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**From the Disappearance of 'Tribes' to Reawakening of the Tribal
Feeling : Strategies of State among the Formerly Nomadic *Bidân*
(Arabophone) of Mauritania¹**

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“Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes.”
(Hobsbawm 1983, p. 5).

“More interesting (...) is the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite
novel purposes.” (Hobsbawm 1983, p. 6).

This essay will attempt a broad outline of the strategies of State employed in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The nomadic population there is organized into kinship groups, or corporated groups called *qabâ'il* (sing. *qabila*) or ‘tribes.’ —even if the ‘tribe’ is not a ‘total society’, but —as Emanuel Marx suggest (in this volume)—“it is merely one of a variety of organizations in which the nomad [or the formerly nomad] participates. ” These groups underwent considerable restructuring during the period of French colonial rule (from the end of the nineteenth 19th century to 1960) and over the half-century since Independence (1960).

At the founding of the new State, 80 % of the population were nomadic. Today in 2004 nomads compose only 8 % percent of the 2.8 million Mauritaniens (Villasante Cervello 2002a, p. 9). The analysis will trace historically the principle paths of State chosen by the ruling elites of a country colonized in a most uneven manner by France, but where discourse and the politics of nation-state construction have been inspired nevertheless by French Jacobinism. In Mauritania, as in most North African and Near Eastern countries, the western model of the State seems not to have declined as foreseen by Eric Hobsbawm (1990). To the contrary, centralized administration, national frontiers, and the expansion of government control over the entirety of the territory under uniform laws represent the principal objectives that most ruling elite will seek in the near future.

Nevertheless, two important aspects of the construction of State and nation are lacking in Mauritania: direct administration that is independent of the mediation of customary chieftaincies; and the full and effective adoption of the democratic principle. An initial phase in which government displayed a political will to abolish ‘tribes’ (1960 to 1986) gave way to a phase where government, while officially condemning tribal politics and ethnic conflict, utilizes these particularistic solidarities to control the population and maintain its own dominance and that of nationalistic and liberal classes.

Colonial Strategies of Popular Control and the Emergence of a New Saharan State with a Nomadic Majority.

From its creation in 1902, the *Territoire Civil de Mauritanie* was based on the principle of racial separation between “*Maures*” [Moors in english] (sub-divided into two categories: *Blancs* and *Noirs*) living to the north of the Senegal river and “*Noirs africains*” in the south. However the people of the western Saharan territories, both pastoral nomads and dwellers of the centuries-old towns, products of a prolonged intermingling of African, Berber and Arab populations, identified themselves by the Arabic term *Bidân* (sing. m. *Bidâni*; sing. f. *Bidâniyya*). In an ethnic context this term translates “those who speak *Hassâniyya*,” the regional Arabic dialect. As a status term *Bidân* denotes ‘free and noble’ men within this society, in contrast to those of servile status known as *hrâtîn*². The French term “*Maure*” continues in use by some contemporary authors overly influenced by colonial conceptions of the country and its inhabitants³.

The colonial policy of organizing the population according to racial categories went hand-in-hand with racialist assumptions about the “attributes” and “vices” peculiar to each race. Like all nomads, the “*Maures*,” were seen as savage, bloodthirsty, lazy, and prone to lying and hypocrisy. The “*Noirs*” were seen as docile, stupid, easily manipulated and timid. The legacy of such clichés and prejudices remains strong in contemporary social life and largely accounts for the continuing ethnic struggles (Villasante-de Beauvais 2001; Villasante Cervello 2003). Within the new colonial space, French administrators attributed political power and territorial dominance to the *Bidân* to the detriment of the African communities. The latter, who constitute a majority in Senegal and Mali, began very early to demand greater political representation within the organs of colonial, and then State, power in Mauritania.

The impact of French colonial policy differed from one region to the next. Control over populations was stronger in the Southwest (*al-gibla* in *Hassâniyya*) and in the region of the Senegal River inhabited by sedentary *Wolof*, *Tukolor* and *Soninke* communities than in the north (Adrar) or the East (*al-sharg* in *Hassâniyya*, Assaba and Hawd). Nevertheless after several decades of colonial presence, and especially after 1945, both *Bidân* nomads and sedentary Africans had undergone profound transformations of social and political structures and of the manner of social representation of these structures.

The colonizers did not seek abrupt changes of political and social organization. Still less did they wish call into question the status hierarchy that separated free and servile groups, the principal foundation on which rested the social structure of groups in all the various locales of Mauritania. Rather, they believed in the necessity of introducing transformations slowly and progressively and were quite optimistic about the long-term influence of French civilization both in Mauritania and throughout Africa.

To administer these populations, the colonizers compiled fairly precise registers of the socio-political jurisdictions, the “tribes,” “ethnicities” and “emirates.” On the basis of these registers they conducted censuses of the population and established lists of members of the chieftaincies and the jurisdictions of local notables, with the “emirs” occupying a special position. They strove to create a system in which indigenous chiefs served as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the *petit peuple* and were compensated for their collaboration (See Villasante 1995, 1998, forthcoming a).

Cognizant of the importance of systems of local power, the administrators decided to fix the number of *émirats maures* which they regarded as quasi-States, at four: Trarza, Brakna, Adrar and Tagant⁴. The theme of emirates has garnered an inordinate amount of attention in comparison to their historical and political reality (R. Taylor, 1996; 2001), a fact which seems to attest the ongoing influence of the ideological and historical heritage of colonialism and orientalism (in the sense used by E. Said, 1978) on some authors who have written very prolifically on this theme⁵.

This internal restructuring of chieftaincies and of customary frameworks in general led to a real loss of political autonomy for the great majority of *Bidân* and African groups. If they were still able to choose their chiefs and notables, these had nevertheless to be approved by the colonizers in order to exercise their functions. It might also happen that the administration would not ratify the local choice but would impose its own candidates for positions of traditional authority.⁶ This strategy for controlling the nomadic populations would leave deep traces in independent Mauritania.

‘The tribes must disappear and the nomads become sedentary’ : Authoritarian State strategies of Ould Daddah, 1960-1978.

