maintenance of Berber–Arabic bilinguism.

[2] The preferred Moorish marriage pattern is with the paternal uncle's daughter (*mint əl-ˤamm*). According to the patrilocality rule, the wife will join her husband' camp. Even when married to a cousin, she can be taken far away from her usual nomadization area.

[3] There is a surprising alliance — which may *a priori* seem against nature but which relates ultimately to the concept of honor — between the anarchic individualism of nomads and the mutual control (or self-control) of individuals by each others. The control exercised by Moorish society with regard to personal injury gives an idea of the control on the language (cf. Taine-Cheikh 2004b).

confraternity) is remarkable, and is paralleled by the unified corpus taught by the *zwāyä*.

The *klām ḥassān* was adopted by everyone at the oral level (as *klām əl-Bīḍān*) due to its prestige, not only as the language of the victorious warriors — the one in which the griots sang their praises — but because, in the eyes of the literate, it benefited from the great privilege of being a "pathway to classical Arabic" (the formula is from a seventeeth century Moorish sage), i.e. to the language of the Quran . Furthermore, the vitality of popular poetry (*finä* and *thäydīn*), with its quite complex quantitative metric, might have contributed to the development of the expressive capacities of Hassaniyya, incidentally providing a means to spread innovations. It has certainly contributed at least to its recognition as a much appreciated means of oral communication.

Finally, one can note that Moorish society in general and the literate in particular — the "ideology professionals" to quote Ould Cheikh (1985) — tend to adopt a negative attitude toward change. This is a fairly common attitude among migrant or peripheral communities as well as among newly converted ones: in the absence of an inheritad legitimacy, they often adopt strong normative attitudes. The Moorish people, in their aspiration toward arabness, sought to distance themselves from their southern neighbors (cf the "Whites/Blacks" opposition of *Bīḍān / Sūdān* in Taine-Cheikh 1989). For all these reasons, the *zwāyä* may have monitored innovations and strongly stigmatized any deviance that might be seen to dilute the "arabness" of the dialect, which was essential to Moorish identity.

The linguistic dynamic observed in Hassaniyya seems to correspond vroadly to the idea of "acceptable" change[4]. The tendenciy (particularity frequent among the *ḥrāṭīn* though but not solely confined to them) to confuse *hamza* and *ᶜayn* or emphatic and non-emphatic consonants (*s ~ ṣ, t ~ ṭ, d ~ ḍ*), is often stigmatized by the *zwāyä* (cf. the realization of *ṭrāb* "earth, ground" among the *ḥrāṭīn* of the south-west)[5].

All in all, it appears that in spite of its geographical spread and social divisions, Moorish Bedouin society was able to maintain its linguistic homogeneity through time and space. Moreover, no linguistic

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[4] The acceptability of the change would especially be dependent on the capacity to preserve synthetic constructions and significant semantic oppositions (the voice, nominal degrees, comparison, etc) as well as phonological opposition (where only the dropping of the *hamza* and the assimilation of the *ḍ* to *ḍ* are regularly admitted).

[5] Those tendencies find their origins, at least partially, in the phonetic of the substrate and it can be noticed that for certain words, the emphatisation/de-emphatisation is present among all the speakers ((*ṣ > s* in *sfīīr* "small" and *s > ṣ* in *ṣaṭla* "iron container").

distinction was prevailing between city-dwellers and Bedouin groups in pre-modern Moorish society.

2.3. Nomadism and caravan cities in pre-colonial era

The mountain (especially the *ḍhaṛ* plateau of Tichît) were the site of an important sedentary settlement during the Neolithic era but, when considering the desert city of the pre-colonial era, it is the image of *kṣaṛ* (or *gṣaṛ*) that comes to mind. A certain continuity between the two types of settlement is possible, since the agricultural workers of the oasis (the *ḥrāṭīn*) may partly be the descendants of an ancient population which inhabited the Sahara even before the arrival of the Berbers.

