

Episodes from the History of the Mauritanian State

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Received: 22/07/2025 ; Accepted: 01/01/2026 ; Published: 04/08/2026

Abstract

The writing of African history has developed considerably from the late fifteenth century to the present day. Broadly speaking, two stages may be distinguished: an initial stage in which almost all historical and literary production was the work of foreign authors, and a second stage marked by the emergence of historians specializing in African affairs.

The history of Mauritania forms part of African history and has received substantial attention from historians because of the important developments it witnessed in both ancient and modern times.

Mauritania—officially the Islamic Republic of Mauritania—is an integral part of the Arab world. It lies between the Sahara and the greener regions of sub-Saharan Africa; indeed, it combines both desert and fertile landscapes. Apart from neighboring Sudan, it is the only Arab country with this distinctive geographical character. Both countries extend southward from the heart of the Sahara, whereas most Arab states stretch northward from areas north of the Equator and are therefore regarded as predominantly northern countries, with Somalia as an exception. Mauritania also constitutes a cultural bridge—in language and religion—between the Arab countries and the states situated farther south in Africa. Its history is also marked by sustained resistance to French colonial domination during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Keywords: Mauritania; European presence; French colonialism; French policy; resistance.

Introduction

The name *Mauritania* is derived from *Mauri* or *Moors*, the designation used by Roman historians for certain North African tribes. The term *Mauri* is believed to derive from the Phoenician word *Mahurim*, meaning “men of the West.” Historically, Mauritania was shaped by three major influences: Berber, Arab, and European.

From the eighteenth century onward, Mauritania was known as Bilad Shinqit (the Land of Chinguetti), after the city of Chinguetti, which served as a departure point for pilgrimage caravans arriving from West Africa. The city became renowned for its scholars, each of whom came to be known as *al-Shinqiti* in reference to it. Since antiquity, Mauritania has borne several other names, including the Desert of the Veiled People, the Land of Takrur, and the Land of the Almoravids. Less widely used designations include the “ungoverned land” (*bilad al-siba*), a description employed by scholars such as Sidi Abdallah Ould al-Hajj Ibrahim. The name *Mauritania* itself became established after the advent of colonial rule.

Different peoples and ethnic groups successively inhabited Mauritanian territory, including Berbers, Black African populations, possibly Romans, and, at a later stage, Arabs. Because these groups initially shared little beyond the territory and historical period in which they lived, relations

among them were at times characterized by tension and warfare. Islam subsequently united them within a single religious community. Over time, these populations and ethnic groups gradually merged into one society, entirely Muslim despite the diversity of its origins, languages, and complexions. This process marked the beginnings of modern Mauritanian society.

Although the Berber and, later, the Arab elements became the most prominent in the historical record—particularly after the rise of the Almoravid state and the arrival of the Hassani Arab tribes—the Black African element, especially the Soninke, was the oldest population known to have exercised control over and spread throughout the territory of present-day Mauritania.

France began its colonization of West Africa through trade and then through the conclusion of ostensibly friendly treaties with kings and local leaders. Dakar became the principal seat of the French administration in West Africa and served as a base for colonial expansion. France then intensified its efforts to occupy the whole of Senegal in 1817, fought the Fulani communities connected to Mauritania, and eventually sought to take control of Mauritania itself.

Mauritanian history passed through several important stages. This study examines selected aspects of that history before the country attained independence in 1960, through the following themes:

1. A general description of Mauritania.
2. The spread of Islam in Mauritania.
3. The Berlin Conference (1884–1885) and the partition of Africa.
4. European penetration into West Africa.

1. A General Description of Mauritania

1.1. Mauritania's Geographical Location

Mauritania is located in West Africa. It is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Western Sahara to the north, Algeria to the northeast, Mali to the east, and Senegal to the south. The Senegal River—historically referred to here as the “Nile of Ghana”—forms the boundary between Mauritania and Senegal.

Mauritania extends approximately between latitudes 15° and 27° north of the Equator. Rainfall is consequently limited despite the country's Atlantic coastline, and summer temperatures are extremely high. Rainfall is irregular: the south receives summer monsoon rains, whereas precipitation in the north is sparse and occurs mainly in winter. The southern desert zone has therefore historically been more prosperous than the northern zone, much of which is covered by vast expanses of sand.

