1. Overview

Sources report that Mauritanian ethnicities are subdivided in castes (Géopolis Afrique 30 Dec. 2014, amended 22 Apr. 2016; Dune Voices 21 Mar. 2017). A 2014 report by the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations (UN) on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in Mauritania, states that the Moors [to which the Moulamines belong (France 2014, 45; professor 24 Jan. 2018; AHME 21 July 2014)], one of the two large population groups in Mauritania, [UN English version] “are divided into many different tribes stratified in castes by profession” (UN 3 June 2014, para. 5 and 9). According to sources, blacksmiths make up a caste in Mauritanian society (US 15 Aug. 2017, 3; UN 3 June 2014, para. 9).

Sources explain that castes in Mauritania are organized by hierarchy with nobility at the top, followed by inferior castes and then slaves (Dune Voices 21 Mar. 2017; Géopolis Afrique 30 Dec. 2014, amended 22 Apr. 2016). Sources state that the noble castes include the following occupations:

- chefs (Géopolis Afrique 30 Dec. 2014, amended 22 Apr. 2016);
- warriors (Dune Voices 21 Mar. 2017);

Sources state that the inferior castes include the following occupations:

- artisans (Dune Voices 21 Mar. 2017);
- musicians (Freedom Now 25 May 2016, para. 7);
- blacksmiths (Géopolis Afrique 30 Dec. 2014, amended 22 Apr. 2016);

1.1. The Moulamines [Lemaalmine, Lemalmine, Maalemines, M'allam, M'allmin, Mallemi, Moualemines, Mullemin, Sounaa] [Moulamine in the Singular] (BDLP N.d.)

According to an article published in 2014 by Jadaliyya [1] and written by Alice Bullard, the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Initiative for the Resurgent Abolition Movement (IRA-USA), a non-profit corporation in Washington “to fight against slavery, racism, and gender oppression in Mauritania” (IRA-USA N.d.), the Moulamines are “the lowest of the low in Mauritanian society” (Jadaliyya 29 May 2014). The
International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), an NGO based in the United Kingdom that works to build “a humanist movement that defends human rights and promotes humanist values” (IHEU N.d.) states in a November 2016 article that the Moulamines “descended from blacksmiths, carpenters and other skilled laborers regarded as ‘low caste’” (IHEU 16 Nov. 2016). A 2014 article published by the French news magazine L’Obs reports that “the ‘Moulamines’ were traditionally at the bottom of the scale amongst the specialized castes” (L’Obs 26 Dec. 2014).

According to an article published in July 2014 on the website of the Association of Haratines of Mauritania in Europe (Association des Haratines de Mauritanie en Europe, AHME), an association based in France that fights slavery in Mauritania (Clichy Sous-Bois N.d.), the Moulamines that continue to practise their ancestors’ trade are the minority (AHME 21 July 2014). According to a Mauritanian professor at the Université de Metz in France and researcher at the Laboratoire d’anthropologie sociale (LAS) [3], “[translation] most of the Moulamine community seems to have remained faithful to the artisan trades, which has now grown to include (especially in Nouakchott) trade in these crafts” (professor 24 Jan. 2018).

According to an article on the Moulamines of Mauritania, published in March 2017 by Dune Voices, a platform “[translation] that transmits the voices from the Sahara and that features reports, surveys and portraits reflecting the real problems of the local population” (Dune Voices N.d.), “the Moulamines (blacksmiths or artisans) … are estimated at close to 600,000 of a total population of 4 million inhabitants” (Dune Voices 28 Mar. 2017). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Request.

The IHEU published an article in November 2016 that states that the word Maalemine comes from the high Arabic for “teacher” and in the Mauritanian context refers to usually “darker-skinned people” (IHEU 16 Nov. 2016). However, the article published in July 2014 on the AHME website states that “[translation] the Moulamines are born fully Moor and they are no different (physically, historically, religiously and culturally)” (AHME 21 July 2014).

A 2005 article on castes and marital incompatibilities in West Africa, published on Afrik.com, a news website on Africa, reports that it is “[translation] hard for the Keita, Coulibaly, Sakho, Ba, Sy or even Ly—noble families—to marry … Fane, Ballo, Bagayogo, Kane or Koumare—blacksmiths—in West Africa” (Afrik.com 4 Nov. 2005). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. In a May 2009 article on the website of the International Observatory (Observatoire international), an NGO that monitors human rights violations, including in Maghreb and the Francophone countries of Africa (Observatoire international N.d.), a man, who belongs to the “Sounaa (blacksmiths),” states that in Mauritania “[translation] merely finding out a surname is enough to recognize a Sounaa” (Observatoire international 23 May 2009). An article on the Mauritanian news website NoorInfo, published in 2012, also states the following: 

[translation]

When two Mauritanians meet, it is common in the reciprocal presentations to hear identifying remarks about the tribe, the patronymic family and even the caste in some communities. Some even go as far as clan references. (NoorInfo 22 May 2012)

