

“Mauritania is an Eye:” A Community Association’s Effort to Promote Unity

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This dissertation titled  
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## **Abstract**

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“Mauritania is an Eye:” A Community Association’s Effort to Promote Unity

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This dissertation project explores how members of a Mauritanian association in the Greater Cincinnati area of Ohio/Kentucky work together to achieve a semblance of unity. The association is made up of two main Mauritanian groups - Afro-Mauritanians and Moors. Historically, these two groups have had a history of tension, which came to a head in 1989 after a suspected coup d’état plot organized by Afro-Mauritanians against the ruling Moorish government. Consequently, the Moorish government committed many atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians who were robbed, killed, and expelled from the country. *Africa Watch* reports that between 1000-3000 Afro-Mauritanians endured these atrocities. Drawing on 16 in-depth interviews and fieldwork observations, I seek to understand how members of this divided group work together to promote unity and the forces that encourage/hinder their efforts. I rely on narrative and postcolonial frameworks to make sense of the field narratives to situate them within their postcolonial/transnational contexts.

A narrative analysis of the field discourses generated three themes. The first theme, “Language and Identity,” illuminates how failed colonial/postcolonial linguistic policies contribute to the problems faced by members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of the Greater Cincinnati Area. The second theme, “Tending to an Old

Wound,” highlights the strategies that members of this association utilize to reconcile their problematic past. The third theme, “Mauritania is an Eye,” examines the narratives my participants invoke to explain their involvement in the association’s efforts to promote unity as well as the challenges they continue to face. The project illustrates how this association’s shared problematic and violent history continues to threaten members’ efforts to promote unity.

## **Dedication**

*To my mother, for abandoning her education so that I could pursue mine.*

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## Table of Contents

	Page
Professor of Communication Studies.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Mauritania: A Brief Overview of History.....	5
1989: A Turning Point.....	10
Beginning the Project.....	13
The Mauritanian Friendship Association: A Story of Beginnings.....	17
A Community's Association.....	18
Project: Mauritania is an Eye.....	19
Chapter II: Literature Review.....	25
Diaspora and Migration.....	25
Rethinking Diasporas: New Approaches.....	30
Exile.....	33
Diaspora and Home Countries.....	34
Diaspora and Host Countries.....	36
Migration: Home, Citizenship, and Political Transformation.....	39
Conclusion.....	41
Chapter III: Theoretical Frameworks.....	46
Narrative and Identity.....	46
Postcolonial Frameworks.....	52
Postcolonial Studies: The Issue of Identity.....	54
Postcolonial Studies: Race, and Language.....	57
Postcolonial Studies and Globalization.....	61
Postcolonial Scholarship and Communication.....	64
Chapter IV: Research Practices.....	70
Finding the Research Site.....	70



Searching for a Gatekeeper.....	73
Recruiting Participants: Community Dynamics .....	77
Interviews and Participant Observations .....	81
Participant Observations .....	83
Narrative Interviewing.....	86
Narrative Analysis: Interpretive Bicolage .....	89
Narrative Voice.....	89
Narrative Fissures .....	91
Thematic Analysis .....	92
The End of Fieldwork .....	95
Chapter V: Language, Identity, and Community Relations.....	99
“The Lucky Ones:” Kadoye and Herma Stories .....	101
Herma’s Story .....	112
The English Language as a Bridge: Malaw and Wane’s Stories .....	120
Wane’s Story.....	126
Conclusion .....	129
Chapter VI: Tending to an Old Wound.....	132
The Traumatic Events of 1989: The Indelible Memories of the Past.....	134
A Day of Memorial or Celebration?: Thiam’s Story .....	137
Re-framing Memories: Warr, the Mauritanian, and Ehlou’s Stories.....	146
Warr’s Story.....	146
The Mauritanian’s Story .....	155
Ehlou’s Story .....	159
Conclusion .....	164
Chapter VII: “Mauritania is an Eye:” A Struggle for Unity .....	167
Soumare and Weddady’s Stories .....	168
Idealizing the Past and Blaming the Government.....	172
Religion and Its Significance .....	176
Samba Kelel Story .....	179
Trial and Error: A Rocky Journey .....	179
Hope and Despair: Mauritania is Like an Eye.....	182

Baba's Story.....	186
Lack of Connection and the Threat on Future Generations.....	187
A History of Injustice.....	190
Final Thoughts .....	195
Chapter VIII: Conclusion.....	197
Reflections on Fieldwork.....	197
In Afro-Mauritanian Company .....	197
Moments of Vulnerability.....	199
An Ailing Eye: Stories about Stories.....	201
Final Thoughts .....	204
Bibliography .....	206
Appendix A: Participants Biographies.....	215
Appendix B: Interview Protocol .....	217
Appendix C: Glossary.....	220

## Chapter I: Introduction

Born to an interracial couple, I am considered an anomaly in a culture that stresses the importance of keeping the boundaries clear when it comes to its social stratification system. I am considered *metis*, a French word that indicates my in-between/hybrid identity. In Mauritania, my mother belongs to *Haratin*, dark-skinned/black Moors. My father is *Bidani*, a light-skinned/white Moor. What this means is that he is part of the dominant group. Despite his low-income job, he is a Moorish man from a well-respected family/tribe. In a Mauritanian setting, this affords one a great deal of privilege. In Mauritania, Arabo-Berber/Moorish tribes (also known as *Bidani* tribes) are first divided into two broad categories: *L'Arab* and *Zawaya*. *L'Arab* belong to warrior tribes and *Zawaya* are tribes that paid more attention to learning and knowledge accumulation. Although all are considered Arabs in the Moorish society, those belonging to warrior tribes are considered more superior to those devoted to scholarship.

Moorish culture is further divided into other hierarchies. On the top of the hierarchy, there is *Al-Shirva*, the descendants of the prophet Mohamed. These persons could belong to any tribe and still be considered superior. Then, there is the rest: *L'Arab* and *Zawaya* who come in the second position even though *L'Arab* view themselves as superior to *Zawaya*. Additionally, there are the Griots who specialize in music making, the blacksmiths who specialize in working with metal and wood, and *Haratin* who are former slaves. Until today, *Griots*, *blacksmiths*, and *Haratin* still argue over which of these three casts is superior to the others

My father enjoys the privilege of being on top of the hierarchy given his position as an Arab from a warrior tribe. My mother, on the other hand, and despite her claims of

a prestigious lineage, comes from a family of former slaves. Her mother is a descendant of a family of slaves. Because there is no evidence that her father was ever enslaved given the fact that he descends from Mali, my mother tends to emphasize the paternal side of her history. She believes that my grandmother's experience with slavery was short and unworthy of emphasis given the fact that her masters freed her to marry a Malian gentleman (my grandfather). We are unsure whether he had to pay for her freedom.

After the death of her parents, my mother lived an older sister – Fatma - who is married to an Afro-Mauritanian. When she was young, my mother moved to live in her sister's home. She viewed her sister and her sister's husband as if they were her true parents. She gained the trust of her new father and oversaw everything around the house, a role that the older sister plays in the family. She continues to tell stories about how she managed to win the trust of her sister's husband. She prepared and served his food, kept his clothes clean, and managed his finances. She was the one responsible for buying groceries in his absence. Although this sounds more like the story of a loyal servant, she sees it as a story of a loving and grateful daughter.

Growing up, she would tell us about her experiences in her sister's house. Even though she spoke fondly of her sister's husband and expressed her gratitude for everything he has done for her, she believes that being related to her family is the only reason he is alive. In 1989, traumatic events led to the killing, torture, and exile of many Afro-Mauritanians in the aftermath of an alleged military coup d'état. This alleged coup d'état was allegedly planned by Afro-Mauritanian officers and had the backing of the Senegalese regime. After it failed, the Mauritanian regime committed despicable atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians. Moorish Mauritanian fanatics used it as an excuse

to inflict pain on Afro-Mauritanians. This was not only the experience of Mauritanians living in the capital. Things were, in fact, worse for those living in the interior land. Moorish gangs attacked, killed, and looted the houses of many defenseless Afro-Mauritanians. At the time, my mother was living with her sister's family in Amourij, a small town outside Nema in the eastern part of Mauritania. Hearing about the recent events in the capital, a Moorish gang in this town gathered and decided to attack the family. If it were not for a neighbor, who claimed to know my mother's deceased father, the gang would have killed my aunt's husband and looted the house. The way my mother narrates the story emphasizes the important role her heritage played in saving the life of an Afro-Mauritanian.

I grew up listening to these stories, and I have come to regard my aunt's husband as my grandfather. This relationship grew stronger after I graduated from high school. Knowing that he fought with the French in Vietnam, I finally found a topic that I could really talk to him about given my fascination and respect for the leaders of the Vietnamese resistance. In his old age, he usually sits alone and does not talk about these issues unless I am around. When I go to visit the family, we always find a way to talk about his experience in Vietnam and the strength of the Vietnamese people. The conversation often moves to his experience as an Afro-Mauritanian living among Moorish individuals in the eastern part of Mauritania. He narrates stories of the strong friendship and respect that they had for him because of his honesty and fearlessness. Although I have always wanted to talk to him about the traumatic events of 1989, the events that led to government's atrocities against defenseless Afro-Mauritanians, I was never able to do so until 2015. What I have found is that he narrates a story that is

different than my mother's. To him, the Moorish society relied primarily on former slaves to inflict pain on Afro-Mauritanians. His story implicates the group that my mother belongs to and never mentions how my mother's heritage has played a role in his survival. Although I do not know what to attribute this to, my conversations with him have always made me wonder what could be done to ensure that Mauritanians live together peacefully.

The stories my mother and my aunt's husband told were the only stories I heard about the events of 1989. Aside from family stories, the atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians in the aftermath of the 1989 events have, to a large extent, been omitted from the public memory. They were present as private memories for those who lost someone or were displaced/exiled during these traumatic events. In schools, we never read about the events of 1989, which makes it hard to acknowledge what Afro-Mauritanians have gone through. Instead, the government's response to the suspected coup d'état plot is seen as a justified response against Afro-Mauritanians who threatened the unity of the country.

Recently, however, the Mauritanian government has tried to make amends by inviting Afro-Mauritanians living in Senegal to return to Mauritania after years of being displaced. While this was seen as a positive gesture in the right direction, these returnees found themselves in a dire situation coming back from exile and with no financial resources to start over. Their situation has helped people realize that there is a long road ahead of the reconciliation process. A simple ticket home does not eradicate the memories of atrocities, looting, and exile. Moreover, there is a growing awareness of the systematic exclusion of Afro-Mauritanians in the country. This exclusion became

apparent when many Afro-Mauritanians were denied national identification cards because they were not able to provide the proper documentations. These recent events have made it clear that achieving a sense of national unity would require more work.

### Mauritania: A Brief Overview of History

Located in the northwestern part of Africa, Mauritania occupies 1,030,700 kilometers.<sup>1</sup> From the East, it is bordered by Senegal and Mali. Algeria and Morocco occupy its northeastern borders. Western Sahara, a disputed territory that partly separates Mauritania and Morocco, lies on the northern borders of Mauritania. In his monumental work, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, Anthony G. Pazzanita claims that the Bafour occupied most of what is now known as Mauritania during the Neolithic times.<sup>2</sup> The Bafour were a group of hunters and gathers. Along with this group, there was the Imraguen tribe – a dark skinned tribe that relied on fishing for survival and lived on the Atlantic coastal line.

Climate change and the encroachment of the Sahara Desert pushed the Bafour to the South. The coming of the Berbers, along with the uncomfortable environment that the desert created, led to the final eclipse of the Bafour. The Berbers pushed the Bafour to the sidelines and established a commercial relationship with the neighboring black kingdoms of Ghana and Mali. While the Berbers continued to prosper, they soon lost control of major cities to the Ghana Empire led by the Soninke.<sup>3</sup>

The Berbers later succeed in winning back the cities captured by the Ghana Empire and established their own empire. Coming back from a trip to Mecca, Abdullah Ibn Yacin started to preach a conservative version of Islam and was successful in acquiring followers who were taught about the Islamic doctrine and were also prepared to

fight to spread these teachings. Organizing his followers at a *ribat*, Ibn Yacin and his supporters succeeded in recapturing cities lost to the Ghana Empire to expand their own empire, the Almoravid Empire. The Empire, as Pazzanita argues “expanded explosively, eventually encompassing much of the Maghreb, southern Spain, and all of present-day Mauritania nearly down to the Senegal River.”<sup>4</sup> The expansion of the Almoravid Empire had negative consequences for black Africans with the capture of major cities and the forceful submission of the Soninke to Islam for the first time.<sup>5</sup> The Empire that the Berbers managed to build could not withstand the increasing power of Christian Spain and lost most of its territorial control, making Mauritania the only place that Almoravid continued to control.

A new invader, the Maqil Arabs, came to Mauritania and managed to gain control over it. These warrior tribes and conservative Muslims, known as Beni Hassan, penetrated Mauritania threatening the control of the Berbers. Dissatisfied with the increasing stronghold of Beni Hassan, the Berbers organized revolts that were suppressed by the Arab warriors. The increased hatred for the Arab rule culminated in a 30-year war that led to the defeat of the Berber and their surrender to the Arab rule. The Berbers were then put in a secondary position and vowed to abandon the sword and devote their energy to learning in an attempt, as Pazzanita argues, “to retain some of their status through religious practice and scholarship.”<sup>6</sup>

In the Mauritanian dialect, Arabo-Berbers are called *Al Bidan*. This label, however, hides the hierarchical social system that exists. Within Arabo-Berbers or *Bidani* tribes, whether *L'Arab* or *Zawayya*, there are other divisions. Arabs or *Bidans* can be descendants of the prophet Mohammed, and they are called *Shirva*. Then, we have



regular Arabo-Berbers, and the term *Bidan* (the Moors) is also used to describe them. These two groups are higher placed in the hierarchical ladder. Then, there is *Igawen*, musicians who made their living praising the leaders of the Arab tribes. The *L'Imalmin* are families of blacksmiths. They made their living making tools that Mauritania's relied on for survival. The *Haratin* are dark skinned Moors who had to endure slavery. The Moors continue to dominate Mauritanian politics because they make up the largest percentage of the population and continue to exert hegemonic power through promoting their cultural values.

In his book, *Mauritania: The Struggle for Democracy*, Noel Foster highlights the important position that the Moors occupy in modern Mauritania. He argues that:

At once Arab, Berber and African, of all hues and complexions, sharing a way of life and the Hassaniya language, those peoples that call themselves Moors account for approximately 70% of the country's population and have contributed to shaping its history and its present.<sup>7</sup>

This continuous power stems from the advantages the Moors enjoy as a result of their roots as the descendants of the Almoravid Empire.

The Mauritanian society is, however, made up of both Arabo-Berbers and Afro-Mauritania's. The tight control by Arabs, especially after the 30-year war, emphasized the divisions not only among Arabo-Berbers but also between Arabo-Berbers and Afro-Mauritania's. Pazzanita describes this more clearly when he argues that:

The upshot of this violent and decisive period (1644-74) was the creation of the outlines of modern Mauritanian society, characterized by pronounced divisions between the Arabo-Berbers ("Moors," as they came to be known) and Black

Africans, and by a rigidly hierarchical social order amongst the Moorish population, with the Hassan occupying the top position, the zawaya slightly below them, and the *Znaga* in decidedly underprivileged status, a station shared by assorted other occupational groups such as bards, musicians, storytellers, and the like, who helped to give Mauritanian Moorish society its complex, multivariate character.<sup>8</sup>

The Afro-Mauritanian community is also divided into different ethnic groups. Made up of Wolof, the Soninke, the Bambara, along with the Halpulaar, Afro-Mauritanians make up 30 % with the majority living nearby the Senegalese River Valley. With Islam as the country's religion, Moors and Afro-Mauritanians have lived side by side without major problems. Historical changes, however, have contributed to tensions that still pose challenges to the future of the country.

The early period of Western exploration and colonization left Mauritania untouched. Although it was given to France by the 1814 Paris Treaty, the French did not show any interest in the territory for a long period of time. Pazzanita argues that "Mauritania continued to be spoken of by the Paris authorities dismissively as "*le vide*" (the vacuum), although its formal name, the "land of the Moors," meant that France, even at this time, took careful note that the peoples who inhabited the territory north of Senegal River were distinct from the Black Africans in and near the Senegal River Valley itself."<sup>9</sup> Because it was empty land, the French did not see that it served any real purpose. This attitude changed, however, when the French started to view the country as a territory that connected French colonies in the South (Mali and Senegal) to those in the North (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia).

Although the French managed to capture this empty territory, their presence in Mauritania was rather limited. The country was ruled from Saint Louis, Senegal. Pizzaniti argues that although Mauritania was brought into the French sphere, France “did not follow up its military successes in the territory with any development program or investment in material and personnel. Until the Second World War, Mauritania remained much as it had been since medieval times and was easily one of the most neglected constituent parts of *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF).”<sup>10</sup>

Despite political, ethnic, and ideological divisions, Mauritania won its independence in 1960 and was beginning a smooth and a stable transition toward self-governance. Arabo-Berber Mauritania continued their dominance after independence. Although there was an increasing sense of security and social unity after independence, it did not last for long. Mokhtar Ould Daddah, the first Mauritanian president, began to take steps that proved problematic and threatened the unity of the social fabric and the country in general. Pizzaniti asserts that:

Beginning in 1966, Ould Daddah felt sufficiently secure at home and abroad to institute a controversial policy of ‘Arabization,’ stressing Hassaniya Arabic as the national *lingua franca* and alienating some Halpeulaaren and other blacks who wanted the educational system and other aspects of the society to remain oriented toward African languages and French.<sup>11</sup>

After Ould Daddah’s regime was overthrown by the military, Mauritania entered an era of military rule that has continued until today despite attempts that were made to democratize the nation. These different military rulers did very little to re-establish a sense of national unity, which was hugely damaged by the Arabization policies. These

policies were regarded as an attempt to exclude of Afro-Mauritanians through emphasizing the Arabic heritage of Mauritania and ignoring its ties in black Africa. In 1986, this exclusionary and systematic neglect of black Mauritanians led a group of Afro-Mauritanians to organize themselves into a movement called FLAM (Forces for Afro-Mauritanian Liberation), one that condemned the systematic mistreatment of Afro-Mauritanians.<sup>12</sup>

### **1989: A Turning Point**

Although the sentiments expressed by FLAM were denied and suppressed, the Arab-Berbers and Afro-Mauritanian relationship took a drastic turn in the year 1989. In this year, the most traumatic events in modern Mauritania took place leading to the killing, exiling, and looting of Afro-Mauritanian families. Although there is a disagreement about what caused the tensions, Pazzanita argues that:

A series of incidents between Senegalese and Mauritanian livestock herders in the Senegal River Valley exploded into open intercommunal violence directed against Mauritanian Moors in Senegal, and to a lesser extent, against Senegalese in Mauritania's two largest cities, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou.<sup>13</sup>

The atrocities against Mauritanian citizens in Senegal, however, were also used as an excuse to suppress Afro-Mauritanians around the country. The Mauritanian government alleged that its actions against some of its Afro-Mauritanian citizens were primarily motivated by its desire to protect the unity of the country by stopping Senegal-backed Afro-Mauritanian officers from jeopardizing national security. The government claims that these Afro-Mauritanian officers intended to overthrow Taya's regime and lead the country toward division. The Mauritanian government took preemptive measures

to stop this coup d'état attempt while those involved were still planning the coup. The involved Afro-Mauritanian soldiers were captured and the coup never took place.

Although he does not detail the atrocities, Pazzanita points that “the Senegal-Mauritania crisis also had a negative domestic effect well beyond its immediate ramifications. Relations between black and Moorish Mauritania suffered a setback, FLAM activity in the Senegal River Valley area increased, and stories of government repression drew severe international condemnation.”<sup>14</sup> The effects of the 1989 events on Moors and Afro-Mauritanian relations were severe. The roots of problem went deeper than the small incident that led to the Mauritania-Senegal conflict.

In *the Ignored Crises of Pain and Injustice from Mauritania*, Sidi Sene argues that the irony in Mauritania is that blacks were instrumental in its development following independence. During the years of colonization, Arabo-Berbers practiced what some refer to as “cultural resistance” refusing to send their children to French schools. However, because French education was mandatory, the Moors often sent their slaves to French schools instead of sending their own children. The Afro-Mauritania community, on the other hand, did not follow the same practice. Afro-Mauritanians sent their children to French schools, which produced a French-educated Afro-Mauritanian elite.

The first Mauritanian president Mokhtar Ould Daddah relied on the Afro-Mauritanian elite to “start schools, health department, the military.”<sup>15</sup> The weakness of the different military regimes allowed for the increase in Arab nationalist sentiments especially during the era of Maaouiya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya. During his reign, especially in the years preceding the traumatic events of 1989, his regime accelerated the “Arabization” process at the expense of the diverse cultures in the country.<sup>16</sup> The

Arabization process, however, was only one aspect of what Sene calls “homeland terrorism,”<sup>17</sup> or the systematic mistreatment of Afro-Mauritanians in the country. His book provides a justifiably angry account of the atrocities that Afro-Mauritanians have endured while the international community watched in silence.

The 1989 events, however, did not come out of nowhere. Before colonialism, Arabo-Berbers were accorded power owing to three factors. First, they made up 70% of the population. Second, they were the heirs of the Almoravid Empire. Third, Moors’ clout can partially be attributed to their status as the carriers of the message of Islam. As Arab speakers, they enjoyed this higher position due to their ability to understand the Qur’an. Although Afro-Mauritanians were prosperous farmers, Arabo-Berbers tribes dominated the country and their Arabic language was highly regarded due to its position as the language of Islam.

During French colonial rule, however, Arabic lost its higher status and was displaced by the imposition of French as both the official language and the language of education. The French started modern schools in Mauritania and French language was taught at these schools. While Afro-Mauritanians partook largely in the French educational system due of their proximity to the French colonial capital of West Africa, Saint Louis – Senegal, the Moors were reluctant to partake in French education.

By the end of French colonialism, Mauritania had a large educated Afro-Mauritanian elite that was ready to play an important role in the newly independent state. However, Arabo-Berbers regained control over the country and initiated an Arabization policy, imposing Arabic as an official language. This maneuver was meant to help Arabs gain more control over government jobs that were dominated by an Afro-Mauritanian

elite. The imposition of Arabic would then help Arabo-Berbers regain the higher status they enjoyed before colonization. These Arabization policies were a response to colonial policies that stripped Arabo-Berbers of their status in Mauritania and decentered their language. Afro-Mauritanians responded negatively to these policies, fearing that it posed a threat to their status and a danger to their own cultures/languages. Their dissatisfaction with these policies and their systematic exclusion due to the imposition of Arabization policies culminated into the 1989 events, the most traumatic events in the history of modern Mauritania. While colonization contributed to the divisions in Mauritania, postcolonial linguistic policies have perpetuated these divides.

### Beginning the Project

As a Mauritanian, I have always thought about the issue of national unity and what could be done to promote this issue. Upon my arrival to pursue my studies at Ohio University, I heard about two Mauritanian communities in the area: one in Columbus, Ohio and the other in the Cincinnati/Kentucky area. While the community in Columbus is made up primarily of Afro-Mauritanians, there is a mixed community in the Cincinnati/Kentucky area, one that includes both Afro-Mauritanians and Arabo-Berbers. What made the community in the Cincinnati area unique, however, is not its diversity. The Mauritanian community in the Greater Cincinnati area has established an association that seeks to promote unity among Mauritanians in the area. Learning more about this immigrant community and the association they have established, I became interested in exploring the story of what the association does to promote unity among its members given their shared traumatic past.

As a critical scholar, I am committed to social change. My commitment to this project stems from my belief in the need to shed light on some of the main issues that threaten national unity and perpetuate injustices in my country—Mauritania. The Afro-Mauritanian experience in Mauritania is one of the most important issues that the country continues to struggle with. The traumatic events of 1989 continue to haunt the country's efforts to move forward. On the national level, different Mauritanian governments have continuously attempted to silence voices that call for a genuine discussion of these issues. The national attitude towards this part of history is to erase it from public memory. Therefore, it is not talked about in school or in the mainstream historical narrative. This attitude towards the history of the marginalized is what Danielle Endres characterizes as “strategic silence,”<sup>18</sup> which is a form of rhetorical exclusion employed by “a group with power over another group as a way to exclude their voices or arguments.”<sup>19</sup> In studying the Mauritanian Association in the Greater Cincinnati, I hoped to start a conversation about this part of our history as well as examine how it is reconciled within this association. With this study, I hope that we can learn about possible ways to address this part of our history. Not only will this be beneficial to this Mauritanian community but also to others interested in how immigrant communities address problematic aspects of their history.

Aside from my personal commitment to the project, there are intellectual reasons behind my pursuit. Although many scholars have examined issues related diasporas and migrant communities, as I will show in the literature, little attention has been paid to how immigrant communities from the same origin negotiate a shared problematic past in their attempt to promote unity in their transnational spaces of residence. My exploration of the



Mauritanian association will expand the literature review on immigrant communities. As a postcolonial communication scholar, I believe that there is a need to study immigrant communities in an attempt to shed some light on how they construct/reconstruct their identities in a changing transnational world.

Jolanta Drzewiecka and Rona Halualani encourage the exploration of immigrant communities' construction/re-construction of identities and the implications of such changes. Arguing its benefits, both scholars believe that:

Understanding diasporas as communicative phenomena can provide great insights for communication and interdisciplinary scholars about the construction of diasporic subjectivities away from, and in memory of, a nationalist homeland as well as the political implications of such identity construction.<sup>20</sup>

In their view, it is important to recognize not only the structural aspects that influence diaspora communities but also the situational aspects as well. In studying the Mauritanian diaspora in this transnational context, this project was meant to determine how their identities are constructed in relation to others as well as the influence of both the homeland/hostland on this process.

In my work with this community, I attempted to seek insights into how members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association reconcile their problematic shared history in their efforts to promote unity. I listened to the narratives that the members are willing to share in an attempt to see which narratives are told/silenced in the services of this goal. Since this association does not exist in a vacuum, I paid careful attention to the different forces that encourage or hinder these efforts.

As a native of Mauritania, I always thought that accessing the Moorish community would go smoothly. I was often concerned that it would be difficult to access the Afro-Mauritanian community. Working with members of the larger Mauritanian community, I was both native and non-native. On one hand, I am a Mauritanian like any other member of this larger community. On the other, I am only native to one of these two communities. As a Moor, I can speak with some authority about the Moorish community, but there are many things I do not know about the Afro-Mauritanian community. However, I am non-native in other ways.

Most of the association members I interacted with had a college education. Despite their education, they were members of a mostly blue-collar community. As a Ph.D. student, I was unable to relate to their experiences. My outsider status was also clear during our conversations. Discussing the domination of Moors with Afro-Mauritanian friends, I would compare the Moors' experiences to that of white Americans and invoke McIntosh's idea of "white privilege." I consistently resorted to academic jargon during these conversations. I would later wonder if it was necessary to speak in the abstract language we are so used to in the academy. Regardless of my status as both native and non-native, however, the utility of this project lies in the fact that it is an attempt by an African to write about an African community. Much Western scholarship has been produced about Africa, but this project contributes to African scholarship on Africa/African communities. The value of such a project lies in at least two things. First, such a project starts a conversation about issues of major concern to an African community. African scholars, it is important that we shed light on the challenges we face in our communities both at home and abroad. This task should not be left to others.

Second, it contributes to a postcolonial tradition of examining the structural forces that continue to affect members of previously colonized communities.

### The Mauritanian Friendship Association: A Story of Beginnings

The members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association that I interviewed did not agree on when the association was officially established. While some believe that the association started late in the 1990s, others argued that the association did not officially begin until the early 2000s. There is no dispute, however, that a group of Moorish cab drivers and a few of their Afro-Mauritanian colleagues founded the association in the Kentucky area. Whether the association started in the late 90s or in early 2000s, what is incontrovertible is that members of the Afro-Mauritanian community in the Cincinnati area became more involved in the association in the early 2000s.

The association, according to its members, was established to bring Mauritians together under the same roof. The purpose behind establishing the association was to overcome the challenges that traumatic events have caused and to counter the negative propaganda of the Mauritanian government, a propaganda that had driven members of Mauritanian society apart. The association was to provide a space for all Mauritians to meet. The different executive bodies always included members from all ethnic groups.

The official beginning, according to one account, was in 2004. The association faced problems in its early years because of members' reluctance to volunteer. Other problems included individuals trying to use the association for their political goals. The tendency for organizations to be used for individual gains led to many Mauritians in the area to being reluctant to participate in the organization. Those who were active with the organization early on attributed their involvement to the need to remain free of

government interference. Some of these members were also members of the democratic opposition to the Mauritanian regime at the time. They tried to make sure that the association was never used for political gains.

The focus was on bringing members of the Mauritanian community closer after years of tensions between the different ethnic groups. There were challenges that the association faced, but it has continued to exist as an umbrella for all Mauritians. Hearing about the association, I was interested in learning about the different ways Mauritians from the two main ethnic groups negotiated their past in their efforts to move forwards as one community and the narratives that were told or silenced for the sake of these efforts. Also, what role, negative or otherwise, do the practices of the Mauritanian governments contribute to these efforts?

#### A Community's Association

In order to understand the nature of this project, certain designations ought to be clarified. First, when I use the term community in this research project, I am referring to the entire Mauritanian community in the Greater Cincinnati area. However, it should be made clear that members of this larger Mauritanian community belong to their own smaller communities. Broadly, they are either Moors or Afro-Mauritians. Members of the Moorish community mostly live in Kentucky, and Afro-Mauritians reside in Cincinnati.

Second, it should be made clear that this project focuses on the Mauritanian Friendship Association and not the Mauritanian community at large. My work explores my participants' experiences promoting unity within this association. When I utilize the terms Moor or Afro-Mauritanian in my discussion of their stories, I am referring to

members of the association who see themselves as either Moors or Afro-Mauritanians. While I use their group identities to distinguish them, my intention is not to generalize their experiences on either their respective communities or the larger Mauritanian community. In short, regardless of these designations, the experiences referred to in this dissertation are solely those of association members and are not representative of their respective ethnic groups or the larger Mauritanian community.

#### Project: Mauritania is an Eye

Over the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed 16 members of the Mauritanian association in the Greater Cincinnati area. Throughout the interviews, and regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, members of the Mauritanian association believed that the organization has been a positive step in the right direction. Their narratives illustrated that much needs to be accomplished to ensure that the Mauritanian community is fully unified. Listening to their narratives, I have become fully aware of the importance of the traumatic events of 1989 and the role these events played in hindering association members' ability to ensure unity among community members. Members of this Mauritanian association continue to struggle negotiating a problematic shared past that still stood as an obstacle facing their efforts to promote unity.

The narratives pointed out the negative effects of current practices by the Mauritanian government. While both Moors and Afro-Mauritanians agree that the government is to blame for the difficulties that both communities face, some Afro-Mauritanians suggested that the Moorish community needed to play a more active role in preventing Moorish government atrocities against other marginalized groups in the country. Although members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association in the Greater

Cincinnati area would readily compare Mauritania to an eye, their narratives show that it is an eye that is ailing. The troubles facing this eye are a result of troubling government practices in both the past and the present.

To understand how members of the Mauritanian association negotiate their identities in relations to one another given their problematic shared past, I asked questions about community, shared history, homeland government, transnational space, religion, and language. While I focused primarily on asking these questions, using them to guide the interviews, the participants often provided extended accounts of familiar stories to illustrate some of these issues knowingly or unknowingly. Broadly, the following questions guided my dissertation project:

1. How do members of this Mauritanian association negotiate the past in their efforts to promote unity?
2. What narratives are told/silenced in these efforts? And what are the effects of the transnational space/home government?
3. What role do language policies play in encouraging/hindering these efforts?

Guided by these questions and relying on narrative analysis, my dissertation examines the issues of language and identity, confronting a troubling past, and analyzing the association's efforts to promote unity. In the analysis chapters, I examine these issues in detail paying attention to the complex narratives that members of this Mauritanian association shared.

Following the introduction, chapter II examines the literature on diasporas/immigrant communities. While it starts with problematizing the concept of diaspora, this chapter pays attention to the issue of migration and exile, examining the work that has

been done on immigrant communities. My examination of the literature shows that while much has been produced about immigrant communities, little has been done to explore how immigrant communities of the same place of origin negotiate their problematic shared past.

Chapter III explores the two theoretical frameworks I relied on for understanding the narratives shared by members of the Mauritanian association. Utilizing narrative and postcolonial theories, I show that paying attention to narratives could shed some light onto how identities are constructed and reconstructed. A postcolonial framework, however, shows that this construction and reconstruction of identities ought to be historicized through analyzing the forces that contributed to it.

In Chapter IV, I lay out the approach I followed in conducting my fieldwork. As an ethnographer, I spend time examining the ethnographic approach pointing out the guiding principles of ethnographic approaches to data collection. Laying out the approach I employed for conducting interviews and participant observations, I explore the methods I utilized for analyzing the data. The chapter shows that these analytical tools work together to provide a robust lens for making sense of the narratives collected from my participants.