The meaning of *qṣar/qṣəṛ* "market town" and "small fortified town" is considered as specifically Saharan according to Maghrebi Arabic dictionaries (Beaussier 1958: 807; Colin 1993: 1578). It differs from the classical meaning of *qaṣr* "palace". The Moorish region, beyond Tombouctou in Mali, encompassed around twenty *kṣūṛ* (with not much more than a few hundreds inhabitants each), which ca be divided into two groups. The first *kṣūṛ* were established between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries (Oualata, Tichit, Ouadane and Chinguetti). While Oualata, located at the border of Mauritania and Malia is rather specific, the other three *kṣūṛ* share many similarities with the cities of the second group, founded between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Atar, Tidjikja, Akreyjit, Rachid and Kasr-el-Barka). These were cities of dry stone construciton, located in the mountainous regions of Adrar and Tagant, and associated with palm groves, and had little in common with southern villages (Rosso, Boghé, Kaédi, Sélibaby, etc.) inhabited by the *ähl lə-ḥyūt* (the sedentary Hal Pulaaren, Soninkes and Wolofs). They depended on the caravan trade and in most cases were founded by *zwāya* tribes. Indeed, marabouts not only had control over the economic activities related to the trans-Saharan trade, but they also undertook the intellectual work associated with the teaching and training provided in the *maḥāḍəṛ*[6].

The prosperity of the various caravan cities often rose and fell over time, due either to shifting trade routes or to economic and political conflicts. Internal rivalries often forced part of the population to emigrate and several cities were established in the wake of such internecine struggles (cf. Tidjikja founded by a fraction of the Idawˁali — the "Blacks" — following their expulsion from Chinguetti).

In the cities, tribal intermixing was very limited. Generally, no more than two or three tribes lived in the same city and often in separated

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[6] There were moreover itinerant *maḥāḍəṛ*, housed under canvas— as well as camp libraries that were transported on camel back.

districts. (cf. the names of districts in Oualata). Even Mosques — the only public meeting places — were subject to a certain form of tribal appropriation, for the designation of the imam was in the power of a particular tribe[7].

The *kṣūṛ*, devoid of public places and markets, appear generally as a juxtaposition of houses, completely closed in on themselves, set along winding sand-covered streets. The main function of the ancient cities was to protect the producte of the oasis and the merchandise of the trans-Saharan trade. The surrounding walls made the surveillance of the houses easier when the whole household resumed their nomadic lifestyle with their herd. For most of the *kṣūṛ's zwāya* were only seasonally sedentary. While Oualata developed an urban culture (mural decorations, a more sophisticated cuisine, pottery, craft objects made of particular types of wood, feminine embroidery, etc.), this is not really true of the other *kṣūṛ* which seemed to have served essentially to storehouse functions. The ancient cities then present a rather chaotic and fragmented picture due to their having been essentially conglomerates of family units — independent and interdependent at the same time[8]. From a sociological, economical and cultural point of view, there was no distinction between the city dweller and the nomad. Beyond a certain economic role, the *zāwi* of the *kṣūṛ* remains culturally a bedouin and socially a nomad.

The issue is more complex for the agricultural worker of the palm groves. Their integration within the Moorish world was probably more indirect (Bonte) and led, from a linguistic point of view, to two phenomena:

1 The presence of specific lexical fields (especially relating to palm cultivation   and architecture).
2 The persistence, almost until the twentieth century, of Azayri speakers.

We know very little about Azayr, which was apparently a variety of Soninke mixed with Berber. It may have been either a vernacular Soninke (it was spoken among the Maṣna group which seems to be originated in the south) or a survival of an ancient vernacular language spoken at the time of commercial relations with the Ghana empire. In

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[7] In Ouadane it caused an important tribal conflict (in the 1820s), which was the origin of the construction of a second mosque and the gradual abandonment of the old one.
[8] Independent because each one was large enough to accomodate an extended family, understood as a small camp, and interdependent because families, especially those from the same tribes, were supposed to help each other in case of danger.

any case, these linguistic particularities did not have much affect of the unity of Hassaniyya. In the ancient cities, the Azayr language may have only suffered the fate of Zenaga in the southwest[9], whose role was to resist the Arabic vernacular as best it could and finally to disappear after a transitory period of bilinguism, leaving no more than a few traces in the form of loanwords. Such a phenomenon is certainly no unique but may well be characteristic of a part (often Bedouin?) of the Arab world (cf. Miller 1996).