With Following independence a modern State based on the a western model was instituted, at least formally, in Mauritania, together with the accompanying mechanisms of political control: Constitution, elections, political parties, public offices, and the national army. This modernization of the administrative apparatus was among the early initiatives of Mukhtar Ould Daddah (d. 2003), the first president of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, who would be driven from power by a military coup in 1978.

Between 1960 and 1978, Ould Daddah set as his central task the construction of the Mauritanian nation, an essential foundation of the modern State. From this followed new ideological, political and social orientations intended to re-order ‘archaic’ social patterns and particularistic solidarities (segmentary, ethnic) in a way that favored the State and advanced new concepts of Mauritanian citizenship and nationality. Nevertheless the construction of the Mauritanian State during the first decade did not involve radical changes in the social and political life of Mauritania. Rather, these years were marked by continuity with the preceding colonial period. In fact, the State administration remained little poorly developed, especially in the interior of the country where approximately ninety percent 90 per cent of the population lived. This State-of-affairs changed fundamentally only with the great Sahelian drought of the 1970s. From that time forward, the State would provide the frame of reference around which a reorganization of customary politics, and of the social representations of political power, would proceed. (Villasante-de Beauvais 1998a, p. 133).

In Mauritania as in other desert countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt), the decade of the 1960s was marked by the introduction of programs of development and of broad-based social modernization —economic liberalism, the valuing of education, and modern individualism. The great majority of Mauritania still made their livelihood from pastoral activities, whether nomadic or semi-nomadic, while the minority African communities who lived mostly in the valley of the Senegal River practiced agriculture. For the Arab States and members of the Arab League, the great objective of development was the sedentarization of

nomads and the colonization of desert territories for agriculture (Cole & Altorki, 1998, p. 97-98). According to these authors: “*However, the formulation of these goals by both Arab and international experts was almost never based on the results of empirical field research but was guided by politics and, in some cases, by prejudice (see Bocco 1993, p. 327-332).*”

As Cole and Altorki (1998) note, the nomadic way of life poses real problems for modern States whose frontiers were drawn *ex-nihilo* by colonizers. Nomadic groups traverse these frontiers for a great many reasons: to pursue their movements of transhumance; to visit kin or attend interregional markets. Thus in Mauritania nomadic groups easily crossed the eastern frontier with Mali, the southern frontier with Senegal, and the northern frontier with the Spanish Sahara. The latter frontier was undefined until 1975 when the colony was abandoned by Spain and became the subject of claims by Morocco, Mauritania and the local Sahrawi population, claims that unleashed a Saharan war whose final settlement is still uncertain.

For the regime of Ould Daddah, the priority of modern development was not so much the sedentarization of nomads—although this was to be encouraged—but rather the disappearance of tribes and traditional powers. These were to be replaced by the emergence of a modern political class organized within the national party, the *Parti du Peuple Mauritanien* (PPM). Sedentarization, along with the liberation *en masse* of slaves, would that occurred in the 1970s and was not the result of any government policy but of the effects of the Sahelian drought.

After independence, Ould Daddah set as his key objectives to consolidate his political power and build the Mauritanian nation-State. To achieve this, he chose a strategy based in part on permanent negotiation with the diverse political tendencies within the country and in part by imposing, in authoritarian fashion, the will of his small government staff. In May 1961, the President succeeded in adopting a new Constitution, based on a presidential model, that ran counter to the principles of the original Constitution of 1959, especially as regards the guarantee of a multiparty system. Henceforth the executive power predominated to the detriment of the legislative: the President of the Republic assumed at once the functions of Head of State and Chief of Government. Under the terms of this new Constitution Ould Daddah had himself elected President of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania on August 20, 1961. At the end of that year, all existing parties were dissolved into the PPM which was destined to order the entirety of Mauritanian political life until 1978. As in some other African countries, the embryonic democratic system was overtaken by the single-party State. However the latter was not entirely monolithic and political confrontations took place within the government of Ould Daddah. These confrontations pitted the more conservative tendencies of society, as represented by the parliamentary Deputies of the customary realm (*notables coutumiers*, or ‘tribal elites’) who clung to prerogatives inherited from colonization, against more radical and modernizing tendencies represented by the partisans of the President, young westernized cadres like himself westernized.

In this political context the first Congress of the PPM was held at Nouakchott on March 25, 1963. In order to prevent the development of customary rivalries, Ould Daddah had Congress vote to suppress traditional chieftaincies “by attrition” (*par voie d’extinction*). This formula signaled that sitting customary chiefs would remain in their positions of

traditional authority and, being recognized by the government of Ould Daddah, would continue to draw their pay just as they had done in colonial times. However, as these chiefs died they would no longer be replaced by successors, and the chieftaincy would be abolished. Consequently the chieftaincies would become extinct and be replaced, according to government plans, by organs of the State. At the same time, Ould Daddah pushed through a measure to end the financial autonomy of the National Assembly in order to counter the emergence of factions among the deputies. The deputies could no longer act contrary to the decisions of the Chief of State.

Under pressure from Ould Daddah there was, for a time, a nearly complete overhaul of the Mauritanian political class. Customary notables were replaced by young cadres educated mostly in France. The objective was to impose the doctrine of the party “based on discipline and respect for hierarchy” (Règlement intérieur du PPM, article 59, 1963). The hierarchical organs of the party were the Congress, the National Council, the National Political Bureau, the Sections of the party (urban and rural), and finally the Committees of the party organized at the level of urban quarters, villages and nomadic camps. The imposition of discipline among party members required their complete political submission. Political activities outside the party framework (whether of a personal nature, or based on patronage or ethnicity) could lead to expulsion.

However, this new logic of the party was never effectively implemented. At the National Congress of Aioun-el-Atrous in 1966, Ould Daddah himself had to admit that “*tribalism and regionalism [remained] strong within the party.*” A report by the Commission on Status of the National Political Bureau went so far as to concede the necessity “*to realign the Party with the tribal level, as that alone is real.*” (Cited by Marchesin, 1992, p. 127, Villasante-de Beauvais, 1998a, p. 143). It was futile to attempt to construct a party outside the customary framework, especially given that popular allegiances to the PPM were mediated by customary chiefs. After a brief interruption, the latter would return to the official political scene and take up posts within the PPM and government. Their direct participation in national political affairs developed side-by-side with their activities in customary mediation.