My analysis chapters begin with chapter V. In this chapter, I examine the issue of language and identity. The stories of Kadoye, Herma, Malaw, and Wane illustrate how colonial and postcolonial linguistic policies have led to a social rupture in the Mauritanian community. Through their stories, one comes to understand that understanding community relations in the present is impossible without paying attention to the various historical roots. The chapter also shows that while failed linguistic policies

have made it difficult for members of the Mauritanian community to communicate, English (as a transnational language) has provided an imperfect solution to the challenges linguistic barriers pose.

Chapter VI, “Tending to an Old Wound,” examines the negative effects the 1989 events continue to exert on community relations. The chapter focuses primarily on a conflict that arose when some members of the association planned to celebrate the Independence of Mauritania. While some believed that they have the right to celebrate Mauritania’s Independence, some members of the Afro-Mauritanian community refused to partake in the festivities, claiming that Mauritania’s Independence Day is a day of memorial on which they remember Afro-Mauritanians killed by Maaouiya’s regime during celebrations of Mauritania’s Independence. The chapter explores the narratives that members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association shared in their efforts to negotiate this issue.

Chapter VII, “Mauritania is an Eye,” focuses on the narratives the members of this Mauritanian association advance to explain their involvement in the organization. While members invoked narratives that emphasized a shared identity, appealed to an idealized past, showed concerns for future generations, and blamed different governments for difficulties the association faced, these narratives were underscored by stories that pointed out how the injustices in Mauritania continued to threaten any efforts for unity. The chapter illustrates that, while members of this association are hopeful for the association, the present political situation in Mauritania casts doubt on the future of the community.



My final chapter, Chapter VIII, provides an account of my impressions of the fieldwork as a Moorish researcher performing research on the effects of the traumatic events of 1989. I closely reflect on my experience living with my Afro-Mauritanian hosts and gatekeepers. The utility of this project lies in its ability to point out the need to pay attention to the ways in which immigrant communities negotiate a problematic shared past, providing some insight into the continued influence nation states still exert on these communities. Here, I highlight the challenges members of this association continue to face despite the positive outlook they have toward their association.

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<sup>1</sup>. Anthony Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*. (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>2</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>. Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>. Ibid., 5

<sup>6</sup>. Ibid., 3.

<sup>7</sup>. Noel Foster, *Mauritania: The Struggle for Democracy* (Boulder: FirstForumPress, 2011), 11.

<sup>8</sup>. Pizzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3.

<sup>9</sup>. Ibid., 4.

<sup>10</sup>. Ibid., 6.

<sup>11</sup>. Ibid., 7.

<sup>12</sup>. Ibid., 8.

<sup>13</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>. Sidi Sene, *The Ignored Cries of Pain and Injustice from Mauritania*. (United States: Trafford Publishing), x.

<sup>16</sup>. Ibid., 13.

<sup>17</sup>. Ibid., 38.

<sup>18</sup>. Danielle Endres, "The Rhetoric of Nuclear Colonialism: Rhetorical Exclusion of American Indian Arguments in the Yucca Mount Nuclear Waste Siting," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2009): 52.

<sup>19</sup>. Ibid

<sup>20</sup>. Jolanta Drzewiecka and Rona Halualani, "The Structural-Cultural Dialectic of Diasporic Politics," *Communication Theory* 12, no.3 (2012): 341.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### Diaspora and Migration

The term diaspora has historically been used to signify the dislocations and displacements of the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian communities.<sup>1</sup> Although the term was primarily used to refer to the Jewish experience, researchers have begun to use the term to capture the experiences of other dispersed communities. William Safran argues that:

The “term ‘diaspora’ and more specifically, ‘diaspora community’ seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court* – in much the same way that ‘ghetto’ has come to designate all kinds of crowded, constricted, and disprivileged urban environments, and ‘holocaust’ has come to be applied to all kinds of mass murder.”<sup>2</sup>

The reason behind using the term metaphorically to refer to these varied experiences stems from social scientists’ need to move away from examining and making generalizing on experiences that are not unique. Safran puts this clearly when he asserts that even though the term “diaspora” has solely been used to capture the Jewish experience, it has become clear that unique experiences are not useful for “social scientists attempting to make generalizations.”<sup>3</sup>

While scholars have not agreed on a one single definition for the term, Sociologist Judith Shuval believes that there is an agreement over the fact that the term connotes “a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country,

desire for eventual return (which can be ambivalent, eschatological or utopian), ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity defined by the above relationships.”<sup>4</sup>

What these characteristics emphasize is the need to move away from seeing every dispersed group as a diaspora. William Safran explains this idea eloquently:

Not all ‘dispersed’ minority population can legitimately be considered a diaspora.

Contrary to the opinion of Richard Marienstras, the Flemish-Speaking Belgians who live in their own communities in Wallonia, surrounded by French speakers, or vice versa, are not, simply by virtue of their physical detachment from a particular linguistic center, a diaspora. They have not been exiled or expatriated, and their condition is the result of demographic changes around them.<sup>5</sup>

For Safran, displacement is essential to the diasporic experience. Moreover, he recognizes that it is essential to also pay attention to the sacrifices that a diasporic group makes. For him, Palestinians living in Arab middle eastern countries cannot be considered diaspora communities because “they have not had to make the kinds of cultural and linguistic sacrifices characteristic of other diasporas; they continue to speak their language and practice their religion.”<sup>6</sup>

Scholars attempting to understand the experience of a given diaspora community could benefit tremendously from focusing on the processes of identity formation and alliance building. From a perspective of transnationalism theory, Shuval argues, diaspora communities are understood as part of transnational networks.<sup>7</sup> Exploring the transnational ties that a given diaspora community establishes is beneficial because it sheds light on the complex relations that exist and the power-relations they produce.

Shuval believes that we need to recognize that the multiplicity of relations are not “only between diaspora communities and their homeland in a binary context but because of the ongoing, lateral relations among diaspora communities located in different sites within nation states and in different states.”<sup>8</sup> Diaspora communities are not only influenced by relations with their home governments, but also the different ties they establish with other transnational communities both within and outside their place of residence.

Also important to our understanding of diasporas is the ambivalent relationship with the nation state. Diasporic communities emphasize that their relationship to the homeland should not be viewed in binary terms. Shuval argues that “diaspora communities make it clear that identifying with a political or a geographical entity does not need to be binary – in the sense of all or nothing- but can involve loyalty to more than one such entity,”<sup>9</sup> creating what some have regarded as some form of deterritorialization of social identity that threatens the hegemony of the nation state. This deterritorialization “challenges the meaning of ‘nation state’ and its claims for exclusive loyalty with the alternative of multiple identities and even multiple citizenships.”<sup>10</sup> While members of a diasporic community may hold multiple citizenships, what distinguishes diasporas from other types of migrations is their “ongoing or re-awakened attachment and loyalty to their earlier culture and specifically to the homeland which they feel they have left.”<sup>11</sup>

Shuval insists that understanding the term diaspora and the experiences of diaspora communities require examining these groups in relation to both the host country and the homeland. These relations are complex and non-static. She posits that it is not only possible for the diaspora to have a homeland, but also likely that the homeland is

welcoming of the diaspora. The homeland could also rely on the diasporic communities not only for financial support but also could use its diaspora community to put pressure on the host land. The host country could also rely on the diaspora to advance its political agendas, and the diaspora could rely on the host country to advance its political views within the homeland.<sup>12</sup> Examining these issues is necessary for acquiring a refined picture of how diaspora communities affect and are affected by the aforementioned transnational relations.

Understanding diaspora communities also requires an appreciation of the complex nature of the globalized world we live in. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai asserts that while “large-scale interactions” between cultures have always existed, what has changed in our contemporary world is that these interactions have acquired a “new order and intensity.”<sup>13</sup> What happened as a result of the rapid advancements in technology is that the world entered “into an altogether new condition of neighborliness.”<sup>14</sup> We now live in a global village.

The fast and massive movement of people and commodities has created a tension between ideas of “homogenization and cultural heterogenization” Appadurai argues. To understand this new globalized world, “the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of the existing center – periphery model (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries).”<sup>15</sup> To account for this multifacetedness, Appadurai proposes focusing on the complex relationship that exists between the five dimensions where the effect of the global cultural flow is manifested. He labels these “*ethnoscape*,

*mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes.*”<sup>16</sup> Appadurai’s main interest lies in pointing out the impact that these movements have had on our contemporary world.

It is important to recognize that Appadurai is pointing out that an understanding of the transnational condition in which we live requires paying attention to the relationship between the movements of peoples, images, technologies, finances, and ideas that touch us all, defying any rush to perceive the world in terms of binaries of center-periphery or multiple centers-multiple peripheries.

This global condition has resulted in the need to reconsider our conceptions of diaspora communities. Khachig Tololyan explains that:

As migration, the reconfiguring of ethnicity, transnationalism and globalization have increased the number of social formations that might sensibly be described as diasporas, rapid major changes in discourse have both responded to and reciprocally shaped the impulse to re-name various forms of dispersion and to attribute new, ‘diasporic’ meanings and values to them.<sup>17</sup>

The change did not happen overnight. The massive movements of groups in an increasingly interconnected world has pushed for the need to rethink the term “diaspora” to make it apply to groups other than the traditional groups it has historically been used to describe. This need for changing our understanding of the term diaspora was not a divorced act but rather a part of a bigger project of “re-articulating the nation-state and the concepts of national identity, indeed of identity as such.”<sup>18</sup>

## **Rethinking Diasporas: New Approaches**

While some scholars have historically understood the diasporic experience as “a collective banishment or trauma suffered by an ethnic, religious or national group that leads to its geographic dispersal,”<sup>19</sup> others have posited that “diaspora populations can emerge from a wide range of other forms of migration.”<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the term diaspora should be applied to a varied range of experiences. This has led some scholars to come up with different approaches for understanding diasporic communities. Robin Cohen, for instance, has come up with a typology that divides diasporic communities into “victim”, “labor”, “imperial”, “trading,” and “cultural diasporas.”<sup>21</sup> For Cohen, victim diasporas share some of the characteristics usually used to describe the Jewish experience.<sup>22</sup> With the African diaspora, categorized as a victim diaspora, the idea of a return to an imagined homeland was on the minds of victims of the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the Armenian diaspora continued to carry the idea of an imagined homeland. Cohen posits that both of these diaspora communities “were widely dispersed and both clung on to a collective memory and myth about the homeland, its location and its achievements.”<sup>24</sup> These two diaspora communities have also displayed a strong ethnic group consciousness, a troubled relationship with host societies (less evident among non-Middle Eastern Armenians), a sense of empathy with other ethnic members, and the possibility of an enriching, creative life in the diaspora (probably more evident in the African case).<sup>25</sup> For Cohen, this stems from the diversity of African diasporas.

However, Cohen notes that a traumatic dispersal may not be the sole reason behind the creation of a diaspora.<sup>26</sup> Cohen gives labor diasporas, imperial diasporas, and



trade diasporas as examples. While he admits that it is not feasible to speak of labor diasporas whenever a group of people crosses borders in search of work, one can speak of a diaspora when there is evidence of “a strong retention of group ties sustained over an extended period (in respect of language, religion, endogamy and cultural norms), a myth of and strong connection to a homeland, and high levels of social exclusion in the destination societies.”<sup>27</sup> Imperial diasporas, on the other hand, emerged with colonialism when many European communities were established in the new territories. Most of these Europeans moved to the new territories looking for better opportunities or to run from political repression in their home countries.<sup>28</sup> In addition to labor diasporas and imperial diasporas, Cohen points out that trade diasporas are one of the oldest forms of diasporas. In a trade diaspora, “merchants from one community would live as aliens in another town, learn the language, the customs and the commercial practices of their hosts then starting the exchange of goods.”<sup>29</sup> Lebanese diaspora communities in Africa serve as an example.

Finally, Cohen proposes cultural diasporas as the last category that deserves our attention. He gives the example of the Afro-Caribbeans living in the New World arguing that “despite the different destinations and the experiences of Caribbean people abroad, they remain an exemplary case of cultural diaspora.”<sup>30</sup> This stems from “their common history of forcible dispersion through the slave trade – still shared by virtually all people of African descent, despite their subsequent liberation, settlement and citizenship in various countries of the New World.”<sup>31</sup> Cohen, however, advises that certain

characteristics should be considered when deciding on what constitutes a cultural diaspora. He believes that:

First, there should be evidence of cultural retention or affirmations of an African identity. Secondly, there should be a literal or symbolic interest in ‘return’.

Thirdly, there should be cultural artifacts, products and expressions that show shared concerns and cross-influence between Africa, the Caribbean, and the destination countries of Caribbean peoples. Fourthly, and often forgotten by the intensely cerebral versions of diaspora presented by cultural studies theorists, there should be indications that ordinary Caribbean peoples abroad – in their attitudes, migrations patterns and social conduct – behave in ways consistent with the idea of a cultural diaspora.<sup>32</sup>

While instructive, this typology has not helped ease the disagreement over what constitutes a diasporic community. Fiona Adamson posits that the opposition to the essentialist views regarding diasporas have led other scholars to view diasporas as social constructions.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, diasporas cannot be viewed as “natural entities that emerge out of boundary- crossing processes; they must rather be discursively constructed or mobilized.”<sup>34</sup> The process of constructing diasporas is made possible through processes of globalization that have facilitated the “emergence of new political practices and identities.”<sup>35</sup> As a prescriptive label, any immigrant group could utilize the term to indicate belonging to larger transnational networks. Through highlighting the political dimension of the diasporic experience, “the constructivist approach points to processes of strategic social construction that lead to the formation of diasporas, as opposed to simply

boundary-experiences.”<sup>36</sup> The constructivist approach stresses that the diasporic experience is constructed and reconstructed and that this construction and reconstruction has been facilitated by globalization. Constructivist approaches pay attention to the different processes that affect the formation of different diasporic communities.

## **Exile**

Scholars have also examined exile as a form of migration. Unlike other types of migration, “exile is rarely sought”<sup>37</sup> but is rather a “state forced upon individuals, groups or a nation: they are passive reactors subject to this state. While individuals are forced to leave their home to live in exile, exile can also be internal.”<sup>38</sup> What distinguishes exile from other experiences is that individuals living in exile tend to perceive exile as a temporary, and their attention “rests with the territory and culture of their former home.”<sup>39</sup> While exile, like diaspora, has historically been associated with the Jewish experience, it differs from the term diaspora. Martin Baumann makes this distinction more eloquently when he argues that:

Exile, in contrast to diaspora, is seldom “associated with religious connotations and semantics. It appears that it relates more explicitly to a state of persecution and forced flight caused by a nation-state than does diaspora. The latter, participant in recent discourse, appears to relate to a state of enduring consciousness of living away from home, adapted to the new social and cultural contact. In contrast, contemporary connotations of exile are resonant of a state of sojourn, estrangement and homesickness.”<sup>40</sup>

The debates over what constitutes a diaspora continue with essentialist referring to specific experiences as diasporic and constructivists viewing diasporas as social constructions that serve the purpose of asserting political identities. However, it is clear that any immigrant group, for the purpose of asserting a political identity, could appropriate the term diaspora. In my work with the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati, most of the association members referred to themselves as members of an immigrant community. Because the members choose to view themselves as members of an immigrant community, I use the term immigrant community instead of diasporic community when referring to them.

While I use the phrase immigrant community, it is obvious that the term diaspora can be used interchangeably. For, James Clifford observes, “it is not easy to avoid the slippage between diaspora as a theoretical concept, diasporic ‘discourses’, and distinct historical experiences of diaspora.”<sup>41</sup> While few of the community members were forced to leave home during the traumatic events of 1989, most of the community members have come here searching for a better life and do not view themselves as living in exile.

### **Diaspora and Home Countries**

Scholars have studied diaspora communities looking at various numbers of issues that are of relevance to the communities’ relationship to their homelands and host countries. In an insightful essay on the Japanese government’s efforts to bring members of the Japanese diaspora in Brazil to work in Japan, Keiko Yamanaka points out that governments could seek out their diaspora communities to maintain the homogeneity of the population. In a response to the need for labor, the Japanese government came up

with a solution that would ensure that ethnic homogeneity is protected. The government granted “privileged access to employment and residence in Japan to descendants of earlier Japanese emigrants – in short, to tap the Japanese diaspora for labor in order to maintain the zealously guarded ethnic and racial homogeneity of the nation.”<sup>42</sup> The attempt to provide a home for these Japanese persons in their ancestral land proved challenging when this minority faced linguistic barriers and were at times unable to find jobs in their new-old home.<sup>43</sup> Yamanaka shows that a positive relationship with a diasporic community can be motivated by different interests.

Political Scientist Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen, using Moroccan immigrants in Europe as an example, examines the Moroccan governments’ efforts to provide certain rights to Moroccan communities living abroad. She, however, advises that these efforts should be read as “political liberalization in the sense of granting more rights and freedom to citizens than democratization.”<sup>44</sup> This serves the government through helping with its efforts to maintain a positive image.

On the other hand, scholars have also explored the relationship between diaspora communities and home countries focusing primarily on the tension that exists due to the demands of diaspora communities seeking to influence change in the home-country. Richard Agbor Ayukndang Enoh illustrates the relationship between the Cameroonian government’s attitudes toward the Cameroonian diaspora living in the West arguing that African governments tend to be hesitant to include their diasporas in development efforts.

Enoh attributes this to the corrupt political regimes that control African countries and their fear of diasporas that seek real change. He posits that “the Cameroonian

government has not shown any interest or has refused/neglected its interaction with her diaspora due to their challenging ideas of change and growth.”<sup>45</sup> The Cameroonian government fear of its diaspora stemmed from the fact that its diaspora is primarily made of young educated professionals who seek to influence change and become important actors in the country’s development.<sup>46</sup> Non-democratic regimes in Africa are hesitant to include their diasporic communities and view them as a danger.

The pressure from the diaspora and the resources diaspora communities could provide help some diaspora communities gain a measure of political influence in their home countries. Taking the Ethiopian diaspora as an example, International Relations Scholar Terrence Lyons argues that “Ethiopian politicians—the government, opposition and local insurgents alike-perceive the diaspora as a key source of resources, ideas and so nurture support among diasporic communities.”<sup>47</sup> Through their ability to provide material support to different political entities, diaspora communities are able to exert some power within their communities of origin. Diasporic communities can be “absent but active constituency”<sup>48</sup> as Laura Hammond argues. While they live abroad, members of the diaspora continue to exert some influence on their home countries through the financial means they can mobilize in support of certain political entities.

### **Diaspora and Host Countries**

While the relationship between diaspora communities and their homelands has been the focus of a large body of literature, scholars have also continuously explored the relationship between diasporic communities and their host countries. Much of this research has focused upon the tension between diaspora communities and their host

countries, and how both for different purposes exploit this relationship. Focusing on how the host nation defines itself in relation to the diasporic Other allows for the possibility of exploring how nation states practice their disciplinary power on alien others, making the concept of the nation-state imaginable. Ali Behead, commenting on issues of immigration and nationalism in the United States, posits that:

Located at the interstices of national consciousness and state apparatus, immigration makes the ambivalent concept of the 'nation-state' imaginable in America: while the figure of the 'alien' provides the differential signifier through which the nation defines itself as an autonomous community, the juridical and administrative regulations of immigration construe the collective sovereignty of the modern state.<sup>49</sup>

On the one hand, the diasporic individual helps the nation state defines itself against this alien other. On the other hand, this alien other is controlled to preserve the sovereignty of the state.

Other scholars have also attempted to understand the process through which diaspora communities adapt to living in the host land, a process that does not often lead to the rejection of their relations with their homelands. Gabriel Shaffer believes that this “integration process involves adaptation by diasporas who have rights and responsibilities in their host land. On the other hand, it involves, of course, the host land society and government that might create the proper opportunities for the migrants’ cultural, social, and economic integration, or might try to cause these diasporas’ exit.”<sup>50</sup> It does not necessarily result in abandoning the roots. Examining this process sheds some light on

how diaspora communities negotiate integration in their host communities and the processes that might facilitate or hinder their integration in these communities. An individual's success in the host community might rely primarily on how successful their integration is in that community.

The relationship between diaspora communities and their host lands have also been examined from a political stance. Diasporas attempt to influence the policies of their host lands toward their home countries. To do so, however, they must demonstrate their willingness to uphold principals of multiculturalism. Focusing on the American context, Yossi Shain argues that diasporas are able to exert some level of influence providing that they “demonstrate their determination to advocate the principles of pluralism, democracy, and human rights abroad, in the terms that are regarded as proper by the US government.”<sup>51</sup> Providing they show their commitment to these principles, diaspora communities may be able to influence policies of their host countries.

In terms of their political involvement on the international level, scholars have also explored the role that diaspora communities can play in influencing international policy towards their home countries. In examining the case of the Greek and Macedonians' conflict over the two countries' right to claim the name Macedonia, Loring M. Danforth claims that the diasporic communities from both countries have played an extremely important role through making their claims to the name globally known, changing the ways national conflicts have been fought. She puts this more eloquently when she explains that:



In the global world of the late twentieth century, then, national conflicts are being fought paradoxically on a transnational level. Relationships between nation-states and ethnic minorities within their boundaries are no longer the private, internal affairs they once were. Now they frequently involve diaspora communities of both the dominant national group and the ethnic minority, their host countries, and various international organizations.<sup>52</sup>

It is not uncommon for diaspora communities to enlist the help of their host countries to influence change in their homeland. However, the conflict between the Greeks and the Macedonians over the right to the name have led to diasporas from both countries playing the role of ambassadors for the cause, bringing their case to international organizations, and seeking to advance their political agenda.

### **Migration: Home, Citizenship, and Political Transformation**

Scholars interested in transnational migration have also examined various numbers of issues related to immigrants' experiences such the changing meaning of home, of citizenship, and the role immigrant communities play in the transformation of home. In studying Syrian immigrants in Turkey and Germany, Heidi Armbruster believes that home can be "where people come from and where they travel to; it can be a tension between the two,"<sup>53</sup> arguing for the need to abandon transnational/cosmopolitan as interpretive terms. Home can no longer be thought of in terms of either/or. Working with migrant Moroccan women in Italy, Ruba Salih also claims that through sending consumer goods, Moroccan women "construct the space they inhabit and through which they both negotiate identity ruptures and establish continuities between countries."<sup>54</sup> While

immigrants continue to negotiate the tension between the home country and receiving country, Bruno Riccio explains that the Senegalese migrants “do not develop multiple attachments; their meaning of home does not shift dramatically.”<sup>55</sup> Their organization as transnational communities is facilitated by the strong attachment they have with the home country.<sup>56</sup> While some continue to negotiate this tension, Riccio shows that others are able to avoid it.

Also, other scholars have explored issues of citizenship positing that “policies in many migrant-sending countries are converging towards this more voluntaristic model of emigrant citizenship.”<sup>57</sup> David Scott FitzGerald acknowledges that “new forms of citizenship and strategies for embracing emigrants are the product of an international system that limits the reach of states vis-à-vis citizen-subjects outside their territory.”<sup>58</sup> These changes, some scholars claim, have led to re-conceptualizing of the idea of non-resident citizens “as equal members of the diaspora community.”<sup>59</sup> Nation states have begun to figure out different methods for dealing with this issue.

Aside from these issues, scholars of migration have also looked at the role that transnational migrant communities can play in the transformation of home. Studying Kurdish migrants in Europe, Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen argues that these “diaspora political groups help keep the issue on the agenda in Germany as well as other West European countries and may serve as a linking point between political actors at home and abroad.”<sup>60</sup> Through doing so, they advocate important causes on behalf of their country.

My dissertation project examines the relationship between this association and the Mauritanian government. Field experiences and my participants’ narratives illustrated

that members of this association have an ambivalent relationship with the home government. Despite the large size of this community, the different Mauritanian governments have largely ignored it. Aside from the ceremonial visits from different Mauritanian ambassadors, the community has been unable to establish a working relationship with its home government. The literature on immigrant communities illustrates that an immigrant community's relation to its home government can be based on mutual interest. The different Mauritanian governments have, for the most part, been disinterested in this community. This disinterest has not helped ease the historical tensions.

Members of the Mauritanian community view themselves as immigrants living in the United States. Although some of the members are naturalized Americans, Mauritania is still their home. Problematizing the idea of home, some of them continue to aspire for a dual citizenship law that would recognize their new home, the United States. Although most of them aspire to return to Mauritania, they do not perceive themselves as living in exile. While community members have established ties with members of Mauritanian communities around the United States, they still do not perceive themselves as members of a diaspora. Living as an immigrant community in the Greater Cincinnati area, members of the Mauritanian Friendship association continue to work on promoting unity in a community that is still divided.

### Conclusion

There is a huge body of literature on diasporas/immigrant communities encompassing theoretical works that examine the need to redefine the term to meet the

need of our contemporary global condition and studies on the multifaceted/ and complex relationships that exist between diaspora communities and their host and homelands. In addition, much has also been produced on the political role that diaspora communities play in changing policies both in their host countries and their homelands. However, little has been written on how diasporic communities coming from the same country of origin negotiate/reconcile their problematic past. In the African context, reconciliation has received much attention especially in the South African context with the creation of Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a mechanism “for dealing with the past.”<sup>61</sup> However, the literature has not examined how transnational groups from the same homeland reconcile and negotiate the past. In my research project, and through working with the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati area, I aspire to contribute to the literature on transnational communities through exploring how members of the Mauritanian community in the Greater Cincinnati area negotiate their problematic past.

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<sup>4</sup>. Judith Shuval, “Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm,” *International Migration* 38, no. 4 (2000): 43.

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### Chapter III: Theoretical Frameworks

#### Narrative and Identity

Stories are an indispensable part of our lives. Human beings have always told and listened to stories. To capture how essential stories are to human beings, Walter Fisher claimed that we are not simply *homo sapiens*. We are *homo narrants*.<sup>1</sup> We are storytellers. For a long time, social scientists ignored the significance of stories and their relationship to the social world. In *Making Stories: Law, Literature, and Life*, Jerome Bruner argues that there has always been a problem of asymmetry “between doing and understanding.”<sup>2</sup> For while human beings are skilled storytellers, “we stumble when we try to explain to ourselves or to some dubious other, what makes something a story rather than, say, an argument, a recipe.”<sup>3</sup> This always makes us hesitant to examine “the shape reality is given when we dress it up as story.”<sup>4</sup> While we see stories as windows to the real world, we realize that there exist “narrative conventions governing storied worlds.”<sup>5</sup> These conventions guide narrative structures and establish the rules that storytellers must follow in a given cultural context. Regardless of our reasons, humans avoided examining the relationship between stories and the real world. Emphasizing this relationship, Bruner argues that it is important to recognize that a narrative gives “shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality.”<sup>6</sup> It is through their ability to bestow a sense of reality on things in the real world that narratives acquire their significance.

When experts paid attention to a narrative, it was either to “control its effects” or to “understand it so as to cultivate its illusions of reality, to ‘subjunctivize’ the self-evident declaratives of everyday life.”<sup>7</sup> While those in legal professions work on taming



the effects of narratives through reliance on “procedural rules,” those working with literary narratives recognize the need for a narrative to “have its roots in familiar territory, in the seemingly real.”<sup>8</sup> Despite their differences, they both have depended on narratives for their success. Bruner posits that if literary fiction “treats the familiar with reference in order to achieve verisimilitude, law stories need to honor the devices of great fiction if they are to get their full measure from judge and jury.”<sup>9</sup> Narratives, despite the efforts to tame and exploit them, are inescapable.

In telling narratives, the teller is constantly working on managing “past and possible, in an endless dialectic.”<sup>10</sup> One is never simply telling one story but multiple stories that make up their identity. Bruner makes this argument clearly when he states:

It is not just who and what we are that we want to get straight but who and what we might have been, given the constraints that memory and culture impose on us, constraints of which we are often unaware.<sup>11</sup>

Narratives, as Bruner sees them, are “whatever challenges our conception of the canonical.”<sup>12</sup> For us to speak of a narrative, something unforeseen should happen. Telling narratives serves as the base for our collective life. It is through narratives that an individual’s experience is converted “into collective coin which can be circulated, as it were, on a base wider than a merely interpersonal one.”<sup>13</sup> Because they are shared, narratives serve as a window to the collective life of a community. Working with my participants, I sought to understand how they used narratives to negotiate their problematic shared past.

Narratives do not simply give shape to reality but are the means through which the individual self is constructed and reconstructed. The self, as Anthony Kerby claims, is not “some precultural or presymbolic entity that we seek simply to capture in language. In other words, I am, for myself, only insofar as I express myself.”<sup>14</sup> In making the same argument, Bruner proposes boldly that:

That there is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears of the future.<sup>15</sup>

Individual identities, in Bruner’s view, are narratively constructed and reconstructed. In studying the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati area, a reliance on narratives helped show how individuals rely on narratives to construct their identities in this transnational space and how these constructions are influenced by both their context and the political situation in their home country.

Telling oneself about oneself is “like making up a story about who and what we are, what’s happened, and why we are doing what we are doing.”<sup>16</sup> While our telling of narratives is constrained by inside factors such as our memories, much of the influence on our narrative self-making comes from the outside. Our narratives are “guided by unspoken, implicit cultural models of what selfhood should be – and, of course shouldn’t be.”<sup>17</sup> In telling others about ourselves, we are taking on a difficult task. It largely depends on “what we think they think we ought to be like – or what selves in general

ought to be like.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, narratives are contextual. Narrative scholars ought to pay attention to the context in which narratives are told. What a narrative means does not primarily reside in its connection to the events but rather to the different meanings attributed to it by its retelling in particular contexts.

In telling our stories, time plays a pivotal role. However, it is essential to recognize that temporality is a complex issue. In “Autobiographical Time,” Jens Brockmeier claims that a narrative about one’s past “is always also a story told in, and about, the present as well as story about the future.”<sup>19</sup> What makes narratives indispensable is their ability to connect the past to the present and provide direction for the future. In listening to narratives my participants shared, it was obvious that some of these stories were not simply about the past but rather connected the past to the present, showing how the past still influenced the present and impacted their views of the future. Mark Freeman makes this point more succinctly when he posits that “there is a dialectical relationship not only between past and present but between past, present, and future: even in the midst of my present engagement with the past, I am moving into the future, giving form and meaning to the self-to-be.”<sup>20</sup> Through examining the narratives my participants shared about their engagement in the efforts to promote unity, I was interested in examining how narratives of the present invoke the past and are used to make predictions about the future of the community.

Narratives are a valuable source of information about how individuals view themselves and what they deem valuable. Kristin Langellier notes that “telling narratives does something in the social world. Personal narratives participate in the ongoing rhythm

of people's lives as a reflection of their social organization and cultural values."<sup>21</sup> The narratives that individuals share provide insight into how they view their community. Robert Atkinson argues that "life stories can be gathered both from an individual and collective perspectives and can inform us about not "only reality existing outside the story but described by the story, to define relationships and roles in the community, to explain an individual understanding of social events."<sup>22</sup> Narratives provide a window into the community.

Narrative scholars examine narratives because of their interest in the meanings placed on these stories and the meanings that could be interpreted from them. Their interest, in other words, goes beyond examining narratives to acquiring some insight into what really happened. In "Criteria Against Ourselves," Arthur Bochner asserts that "the purpose of self-narratives is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived. These narratives are not so much academic as they are existential, reflecting the desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning, which is what gives life its imaginative and poetic qualities."<sup>23</sup> Because they are existential, the significance of narrative inquiry lies in its "concern not only for the commonplace, even trivial routines of everyday life, but also for the flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life's contingencies; not only facts but also feelings."<sup>24</sup> Gathering narratives from my participants provided some insight into how they make sense of their lives in relation to others in their community.

Narrative scholars are not interested in the truthfulness of the narratives that our participants share with us, but rather how these narratives are situated within other

stories. In “Narrative Virtues,” Arthur Bochner asserts that “life stories may be based on facts, but they are not determined by them. The facts achieve significance and intelligibility by being articulated within a temporal frame that considers what came before and what came after.”<sup>25</sup> Listening to stories and examining how they are temporally related to other stories provides insight into the meanings that the narrators ascribe to them.

Narrative theory teaches us that the self is constructed and reconstructed narratively.<sup>26</sup> Narrative scholars also invite us to consider the issue of temporality, for the stories individuals tell about the past are also stories about the present as well as the future.<sup>27</sup> The importance of narratives, however, lies in the important insight they provide not only into individual experiences but also the collective experiences of a community.<sup>28</sup> Through examining narratives, scholars are able to derive the meanings that individual members associate with the stories they tell about their community.<sup>29</sup> Narrative theory also invites us to pay attention to the situatedness of narratives.<sup>30</sup> Narratives individuals share are influenced by both internal and external factors that affect the narrator.

Working with members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati, a narrative lens is useful because of its ability to point out how an individual’s sense of self/identity goes through a constant process of shaping and reshaping. This project focused on examining how members of the Mauritanian community work together to promote unity despite their problematic shared history; therefore, using narrative theory allowed for seeing how narratives of the present invoke stories about the past and help members make assumptions about the future. In telling their stories about

their efforts to promote unity, my participants pointed out the continuous influence of the 1989 events. In addition, narratives about the present were used to point out the challenges that government practices continue to pose to the association's efforts to promote unity.

Using narrative theory also helped me examine the meanings that can be interpreted from narratives members of this Mauritanian association shared, providing insight not only into the individual but the collective narrative.