3. (R)urbanisation and "modernity"

Did the caravan cities contribute to the creation of an urban space? The answer is highly dependent on the definition of "urban". If we follow the Khaldunian paradigm with regard to the distinction between nomadic and sedentary peoples and if bedouinity is equated with the *ʕaṣabiyya* and the nomadic lifestyle, then it appears that urbanity was not only absent from ancient cities but is still largely in its infancy even in a city like Nouakchott (Ould Cheikh 2006). If, on the other hand, the city is considered as "a problem and not an object *a priori*" (Louiset 2001: 232), with the idea that different modes of urbanity co-exist and that not all of them involve a discontinuity between urban and rural (or sedentary and nomadic) peoples, then the answer becomes probably positive both for modern and for ancient cities. If the points of view of anthropologists and geographers tend to diverge, where does the linguist stand? And indded the dialectologist, who knows the usefulness of certain classifications (the reality of the opposition between Bedouin and sedentary dialects, or even the sub-categorisation into rural vs. urban dialects) but who also knows that there is no automatic correspondence between the spoken variety and the current lifestyle?[10]

The prevailing feeling concerning the old Mooreich cities is that they lacked the linguistic specificity that caracterized many North African cities like Fes, Tlemcen and Djidjelli (the famous North African pre-Hilāli city dialects). This of course is due to their completely different history of both arabization and urbanizatino. Until the middle of the twentieth centyru then, Mauritania was characterised by a relatively undifferentiated variety of spoken Arabic (Hassaniyya) with few regional, social or communal variants. But the changes that have occurred during the most recent decades of Mauritanian history have

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[9] The presence of another vernacular language alongside Berber may have accelerated the disappearance of Zenaga, which was dominant in the ancient towns, probably at least until the sixteenth century.

[10] Cf. the case of Baghdad where the Muslim dialect is classified as a former Bedouin dialects, contrary to the Christian and Jewish dialects (cf. Blanc 1964).

had important consequences for the sociolinguistic situation of the country, and particularly for the capital, Nouakchott. This is the very epitome of a modern city, and was originally a relatively controlled space domined by power and public administration. Soon though its status as a city-state led to its transformation into a sprawling city, with rampant development (a kind of octopus-town sucking in all the resources as well as all the poverty of the country).

3.1. Urban spaces and city politics

In Mauritania, the first proto-states entities were the four emirates (Trarza in the southwest, Brakna in the center south, Adrar in the north and Tagant in the center). Offshoots of warlike tribes (and, in three cases out of four, of tribes from Arab origins), the emirates had only an indirect link with the traditional cities describe above. It is only in 1902, with the beginning of French colonization, that cities and villages in Mauritania experienced a real blossoming, due to the physical presence of an embryonic administration.

3.1.1 Cities with two centers

The administrative presence is materialized, in both ancient and modern cities, by the existence of a distinct district, often named *əl-ǯädīdä* (lit. "the new one")[11]. Most of the ancient cities, being located in relatively unaccessible places, did not undergo significant development (with the rare exception of a citiy like Atar, where the French army settled in the 1950s). The new towns, on the other hand, experienced significant growth, even when their creation was due to a purely administrative decision.

The creation of the capital Nouakchott followed the model of Boutilimit, Kiffa or Aleg, each being a city built from scratch in order to satisfy the political or administrative needs of the central power.[12]. In the case of Nouakchott, the first stone was formally laid, as recently as 1957, by Mokhtar Ould Daddah, already acting as the future president for the nascent Republic during a ceremony in the presence of the colonial power. The location was chosen for various reasons, including its proximity to the ocean (to benefit from the sea breeze) and its latitude (far enough north of the Senegal River to give Moorish people the impression of being on their own territory). During the colonial period, it had neen the site of a small village (or *kṣaṛ*, similar in style to

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[11] For more details on the names of districts in small towns, cf. Taine-Cheikh 1998: 79–83).

[12] Only Zouérate and Akjoujt, other recent cities (and the Cansado district of Nouadhibou) were created because of the implantation of the iron and copper mining industries.

the ancient cities) but in 1950 this was almost entirely destroyed by an exceptional flood of the Senegal River. It was then rebuilt on slightly higher ground, to a grid plan, but remained for a long time very far from the city center of Nouakchott.