The country is largely arid, with approximately two-thirds of its territory lying within the Sahara and the remainder within the Sahel. Its proximity to the ocean nevertheless moderates the climate in coastal areas. In the south, from the Senegalese border to the Adrar region, rainfall generally occurs between June and September. North of Adrar, near the Tropic of Cancer, precipitation is highly irregular, and several years may pass without rain. The eastern regions have an exceptionally harsh climate, characterized by scorching summer days, cold winter nights, and severe aridity. Moreover, the northeastern quarter of the country—described by Théodore Monod as the “empty quarter”—is virtually uninhabited because the scarcity of water makes permanent life there almost impossible.

Mauritania is predominantly a country of plains. Its highest point, Kediet ej Jill, rises to approximately 917 meters. A chain of medium-altitude plateaus, generally ranging between 400 and 500 meters, forms a relief axis extending from north to south. East of the Tagant and Adrar massifs lie the Dhar Tichitt and Dhar Oualata escarpments, while the Hank Plateau rises farther to the northeast.

Food crops—including millet, sorghum, rice, and dates—constitute the bulk of agricultural production. Grasses grow in scattered areas that support livestock, particularly camels and sheep. Livestock herding—cattle, sheep, goats, and camels—practiced by nomadic communities is an important economic resource, as is annual fishing. Although the desert is barren, it is rich in minerals. The text reports iron deposits in “Jerada” estimated at approximately 200 million tons, in addition to petroleum, copper, gold, manganese, cobalt, and coal in different regions. Mauritania’s economic development has consequently relied heavily on extractive industries, including iron and gypsum; the latter is said to occur in exceptionally large deposits in the salt plain of Ndrumcha.

Although Mauritania is now regarded as one of the most desertified countries in Africa, archaeological and historical research indicates that, during the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, it contained numerous rivers and forests and supported a substantial human population. In the Dhar region between Tichitt and Oualata, where no stable settlement exists today, researchers have identified at least 127 archaeological villages. Surviving traces of this remote past include crocodile populations in the gueltas of Matmata and Tartega in the Tagant region.

Further evidence is provided by place names referring to animals no longer found in those areas, such as Guelb er-Raoui, Guelb edh-Dlim, and Ras al-Fil (“Elephant’s Head”), among others.

The progressive desertification that has continued for thousands of years compelled human groups to migrate steadily southward in search of areas suitable for settlement and agriculture. This movement did not substantially slow until the wave of sedentarization that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which helped establish the general contours of the country’s present population distribution.

Alongside this central environmental factor, other forces—more limited in time and place—contributed to Mauritania’s social development and transformation. Among the most significant was competition over caravan trade, which lay behind many conflicts, shifts in the balance of power, and even major population movements. For example, one explanation for the migration of the Mashzouf toward the Hodh region is the strong attraction exerted by trade with the Sudanese zones, particularly through a commercial center near Kayes in present-day Mali. Likewise, the events of the Char Bouba War may also be read—without diminishing their cultural dimension—as partly reflecting competition over the coastal route after its revival following European settlement in Senegal and European attempts to redirect trade toward their own establishments.

Mauritania is also closely associated with the name Shinqit, traditionally used in Arabic for the Rio de Oro coast and the Western Sahara. The source text gives Mauritania an area of two million square kilometers and a population of 375,000 inhabitants.

1.2. Berber Penetration into Mauritania

Mauritania’s earliest inhabitants were Black African populations who practiced inland and maritime fishing, animal husbandry, and agriculture during the Neolithic period. As the Sahara began to dry during the first millennium BCE, these populations gradually retreated southward toward more

favorable climatic zones. They were progressively replaced across the Sahara by lighter-skinned peoples from North Africa—the Berbers. This Berber expansion continued for more than fifteen centuries, beginning with the Sanhaja confederation, which included the Lamtuna, Lamta, Judala, and Massufa tribes, and extending to later arrivals such as the Zanata.

The Black populations forced southward—some of whom were enslaved by Berber groups—reorganized themselves and, in the fourth century CE, established a powerful and highly structured state: the Ghana Empire. This polity extended from the upper Niger to the upper Senegal and included the Tagant region. By the end of the tenth century, it had retaliated against Berber groups by bringing Awdaghust, the Sanhaja capital, under its control.