Drought, Food Aid and Customary Chiefs

Despite the Ould Daddah regime’s authoritarian efforts to effect social transformation, the real modernization of Mauritanian society came as a direct consequence of the Sahelian drought that began in the 1970s, the effects of which continue today. As in other arid countries, the consequences of sustained drought are maybe irreversible. In Mauritania it transformed the nomadic and pastoral way of life and led to the massive sedentarization of the *Bidân* and the emancipation of slaves and former slaves. While desertification is certainly an ancient phenomenon in the Sahara and many episodes of drought were recorded in the nineteenth 19th and twentieth 20th centuries, these did not produce the devastating effects of recent times. The factors of global change were not present prior to the 20th twentieth century, among these the expanding dependence on capitalist market economies and new, Western consumer goods that produced a major transformation in the pastoral and nomadic lifestyle.

The initial period of the great drought witnessed a massive movement of rural exodus and sedentarization. Impoverished and famished *Bidân* went in search of emergency food and

health aid that was distributed (since the 1970s until today) along the *Route de l'Espoir*—a highway that runs from the capital to the town of Nema in the far eastern part of the country—and in the regional capitals. International organizations began distributing aid in 1968. The Mauritanian government did not begin to intervene directly until 1973. From that date until the fall of the Ould Daddah regime in 1978, the PPM provided the organizational framework for food and health assistance. Subsequent military regimes deployed another governmental body to assure delivery, the *Structures d'éducation des masses* (SEM). In turn, the latter would be replaced during the regime of Ould Sid'Ahmad Taya by the *Comité à la Sécurité Alimentaire* (CSA) which is still active in 2004.

Elsewhere I have suggested (Villasante-de Beauvais, 1995, 1998a) that the system of food aid established by the Mauritanian State to assist populations hurt impacted by drought permitted an integral relationship to develop between the national administration and the Mauritanian people, for the first time in the country's history. It was from these years of upheaval in the Mauritanian way of life that the organization of the State and the organization of the customary, segmentary and ethnic realms grew more deeply and irreversibly intertwined. These two organizations fed one another in a hierarchical relationship characterized by the dominance of a logic of State over a customary logic.

The linkage between the national administration and the Mauritanian people developed, as always, through the mediation of chieftaincies and local notables. The latter had in many cases been installed in their posts by the French colonizers. It was they who determined the locations where sedentarization took place (near oases or dry-season wells) and they alone who enjoyed close, day-to-day ties to the nomadic rural populations. The customary notables were expected to provide information on the total numbers of people in their groups. These head counts, however summary and unreliable, were used by governmental bodies and foreign non-governmental agencies (NGOs) in distributing food, medicine and clothing. By means of this process the old clientage networks that linked the notables to the common people and to the agents of national administration were revalidated, but alongside these appeared new clientage networks based on more modern activities. On one hand, there were networks of merchants and businessmen or women who were able to profit from the climatic crisis by speculating in items of emergency aid. On the other hand one witnessed the rise of 'new notables,' both young and educated, who tried to replace customary notables whose legitimacy was based on noble genealogies. Thus merchants and young cadres represent a new stratum of village or urban notables born in the aftermath of the great Sahelian drought. Finally, these two groups defied and competed openly with customary chieftaincies in building factions whose objectives were no longer the defense of group honor, but the rapid development of bases of power that would enable them to obtain benefits from the government, their most reliable ally. In the context of poverty and increasing misery, drought and sedentarization led to a reversal of social values, formerly based on the defense of collective and personal honor as legitimated by genealogy and personal qualities. In our day these older values were replaced by the quest for consumer goods, salaries and—more prosaically, money and gifts—dispensed by the State, by powerful protectors, or by generous patrons in search of clients. (Villasante Cervello, 2002a).

A major effect of the drought was the growing dependence upon the capitalist economic market. Nomads settled down not only because climatic conditions rendered impossible

the pursuit of pastoral activities, but also—and especially after the 1990s—because they wanted to find salaried employment, live near public services such as schools and hospitals, and access food more readily. The dependence upon the capitalist market of the Mauritanian economy also led to a deepening of social conflicts over land suitable for agriculture in the region of the Senegal River. These conflicts opposed, on one hand, *Bidân* entrepreneurs with the financial means to develop the land (notably through rice cultivation), on the otherhand African peasant farmers (Halpular'en and Soninke) whom the State expropriated if they lacked the means to exploit their lands in a “modern” fashion (Villasante-de Beauvais 1991, 2000).

In conclusion, one may say that the authoritarian attempts on the part of the Ould Daddah regime to eradicate the pre-State segmentary organization were unsuccessful, but the beginnings of a State organization spread within the national territory. The customary segmentary organization continued to evolve within the new framework of modernization introduced by the drought. Henceforth new individualistic values of the capitalist economic system would supplement the old collective values (Dumont, 1983). Simultaneously, the political role of customary chiefs weakened and a great number of *qabâ'il* were unable to withstand the challenge of drought and the subsequent loss of their means of pastoral subsistence. This was especially so with chieftaincies located in areas most severely affected by the drought, the southwest (*gibla*) and the north (Adrar, Western Sahara), where many *Bidân* groups were completely destroyed. Whereas In contrast in the east of the country (*sharg*) the replenishment of pastures permitted some pastoral activities to continue among some remaining nomads. It is here that the *Bidân* groups are today the best organized politically. They are also steadfast in their support of the established political order.

The Military Regimes: Between Institutional Void and Social Reforms

In 1978 a coup brought down the Ould Daddah regime and inaugurated the period of military rule. The justification for the *Coup d'État* was the decision to withdraw Mauritania from a Saharan war [against *Saharaouis*] in which the country had participated since 1975 in an effort to secure claim to portions of the former Spanish Sahara. Ould Daddah had counted these territories as part of the “Great Mauritanian Homeland” (*la grande patrie mauritanienne*). Indeed the Sahrawi inhabitants have *bidân* culture and spoke the same *Hassâniyya* dialect, while many criss-crossed the colonial and national boundaries in their nomadic movements.

The successive military governments between 1978 and 1984 were unstable, chaotic, dominated by struggles between military powers that pursued personal goals of monopolizing power. Overall these were years of institutional void, censorship and repression of all forms of political association in which the State administration grew estranged from the Mauritanian population.