After extended negotiations and a succession of development plans (for details, cf. Pitte 1977), Nouakchott eventually took the dual form characteristic of African neo-colonial towns. A wide avenue traversed the city from east to west, from the mosque (on the road to the *Kṣaṛ*) to the hospital (on the road to the ocean), each half fulfulling one of the two functions of the town. The different administrative buildings, the presidencial palace, the embassies, and the general headquarters of the notables are located in the north: the *kapitāl/kabbitāl*. The popular neighborhoods with the big market occupy the south: the *mädīnä* (as in Dakar) — or rather the *mädīnä*-s because each block, each *mädīnä*, sports an identifying letter (*mädīnä R*, *mädīnä L*, ...). Everything contributes to set each half of the town in contrast to the other: the size of the plots and of the houses, the width of the streets and the existence or absence of tarmac surfaces. The contrast appears even in the official names given to the streets. For the up market districts and streets, the most prestigious names from world history were chosen (according to the criteria of the time): Gamel Abdel Nasser, Kennedy, De Gaulle, Bourguiba, Gandhi, Lumumba, etc. For the others, in the *mädīnä*, names were drawn from Mauritania's own history, or from the sub-region : Nasser Eddine, Hennoune O. Bouceif, Samori Touré, etc. However, with a few rare exceptions (such as the Gamel Abdel Nasser avenue and, more recently, the Kennedy and De Gaulle Avenue), these names went unused and are now forgotten.

3.1.2 Tarmac roads, 4x4's and donkey carts
If the notion of town centre exists today in Nouakchott, then it corresponds to the urban space occupied in the 1960s, but the town subsequently underwent very rapid exponential growth that the state could never have anticipate, or even follow. The first unexpected influx of people, at the end of the 1960s, corresponds to the mass settlement of nomads that several years of drought had reduced to extreme poverty. But the end of the droought cycle, several years later, did not reverse the trend: the city state of Nouakchott continues inexorably to attract more and more people, seeking their share of power, employment, medical care or education for their children. The following figures (from Ould Cheikh 2006, source: ONS) give an idea of the extraordinary demographic boom seen in Nouakchott over the past forty-five years.

Year	1962	1972	1975	1977	1988	2005
Population	5.807	55.000	130.000	134.704	590.532	743.511

The expansion of the town (whose population grew fourfold between 1974 and 1990) mainly followed the major road axes spreaching out from the capital (the Rosso road to the south, the road known as the "Hope Road" to the east and the Atar Road to the north). Four new districts (El Mina literally "the seaport", Arafat, Riyad — originally *ṛyaḍ* "graves, cemetery" — and Dār Naïm) were created in 1989, supplementing the five *muqāṭaʿāt* already existing (Teyaret, Ksar, Tevragh Zeina, Toujounine and Sebkha). "Star formation" developments along the tarmac roads have transformed some crossroads into new town centrers. Recent plans mention *Kaṛaffūṛ Madrīd*[13] as Nouakchott's center, at the junction of North, East, and South roads: a center displaced from the prosperous neighborhoods of Tevragh Zeina.

The official policy has always been to try to curb as much as possible the arrival of internal migrants, but despite this Nouakchott has continued to grow, wether through the selling of the land (including the theoretically preserved areas), the legalization of informal settlements (*gaẓṛa*[14]) or frequent resignations in the face of the perpetual renewal of shanty towns or "shanty encampments' (*kebbe*[15]). Thus the relationship between planners and politicians on the one hand and inhabitants on the other, is often rather fraught.

Popular unofficial place names humorously reflect these conflicts. They either pun on the way the land was appropriated or make fun of the lifestyle of the local inhabitants. Among the many popular place names are:

- *Mgayẓīra* "the little squatted".
- *Käžž əl-ḥākəm* "(under) the Prefect's nose", a district which was originally a   shanty town located just in front of the Prefect's offices.
- *"Säbḫat Äwlād Nāṣər*, referring to the tribe of the 1980–84 Finance Minister   who is supposed to have shamelessly favored his kinsmen in the distribution   of plots of lands
- The Aouzou strip (fr. "la bande d'Aouzou"), a district with well situated plots theorytically reserved for green spaces, which after much competition ended up in the hands of the military. It is an

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[13] The construction of this turn-around coincided with the visit of the king of Spain to Mauritania.
[14] The tem means "squat" and is a neologism derived from the Hassaniyya root GÅR, from which is derived *gaẓẓaṛ* "to buck".
[15] Lit. "Rubbish dump(s)". The word, borrowed from Hassaniyya, *käßßä*, is the nominal derived from *käḅḅ* "to dump".

allusion in French to the Aouzou territory, a contested area between Libya and Tchad.