Ghanaian supremacy over the Sanhaja collapsed when Yahya ibn Ibrahim, one of the most prominent figures of the Lamtuna, founded the Almoravid movement in 1042 together with Abdallah ibn Yasin, a Moroccan religious scholar, and the brothers Yahya and Abu Bakr ibn Umar. Their principal aim was to reform and purify Islamic practice among Berber populations who had embraced Islam from the eighth century onward. Almoravid power later extended into Morocco with the conquest of Sijilmasa in 1053 and the foundation of Marrakesh in 1070 under Yusuf ibn Tashfin. In the south, the Almoravids conquered Awdaghust and brought the Black pagan population of Ghana into Sunni Islam.

1.3. Arab Penetration into Mauritania

The Almoravid state emerged from Mauritania under the leadership of Sanhaja and Lamtuna tribes and eventually extended eastward as far as Algeria. Mauritania thereby became a link between sub-Saharan Africa and Arab-Islamic North Africa and assumed a strategically important position in the heart of the Sahara.

Around 1400, a group of the Maqil Arabs known as the Banu Hassan, originally from the Arabian Peninsula, reached Mauritania. They defeated Berber tribes and organized the country into emirates. The Emirate of Trarza was established around the fifteenth century, followed by the emirates of Brakna and Hodh. Tagant and Adrar did not fall until the seventeenth century, after the thirty-year Char Bouba War (1644–1674). The Emirate of Adrar itself was not established until 1740.

The victorious Hassani Arabs formed a warrior aristocracy and imposed their language, Hassaniya, on Berber populations. Nicolas described this process in 1953 as follows: “The defeated Berbers became their dependants and devoted themselves to religious learning.” Nevertheless, as custodians of an older Berber cultural heritage, particularly its language, they were increasingly expected to abandon it. Their inclination toward scholarship and their resulting mastery of Classical Arabic also encouraged genealogical narratives that attributed to them a supposedly purer Arab ancestry than that of the conquerors themselves.

Both White and Black Moors speak Hassaniya, an Arabic dialect influenced by Berber. Like Arabic, Berber belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family. Ould Cheikh, one of the leading specialists in this field, notes that certain lexical domains—such as animal husbandry and place names—retain Berber vocabulary. The clearly Arabic character of Hassaniya does not, however, preclude significant differences between the dialect and Classical Arabic. In several respects, Hassaniya appears relatively conservative and close to Bedouin dialects. One phonological example is its preservation of the three interdental consonants of Classical Arabic.

Black Mauritians, by contrast, speak several African languages also used in neighboring countries. These include Pulaar, a West Atlantic language of the Niger-Congo family spoken by the Haalpulaar population; Soninke, a Mande language of the Niger-Congo family spoken by the Soninke people; Wolof, a West Atlantic language of the Niger-Congo family spoken by the Wolof; and Bambara, a Mande language of the Niger-Congo family spoken by the Bambara people.

A fundamental difference between Hassaniya and the Afro-Mauritanian languages should nevertheless be emphasized. Whereas the latter possess rich oral traditions but acquired standardized written forms only relatively recently, Hassaniya is “connected to a written and taught language that is also the religious language of all Mauritians: Arabic” (de Chasse, 1984). This difference in the relationship to writing partly explains disparities in the social status of the languages, patterns of communication, and access to literacy among members of the different communities.

2. The Spread of Islam in Mauritania

2.1. Factors Contributing to the Spread of Islam

Islam entered the African continent through two principal routes, each characterized by its own trajectory, social formation, and depth of influence. In East Africa, its spread was connected to relations between African ports and the Arabian Peninsula. In West Africa, Islam spread through Moroccan Berber tribes that had embraced the religion and through the western Sudan, along the caravan routes leading toward West Africa.

The significance of Islamic expansion in these regions was closely associated with the establishment of the Almoravid state in the fifth century AH. This period is commonly described as one of Islamic revival. One of its most visible manifestations was the southward movement toward the Adrar Mountains, then into Mauritania, and finally toward the Senegal River. By the ninth century AH/fifteenth century CE, the diffusion of Islam and Arabic had intensified across these areas. It expanded further during the tenth century AH/sixteenth century CE, as Islam spread among local tribes and gradually displaced indigenous religious practices.