The first military regime was that of Mustafa Ould Mohammed Saleck (1978-1979) whose chief concern was to distinguish himself from the government of Ould Daddah, whom he labeled as a modernist of socialist tendencies. He extolled the ‘return to traditions,’ to Islam in particular. Such language formed part of a euphemistic discourse of which Ould Daddah had himself availed when he spoke of the re-personalization of the Mauritanian

man” and the ‘return to authenticity.’ The current President Ould Sid Ahmed Taya evoked the same in 1993 when he called for the ‘return to the sources of tradition.’

In these governmental usages, the term tradition evokes old social values (founded on honor and nobility of origins) and the nomadic pastoral or agricultural way of life, values still upheld by the common people of Mauritania. In this manner, the utilization of this ideological and symbolic material by Mauritanian governments leads to the establishment of new traditions on the foundation, purportedly, of old ones—or rather, of modern conceptions of the traditional practices that may have pre-dated colonialism. This construction of an idealized Mauritanian past is bound up with new political objectives (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 6), in this case to manipulate the Mauritanian public that seeks reassurance of the validity of its historical beliefs in which are rooted its contemporary sense of identity and dignity. Thus the traditional past, imagined and idealized in the sense of Benedict Anderson (1983), is pressed into service by Mauritanian governments in a context of social crisis. This crisis was engendered by drought, the threat of military coups (the most recent a *coup d'Etat* attempt was made in June 2003 for example), and by resurgent conflicts along ethnic lines (between majority Arabophones and the African minority) or status lines (between free *Bidân* groups and *hrâtîn* servile groups who comprise half of the Mauritanian *Bidân*).

Following the brief turn stint in power by of another lieutenant-colonel, Ahmed Ould Busayf, who ruled from April through May, 1979, with support from the pro-Moroccan faction in government, power then passed to Mohammed Khuna Ould Haidallah, a pro-Polisario leader who remained in office until December, 1984. Ould Haidallah’s political strategy was less chaotic than his predecessors’. First, he concluded a peace accord between Mauritania and the Polisario Front on June 5, 1979 and inaugurated the period of Mauritanian neutrality in this ongoing conflict that is still unresolved. Second, he slowed the pace of the education reforms initiated in 1973 and intended to impose Arabic as the language of instruction. Africans students had organized strikes to oppose this measure, the objective of which was to homogenize Mauritanian cultural referents around Arabism. Themes of language and identity would be at the heart of subsequent political struggles.

Despite the unsettled context, Ould Haidallah adopted two social reforms that would be of decisive importance for Mauritania. The first was the Law of Abolition of Slavery, promulgated June 5, 1980. Next came the Law of Land Reform on June 5, 1983. In 1981, Ould Haidallah had created a new governmental agency, the *Structure d’Education de Masses* (SEM), intended to fill a political gap that had existed since the installation of military rule. Henceforth customary chiefs would make haste to align themselves with what had been conceived as “the new single party” that took up the task of distributing food aid, the major stake of power politics in the interior of the country. (Villasante-de Beauvais 1998a, p 190; 1999b).

Then as now, social hierarchies in Mauritania separated free men from those of servile status, both amongst the *Bidân* and the African communities.⁷ By the terms of this central cleavage in Mauritanian social organization, the appropriation of agricultural lands, wells and oases are reserved for free men to the exclusion of servile groups, who themselves represent the main source of agricultural labor (Villasante-de Beauvais 1991, 2000a).

The two reforms of the Ould Haidallah government aimed to achieve an egalitarian social transformation that was unprecedented in the country. These reforms were promoted within the country by the *Mouvement El-Hor* (The Free Man), a movement championing the rights of former slaves (whether actual or putative) known as *hrâtîn* (sing. *hartâni*) whom the colonizers had called 'Black Moors.' The movement emerged at the end of the 1970s in the context of massive self-liberation of servile groups who abandoned former masters ruined by the drought and incapable of supporting them. Augmenting this internal pressure was international pressure as reports appeared during these years documenting in detail the survival of domestic slavery in Mauritania⁸.

It should be noted that these two laws did not succeed in forcing major changes in the condition slaves and former slaves, nor in their free access to the lands they farmed. The Law of Abolition of Slavery did at least end the official denial of the continuation of slavery—a subject on which Ould Daddah had been silent—even if the means were lacking to enforce it.

However, it proved ineffective and too minimal truly to truly transform the statutory condition of the nearly one million peoplersons who were subject to extreme forms of dependency. Of the nearly three million Mauritians, one could estimate that the Arabophone population constitutes two and one a half million, of whom more than a million might be classified as of servile status. (Villasante Cervello, 2002a). The ineffectiveness of this law is evident when one considers that it would take another twenty-three years before it was officially decreed to be in force on June 4, 2003⁹.

The Land Reform law, initially intended to benefit the most disadvantaged strata of society, the servile cultivators, also proved ineffectual. The goal of modernizing Mauritanian agriculture by means of expanding commercial agriculture (particularly of rice, notably) took precedence over land reform. Measures to promote the development of lands benefited most the urban-based entrepreneurs who had the resources to invest in agricultural schemes. Further these schemes that sometimes entailed the expropriation of collective lands in the Senegal Valley that had belonged to African peasant farmers.

Democratization imposed on a “reawakening of the tribal feeling”. The regime of Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya, 1984-2003.

The social, economic and political transformations initiated during the time of the Ould Daddah government continued to deepen in the period that followed. In fact we see a movement away from authoritarian attempts to impose western modernity toward the manipulation of customary forms of belonging (ethnic and tribal) for political ends. The new practices of President Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya imply the paradoxical notion that democratization of the country must proceed by the reawakening of the tribal feeling (*réveil de la fibre tribale*) and the ‘tribalisms’ that accompany it. Nonetheless the government remains officially committed to the principle that particularistic communities (ethnic, tribal, racial) must disappear in order to build the Mauritanian nation.