- *Las Palmas*, one the rich new neighborhoods established in the 1990s, where the inhabitants are seen as wheeler-dealers accustomed to the casino of the Canary Islands.
- *Mällaḥ mən ḥäyt-ak!* "make your meal salty [with salt] of your wall!" — a popular district where the walls are seriously damaged by the capillary action of the underground water.
- *Bäll w-äžḥaṛ!* "wet it and dig!" — a desperate attempt to build house foundations in dune areas.
- *Nättäg žämbä!* "dig up the skins!" — a necessary preliminary operation for any installation in this district, which adjoins the *l-Baṭwāṛ* "slaughter houses".

These ironic place names (toponyms), which express the local discontent towards the ruling urban elite, reflect a rupture in social relationsships compared to the Bedouin traditions (Taine-Cheikh 1998).

3.2. The arabisation of town's walls

The creation of Nouakchott coincided with the withdrawal of the former colonial power. When Mauritania became independent in 1960, Arabic was the recognized as the new state's national language and French (the former colonial language) as its official language. The newly independent Mauritania aimed to give Arabic the same status as French, making it not only an official administrative language but also, more immediately and concretely, an important language of modern education. The proclaimed parity between Arabic and French was quickly abandoned, for as early as 1980 Arabic was made the only official language. However subsequent policy shifted, according to sectors and periods, between an equal balance between the two languages and a reversal of powers in favour of Arabic[16].

If there is one domain however, where the parity between the two languages has become a reality, it is the road signs and markings of any kinds. At the beginning of the 1990s, almost ten years after the adoption of Arabic as Mauritania's sole official language, shop signs and advertisements hoardings started to become French–Arabic. It gave a serious boost to the profession of calligraphers[17]. Previously, inscriptions on walls had been only in French and were rather rare, limited to official buildings and to certain premises run by foreigners

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[16] On the linguistic policy of Mauritania and its consequences, cf. Taine-Cheikh 2004a.
[17] Until then the profession of calligraphist concerned the copying of Arabic manuscripts — a profession clearly in decline at the end of the twentieth century.

(essentially French and Lebanese–Syrian) like hotels, import-export businesses or grocery shops. All the small trades were in the hands of Moorish people whose shops did not, and still do not, exhibit signs. One of the first shops to ignore this rule was the "Bana Bleu" (Blue Bana), a large, well-stocked shop. It painted on its front wall *Bana Ble*, an approximative transcription of the name given by its French-speaking customers. The term "bana" thus acquired a positive connotation even though originally derived from *bana-bana* a hawker, and *ḅānä-ḅānä*, which in Hassaniyya refers to shoddy goods.

Signs became common at the beginning of the 1990s with the development of the liberal professions (doctors, pharmacists, teachers, etc.). In choosing names, at least for administrative reasons, new offices (in particular pharmacies and clinics), tended to use the propitiatory terms of the Arabic lexicon (abstract names such as "Chiva", "Ennejah", "Dawa", "Elbaraka", "Emel", "Al-avia") or names of famous doctors such as Ibn-Rouchd or Ibn-Sina. Like Mauritanian toponyms or ethnic and personal names, those propitiatory terms, borrowed from classical Arabic, were much easier to write in Arabic script than in latin ones and contributed greatly to the arabization of written signs. In the 1990s, which saw a boom of mural calligraphy, the spelling was not perfect. Ten years later, signs, mural calligraphy and hoardings have progressed, in quantity as well as in quality[18]. They hve changed the face of the city, creating a bilingual written environment in French and (literary) Arabic[19].

3.3 Language contacts and management of boundaries

According to geographers such as J. Levy, urbanity is characterized by the geminate concept "density + diversity" (cf. Louiset 2001: 227–8), and one can wonder how this phenomenon is reflected linguistically. In Mauritania, the homogeneity of Hassaniyya has *de facto* suppressed one of the main sources of linguistic diversity in the Arab world, i.e. dialectal diversity (which has often played a very important role in the history of Arabic urban vernaculars, cf. Miller 2004). Diversity in the Nouakchott context could thus be thought to be limited to the concurrent and often redundant use of written French and Arabic. However, the situation is not that simple and urban Hassanyya speakers are often subjected to various and partially new contacts[20] to whom

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[18] It is also true for French — the shop sign of "Bana bleu" has indeed added the *u* of "bleu".