Many researchers attribute the spread of Islam among Black African populations from the eighteenth century onward to the activities of Muslim preachers. African communities found reassurance in Islam because of its social organization, the security it offered to merchants during travel, and the relative accessibility of its religious obligations. Islam transformed everyday life in the regions where it became established and promoted practices of cleanliness. Muslims were often distinguished by loose clothing and by the prohibition of pork. The journeys of many Africans to perform the pilgrimage and to pursue learning in Kairouan, Fez, al-Azhar, Mecca, and Medina also contributed to the dissemination of Islamic teaching and scholarship.

2.2. The Spread of Sufi Orders

Zawiyas and Sufi orders played a fundamental role in the dissemination and development of culture. Through these institutions, learning reached wider social groups, illiteracy declined, the Qur'an was protected from neglect and disappearance, and Arabic and Islamic culture were preserved. Considerable resources were devoted to teaching and disseminating this heritage throughout society. This constituted a form of resistance to ignorance and illiteracy and broadened access to knowledge. The zawiyas trained generations of prominent scholars, jurists, and judges. They also functioned as repositories and libraries for books and scholarly manuscripts in a wide range of disciplines, owing

to the commitment of their shaykhs and students to teaching, transmission, manuscript copying, and authorship.

Mauritanian Sufi schools formed an important link between Sufi institutions in the Maghreb and those of West Africa. Sufism constituted a major social, cultural, and political structure within Mauritanian society. The Tijaniyya became one of the most prominent and widespread Sufi orders in Mauritania, alongside the Qadiriyya-Bakka'iyya.

The Muridiyya also established a presence in Mauritania. It originated in the nineteenth century under Shaykh Ahmad Bamba. These orders received state support through the establishment of specialized educational institutions in which Islamic legal and religious sciences were taught.

The Mauritanian population was overwhelmingly Muslim and adhered to Sunni Islam. Several active Sufi orders were present in the country, and their leaders were committed missionaries who worked to spread Islam among non-Muslim populations. The two most widespread orders in Mauritania were the Qadiriyya and the Fadiliyya.

The Qadiriyya is the oldest of the country's Sufi orders. It entered Mauritania in the late ninth century AH/fifteenth century CE and became known locally as the Bakka'iyya, after Shaykh Ahmad al-Bakka'i (d. 1504), through whom the order was introduced into the country.

The second order, the Fadiliyya, emerged among a Sanhaja group associated with Ahl Talib al-Mukhtar. It took its name from Shaykh Muhammad Fadil (1780–1869), who had been affiliated with the Qadiriyya before establishing his own order. The Fadiliyya differed from the Bakka'iyya in certain rituals and formulas of remembrance (*dhikr*). Through the activity of Shaykh Muhammad Fadil's forty-eight sons, the order developed an extensive network of followers across the Western Sahara, extending from the Atlantic coast to Nioro in Mali.

The Sidiyya was another branch of the Bakka'iyya. It came under the supervision of the Sidiyya family after the death of its shaykh, Abdallah al-Shaykh Sidi Baba, in 1964. This family exercised broad influence and included numerous politicians and senior officials.

The Tijaniyya spread in Mauritania during the lifetime of the order's founder. In Fez, the founder received Muhammad al-Hafiz ibn al-Mukhtar after the latter returned from the pilgrimage, commissioned him to spread the order in the Western Sahara, and appointed him as its *muqaddam* (authorized representative). This occurred shortly before the founder's death.

The Hamalliyya later emerged from the Tijaniyya as a reformist movement. Its founder, Hamah Allah, was a prominent Tijani missionary in West Africa. The order became particularly widespread in the Sahel, Chinguetti, and Adrar.

Tijani teachings first radiated from the city of Chinguetti among the Idaw Ali tribe. They soon spread among the various Saharan tribes of Adrar, Trarza, and Tagant. By the end of the nineteenth century, their influence had reached most Bidan tribes, including Awlad Tayman and Tashdibit, as well as several other groups. Tijani leaders also maintained continuous relations with the mother zawiya in Fez.

After the death of Shaykh Muhammad al-Hafiz al-Alawi in 1247 AH, the order continued to be disseminated by a number of followers, most of whom belonged to the Idaw Ali tribe. During the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, these included Muhammad ibn Abdallah Awda al-Alawi; Abdallah ibn Sidi Muhammad ibn Sidi al-Amin, a close adherent of the order who traveled with Mawlud Fal to Morocco; Baba ibn Ahmad Bib, another renowned Tijani

figure in the Sahara (d. 1226 AH); his son al-Tijani ibn Baba ibn Ahmad Bib, author of *Munyat al-Murid*; Sidi Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Saghir; Ibrahim Niasse; Muhammad Said ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Hafiz; Shaykh Ahmad Mahmud, known as al-Shaykhan; and Muhammad al-Mishri ibn Abdallah.