Factional struggles within the military, which had never fully subsided, broke out with renewed force in December, 1984. On December 12, a *coup d’État* within the army brought Lieutenant-Colonel Maauya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya to the head of State. He would go on to be elected with universal suffrage in 1992 and by 2004 has been re-elected a further twice since. The new generation of military leaders would take greater care to

maintain political recognition abroad, not only because this was seen as the principal source of internal legitimacy but also because the African political context had begun to change and authoritarian governments and dictators would no longer receive support from the Eastern Bloc. That is why the official explanation of the 1984 coup—one that evoked the supposed ‘tribalism’ [as opposed to modern democracy] of the Ould Haidallah government—received international acceptance and recognition, particularly in France.

Beginning in 1984 the new government of Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya announced a ‘return to democracy’ that would begin with the holding of municipal elections (1986) and lead to presidential elections with universal suffrage (1992). Elections were to coincide with the establishment of civil liberties, notably freedom of expression and of an independent press (since independence, the whole of the media—radio, newspapers, television—had been placed under State authority and there had existed only one official newspaper, *el-Shaab/Le Chaab*).

The process was one of installing democracy by governmental decree rather than by popular initiative. From the beginning it was marked by deepening of struggles over status classification among groups within Mauritanian society in the throes of modernization. These struggles of classification—struggles over political power in this sense discussed by Pierre Bourdieu (1982)—concerned on one hand the degree to which *Bidân* ‘tribes’ would play a central role in the regime, and on the other hand the hierarchical positioning of marginal and marginalized social groups such as *hrâtîn* or ‘former slaves’ and members of the non-Arabophone African communities.

In Mauritanian society, the hierarchical classification inherited from colonization placed *Bidân* Arabophone groups (organized in ‘tribes’) at the center of political, economic and social power. However, these ‘tribes’ were not of equal rank, neither on a national scale nor within their respective regions of origin within the country. Certainly, from an external point of view the collective solidarity and social cohesion among members allowed them to perceive themselves, and be perceived by other ‘tribes,’ as of equal status. But viewed internally each group was divided into fractions and lineages—whether cemented by common descent or political alliance—that occupied provided a distinctive rank (more fluid than status) within the larger collective. The hierarchy of the *Bidân* social system was, and remains, more readily acknowledged within confederations of warrior or mixed warrior and religious status—such as the Ahl Sîdi Mahmûd confederation among whom I have conducted research since 1986—than among the smaller groups of religious status that have somewhat dissolved today (Villasante-de Beauvais, 1995, 1998b).

Today the most respected kinship groups, occupying the central position within the tribal hierarchy, are those who have managed to transform themselves and adapt best to post-modern changes, especially by maintaining relatively strong chieftaincies, or “*by a network of respected elders, many of whom are also in demand as mediators in disputes*” (Marx in this volume). The principal roles of these customary bodies, which retain their importance in the interior of the country, are as follows: First, the role of arbitrating social or individual conflicts (customary Islamic judges [*queddât*, sg. *qâdi*] form part of the official justice system). Even if the *Bidân* “*prefer not to come to the knowledge of the authorities*” (Marx in this volume). Second, the role of redistributing material and symbolic goods acquired through relations of clientage with wealthy and important merchants or with the State, as

the dispenser of jobs, political gifts, and food aid (Villasante-de Beauvais 1998a, Villasante Cervello 2002a).

On close examination, the years of the Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya regime were marked by the struggles of classification between influential groups close to the higher spheres of power, by political struggles between *Bidân* 'tribes' to obtain the goods of State, and finally by political struggles between the dominant Arabophone population as a whole and the diverse and dominated African communities that were understood and waged by those involved as struggles of *ethnic opposition*. These were not mere products of social invention but were, and remain, directly influenced by discourses and political practices of *di-vision*—along lines of ethnic and tribal membership—that the regime itself has deployed.

In this context, the length of Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya's tenure in power seems to be explained as much by his capacity to adapt to the new African and international context as by his political skills, which he continues to demonstrate down to the present time of writing (2004) by neutralizing to his own advantage factional struggles within the government and debates within the society. The latter had become strongly polarized since 1985 with the emergence of a political grouping of *Négro-africans*¹⁰, the *Forces de liberation des africains en Mauritanie* (FLAM). FLAM portrays the political structure in racial terms—Whites against Blacks—and does not hesitate to wage armed struggle to attain its objective of deposing the "White" regime in place *in situ* and establishing an African government. The political actions of this movement (racialist propaganda, some attacks on the major towns, calls to violence) became widespread between 1986 and 1989. In October, 1987 there was an attempted *coup d'État* fomented, according to the government, by *Négro-mauritaniens* military officers of whom three were executed on December 3, 1987. (Villasante-de Beauvais 1998a, p. 201).

Finally, political struggles (for example over government jobs) posed in ethnic terms reached a fever pitch in April 1989 when ongoing struggles between pastoralists and farmers in the Senegal River zone gave rise to massacres and atrocities that left hundreds dead (see Stewart 1989; et Villasante-de Beauvais 2001, 2003).

Democratic elections manipulated and conducted under intensive surveillance

The announced municipal and presidential elections took place in 1986, 1990 and 1992 within this unsettled social climate and subject to arbitrary control by the national administration. The regime authorized the creation of electoral lists that were not made up of political parties but rather of groups representing factions or 'sensibilities'—a term designating restrained political currents in Mauritania—in competition at the national level. Differentiated and identified by color [randomly attributed], these electoral lists were not to be based on tribal or ethnic alignments, these being formally prohibited. In the towns, and notably Nouakchott, they represented above influence groups and economic and financial constituencies—called lobbies by the local journalists—whose interests were national in scope. Within the interior of the country the lists took shape around local and regional political objectives, these being the only ones matters of interest to the rural populations that were uneducated and largely ignorant of the implications of modern elections¹¹.

Within the interior of the country, home to nearly three quarters of the total population, political practices revolve around factional alliances held together by kinship and/or ethnic

groups with a view toward obtaining common objectives in the short term—aductions of water, construction of wells, schools, clinics—or indeed symbolic goods such as municipal and bureaucratic posts. Nevertheless these factional struggles, (which are of a dual nature in that they oppose a faction legitimized by an idealized tradition and an opposition faction), differed from those of the pre-colonial past. They developed as a function of a centralized power, first the colonial and then the Mauritanian State, and of the benefits that follow from collaborating with it. Finally, contrary to one interpretation, the factional political struggles do not take shape within an exclusively ‘tribal’ or ethnic framework since the modern factions are all trans-ethnic and trans-tribal. Elections follow along lines of factional alliances that are negotiated and understood well before the electoral process takes place. As there is no tribal or ethnic vote, properly speaking, in Mauritania, the political groupings are all factional. Hence the election itself remains an extraordinary social moment where social solidarities, feelings of honor and alliances are freely expressed, giving rise to the atmosphere of celebration and collective joy that characterizes them and that, through the years, has become largely ritualized within the country. (See Villasante-de Beauvais 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2000b; Villasante Cervello, 2002a p. 21).