In short, the utility of narrative theory lies in its ability to point out that stories about the present are, at the same time, stories about the past and the future. Paying attention to stories helps narrative scholars gain insight into the community with which they are studying. Working with my participants, a narrative lens provided insight into how they live their lives. The narratives they told about their present relations often invoked stories about the past. While they spoke positively about the association, narratives about the past served as a reminder that past experiences still informed members' relations in the present. Narrative theory also highlights the contextual nature of stories. As complementary lenses, Postcolonial theories provide a possibility of contextualizing/historicizing my participants' narratives.

#### Postcolonial Frameworks

Postcolonial studies, according Raka Shome and Radha Hegde, is an “interdisciplinary field of inquiry committed to theorizing the problematic of colonization and decolonization.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the seemingly straightforward definition, the term postcolonialism is notorious for its ambiguity and vagueness. In her book, *Colonialism*

*and Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba asserts that “the term is not only inadequate to the task of defining contemporary realities in the once-colonized countries, and vague in terms of indicating a specific period of history, but may also cloud the internal social and racial differences of many societies.”<sup>32</sup> The vagueness of the term postcolonialism has generated a great deal of controversy.

The controversy over the term concerns both the prefix *post* and the word colonial. First, the prefix *post* implies the aftermath, “in two sense—the temporal as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting.”<sup>33</sup> If we view it from the temporal, we can always ask the question: what is post about postcolonialism? Critics of the term have asked the question of whether it is premature to claim the supplanting of colonialism when “the inequities of the colonial rule have not been erased.”<sup>34</sup> This particular question is of extreme relevance to scholars studying the effects of globalization.

Without delving into the issue in great detail, the controversial nature of the term postcolonialism stems from the different understandings of the terms colonialism and imperialism. Although some scholars, according to Loomba, have made the distinction between the two terms through seeing colonialism as the pre-capitalist phase and imperialism as a capitalist phase, this distinction is easily refuted. Imperialism existed long before the rise of capitalist economic structures. She suggests that it is more useful to view imperialism or neo-imperialism “as a phenomenon that originates in the metropolis, the process of which leads to domination and control.”<sup>35</sup> The consequences of imperial domination can either be colonialism or neo-colonialism. Aside from these

concerns, however, postcolonial theory has provided a lens through which various issues have been examined.

### **Postcolonial Studies: The Issue of Identity**

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said was interested in showing the relationship between knowledge and power through tracing the genealogy of Orientalism as an institution. Orientalism meant three different and yet interrelated things for Said. First, he used it to refer to anyone studying the Orient. Second, it can be understood as a European style of thought that is based on the epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident. Third, Orientalism is an institution or a Western style of thought that was responsible for dominating the Orient.

Orientalism was an indication of the imbalance of power relations between the West and the Orient. Said argues that the Orient was Orientalized because “it could be—that is, submitted to being-made oriental.”<sup>36</sup> This making of the Orient was made possible because of European power. Orientalism was an exercise of power and cultural strength. European knowledge of the Orient was an integral part of the process of controlling the Orient and having power over it. Knowledge of the Orient was not only a means of having power over it, but it was also necessary for delimiting the self. Operating on a dichotomy, Orientalism made Europe stand for everything that was not Oriental. This was only possible through constructing an us/them dichotomy. If the Orient is irrational, Europe stands for rationality and reason. As Said notes that cultures have a tendency to “derive a sense of their identities negatively.”<sup>37</sup> As a form of hegemonic cultural power, Orientalism helped justify European colonization.



While Said was interested in examining identity in relation to the imbalance of power between West and the East, his ideas are relevant because of their ability to theorize the relationship between identity, power, and systems of domination. Listening to some of my participants' stories, it was clear that the domination of the Moors allowed the different Moorish regimes the ability to produce alienating discourses about different marginalized groups. These alienating discourses often portrayed the Other as a threat to the Moorish community. With Samba Kelel's story, I was able to see that some of my participants feared that the current Mauritanian government has produced an othering discourse targeting anti-slavery activists. This discourse served as a reminder of similar practices used against Afro-Mauritanians. Also, different Mauritanian governments have always attempted to emphasize the Arab character of the nation, alienating Afro-Mauritanians and other marginalized groups that still continue to stress their distinct identities.

During the colonial era, the French government relied largely on Afro-Mauritanians, employing them as civil servants, because of Arabs' resistance to French culture. Owing to their involvement in the colonial educational system, Afro-Mauritanians were immersed in the French culture. The French surrendered power to the Moors in 1960, ending Mauritania's occupation. The Moorish government, in an attempt to emphasize the Arabic character of the nation, sought to limit the influence of the French heritage. In imposing Arabic, the Moors alienated Afro-Mauritanians. While the French did not create these divisions, colonialism exacerbated them.

If Said's Orientalism reinforced the binary opposition between East and West, Homi Bhabha invites us to move away from viewing colonial identities in terms of binaries. Bhabha was influenced by the idea that "communication is a process that is never perfectly achieved and that there is always a slippage, a gap, between what is said and what is heard."<sup>38</sup> Because of this gap, it is impossible for colonial authorities to reproduce colonial discourses perfectly leading to its ambivalence or hybridity. Bhabha's notion of hybridity warns against seeing colonial identities as being independent of each other in the form of colonizer and colonized. Instead, they are interdependent.

Although Bhabha is useful in allowing us to move beyond viewing colonial identities in terms of binaries, his idea of hybridity has met criticism from scholars who were not equally excited for the universalizing/essentializing tendencies that characterized it. As Loomba points out, critics have warned that these universalizing tendencies are insensitive to the different and varied experiences of hybridity and are unable to contextualize them. While Bhabha's idea of hybridity makes it difficult to make a fast and a clean-cut distinction between the colonizer and the colonized, JanMohamed has argued that behind that ambivalence, "a Manichean dichotomy between colonizer and colonized is what structures colonial relations."<sup>39</sup>

Despite the criticism directed against some of his ideas, Bhabha's notion of hybridity was instructive during my fieldwork. My participants did not view their identities in terms of binary opposition between Moors and Afro-Mauritians. Their narratives often emphasized other shared identities. All my participants viewed themselves as Muslims and Mauritians. They emphasized these identities in an effort to

find common ground on which they could establish a base for unity. While their narratives emphasized these identity markers, my Afro-Mauritanian participants stressed the importance of their African identities, especially when they perceived government practices as attacks on their languages/cultures. Overall, however, members of the association saw themselves as both Afro-Mauritanians/Moors and always something else.

### **Postcolonial Studies: Race, and Language**

Although postcolonial scholars have relied on the work of European thinkers, they often found that Euro-centric knowledge needed to be stretched for a better analysis of the colonial situation. While Marx relied on issues of class to understand the ramifications of the capitalist system, Fanon believed that a Marxist analysis ought to be stretched to enable a better understanding of the colonial condition. For what divides the colonial world is not what class one belongs to but rather what race one belongs to. In *the Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that:

Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what races one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a super structure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.<sup>40</sup>

Fanon dedicated much of his energy to exposing the racialized world that the colonizers created through relying on and stretching Eurocentric thought. For instance, in *Black Skins, White Mask*, Fanon asserted that colonialism was the cause of the psychological trauma the colonized experienced. As Loomba argues, Fanon's work "pushed to its logical conclusion the view that modernization led to the native madness

by suggesting that it was not modernization as such but colonialism that dislocated and distorted the psyche of the oppressed.”<sup>41</sup> It was colonialism that convinced the black man of his inferiority rendering him “a victim to his appearance.”<sup>42</sup>

Fanon focused primarily on racial issues in relation to the struggle between the colonizers and the colonized. However, issues of race have not lost their significance. In postcolonial states, the issue of race has continued to pose problems to different communities. Some of my participants’ narratives implicitly highlighted the challenges that issues of race pose to members of this association. Baba’s story, for example, pointed out Afro-Mauritanians’ dismay with the Moors’ tendency to empathize with the struggles of other Arabs (the Palestinians are the example he provided) while they continuously ignored the experiences of other marginalized groups in Mauritania. To Afro-Mauritanians, Moors’ interests in issues of importance to Arab nationalism at the expense of Mauritanian relations hindered the community’s relations.

Aside from issues of identity and race, the issue of language is important to postcolonial scholars. In his *Black Skins White Masks*, Fanon claims that convincing the colonized of their inferiority, the colonizers forced colonial languages and cultures on the colonized. This led to an obsession with speaking colonial languages properly, leading to alienation. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi pursues the same topic when he asserts that colonial linguistic policies were meant to dominate the minds of the colonized through destroying their cultures.<sup>43</sup> It was an alienation of the African child from his social environment.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, the imposition of colonial languages continued after independence. Postcolonial scholars have continued to explore this issue. Ngugi has been

one of the major advocates of Africans going back to using their native languages.

Recognizing the importance of language, as a carrier of memory, Ngugi sheds light on the challenges that Africans face as a result of linguistic policies (both old and new), policies that have always led to a social rupture in these previously colonized communities.

In his *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, Ngugi claims that European engagement of the slave trade was an act of dismemberment. As an outcome of the slave trade, the diasporic African was “separated not only from his continent and his labor but also his own very sovereign being.”<sup>45</sup> His brother and sister on the continent faced a similar destiny. After years of having ownership of the land and his production, he has now become a “subject of another”<sup>46</sup> under the rule of colonialism. The act of dismembering the African was magnified and refined through the imposition of European languages, which resulted in killing African languages in the diaspora and starving them on the continent. Ngugi refers to these two phenomena as *Linguicide and Linguifam*.<sup>47</sup> *Linguicide* is what happened to the African languages that the slave brought with them to the new world. Ever since the great dismemberment, the African has been in search for wholeness. Ngugi claims that “it could be argued that the political and cultural struggles of Africans since the great dismemberment wrought by European slavery then colonialism have been driven by the vision of wholeness.”<sup>48</sup> For Ngugi, language was at the heart of this search.

To accomplish this wholeness, issues of language must be addressed. Language, being the carrier of memory, was of extreme significance in the process of

dismemberment. Ngugi argues that, “to starve and kill a language is to starve and kill a people’s memory bank. And it is equally true that to impose a language is to impose the weight of experience it carries and its conception of self and otherness.”<sup>49</sup> A huge part of the European scheme was to starve and kill African languages, the carriers of African memories. The result would be an African without a memory of his own past, which makes it easy for the Europeans to plant European memories in the head of the colonized. This scheme was successful after the Europeans created a native class that was “dismembered from its social memory.”<sup>50</sup> Despite the success of this effort, the Africans both home and in the diaspora, never truly gave up on their memories of Africa using language as a rhetorical device of resistance.

Although the languages African slaves spoke may have suffered from *linguicide*, the diasporic never gave up and came up with his new language. The diasporic memory of Africa never died. It was nurtured in the plantation fields, and it was the slave who fashioned “his own means of keeping it alive. In time, out of the remembered fragments of African speech and grammar the enslaved create new languages.”<sup>51</sup> On the continent, a similar thing happened. African languages were kept alive by the peasantry after African intellectuals abandoned their native languages. Keeping African memories though preserving African languages was an act of resistance, an act of asserting difference, and an act of remembering. It was through this act of remembering that the African memory was kept alive.

Postcolonial theory was a suitable lens for exploring the challenges that colonial and postcolonial linguistic policies have posed to the cultures of previously colonized

African countries. Postcolonial scholarship on this issue, however, ought to be broadened to account for the instances in which the imposition/elevation of particular African languages led to a rupture in the social fabric and facilitated the hegemony of these languages. My Afro-Mauritanian participants blamed the difficulties the community faced on the Arabization policies that the Mauritanian government imposed. These policies were perceived as attempts to emphasize the Arabic character of the country and destroy Afro-Mauritanian languages/cultures. Their rejection of Arabic was a reaction against the threat it posed to the survival of their own languages/cultures. Arabization policies have helped perpetuate the separation of Afro-Mauritanians and Moors. A postcolonial lens provided the possibility for historicizing the linguistic challenges this association faced. Different Mauritanian governments divided the population into Arabic speakers and French speakers, teaching French primarily to Afro-Mauritanians. The imposition of Arabic as a national language led Afro-Mauritanians to choose French as their language of education in order to resist the hegemony of Arabic. Some of my participants' stories highlight this attitude.

### **Postcolonial Studies and Globalization**

Advocates of globalization argue that globalization “has rendered obsolete a critical and analytical perspective which takes the history and legacy of European colonialism as its focal point.”<sup>52</sup> Put simply, viewing the world in terms of margins and centers is rendered obsolete in an interconnected and a deterritorialized world. Characterized as having no territorial center of power and providing space for liberation,

globalization is seen as a new positive global order that postcolonial studies is incapable of theorizing.

Despite these claims, postcolonial scholars believe that the field of postcolonial studies is extremely useful for a better understanding of globalization. Globalization, despite the views presented by its advocates, creates dual economies that hide its injustices and divides the world. In his foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Homi Bhabha argues that the image of a divided world invokes Fanon's compartmentalized world that was an integral part of colonialism. Although globalization is not a new phenomenon, scholars have started to show some interest in examining what is new about globalization without forgetting to pay attention to the continuities between globalization and other systems of domination.

In *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, an edited volume dedicated to examining the future of postcolonial scholarship, some of the authors have started to see globalization as an opportunity to broaden the scope of postcolonial studies. Issues of globalization have led scholars to look at what Peter Hulme calls "the unusual suspects."<sup>53</sup>

If globalization scholars are looking beyond the nation-state, "postcolonial studies scholars are trying to look afresh at the relationship between national and transnational forms of government, economy, society, and culture."<sup>54</sup> While cultural anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai employed terms such as postnation, postnational, diasporic nationalism, and deterritorialization to suggest that we have moved away from the nation-state, postcolonial scholars argue that it is premature to ignore the role of the nation-state in the new global order. Ali Behdad argues that nation-states still "exercise a great deal of



power in planning and shaping the ways in which their countries are globalized.”<sup>55</sup>

Nation states have not been surpassed. Vilashini Coopan makes a similar argument when he states that “the flows of diasporic movement and the border-crossing processes of diasporic identification have transformed the nation, not transcended it.”<sup>56</sup> Retaining the nation, Coopan argues, does not mean giving up the global. On the other hand, it is an opportunity to learn from this back-and-forth movement. Although scholars like Appadurai would want us to think that nation-states have lost their significance, postcolonial scholars are inviting us to examine the new roles nation-states are playing within the new global order.<sup>57</sup> Through paying attention to the role that nation states still play in our globalized world, a postcolonial lens allows for examining whether the politics in Mauritania affects members’ relations and how they negotiate the effects of these political changes.

Using a postcolonial framework helps us recognize the effects different power structures have on the experiences of immigrant communities. In working with my participants, it became clear that the practices of different Mauritanian governments have done nothing but escalate the tensions between the different Mauritanian groups. While their narratives showed that the Mauritanian state is not invested in accommodating the needs of this community, the Mauritanian government’s aggression against anti-slavery activists served as a reminder that history was likely to repeat itself. These practices were similar to practices against Afro-Mauritanians. A postcolonial lens identified how globalization has not eliminated the power and influence of nation states. Working with

my participants' narratives, it became clear that the Mauritanian state still influenced community relations even when this influence was indirect.

### **Postcolonial Scholarship and Communication**

In 2002, *Communication Theory* devoted a special issue to postcolonial scholars in communication and postcolonial studies. In the introductory essay, Postcolonial Studies Approaches to Communication: Charting the Terrain, Engaging Intersections, Shome and Hedge claim that “postcolonial scholarship constitutes one of the most central critical lenses through which to name and theorize cultural condition of contemporary society” because of its ability to theorize the historical, geographical, and geopolitical contexts within which different forms of power are located.”<sup>58</sup> Because globalization has had massive economic, social, and political effects on contemporary life, postcolonial critical lenses remind us that “global issues are not born fully formed, the Minerva style, but rather have to be situated within the larger historical sweep of colonialism and its imperial centers as well as within both the present and the historical.”<sup>59</sup> Postcolonial studies can prove useful in “restoring the macro structures and the historical trajectories that frame contemporary social relations with global/local nexus.”<sup>60</sup> Because the field of communication has also been accused of ignoring issues of agency, establishing a connection with postcolonial studies can provide the analytical tools necessary to “deconstruct privilege and account for complex interconnections between power, experience, and culture.”<sup>61</sup>

In the “Postscript” of the same special issue, Grossberg noted that establishing a connection between postcolonial studies and communication is important because of

communication scholars' commitment to context. This commitment to context has been hindered by communication scholars' tendency to assume that "power is always the result of the action of external agents, agencies, forces, or events on the context of communication."<sup>62</sup> Work in critical studies, on the other hand, views contexts as "active and even in part self-producing formation" ...as "structures in and of difference" ...as "structures of power."<sup>63</sup> Knowing the external forces that affect a communicative event does not mean that internal power relations can be discarded. Because they are the result of complex relations of contestation that need to be understood in geographical terms, understanding any contemporary social context requires placing it "within the history and geography of colonialism as a crucial and deep structure of North Atlantic modernity."<sup>64</sup> With this in mind, it becomes clear that all communicative contexts do not only exist in geo-historical space but are also, according to Grossberg, found interacting with complex geo-historical relations.

In our globalized world, communication scholars should pay attention to the complex nature of identity construction through examining structural and cultural forces that affect identity construction and reconstruction. Jolanta Drzewiecka and Rona Halualani argue that:

Accelerated processes of intercultural exchanges under conditions of globalization have significantly altered the nature of identity construction among migrating groups and the ways in which they communicate their identities and engage in communication with their counterparts in the homeland and in migration sites.<sup>65</sup>

The utility of using a postcolonial framework for communication scholars lies in its ability to historicize the communicative phenomenon. In an era of globalization, a postcolonial framework offers us the possibility of examining the different power structures that influence issues of identity construction and reconstruction. During my fieldwork, I examined how my participants' experiences of the past influence their experiences in the present. Focusing on the traumatic events of 1989, I explore the different ways these events continued to influence members of this association's relations in the present.

As communication scholars, the challenge we face lies in exploring "the multilayered communication discourses of diasporic groups, the embedded political and structural forces that surround such diasporic groups, and the dynamic contradictions and coherencies of diasporic identity."<sup>66</sup> Immigrant and diasporic communities "must be studied through an understanding of the context of their production and an examination of how the structural-cultural dialectic informs those contexts in different ways in different national sites."<sup>67</sup>

For communication scholars, the utility of a postcolonial lens lies in its ability to push for a contextualization of the communicative event under study through pointing out its historical, geographical, and political dimensions. A postcolonial lens does not simply problematize the issue of identity but also invites us to contextualize the politics of identity construction and reconstruction. Through relying on a postcolonial lens, we are able to examine the continuous influence that nation states exert on transnational communities.

From my field narratives, it was clear from the beginning that I needed to contextualize the struggles faced by this Mauritanian association. Their narratives showed that the problems they faced could not be understood without this contextualization. My participants primarily attributed the problems their association faces to government atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians and the injustices different marginalized Mauritanian groups continue to experience. Understanding my participants' narratives required placing them within their historical/geographical contexts.

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<sup>1</sup>. Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communications Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 1–22.

<sup>2</sup>. Jerome S. Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 4.

<sup>3</sup>. Ibid., 3.

<sup>4</sup>. Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup>. Ibid., 7.

<sup>6</sup>. Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup>. Ibid., 11.

<sup>8</sup>. Ibid., 12.

<sup>9</sup>. Ibid., 13.

<sup>10</sup>. Ibid., 14.

<sup>11</sup>. Ibid., 14.

<sup>12</sup>. Ibid., 15.

<sup>13</sup>. Ibid., 16.

<sup>14</sup>. Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 41.

<sup>15</sup>. Bruner, *Making Stories*., 64.

<sup>16</sup>. Ibid., 64.

<sup>17</sup>. Ibid., 65.

<sup>18</sup>. Ibid., 66.

<sup>19</sup>. Ibid., 56.

<sup>20</sup>. Mark Freeman, "Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry," in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, ed. D. Jean Clandinin (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2007), 138.

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34. Ibid., 12.
35. Ibid., 12.
36. Ibid., 6.
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40. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1st Evergreen ed (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 5.
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- <sup>57</sup>. Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup>. Raka Shome and Radha S. Hegde, "Postcolonial Approaches to Communication: Charting the Terrain, Engaging the Intersections," 253.
- <sup>59</sup>. Ibid., 260.
- <sup>60</sup>. Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup>. Ibid., 263.
- <sup>62</sup>. Lawrence Grossberg, "Postscript" 12, no. 3 (2002): 366.
- <sup>63</sup>. Lawrence Grossberg, "Postscript," 368
- <sup>64</sup>. Ibid., 368.
- <sup>65</sup>. Jolanta A. Drzewiecka and Rona Tamiko Halualani, "The Structural-Cultural Dialectic of Diasporic Politics" 12, no. 3 (2002): 340.
- <sup>66</sup>. Ibid., 341.
- <sup>67</sup>. Ibid., 343.

## **Chapter IV: Research Practices**

### **Finding the Research Site**

When I first came to Ohio University in 2009 to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Linguistics on a Fulbright scholarship, I was the only Mauritanian here. Every two years, a new Mauritanian Fulbright scholar would come to the Ohio Program of Intensive English for a short period before they were sent away to pursue further education somewhere else. During my first year at Ohio University, I found out about the Mauritanian community in Columbus through Abdul, a Senegalese Fulbright scholar. Following a short trip he took to Columbus, Abdul came back and told me about the members of the Mauritanian community he had met. Because the majority of the community members were Afro-Mauritanians, I was hesitant to visit given the language barriers.

It was not until two years later that I found out about the Mauritanian community in the Cincinnati area. A new Mauritanian Fulbright scholar, Abdeljalil, came to Ohio University to study English at the Ohio Program of Intensive English. On some weekends and during breaks, Abdeljalil traveled to Cincinnati to see some relatives. It was through him that I first heard about the Mauritanian community in Cincinnati. Because he was a Moor who travelled to Cincinnati to visit his relatives, I was under the impression that there was a small number of Moors living in the Cincinnati area. I never wanted to visit those either. These are Moors like myself, and there were no language or cultural barriers. However, I did not want them to assume that I was coming to see them because there was something that I needed.



In this way, I ended up spending years at Ohio University next to two large Mauritanian communities without meeting any Mauritanian. It was not until 2014 that I learned more about the Mauritanian community in the Cincinnati area. In early 2014, I wrote a Facebook post about the need for the Moorish community to acknowledge the atrocities that were committed against different ethnic groups in Mauritania. I was discussing something I heard while watching a YouTube video in which Edward Said argues the need for acknowledgment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although Said was discussing this particular conflict, I thought that the idea was relevant to Mauritania. In the post, I shared my belief in the need for the Moors to acknowledge the atrocities committed against some sections of the society and especially the 1989 atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians. The post, despite being attacked by my Moorish friends for generally blaming all Moors for something the elite committed, was something that some of my Afro-Mauritanian friends found positive. This prompted one of them to share it on his Facebook page.

A day or two after the post, I received a friend request from Wane—an Afro-Mauritanian living in Cincinnati. After accepting the friendship request, I received a message from him thanking me for accepting the friendship request. Wane explained that my post on the 1989 events touched him. I explained to him how I thought it was necessary to acknowledge those catastrophic events and he agreed. Like myself, he believed that it is shameful that we are not able to overcome these challenges. He told me: “It is a shame for a country like ours, with so many assets, wealth, cultural diversity

etc . . . It is a shame our communities are so divided. We can't develop under these circumstances. Such distrust (and sometimes hatred) between our communities.”

Wane and I talked about school, life, and work. After a long conversation, he invited me to come to his house if I ever came to Cincinnati. Before I got to know him, I did not realize that the community in the Greater Cincinnati area was a mixed community. I promised to get in touch with him if I ever came to Cincinnati. We would chat from time to time to catch up. During one of our conversations, he invited me to come and attend some of the events the community organizes. I continued to promise to visit with him, but was not able to do so. During the summer of 2014, as I was thinking more about my dissertation project, I went back to Mauritania to spend some time with my family. I started to become more interested in the community, and I now wanted to know more about it.

I talked to Wane and told him about my intention to conduct my doctoral project on the Mauritanian community in the Cincinnati area. He mentioned the association that the community has established to bring Mauritanians together and promote the Mauritanian culture. As I learned more about their association, I decided to focus on examining its members' experiences working to achieve unity and the challenges they face. It seemed easy to get access to members of this association since I already had a gatekeeper. Wane, as it turned out, was a former president of the association and an active member of the association. I was excited that this individual was my first point of contact. As a Moor doing research on an association that attempts to bring Moors and Afro-Mauritanians together, I was happy that I had an Afro-Mauritanian who was willing

to introduce me to members of the association. I was especially happy because he would make it easy for me to access the Afro-Mauritanian community. As a Moor, I perceived this to be the most difficult part of the project. After all, I belong to the dominant group. In my mind, I was one of the aggressors. I had created an image of the Afro-Mauritanian community as a community that would be difficult to create a rapport with given my status as a Moor. This idea, however, was based on nothing but my own assumptions given our problematic shared past. I had created an image of them as an Other, and my assumptions regarding their attitudes toward me acquired a sense of givenness that served as a source or rather a trigger for my fear. The Other is a mere creation as Johannes Fabian reminds when he eloquently argues that the “Other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but made.”<sup>1</sup> Having an Afro-Mauritanian gatekeeper, I hoped, would serve as a reassurance to skeptical community members. Wane assured me that he would help facilitate my access to the community members, but things did not go as planned.

### **Searching for a Gatekeeper**

Gaining access to members of the association was difficult at the beginning. Once I finished writing my proposal and started thinking about visiting the research site, I began to contact my friend again to ask for his help in introducing me to the association. Because of his work, Wane was not always able to answer my inquiries in a timely manner. It was then that I realized that I needed a backup plan to gain access to members of this association. Since I did not know anyone in the area, I contacted another Facebook friend, Wadoud, who is pursuing a Ph.D. at a university in Indiana. I had never met

Wadoud in person, but I knew of him. Since we had been Facebook friends for a while, I knew that he lived in Cincinnati before moving to Indiana. I contacted him hoping that he would help introduce me to some members of the association. Wadoud explained to me that he no longer lived in the area and put me in touch with his friend, Saad. After being in touch with Saad for days, I realized that I needed to get in touch with the president of the association myself.

I had seen the president contact information on the association's website, but I was hesitant to use him as a gatekeeper. I was searching for an Afro-Mauritanian gatekeeper, and his first name sounded Arab. I was concerned that having a Moor gatekeeper would limit my access to the Afro-Mauritanian community. When I finally decided to call him, it was early on a Sunday morning. I thought that the weekend would be a perfect time to place a call.

Kadoye sounded like a considerate, well-mannered, and intelligent man. He was excited about the project and promised to help me in any way possible to ensure my access to members of the association. I explained that I would primarily visit on weekends, and I would only stay on weekdays if there was a community event that fell during the week. He asked where I was from, and I responded that I am from the eastern part of Mauritania. Even though my place of origin would have been largely inconsequential, I think that my place of origin helped in the instant bond we established. When he learned that that I was from Nema in the eastern part of Mauritania, he responded by saying *enta wahid min ehl yana* (you are one of my people). I, too, he added come from Ayoun. We are both from the eastern regions, and we are usually

grouped together. We both belong to “ehl echerg” (the people of the East). Because of his beautiful Hassaniya, I was convinced that he was *Hartani*. This was primarily because of his skin color and his high proficiency in Hassaniya. I thought in my mind that a *Hartani*, while not an ideal choice in these circumstances, is much better than relying on a *Bidani* gatekeeper. I thought that it would be much harder getting access to the Afro-Mauritanian community with a *Bidani* serving as a gatekeeper. Generally, linguistic barriers make it difficult for Moors to have close relationships with Afro-Mauritanians.

As I was evaluating the situation, partly worried if he would be able to deliver on his promise, he added that he is an Afro-Mauritanian who was born in Ayoun and lived his entire life among Moors. I was now content that I had finally found someone who did not only have access to the Afro-Mauritanian community but was a fluent Hassaniya-speaking Afro-Mauritanian. This meant that he had no problem communicating with Moors. Before we ended the conversation, he invited me to come stay at his place whenever I came for these research visits, adding that he lived alone now. After a long search, I had finally found my perfect gatekeeper. Of course, as I began my visits, I realized that gatekeepers are never perfect. They might be well positioned but this does not guarantee that they have access to everyone.

I first visited Cincinnati the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 2016. The purpose of the visit was to meet Kadoye in person, discuss the layout of the project further, and request his permission to work with members of the association. That Friday night was an occasion for both of us to bond over some Mauritanian music at an event the Moors in Kentucky organized. We drove to the event in Kentucky with two other Afro-Mauritanians. Kadoye

and the two other Afro-Mauritanians were the only Afro-Mauritanians at the event. “It was not properly advertised,” he suggested. During this event, Kadoye introduced me to Hamadi, a Moor who was highly respected by the Afro-Mauritanian community. Kadoye explained my intention to work on a project about the Mauritanian association.

The following morning, two of Kadoye’s Afro-Mauritanian friends, Soumare and Warr, came to see us at his apartment. Because they were members of the executive bureau, he had asked them to come and meet with me to learn more about the project. This was an opportunity for me to share my research story one that Kadoye was now hearing for the third time. Telling the research story so to speak, becomes a routine in a research setting. Thomas Lindlof and Brian Taylor remind us that:

Gaining the support of a gatekeeper or a sponsor does not guarantee successful entry. The researcher must still go to the people who live or work in the scene—people who have their own interests to look after. There, on the members’ turf, the researcher must engage these preexisting interests. This is usually done by telling them an informal (but carefully crafted) story about the project and why their participation is important.<sup>2</sup>

After I finished talking to them about the project and the reason I was doing it, they all took turns commending me for my interest in the association and promised their support to help ensure the success of the project. They shared their belief that it was something that could potentially benefit not only members of this community association but also the entire country. I came realize that when discussing my project with the participants, they found it an opportune time to provide me with a synopsis of their views

regarding the topic. After a long discussion about Mauritania and the challenges faced by the association, Soumare left. Warr proposed that I go with him to a birthday celebration at his cousin's house. She had just given birth a week ago, and they were celebrating the naming event.

### **Recruiting Participants: Community Dynamics**

The ride to Warr's cousin's home, indeed, served as an opportunity for me to learn more about the important players in the history of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati. He used this opportunity, however, to emphasize the need for fairness and objectivity in this research project. "You need to interview everybody," he said. "You need to hear all the stories." "I have faith in you," he added. "Some people will tell you this, and some people will tell you that, but you need to listen to everyone." I began to wonder about his fear that, unless done properly, the project will not be fair to everyone. Is he worried that, as a Moor researcher, I will not be fair in my representation of the Afro-Mauritanian story? Here, I was reminded of my status as an outsider, and how I needed to pay attention to members' dynamics.

Finding comfort in that outsider status was essential in paying attention to the minute nuances of members of the association's relations. It was a reminder that, while this is my community, I essentially know nothing about its dynamics. In writing about the intersections between the ethnographer's position as native, other, and another, Communication Scholar Devika Chawla emphasizes the need to recognize that "any ethnographer, whether native or other, (re) enters her field ensconced in degrees of outsidership created by temporal, geographic, demographic, intellectual, or emotional

distance from the field.”<sup>3</sup> While this is a Mauritanian community, the conversation with Warr reminded me that being a native researcher does not mean that I automatically have an insider status. I had always wondered if I was eligible, as part of the Moorish community, to conduct such a project given its controversial nature. The conversation with Warr reminded me of the distinction Chawla makes between legitimacy and eligibility. While she views legitimacy as something that refers directly to the legality of doing a research project, she regards eligibility as something that the ethnographer has to earn during their work in the field.<sup>4</sup> If I were to earn eligibility, I had to work for it. To earn eligibility with Warr, however, I had to pay attention to the relational dynamics among this association members and make an effort to “listen to everyone.”

As he talked, I listened carefully to what he was trying to say and asked questions about the individuals he mentioned in the overview he was providing about the association. I asked him if I could write down some of the names he was listing for future reference. As I began my research, I relied on these types of stories in the process of recruiting participants for my study. As I proceeded with the research, I would compare the list of individuals that different members provided in their narratives to decide on which members have been active. The names that received the most mention in these stories were approached about the project.

Listening to Warr talk about the association and the project, it became clear that he was most afraid that I would not pay attention to the different divisions that exist in the two communities, particularly his own. He started talking to me about the opposition and its members, and he insisted that I try to talk to members of the opposition and listen



to their stories. When I asked Warr if he could put me in touch with some members of the Moorish community, he suggested that I talk to Kadoye. When I asked Warr if Kadoye could help put me in touch with the opposition, he suggested that I talked to Malaw. “Maybe, Malaw can help you with the opposition,” he added. It was clear from the beginning that I needed to make sure that I learned more about the members and their history. If I were to call someone about my project, I needed to obtain their phone number from the right person.

As I began fieldwork, I would make an effort to ask and learn more information about the different names my participants mentioned in their stories about the association. In doing so, I was able to get a sense of the type of relationships individuals have. When the participants spoke fondly of someone, they either offered to share that person’s number with you or told you about someone who could. If they did not, they may direct you to someone who “could help you”. “I don’t have his number. You can ask X”. While not having a person’s phone number was not an indication of a bad relationship, I learned quickly that when recruiting participants, I needed to find the right reference.