As the Tijani litany spread through Moroccan urban centers from Fez, its influence reached remote mountain and desert regions. A group of Shaykh al-Tijani's disciples assumed responsibility for disseminating the litany and extending its sphere of influence into the interior of West Africa. Since the Islamic conquest of North Africa, the Sahara had served as a link between Morocco and the countries of West Africa. Through it, Islamic culture and teaching spread, and intellectual and spiritual life developed across these regions.

3. The Berlin Conference (1884–1885) and the Partition of Africa

3.1. The Convening of the Conference in 1884

The Berlin Conference of 1884 constituted an important turning point. It helped shape the political map of modern Africa, not through the agency of Africans themselves, but through European efforts to assert competing claims over what James Mayall described as the last major landmass awaiting territorial enclosure. The expansion of the European conception of sovereignty resulted in an almost complete partition of the continent's political space, leaving virtually no territory outside colonial control. In 1870, only approximately ten percent of Africa was under direct European rule. Thereafter, artificial geographical arrangements were imposed on the continent, often in sharp contradiction with established social and economic patterns and with profoundly disruptive effects on traditional structures.

During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, Berlin hosted two international conferences that had far-reaching consequences for the future of the Arab world in particular and the African continent more generally.

The first opened on 13 July 1878 to settle disputes between the Ottoman Empire and other powers, especially those concerning the Balkans. The second began on 15 November 1884 and ended on 26 February 1885. It addressed several issues, including freedom of navigation in the Congo Basin and the regulation of European colonial expansion in Africa.

3.2. The Effects of the Conference on West Africa

The conference achieved two principal objectives:

- It established a large “free state” in the heart of equatorial Africa that was nominally open to all nations and supposedly insulated from international rivalries.
- It laid down principles governing economic activity in the continental interior.

In its formal decisions, the conference endorsed freedom of trade and ostensibly fair competition, in contrast to older colonial monopolies. It also provided a framework for dividing territories north and south of the Equator in a manner intended to prevent destructive conflict among colonial powers of the kind that had accompanied the colonization of the Americas. Sybil Crowe, a scholar of international law, argued that the conference sought to regulate relations among colonial powers through defined legal principles. In practice, however, it accelerated the European scramble for Africa and ultimately enabled the major powers to monopolize trade in the territories that fell under their control.

The conference thus partitioned Africa in a manner consistent with European interests and granted international recognition to a process already underway. After the conference, European states rapidly intensified their competition for African territory. This expansion necessarily brought them into confrontation with African political and social forces that were themselves attempting to build unity around Islamic reform movements.

Following the second Berlin conference, the political map of West Africa was divided among European powers. Germany acquired Cameroon and Togo. Britain controlled four principal territories: Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and the Gambia. France seized an immense area known as French West Africa, which included Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan (present-day Mali), Niger, Dahomey (present-day Benin), Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Upper Volta.

French West Africa constituted an enormous territorial bloc, among the largest political units in the world at the time. It extended from the Atlantic coast in the west to the far reaches of the Sahara in the east, and from the borders of Morocco in the north to those of Nigeria in the south. Its area was approximately eight and a half times that of metropolitan France, and its populations included numerous ethnic communities speaking approximately 120 different languages.

4. European Penetration into West Africa

4.1. The European Presence in West Africa

Europe turned toward Africa after its earlier expansion into Asia. European powers recognized the continent's abundant resources, its proximity to Europe, the relative accessibility of its coasts, and its enormous area of approximately thirty million square kilometers. Spain and Portugal, strengthened by their early maritime revival, were the first to compete in sending raiding expeditions toward the Mauritanian and broader West African coasts, where coastal villages and encampments were attacked.

Four major regions on the horizon were associated with waterways that brought life and fertility to this part of Africa. European observers regarded the local climate as sufficiently favorable to permit settlement and the establishment of permanent centers of influence. In their colonial discourse, these areas were described as a "key to the Sudan" and as an entry route through which European civilization and commerce could penetrate the African interior. The passes of Futa Jallon were similarly viewed as an ideal route for European coastal trade.