[19] Certain districts however still exhibit the predominant use of Latin scripts, especially in the district of Sebkha were black-Africans are numerous.

[20] Spatial mixing is however very limited, first because of ethnicism and the "communalization of space" (cf. Choplin 2003: 71–73), second because of the

they tend to react by adopting attitudes unknown in the past. Previously, the different languages (mainly: Hassaniyya, classical Arabic and Zenaga Berber) were rarely mixed and only borrowings and calques that proved essential for inter-communication were accepted[21]. Nowadays the dominant trend is toward the blurring of linguistic as well as stylistic boundaries, through lexical borrowings, language mixing and code-switching. The following are some aspects of this development that tend to affect Hassaniyya traditional norms.

3.3.1 The evolution of Hassaniyya

In Nouakchott, a large part of the Hassaniyya traditional lexicon tends to be no longer used. The younger urban born generations ignore the typical vocabulary of the *bādiyya*, the traditional location of Bedouin life. Particular terms such as *äšäylāl* "pendulum (from a pendulum well)" or *täynnä* "pulley" are totally unknown. Similarly, a large part of the vocabulary relating to plants, livestock, farming and agriculture, and whikh, until the 1960s was still known by the majority of the population, is today scarcely known. Those who do not move outside the urban space have no occasion to use this lexicon and often the gap deepens between younger and older people, the latter being the only ones keeping such vocabulary alive. Poetry is also being slowly forgotten, and given its links with the Bedouin world, one would not expect the *finä* to retain the same appeal for city dwellers as it had for nomads.

In the 1970s and 1980s, one talked about the "Hassaniyya of the 50's" when someone was heard speaking in traditional Hassaniyya with obsolete terms, mostly borrowings from European languages, especially French such as *boṛṭmālä* "coin-purse", *gərmwäyti* "mixed blood", *gläysīs* "spinning", *tilbināṛ* "tribunal" or *tāfiəṭ əs-səkkä* "bank note".

Nowadays, it is the "Hassaniyya of the 70's" referes to the language used by someone who speaks Hassaniyya without any borrowings, thus showing a good knowledge of the expressive resources of the language. Previously, such knowledge was admired and the proficient speaker was known as *uḏn-u bäyḍa* "his ear is white" or *äbäyḍän mən tidinīt wəll Mānu* "more Moorish than Mānu".

Certain lexical fields, those closely related to the traditional life style and values, disappeared while others were introduced as a result of the profond changes that occurred in all the spheres of life — economic,

separation between richer neighborhoods (where inhabitants are in the majority "white" Moorish) and poorer neighborhoods (where the majority of the inhabitants are Black or, almost exclusively, "black" Moors).

[21] Linguistic mixing has always existed in North Africa (cf. Dakhlia 2004), but the degree of mixing has been far from uniform through time and space.

social, political and cultural. But the evolution of language does not reflect communicative needs alone: power and ideology also play a role. The urban lexicon had evolved and integrated dialectal neologisms (cf. *käḅḅä* et *gaẕṛa* mentioned above) as well as french and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) borrowings, with a trend toward the increasing use of the latter.

3.3.2 Middle Arabic as a "modernisation" of the dialect

A new usage of Arabic developed during the period 1968–75 under the influence of Arabic media and the increasing contacts with other Arab countries (of students going abroad and the opening of Arab cultural centers in the capital). Its apparition is clearly linked with political movements. This new usage was clearly associated with political movements. Middle Arabic (*ʕaṛabīya l-wusṭa* lit. "Arabic of the middle") was first introduced among the intellectuals who had received a traditional education, in particular among those influenced by pan-Arabism. If then then spread among a number of young urban students. Indeed, whereas the numerous French speaking educated people of Nouakchott regularly used french in their discussions, the Arabic speakers — often unfamiliar with the oral use of MSA — did not have an adequate means of expression. Unlike Middle-Eastern countries, Mauritania had retained a very traditional Arabic education system, based on the memorization of the Quran and of a great part of the classical Islamic corpus. This left very limited room for free expression, particularly at the oral level, where the scrupulous respect of case and modal markers made the practice of Standard Classical Arabic (SCA) very difficult. The great novelty then was to follow an intermediary path between colloquial and SCA, by dropping those grammatical complexities which did not serve the purposes of communication.