The ride with Warr made me realize that I needed to depend on my participants to access other association members and/or to learn about the most suitable way to access them. What Warr provided me with was a survival tip without which I would not have been able to successfully approach my participants. In a research setting, this negotiation and renegotiation of power is inevitable. In a *Thrice Told Tale*, Margery Wolf argues that at the beginning of the fieldwork experience “most fieldworkers are dependent on their informants to help them figure out what the questions are (and in some environments how

to stay alive).”<sup>5</sup> In my situation, I ended up having to rely on my participants’ accounts to learn about possible future participants and to discern the most appropriate way to approach them. This was later refined when I recognized that when responding to the routine question of “where did you get my number?” I should reply by listing the number of individuals who spoke to me about a given participant.

While I started with the list Warr provided and checked it against lists provided by others, the list included names of individuals that I could not access due to travel and work obligations. In this situation, I relied on the snowballing sampling technique which researchers use when they are able to locate “someone who is willing to serve the dual role of an interview subject and a guide to potential new subjects.”<sup>6</sup> I found this technique useful not only because I was studying with a hardworking immigrant community whose members were difficult to access but also because I had to rely on members of the association to obtain information about potential research participants. Because the snowballing sampling technique is criticized for introducing bias “due to the fact that the referrals tend to radiate in a social network,”<sup>7</sup> I made sure that my sample is representative of this Mauritanian association.

I spent the first stage of this research project living among Afro-Mauritanians. During this time, I only encountered/spoke with a few Moors. Moorish members of this community first saw me in the company of Afro-Mauritanians, and one of my Moorish participants thought that I was an Afro-Mauritanian. When I met with him for an interview, he was intrigued that I was fluent not only in Hassaniya but also classical Arabic. He would repeatedly ask if I understood what he said. When I told him that I

spoke Arabic, he wanted to know how I learned to speak it. Even though he knew that I was from eastern Mauritania, a region that is largely populated by Moors, he still believed that I was an Afro-Mauritanian who spoke fluent Arabic. Although I do not know the exact reason he thought I was an Afro-Mauritanian, I can attribute it to one of two things. First, he may have assumed that, because the Afro-Mauritanian community was my first point of contact, I must be an Afro-Mauritanian. Second, he may have thought that I was an Afro-Mauritanian because of my slightly darker complexion, one that results from my status as *metis*. This only happened with him, and I wonder if my status as *metis* may have affected the way others interacted with me. These early assumptions from this particular participant had were formed at beginning of my fieldwork.

### Interviews and Participant Observations

My formal fieldwork lasted until the end of August 2016. For a period of three months, I traveled to Cincinnati over the weekends and spent most of the month of Ramadan with members of this association. During the month of Ramadan, and instead of going only for the weekend, I would spend a week in Cincinnati before heading back to Athens, Ohio. During my visits and stays with them, I visited with families, attended birthday parties, shared meals, witnessed an engagement ceremony, and attended a conference the Afro-Mauritanian community organized. These visits provided me with the opportunity to be present with the participants as they performed their daily activities, using my body as an instrument for data collection. Dwight Conquergood argues this point more eloquently when he claims that “ethnography is an embodied practice; it is an

intensely sensuous way of knowing.”<sup>8</sup> What Conquergood understands as a “Return to the Body” is an important characteristic of ethnography as a research method that seeks to move beyond the mind-body dualism. Relying on the body as an instrument is extremely useful in capturing how our bodies engage and respond to the everyday world of the participants.

By immersing myself in the activities that my participants partook in, I developed a sense of how they went about their day-to-day routines. There were times when I felt at home. Other times, I felt uncomfortable due to the language barrier and my limited knowledge of the community. The attunement to the body as an instrument of knowing was essential in the process of accounting for these varied experiences. Through engaging with the participants in different ceremonies, I fulfilled my role as a “co-performer.” Commenting on the co-performative nature of ethnographic work, Conquergood stresses that “the ethnographer must be a co-performer in order to understand those embodied meanings”<sup>9</sup> that the participants associate with their performances. Paying attention to and taking parts in these performances is also an ethical attempt to pay attention to different modes of expression, for it is a “great mistake for a communicator to simply ‘sit down with a transcript of discourse’ and privilege words over other channels of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> In taking parts of these performances, I am committed to the complexity of everyday life. Recognizing the need to attend to this complexity, Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont suggest that ethnographers need to seek “a principled, systematic ethnography that is faithful to the complexity of social life. That complexity is grounded in the diverse modes of everyday life.”<sup>11</sup> Taking part in a variety

of events provided me with the ability to remain faithful to this complexity. I did not simply rely on interview accounts to get a sense of how members of the different groups viewed each other, but I used these events to see if these different groups interacted beyond the formal gatherings of the association.

My commitment to the performative aspect of ethnographic work stems from my belief in the need to move beyond privileging sight as the primary mode of ethnographic knowledge production. In his writings on the role of performance in ethnographic research, Conquergood stood against privileging sight as a primary mode of ethnographic data collection. He makes this point clearly when he claims that “dominant epistemologies that link knowing to seeing are not attuned to meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike dominant groups, subordinate groups “don’t have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a leveled playing field that the privileged classes take for granted.”<sup>13</sup> I relied on my engagement in these performances to collect observations on these subtle and hidden meanings that only come to the surface in these performances. Through this immersion in the performances, the ethnographic work turns into an enactment of “co-performative witnessing.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Participant Observations**

Conducting participant observations, according to Atkinson and Delamont is “the craft of experiencing and recording events in social settings.”<sup>15</sup> Their use of the word craft captures the difficulty of the method. Participant observations are not simply

accomplished by being there and participating in what your participants do. Rather, it involves making a critical decision on what to pay attention to, what is worth noting down, as well as the best method to note it down. Ethnographers refine this craft through trial and error. In doing observations of members of the association, I had to rely on my phone to take notes. In a technological world, where we have largely become separated by technology, using one's phone in a group setting has increasingly become less frowned upon. Working with an immigrant community, where one is often on the phone listening to a WhatsApp voice message or sending one, made me comfortable using my phone to take notes on important data points. I would then immediately elaborate on these points as soon as I arrived in the apartment where I was staying. However, it was not always feasible to use my phone to take notes. This was especially true when I took car rides with my participants. In this case, I would immediately jot down some notes in my phone the moment I had a chance to do so. I worked with "asides" and "commentaries"<sup>16</sup> to make sense of the data that was produced. While asides provide brief "reflective bits of analytic writing,"<sup>17</sup> commentaries are more elaborate and serve the purpose of reflecting on interesting issues that are encountered in the data. While I worked with these regularly, I took time to engage in "process memos,"<sup>18</sup> which take more time and are devoted to helping me develop certain ideas in writing.

In doing participant observations, and through being in the presence of my participants, I had to embrace the position of a professional stranger.<sup>19</sup> During Ramadan, I frequented Malaw's house. It was there that Kadoye and I broke the fast especially on weekends. There, we would hang out with Malaw and other friends who usually came to

visit with him. During these visits, we would stay until 2 or 3 in the morning. Aside from eating and drinking tea, they would engage in discussions about politics in Mauritania, life in the United States, and other issues of importance to members of this association. While I was often able to follow these conversations, I could not always understand everything. They shifted between French and Halpulaar. While I was always aware of what they are talking about, I did not always know the details of what was said. While I understand French well, Halpulaar is a language that I do not speak. Not only did I learn to become comfortable in this position, I saw their use of Halpulaar as a proof that they were comfortable around me enough to know that I would not see the shift between languages as a rude maneuver.

Aside from participant observations, I conducted 16 interviews. English was the language used in all formal interviews and transcriptions. Out of these 16 interviewees, there were 8 Afro-Mauritanians (7 *Fulani* and 1 *Soninke*). The other 8 participants included 7 Moors and one participant who was half Moor and half Afro-Mauritanian. I only interviewed males who were in their 40s or older. My interest in this group stems from the nature of the project. Since I was interested in the experiences of members of the association and their efforts to promote unity, I wanted to talk to members who have been involved in the association for a longer period, were familiar with its history, and have witnessed its growth. While I would have liked to include female participants, certain constraints prevented their inclusion. First, language barriers were a challenge. As a Moor, I am not well-versed in many of the Afro-Mauritanian languages and am not fluent in French, so I was unable to interview the Afro-Mauritanian women I that I met.

Their English skills were limited. Second, there were cultural barriers that made it difficult to include Moorish women. While it would have been easy for me to talk in private to Afro-Mauritanian women, I would not have been able to interview Moorish women who would only talk to me in the presence of a husband/relative.

While I relied on the lists of names that received mention in the stories I heard about the association before I started the interview process, I continued to pay attention to the names that were mentioned in the formal interviews that I later conducted. Often times, I met with the participants or talked to them informally on the phone before the interview. Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin highlight this tendency among qualitative researchers when they argue that some “conduct handful of informal interviews prior to the formal questioning.”<sup>20</sup> Being in the field and doing participant observations helped in the process of recruiting individuals for the interviews. Rubin and Rubin claim that “participant observation is the key to choosing interviewees as well as to building sufficient trust to allow you to interview them.”<sup>21</sup> Being in the field did not only allow me to hear stories about the most active members of the association (past presidents, members of past executive bureaus, members of the council of elders etc...) but also provided me with the opportunity to know them, which facilitated recruiting participants for the interviews. The interviews I conducted took place in different contexts that ranged from participants’ homes, restaurants, coffee shops, and taxicabs.

### **Narrative Interviewing**

While qualitative researchers regard interviews as “conversations with purpose,” the practice of narrative interviewing differs drastically from mainstream social science



interviewing. Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein argue that mainstream social science interviewing is concerned with “maximizing the flow of valid reliable information while minimizing distortion of what the respondent knows.”<sup>22</sup> The turn to the narrative practice of interviewing, however, has re-defined the practice of interviewing. Unlike mainstream social science interviews, the practice of narrative interviewing recognizes that “the circumstances of narrative production are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating the meanings that ostensibly reside within individual experience.”<sup>23</sup> This approach to interviewing moves away from viewing the interview encounter as one in which the research extracts information from a knowledgeable informant. Both researchers and their participants actively engage in the construction of the narrative account. The contrast between traditional interviewing practices and narrative interviewing is a contrast between two types of subjectivities. In traditional interviewing, the respondent is regarded as a carrier of knowledge, “a vessel for answers to whom the interviewer directs their questions.”<sup>24</sup> In this regard, the interviewer can be viewed as a passive subject.<sup>25</sup> In narrative interviewing, however, the interviewer is an active partner in the construction of the narrative. Gubrium and Holstein argue this point eloquently:

The active subject behind the interviewer is a necessary counterpart, a working narrative partner, of the active subject behind the respondent. The subject behind the interviewer is fully engaged in the coproduction of accounts. From the time one identifies a research topic, to respondent selection, questions and interviewing, and finally to the interpretation of respondents, the interviewing enterprise is a narrative project.<sup>26</sup>

During the interviews, my role as a partner in the construction of the narrative was evident in my attempts to double-check stories I heard before and the understandings I have of the political situation in Mauritania and the community dynamics. In this regard, I did not see the interview process as a “neutral conduit or source of distortion but as an occasion for constructing accounts.”<sup>27</sup> While a traditional interview researcher would have focused primarily on asking questions in search of an unpolluted version of the truth the interviewee is thought to possess, my belief in the co-constructed nature of narratives made me more interested in probing further and clarifying my understandings of issues brought up by my participants. It also shows in the type of questions that are used in the interview. In *Narrative Analysis*, Catherine Riessman believes that “it is preferable to ask questions that open up topics and allow respondents to construct answers, in collaboration with listeners in ways they find meaningful.”<sup>28</sup>

My belief in the co-constructed nature of narratives did not only influence how I understood the interview encounter and the role that I had to play in it as a co-constructor of the narratives, but was also carried out in the manner in which the interviews are transcribed. When transcribing narrative data, Riessman posits that the researcher follows one of two theoretical frameworks that highlight their understanding of the self. A researcher may either believe that “the act of storytelling in dialogue *constitutes* the autobiographical self, that is, how the speaker wants to be known in the interaction” or they can view the autobiographical narrative as a reflection of a “pre-existing self.”<sup>29</sup> Understanding narratives as co-constructed, I transcribe the interviews in a manner that shows my active participation in this construction through probing and taking the

interviewee back to earlier points made during the interview or other encounters. My transcription shows how “the complex narrative gets jointly produced in a storytelling context.”<sup>30</sup> This style shows a theoretical orientation towards the self as fluid, co-constructed and re-constructed in the interview encounter.

### Narrative Analysis: Interpretive Bicolage

In an introduction to their edited book, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln explain that the qualitative researcher can be seen as “a *bricoleur*, as a maker of quilts.”<sup>31</sup> The bricolage, or the end product, does not merely refer to the assembling of different research methods as a means for collecting data, for there are other kinds of *bricoleurs*.<sup>32</sup> An interpretive *bricoleur*, similar to the methodological *bricoleur*, seeks to produce “a pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of the complex situation.”<sup>33</sup> In doing so, the researcher relies on different interpretive lenses that allow for the capturing of the complex nuances of the phenomenon under study. In analyzing the interviews, I have relied on different analytic ideas, a bricolage that has shaped my understanding of narrative analysis.

### Narrative Voice

When working with interviews, narrative scholar Susan Chase urges narrative researchers to “begin with the narrator's voices in the stories, thereby extending the narrator-listener relationship and the active work of listening into an interpretive process.”<sup>34</sup> Through doing so, the researcher starts with listening to “the voices *within* each narrative,”<sup>35</sup> as oppose to focusing on finding the common themes that exist across

the interviews. The act of listening for the voices pushes the researcher to listen carefully while and after transcribing the materials, providing the researcher with an opportunity to note significant information that would otherwise have been ignored. In describing the importance of repeated listening, Gerry Philipsen argues that:

The repeated hearing and painstaking effort to transcribe faithfully some segment of speech helps to bring culturally significant phenomena to the investigator's attention in a way that would not have been possible without the detailed inspection that repeated viewings/hearings provide.<sup>36</sup>

Paying attention to the voices in an interview ensures that the researcher is loyal to the complex yet interconnected self/selves that the interviewee constructs in the interview encounter. In working with women superintendents, Chase found it difficult to separate their talk about their achievement from their discussion of inequality. This led her to adopt the term "*narrative strategy*" to draw attention to "the complexity within each woman's voice – to the various subject positions each woman takes up – as well as to diversity among women's voices because each narrative strategy is particular."<sup>37</sup> During this research project, I paid attention to the voices within every interview. In examining some of the interviews, I was struck by the fact that some of my participants seemed to hold differing/contradictory ideas. Relying on Chase's idea of focusing on the narrative voice, I came to realize that some of my participants' accounts present different voices that cannot be read apart from each other. While a participant can tell a story about the indispensable role that the association played in bringing the community together, they were still able to point out its different shortcomings. It is through paying attention

to the narrative voices that I was able to account for the paradoxes in the participants' accounts while still being able to understand them as being interconnected.

### **Narrative Fissures**

In reading narratives, Nita Schechet, illustrates that narrative scholars need to map out narrative propositions advanced during interviews. To do so, she recommends using “narratives fissures as a methodology to accomplish this mapping.”<sup>38</sup> In working with fissures, the researcher learns to move beyond what is said to what is implied. In working with interviews, collected during my work with the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati, I relied on Schechet's idea of narrative fissures to help me reflect on the implications of some stories my participants shared. In one of the interviews, one of my participants passingly talked about how the Moorish community in the Greater Cincinnati area was more likely to participate in a demonstration about Palestine than take part in demonstrations organized by Afro-Mauritanians for the sake of condemning the unjust treatment they face in Mauritania.

While this could be understood as a simple comparison between two different reactions, it reveals the participant's belief in the Moors' tendency to side with the Palestinians because of Arab nationalism while ignoring the injustices Afro-Mauritanians experience. Nita Schechet believes that “learning to recognize the point of view implied even in seemingly objective nouns gives access to other perspectives.”<sup>39</sup> Relying on the idea of narrative fissures enabled me to pay attention to the implied meanings behind some of the stories I heard. Although one can argue that there are many possible readings for a given story, I believe that the native ethnographer is better suited to understand

these references. As a Moor, I am well aware of Afro-Mauritanians' dissatisfaction with the Moorish community's tendency to be active in fighting for Arab nationalist causes when it is usually quiet about issues of injustice some marginalized groups experience.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The last and the most important part of my interpretive bicolage is my reliance on thematic narrative analysis when working with interviews collected during my fieldwork. In working with the stories, I have tried to keep them intact focusing my analysis on one story at a time. Riessman argues that unlike other social scientists, "narrative scholars keep a story 'intact' by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases."<sup>40</sup> Their focus is on "what is said."<sup>41</sup>

In analyzing the interviews, I followed a process that is common among narrative researchers. First, I broke down the interview "isolating and ordering relevant episodes into a chronological biographical account."<sup>42</sup> I then moved to examining the interview carefully "identifying the underlying assumptions in each account and naming (coding) them."<sup>43</sup> And lastly, I selected particular cases to help illustrate different themes and worked on comparing different themes across cases. Riessman argues that after identifying different assumptions, particular cases are usually "selected to illustrate general patterns- range and variation – and the underlying assumption of different cases are compared."<sup>44</sup>

After verbatim transcribing, I began reading and re-reading every interview carefully paying attention to the different assumptions the interviewee made and the claims that they advanced. I then used sticky notes to label these assumptions. Working

with the idea of narrative voice, I paid attention to the different and often contradictory voices within the narrative. I used sticky notes to label these contradictions and wrote comments about the connections/disconnections between these voices. Through employing narrative fissures, I was able to write extended explanations for the implied meanings behind a story.

For this project, I was interested in the nature of my participants' experiences within this association. I primarily asked opened-ended questions to solicit these experiences. For example, I would ask my participants the following questions:

1. How would you describe the community life?
2. How would you describe the different affiliations within this association?

My participants would often respond to my open-ended questions by providing elaborate stories to make a point about their experiences. Snippets of their stories are presented at length in this project so that others can make their own judgment about their experiences and evaluate my analysis of them.

Although I interviewed 16 participants, 12 stories were used to illustrate the following themes: "Language and Identity", "Tending to an Old Wound," and "Mauritania is an Eye". I have decided to focus on the stories of these 12 participants for two main reasons. First, these stories are representative of the association's ethnic make-up. Second, and most importantly, the stories were chosen because they best illustrate these three different themes.

In the first theme, Language and Identity, I examine the issue of language and the challenges it posed to the association's efforts to become more unified. While Afro-

Mauritanians and Moors must rely on French to communicate with each other back in Mauritania and use French or English in their interactions in the United States, it was not always easy to communicate. Some Moors did not speak French and the English some members used was mediocre. In this chapter, the participants' recount their frustration having to rely on translation to communicate with each other. Blaming the government for creating this gap between the two groups (through making French the language of instruction used in Afro-Mauritanian schools and Arabic for Moorish schools), the two groups highlighted the problems that the issue of language posed to their efforts to become more unified. While using English helped with the problem, it still did not solve the problem. Promoting national languages and cultures was prescribed as the most useful way to bring Mauritanians closer, ensuring unity. This thematic tied this specific phenomenon to its colonial/postcolonial roots.

Through the second theme, "Tending to an Old Wound", I examine the problems that the celebration of Mauritania's Independence Day posed to the association. While some of the participants considered November 28<sup>th</sup> a national holiday, some had conflicting feelings when it came to celebrating this day. They attributed their decision not to celebrate to the fact that 28 Afro-Mauritanian soldiers were killed on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1991 in the aftermath of the 1989 events. Those who celebrated the holiday (Moors and Afro-Mauritanians alike) have started to make prayer a part of the celebration to mourn the death of Afro-Mauritanian soldiers who were killed by Maaouiya's regime. While this was seen as a positive step by some Afro-Mauritanian seeking acknowledgment for the atrocities, other Afro-Mauritanians continued to refuse to take



part in the celebration, making this issue the greatest obstacle that faced the association's efforts to promote unity.

Through the third theme, Mauritania is an Eye, I explore members' tendency to compare Mauritania in general and the association in particular to an eye. In an eye, there are two colors: white and black. Like an eye, Mauritania has black Afro-Mauritanians and white Moors. For Mauritania to function successfully, both colors should be paid attention to. In this chapter, I highlight that some of the participants are caught between hope and despair. My participants explained their involvement with the association through stressing a common identity, appealing to an idealized past, and blaming government atrocities for challenges faced by members of the association. While some of them were hopeful that the future was bright, others warned that people have brought fear with them to this country, and structural changes were necessary to help make amends. This group recognized that not only the government but also members of the Moorish community needed to actively participate in these efforts. While both groups agreed that Mauritania was like an eye, some of the stories pointed out to an eye that was still ailing.

#### The End of Fieldwork

While I was always hesitant to reach out to Mauritians in the States, I found the fieldwork experience to be an opportunity for me not only to overcome my fears but also learn more about myself. I spent much of my time among Afro-Mauritanians, eating their gourmet food, drinking Mauritanian tea, and discussing politics. While the language barriers negatively influenced this experience, I have never felt more at home. I realized that, like myself, the Afro-Mauritanian community was/is concerned about the future of

Mauritania and wants what is best. I also learned that many of the preconceived ideas I had were simply the work of my imagination. I hope that my presence among them has done the same. In my interpretation of the stories, I attempt to move away from a denial of coevalness that characterized anthropologic and ethnographic work.<sup>45</sup> Ethnographers, as Conquergood argues, “go to great lengths to become cotemporal with others during fieldwork but then deny in writing that these others with whom they lived are their contemporaries.”<sup>46</sup>

The stories I present to advance and support arguments I make about my research findings are not meant to present the ultimate truth about this community association. As an ethnographer, I accept James Clifford’s characterization of ethnographic truths. They are, to use his words, “inherently impartial, committed, and incomplete.”<sup>47</sup> I view my presentation of these stories as a narrative that is, like any other narrative, prone to be influenced by what is included and omitted. In describing the presentation of experience, Catherine Riessman argues that through attending to experience, telling about experience, transcribing experience, analyzing experience, and reading experience, the narrative scholar is always engaged in a narrative creation. This narrative creation is influenced not only by choices that the scholar makes about what deserves to be included but also the audiences for whom the final document is meant. In the end, Riesman argues, “the analyst creates a metastory about what happened by telling what the interview narratives signify, editing and reshaping what was told, and turning it into a hybrid story, a ‘false document.’”<sup>48</sup> Recognizing that my interpretation is at best a false document, I strive for

a thick description<sup>49</sup> of the interview encounters presenting the narrative at length so that readers may arrive at their own conclusions.

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- <sup>1</sup>. Johannes Fabian, "Presence and Representation: The Other and Anthropological Writing," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990): 755.
  - <sup>2</sup>. Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 3rd ed (Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2011), 101.
  - <sup>3</sup>. Devika Chawla, "Subjectivity and the 'native' Ethnographer: Researcher Eligibility in an Ethnographic Study of Urban Indian Women in Hindu Arranged Marriages," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 4 (2006): 2.
  - <sup>4</sup>. Ibid., 13.
  - <sup>5</sup>. Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1992), 134.
  - <sup>6</sup>. Lindlof and Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 114.
  - <sup>7</sup>. Ibid., 115.
  - <sup>8</sup>. D. Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," *Communication Monographs* 58, no. 2 (June 1991): 180.
  - <sup>9</sup>. Ibid., 187.
  - <sup>10</sup>. Ibid., 189.
  - <sup>11</sup>. Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont, and William Housley, *Contours of Culture: Complex Ethnography and the Ethnography of Complexity* (Walnut Creek, [CA]: AltaMira Press, 2008), 3.
  - <sup>12</sup>. Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical research1," *TDR/The Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (2002): 146.
  - <sup>13</sup>. Ibid.
  - <sup>14</sup>. Ibid., 149.
  - <sup>15</sup>. Lindlof and Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 135.
  - <sup>16</sup>. Ibid., 144.
  - <sup>17</sup>. Ibid.
  - <sup>18</sup>. Ibid., 146.
  - <sup>19</sup>. Ibid., 134.
  - <sup>20</sup>. Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1995), 34.
  - <sup>21</sup>. Ibid., 61.

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## **Chapter V: Language, Identity, and Community Relations**

Listening to members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association describe the positive impact of their organization, it became clear that members of the association relied on different events to bring members together, strengthen ties, and provide the opportunity for networking. Aside from the annual assembly general, the association planned different events throughout the year, the most important of which was an annual potluck. Despite their satisfaction with such events, members of the association highlighted that these gatherings have not developed into a successful occasion to establish connections between members of the different ethnic groups.

When they arrived at these gatherings, members of the different ethnic groups often sat in proximity with and interacted with members of their respective groups. In their interviews, members of the association would instruct me to look at pictures from the association archive to see for myself. Even when they could interact within these settings, members of the association were often unable to build on that initial contact. Outside the confines of the association, members often spent time with those who shared their cultural/linguistic identity.

My participants attributed this problem to linguistic and historical barriers that have kept members of the Afro-Mauritanian and Moorish communities apart. Through examining the stories of the “Lucky Ones,” this chapter analyzes the struggles members of this association faced as a result of these linguistic barriers. The “Lucky Ones” was a designation used to describe those fortunate enough to master different local languages, facilitating their interactions with members of different ethnic groups. Exploring the

stories of two of the “Lucky Ones,” the first part of this chapter highlights that colonial and postcolonial linguistics policies have, for the most part, created barriers that have made communication among members of the Mauritanian community difficult except in rare occasions.

Their stories showcase that colonial/postcolonial linguistic policies have created a rupture in the Mauritanian social fabric. By examining the historical roots of this problem, in this chapter I seek to situate the experiences of members of this association within a historical context. I do so by providing insight into how postcolonial linguistic policies imposed by different Moorish governments continue to be perceived as an attempt to exclude Afro-Mauritanians and a threat to their cultures/identities. Afro-Mauritanians’ resistance to Arabic was a reaction to Moorish governments’ continuous attempts to elevate the status of Arabic and Moors at the expense of Afro-Mauritanians’ languages and communities. In short, exploring the stories of these “Lucky Ones” shows that while colonial linguistic policies triggered/contributed to the divisions between the two communities, postcolonial linguistic policies have perpetuated them.

While members of this Mauritanian association continue to struggle with these linguistic barriers, living in the transnational space has provided them with new possibilities. Through exploring the stories of Malaw and Wane, this chapter demonstrates the significant role that the English language has come to play for members of this association, serving as a linguistic bridge between members of the different ethnic groups. Their stories highlight that using English has helped solve the communication problem that have long existed, providing members of the Mauritanian association with

the possibility to communicate and helping their efforts to promote understanding between members of the different ethnic groups.

Collectively, these stories highlight the significant problems members of the association have faced due to the linguistic barriers that colonial and postcolonial policies have created. The stories also demonstrate the important role that the English language has played as a new communicative tool that members of the association have relied on to move forward. Through contextualizing this problem, the chapter provides insight into how the impact of these historical decisions has continued to negatively influence members of this association's efforts to promote unity.

#### "The Lucky Ones:" Kadoye and Herma Stories

Unless a person's ethnic identity is apparent, we heavily rely on language as an identity marker. When I first came across Kadoye's name as I was browsing the official website for Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati, I was almost sure that he was not *Bidani*, a lighter skinned Moor. Because of his darker complexion, I thought to myself that he was either *Hartani* or Afro-Mauritanian. Because of his uncommon last name, I was unable to place him in either group with certainty. I saved his phone number and called him on a Sunday morning to talk about my research project given his position as the president of the association. I first spoke in English because I was not sure that he spoke Hassaniya, my mother tongue. After I introduced myself, he switched to Hassaniya. His eloquent use of Hassaniya led me to believe that he is *Hartani*. After I shared with him that I am originally from the Eastern part of Mauritania, he responded "*hada wahid min ehli ana* (one of my people)." I am from the Eastern part

of Mauritania as well, he added. We automatically bonded. Destroying my assumptions, Kadoye explained that he was a *Fulani*, a member of one of the biggest Afro-Mauritanians ethnic groups. However, “I grew up in the East,” Kadoye added. It was then that I realized that I was dealing with an Afro-Mauritanian who happened to be a fluent Hassaniya speaker.

I explained the project and informed Kadoye that I would visit on weekends. He offered for me to stay at his home. I first came to visit Kadoye on May thirteenth. I called to tell him about my arrival time, and he left work early to meet me at his apartment. When I visited his house, and after greeting me in Hassaniya, we chatted briefly about life, school, and family. He then asked what I would like to eat, giving me the option to choose between *Tebbu Jen* (rice and fish) and lamb. Although I tried to convince him that I had already had dinner, he refused to take no for an answer. We sat on the carpet in his living room and ate our dinner.

As we ate our dinner, he told me about a party that he wanted to go to that night. “The brothers in Kentucky have a party tonight,” he told me. He invited me to come along with him and two others. “I told some of the brothers there about you,” he added. So, later that night, Kadoye and I drove along with two other Afro-Mauritanians to attend a party organized by the Moors in Kentucky. The turnout was small given the size of the community, and Kadoye was one of the only three Afro-Mauritanians present. He blamed the low turnout, especially that of the Afro-Mauritanians, on the lack of publicity.

Kadoye, a tall, well spoken, educated Afro-Mauritanian, loved to engage in debates. To him, these debates served the purpose of problematizing some of the beliefs



that some of the community members hold in regards to politics, religion, and society. I was not always able to follow these debates/conversations. At Malaw's home, where most of these debates took place, they spoke in a mixture of Halpulaar and French, and I was only able to follow when they were speaking French. That often gave me an idea of what the topic was. There were times where mostly French was used, and I believe it was done to ensure that I felt included. Kadoye especially made an effort to speak in French to allow me to follow the discussion. He knew that, although I did not speak French very well, I had a good understanding of the language.

Educated in the French language, Kadoye was more comfortable discussing philosophical ideas in French. Unlike him, and as an Arab, Arabic was the language of my education. We belonged to two different worlds. We were the product of an educational system that primarily produced two types of individuals: a French-educated and an Arabic-educated person. The fact that he spoke Hassaniya, however, made it easier for us to communicate even though it was not the only language we used. If he did not speak Hassaniya, we would have had to rely on English, a language that we used occasionally during my stays with him.

Over the first couple of days in the field, Kadoye and I spoke about the issue of language and identity. When I finally decided to interview him, I was interested in learning more about the role that language plays in helping members of this Mauritanian association come together. During my visits to many Afro-Mauritanian families, I noticed that they mostly spoke in a mixture of Halpulaar and French. In my conversations with members of the association, many were disappointed with the fact that language barriers

still managed to keep them apart. Kadoye shared my sentiment. He felt that language still managed to keep people apart or holds them back. Although he was one of the lucky ones as he put it, others still struggled to communicate because of the linguistic barriers. As he explained it to me:

It is a little bit difficult because we have people who don't speak good English. They only speak their language, and the other doesn't speak their language. That makes it a little bit difficult for some people. But there are people like myself who speak many Mauritanian languages. I am *Fulani*, but I speak my language. I speak Wolof and Hassaniya, too. It is like Arabic and that makes it easier for me to get together with everybody else. I don't have any problem getting together with other Mauritians. But some people it is not the case because language holds them back.

Kadoye's narrative highlighted the fortunate position of the "Lucky Ones."

Unlike others in the community, the lucky ones enjoyed the ability to establish excellent relationships with members of other groups. Kadoye was mainly referring to his ability to interact with members of the Moorish community. As an Afro-Mauritanian, his linguistic skills have provided him with the ability to establish good relations with members of the Moorish community. Implicitly, his story pointed to the difficulties that others faced and the challenges these difficulties posed to members' efforts to promote good relations among association members. I witnessed this during the mixed gatherings I attended. Kadoye's comfort with Hassaniya facilitated his interactions with the Moors who were in attendance.

In Mauritania, a multiethnic country, language has always been an issue. Historically, and because of their proximity to the West African colonial center, Saint-Louis, Afro-Mauritanians had more exposure to the French language. Many Moors refused to partake in colonial education. Also, colonial authorities employed Afro-Mauritanians interlocutors and “civil servants to the detriment of Moors’ elite.”<sup>1</sup> The exposure to the French language prepared Afro-Mauritanians to play an important role in the post-independence state.

In post-independence Mauritania, in order to limit Afro-Mauritanians’ access to government jobs and lessen French influence on the newly established Mauritanian state, the first Mauritanian government initiated an Arabization policy in 1965, enshrining Hassaniya Arabic as the national language in 1968. The decision to establish Hassaniya as the national language of the independent Mauritanian state “alienated black Africans from the Senegal River Valley, who saw it as discriminatory.”<sup>2</sup> Anthony Pazzanita argues that the decision was exceptionally shocking and was seen as an attempt to alienate Afro-Mauritanians who “wanted the educational system and other aspects of the society to remain oriented toward African languages and French.”<sup>3</sup>

Following the decision to enshrine Arabic as the national language, riots erupted between Moors and Afro-Mauritanians in the capital city of Nouakchott. Robert Lindlof states that the fears of Afro-Mauritanians were “exacerbated by the 1966 decision to make the study of Hassaniya Arabic compulsory in secondary schools.”<sup>4</sup> Understandably, as Foster argues, “Francophone Afro-Mauritanians had the most to lose, since they dominated government positions and saw Arabization as an encroachment by Moors.”<sup>5</sup>

Arabization policies were seen as an attack on Afro-Mauritanian languages, an attempt to eradicate them. Kadoye believed that this was at the core of the issue of language in Mauritania. He asserted:

The problem in Mauritania, uh, I know the government tried to kill some languages for others. And that is a problem, a real problem in Mauritania.