The Dutch, Spanish, Germans, British, and French consequently competed for positions along the Mauritanian coast and at the mouth of the Senegal River. They established coastal posts as commercial stations and strategic footholds from which they could exert political and economic influence over local populations and prepare for deeper territorial penetration when circumstances permitted.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to reach Mauritania. Between 1448 and 1449, they established themselves at Arguin and built a fort there. They later moved eastward toward Adrar and created depots for the storage of gum arabic, the principal export commodity. The Spanish replaced the Portuguese in 1580. In 1638, the Dutch in turn displaced them and founded several trading posts, especially at Arguin. The British seized these establishments during the Napoleonic Wars. Under the Treaty of Paris in 1814, they were restored, together with other French settlements in West Africa. French explorers—including Mollien, Caillié, Mage, and Panet—then strengthened relations initiated

along the coast in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by advancing farther into the interior.

Before formal French occupation, European merchants encouraged rivalry and conflict within ruling families through their contacts and missions. They also provoked disputes among the various emirates by employing material and psychological tactics. One such method consisted of giving one emir more valuable gifts than another or honoring him with a greater number of ceremonial gun salutes, thereby fostering jealousy and division. This encouraged local rulers to compete for relations with European traders, whom they increasingly regarded as indispensable sources of wealth, weapons, and prestige.

Coppolani's reports concerning his dispute with French merchants in Saint-Louis (known locally as Ndar) revealed the harmful intentions and practices of certain traders in their dealings with Mauritians. They sought to extract local resources, inflame conflicts among communities, and encourage participation in the slave trade in order to supply labor for plantations and workshops.

This colonial policy contributed to weakening the Mauritanian emirates, undermining security, and increasing raids and attacks on property. Society became more fragmented, and exaggerated pride in genealogy and group particularism intensified. Many local sages consequently called for a comprehensive response to disorder and corruption and urged communities to prepare for the colonial invasion assembling at their borders.

4.2. The French Presence in West Africa

France was able to implement its colonial project in northwestern Africa by drawing upon its military and political power as a state competing with other imperial powers, especially Britain and Germany.

Its effective political and military presence in colonies surrounding Morocco and its southern extensions—most notably Algeria and Senegal—combined with its naval power to permit the economic encirclement of Morocco and to separate it from its southern and eastern zones of exchange.

The principal axes of French penetration followed the Senegal River toward Bilad Shinqit and extended toward the Tuat oases and the lands south of Figuig. After the occupation of Mauritania, colonial expansion continued toward Rio de Oro and Saguia el-Hamra.

British imperial strategy in Africa aimed to create a continuous chain of colonies extending from Alexandria in the north to the Cape of Good Hope in the south. French plans, by contrast, sought to establish a belt of colonies from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east. Senegal, which France had occupied during the seventeenth century, became the principal base for expansion south of the Sahara. A fortified town constructed approximately 800 miles from the coast on land purchased from a local ruler served as an advanced position for colonial expansion into the western Sudan.

The French advanced gradually, built fortified posts, and concluded treaties with local rulers in order to gain time and consolidate their position. Through this process, they seized territories from the Wolof, Malinke, Tukolor, and other peoples.

The nineteenth century was therefore an era of intensive trade, treaty-making, and warfare between the Mauritanian emirates and the French established in Senegal. Owing to its geographical position, the Emirate of Trarza experienced most of the diverse dimensions of relations between the Bidan and the French. The reign of Emir Muhammad al-Habib Ould Amar Ould al-Mukhtar, who

succeeded his father and ruled from 1826 to 1860, provides a particularly clear illustration of these developments.

France's position resembled that of other imperial states, but several new factors pushed it more forcefully toward colonial expansion. These included widely celebrated technological developments and the nationalist sentiment generated among the French population after defeat by Germany in 1871. The loss of Alsace and Lorraine also stimulated a desire to demonstrate that France remained powerful, capable of expansion, and able to continue what colonial advocates described as its "civilizing mission."

French policy soon produced results in West Africa. French traders began moving into the interior of the Senegal River basin with the aim of linking Senegal to the upper Niger by railway and thereby controlling the products of western Africa. This policy affected British trading centers in the Gambia and indirectly disrupted commercial routes leading toward Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast.