Mauritanian Middle Arabic (MMA) corresponds only partially to what English speaking authors call Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), because, as the dialectal base is fundamentally homogeneous, there is no need to select between the different colloquials realizations. This selection would involve either "purifying" the lowest variety through the removal of its stigmatized features (cf. the affricate realization of a phoneme, the discontinuous variant of the negation and so on, which are associated to the non-prestigious dialect of a local community, often of rural origin), or to abandon the local variety features in favor of koine features, even if the latter are more deviant from the classical norm than the local features (cf. the [ʔ] realization of the *qâf* instead of [q] felt locally as typically Druze in Palva (1982)). MMA can thus appear as a semi-literary variety, fairly comparable to the literary classicized colloquial variety studied by Palva (1969), even though MMA probably remains

closer to the "purely" dialectal base than most of the production considered as ESA, due to the absence of purification tendencies.

The transformations observed in MMA are mainly linked to the introduction of words borrowed from MSA. These borrowings respond to new needs of communication and, with a few exceptions, are not inspired by a desire to raise the style level of the discourse through the use of classical Arabic expressions. Borrowings are generally treated according to the morphological and syntaxic rules of Hassaniyya, thus creating a certain systemic discontinuity between Middle Arabic and Standard Arabic. Examples include: the elimination of cases and modes, a very limited use of TMA (Tense–Modal–Aspect) particles *qad* and *sa-*, the absence of dual form (except for names), a tendency to use the colloquial verbal conjugation such as *n-* first singular imperfective form). But borrowed terms retain their schematic patterns (some are quite rare in Hassaniyya) and their morphology (especially plural nominal forms). At the phonological level they are only partially integrated into Hassaniyya; MMA largely respects the phonological characteristics of classical Arabic: the *ḍād/ḍā'* distinction, the voiceless realization [q] of *qāf*, the regular retention of short vowels in open syllabes (even though the quality of the vowel sometimes changes) and partial retention of the *hamza*. Generally speaking, the phonetic and phonological treatment of the borrowings corresponds to the traditional usage of educated Hassaniyya people, when quoting classical Arabic terms in colloquial speech. However, the use of Standard Arabic is so frequent that the dia-systemic aspects have become the main characteristics of MMA. This tendency is further accentuated by the fact that, in contact with a borrowed noun, the speaker tends to use a more standardized form, even when the dialectal form exists: thus, *käbīr* instead of the dialectal *kbīr* (whit I have called "contiguous arabization", Taine-Cheikh 1978). One may note that while "pure" coloquial forms are frequent and belong to all syntaxic classes, "pure" literary forms, on the contrary, belong to specific categories (adverbs, particles, conjunctions, etc.), which escape morphological variation but often contribute to a complexification of the syntaxic structure. Indeed, verbs and verbal nouns are usually borrowed along with their own particular inflectional regime.

In practice, the use of Middle Arabic is rather limited compared to the use of Hassaniyya, but more frequent than Standard Arabic)[22]. Nevertheless, MMA can be considered as a "mixed dialect" in the sense of Trudgill (1986: 59). It clearly tends, in certain circumstances, to

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[22] It can be reduced to the use of *qaṭʕan* "certainly" and *ṭabʕan* "of course" (expressions on their way to becoming verbal tics).

constitute a third code alongside Classical Standard Arabic and Hassaniyya. This was the case, for instance, with the popular preacher who spoke all three codes perfectly and knew how to alternate them appropriately during his sermons (Taine-Cheikh 2002).

3.3.3 Contacts, mixity and globalization

Despite the spread of Middle Arabic, a great number of the Arabic speaking inhabitants of Nouakchott (especially the *ḥrāṭīn*) speak only one code perfectly: Hassaniyya. However, they are in contact (in town more than elsewhere) with other languages, either oral or written, such as French (and, more recently, English), or quasi written such as classical Arabic, or (almost exclusively) oral such as the Pulaar, Soninke and Wolof, as well as other Arabic dialects heard in the streets or on television.