I talked to a lot of Afro-Mauritanians about Arabic. They tell me: I am not against Arabic. I am not against Arabic, but my problem is that if they are going to use Arabic to kill my language, I am not going to be into that. If you see a lot of them today, they don't want to speak Arabic. They don't want to learn Arabic because the government tried to use Arabic to kill their languages.

Afro-Mauritanians' resistance to Arabic stemmed more from fear than hatred. They perceived the imposition of Arabic as an attempt to kill Afro-Mauritanian languages. The policies and their implications were viewed as less of an attempt to "tame a wild tongue"<sup>6</sup> and more of a systematic plan to kill Afro-Mauritanian languages and therefore cultures. In his *Something Torn and New*, postcolonial scholar Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o asserts that that:

To starve and kill a language is to starve and kill a people's memory bank. And it is equally true that to impose a language is to impose the weight of experience it carries and its conception of self and otherness.<sup>7</sup>

The imposition of Arabic threatened to exclude Afro-Mauritanians and was/is still perceived as an attempt to destroy their languages and cultures. The Arabization policies

and the alienation of blacks continued with the subsequent governments and reached its peak following the 1989 events. Pazzanita argues that:

The Senegal-Mauritania crisis also had a negative domestic effect well beyond its immediate ramifications. Relations between black and Moorish Mauritians suffered a setback, FLAM activity in the Senegal River Valley increased, and stories of government repression drew severe international condemnation. In addition, interethnic tensions served as an additional opening to the Mauritanian Baathists, whose followers used their privileged position in the bureaucracy to move the state ever closer to Saddam Hussein's Iraq and to accelerate the Arabization program."<sup>8</sup>

The policies should also be understood as an attempt to establish the Arabic character of the country in an era of growing Arab nationalism. In the *Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon argues that "whereas the demand for Africanization and Arabization of management by the bourgeoisie is not rooted in a genuine endeavor at nationalization, but merely corresponds to a transfer of power previously held by the foreigners, the masses make the very same demand at their own level but limit the notion of African or Arab to territorial limits."<sup>9</sup> While Fanon's characterization of the postcolonial bourgeoisie is rather informative, Kadoye's narrative reminds us that these types of policies were not only used against foreigners but also minority groups. The Arabization policies in Mauritania, as Kadoye seemed to believe, were an attempt to kill African languages and hence cultures.

The decision to make Arabic an official language in Mauritania did not eradicate the role of French. French continued to be an official language in Mauritania. The educational system has two tracks for students. Mauritanian students can either be bilingual or choose Arabic as the main language of instruction. Those who choose bilingual education take most of their classes in French and only few hours of Arabic instruction. Mostly, Afro-Mauritanians are taught to be bilingual. This educational system is what produced both Kadoye and myself. Educated in two different languages, it would have been hard for us to understand each other if he did not speak Hassaniya. The system, according to Kadoye perpetuated the separation between the Moors and Afro-Mauritanians. He posited:

And I know. I have seen it in Mauritania now. They take all Moors and teach them Arabic. They take all Afro-Mauritanians, and they teach them French. They call that bilingual. No, it is not bi-lingual. It is just French. That is a problem now in Mauritania because you see a people from the same country, they go to the same school, but they don't get together. They separate them because you are Arab, and they are not Arab.

Through telling a story about the educational system in Mauritania, he demonstrated his belief that postcolonial educational policies were created to divide Mauritanians based on ethnic lines. His narrative highlighted that the linguistic problem Mauritanians struggled with have stemmed from failed educational policies that have created two educational systems existing side by side. Through teaching Arabic to Arabs and French to Afro-Mauritanians, different Moorish governments were blamed for

perpetuating the divisions between Mauritians. Kadoye's narratives implicitly pointed out that ethnic/nationalist tendencies have fueled Moorish governments' efforts to divide the two communities. Pazzanita argues that "the Arabization process in Mauritania reached a high point during the late 1980."<sup>10</sup> During the 80s, he argues, the Arab Baath Socialist Party, "an Arab nationalist group with close ties to Saddam Hussein's Iraq"<sup>11</sup> dominated key positions in the Mauritanian government. The decision to impose this divisive educational policy has resulted in creating a gap between Afro-Mauritians and Moors. Franz Fanon claims that "the haziness of its ideological positions have been incapable of enlightening the people as a whole or have been unable to put the people first, wherever this national bourgeoisie has proven to be incapable of expanding its vision of the world, there is a return to tribalism, and we watch with a raging heart as ethnic tensions triumph."<sup>12</sup> The decision to impose Arabic as an official language should be understood in relation to the rise of nationalist tendencies in the country. This imposition was not meant to improve the possibility for communication between the two groups; otherwise, it would not be perceived as a problem by Afro-Mauritians. Kadoye noted:

But I know if this was used at the beginning as, languages, common languages, we can use it for our communication. I don't know what to tell you, for us to make our life better. Certainly, it is not going to be a problem because French is not for Afro-Mauritians. French is for colonization. I don't know if there is anyone who loves colonization.

In a serious tone, Kadoye pointed out that instead of dealing with a troubling colonial legacy, the Mauritanian government initiated an Arabization policy that alienated Afro-Mauritanians. Kadoye explained that Afro-Mauritanians were not in favor of the French language because it was an imposed colonial language, a heritage that Afro-Mauritanians were not proud of, according to him. The imposition of Arabic, however, was not perceived as an attempt to improve the possibility of communication between Mauritanians. Its elevation came at the expense of other Afro-Mauritanian languages. The problem with the postcolonial linguistic policies in Mauritania, as Kadoye saw it, stemmed from the fact that these policies did not take into account the importance of creating an educational linguistic system that paid attention to the multilingual nature of the country. While he recognized French as part of a troubling colonial heritage, his narrative implied that the failure of postcolonial policies resulted in two things. First, Mauritanians were unable to appropriately deal with this problematic colonial legacy. Second, they initiated policies that perpetuated the divisions that existed.

Under the guise of religion, the government tried to impose Arabic hegemony through advancing it as the language of Islam. Explaining the importance of Arabic to all Mauritanians, Kadoye pointed out:

And we are more close to Arabic than French. At least, even if you don't speak Arabic, you are going learn Al-Qur'an in Arabic. When you do your prayer, you do Al-Qur'an, you do not speak that Qur'an in French or in Fulani or in Soninke. You speak it in Arabic. You see. But the way the government used Arabic for killing all the culture made all the people go against Arabic. What they tell them



in the beginning is okay we are Muslims, and that means we are Arab. No, that is not right. I am a Muslim, but I am not Arab. I am a Muslim, but I am *Fulani*. And I am really proud to be *Fulani*.

Here, the importance of Arabic to members of the Afro-Mauritanian community was highlighted. As Muslims, Afro-Mauritanians recognized the importance of Arabic. However, the imposition of Arabic has led Afro-Mauritanians to fear for their languages/cultures. Their refusal to embrace Arabic stemmed from this fear. Implicitly, his story showed that Afro-Mauritanians had nothing against Arabs or their language. They, however, had a problem with the use of Arabic to destroy their languages/cultures. Emphasizing the religious identity and acknowledging the importance of Arabic to Afro-Mauritanian, Kadoye highlighted that Afro-Mauritanians' resistance to Arabic was a due to the perceived danger it posed to Afro-Mauritanians' cultures/languages. Other Afro-Mauritanians expressed the same sentiments in their interactions with me. While their Muslim identity led them to appreciate Arabic, their fears for their cultural identities have pushed them to resist its imposition.

Kadoye tied his ethnic identity to his linguistic identity, and he took pride in both. Gloria Anzaldua argues that "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language."<sup>13</sup> Other postcolonial scholars have also emphasized the centrality of language in people's sense of identity. In his *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o asserts that "the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe."<sup>14</sup> The Arabization policies, according to Kadoye,

provided a fertile environment for promoting the separation of people in Mauritania. If Arabic were used as a language of communication, such resistance would not be necessary. Its imposition, however, led to division between the Moors and Afro-Mauritanians. Alfred Gerteiny argues that “there really exist two different worlds in Mauritanian neither willing to lose its identity by assimilation to the other or by regional regrouping. Affinities of northern tribes with the Maghrib and the Southern ones with black Africa have been pulling Mauritanian in two diametrically opposed directions, affecting both her internal and external policies, and threatening her with dismemberment.”<sup>15</sup> This Mauritanian association continued to struggle dealing with the challenges created by language policies in postcolonial Mauritania.

#### Herma’s Story

Similar to Kadoye, Herma is a Moor who considers himself one of the “lucky ones” due to his ability to speak few Afro-Mauritanian languages. His story highlights some of the problems that the language barriers pose and the role language could play in elevating them. During my fieldwork, I learned to tread carefully as I searched for new participants. When obtaining a person’s number, I had to make sure that I was taking the number from the right person. This was important when answering the constant question: who gave you my number? While you could obtain the number of a community member from many people in the community, it is preferable to obtain it from individuals who are close to that person. Members of the community, when asked about an individual’s number, would instruct me to take it from a specific person. This was helpful in two specific ways. First, when a community member asked about the means through which I

obtained their number, it was reassuring for them to know that a friend gave it to me. Second, members of the community did not only give me the number, but also called their friends to ask them to take part in my research project, helping me in recruiting participants. When I later called a member to introduce myself, explain the study, and ask them to participate, they would already have an idea of what the project is about. Their friend had already vouched for me. For you to possess or be able to share a person's number, you need to have a close relationship with them. In this community, this was immensely dependent on whether there were language barriers or not. Individuals associate with those with whom they share a common language.

Although I came across Herma's name early on, he was one of the last few participants I interviewed. This was partly because he lived in Kentucky, where the majority of the Moors lived. And because I started with the participants in Cincinnati then moved to Kentucky, he was among the last few I interviewed. When I finally decided to interview him, I had to make sure that I obtained his number from the right person.

I came to Herma's house on a Sunday afternoon. He greeted me at the door. He was wearing a beautiful white *dara'a* – one of the traditional garbs of Mauritania. I followed him into the living room. He introduced me to two Afro-Mauritanians who had come to visit with him that day. Herma then offered me a drink from a selection of juices and soft drinks that he had put out for his guests. We chatted about my project, and I told him about what I had been doing in the area. "If I had known, he said, I would have invited you to my office," he explained. I asked if it was inconvenient for him to conduct

the interview that day. With no objections to being interviewed at home, we started the interview.

After the interview, his wife came to greet me. They then started to get ready to eat. Although I wanted to leave before lunch, they insisted that I stay and eat with them. Over lunch, I sat with Herma, his wife, and guests, and enjoyed deliciously grilled lamb *tajine* and a side of salad. Over lunch, we continued our conversation about the issue of language. He pointed out that because he spoke Mauritanian local languages, he was able to bridge the gap between himself and other Mauritians. His guests were an excellent example. Although he was a Moor, he had two Afro-Mauritanian guests at his house that day.

The wife spoke about how language posed a particular challenge to the women in particular. As an Afro-Mauritanian who spoke Hassaniya fluently, she found herself acting as the translator between Moorish and Afro-Mauritanian women. “She is a believer between two infidels,” as Herma put it. The metaphor was used to emphasize the fact that she was the lesser of two evils. Unlike Moorish women who did not speak Afro-Mauritanian languages and Afro-Mauritanian women who did not speak Hassaniya, his wife spoke the languages of both groups. I came to Herma knowing that his linguistic skills have made it easier for him to bring the two groups closer. In times of hardship, as some members of the association reported, Herma was able to bring Mauritians together because of his ability to speak to the two groups.

When I asked him about language and its challenges, he explained that his linguistic skills have made it easier for him, as a Moor, to be closer to Afro-Mauritanians.

Mauritanians who do not possess the same linguistic skills did not have the same opportunities to bridge the gap between cultures. Language, according to him, still created a gap between people. He attributed his ability to speak Afro-Mauritanian languages to the fact that he grew up among them. In this way, he was similar to Kadoye who spoke Hassniya because of the environment he was raised in. Unfortunately, the exposure they had was not possible for everyone. The country is divided with Afro-Mauritanians living primarily in the Southern region. Herma explained his story with Afro-Mauritanian languages:

Okay, myself, I don't have that problem because the way, the geography on which I was raised. I was raised in a place where all the community was together. I communicated with all the Mauritanians. So we do have that problem. We have the Negro Africans, on one side, and the Arab on the other side. It is not necessarily a problem. But because of the linguistic and cultural barriers, that would put a gap between them sometimes.

As a member of the Moorish community, Herma's ability to speak Afro-Mauritanian languages has helped him obtain an insider status within the Afro-Mauritanian community. This ability, however, was not a result of a successful educational system that taught local languages. Like Kadoye, Herma was lucky by virtue of the environment in which he was brought up. His narrative showed, however, that others struggled with the linguistic barriers that continued to keep them apart, creating a gap that was difficult to bridge.

While he is happy with the opportunities that he had growing up in an environment that allowed him to interact and learn the languages and cultures of Afro-Mauritanians, he recognized the failure of an educational system that has continued to separate people in Mauritania. Unlike his neighborhood, the educational system separated Mauritanian children by placing them in different schools. Through doing so, it created a gap that will not easily be bridged, making language one of the most pressing issues for Mauritanians. Herma was lucky to have had a special childhood experience that exposed him to Afro-Mauritanian languages. He noted:

When I grew up, my friends, the street I grew up on, we were all in the same school. We were all in the same neighborhood. We ate the same food. We grew up. They speak my language. I speak their language. They teach me their language, I teach them my knowledge. It was automatic because we were young. We spoke the same language. So, I grew up with no problem with any of the other communities. So, I don't see myself different than any Mauritanian. They all to me the same because the way I was raised, because the neighborhood we grew up. This is the problem we have now. The school, the Arabs are in one place, the school of *Haratins* is in one place. The school of *Pulaars* is in its place. So it creates a gap between for the children. They grow up having that gap between them. That gap is not going go away. It is going to take time to get this people together. So, I think this is one of the problems we run into now in Mauritania, language.

Commenting on the educational system in Africa during the period of colonialism, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o argues that the imposition of colonial languages on the African child "resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment."<sup>16</sup> While postcolonial language policies continued to maintain the hegemony of European languages and the alienation Ngugi describes, what happened in Mauritania is different. The alienation of Afro-Mauritanians did not simply result from the imposition of French as a colonial language but was also an outcome of the Arabization policies that put Arabs and Afro-Mauritanians in different schools, teaching Arabic to Arabs and French to Afro-Mauritanians. French colonial practices contributed to this problem, but postcolonial linguistic policies perpetuated it.

This was a problem that the association in the Greater Cincinnati area still struggled with. Herma clarified the challenges language barriers posed when he asserted:

It is always a problem, and let me tell you this. This is one of the problems we have as a community here. To create a real community, you have to have all Mauritanians. All Mauritanians have to be in one place, to do everything the same. But the cultural problem becomes a barrier. So, for example, when we go, when we have a meeting for the community, I took my family with me, there is another guy from Halpulaar, he brings his family with him. You can see that the kids, even though each one of them is sitting with distance from adults, the Arabs are sitting in one group. You can see that. You can see the pictures.

"You can see the pictures," he told me. Many others told me about the pictures. What he wanted me to do was to examine videos and photos from the different activities

the association holds. The pictures showed how the association was divided based on linguistic lines. Observing the pictures from the archive, I could get a sense of what Herma and others described. Herma explained:

The Arabs are sitting in one group. The Halpulaar are sitting because they don't communicate, because there is no communication there. I mean if you have a Mauritanian community, you want to bring a singer from the Arab community, those guys are not to enjoy it because they are not used to it. It is the same thing if you bring someone from the Fulani community. They are not going to enjoy it. This is a problem. So, now, the community lives as tribal, regional stuff.

Although these groupings are natural, and I observed the tendency for the different groups to sit together during my fieldwork, Herma told this story to emphasize the negative effects of the linguistic barriers on members of this association. Through telling a story about members' inability to appreciate each other's cultures, Herma's narrative drew a picture of how linguistic policies have divided members of this association, alienating them from each other. This alienation was not evident only in the groupings but also in their inability to enjoy each other's cultures. These divisions not only existed back home but were also reflected in this association's gatherings in their new home.

Herma also pointed out the political implications of only the educational system but also the hegemony of Arabic in all facets of life, especially in the media. He noted:

You know I talk to friends, Fulani friends. What I hear sometimes touches me for a moment because what they say is sometimes true. If they turn the TV on, they



have to switch the channel to Senegal because they see themselves in Senegal more than they see themselves in Mauritania. The culture is not the same. The only thing they see is one culture being represented. But at the same time, it is a reality. I can't. I can't argue that. So, I would say the change has to come from back home.

Telling me a story about his Afro-Mauritanian friends, Herma empathized with their feelings of being alienated. He used this story to illustrate the negative impact of the Arabization policies and the hegemony of Arabic. His story illustrated the sense of alienation his Afro-Mauritanian friends felt. Herma argued that their sense of alienation stemmed from the fact that their languages and cultures were not represented in a state media where Arabic dominated. Implicitly, his story illustrated that the hegemony of Arabic in all facets of social and political life has done nothing to ease the tensions that linguistics policies have created. To bridge the linguistic and cultural barriers, Herma believed that serious changes should happen back home first.

In *Something Torn and New*, Ngugi believes the imposition of European languages created a gap between the elite educated in European languages and the masses who kept the African memory alive through preserving the native tongues. Although Ngugi's framework is useful for understanding the issue of language in colonial/postcolonial Africa, it is clear that the case in Mauritania requires a broadening of Ngugi's framework. The gap that exists in Mauritania is not merely between the masses and the elite and does not come as a result of the imposition of French as a colonial language. The gap that exists is a result of an attempt to promote the hegemony

of one the local language over the others. The Arabization policies were meant to exclude Afro-Mauritanians in favor of the Moors. They were, therefore, perceived as an attempt to kill African languages and culture. Their impact lies in the fact that they have created a gap between Moors and Afro-Mauritanians. Gerteiny posits that “there still exists no significant community of feelings in Mauritania, no linguistic or cultural unity, and no tangible national character.”<sup>17</sup> This gap was still felt among members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati.

#### The English Language as a Bridge: Malaw and Wane’s Stories

I first heard about Malaw during my trip with Warr. During this trip, Warr told me that I should interview Malaw. As a respected member of the association, Malaw served on the council of elders that advised the association on important issues. I met Malaw when I came to visit his family. Kadoye informed me that we would be going to his friend’s house. “I always go to Malaw’s family after work and hang out,” Kadoye explained. Because this was during Ramadan, Malaw’s family insisted that Kadoye and I joined them for *iftars*. Except for rare occasions, it was at Malaw’s house that we broke the fast and stayed late drinking tea and discussing politics.

At night, when Kadoye had to work late, Malaw would come or send his son to pick me up. He and his wife showered me with love and generosity. In a combination of French and English, they would remind me that I was home. “This is chez toi” was their constant reminder that their home was also mine. My interactions with Malaw were mostly in English. Even though he would underestimate his English skills, he was a proficient English speaker. Because neither of us spoke the other’s language, English was

our language of communication. French would have been the best choice, given its status as the colonial language, but I was not as proficient in French.

There were regulars at Malaw's house, but there were also those who infrequently came to the house. The regulars discussed issues that pertained to the community, but they often discussed politics in Mauritania. The issue of language was among the issues that were often discussed. The discussions, however, were often a mixture of Halpulaar and French. I was often able to follow the conversations without fully understanding the different points that were being made. When I interviewed Malaw, he indirectly apologized for making me feel excluded. He was mostly concerned about that. "I do not like it. I know how you feel because it happens with me when I visit my friend. Someone comes, and they switch to Hassaniya." While I was happy that they were comfortable with me to know that I would not mind them code switching between French and Halpulaar, Malaw was concerned that I felt excluded. When we decided to meet for the interview, Malaw suggested that we met at Kadoye's home where I was staying. Because Malaw's house was the meeting place for many friends, Kadoye's home was a better choice for both of us. Malaw arrived around 11 PM. wearing a beautiful green *dara'a*.

In our previous meetings, we always spoke in English. Whether at his home or taking a ride with him, we used English with each other. Because he was French educated, he spoke French fluently. I understood French, but I could not have a long conversation in it. English was our refuge. I asked Malaw to tell me about the language members of the Mauritanian association use with each other. He explained to me that it depended on the members. There were members of the association on both sides who

were articulate in other national languages. They could have a conversation with virtually anyone. Apart from those members, English was the language that members of the two main groups relied on in their interactions when speaking French was not possible.

Malaw explained the advantage that the “lucky ones” have in comparison to others when he noted:

These people, they know. When they are with a *Bidan*, it is very easy. If it is *Bidan*, they talk Hassaniya. It is very easy. Like, I can understand but I cannot speak. Everything you say, 80 or 90 %, I can understand that, but I cannot talk. I talk a little bit, what I need to say, but it is not a conversation. So, this kind of situation, when you have a *Bidani* coming and usually they don't have Halpulaar. Some of them go for Wolof. But when is this issue arise, where are we going go? French. Or right now, here, English. So for the most cases, we go for English. Even in our community, when we go for meeting, for the community somewhere, you are going to get somebody who does not speak Fulani, and we try to translate to Hassaniya. Or somebody can make it easy and speak English. As in our country, we go to French, the communication language between them. But here is English. So, it works that way. It is either English or somebody speaks a language and we translate.

Malaw's narrative showed the difficulties that the language barriers posed to individuals like him. His inability to speak Arabic made it difficult to interact with Moors. Telling his story was meant to highlight the role that English has come to play for members of this association. Because of their linguistic barriers, English has come to

function as a bridge when communication in Mauritanian languages or French was impossible. Without knowledge of English or French, you needed someone to translate between a Moor and an Afro-Mauritanian. Malaw asserted:

Otherwise, you cannot be two. You need to be three. One who can speak both and make translation. That is why we don't have a choice. I think is good for English to be the language of communication. It is going to be fast. Otherwise, it is translation. To get translation, who is going to transfer what I say? Better to speak English. It's going to be easy. So, I think is going to be important to go for. It is. But we don't have choice so we can understand each other, by speaking English. Or otherwise, anyway, we don't have choice. Otherwise, what is going be? Translation. I think translation is not good. A Fulani speaks Halpulaar and a *Bidan* call someone else to translate. It should not be like that. A Fulani should understand *Bidans*, should understand Hassaniya, and the *Bidans* should understand Fulani. That should be because we are together for years and year, in the same place, in the same country. Normally, everybody should speak the language of the other. As Fulani, with Soninke, we don't have this problem. We don't have this problem. All the Soninke, most of them actually, they speak Fulani. They leave their Soninke between them. But when a Fulani comes with them, they speak Fulani.

Malaw sought to provide an overview of the challenges that Moors and Afro-Mauritanians faced as a result of the linguistic barriers and the possibilities that were open to them. Among Afro-Mauritanians (Fulani, Soninke, and Wolof), these linguistic

barriers were easily overcome. In comparing Moors to the Soninke, he highlighted that the Soninke were able to interact with Fulani individuals. Whether through relying on African languages or French, Afro-Mauritanians overcame their linguistic differences. This comparison served two purposes. First, it highlighted that this communication problem existed between Moors and Afro-Mauritanians. Second, pointing out that different Afro-Mauritanian groups could overcome the linguistic barriers helped Malaw illustrate that it was possible to do so. Malaw expressed bitterness regarding members' inability to understand each other given their long shared history. Implicitly, he blamed the linguistic policies for the challenges that members of the association faced, viewing the linguistic situation as abnormal.

To have someone translate between two Mauritanians was an embarrassment that speaking the English language helped guard against. Translation, however, was only needed between Moors and Afro-Mauritanians when members did not speak English. For those who spoke English, it was the language that they resorted to. I noticed this during my fieldwork. Whenever there was a mixed group of Mauritanians, using English ensured that no one felt excluded.

Because I spent much of my time at Malaw's house, I witnessed conversations about important issues regarding the community. Most of these conversations were in a mixture of Halpulaar and French, and I was only able to follow the conversation without knowing some of the minute details. Malaw was often worried that I felt excluded from the conversation because that is how he felt around Moors. I believe that wanting to

reassure me that he felt my pain, he expressed to me that English was what ensured that such exclusion did not take place. Malaw explained:

When I am only with Fulani people and I see a *Bidan*, we go to our language and talk, and sometimes the debate is very interesting, and we go to Pulaar. And these people want to participate. But they cannot. Uhuh, even I am here with Fulani. I don't feel good. This guy here is Mauritanian. The debate is interesting to him, but he cannot participate. So I don't feel good. The same thing when I go to Mohamed Ould Herma. And other people come. And automatically, they go to Hassaniya. It is automatic. They don't. It goes like this. They don't realize that there is somebody here who needs to participate. When they do, they need to cut that and go back to English. So I think that I am not feeling good. I don't have choice.

Trying to empathize with my experience being surrounded by Afro-Mauritanians, Malaw explained that he knew that I felt excluded due to my inability to speak any of the Afro-Mauritanian languages spoken at his home. He understood my situation because he often experienced this feeling with his Moorish friends. The story, however, was meant to illustrate the difficulties that language barriers caused and how English helped with this problem.

Even though I did not mind being unable to understand the details of the important conversations I witnessed, I understood the feeling Malaw described. I often felt uncomfortable having to use English whenever I participated in these conversations. I felt like an outsider. This feeling, however, was minor in comparison to knowing that you

have never made an effort to speak other national languages. But as Malaw put it, “we don't have choice.” As bitter as it is, English became the language that we relied on in our interactions.

### Wane's Story

Before going to visit the community for the first time, I had mostly heard about it through Wane. After adding me as a Facebook friend, Wane and I often talked about the community. He would let me know of any events that the community was planning to organize. Although I had wished to use him as a gatekeeper, his work commitments made it difficult for him to fit me into his busy schedule. After many attempts, I was finally able to meet him in person for the first time. We had tried to meet several times before then, but something always came up. We finally agreed to meet after a conference on development organized by the Afro-Mauritanian community.

Despite being one of the youngest participants, Wane had been active in the association. He worked as a head coach for the association's soccer team and served as a president after a period of inactivity and conflict within the association. As a young Afro-Mauritanian professional, Wane worked in his capacity as the president to bring members of the Mauritanian community closer. He believed that it is easier for the younger generations to work together. The elders are “still stuck in the past,” he argued. And language still worked as an obstacle. “I have friends that I cannot talk to because I don't speak Arabic.” But he was thankful for the English language, the new language of communication. Wane pointed out:



The association helped people see each other and introduce themselves to each other. And it is ongoing. The association itself has some challenges, has big challenges. But overall, I am going to say it has had a good positive impact on the community. It could even bring more positivity. Right now, let's say it has brought just a little bit of its potential. It could even be more. I have seen few small things like coming together for a Picnic or Eid. I have seen *Fulanis* say: In my whole life, I have never talked to a Moor. And I have seen Moors say that, too. You know things that people didn't do back home, interacting. As soon as people are interacting, and the fact that people here speak English, it helps, too. Because back home, there is a big divide, some people don't speak Arabic. They speak French. Some people speak Arabic, so people don't even interact.

Wane reminded me of the difficulties members of the two communities faced in their efforts to communicate. With Afro-Mauritanians speaking French and Moors speaking Arabic, members of these communities struggled in their efforts to communicate. These challenges continued here as well. However, these linguistic barriers were partially overcome due to the role that English played. Through sharing stories about members' satisfaction with their ability to use English to communicate, Wane wanted to emphasize how English has encouraged communication between members of the association.

He joked about making English the official language in Mauritania to overcome the barriers that existed because of association members' inability to speak each other's languages. Providing an example, Wane clarified:

Somebody was joking with me at a picnic. They said: maybe we should just install English in Mauritania because the political fight has gone to many things. People have taken language and so many things. You know back home how people are talking about language when they should not. Here, we have one language. English is the official language, and that is what we use. It has helped people a lot. Yeah, when we do our activities, picnic and stuff, a lot of people come talk to me. They say this is the first time I have been able to talk to a Moor and understand each other. I have never been able to. Laughter. You know, I hear a lot. I hear a lot. You know myself I know some friends and we cannot understand each other because my Arabic is poor.

Although it was meant as a joke, Wane's narrative highlighted that the linguistic barriers were perceived as the most challenging problem facing members of this Mauritanian association. If this problem was overcome, members of the Mauritanian association would be able to move forward with their efforts to promote unity. Their joke that installing English back home would solve problems there was meant to highlight the important role English has played in their efforts to promote unity. Those who learned English were able to overcome this problem.

Unfortunately, some members were still unable to overcome these language barriers. For new arrivals, communication was still a challenge, maintaining the barriers that have long existed between members of the same nation. I noted this in my interactions with new immigrants. Because of their lack of English skills and my poor French, our interactions were extremely limited. In many ways, Wane and I were similar.

We both relied on English to understand our friends because of our inability to speak their native languages. Although the interactions and the English language skills of the association members were far from sophisticated as some of them put it, English still served as the language that brought them closer by allowing them to interact. Sometimes, they did so for the first time.

### Conclusion

While the “Lucky Ones” enjoyed their ability to navigate different cultural ways of being, for most Mauritians the issue of language remained an important issue. Most of my participants acknowledged the role English played yet conceded that there was still a gap that resulted from their inability to speak each other’s languages. I felt this bitterness in my interactions with different members of this association. There was just “no connection” as some of them noted. Or as Herma stated, “You can see the pictures.”

Contextualizing the linguistic experience of this group, it becomes clear that linguistic policies both during the colonial and postcolonial era have created a rupture in the Mauritanian social fabric, creating challenges that members of this association continue to deal with. The imposition of Arabic as an official language created a rupture in the Mauritanian social fabric, but this imposition should be read historically. As an attempt to emphasize the Arabic identity of the country as well as limit Afro-Mauritanian’s access to power, language policies in Mauritania were/are perceived as unjust, an attempt to destroy Afro-Mauritanian cultures. The continuation of these failed policies created barriers that members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati area still strive to overcome.

For them, the English language became the go-to language when the interlocutors did not share another common language. Although the English skills of my participants were not always sophisticated, English helped members interact allowing them to bridge the linguistic barriers that existed due to a long history of failed linguistic policies. These linguistics barriers, however, had to be examined carefully as these narratives show. The Arabization policies, initially used to limit Afro-Mauritanians' access to government jobs in the newly established state, were perceived as an attempt to destroy Afro-Mauritanian culture. Regardless of the different paths language policies took, they undoubtedly created a gap between Afro-Mauritanians and Moors, a gap that my participants still struggled with. In their transnational space, members of this Mauritanian association used English as a "linguistic bridge" between the two groups in an effort to move forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Foster, *Mauritania: The Struggle for Democracy*, Studies on North Africa (Boulder, Colo: FirstForumPress, 2011), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed, Historical Dictionaries of Africa, no. 110 (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>5</sup> Foster, *Mauritania*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Second edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 75.

<sup>7</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed, Historical Dictionaries of Africa, no. 110 (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1st Evergreen ed (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 104.

<sup>10</sup> Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 81.

- <sup>14</sup>. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Studies in African Literature (London : Portsmouth, N.H: J. Currey ; Heinemann, 1986), 4.
- <sup>15</sup>. Alfred G. Gerteiny, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, African Historical Dictionaries, no. 31 (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 14.
- <sup>16</sup>. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 17.
- <sup>17</sup>. Alfred G. Gerteiny, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, African Historical Dictionaries, no. 31 (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 15.

## **Chapter VI: Tending to an Old Wound**

In his essay, “Policing Politics: Framing the Past in Post-Conflict Divided Societies,” Cillian McGratten asserts that “dealing with violent pasts in post-conflict societies is especially problematic in ethnically divided societies where ideas about historical events are inextricably bound up with ideas about identity, community, and nation.”<sup>1</sup> This results from the fact that there is usually, as Raili Nugin asserts, some tension between “hegemonic and alternative pasts.”<sup>2</sup> This could not be truer for members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of the Greater Cincinnati area.

Members of the Mauritanian Association of the Greater Cincinnati area would always claim that their association was an apolitical entity whose main goal was to serve members of the Mauritanian community, promote unity, and provide a platform on which the Mauritanian culture would be promoted/introduced to an American audience. Because of its apolitical nature, members of the executive offices refrained from allowing the association to be used for any political purposes. For years, those with an interest in preserving the association were successful in ensuring that the association was not high-jacked by individuals with a desire to use it for political ends. Anything that could be seen as an endorsement of a political orientation was avoided.

Recently, however, and in an attempt to celebrate Mauritania’s Independence Day as a unified community, the leaders of the association planned a large celebration. The plan to celebrate Mauritania’s Independence Day triggered a huge disagreement within the association, particularly among Afro-Mauritanians. While many of them perceived the plans to celebrate their country’s Independence Day as an excellent gesture from the association leaders, others viewed the celebration of the Independence Day as an insult to

the many Afro-Mauritanians soldiers who were brutally killed during celebrations of Mauritania's Independence following the 1989 events.