4.3. French Colonial Policy in Mauritania

The French military advance was led by Governor Louis Faidherbe, who first brought Muslim political influence on the left bank of the Senegal River to an end. In 1858, he concluded treaties with the emirates of Trarza and Brakna. French policy declared, in substance, that the river belonged to France, that France was not obliged to pay duties for navigation or settlement along it, and that the states south of the river should become independent of the Bidan.

Faidherbe addressed the Waalo leaders who had migrated to Cayor in uncompromising terms. He warned them that, should they remain allied with the Bidan and continue to recognize Ali Kuri Ould Muhammad al-Habib as their king, their return would be futile because any authority or settlement they attempted to establish would be destroyed. He insisted that Waalo would either separate from Trarza or be reduced to desolation.

Faidherbe's plan for achieving French colonial objectives rested on three principal elements:

- Strengthening the French presence throughout Senegal so that the colony would be protected from internal and external threats originating in Guinea, Mali, or north of the Senegal River, while extending French influence in every direction whenever opportunities arose.
- Waging war against the political presence of the Bidan emirates south of the river, dismantling the alliance between the rulers of Waalo and Trarza, and compelling them to sign treaties of submission recognizing French sovereignty in Waalo and releasing France from its obligations concerning trading posts.
- Sending explorers into Bidan territory to study the country and gather information about it. In 1899, Xavier Coppolani, the French official responsible for Mauritanian affairs, formulated a project for the creation of "Western Mauritania."

On 27 June 1900, France and Spain divided this part of West Africa between them. The resulting territories became known as Mauritania and the Spanish Sahara (Western Sahara).

French expansion proceeded along the right bank of the Senegal River and toward the north. France established effective control over northern Mauritania by 1936, after suppressing the final resistance of the Reguibat tribes. French rule also interrupted the historical southward movement of Moorish populations and contributed to demographic and administrative changes in the south, where substantial Black African communities had already long been present.

4.4. Mauritanian National Resistance

As soon as colonial armies entered Mauritania with the intention of establishing permanent rule, people mobilized from different regions and social groups. Communities from Hodh participated in the resistance in Tagant; people from Tagant moved toward Adrar; and fighters from the north joined those of Adrar and the east. This cooperation reflected a deep awareness of shared belonging, common interests, and a collective destiny.

Local communities created extensive networks for transmitting news, maintaining communication among resistance groups, and supplying them with provisions and supporters. Mauritanian resistance was distinctive in its use of a broad range of available means, including armed struggle, culture, literature, and social and psychological methods. Resistance fighters were also subjected to intense propaganda intended to discredit them, isolate them from society, and portray them as agents of disorder and destruction.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, relations between France and the Trarza and Brakna tribes were characterized by rivalry and confrontation. Mauritanian tribes regarded Waalo as part of their sphere of influence, whereas France sought to control the commercial zone surrounding Saint-Louis. Faidherbe considered Mauritanian tribes the principal threat to the Senegal colony from the north. He therefore constructed forts at Podor, Dagana, and Bakel, organized a military force in the region, and attempted to secure French domination.

Muhammad al-Habib, Emir of Trarza, attempted to negotiate with Faidherbe, but the negotiations failed. The French attack of April 1855 marked the beginning of repeated defeats for Trarza and exposed divisions within its ranks. Faidherbe exploited the situation and concluded a series of agreements with the zawiyas of Dagana and Podor. The gum-arabic trade resumed, increasingly under French control.

Despite Muhammad al-Habib's defeat in 1857, he prepared to attack the French again after receiving support from al-Hajj Umar al-Futi in the upper Senegal region and responding to calls for Muslim unity against France. Faidherbe moved rapidly to contain the danger and concluded a treaty with Muhammad al-Habib in May 1858. The agreement stabilized the French position: Muhammad al-Habib renounced territories south of the Senegal River and recognized French protection over Waalo. Faidherbe thereby secured the northern frontier of the Senegal colony and was able to redirect his military operations toward other areas.

Shaykh Ma al-Aynayn became increasingly involved in political affairs when the French expanded their influence in Mauritania at the beginning of the twentieth century. French officials regarded him as a serious threat because of the substantial support he provided to the Sharifian ruling family in Marrakesh and because of his high standing in Adrar. As they advanced into the region, the French feared that he might form an Islamic alliance of nomadic tribes against them.