Compared to "bush" Hassaniyya, urban Hassaniyya (particularly in Nouakchott) is essentially characterised by a greater permeability to borrowings, (in addition to the previously mentioned loss of the "rural" lexicon, which had many old Zenaga loanwords). Borrowings are mainly initiated and reinforced in towns, even though they do sometimes penetrate the Hassaniyya of the "bush". Some old French borrowings are still used, as *ṭāblä* "table" or *ḅombot«ṛ* "pomme de terre"/"potato" whereas others, such as *minyistr* "ministre"/"minister" or *ṛadyo* "radio", have more or less disappeared, having been replaced by their classical Arabic equivalents *wäzīr* and *iḍāʕa*. Other more recent Arabic borrowings betray the influence of Arab media, e.g. *bass?* "That's all?" which has penetrated the vocabulary of some traders. Indeed, the frequency of the borrowings in towns is related not only to the presence of the administration and the modern economic (industrial and commercial) sectors, but also to popular markets and to the numerous activities of the informal sector (cf. the activity of *michelin* which consists in re-inflating tires).

Generally speaking, we note that French borrowings are tending to decrease while, as already mentioned, Standard Arabic borrowings are on the increase and borrowings from local African languages remain extremely limited.

In parallel, the French spoken in Mauritania (Ould Zein et Queffélec 1997) has been enriched by numerous terms directly borrowed from the national languages: *melhafa* (women's veil), *ogla* (shallow well) and *kebbe* (shanty town) borrowed from Hassaniyya, *gordiguene* (gay), and *bana-bana* (poor quality, itinerant petty trader) borrowed from Wolof, *niebe* (variety of bean) or *walo* (fertile lands along the Senegal River) borrowed from Pulaar (Fulani). It is also hospitable to neologisms such

as *enceinter* "to impregnate, i.e. to make someone pregnant" and *cabiner* "to toilet, i.e. to go to the toilet", and to semantic shifts such as *cow boy* "a crafty one, bandit" and *écritoire* "writer, i.e. writing implement: pencil, pen". These are fairly common phenomena but it is nonetheless interesting to note that often the same terms, such as *gordiguene, niebe* and *cow boy* are also used in Hassaniyya, thus bringing closer the lexicons of the two languages.This is an indicator of a phenomenon which, while difficult to quantify, is representative of an increasing trend for languages to "communicate" whith each other. Hitherto, the practice of code-mixing had been restricted to less educated people who had the impression that by resorting to numerous french borrowings they gained in expressivity and modernity. But it seems now to have spread and to have touched even new generations of intellectuals, who are not hesitate to code-switch freely between French and Arabic, even in mid-sentence.

Borrowings and code-switching tend to function as signs of claims to identity. While borrowing responds first to the need to name an object, activity or behaviour, it very often carries a positive or negative connotation which it acquires by reference to the speaker's speech community. The need for modernity and identity is particularly developed within young people's speech communities, and among them, those most open to the outside world or the most marginal groups. It explains why the relatively less spoken languages in Mauritania such as Wolof and English are the ones which nonetheless supply a number of words to Mauritanian French and to Hassaniyya, cf. *tnappi* "to rip somebody off") which was borrowed from Wolof and whose usage is no longer confined to urban delinquents.

From this point of view, among the different urban centers which emerged from the period of colonial administration, the little town of Rosso, located on the Senegal River, (and socially very mixed) is often up with the latest fashion — at the crossroad of Mauritanian and Senegalese fashions[23].

Increasing processes of borrowing and diversification of the source languages have contributed to the "colorful" aspect of urban Hassaniyya. Moreover, code-switching and code-mixing constitute an even clearer break with former linguistic practices. These developments, together with the emergence of Middle Arabic, are the first linguistic results of the upheaval brought about by the multiplication of contacts with the outside worldin an urban environment, despite the

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[23] In quite of a dominant Moorish and hal Pulaaren population, Wolof is the main lingua franca (Fall 1996–97).

maintenance of ethynic and tribal affiliations both within and beyond the city.

The effects of globalization have sometimes been described as "glocalization", in the sense that they produce local from global, and global from local, in a simultaneous process of heterogenization-homogenization. It seems to me that, with regard to linguistic practices, "glocalization" manifests itself first in the increasing diffusion of Arabic and French in society (i.e. the globalization–homogenization facet) and, second, in the development of phenomena of diversification and pluralism — borrowing, code-switching, code-mixing — (i.e. the localization-heterogenization facet).

While the phenomenon is not limited to Mauritania, it is characteristic of at least the recent history of the country and contemporary with its recent urbanization.

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