The disagreement over whether this celebration should take place divided the Afro-Mauritanian community, with some vocal members expressing their dismay with the association leaders. Those who refused to take part in the celebration argued that the Mauritanian government killed 28 Afro-Mauritanian soldiers following the 1989 events as part of the celebrations of the Independence of Mauritania. While some Afro-Mauritanians maintained that those events did not warrant refusing to celebrate Mauritania's Independence, others claimed that this was a day on which Afro-Mauritanians were killed making it more of a memorial day than a day of celebration.

Through following the stories of Thiam, Warr, the Mauritanian, and Ehlou, this chapter examines how the legacy of the 1989 events continued to hinder this association's efforts to promote unity. While all these stories refer to the disagreement that occurred when the leaders of the association attempted to celebrate Mauritania's Independence, Thiam's story outlines the disagreement and provides insight into the rationales that those opposed to these celebrations provided. What is revealing about his story, however, is that it points out the need to read this disagreement within its context, highlighting the passive negative role that the different Mauritanian governments have played in fostering/promoting unity. Examining Thiam's story shows that past and current practices of the Mauritanian government have done nothing to ease the lingering negative effects of the 1989 events.

Exploring Thiam's story demonstrates the continued influence of the nation state. While the Mauritanian government does not interfere with this association directly, its

disinterest in this community have continued to influence this association's efforts to promote unity. The various Mauritanian governments have not provided their people with the proper tools to recover from their traumatic legacy. Their lack of action continued to affect members of this association's efforts to move forward.

While this disagreement has proven challenging for this association, the other three stories highlight the different strategies members of the association utilized to keep their efforts to promote unity alive. Through acknowledgement and prayer, Afro-Mauritanians and Moors reframed the celebrations to accommodate the needs of each other in an effort to move forward. The stories of Warr, the Mauritanian, and Ehlou highlight the important role these tactics have played in helping some members of this association find a common ground. Their reframing of the past served as a way to move forward, a step that members of this association wished their countrymen back home could learn from.

#### The Traumatic Events of 1989: The Indelible Memories of the Past

In examining the roots of the 1989 conflict, Noel Foster argues that the Land Reform Act of 1983 was a significant moment, one marked by increased hatred for the Moors because of oppressive policies that disadvantaged Afro-Mauritanians. The Mauritanian government exploited the Land Reform Act and confiscated Afro-Mauritanian agricultural land whenever this land was not cultivated and sold it to Moorish businessmen.

FLAM (Forces for Afro-Mauritanian Liberation) expressed their resentment for policies that systematically targeted Afro-Mauritanians. In 1986, these sentiments were publicly made known through the "Manifesto of the Oppressed Black Mauritanians."<sup>3</sup>



The harsh or rather separatist tone of the manifesto was met with the incarceration of some of the FLAM leadership. While Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya's regime paid close attention to the activities of Afro-Mauritanian intellectuals, the regime feared that Afro-Mauritanian officers might find this rhetoric appealing. In 1987, the Mauritanian government alleged that a group of FLAM affiliated military officers were planning a coup that was meant to overthrow the regime. Foster argues that "fifty-one black Mauritanian army officers were court-martialed, and three lieutenants, accused of being the ringleaders, were sentenced to execution."<sup>4</sup> This verdict resulted in the executions of the Afro-Mauritanian officers.

The Mauritanian government tightened its hold and paid careful attention to the activity of Afro-Mauritanians in general and FLAM affiliates in particular. While the execution of the three Afro-Mauritanian soldiers and the systematic oppression of Afro-Mauritanians was always a challenge to national unity, the events of 1989 were the most traumatic events in the history of Moors and Afro-Mauritanians. After a group of Mauritanian herders shot and killed two Senegalese farmers near the Senegalese River Valley, the Senegalese responded by killing, looting, and sending home Mauritanians merchants living in Senegal.

The Mauritanian government responded to these attacks against Mauritanians in Senegal by not only targeting Senegalese, but also Afro-Mauritanians. Citing Human Rights Watch, Foster claims that "nearly 3,000 Afro-Mauritanians were reportedly jailed for sedition and subjected to torture. Within the military, between 500 and 600 black officers and men were executed or tortured to death in unspeakable manners."<sup>5</sup> Foster adds that Mauritanian soldiers in northeastern Mauritania not far from the economic city

of Nouadhibou hung twenty-eight Afro-Mauritanian soldiers in celebration of Mauritanian's Independence day.<sup>6</sup> Moors exploited the problem with Senegal to target Afro-Mauritanian citizens. Many Afro-Mauritanians were expelled from the country and sent to Senegal. Foster argues that black Mauritanians were "deported en masse in trucks, were some suffocated."<sup>7</sup>

The Mauritanian government, in addition its reliance on Mauritanian soldiers in its atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians, mobilized *Haratins* to help oppress the Afro-Mauritanian communities. Forster argues that:

In two-pronged effort to reduce Afro-Mauritanian political and economic power, the architects of Mauritania's expulsions sought to involve Haratine mobs in atrocities and looting so as to ensure unity among white and black Moors rather than a potential coalition between two disadvantaged segments of the population, which collectively outnumbered Bidan roughly two to one.<sup>8</sup>

Commenting on these atrocities, *Africa Watch*, details the atrocities that black Mauritanians faced. After the alleged coup d'état, 200 blacks were reported to have died without any international intervention. Although the number is unclear, *Africa Watch* estimates that between "1.000-3000 blacks were held in incommunicado detention,"<sup>9</sup> where some were kept without a trial. Not only were blacks looted, imprisoned, tortured, and killed but were also systematically segregated against in the military. *Africa Watch* argues that "the number of black army officers and rank-and-file soldiers had been drastically reduced since the last alleged coup attempt by black army officers in October 1987. Since then, blacks were gradually purged from the army, no new black recruits

were hired and those who remained were disarmed.”<sup>10</sup> Although the numbers may have changed, the systematic oppression continued.

#### A Day of Memorial or Celebration?: Thiam’s Story

I had heard so much about Thiam and was looking forward to meeting him. He was an important player in the transformation of the organization and had led the organization at an important stage of its development. Those who talked about Thiam explained that he was one of the Afro-Mauritanians who were active in involving Afro-Mauritanians in the organization. The organization started in Kentucky through the diligent efforts of some Moors and a few Afro-Mauritanians in the area. Thiam and other Afro-Mauritanians were influential in encouraging the two communities to come closer, and he was the first Afro-Mauritanian to lead the organization.

While some argued that he became the president of the association as Moors in Kentucky sought more involvement from Afro-Mauritanians following a degree of inactivity in the organization, others claimed that Thiam became the president of the association following a visit from the Mauritanian ambassador. Following the election of the first democratically elected president in Mauritania, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, the Mauritanian ambassador in D.C visited the community and demanded that the community members work on strengthening their relations. It was after this visit that Afro-Mauritanians became more involved in the organization. Thiam, according to this version, became the first Afro-Mauritanian to lead the organization. Moors had always been in leadership positions due to the fact that the association was established in Kentucky where Moors reside.

Although many spoke to me about his role, I had not met Thiam in person as I did with most of the Afro-Mauritanians I interviewed. I asked Warr to help put me in touch with Thiam. Warr willingly obliged, and he talked to Thiam about my project and asked if he would be willing to meet with me. Thiam gave Warr permission to share his contact information with me, after which I telephoned him and talked about the project. He asked that I let him know whenever I was in Cincinnati so we could meet for the interview. We met the following week.

I reached Thiam's house in the early afternoon. He was home with two small kids. He greeted me warmly and asked what I wanted to drink. He was eager to talk to me about the association and the work they did to promote unity. He entered the interview mode before I had a chance to explain the project further or talk about my need to record the interview. When I realized that he was ready to talk to me about the association, I stopped him explaining that I would like to record what he had to share so that I had a record of his account. He accepted my suggestion, and I started by allowing him to share some information about the association since he was one of the members who played a significant role in establishing it. The interview with Thiam was long partly because of his desire to lay out the history of the association. In the middle of the interview, he asked if we could stop. His wife had just come back from work, and he wanted us to eat lunch and then continue with the interview. I knew that there was no point in declining his offer to join them for lunch, so I grabbed the spoon his wife had brought me and ate some of their deliciously made rice and lamb.

Thiam wanted to spend a great deal of time laying out the problems that face the association, the most important of which was the Mauritanian government's lack of

interest in working to strengthen community relations. He seemed dismayed by this and mentioned that the government ignored them unless they needed the association for political reasons. Even through the Mauritanian community in the Greater Cincinnati area was large and prosperous, there were no government offices to take care of the Mauritanians in the area. Community members drove to D.C to get a paper signed or obtain an official document from the government. He highlighted this belief as he explained to me that there is a need for the association to continue working on doing its part, but that did not exempt the government because the government still had a role to play outside of any political considerations. Thiam noted:

We have to keep working and do our part. But also, the government, the ambassador here, should go, should come to Mauritanians and let them know, not for the political things, but they should be here to build the Mauritanian community. Unfortunately, they don't have the embassy working for this target. They come here. They see Mauritanians only from the political side. They don't see Mauritanians as a community outside Mauritania in need of help outside the country of origin. No, they only see Mauritania as a political view.

In his narrative, Thiam focused his criticism on the embassy, the representative of the Mauritanian government here. While this may appear as a criticism of its effectiveness, Thiam's narrative implicitly pointed to how the Mauritanian embassy has not shown any genuine interest in promoting the well-being of the community. While he may seem concerned about the services that the embassy has failed to provide, his narrative implicitly indicated that the embassy has failed to encourage unity among

community members. Its lack of interest in the well-being of the community has done nothing to ease the tensions.

Thiam had much to share about the lingering negative effects of the 1989 events. The most important of these effects was some association members' refusal to take part in the celebrations of Mauritania's Independence Day and their dismay with those who took steps to ensure the success of these celebrations. Thiam attributed the conflict to the fear that followed members of the association to their transnational home in the Greater Cincinnati area. This fear, in his opinion, resulted from the failure of the political system. Different Mauritanian governments have failed to bring justice to individuals affected by the traumatic events of 1989, leading to a continuous fear that haunted the association. The failure to bring to justice the perpetrators of atrocities against members of the Afro-Mauritanian community was the reason behind some members' unwillingness to partake in the celebration of the Independence Day. Thiam emphasized the need to ensure that justice prevailed. He explained:

That is what I said. It is a political thing. If now, my brother was killed, I am giving an example. I am just giving an example. My brother/my father/my uncle was killed that day to celebrate the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, to celebrate that day, and you invite me on that day to celebrate? The only thing we can do is fix it. How we can fix it? Recognize what was done, who did it. Bring people to a judge to get a pardon from a victim or to condemn the people who have done those things. We become clear. But now, until we fix this problem, until we say, hey your brother is here. You can visit his grave. Or your brother was killed. He is between Boulanwar or somewhere. The place is here. You can go visit it. And this guy is

the one who did it is here. He goes to justice. It is up to you now. As a Muslim, do you want to pardon him or do you want justice to prevail?

Through providing examples, Thiam shed light on the lingering feelings of sorrow that some Afro-Mauritanians continue to feel due to the traumatic legacy of 1989. He was adamant that the association would not be able to overcome this legacy without structural changes occurring back home. When Thiam argued that “the only thing we can do is fix it,” he was pointing to the necessity of government interference. This was especially clear when he pointed that not only was acknowledgement necessary, but it was also important to locate those who have been disappeared, bring the criminal to justice, and ensure transparent procedures. Without taking these steps, the association would continue to deal with this troubling legacy. Thiam’s narrative highlighted that the well-intentioned attempts of the association members to promote unity would not bring about any real change. To some Afro-Mauritanians, at least, these genuine efforts fell short.

What the Afro-Mauritanians put forward was a counternarrative, one that problematized the celebration of independence. Godwin Onuoha argues that a state, relying on its resources, can easily shape memories to meet its own interests.<sup>11</sup> However, different ethnic groups are capable of contesting the official version of events as the only legitimate version.<sup>12</sup> These counternarratives, as Tamara Benjeglav posits, threaten to destabilize the dominant narrative.<sup>13</sup> While the official memory regards the Independence of Mauritania from France as a cause of celebration, members of the Afro-Mauritanian community remembered November 28<sup>th</sup> differently. It is not only a day on which some of their sons and relatives were killed, it serves as a reminder that justice was not achieved. Thiam’s narrative suggested the need for reconciliation.

Thiam explained that if justice was served, Mauritians would be able to celebrate their independence together as a community. He posited:

If that thing is done, we can all celebrate the Independence Day because this always happens. Any time people kill other people; they end up together. But we have to do the justice part. Hey, those people were killed. Those people are the killers. You are the parent of the victims. That is the judge. The judge decides that these people are brought to justice. Your parents were killed. That is what we give you. It is not just we have to demonize you because a person died. That's what should be done and the persons brought to justice.

Thiam believed that the uniqueness of the 1989 events did not lie in the atrocities that were committed by one dominant group against a marginalized group within the same community. Its uniqueness lay in the fact that nothing has been done to bring the killers to justice. The sentiment that Thiam expressed was not solely his opinion. Others in the community, even those who planned the celebrations of Mauritania's Independence Day, shared the same view. Thiam explained to me that an attempt was made by Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdullahi, the first democratically elected Mauritanian president. Ould Cheikh Abdullahi brought some Mauritanian refugees from Senegal, acknowledging the injustice they have suffered. Those efforts were short-lived and did not produce a large-scale attempt to bring the perpetrators to justice. Through bringing individuals to justice, the government could easily obtain a pardon from those concerned. Mauritians, in his view, were capable of pardoning one another. He explained:

All we can do is pardon, but the government has to do its part. If the government



does its part, people can live together because every single day on the field we have this kind of incident, people killing people.

At that time, we can celebrate the Independence Day because independence is very important. But it was biased because people were killed to celebrate that day. It was. We did not kill 30 people. We killed exactly 28 people because 28 was the Independence Day. Those people. It is 28 November. We need 28 people to celebrate independence. The only thing you can do is that the government solves this problem. People can go and celebrate any independence.

Through this narrative, Thiam explained how the atrocities committed against Afro-Mauritians during the 1989 events have polluted the legacy of the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, Mauritania's National Day. In his narrative, the killing of 28 Afro-Mauritanian soldiers was implicitly perceived as a statement meant for the Afro-Mauritanian community. While on the one hand, the killing of these 28 Afro-Mauritanian soldiers during celebrations of Mauritania's Independence could be read as a symbolic act meant to emphasize the measures Mauritians were willing to take to preserve unity, its symbolism was perceived differently among Afro-Mauritians. For some Moors, the Mauritanian government was responding to a threat to the country's stability. For Afro-Mauritians, the killing of Afro-Mauritanian soldiers during celebrations of Mauritania's Independence was an attempt to alienate the Afro-Mauritanian community.

In noting the response from some members of the Afro-Mauritanian community, he explained:

Hady, this year, he tried to celebrate the Independence Day, and people said okay we are not going because we are now going to commemorate our dead people

rather than doing celebrate it. But as a leader, you always have this conflict situation. What to do to make all people happy is not easy. If you do this, some people will say good. Other people will say no. But as a leader, you try to find a common ground and try to do something everybody is going to say okay, normal to do it. But it is not easy because the gap between the communities are big. We need time to fix it. It is not easy, but I have hope it should be done.

For him, struggling to reconcile this legacy was the dilemma that the leaders of the community continued to face. Members of the association had to deal with two conflicting narratives about Mauritania's Independence. While he argued that the leaders ought to always attempt to find common ground, his narrative pointed out that the problems that members of this association faced were difficult to solve. He argued that it would need time and that the situation was hopeful. However, Thiam recognized that time would not be enough without genuine government efforts.

Bringing up the events of 1989 during the celebration of Mauritania's Independence can be thought of as a counternarrative to the existing "memory politics."<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Moll defines memory politics as "a field of action where different memory entrepreneurs – political and social stakeholders such as governmental structures, political parties, interest groups and intellectuals – use public discourse and practices such as the erection of monuments, to construct collective narratives on the past in order to support the legitimation of political action, the cementation of group cohesion and the development of collective identity."<sup>15</sup> Instead of celebrating the independence as a cohesive association, the Independence Day has become a field on which two different narratives clash, affecting attempts to foster one collective identity.

Thiam explained that even though the atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians were committed long ago, their legacy lives on and justice is necessary. Thiam clarified:

Because now, those people here, a lot of people here now, 10 years after today, they don't know about 1989. It does not concern them. But if the injustice is still there, those people were not judged yet, they are not going part to in it. And even 100 years after that, we are still going think about it. But if it is fixed one time, those people born after 1989, they don't care about what happened in 1989. If we don't fix it, they will say this people killed your father and your brother and if justice is not done, maybe they will repeat it again. But if justice is done, we are sure it will not happen again because people say when that happened, those people were killed, went to jail, or justice prevailed. But until then, the problem will be there. Any 28 November, people will remember those who lost their lives. But if they fix it, it is done. Today if you come here, people born in 1991, 92, you call them to tell them that in 1989, something happened. People were killed.

Those Mauritanians born here, people have been here for 12 years, if you talk to them about 1989, they don't care. If they are lucky, they will say we are Mauritanians, but those problems we don't care about. That's not our problem.

The justice will prevail first. Then, people can celebrate anything.

Thiam believed that justice meant reassurance. Without ensuring justice, Mauritanians could not feel secure. Bringing in those involved in the atrocities would serve as a deterrence to others and ensure members of marginalized groups that they would not be unjustly treated. Justice would also provide the possibility of making amends and moving forward. Mauritanians in general, and members of this Mauritanian

association in particular, will not be able to overcome this traumatic legacy until the traumatic events of 1989 were dealt with properly. Implicitly, Thiam invited everyone to understand their reasons. Mauritians, especially the Mauritanian government, needed to take serious steps to repair community relations through ensuring the triumph of justice. If the government did that, it would encourage those reluctant to celebrate Mauritania's Independence to rethink their position.

#### Re-framing Memories: Warr, the Mauritanian, and Ehlou's Stories

While those who planned the celebrations of Mauritania's Independence Day agreed with this perspective and were equally troubled by the events, they found creative ways to overcome the dilemma of an Independence Day that has become a cause for celebration as well as a day of memorial. The following stories explain how those who partook in the celebration of Mauritania's independence reframed the celebrations in an attempt to reconcile these two positions.

#### Warr's Story

I first met Warr when he came to see me at Kadoye's house. Because of his position as the treasurer for the association and his strong relationship with Kadoye, he was told about my visit and came to learn more about the project. He spent some time with Kadoye, Soumare, and I. Soumare had come a bit earlier for the same purpose. Warr is an intelligent and soft-spoken Afro-Mauritanian. He was one of those who believed in the value of this research project the most, providing the study was done properly. As a biologist working as a lab technician in one of the large pharmaceutical labs in the area, he believed that there were certain procedures that needed to be followed to ensure that the findings were valid. This was due to his scientific training. Although he

recognized the difference between social science and the work he did as a lab technician, what he wanted was to ensure that everyone had a chance to have their voice heard.

Because I was his guest, Kadoye always left me with a trusted friend whenever he had something to do. This was until I became more acquainted with the city of Cincinnati. Since it was my first day in Cincinnati, Kadoye had asked Warr to spend time with me so that he could attend to some other business. Warr took me on a ride to Kentucky to see one of his relatives. She had just given birth to a little boy a week ago, and they had a naming celebration. In the Mauritanian tradition, a newborn is assigned a name a week after they are born. On that day, the family slaughters sheep and invites family members and neighbors to attend the celebration. Families usually take pride in ensuring that these celebrations are well attended. In this transnational space, however, different families do things differently.

The celebration was rather small, and only four people were present that day, including Warr and I. The baby's father explained to us that they decided to keep it simple. The real celebration was happening in Mauritania, and they decided to send money back home so that they could celebrate it there. "I send money to my father, and they will do it there," he said. This was the first time I had seen something like this, but I could understand that this was a creative way of handling this issue given the difficulty of having everyone come to the U.S for the celebration. It felt easier to just have it done back home. The boy, however, was assigned a name and we were there to partake in the small celebration.

This trip was an opportunity for me to know Warr better. I felt that Warr and I established a rapport immediately. Because of his concern that some voices would not

have the opportunity to be heard, the ride to Kentucky and back served as an excellent opportunity to point out some individuals who needed to be approached about the study. It was during my trip with Warr that I first heard about “the opposition.” This opposition consisted of a group of Afro-Mauritanians who, according to Warr, were not fond of the leadership of the Mauritanian Association of the Greater Cincinnati area. While there may have been different reasons for why this small group has come to be known as the opposition, their dissatisfaction with the current leadership was often attributed to their discontent with the leaders’ plans to hold a celebration for Mauritania’s Independence Day.

In my conversation with Warr, he was hopeful that association members would be able to talk through their differences. Even though he explained to me that the members were “victims of the past,” he believed that being together in the Greater Cincinnati area has allowed them to come together and learn to show compassion towards one another. As an Afro-Mauritanian, he was especially moved by the fact that some Moors have shown a genuine interest in working to promote understanding between the two groups, showing their compassion. Warr explained the attitude of some Moors and how it contributed to bringing the two communities closer. He stated:

I would say that we are victims of the past. So, we understand that in the past there were some executions, some violence against human rights. And there is also people on the Other side: *Bidan* people who understood also we have to do something about. There are some people who are working with us. They say okay. You know we are not the one who did it, but we are very sorry about it. And there is no reason this happened, some of them not all. They will say we are not the

government. We cannot do anything, but actually they show their compassion.

They show that Mauritania cannot exist if we cannot talk, if we cannot see really the big compassion toward someone who suffered in the past. So, there is some you know I would like to say, some uh goodwill that we are here and we talk about it.

In explaining the challenges members of the association faced due the conflict over celebrating Mauritania's Independence, Warr showed the important role that acknowledgement played in easing the tensions between members of this association. While his narrative demonstrated Afro-Mauritanians' satisfaction with the Moors' willingness to work with them in dealing with problems of the past, it also implicitly highlighted that Afro-Mauritanians acknowledged that their Moorish brothers were not responsible for the atrocities committed against Afro-Mauritanians. The Moors' willingness to acknowledge the atrocities was perceived positively by members of the Afro-Mauritanian community.

During our interview, Warr explained the conflict that arose after an executive office attempted to organize celebrations for Mauritania's Independence Day.

Last year, in our mandate, they suggested (the bureau and the executive members), they suggested that we celebrate Mauritania's Independence. And then that idea came 2 months/ 3 months before even the celebration took place. But it seemed that to be some people didn't want talk about it. They say okay the independence of Mauritanian shouldn't be celebrated. Some of them say that it was some kind of politics. Some of them say no. We are family members of parents who were killed on that day. There is no way we are going to celebrate

that. So, this association now is going off from their main objective. So, therefore, we can't celebrate that. So, there is this other side who think about the independence of Mauritania is nothing related to the execution to the killing that took place on November 28 or 29 or whatever in 1990 or 91. I don't remember the year, but actually it was during that time.

Through telling this story, Warr explained the conflict that members of the Mauritanian association faced. While some wanted to celebrate Mauritania's Independence, others viewed it as a day of memorial/mourning. To some Afro-Mauritanians, their celebration of Mauritania's Independence was perceived as an insult to the memories of their dead. For other Afro-Mauritanians and Moors, Mauritania's Independence had nothing to do with the ill-advised decisions of various Mauritanian governments. Some Moors perceived Afro-Mauritanians' refusal to celebrate Mauritania's Independence as an unpatriotic act. Afro-Mauritanians who partook in these celebrations were perceived as traitors by members of the Afro-Mauritanian community who viewed the day as a day of memorial.

Working with their Moorish brothers, a group of Afro-Mauritanians decided to work on coming up with a solution that would help the association overcome the challenges that this conflict caused. Warr pointed out:

Some of us say the independence of Mauritania, even though something happened we regret did happen during that time, but actually the independence is way before when that killing happen. So, the independence of Mauritania is just the independence of Mauritania. What we can do is join together and celebrate the independence of Mauritania and pray for those people who were



killed. Both together. *Bidans*, they agree. *Bidans* agree that day we are going to sit and pray for those who was killed. You see, for us, when we saw that, we said this is good because some people don't want to talk about it. They don't even want to talk about it. Some *Bidans* want to celebrate the independence without even talking about those killing. Some people want to celebrate it but also have compassion with those people whose parents, fathers, uncles, or you know, close relatives were killed. They want have compassion about it. So, this is something we see is very important. Some people may not see it like that, but we see this as a step to solve the problem. Even though we are not the government, we have compassion to each other.

Warr believed that through their willingness to partake in the reframing of the celebrations to accommodate their Afro-Mauritanian brothers and sisters, the Moors took a step that touched Afro-Mauritanian hearts. Warr's narrative showed that Afro-Mauritanians were waiting for such a step. What was unique about this step was that it served as an acknowledgement of what happened to the Afro-Mauritanians killed in the aftermath of the 1989 events as well as pointed out that some members of the Moorish community were willing to take the necessary steps to accommodate their Afro-Mauritanian brothers and sisters.

The group that celebrated Mauritania's Independence approached the past differently. They could be thought of as revisionist. Oto Luthar argues that while there are different approaches to the past, implicit in a revisionist approach is the "quest for an ideal 'we' of the present."<sup>16</sup> There was a willingness among the members to accommodate one another for the sake of a perceived collective identity. The

Independence of Mauritania was regarded as everyone's independence. Such a revisionist approach, according to Luthar, does not call for ignoring the past. On the other hand, revisionist approaches have the potential to create possibilities for moving forward. Through their willingness to embrace new creative ways of dealing with such a problematic event, members of this Mauritanian association were able to accommodate others, showing the compassion necessary for unity.

The Moors' willingness to partake in this revisionist narrative where prayer became part of the celebration of Mauritania's Independence touched the hearts of some reluctant Afro-Mauritanians. Warr explained that members of the Afro-Mauritanian community were moved by the Moors' willingness to make prayer for the lost Afro-Mauritanian lives a part of the celebrations. Providing an example, Warr posited:

I have some friends. Their fathers were killed. When they came that day, they saw some people I would say *Bidans* praying for the people who were killed. At the same time, they celebrated the independence of Mauritania. Celebrating the independence of Mauritania does not mean jumping and dancing. It is just it is the day we received our independence from France. So, we are happy about that. But actually, what happened is that in 1990, those killings, just polluted that day. But we are trying to do something. Some people understand that. The problem is not that. The problem is that whoever killed/was responsible for the killing has to be taken to the justice. It is very simple like that. So, it would be better to call for justice for those who are responsible for killing instead of saying we are not going to celebrate the independence of Mauritania.

For Warr and others in the association, celebrating Mauritania's Independence and acknowledging the traumatic past were not incompatible. Through coming together, praying for the lives lost, and acknowledging the pain, members of the association showed that they were able to celebrate Mauritania's Independence as well as accommodate the pain of those who continued to suffer. His narrative, however, implied that these steps were not enough. Similar to Thiam, Warr believed that ensuring justice was necessary. His account, however, showed that the decision to reframe the festivities ensuring that they prayed for those who lost their lives touched members of the Afro-Mauritanians community. For the first time, Afro-Mauritanians had the opportunity to see Moors praying for their lost loved ones during celebrations of Mauritania's Independence. This symbolic gesture served as an indication that these Moors recognized the pain that Afro-Mauritanians continued to endure in the absence of justice. Members of the Afro-Mauritanian community appreciated the gesture. Warr noted this in an example he provided in his interview.

I know someone. His brother was killed. He was opposed to celebrating Independence Day. But when we talked to him, he said okay. I never seen someone (*Bidans*) talks about it, even taking/ praying for my brother. Since they are here, they are going to pray for that, I will be coming even though they are not responsible. I will be coming. That is the thing we want to do because you know. We can't. We can't. You know. For myself, we have to do something to move all the Mauritanians together. Justice has to be made, but we have to do something. And we have to give a chance to those people who want to help us. There is some *Bidan* who want to help. He wants to help. He was against those killing. They,

some of them, I never seen it before but once I joined to the group, I see some people. If you don't join it, you cannot see it. But if you join, you see some people who have good will/good willing to show you that we are all same. And then we have to do something for the next generation, for our kids. So, the only way to do that is to consider all the human beings like you, consider them to have the same right like you, same as yourself.

This story showed that Afro-Mauritanians recognized that their Moorish neighbors did not commit the atrocities against them, and they were moved by the Moors' willingness to acknowledge their pain. Warr's narrative implied that these well-intentioned acts, while not a substitute for structural changes needed from the government, were necessary. Those involved in the celebrations recognized the need for an active government's role to ensure that justice prevailed. However, they acknowledged the fact that they needed to continue moving forward. In attempting to move forward, those who saw a need to celebrate Mauritania's independence had to reframe their celebrations to include and acknowledge the past. They did so through both remembering and prayer.

This reframing of the celebrations served as a way to overcome the dilemma of an Independence Day celebration, one that turned into a source of conflict within an association that still struggled in dealing with a problematic past. This reframing of these celebrations helped association members find common ground that would allow them to move forward. McGrattan believes that while that a reframing of the past is rather inevitable, it is necessary to engage in what she calls "fencing in."<sup>17</sup> She argues that "fencing in involves the identification of common elements and the subsequent warding

off of others. Of course, we mould our divided and troubled past into manageable shapes, but fencing in involves the recognition that that should not be incompatible with manageable futures.”<sup>18</sup> This moulding of the troubled past is a recognition that something ought to be done to promote peace between the two groups. Many members of the organization attested to this need and were committed to working for this goal. This reframing of the celebration was seen as an excellent attempt to move in that direction.

### The Mauritanian’s Story

I first spoke to the Mauritanian, as he preferred to be called, on the phone when I arrived in Cincinnati for the first time. Kadoye, being the president of the association, suggested that I talked to the Mauritanian. Knowing that I was planning to conduct interviews with both Moors and Afro-Mauritanians, Kadoye put me in contact with the Mauritanian. He was one of the Moors that Kadoye mentioned when he was trying to remember all the different people that I could interview for the project. However, this was not the only reason that Kadoye put me in touch with him. The Mauritanian, because of his technology skills, served as the technology person for the association. He oversaw maintaining the website and keeping a digital record of the activities and contact information of the association members.

Kadoye had told the Mauritanian about my visit because of his position as one of the community members in charge of the association. I called and introduced myself. The Mauritanian and I shared information about school and life in America. We spoke extensively about our education since we both had the chance of pursuing our education here in the United States. He told me about his career, and I explained to him how I was open to many options when it came to my career path. The Mauritanian offered to help in

any way possible to ensure that I received all the assistance I needed to ensure the success of the project, a generous offer that I heard from many in the association. Many of my participants treated the project as their own and did everything in their power to make certain that I acquired all the support I needed. He was one of those members who were genuine about their willingness to support. This came in the form of responsiveness and his readiness to put me in touch with the people I needed to talk to. This was especially important during the early stages of this project. Since he had direct access to many other Moors, he was able to provide me with information as well as talk to other about my research project.

When I decided to interview the Mauritanian, we spoke on the phone and agreed on a meeting point. Because we lived in different parts of the city, we agreed to meet at a point in the middle. His choice was a Starbucks coffee shop that was about the same distance from both of us, one that he seemed acquainted with, judging by his familiarity with the space. When I arrived, I found him sitting at a table outside the store. We greeted each other and went inside to order something to drink, where he insisted on treating me to a hot chocolate. Knowing that he would not allow me to buy my own beverage, I accepted his offer. Over the drinks, we discussed our places of origin. I told him that I was originally from the Nema, and he gave me a brief overview of his upbringing in Nouakchott, the capital city, where he lived for most of his childhood.

The Mauritanian had great hope because of what the association has accomplished so far. However, he acknowledged that their shared problematic past posed some challenges. He explained to me that he needed to distinguish between two periods: pre-2013 and after 2013 when he joined the association. He noted the two phases:

There are two. Personally, I am talking from my personal experience. I can divide that in two periods. The first one was pre-2013 for me because I was not aware. I know that there were some events in 1989, but I didn't know what is the influence or the effect that it had on people. I know that there were some killings that happened by some soldiers in the government. But my definition to that is if you are a soldier who is in power, you tend to act as a soldier in power. You don't want anyone to come near that, and there was an attempt at a coup d'état and it failed. It is the case with most coup d'états in the world. Yes, some people were targeted. Some of them may be innocent. I am not in a position to say that is true or not. What I can say is I don't affiliate myself with. I don't also want to be blame for what happened in those years because:

1. I was a kid when that happened.
2. I didn't know what happened. I just started getting pieces and bits when the arguments happened. Try to understand why is this happening.

While he empathized with Afro-Mauritanians, the Mauritanian illustrated Moors' unwillingness to take blame for the atrocities committed during and after the 1989 events. His narrative showed that he was only familiar with the government version regarding what happened during the 1989 events. Although his narrative suggested that he understood the government's reaction, his acknowledgement of the atrocities was made clear. While he was willing to acknowledge the pain Afro-Mauritanians suffered, he was more concerned about distancing himself from the blame.