The first municipal elections in 1986, to elect the mayors of the twelve regional capitals and the district of Nouakchott, demonstrated that two modern political forces had emerged clearly on the Mauritanian political landscape:

- 1) The ‘white’ list of candidates representing list, the *Union pour le progress et la Fraternité*, formed of customary notables, businessmen, and political cadres; and
- 2) The ‘blue’ list, representing the *Union nationale pour la démocratie*, formed by members of an old previous party created in the time of Ould Daddah (*Alliance pour une Mauritanie démocratique*), as well as by customary notables of the Adrar.

These two lists, of similar and competing objectives, represented the most conservative and the most liberal tendencies in Mauritanian society. Two other lists grouped the most innovative sectors of the existing social order:

- 3) The ‘orange’ list, representing the *Union pour le progress* included the *Mouvement El-Hor* for the liberation of slaves and former slaves; and finally:
- 4) The ‘yellow’ list, *Union pour le renouveau*, was formed of young and progressive cadres drawn from the *Mouvement National Démocratique* (Villasante-de Beauvais, 1998a, : p. 199).

The political cleavages divisions that emerged in 1986 reappeared and developed subsequently further in 1988 during the municipal elections to elect the mayors of the 32 departmental capitals of the country, and in December, 1990 during the races campaigns to re-elect the mayors and municipal councilors. They developed yet again further, within an apparently more democratic context, with the establishment of political parties in 1991 and the preparations for presidential elections in 1992. From that time forward, public political life unfolded within a framework of political parties divided into factions and tendencies or ‘sensibilities’ according to segmentary, ethnic, regional and local cleavages. However, this political pluralism gave rise to a single party State with the national development of the *Parti républicain démocratique et social* (PRDS) under the direct leadership of President Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya.

Anti-Tribal discourses and practices of manipulating the 'tribal feeling'

Increasingly Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya imposed a vision of society that was matching that of the conservative and nationalist elites of this country of former nomads. His success owed in large part to his ability to manipulate the segmentary and ethnic social organization and the accompanying solidarities in a way that his predecessors had not fully exploited. Taya mobilized the support of his *qabîla* and the notables of his region of origin, the Adrar, to govern. In return, these supporters obtained important economic and political rewards including the nomination to positions in government and concessions for the import of certain foreign products, a source of veritable monopolies and great fortunes in Mauritania.

Thus coexisted, in schizophrenic manner, an official anti-tribal discourse for the defense of the Nation-State that claimed the inspiration of Islam—though, certainly to be sure, an institutionalized Islam in the service of the State, not the popular and oppositional Islam of the poor urban quarters—and an official practice that blatantly manipulated particularistic solidarities to the advantage of the President, his party, and the privileged strata of the country.

Thus in an statement at Kiffa on March 17, 1987, Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya declared:

The most hurtful of these [social] evils is without question tribalism that is a real cancer eating away at our social tissue and squandering the efforts of a large part of our population who have still not left behind old-fashioned attitudes. In fact, this phenomenon has always stood in the way of the forward evolution of the nation by dividing the people into scattered little entities where each one puts its egotistical interests above the whole. It is urgent to launch a vigorous struggle against this evil by removing, especially, the barriers between the different social stratum of our society so that together we can throw off these shackles and arm ourselves to win the all-important battle of building the country. In particular, this duty requires us to look reality in the face and realize that the tribe is, after all, only an archaic instrument to serve egotistical interests that cannot coincide with the overall attainment of national goals. (.....) Therefore we must place our trust in the State and work to strengthen it, because in contrast to the tribe or clan, only the State can guarantee to everyone health, education, and the distribution of necessities, and assure them of safety. Likewise, only the State has the means to defend national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the country.” (Printed in *Le Chaab* n° 3570, March 22, 1987; Cited in Villasante-de Beauvais, 1998a, p. 200).

Despite such pompous pronouncements on the omnipotence of the State and the anti-nationalism of the tribe—this “archaic instrument” according to Taya—the Mauritanian populations could not really count on the State administration to guarantee their education, health and food security. While certainly the logic of the State had taken hold to a great extent in the interior of the country after the 1980s (for example, with the expansion of overland communication routes, improved civil record-keeping services and the normalization of State ceremonies such as the celebration of the national holiday and the display of the national flag), nevertheless problems matters of a social or individual nature remained the exclusively within the domain of families and preferably of extended kinship groups, or *qabâ'il*. These latter groupings were seen and treated as spaces for support, protection and social security. Ultimately, it is because the Mauritanian State is weak,

chaotic and anarchic that the particularistic solidarities of the former nomads continue to reproduce while incorporating within themselves the new values of modernization (as I have suggested: economic liberalism, the valuing of education, and modern individualism.) However, it is necessary to distinguish between the logic of the State and the objectives of the Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya regime on one hand, and the real reform of the mode of political and social order of Mauritaniens on the other.

From the perspective of the Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya regime, the manipulation of customary chieftainships, local notables, and the 'tribal sensibility' in general has proved indispensable in maintaining its own political power and the privileges of the wealthy strata. In practical terms this manipulation was effected by the cadres of the PRDS who paid visits to notables and offered them material and symbolic rewards in return for their loyalty. For example, during the preparation for the presidential elections of 1992, I witnessed at Kiffa (capital of Assaba region) that the gifts offered to customary nobles included positions in the bureaucracy, the financing of wells or village schools, and the provision of all-terrain vehicles, and even dozens of head of livestock, the perennial symbol of social prestige in this society. Nevertheless this State logic faces a difficulty: given that chieftaincies are rarely united but rather are more commonly divided into two factional groups (trans-ethnic and trans-tribal), deals must either be made with both camps or else one must choose the camp that will, it is hoped, will rally the largest number of individual loyalties when elections draw near. But as I noted earlier, there is no tribal vote in Mauritania but rather rival factions of which one (or both) will promise unconditional support for the PRDS. At each election, deals are made that lead to the choice of one faction within each tribal or ethnic grouping to become as the favored one, and the only one "authorized" to represent the PRDS at the local or regional level.