The shaykh maintained a network of agents who informed him of French movements and plans. French officials identified one of his associates, a merchant from Chinguetti, making repeated journeys to Saint-Louis. They also discovered an envoy of the Moroccan sultan who had been sent to Muslim scholars in Senegal to encourage them to proclaim jihad and form an alliance against France. The French consequently recognized the potential danger of cooperation among the Moroccan sultan, Shaykh Ma al-Aynayn, and prominent Muslim figures in Senegal.

A French officer described Mauritanian fighters as exceptionally mobile, courageous, and skilled in adapting to rocky terrain. Armed lightly, they moved rapidly from one position to another, used even minimal cover, fired on advancing forces, and surrounded military positions. The officer compared their agility to that of gazelles.

The Saharan fighter represented the first major adversary feared by the French because of his combat ability, alertness, intelligence, and tactical methods. The second—and in many respects more formidable—adversary was the desert itself: a land of fear, heat, and thirst. General Duboc described the extreme exhaustion and dehydration suffered by French soldiers and their African auxiliaries. Some collapsed and could no longer continue, while others, disoriented by heat and fatigue, searched desperately for even minimal shade. Facial features became distorted by exhaustion, lips swelled, and men sometimes failed to recognize long-standing companions. In states of delirium, some troops abandoned weapons, ammunition, equipment, and clothing in order to reduce the burden of movement. The account emphasizes that the physical limits of the expeditionary force were repeatedly exceeded by the Saharan environment.

When French forces began to penetrate Adrar, they encountered fierce resistance. In 1905, peaceful occupation of the region proved difficult. The French commander Coppolani faced unexpected clashes and lost many men after Muslim groups formed a strong front under Shaykh Ma al-Aynayn, who proclaimed jihad against the French from 1905 onward.

Mauritania subsequently became a colony within French West Africa and was administered from Saint-Louis, the administrative capital of Senegal located outside Mauritanian territory. This colonial administration was not accompanied by large-scale European settlement. Its primary objective was military control over a country regarded by colonial authorities as unstable. Policing operations continued periodically until 1933, particularly against Reguibat and Awlad Dlim nomads in the north who sought refuge in Spanish-controlled Rio de Oro. Sporadic raids nevertheless continued until the end of the colonial period.

Colonial influence remained limited in practice. As Pitte observed in 1977, after half a century of colonization Mauritania remained among the least deeply transformed colonial territories. The severity of the natural environment, the difficulty of communications, and the limited economic potential of a country whose principal export had long been gum arabic prevented intensive colonization. The towns created during this period were initially associated with the presence of the army and later with administrative functions.

In 1946, Mauritania was declared an overseas territory of the French Republic. This inaugurated a period of increasing autonomy marked by a series of developments, from the creation of political parties to the election of parliamentary representatives. The adoption of the *Loi-cadre* (Framework Law) by the French National Assembly in 1956 accelerated decolonization.

A first major manifestation of this process occurred on 24 July 1957, when the capital of Mauritania was transferred from Saint-Louis in Senegal to Nouakchott, a city developed specifically for this purpose. On 28 September 1958, Mauritania obtained internal autonomy within the French Community. On 28 November 1960, it proclaimed itself an independent Islamic republic under President Moktar Ould Daddah, who governed through a one-party system until he was overthrown by the military on 10 July 1978.

In 1991, Mauritania formally entered a multiparty democratic phase. Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya was elected president by universal suffrage in January 1992 and was re-elected in December 1997.

Conclusion

Mauritanian history passed through several major stages that attracted the attention of historians studying West Africa generally and Mauritania in particular. The country experienced successive Berber and Arab migrations and was later subjected to European penetration. European powers were drawn by the region's resources, fertile zones, waterways, and position within African commercial networks. Their rivalry over Mauritania intensified, and the Berlin Conference provided an international framework through which their colonial objectives in Mauritania and other parts of Africa could be pursued.

Colonial France was among the principal powers to establish control over Mauritania. It employed a policy of divide and rule, encouraged factionalism and conflict among the tribes and emirates, and suppressed resistance movements that threatened its presence and territorial expansion.

After a prolonged period of resistance and struggle, Mauritania obtained independence from France on 28 November 1960 and proclaimed the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Independence marked the beginning of a new stage centered on national development and the consolidation of Mauritanian identity.