In Mauritania, the 1989 events are not taught as part of the curriculum. The bits and pieces some Moors know about the events are part of a circulating public narrative

that the government has initiated. Most of it is abstract and ignores the details of the concrete experience. Lea David claims that when dealing with an undesirable past, the state can engage in a process of replacing the concrete memories with abstract memories eliminating the possibility of attaining access to the concrete experiences.<sup>19</sup> Among the Moors, what is remembered tends to be the government version, one that lacks the details that would point to the government atrocities.

While he did not want to take blame for something others committed, something he did not know about and was not old enough to participate in, the Mauritanian and Moors like him were willing to show the compassion that Warr described. As a member of the association, he learned more about the 1989 events and their lingering negative impact on the Afro-Mauritanian community in particular and the Mauritanian community in general. The Mauritanian explained the conflict and what members of the association did to overcome the dilemma it posed. He posited:

But that feeling accentuated when I joined the office in 2013 in the greater Cincinnati area, that is when I saw how the community was really into this because we had people that were calling names, and who were going haywire. Traitor! You cannot do this. This is. You are affiliating with this community. That community killed some of us. You have other people going on about that, saying that we did not do this. And it was not our fault. And some of them were very. The moral of the story is both communities were affected. Some of them more than the others granted. Is that a good thing? Is that a bad thing? No, but it is part of the history. It is something that cannot be denied. Mauritania was born in 1960, 28 of November. It was before the events happened. It will be after



the events happened. It will still exist. My take on this, why can't we celebrate Mauritania. And like in the history of every country, there are dark spots. Not saying to forget them. Let's say why can't we get together, pray for them, do whatever we can do to accommodate them, to bring the perpetrators for justice, and just live as a community. I know that I am probably being pessimistic. I am trying to be hopeful, but I don't think that is going to be very easy. But at least, I can see in this community that this dialogue is happening. Whether we like it or not, this dialogue is happening. Anyway, I was personally shocked because I never thought about the subject.

Through telling this story about the community, the Mauritanian sought to explain the need to understand the atrocities committed against Afro-Mauritanians within their context. He implied that Mauritania was not unique in its experience highlighting that members of the association were left with one choice to try and keep moving forward. His narrative suggested that praying for those lives lost, accommodating those affected, and working for justice were the only things that members of the association could do. However, he recognized that it was not an easy task. For Moors like himself, the association brought these topics to light, allowing him the opportunity to learn about them. Such a response from Moors like himself has touched many Afro-Mauritanians who have always longed for their pain to be acknowledged.

#### Ehlou's Story

Although I saw Ehlou's name the first time I browsed the association's website, he was one of the last individuals I interviewed. I was not able to establish contact with him because he was in Mauritania visiting his family. I spoke with members of the

executive body early in the research project. As a member of the executive body, Ehlou had been notified that I was coming to conduct a project on the Mauritanian association. However, he knew that he would be away in Mauritania when I arrived. Kadoye explained to me that Ehlou would gladly participate in the project and that I should connect with him as soon as he came back.

Since no one knew exactly when he was coming back, except for the fact that he was going to be there in July, I had to keep listening and asking for information about his arrival. Toward the end of my research with the Afro-Mauritanian community in the Greater Cincinnati area, I visited with a friend in Kentucky since he had just moved to a new home. My friend Abdul was one of the first Mauritians I met. I came to his house with Warr to partake in his son's naming ceremony. We exchanged numbers, and I kept in touch with him. He was an Afro-Mauritanian who was half Moor. I was interested in learning more about why he was reluctant to participate in the different Mauritanian organizations around the area. This time, however, I simply came to spend some time with him and his family. He told me that this would be a great opportunity because other members of his family were there, and I could talk to his brother, Al Haj. Al Haj had been in the area longer and would be able to provide information regarding how the association came to be and the individuals who were active in the process of establishing it.

Talking to Al Haj was not only instructive in pointing out the different dynamics, but it was through Al Haj that I learned about Ehlou's return. I explained to Al Haj that I had been waiting for Ehlou to return so that I could interview him. Al Haj explained to me that Ehlou was one of his closest friends and that they lived together. "You can come

to my house when I am off work. Ehlou will be there,” Al Haj explained. “Just text me when you are coming,” he added. I called Ehlou who expressed his willingness to participate in my research, and we agreed to meet on a Saturday.

I arrived at Al Haj’s place a bit before 8 O’clock. He invited me inside and we chatted a bit before he decided that I should go meet the Mauritians at the airport. Al Haj took me in his car to show me the large number of Mauritians who worked in transportation at the airport. This group of Mauritians constituted a huge number of the individuals who worked in transportation at the airport. We arrived in the parking lot where all the taxis were parked waiting for their turn to leave. It was a Mauritanian atmosphere with people playing cards and drinking Mauritanian tea. Al Haj took me to see Ehlou who was there at the time. I talked to Ehlou, and we agreed that we would meet the following weekend. I then approached the rest of the Mauritians, and they stopped playing and greeted me. Al Haj went around and greeted some of the Mauritians.

The visit was an opportunity for me to meet some of the individuals that I could only meet there because of their job commitment. I talked to some of the senior members of the association, those who were around when the association was first established. Some of these individuals I interviewed later for this project. This was the first time I met Ehlou face-to-face, and I met him at the same parking lot again the following weekend to conduct the interview. I conducted the interview in his car as he sat in line waiting for his turn to go to the airport. At the airport, he would wait for a client. His car was the best place to conduct the interview because it provided the privacy necessary to record the interview.

In his car, Ehlou explained to me that the divisions still existed. What happened in the transnational space reflected what happened in Mauritania. The 1989 events did not help promote trust between Mauritians back home, and it posed challenges for those who were here. As one of the organizers of the celebrations, he was shocked to see the low turnout of Afro-Mauritians. It was not until later that he realized that many of them were against the celebrations. He pointed out:

To them, the 28<sup>th</sup> of November corresponds with, is a very, very sad day for them because in 1990, 1989 there was a failed, and it was claimed back then. It is very debatable. I don't know. It was claimed that there were Mauritanian Negros. Okay, by the way, whoever is listening to you here, you should know that we use Negro not in any derogatory way. So, there is a difference between the Moors and the American experience. Anyways, some African officers tried to overthrow the military regime back then. It was all a vendetta. The coup failed and the officers involved were all executed right away, and there was some kind of witch-hunt against the various. Anyway, the very 28<sup>th</sup> of November is the, that is where most of those Afro-Mauritians were executed. Again to end, they were mostly Fulani. And they happened to be the majority here. So, they claim that or they rightfully say that there is no way in the world they would celebrate the day where their own were slaughtered by the military regime.

Although he did not trust it, Ehlou's narrative showed that he was only familiar with the government version regarding what happened in the aftermath of the 1989 events. His narrative both acknowledged the atrocities committed against Afro-Mauritians and highlighted how they were justified in boycotting the celebrations for

Mauritania's Independence. In his narrative, it was clear that the Afro-Mauritanian experience with 28<sup>th</sup> of November was not well-known. Because of the government efforts, it never became a larger, widely shared public narrative. Instead, it is known about through individual stories. Christopher Kaplonski argued that states' efforts to suppress narratives of traumatic events can lead to what he called "personal memory in the form of singularities."<sup>20</sup> This could easily "preclude the enveloping of personal accounts into larger social or political narratives, which are often seen as necessary for 'coming to terms with the past.'"<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that many Moors were not familiar with the details of what happened, Ehlou empathized with the Afro-Mauritanian experience.

Ehlou explained to that there are problems between Mauritaniens in general, but the problems between the Moors and the Afro-Mauritanians were not the most serious. There are bigger problems between the Moors. They are deeper problems between Moors living in the West and those living in the East. He explained:

You and I are here talking about the divisions between Moors and non-Moors but the divisions are more deep and more dramatic between the East of the country and the Moors from the West, more deep than it is between the Moors and the non-Moors. It is not as easy as people might think. It is not all black and white. It is deeper than that.

Ehlou implied that the divisions between Afro-Mauritanians and Moors should be understood within their context. They were not a unique case in Mauritania, for there were far deeper divisions among the Moors themselves. While he may appear to downplay the divisions that existed as a result of the 1989 events, his demand to

contextualize these divisions was not meant to suggest that the 1989 events were irrelevant. It was clear to him that the impact of those events was still felt among members of the Afro-Mauritanian community. Rather, it is an invitation to view them as a part of bigger problems that Mauritians ought to acknowledge and deal with. In their transnational space, what some members of the association attempted to do was take small steps in that direction, steps that have come in the form of acknowledgement, remembering, and prayer. In doing so, they reframed the memory of Mauritania's Independence to meet the needs of different members of the association.

What Ehlou and other Moors did was partake in the celebration of Mauritania's Independence while making prayer for the dead Afro-Mauritanian soldiers a part of the celebrations. The Moors' willingness to reframe the celebrations in cooperation with other Afro-Mauritanians was perceived to be an incredibly touching gesture and a move in the right direction.

### Conclusion

The 1989 events continue to have a negative effect on this Mauritanian association's efforts to promote unity among its members. While these memories were not often discussed during the Mauritanian association's general assembly meetings, they came to the forefront recently when the leadership of the organization proposed celebrating Mauritania's Independence Day. Although it seemed appropriate to celebrate the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, many considered these plans ill-advised and utterly inappropriate. Some members of the Afro-Mauritanian community believed that Mauritania's Independence should not be celebrated due to the executions. The debate led to a huge conflict that has resulted in some Afro-Mauritanians boycotting the celebration and the

association. In an effort to overcome the dilemma of whether the Independence Day was a day of celebration or a day of memorial, some members of this association decided to approach the celebrations differently. Instead of treating November 28<sup>th</sup> mainly as a day of celebration, they decided to seize the opportunity to remember those Afro-Mauritanians who were killed. In doing so, they re-framed the celebration in an attempt to accommodate the needs of the two different groups. Members of the Afro-Mauritanian community were pleased to see that Moors partook in these efforts. While the problem continued, members of the association continue to seek a common ground on which the two groups could establish a unified community. Many of my participants hoped that others in Mauritania could learn from their experience and work on finding ways to recognize their problematic shared past.

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<sup>1</sup> Cillian McGrattan, "Policing Politics: Framing the Past in Post-Conflict Divided Societies," *Democratization* 21, no. 3 (April 16, 2014): 389–410, doi:10.1080/13510347.2012.734809.

<sup>2</sup> Raili Nugin, "Negotiating the Past: Some Issues of Transmission of Memories among Estonian Young People," *Studies of Transition States & Societies (STSS)* 8, no. 2 (July 2016): 13–30.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, *Mauritania: The Struggle for Democracy*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>9</sup> Africa Watch, "Mauritania: More than 200 Black Political Detainees Executed or Tortured to Death," *Africa Watch* 3, no 10(1991): 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Godwin Onuoha, "Shared Histories, Divided Memories: Mediating and Navigating the Tensions in Nigeria-Biagra War Discourses," *Africa Today* 63, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 3–21, doi:10.2979/africatoday.63.1.01.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>13</sup>. Tamara Banjeglav, “Conflicting Memories, Competing Narratives and Contested Histories in Croatia’s Post-War Commemorative Practices,” *Politicka Misao: Croatian Political Science Review* 49, no. 5 (November 2012): 7–31.
- <sup>14</sup>. Nicolas Moll, “Fragmented Memories in a Fragmented Country: Memory Competition and Political Identity-Building in Today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 6 (November 2013): 910–35, doi:10.1080/00905992.2013.768220.
- <sup>15</sup>. Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup>. Oto Luthar, “FORGETTING DOES (NOT) HURT. Historical Revisionism in Post-Socialist Slovenia,” *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 6 (November 2013): 882–92, doi:10.1080/00905992.2012.743510.
- <sup>17</sup>. McGrattan, “Policing Politics.”
- <sup>18</sup>. Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup>. Lea David, “Dealing with the Contested Past in Serbia: Decontextualisation of the War Veterans Memories,” *Nations & Nationalism* 21, no. 1 (January 2015): 102–19, doi:10.1111/nana.12100.
- <sup>20</sup>. Christopher Kaplonski, “Neither Truth nor Reconciliation: Political Violence and the Singularity of Memory in Post-Socialist Mongolia,” *Totalitarian Movements & Political Religions* 9, no. 2–3 (September 2008): 371, doi:10.1080/14690760802094941.
- <sup>21</sup>. Ibid.



## **Chapter VII: “Mauritania is an Eye:” A Struggle for Unity**

In my interactions with the members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati, I could easily see their satisfaction with the role that their association has played in promoting unity among members of the different ethnic groups. While my participants would agree that much remained to be accomplished, they would all concede that the association has been a step in the right direction.

In talking about their association, some members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association would compare themselves to an eye. “We look like eyes,” “Mauritania looks like an eye,” and “Mauritania is an eye” were thrown around to emphasize members’ belief in their shared destiny and the need to work on promoting unity. Made up of black Afro-Mauritanians and white Moors, the eye metaphor was used to point out that like the two colors in an eye, the two main groups that made up the association needed each other to move the association/country forward. While some used this metaphor to emphasize this belief, others claimed that this metaphor was also used by individuals who did nothing to help promote unity.

The problem, as this chapter attempts to show, does not lie in the fact that one group was genuine about their belief in the need to work for promoting unity while the other group was not. While all my participants believed that Mauritania is an eye, they shared different and complex narratives about their efforts to promote unity and the challenges they continued to face. As I listened to their stories, I realized that some members of this Mauritanian association accessed different narratives to explain their involvement in the association and keep their hope in these efforts alive. Narratives that

emphasized a common identity, invoked an idealized past, and blamed different Mauritanian regimes were accessed to give reasons for members' involvements in the association's efforts to promote unity. Dark moments of the past were treated as unfortunate events that should not cloud a much longer harmonious and peaceful history. Blame for these unfortunate events was attributed to a common enemy of the people, the different Mauritanian governments.

While other narratives expressed this shared belief in a common destiny, their complexity highlighted that past and present injustices posed challenges to the desired unity members of this association worked for. These narratives conceded that while Mauritania was like an eye, it was an eye that was still hurting, emphasizing the need to work on dealing with the lingering injustices that continue to pose challenges to unity.

Through following the stories of Soumare, Weddady, Samba Kelel, and Baba, this chapter highlights that members of this association accessed different narratives to explain their involvement in the association and keep their hope in promoting unity alive. In doing so, they were all faithful to their belief in a shared destiny. While they all believed in their common destiny and the need to work for it, some of the narratives pointed out that injustices from the past/present continued to negatively affect their efforts for unity. Collectively, the stories demonstrated a belief in Mauritania as an eye. However, some of the narratives showed that this was an eye that was still ailing.

#### Soumare and Weddady's Stories

I met Soumare during my first visit with members of the association. He was actively engaged in the association and served on the council of elders. He was highly

regarded in both communities. He came to see me at Kadoye's apartment after a long day at work. We met around 11 PM. Because it was Ramadan, the evening was the most suitable time for members of the association to meet with me. Full of positive energy, Soumare sat across from me on the dark grey wooden table in Kadoye's living room. I offered him something to drink, but he declined saying that he was fine. We chatted a little bit about the project before beginning the interview. When I asked Soumare about the association, he had a positive outlook on how things were going attributing the little problems the association faced to politics and individual differences.

Two weeks after I interviewed Soumare, I interviewed Weddady who was the second Moor I interviewed. Kadoye had shared his number with me after he had talked to him about the project. I arrived at his apartment in the middle of the afternoon, after a short visit with Warr. When I arrived, I realized that he had been waiting for me so that we could share a meal. We sat in his living room, ate fruit, and talked about the conflict in Syria while waiting for the main meal. "I was waiting for you so that we could eat together," he said as he chewed on grapes. Talking to Weddady, I came to realize that we have someone in common. Over the past few years, I have been following his brother on Twitter.

Weddady then provided me with a brief synopsis of his family history. That was how the conversation about Syria started. He had spent a significant amount of time in Syria, and it was in Syria that he went to college. Over the main meal, we talked about Mauritanian politics, and the challenges that the country faced. A calm, collected, and

soft-spoken person, Weddady shared his belief that the future of Mauritanian was in danger because of the continuous injustices perpetrated by the Mauritanian government.

Both Weddady and Soumare had a positive outlook on the role that the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati played in promoting unity among members of the community. While they both recognized that there are still problems, they were hopeful because of what the association had accomplished. They both appealed to a common Mauritanian identity emphasizing sameness and underplaying the importance of the differences that existed within the association. Downplaying the differences that exist among members of the association Soumare explained:

But in the general, we don't really have those problems. We try and even those little differences between people, everybody got differences: difference views, different thinking, and all that we see. That is why we are trying to work together. We are trying to call these people like even though they have differences. We telling them you are all the same, and we have to work together. Over here, we work hard as a community to bring everybody together. And like let them know that at the end of the day we are all the same. We don't have to. These are political differences. Like this should make us stronger and not divided.

In his narrative, Soumare showed that members of the association advanced a narrative of sameness to promote unity among the members. Implicitly, this emphasis on sameness was an attempt to stress a common Mauritanian identity that was meant to help members of the association recognize their similarities. While this emphasis on sameness

did not ignore the differences that existed between association members (ethnic or political), it sought to foreground this sameness and treat the differences as points of strengths not weaknesses. To illustrate this common identity and downplay the differences (or rather view them as a source of strength) Soumare provided an example of a little girl from the Moorish community who touched the hearts of all Mauritians present at an annual general assembly meeting for the association. This little girl grabbed the microphone and told all members of the Mauritanian association to embrace their common identity. He narrated her story:

One day, one girl. She is from the Arab community. When they come, we give them the microphone, tell them to talk to the community if they want.

Everybody feels free to talk. When she talked, she said: “We are all the same.”

Why sometimes people talking even about the differences in this community.

This touched people’s heart, you know, because they are kids. They don’t know even nothing. When you see like your kids and other kids playing together and everything. They bring us like and gives like feel that we need to work hard to make this community together.

As an Afro-Mauritanian, Soumare invoked the story of a Moorish girl to highlight that this emphasis on sameness was natural. A little girl could see it. Everyone was able to learn from her, and that was why her story was touching. Telling her story, however, served a different purpose. It pointed out the importance of thinking about future generations and the need to create common ground on which Moors and Afro-Mauritians could live together as one unified community. Through his emphasis on a

common identity and his belief in the need to work for a better future for the community, Soumare explained his active involvement in the association. While he described his involvement by invoking a common identity and stressing the importance of working for future generations, Soumare acknowledged the problems the association faced. He, however, blamed them on government practices.

### **Idealizing the Past and Blaming the Government**

Soumare and Weddady both spoke of an ideal past where Moors and Afro-Mauritanian lived side by side peacefully. In sharing his view about the history of the two communities, Soumare told a story of harmony and understanding. He posited:

I know really well about the history of Mauritania because I am born in Nouadhibou like all the communities were together. I remember before, during Mauritania's Independence Day, we don't have difference between Moors or the other community. I can talk about communities because my mom is Fulani, my dad is Soninke, and my wife is Wolof. I am involved in all the communities. You know. My dad is the one who is Soninke. Born in these communities, I remember in Independence Day, like in Mauritania before, we were young. Like people doing some *Khaima* (tent). My mom was sitting with Moors and everything. Everybody was sitting together. I don't know if you know if you know Ewfa Family, the guy who was good in football and everything. Our families were next to each other, our moms and everything. We were all playing together. The differences people are talking about in Mauritania are recent. It's after 1988 and everything, what people saw. But before that, everybody was together and

hanging out together.

In telling the story of his Afro-Mauritanian mother sharing a tent and partaking in the celebrations of Mauritania's Independence alongside her Moorish neighbors, Soumare drew a picture of a harmonious Mauritanian community. His focus on this particular moment, however, served a different purpose. Mauritania's Independence had become a source of conflict within the association after members of the Afro-Mauritanian community refused to partake in celebrations of Mauritania's Independence. By focusing on an Independence Day celebration that everyone partook in, Soumare accomplished two things. First, he pointed out an ideal past that kept his hope of unity alive. Second, through painting this picture, he was emphasizing that the problems keeping Afro-Mauritanians and Moors apart were recent. He briefly mentioned the 1989 events not to downplay their importance but to highlight that they were an unfortunate traumatic experience that took place after a longer history of harmony.

Similar to Soumare, Weddady spoke of an ideal shared past where Mauritanians lived together in peace. He explained to me that the differences that existed were also recent. He, however, traced them back to changes in the Mauritanian political system after the military assumed power in 1978. Weddady explained:

Since a long time, the different ethnic groups in Mauritania have been doing a good job living together. They have no problems. Only after, probably after the military coup that started in Mauritania in 1978. Different military juntas tried, especially at the difficult times of their military ruling, they tried to do famous saying "to divide is to rule" especially at the time of Mouaouiya Ould

Sid'Ahmed Taya. He played on this. He played on the ethnicities of Mauritania. He tried to rule more, make it harsh sometimes even order criminal acts against the community of Pulaar. He killed a lot. He killed a lot of them. He sacked them out of their jobs, the army, the point of power in the state. That created a lot of havoc in the communities between the two. But I think with time, both communities, in the Arab community and the Pulaar community, they all now are doing very good, especially after the fall of Moaouiya Ould Taya.

In assigning the blame to the government, Weddady's narrative created a common enemy, the different Mauritanian military governments that have always tried to divide the Mauritanian communities. By blaming a common enemy, members of this association were able to accomplish a few things. For Moorish members, blaming the government meant that they could divert the blame away from the entire Moorish community. For Afro-Mauritanians, blaming the government also helped them win allies within the Moorish community. By creating a common enemy, members of the association established a common purpose, fighting injustice that many experienced in Mauritania. According to this narrative, this common enemy was the real threat on the larger Mauritanian community.

Weddady believed that while Taya's regime divided the Moorish and Afro-Mauritanian communities, the current Mauritanian government was trying to lead Mauritania down the same dark path. This time, however, the victim was different. The



government has decided to target dark skinned Moors, *Haratins*, as part of an attempt to divide the Mauritanian community further. Weddady speculated:

Now, the current general who is ruling Mauritania, Ould Abdul Aziz, is trying to do the same thing between the two communities which we call it, the community between *Bidan* (light skinned Moors) and those who call themselves *Haratin*.

Personally, I call them *Bidan*. I consider them Arabs. They have the same language, the same culture. Yes, some of them or most of them experienced slavery. But they are now free men and women. No one practices slavery on them. The one who plays this slavery card is the general, the military rulers. They are trying to divide the society so that they can rule. So, that also shed its implication on the community here. We have people from all those ethnicities, but I am telling you they are doing very good in getting together, in trying to overcome all the burdens from back home.

Waddady's story of the government attempt to divide the Moorish community through attacking anti-slavery activists who are mostly *Haratin* was meant to provide an example of how various Mauritanian governments have worked to divide communities in Mauritania. His narrative served as a confirmation that the problems the Moorish community had with the Afro-Mauritanian community were the result of government actions, the same way the problems *Bidan* and *Haratins* were beginning to experience were an outcome of actions by the Mauritanian government.

Soumare also believed that, while the divisions that existed have negatively affected the relations between the two Mauritanian communities, they should be blamed

on politicians. The Mauritania Soumare grew up in was different. The divisions, according to Soumare's narrative, were created after the 1989 events when Mauritania entered a conflict with Senegal, one that the Mauritanian government used as an excuse to subject Afro-Mauritanians to a great many atrocities. Soumare explained the role that politics played in creating conflict between the two communities. Soumare claimed:

This politics brings this difference between us. I think that most of politicians are trying to divide people to stay in power. That's happening in our country. But Mauritania, we don't have this difference before. But I notice this because I was raised in Mauritania. We were playing soccer together on the weekend and everything. We were going to school together. We never have this difference.

This kind of difference is coming recently in 1989, 88. And people start to divide. You saw that some black communities were being deported, and people start scaring each other.

Soumare, again, drew a picture of harmony. In telling stories about his childhood experiences with his Moorish neighbors, Soumare emphasized an ideal past that provided him with hope. While he admitted that relations between the two communities changed because of the atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians, this ideal past was stressed to highlight the possibility of unity. Similar to Weddady, Soumare blamed the divisions that existed on politicians.

### **Religion and Its Significance**

Many members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association stressed the importance of their common religious identity. "We are Mauritanians, but we are also

Muslims,” different members would argue. Their religious identity often came before their national identity. Like many others, Baba, Soumare, and Weddady pointed out the importance of religion as a shared identity. Highlighting the importance of religion, Soumare explained that religion was one of the things that brought them together. He stated:

Religion brings us together. Even aside from religion, like Mauritians, we got the benefit of being on the same religion, too. And that is why we meet in the same places, in the religion places, in the mosque and everything to pray together and everything. And when we see each other and everything, it helps us. And that is the root in religion. Religion is about peace. All this Kutba, we are listening to. It helps us a lot because that is religion base, too. We have to be the same. We need to take care of our neighbors and everything. If I am going to take care of my neighbor and everything, why am I not taking care of like other people, like, in the same community, too?

Similar to their emphasis on a common Mauritanian identity, their narratives about Islam highlighted togetherness. Unlike any other identity, however, this togetherness was stressed by the values Islam taught. For Soumare and others, promoting this closeness was portrayed as a responsibility/an obligation. If one was commanded to care for their neighbors, caring for one’s own community was more of a priority. As a Muslim country, Mauritians are “Sunni Muslim of the Malekite school.”<sup>1</sup> For them, as Noel Foster argues, “the universal practice of Islam is the single unifying factor bringing together all Mauritians.”<sup>2</sup> My participants explained their involvement in the

association by pointing out the significance of their shared Islamic identity. In fact, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania employed the Islamic idiom as a means of bringing together a segmented society. Anthony Azania argues that:

The Islamic faith was essentially the only thing that the various racial, tribal, and regional groupings had in common, and thus religion was constantly emphasized as a powerful tool in building national unity where none had existed before. The name of the country, the Islamic Republic symbolized this overriding concern, and was the very first state in the Arab-Islamic world so named.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence of a shared religious identity serving as a bond for community members was still apparent within the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati. However, while many argued that their religious identity has had a positive impact on the members' relations, some believed that religion should play a bigger role in bringing members of the association closer. In my interview with Baba, for example, he explained the importance of religion but highlighted that it should have more of a positive impact on members' relations. While Soumare believed that it brought them together, others in the association claimed that their shared religious beliefs have the potential to bring the community even closer. The role of religion, however, was still minimal, serving as a fragile bond. Alfred Gerteiny argues that "Islam does act as a fragile bond evolved through the age-old cultural, historical, and political interaction among this ethnically and racially diverse tribal population."<sup>4</sup> However, by emphasizing a common identity (both national and religious), invoking an ideal past, and assigning the blame to a common enemy, members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater

Cincinnati explained their involvement in the association and kept their hope in unity alive.

### Samba Kelel Story

I had heard much about Samba Kalel before I decided to contact him for an interview. When I contacted him on the phone, we bonded immediately after I told him that that I come from Nema, Mauritania. “Do you know Wedou?” he asked.

Sidi: Yes, I do. He lived in my neighborhood.

Samba Kalel: I know Wedou, his wife, and his children.

Sidi: How do you know Wedou?

Samba Kalel: I worked with him.

Sidi: I know Wedou very well. I grew up in the same neighborhood. I know the entire family.

For 10 more minutes, we continued to talk about a giant figure from my neighborhood, someone that Samba and I had in common. I felt that I have known Samba Kalel for much longer than the short few minutes we spent on the phone. We agreed to meet on a Saturday, and I came to his house for the interview.

### **Trial and Error: A Rocky Journey**

He began his story by telling me about what he perceived to be the real beginning of the association. Although the association was established in the early late 1990s or early 2000s, Samba believed that its real beginning took place with the coming of the first democratically elected Mauritanian president. After this election, the Mauritanian ambassador to the United States visited the Mauritanian community in Cincinnati.

According to Samba, up until then, the Afro-Mauritanian community did not know about the existence of the Mauritanian association. According to his story, he received a call telling him about this visit. As an important member of the Afro-Mauritanian community, his job was to mobilize this community in preparation for the ambassador's visit. The Ambassador's visit encouraged the Afro-Mauritanian community to become more involved in the association, and the first Afro-Mauritanian president, according to Samba version, came as a result of this increasing involvement of the Afro-Mauritanian community. Samba's story was characterized by division and conflict within the larger community. These divisions had their roots in the problems that the two groups have brought with them to this transnational space. The struggle over power in the association and the divisions it created especially within the Moorish community were far less threatening to the larger community when compared to the fear that existed as a result of the 1989 events. Samba spoke about the failure of the government:

The government is supposed to help. We were supposed to get that help with the first elected civilian, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdullahi. When he came to power, he apologized in the state name. And he promised to bring back all the people who were deported. And we start doing good things, but the military again threw him away. But something they promised, the new president brought the refugees back, but that was all. They don't have until now, most of them, don't have birth certificates. They don't have IDs. They look like refugees again in Mauritania. If you see that, you see what happened with the two populations. You know it is something that is not easy to fix.

Narrating the harsh experiences of Afro-Mauritanian refugees, Samba highlighted the lingering effects of the 1989 events. While the first democratically elected Mauritanian government took steps to heal the wounds of the 1989 events, these efforts have done nothing to help Mauritians heal. The picture Samba drew showed Afro-Mauritians living as if they were refugees in Mauritania after years of exile in Senegal. For Samba and other Afro-Mauritians, seeing these Afro-Mauritians suffer served as a reminder of the difficulty of their task of achieving unity. His narrative, however, laid the blame on the different Mauritanian governments. While scholars of transnationalism and globalization argue that the nation state has become obsolete, some still argue that the nation state has a great deal of influence in an increasingly globalized world.<sup>5</sup> Examining the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati, it was clear that the politics within the nation state still influenced members of this association in their space of migration. The influence the nation state may not always be obvious or direct, but individual members of this association felt it.

Samba, however, qualifies his narrative by suggesting that there was a need to distinguish between the government and the Moorish community. While the Moorish government has committed atrocities against Afro-Mauritians, he believed that one should not generalize and include all the Moors. Samba provided examples of places in the interior where the two communities lived side by side. The fear created by the 1989 events have created has continued as a result of the government failure to take action, leading to a lack of connection between the two communities.

## **Hope and Despair: Mauritania is Like an Eye**

Samba explained his active involvement in the Mauritanian association by arguing that Mauritians have no choice but to come together as one community. This conviction led him to call for a suspension of the fear that members of the two communities have carried with them to their new home.

Don't be afraid to talk to anyone. Everyone have to put that in his mind. We don't have a choice. We are in the same boat. We look like eyes. We have black and white. If you pull the black side, you will be blind. If you take the white one, you will be blind. Then the eye, we don't touch it. Now, we just have a little inside, but we can clean it.

Like Soumare and Weddady, Samba believed in the association members' shared destiny. "We look like eyes," he would repeatedly tell me. For him, this metaphor served to emphasize his belief in a shared destiny and the need to work on improving relations between members of the association. While this metaphor highlighted that the two ethnic groups had to rely on each other, he used it to point out the problems that members of the association were still facing. The eye Samba described was not a normally-functioning eye, but one that had some dirt in it and was in need for cleaning. The dirt, for Samba, stood for the challenges that both past and present injustices posed to members' efforts to promote unity. Despite these challenges, however, he chose to remain hopeful. What distinguished Samba's narrative, however, was that it highlighted the negative impact of past and current injustices on the association.



Others in the reiterated the same sentiment. Using metaphors such as broken knee, other association members saw the Mauritanian association as a body that was ailing and in need of immediate care. This need was what motivated their involvement in the efforts to promote unity between the two groups in the Greater Cincinnati area. For Samba, an ideal past provided hope that this could still be accomplished. Remembering his childhood years, he explained that his childhood was full of examples of Moors and Afro-Mauritanians living together as one community. Providing examples of this togetherness, he stated:

We do school with them. We were friends. When grew up, we tried to do something like all the young generations. We have ideology. When we start “Al Kadiheen” and Mauritania, the year 1970 was the best year in Mauritania. People were together. They do everything together. They go to sleep together. They get beaten together. If someone was bad, people want to catch him. The police are looking for him. If he is Moor, he will be hidden by a black. If he is Kori, he will be hide by Arabic family.

Samba also painted a picture of an ideal past when Moors and Afro-Mauritanians experienced happiness and sorrow as a unified community. Telling a story about this early experiences in Mauritania, Samba emphasized this harmonious past. By emphasizing this past, he sought to accomplish two things. First, he kept his hope in unity alive. Since Mauritanians were unified once, they might be able to achieve this state of being once again. Second, he pointed out that relations between the two ethnic groups were not always characterized by division. His story of a harmonious Mauritania

served as a reason for his involvement in the association. However, his story highlighted the change that took place. The experiences Samba referred to dated back to the 1970s. Those were the best years. Afterwards, Afro-Mauritanians and Moors' relations have gone downhill as Samba's narrative implied.