The other political parties, notably those in opposition (which were formerly strong but have now subsequently been undermined and weakened by the government), lack the means to work in similar fashion and must be satisfied in attracting individual votes of those who support their political programs, as a rule drawn from among the educated and the urban electorate.

From the perspective of customary chieftaincies and the circles of local and regional notables, or networks of respected elders, as well as of common people whose social vision is segmentary, the political actions of Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya have led to a kind of 'retribalization' of Mauritanian society and especially of the *Bidân*.

During his visits to the interior of the country, Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya allows himself to be entertained by various local tribes who prepare sumptuous feasts in his honor. Tribes compete among themselves to decide which will offer the most magnificent banquet. Dozens of sheep are slaughtered and even camels and cattle, purchased by contributions levied on the members of the *qabîla*, from the wealthiest to the poorest. These great feasts in the desert never fail to include parades of warriors on camel and horseback and rifle salutes accompanied by the ululation of the women. The objective is to demonstrate the collective force of the strongest tribal groups in the region. Obviously these demonstrations reaffirm the social cohesion of the groups themselves, but contrary to appearances they do not imply a 'neo-tribalization' of society. Neither the Mauritanian *qabâ'il*, chieftaincies or notables are the same as those of former times since, far from being

autonomous, they depend on State concessions and reflect the introduction of new, modern values.

Epilogue

The majority of Mauritians, former nomads sedentarized only since 1970, continue to uphold a vision of the world organized around particularistic forms of belonging (segmentary, statutory, and ethnic) that coexist with a still-emerging national identity. The imagined memory of their former traditions—not so much false as created and constructed (Anderson 1983)—finds realization in the political, cultural and social domains, for example, in the values accorded to chiefships, councils of notables, the defense of honor, and generous hospitality—as the tribesmen of South Sinai described by Emanuel Marx (on this volume), and by Smadar Lavie (1990). The political strategies deployed since the end of the colonial *époque* have sometimes aimed to eliminate these identities and traditionalist world-views (as did the governments of Ould Daddah and various military governments), sometimes to manipulate them for political objectives as does the current regime of Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya.

In Mauritania, it is as if there exist two parallel worlds that move in step but ignore one another. One world is that of the poor majority of the population, both rural and urban, for whom particularistic solidarities and permanent mutual assistance are fundamental guarantors of survival and who understand little or nothing of the political and economic modernity of contemporary national life. The other is an urban world made up of educated, often well-to-do people (the salaried or independent entrepreneurs), possessing an modern political culture, who may be grouped into two large principle sectors:

1) a majority sector composed of the middle class, committed to the building of a State and the rule of law, made up of civil servants, members of the liberal professions and journalists, who may belong to particular *qabâ'il* but who understand that 'tribalism' is out-of-place in a modern country because—as one hears said—the tribal logic is one of struggle of all against all where nobody stands for the common good;

2) and a less numerous sector composed of the wealthy and favored class (great merchants, businessmen and women, former ministers and ambassadors, rich notables) who see in 'tribalism' an opportunity to be exploited in order to safeguard the privileges of the of dominant class. The regime of Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya finds in this dominant class its principal political ally, an ally that will support its current governing policies. These policies include: a) Pragmatism and opportunistic alliances with western nations (including the United States of America and Israel) in order to obtain financial and technical aid; and b) Turning away from controversial movements that might interfere with the authoritarian political style, for example those of Nasserite Arab nationalists, Baathists, non-institutional Islamists, progressives of various sorts, and movements of two groups of differing status, the politicized *hrâtîn* (culturally *Bidân*) and *Négro-mauritians*.

It seems likely that political struggles in the years to come will center around these two new national policies, policies of which the apolitical (in the modern sense) rural and urban populations of former nomads will understand almost nothing. For this reason Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya's regime takes care to reify his tribal ideas and practices, for example leading the populace to believe that he follows a principal of 'tribal apportioning' in selecting ministers, high officials, and tribal candidates to represent his party, the PRDS, at

the local and regional levels. This great political masquerade, this immense manipulation of the *petit peuple* kept ignorant of modern changes, produces at least two harmful effects since the reification of tribalism:

- 1) it frees the government of its duty to distribute equally the national wealth (presently concentrated among a few great families); and
- 2) it prevents and impedes the emergence of a true civil society properly so-called, one whose members are cognizant of their rights and duties, such including the right of as freedom of association in syndicates or political parties (Villasante Cervello 2002a).

Finally, the so-called tribal apportioning is less real than is believed, since the designation of members of government or candidates of the ruling party more often reflects improvisation, chance, or the whims of President Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya than a rational and thoughtful political strategy.

Certainly, the introduction of democratic principles creates the appearance of a real modernization of politics in Mauritania. Freedom of expression and the creation of political parties have been permitted effectively since 1991. Nevertheless these represent minor concessions by the regime of Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya to the demands of the Mauritanian political class (diminished but still in existence) and above all are designed to impress international lenders. In reality there is permanent censorship with regards to both within the national press (which is closely monitored) and within the political parties, some of whose members are imprisoned, their whose meetings are forbidden, and their whose very existence is threatened outright with banning (as was the case recently with the party *Action pour le changement*, representing former slaves, outlawed in 2002). In the face of this social reality, the majority of the Mauritians (impoverished, badly cared-for, and poorly educated) accept the *status quo* of renewed tribal and/or ethnic allegiances as a means of obtaining material and symbolic goods from a State that poses as savior and protector. Thus in the last three elections held under universal suffrage to the date of writing (1992, 1997, 2003) Mauritians voted by a large margin for Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya. On November 7, 2003, of 1,107,400 registered voters 60.83 per cent% participated in elections and Taya received 66.69 per cent% of the votes cast¹².

