

WOMEN IN MAURITANIA

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The reason which gave rise to this study was the 1970-1980 drought in Mauritania, which caused male migration, hence unprecedented disruption in Mauritanian society. Women were either abandoned or became *de facto* heads-of-households.

Mauritania is an African country, recently freed from French colonization. Its official name is the «Islamic Republic of Mauritania». Area: 419,229 square miles; population around 1,500,000. Social conditions in this country present a complex background of ethnic groups, tribes, classes and castes which are continuously confused and are not easy to define. The class-system prevailing in the country creates barriers and stereotypes which tend to hinder normal progress.

The Maures are divided into Bidan (white Maures) and Haratin (black Maures). The Bidan comprise the Mauritanian nobility, made up of the Zawaya or Marabout groups (those with religious training and functions), and the Hassaniya, a warrior group. To them are attached the Zenaga (free tributary or vassal

groups), Muallimin (craftsmen), the Ighyuwm (entertainers), all of whom are of inferior rank.

The population consists of four categories of men and women:

- 1) free people, including nobles and commoners;
- 2) casted people including craftsmen, artisans and entertainers;
- 3) freed people: former slaves;
- 4) slaves or captives

The Black Maures (Haratin) are freed slaves who are held in low esteem but still higher than the Zenaga. They live as an integrated part of larger Bidan (white) encampments, or work as herders or in settled agricultural communities.

There are other divisions of the population, identified by their traditional occupation, which means that the occupation of the individual indicates the group or the sub-group to which he belongs. Examples:

- 1) The Tourcouleur: agricultural groups, divided into freemen, artisans and captives.
- 2) The Peulh: semi-itinerant cattle-owning class, equivalent to Tourcouleur religious nobles.
- 3) The Soninke: traders and laborers.

The above social divisions and subdivisions indicate that the Mauritians still adhere to an archaic culture of which certain aspects persist in conservative societies, more particularly in developing countries. It is the class-system in which religious leaders and warriors occupy the highest rank, the first, because they are the keepers of the faith which they are supposed to pass unto posterity. As such, they are the privileged recipients of tributes in money and goods from all those who follow Islam. They do not do any other activity because they consider work below their dignity. The same principle applies to warriors, the Hassani noblemen, who live from tribute and pillage and perform no work apart from fighting.

The noble class: religious leaders and warriors, look down on craftsmanship and manual work, which is performed by slaves, freed slaves or people unwilling to accept or defend Islam during the religious wars and who, through respect to the conquering or returning warriors (nobles), consented to serve the warriors' family needs.

How did slavery originate?

When a fight took place, the stronger men captured the weaker ones, turned them into slaves or sold them. These captives had to work very hard and recover their freedom at a heavy price. Freed slaves, however, do not enjoy the same social status as free men and nobles.

STATUS OF WOMEN

Women are equally divided into Bidan and Haratin, noblewomen and servile women, free women and slaves. The first belong to the Zawaya or Hassani groups. They are preeminently managers and supervisors of tent and camp labor performed by Haratin (black), Zenaga and other artisan groups.

The status of the Bidan woman is expressed by the degree of her inactivity, since inactivity demon-

Development of 3-6 year old children

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responses showed that their role was insignificant. The physical needs of the child absorbed most of their time while the moral and intellectual needs were neglected.

On the other hand, investigation regarding mothers' knowledge on nutrition and health practices revealed their awareness of such matters, but there was no evidence of practicing this knowledge.

Data regarding the child's cognitive development were reported on 205 children whose ages ranged between 3 and 6 years. The results revealed differences in scores of children with respect to type of settlement. The five-year-olds of the large villages achieved higher scores than those of the small villages, while Beirut's five-year-olds scored higher than those of suburbs and towns.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The study which has been hereby briefly presented gave indications of existing differences and similarities among the various areas of Lebanon. Discrepancies exist with respect to institutional structures, community services, basic living facilities and standards of living in the different settlements. Some areas, such as Akkar and the Beqa'a, suffered most from the absence of community services.

Another result of the study was to confirm the feasibility of the proposed strategy for the assessment of Lebanese preschoolers' priority needs.

trates the wealth of her family. The sedentarization of those Bidan women limits their awareness and knowledge of productive activities. Force feeding or «gavage» condemns them to immobility and obesity. This condition makes them physically inferior and less prolific than Haratin women. As a result, noblemen often marry Haratin women or take them as concubines because they are physically more resistant.

The major part of the study is devoted to a detailed report about women's activities, their economic status and the laws regulating this status, the problems which women had to face as a result of the 1970-1980 drought and the male migration which followed. During the last ten years, the population has changed from being 2/3 nomad, 1/3 sedentary to the opposite status: 2/3 sedentary, 1/3 nomad.

Women's role as income earners is determined through both ethnic ascription and a relevant production system. In household production, their role is considered secondary or complementary, yet important and necessary. They participate in all kinds of occupations: uncasted ones such as cropping, gathering, livestock and herding activities, in which Tourcouleur and Peulh women take part; and casted occupations, such as fishing, artisan occupations and servile tasks.

The drought and the resulting effects obliged many rural women to seek employment in the capital, Nouakchott, where they performed paid domestic labor and practiced some business. Protracted drought accelerated migration and sedentarization created new cultivation activities and increased productive activity of women. On the other hand, it decreased the economic exchange value of women's products relative to the value of men's urban wage-earning. It also created the problem of declining yield and increased women's dependence on migrant remittances, merchant credit and aid.

The recommendations derived from general observations on the orientation of government and donor assistance are summarized in the following initial paragraphs of page 95:

«The major drought-period focus of government and donor assistance efforts has been the provision of food and medical services and goods to urban and rural populations. Women have been addressed, through the extension of health care and nutritional services, as part of a services recipient population. These relatively well-financed programs have as their principal objective the amelioration of living conditions and, as a long-term goal, the instruction of women in adaptive nutrition and childcare...»

«In contrast, projects addressing women as income earners and producers have received meager support. Subsequent to the change in national development policies, the opportunity for wage-earning activities, through state-financed industrial investment programs have diminished for the population as a whole, and for women in particular.»