Although a narrative of a shared togetherness was relied upon to keep the hope for unity alive, Samba acknowledged that the Mauritanian government continued to work on tearing the communities apart. The government's unjust treatment of anti-slavery activists and the alienating rhetoric directed to anti-slavery activists reminded Samba of tactics used to demonize Afro-Mauritanians. He explained:

The government doesn't try. It is easy to say. Okay, we found slavery here, but we are trying to fix it. We don't need make a lot of noise about that. It is something we found. We inherited, and we are trying to do the maximum we can to push people to avoid something like this, but they go to the other way. They start fighting. If someone wants to say something about slavery, fight with him. Now, Biram get the Noble Prize. That is fine. But because he is coming over here, he gets some prize, they take all the militants and they put them in jail again because. And now, people say Biram and the Fulani want to come together to kill the Moors. That is the message some people/ guys are trying to put in the Moors' mind. That was the same message they did to FLAM, which was not true. And they use the same lie again for IRA to push people to hate them, to put them to the same side to the FLAM, and to start again to do bad things. I am very afraid

to this country because we don't get again a man who want to take the country forward.

By telling stories about government atrocities against members of IRA, an anti-slavery movement whose members are primarily of *Haratin* group, Samba sought to draw comparisons to highlight the negative impact of injustices committed by Mauritanian governments. In comparing the experiences of members of the IRA to the experiences of FLAM members, Samba implied that history was repeating itself even when the victim was different. Similar oppressive tactics and rhetoric was used against members of the FLAM movement. Anthony Pazzanita posits that the late 1980 witnessed a “wholesale purge of black army personnel suspected of being sympathetic to the nascent armed opposition movement, the Forces de Liberation Africainne de Mauritanie.”<sup>6</sup> The atrocities against members of IRA, however, were also cited to point out how continuous injustices by the Moorish government negatively impacted the efforts of the association to promote unity.

In a defeated voice, Samba confided that Mauritania has not found leaders who are genuinely interested in promoting its unity. With no hope on the horizon, Samba expressed a feeling of despair because Mauritania was not heading in the right direction. While he remembered a past where the Mauritanian community was united and he believed that Mauritians could still go back and re-establish that unity, he was afraid because all indications showed that government practices promised to perpetuate the dark parts of Mauritanian history by targeting new victims, *Haratins*.

In “Autobiographical Time,” Jen Brockmeier explains that a story about the past is also a story about both the present and the future.<sup>7</sup> In telling stories about the past, individuals relate it to the present and make inferences about the future. Samba’s narrative illustrated how a story about the present was also a story about the past that ultimately provides indications about the future. His reference to the atrocities against the *Haratins* served as a reminder of how Afro-Mauritanians were treated under similar circumstances, leading him to believe that the future promised to be challenging for Mauritania if nothing was done to stop the alienating government’s rhetoric.

If the self is constructed narratively,<sup>8</sup> it was clear from Samba’s narrative that members of this Mauritanian association were continuously constructing and reconstructing narratives of their identity and their relations with each other. The shaping and reshaping of these narratives, however, could not be understood without paying attention to the government practices and their effect on these narratives.

#### Baba’s Story

I met Baba at Kadoye’s home. Malaw had helped me set up this meeting since he had good relations with Baba. Baba agreed to stop by and see me for the interview after he finished his work. It was right after *Eid Al Fitr*, the end of the holy month of Ramadan. We spoke briefly about *Eid*, agreeing with each other that it was difficult to celebrate it away from home. Baba confessed to me that he could not enjoy it because he had to work the day before and the day after. Eid is an opportunity for Muslims to celebrate and visit with others. In the Mauritanian tradition, these visitations are used as an opportunity to ask for forgiveness for any wrongdoing one may have committed

against others. Baba explained that unlike Mauritania where you have a three-day break that allowed you to see friends and relatives, time constraints in America made socializing harder. He was happy however that he had the chance to visit with some of the families he knew.

### **Lack of Connection and the Threat on Future Generations**

I asked Baba to talk to me about members' relations. He explained that while the association worked hard to bring people together, the Moors and Afro-Mauritanians only saw each other during events organized by the association. Beyond that, there was minimal contact except for some inner circles. The contact between members of the two communities is minimal due to distance (Moors live in Kentucky and Afro-Mauritanians in Cincinnati) as well as for historical reasons. "I may know a lot of friends who are Moor, but did I ever invite them to my house? Never. It is not because I don't want to. I just didn't see the connection between us to make that happen, and that is the only way the Mauritanian association will work." Baba attributed this lack of connection to cultural and linguistic differences. While the Afro-Mauritanian culture is open to the intermingling between males and female during family visitations, the Moors are less open to that idea. Linguistic policies in Mauritanian have continued to alienate both communities from each other.

Hearing Baba discuss this lack of connection, one might be quick to believe that he endorsed it. However, like many others, he was troubled by the situation and wished for it to change. Baba believed more needed to be done to ensure that Mauritanians from both communities could establish strong lines of communication for a better future.

Without these lines, there was a threat to future generations. He believed that while there may be some interpersonal relations between Moors and Afro-Mauritanians, it was uncommon. It did not exist on a larger scale, which was necessary for strengthening members' relations. The association, in his view, has not been able to accomplish this. Without establishing stronger networks of communication between the two communities, what happened at the organizational level remained superficial. He explained:

Because without it, the one on one relationship might work for just better between you and I as individuals, but it is not helping our community. All we do is go to the meeting and then we do a picnic. That is about it. And at the picnic event, everybody goes to the person they know. The only time that we are together is when we are playing soccer together or there is an announcement to be made and everybody gather together. Without those two things, everybody sitting with people on their side, kind of looking at the other like a stranger. You know, like you have never met before. But at the same time, you have to think about like I might meet him tomorrow because he is Mauritanian. I might live next to him tomorrow.

Baba's narrative alluded to an association that lacked cohesiveness. In describing this lack of cohesiveness, Baba was concerned about the future of the association. Implied in the narrative, however, was a recognition of a common destiny, a shared identity. In pointing this out, Baba sought to emphasize the need to work hard on improving relations between association members. The future of the association, to him,

depended on members' ability to foster those relations on a larger scale – beyond the individual levels.

Like others, Baba was concerned about the dangers that this lack of connection posed to the future of the community. Particularly, they were concerned about the future of the children. Fostering good community relations would serve to bring the children closer. Baba did not blame the association for the failure of establishing lines of communication. He believed that the association took the important step of bringing people together, but individual members ought to work hard on fostering connections outside the confines of the association. They needed to do so for the sake of future generations because the current set up threatened to alienate the children from each other, threatening future generations. Baba noted:

That is not the right way to create a community and make it grow bigger because it is all about the children, too. Without the children being involved, it is just the older ones. One day, we are not going to be here. Now, there is a big void over here. Our children do not know each other. The Mauritanian community, the Mauritanian association, is gone because we didn't bring when we had too. We did not show them. Hey, that guy, even though he is white, even though he is Moor, we share the same values:

1. As Muslims.
2. We are from the same country.
3. We want a better community over here. What you want in life, that is what he wants in life. Without that, I don't think that the Mauritanian association will

ever, ever be at the level that other communities have, that other associations have.

Like others, Baba emphasized both their shared Muslim and national identities. In doing so, he laid out the commonalities between Afro-Mauritanians and Moors. Emphasizing these shared identities, Baba provided reasoning for the need to work on promoting unity among members of the association. Beyond using these shared identities to emphasize the importance of working for unity, Baba highlighted a shared destiny that would be in danger if future generations were not involved in its shaping.

### **A History of Injustice**

Like Samba Kelel, Baba believed that much was needed to overcome the history of injustice that Afro-Mauritanians have had to deal with. Unlike Samba Kaleb, however, he argued that not only the governments but also the Moors in general should play an active role in this endeavor, speaking up against the injustices of the Moorish government. For, the “history of injustice outweighs the good that people want to create,” Baba stressed. Although he blamed the government for the problems the association faced, he pointed out the need for Moorish community—as the dominant group—to work with Afro-Mauritanians and other marginalized groups to stop the unjust treatments that they experienced.

Every time we criticize the Moors, we tend to stereotype it, generalize it. Say all these Moors is the same. All they want to do is oppress the black people. They are not good. I am sure there are some Moor who are very good, who want the same thing for us. But they need to speak up, like when we are having a rally down



town Cincinnati against, for example, slavery in Mauritania or against why Arabic is forced in universities. They need to come because it is not just because we are black. This *Halpulaar* are always complaining about something that does not exist. If it does not exist, we will not complain about it. You know. If it does not exist, Mauritania will not have any problem. If it does not exist, I will never be in my living room talking to my kids: this is why Mauritania will never be a country as a whole. This is why our community will never come together. If we see the initiative, people stepping forward every time we have rallies, um speaking against injustice. We see them. We know they are with us.

In his narrative, Baba recognized that the different Moorish governments were responsible for atrocities committed against Afro-Mauritanians. This acknowledgment, however, did not exonerate the Moorish community who he believed needed to stand with marginalized communities and correct the wrongdoings of different Moorish governments. In describing how the Moors often underestimated the pain Afro-Mauritanians experience, Baba stressed the need for the Moorish community to take this pain seriously. In alluding to the imposition of Arabic, Baba was referring to recent clashes between Afro-Mauritanians and Moors in the capital city of Nouakchott after talks of a government attempt to eliminate French based education as an option and impose Arabic on Afro-Mauritanians. Through referencing these clashes, Baba wanted to point out some of the injustices that Afro-Mauritanians have dealt with. These injustices, for him, threatened efforts for unity.

Baba's call on the Moorish community served as an invitation for members of this community to stand with the marginalized voices, promoting unity. In doing so, they would be able to bring to light silenced discourses. Florencia Mallon believes that "the struggle to remake solidarity through the reincorporation of already existing, yet buried, subaltern practices and alternative discourses still constitutes a crucial task for the future."<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, as members of the dominant group, some Moors were still unwilling to acknowledge the injustices experienced by marginalized groups such as Afro-Mauritanians. Until that was done, the efforts to promote unity would be jeopardized.

Baba, however, thought that some Moors were more committed to the question of Palestine than they were to the struggles of Afro-Mauritanians and *Haratins*. Explaining this disconnect, Baba argued:

But if Palestine is being bombed by the Israelis, you see all the Moors coming out. That's a big disconnect. It is hard to put it in your head saying, how come we just did a rally last week condemning slavery in Mauritania, and then the Moors did not show up. Now, all of sudden, Palestine, which is I don't know how many miles away from our country, even though what happened to them is not fair, we should all go. But they only come to that event. That creates a big separation between the two, and therefore, escalates the problem for many many years to come, and then not even trying and helping us forget the past that is very dark and very bad.

As Arabs and Muslims, Moors are committed to the issue of Palestine. However, Baba's narrative implied that their inability to empathize with Afro-Mauritanians' struggles was problematic. Through alluding to the Moorish community's unwavering support of the Palestinian people, Baba highlighted how their Afro-Mauritanian countrymen both home and abroad continued to struggle with understanding the Moorish community's readiness to support Palestinians when they could see that the same community have not helped with Afro-Mauritanians' struggles for justice in Mauritania. Through this simple comparison, Baba pointed out the bias in treatment and the challenge this posed to the association's efforts to promote unity.

While Samba and others would argue that Mauritania was like an eye that could only function if the white and the dark parts were taken care of, Baba believed that the Moorish community needed to take the necessary steps to ensure that this eye was cared for. When Moors only showed their compassion towards their Arab brothers and sisters in Palestine, they run the risk of alienating their Afro-Mauritanian brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, this was something that Baba felt and made him worry about the future of his association. Showing compassion, however, was not the only thing that Moors should engage in. Baba explained that including Afro-Mauritanians and acknowledging their pain were required in order to help them forget the dark past. This could only be done if the Moors in general, and the Moorish government in particular, started to treat Afro-Mauritanians as an indispensable part of the nation. He clarified:

You know. I want to have my freedom. I want to be looked at as a part of a country, as part of a system, as part of anything that develops the country. But I

don't want be looked at as. We did what we did twenty some years ago. Now we marginalized you. We took you off the map, we wiped you out completely. Now you are nobody. You know. You can't be anybody. We're enjoying it. That's what makes this history never go away. It is like when you get hurt in your knee and you keep pounding on it all the time, you will never forget about that pain unless you take something to heal it. That is why this history of 1989 events still in my head, all the time.

In many ways, Baba's narrative was a cry for help and acknowledgement. He believed that while visible atrocities against Afro-Mauritanians might have ended, their marginalization in all aspects of life persisted. The injustices they continued to feel have made healing difficult, affecting not only the larger Mauritanian community back home but members of the association in their transnational home in the Greater Cincinnati area.

If "Mauritania is Like an Eye," much was needed to heal it from the pain that it has continued to suffer. Baba explained that Mauritanians needed to do more to ensure that the pain and the injustice marginalized groups experience were dealt with. Without acknowledging the atrocities and working with members of the Afro-Mauritanian community to ensure that they were included as part of the nation, the Moors ran the risk of keeping the dark memories of the 1989 events alive.

Also, imbedded in Baba's narrative was the desire to be appreciated and valued as a member of the nation. He felt that while the 1989 events took place many years ago, the marginalization of Afro-Mauritanians has continued. This marginalization still posed challenges to efforts to promote unity. Foster argues that "Bidan political culture

permeates Mauritanian society as a whole through the Bidan's political dominance, with considerable implications for nation-building and governance."<sup>10</sup> For this reason, Baba believed that the entire Moorish community was responsible for working with marginalized groups to affect change.

### Final Thoughts

Listening to members of this Mauritanian association talk about the association and their efforts to come together as one unified community, one may be quick to assume that the members have been able to overcome their problematic past. Members often talked about the fact that people back in Mauritania should learn from their experience. Examining the narratives members told, it was easy to notice that their shared problematic past and the challenges they faced in the present continued to shape and reshape their relations. In explaining their efforts to promote unity, members of the association invoked narratives of shared identities, appealed to an ideal past, and blamed government atrocities for the problems members of the association faced when they attempted to become more unified.

These narratives, however, were threatened by present struggles with injustice that have led some of the members to fear that the problematic past was bound to repeat itself. While members of this association quickly acknowledged that Mauritania was like an eye, other stories pointed to an eye that was/is ailing.

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Foster, *Mauritania: The Struggle for Democracy*, Studies on North Africa (Boulder, Colo: FirstForumPress, 2011), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 13.

- <sup>3</sup>. Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 3rd ed, Historical Dictionaries of Africa, no. 110 (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 159.
- <sup>4</sup>. Alfred G. Gerteiny, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, African Historical Dictionaries, no. 31 (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 14.
- <sup>5</sup>. Ali Behdad, "Nationalism and Immigration to the United States," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 155–178.
- <sup>6</sup>. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Mauritania*, 45.
- <sup>7</sup>. Jens Brockmeier, "Autobiographical Time," *Narrative Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2000): 56.
- <sup>8</sup>. Jerome S. Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002).
- <sup>9</sup>. Florencia Mallon, "Pathways to Postcolonial Nationhood," in *Postcolonial Studies and beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2005), 288.
- <sup>10</sup>. Foster, *Mauritania*.

## **Chapter VIII: Conclusion**

### **Reflections on Fieldwork**

#### **In Afro-Mauritanian Company**

Even though I was interested in pursuing this project, I was anxious about the fieldwork experience. I planned to spend some time collecting interviews and doing participant observations with the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati. I was not sure how I would accomplish all of this. How was I going to get there? Where was I going to stay? How was I going to afford it? While I needed to figure out the answer to these questions, I was more concerned about other issues.

As a Moor, I was about to start a project that examines how members of the Afro-Mauritanian community and the Moors in the Greater Cincinnati area reconcile their problematic shared past in their efforts to promote unity. In my mind, I had always thought that it would be easy for me to access the Moorish community since that is the group I belong to. I was worried that it would be difficult to access Afro-Mauritanians. Partly, I was unsure whether members of the Afro-Mauritanian community would be willing to talk about these tragic events with a Moor given the sensitivity of the issue. Aside from the historical barriers, there were the linguistic barriers. Because I do not speak any of the Afro-Mauritanian languages and only have an intermediate knowledge of the French language, I knew that the linguistic barriers would be challenging.

Members of the Afro-Mauritanian community answered all these questions and eased all my concerns. During my first interaction with Kadoye, he offered to let me stay

at his home for as long as it took me to finish the project. Through Kadoye, I immediately met other Afro-Mauritanians who left me humbled with their generosity.

The language barrier was indeed a problem. Often, I found myself listening to the beautiful mixture of the different Afro-Mauritanian languages and French that members of the Afro-Mauritanian community used when they were around each other. Despite being an obstacle to fully understanding what the heated conversations were about, language barriers could not obscure the generosity that Afro-Mauritanians displayed, for this generosity was expressed in the acts of smiling, giving, and caring. I spent most of the first stage of the project hanging out at Afro-Mauritanian houses, and it was at these houses that I felt at home. “This is chez toi,” my different hosts would proclaim as they passed me drinks and food.

Spending time with members of the Afro-Mauritanians community made me realize that the fear I had of being unable to access the Afro-Mauritanian community was a product of my position as a member of the dominant group. Was it guilt? Or was it a feeling of shame that nothing has been done to make up for the atrocities that my group has committed against innocent Afro-Mauritanians? Regardless of what was triggering my fear, it had made me wonder whether this community would be welcoming of a Moorish researcher conducting research about such a sensitive issue. After some time in the field, I realized this was all in my mind.

Members of the Afro-Mauritanian community were pleased that I was working on this project. To them, this was an opportunity to have a conversation about such an important issue. They would explain to me that they always had hope that “someone like



me” would eventually start a genuine discussion about this issue because of their ability to put the interest of Mauritania first. In a sense, I was just like them. They had started this conversation by showing an openness to discuss these issues with their Moorish brothers and sisters. Their trust in my ability to capture and remain faithful to their experiences was often overwhelming.

### **Moments of Vulnerability**

In the company of Afro-Mauritanians, I listened to stories of horror that some of them witnessed during the events of 1989, stories of betrayal, of friends turning on friends, and neighbors turning against neighbors. When I spoke to Samba Kalel, we immediately established a rapport after we realized that we knew the same person. Samba had been to Nema, my hometown. His trip to Nema took place during the 1989 events. He was sent there to replace a co-worker who was in charge of the company team in Nema. Samba was to start working in Nema while his co-worker was being moved to a different post.

When he arrived in Nema, and after spending the first night at his co-worker’s house, he was surprised when the police came to pick him up the following morning. “My friend called them,” he explained.

Sidi: Why did he call them?

Samba: He did not want to leave Nema. He did not want me to take his post.

Because Samba is an Afro-Mauritanian, it was easy to call the police on him at the time and have him imprisoned, deported, or killed. Samba continued with his story of being put in prison and the Afro-Mauritanian families he encountered during the time of

his incarceration. At the police station, he saw families with kids who were being deported to Senegal. The kids, he explained to me, only knew Hassaniya. They were born in Nema and lived there all their lives. What saved Samba was a Moor army officer who took care of all the Afro-Mauritanian prisoners in the area. Samba explained his admiration of the generosity of that Moorish commander. After years of being in the United States, Samba returned to Mauritania and went to see that aging army officer to show gratitude for everything he did for him.

What I found intriguing about Samba's story was the fact that he still referred to his co-worker as his friend. To him, there was no point in holding grudges. His story of incarceration is followed by a story of a genuinely caring countryman who did his best to lessen the suffering of the Afro-Mauritanian prisoners. He blamed his imprisonment on the chaotic situation Mauritians were placed in due to government actions. The story about his savior is meant to emphasize that there is goodness among the people. When acted on, the results are positive. Such stories bring Samba hope that Mauritians are able to come together as one community. Current government practices, however, make him wonder whether his hope will materialize.

Listening to Samba's story, I could not fathom the pain he must have endured during those events. I could not relate to his experience or to that of the Afro-Mauritians he encountered during his time in jail. It made me wonder about my responsibility as a member of the dominant group. Members of the association, especially the Moors, have decided to take steps to promote unity. They, however, refuse to accept the blame of the atrocities committed by the Moorish government.

## An Ailing Eye: Stories about Stories

Regardless of their political positions or ethnic backgrounds, members of this association had a positive outlook on the association. To them, the association is important, both culturally and socially. On the cultural level, the association helps introduce Americans and other Mauritanian ethnic groups to the various cultures of Mauritania. Owing to the association, Afro-Mauritanians and Moors learn more about and develop greater appreciation for the richness of Mauritanian cultures. Socially, the association provides support to any community member in need for help. Association members provide both material and emotional support to any member who is hospitalized or has experienced a tragedy that they cannot handle on their own. Members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association are invested in providing this social support to any member regardless of their ethnic background. The association has helped show what Warr and others referred to as the “goodwill” in the association. This goodwill has become one of the reasons why members of this Mauritanian association appreciate their organization.

Despite the positive stories members told about the association, some of the members (especially Afro-Mauritanians) recognized that the association was ailing. They attributed the problems of the association to Mauritanians’ inability to appropriately address issues from the past. To illustrate the need to heal the ailing body, some of the members compared the challenges this association faced to a migraine headache, a broken knee, and a hurting eye.

Kadoye used the migraine headache metaphor to explain that certain issues are difficult to ignore. It is not only impossible to ignore the constant pain but it is essential to work on diagnosing the problem. The challenge Mauritians continued to face was a result of their unwillingness to address the problems of the past through examining their roots. For Kadoye, acknowledging the past and addressing lingering issues from the past would ensure that Mauritians are able to move forward. Until that is accomplished, forgetting the migraine headaches would be impossible unless a proper method for healing was established.

For Samba Kelel and Baba, the challenges faced by this Mauritanian association can be compared to a hurting eye and a broken knee. For Samba, Mauritians are parts of the same eye. There are the white Moors and the dark Afro-Mauritians. The functioning of this eye requires that both parts are healthy. However, the eye Samba describes is hurting because some dirt has gotten inside. While it is possible to clean and make it normal again, Samba feared that government practices gave indications that this eye will continue to suffer. Baba compares the challenges this Mauritanian association face to a broken knee. The pain that is felt will only subside if one stops pounding on it. To him, the problems this Mauritanian association faces lie not only in the atrocities of the past but also the continuous injustices in the present. Unless these injustices stop, the pain will continue.

Interviewing members of this association, I learned that their problematic past continues to influence their relations in the present despite efforts to unite as one community. They put much of the blame on government policies that led to rupture in

Mauritanian society. Arabization policies imposed by different Moorish governments are perceived as attempts to destroy Afro-Mauritanian languages and sense of identity. One could easily see the tremendous negative influence of these policies. “Just look at the pictures,” members of this association would instruct me. When you see the pictures, you can see how the linguistic barriers continue to separate the Moors and the Afro-Mauritanians. This is true except for the “lucky ones.”

Association members, in an attempt to explain their involvement in the efforts to promote unity, rely on different narratives. First, they cite stories from an ideal past where Moors and Afro-Mauritanians lived in harmony. To them, remembering such an ideal past provided hope that the issues the association struggled with could be overcome. Second, members of the association blame the government for the problems the association struggles with. Placing the blame on the different Mauritanian governments, Afro-Mauritanians and Moors work against a common enemy. For Moors, this strategy is important because it does not place the blame on the Moorish community. For Afro-Mauritanians, placing the blame on the government allows for the possibility of seeing their Moorish brothers as allies. Third, many association members believed that they owe it to the future generations. They feared that, unless something was done to repair relations, there is no hope for the Mauritanian community. Additionally, some narratives pointed to current government practices and how they threatened to jeopardize these efforts.

Dealing with a problematic past, association members recognized the need to devise strategic ways to provide the possibility of moving on. Struggling with the

challenges of the 1989 events, members of this Mauritanian association have embarked on a compromise that may provide some hope. Because Afro-Mauritanian soldiers were executed during celebrations of Mauritania's Independence Day, some members of the Afro-Mauritanian community refuse to celebrate the 28<sup>th</sup> of November as a day of freedom. Their refusal to partake in these celebrations has resulted in conflict within the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati. To overcome this conflict, Afro-Mauritanians and Moors have begun to use these festivities as an opportunity to celebrate as well as remember those who tragically lost their lives. This compromise was perceived positively by Afro-Mauritanians who were touched by Moors' willingness to acknowledge their pain.

In working with this association, the negative influence of government practices became clear to me. Despite their interest in the association and belief in its importance, Afro-Mauritanian community members continued to cite the negative effect of the injustices practiced against marginalized groups in Mauritania. Although the association is apolitical in nature, the influence of political decisions by the government was still felt. The failure to reconcile with the past continued to hinder members' relations.

### Final Thoughts

I began this research project with a view to understand the different ways members of this association negotiated its shared problematic past in its efforts to promote unity. The project was appealing to both members of the Afro-Mauritanian community and the Moors. For Afro-Mauritanians, this was an opportunity to discuss an issue that has been ignored for a long time. To them, this was a step in the right direction.

For both Afro-Mauritanians and Moors, this project was important because it could help Mauritanians back home learn from the experiences of this particular immigrant community. Their interest in the project was overwhelming at times, but it has showed their genuine desire to set the records straight.

I do not claim to have been able to capture the experiences of this association fully, and this project has been a humbling experience for me. I have always been interested in talking about the problems that have resulted from injustices that different groups experience in Mauritania. Working with this association has helped me understand that the roots of these problems run deep in Mauritanian history. What I sought to do with this project was to work hard on contextualizing the issues that impacted members of this association. In contextualizing these issues, I have made visible some of the complexities. The stories of these wrongs have kept me wondering about my own responsibility in regard to these injustices. What has become obvious, however, is that the future of this Mauritanian association depends on alleviating the injustices that some continue to experience.

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## Appendix A: Participants Biographies

**Al Haj**, 40s, is an Afro-Mauritanian from the *Fulani* ethnic group. While his father is Afro-Mauritanian, his mother is a Moor. He sees himself as belonging to the two groups. He has lived in the area for the past 15 years.

**Baba**, 42, is an Afro-Mauritanian from the *Fulani* group. He has lived in the area for the past 16 years.

**Dah**, 40s, is a Moor from the *Haratin* group. He has lived in the Cincinnati area for the past 10 years.

**Dahaye**, 43, is a Moor from the *Bidan* group. He has lived in the area off and on since 2000.

**Ehlou**, in his 40s, is a Moor from the *Bidan* group. He has lived in the area for the past 15 years. He serves on the current executive body.

**Hamadi**, in his 40s, is a Moor from the *Bidan* group. He has lived in the area for the past 14 years. He serves on the council of elders, a group of individuals who provide the association with advice and guidance on issues of importance to the community.

**Herma** is a Moor from the *Haratin* group. He has lived in the area for the past 15 years. Herma is fluent in some Afro-Mauritanian languages, which has helped him establish good relations with the Afro-Mauritanian community.

**Kadoye**, 42, is an Afro-Mauritanian from the *Fulani* ethnic group. He is an active member of the community and serves on the current executive office. He has lived in the Cincinnati area since 2002. Kadoye is an excellent Hassaniya speaker, the Arabic dialect spoken by Moors.

**Malaw**, 52, is an Afro-Mauritanian from the Fulani ethnic group. Malaw has lived in the Cincinnati area since 2002. He is an active member of the community and serves on the council of elders.

**Samba Kelel**, 71, is an Afro-Mauritanian from the *Fulani* group. He is an elder in the community. Samba played an important role in helping the association expand during its early stages

**Soumare**, 48, is an Afro-Mauritanian from the *Souninke* ethnic group. Soumare serves on the council of elders as well as on the executive body. He has lived in the area since 2002.

**The Mauritanian**, 35, is a Moor from the *Bidan* group. He has lived in the area since 2001. He serves on the executive body.

**Thiam**, late 50s, is an Afro-Mauritania from the *Fulani* ethnic group. He has been in the area since the late 1990s. He has served on executive bodies before.

**Wane**, 43, is an Afro-Mauritanian from the *Fulani* ethnic group. He has served on different executive bodies.

**Warr**, 40, is an Afro-Mauritanian from the *Fulani* ethnic group. He serves on the executive body. He has lived in the area since 2002.

**Weddady**, in his 40s, is a Moor from the *Bidan* group. He has lived in the area off and on for more than 14 years. However, he has been living in Cincinnati for the past 6 years.

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Opening: I am conducting interviews with members of the Mauritanian Friendship Association of Greater Cincinnati area. I am interested in examining how the community negotiates the past in its effort to promote unity among its members. Specifically, I am interested in how members see themselves in relation to others and how the community approaches its shared history.

### Demographic Questions:

Name:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Time in the United States:

1. **Community Life in the Area:** I am going to ask you few questions about the community life in the area and the association's attempts to bring its members together.

- a. How would you describe the community life?

Probe 1: Does the association work to ensure unity? If so, how? If not, why do you think so?

Probe 2: In your opinion, what works to ensure unity or hinder it?

- b. How would describe the different affiliations within this community?

Probe 1: Do members of the different ethnic groups affiliate with members of other ethnic groups outside the confines of the organization? If so, how? If not, why?

Probe 2: How would you describe the things that make it easier/harder for members of different ethnic groups to have connections outside the organization?

2. **History:** Now, I want to ask questions about how you see the history of Mauritania.

- a. How would you describe your shared history in your Mauritania?

Probe 1: Do you talk about your history in Mauritania? If so, how? If not, why not?

Probe 2: Do you ever talk about the power structure in Mauritania: the domination of the Moors and the subordination of other groups including Afro-Mauritanians throughout your history? If yes, why and what do you talk about? If not, why not?

- b. Can you tell me what you remember/know of the events of 1989?

Probe 1: In your opinion, what is the importance of these events?

Probe 2: Are these events important to the community and its effort to promote unity or not? If yes, how? If no, why not?

3. **The community and the influence of homeland:** I want to ask you questions about the community in relation to Mauritania in an attempt to see how the politics in Mauritania influences the community life.

- a. If you can, how would you describe the community in relation to the politics in Mauritania?

Probe 1: Does the politics in Mauritania influence the community's effort to promote unity? If so, how?

Probe 2: If no, how does the community work to prevent political changes back home from influencing community life?

4. **Transnational Space/Hostland:** I am going to ask you questions about being in America and how it helps or limits your efforts to promote unity.

- a. Describe if being in America encourages unity?

Probe 1: Do you think being in this space encourages the community to come together? If so, how? If not, why do you think so?

Probe 2: Do you think you have acquired values that make promoting unity possible? If so, how? If no, why do you think so?

Probe 3: Do you think obstacles have been lifted to ensure the possibility for promoting unity? If so, how? If not, why do you think so?

5. **Religion:** I am going to ask you few questions about the role religion plays within your community.

- a. How would you describe the religious practices that the community engages in if any?

Probe 1: Does religion play a role in bringing the community together? If so, how? If not, why not?

Probe 2: Does the community engage in religious activities together? If so, what kind of activities and are they inclusive? If not, why not?

6. **Language:** I am going to ask you about language and its importance in ensuring the coming together of the community.

- a. Can you tell me about the language that is commonly used among community members?

Probe 1: Does speaking English as a common language help the community come together? If so, how? If not, why do you think so?

Probe 2: Is language utilized to bring the community together? If so, how? If not, why?

7. **Conclusion:** I am going to ask you some concluding questions.

- a. Is there anything else you would like to share with me today? Is there anything I could have asked you but did not?
- b. Do you have any questions that you would like me to answer?

## Appendix C: Glossary

***Al-Shirva:*** Moorish individuals who trace their lineage to the Prophet Mohamed.

***Afro-Mauritanians:*** A term used to refer to members of the different African ethnic groups in Mauritania. In Mauritania, there are two main groups: Afro-Mauritanians and Arabo-Berbers (also known as Moors).

***Arabo-Berbers:*** A term used to describe the Moors' Arab and Berber heritage.

***Beni Hassan:*** An Arab tribe that migrated to North Africa. Many believe that they were a Yemeni tribe. Moors trace their roots to this tribe.

***Bidan:*** A term that refers to light-skinned Moors. A *Bidani* is a white Moor in the Hassaniya language. The term is used to distinguish white Moors from black Moors (*Haratin*).

***FLAM:*** An Afro-Mauritanian movement that fights for justice for Afro-Mauritanians.

***Fulani:*** A term used to refer to the largest Afro-Mauritanian ethnic group. In Mauritania, they are also known as *Pulaar* and *Halpulaar*.

***Halpulaar:*** In Mauritania, this term is used to refer to a member of the *Fulani* group. It is also used to refer to the language of this ethnic group.

***Haratin:*** A term is used to describe black Moors.

***Hassaniya:*** An Arabic dialect spoken in Mauritania.

***Igawen:*** A term used to describe Moorish families that specialize in music-making.

***L'Arab:*** A term that refers to Moorish warrior tribes.

***L'Imalimin:*** In Hassaniya, this term refers to Moorish families that specialize in metal, families of blacksmiths.

**Maaouiya or Moaouiya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya:** A Mauritanian dictator who ruled the country from 1984-2006.

***Metis:*** A French term used to indicate a person’s interracial/in-between status.

***Moktar Ould Daddah:*** The first Mauritanian president. He is considered the father of Modern Mauritania.

***Moor/Moors:*** A term used to refer to Arabic-speaking Mauritians. It is equivalent to the term Arabo-Berbers.

***Moorish:*** Anything that could be traced back to Moors (Arabo-Berbers).

***Pulaar:*** Colloquially, Moors use the term Pulaar to refer to members of the Fulani ethnic group or their language.

***Soninke:*** A term used to refer to one of the Afro-Mauritanian ethnic groups. Their language is also called *Soninke*.

***Wolof:*** A term that describes one of the Afro-Mauritanian ethnic groups. The language they speak is also called *Wolof*.

***Zawaya:*** A term used to refer to the Moorish tribes that have devoted their attention to learning.



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