Most likely the population prefers to reelect a known 'dictator' —as he is called by the educated people who have a modern political culture—as president rather than select a new head of State who is unknown. In any case the tribalist interpretation of political life was given new expression during the recent attempted *coup d'État* of June 8, 2003, which commentators unanimously attributed to "warrior tribes of the East" such as the Awlad an-Naser acting against the "religious tribes of the Adrar" (among them the Smasid, *qabila* of the President). In actuality, it appears that the failed *putsch* was the work of a handful of soldiers who were marginalized and out for revenge¹³.

In the end, the adaptation of former nomads to the changes of the modern world seems to have developed within the context of a defeatist, fatalistic and resigned allegiance to the political power in place. During the time of my fieldwork among the Ahl Sidi Mahmud of Assaba—since 1986 but especially from 1991 through 1994—, many people told me:

"We are obliged to give allegiance to the people of Taya; what else can we do? They have power, money, and guns; we are only people of the desert (ahl badiyya) and weak."

Similar remarks were reported by the anthropologist Smadar Lavie when she worked among the Mzeina, Bedouins of the South Sinai, in 1975-1977:

“But what can we do? We are ahl al-dage’a, the people of the land. They—the potential or previous occupiers, whether Turks, British, Egyptians, Israelis, Americans or Soviets,—are ‘shughlîn al-siyâsa.’ They are people of politics. So what can we do?” (Lavie 1990, p. 89).

Of course for the Mzeina, the *shughlîn al-siyâsa* were composed of occupiers of their lands (Israel, at that time) while Ahl Sidi Mahmud spoke of their own Mauritanian government. Still, the foreignness of the central power with respect to the segmentary customary organization seems to have been understood in the same manner. In both cases, the former nomads evoked their position of weakness in the face of governments who possessed goods and values perceived to be overwhelmingly more powerful than their own.

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¹ In this article I will present a general synthesis of my work on Kinship and Politics in Mauritania, which I developed since 1986. The data are based on several fieldworks in the Assaba region—in particular on the political history and social organization of the confederation of the Ahl Sîdi Mahmûd (more or less 50.000 members),— but also in the Hodh, the Tagant and the Gorgol regions, and in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. The basic hypothesis of this essay were published in my book *Parenté et politique en Mauritanie* (1998, Paris: L'Harmattan), and on my recent article 'La place de la parenté dans le système politique mauritanien. Les termes du débat académique actuel' (2002a, in *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord 2000-2001*, p. 3-26).

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² This semantic distinction of the two meanings of the word "*Bidân*" was recognized and adopted by the majority of the scholars working on Mauritania, or on the neighbouring societies—i.e. Harry T. Norris (*The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara*, 1986), Raymond Taylor (1996, 2001), James Searing (2003); the authors of the book *Groupes serviles au Sahara* (M. Villasante ed., 2000), and the authors of the book *Colonisations et héritages actuels au Sahara et au Sahel* (M. Villasante ed., forthcoming 2005).

³ See Villasante-de Beauvais 1997, 1999a, Villasante Cervello forthcoming b: 'Les producteurs de l'histoire mauritanienne. Heurs et Malheurs de l'influence coloniale dans la reconstruction du passé des sociétés sahélo-sahariennes', in M. Villasante Cervello (ed.), *Colonisations et héritages actuels au Sahara et au Sahel*, Paris: CNRS-Editions.

⁴ Elsewhere I broached the question of the emirates (Villasante-de Beauvais 1995; Villasante Cervello 2002a) which have been a subject of ongoing debate among scholars working in Mauritania. See also Villasante Cervello forthcoming b: 'Les producteurs de l'histoire mauritanienne.'

⁵ See Pierre Bonte 1991, 1998a, 1998c, 2001; and Ould Cheikh 1985, 1991. These works contain important gaps and provide no coherent account of the manner in which the emirates emerged. The younger generation

of scholars has called these analyses into question together with the legacy of colonialism and orientalism generally (T. Cleaveland 1995, 2002; R. Taylor 1996, 2001; Villasante-de Beauvais 1995; Villasante Cervello 2002a. See also my review of P. Bonte, 1998c, *L'émirat de l'Adrar*, in Villasante Cervello, 2002b, p. 528-535). About the colonial influence on the history of modern Mauritania see my essay 'Les producteurs de l'histoire mauritanienne. Heurs et Malheurs de l'influence coloniale dans la reconstruction du passé des sociétés sahélo-sahariennes', forthcoming b.

⁶ I follow here Hobsbawm's distinction (1983, p. 2) between the term *custom/customary*, which designates the social practices and values of the *Bidân* as they have developed over time, and the term *tradition/traditional* which designates historical social values, whether these are of actual long duration, idealized, or invented. In this sense custom may not be static while tradition may be.

⁷ Regarding domestic slavery see: *Groupes serviles au Sahara. Approche comparative à partir du cas des arabophones de Mauritanie* (M. Villasante-de Beauvais (ed.), Paris, CNRS-Éditions, 2000.) On domestic slavery in West Africa see Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁸ See Amnesty International 1989, see also Villasante-de Beauvais 1998, p. 202-205 ; and Villasante-de Beauvais 2001, p. 69-94.

⁹ See Villasante Cervello, forthcoming a: 'Les formes extrêmes de dépendance au devant de la scène politique en Mauritanie. Le statut servile et la Loi d'abolition de l'esclavage de 1980', in *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord 2003*, Paris, CNRS-Éditions.

¹⁰ The terms *Négro-africain* and *Négro-mauritanien* derive from the ideology of *Négritude* conceptualized by Léopold Senghor. See Villasante Cervello, 2003, 'La Négritude: une forme de racisme héritée de la colonisation française ?' in Marc Ferro (ed.), *Le Livre Noir du Colonialisme*, Paris: Robert Laffont.

¹¹ The local importance of elections is also evident among the Bedouins of the Negev, Israel. See Cedric Parizot, 2000 and in this volume.

¹² *Al-Ahram Hebdo*, Cairo, November 12-18, 2003 ; see also 'Chronique politique Mauritanie 2003' in *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord 2003*, forthcoming 2005.

¹³ For further details see M. Villasante Cervello and Hindou mint Ainina, forthcoming c: 'Chronique politique Mauritanie 2003' in *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord 2003*.