Information on the location of the Moulamines in Mauritania could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Treatment of Moulamines by Society

Sources describe the Moulamines, or blacksmiths, in Mauritania as a group that:

- suffers discrimination (US 15 Aug. 2017, 3; IHEU 16 Nov. 2016);
- suffers [translation] “injustices” (El Wassat 11 Nov. 2017);
- is [translation] “stigmatized” (Dune Voices 28 Mar. 2017; ActuaLitté 29 Dec. 2014);
- is marginalized (UN 3 June 2014, para. 9);
- suffers social and economic (IRA-USA 10 Nov. 2015) exclusion (IRA-USA 10 Nov. 2015; UN 3 June 2014, para. 9)
- is a victim of stereotypes (Dune Voices 21 Mar. 2017).

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI) 2016, an analysis of the global, regional and country developments, including political and economic trends (BTI [2016]) in Mauritania, the
“social background is an important determinant of access to education, public office and employment. Among the most important social criteria are gender, ethnicity and social status (‘caste’)” (BTI 2016, 24). The 2014 UN report on Mauritania states the following:

[UN English version]

The Special Rapporteur was informed that relations among the different castes are very hierarchical .... Access to certain functions, activities and responsibilities is therefore closely linked to caste identity .... For example, the Special Rapporteur met with members of the blacksmiths caste, who reported that 90 per cent are involved in business and retailing, that only 5 per cent are primary school teachers. (UN 3 June 2014, para. 9)

With respect to the treatment of the Moulamines, the professor at the Université de Metz referred to a [translation] “a legacy of marginality and social decline tied to their former status in traditional society” (professor 24 Jan. 2018). That same source stated that, to his knowledge, [translation] “no specific violence targets the Moulamines as a group, both in ‘traditional society’ and in today’s urban world” (professor 24 Jan. 2018). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Treatment of the Moulamines by the Authorities

Scarce information on the treatment of the Moulamines by the Mauritanian authorities could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.


The professor stated that he was not aware of any particular treatment reserved for the Moulamines by the authorities (professor 24 Jan. 2018).

4. Marriage Between Castes


A report on a mission organized in March 2014 in Mauritania by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (Office français pour la protection des réfugiés et apatrides, OFPRA), with the participation of the National Court of Asylum (Cour nationale du droit d’asile, CNDA) of France, cites the statements of Fatma Elkory, Director of the Réseau MauriFemme [4]:

[translation]

Marriages between castes are also possible. The choice belongs to the man, who is free to marry whom he wants, because he “decides the stock,” while the woman is merely “bearer of the stock,” and is therefore subjected to her community’s choice. This is true for Moor and Afro-Mauritanian communities. (France 2014, 67)

Another article published by Dune Voices in November 2015 states that [translation] “secret marriages” are “widely practiced in today’s Moor society” and enable women “generally over 35 years of age, who are either
widows or repudiated and who have a reputation or social status to preserve ... to marry men who are younger or of a less noble caste than their own, without drawing rejection from their community” (Dune Voices 29 Nov. 2015b). That same source cites an aakad, [translation] “an individual who carries out the traditional marriage act” (Dune Voices 29 Nov. 2015b), who stated the following about these secret marriages and their formalities:

[translation]

This all occurs ... through traditional contractual means, with no validation by the state. It is not until there are issues of paternity or heredity that those involved consider regularizing their respective civil statuses. (Dune Voices 29 Nov. 2015b)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

With respect to the blacksmiths caste, the 2014 UN report states that [UN English version] “their sons cannot marry girls from other castes” (UN 3 June 2014, para. 9). The professor at the Université de Metz reported the following:

[translation]

It is extremely rare for a Moulamine to marry a person from another status group, especially with respect to men; the rule of female hypergamy (may) authorize a woman from that “caste” to marry a man from a “superieur” rank (hassân or zwâya). However, this second type of relationship, while possible in theory, is extremely rare. (professor 24 Jan. 2018)

The May 2009 article on the website of the Observatoire international refers to a man belonging to the blacksmiths caste who states that because blacksmiths [translation] “have a bad reputation and are scorned upon,” they are forced to “marry amongst themselves” (Observatoire international 23 May 2009). The article from Dune Voices from November 2015 on secret marriages reports the following case:

[translation]

Mohamed, a 48-year-old bank director, was forced, out of love, to marry the girl whom he loved, in secret. Born of the blacksmiths caste, considered to be inferior to that of the warriors, he could not take the hand of his lady-love before the men. Despite his social success and his position, he could marry only his cousins, according to his testimony. He stated that, although the religion authorizes the marriage, it is inconceivable for his lover’s family to accept the union. (Dune Voices 29 Nov. 2015b)

4.1 Consequences of a Marriage with a Person from a Noble Caste

According to Country Reports 2016, “NGOs continued to report that powerful individuals used the judicial system to intimidate and persecute members of their families who married below their social rank” (US 3 Mar. 2017, 21). The professor stated the following:

[translation]

Since the alliance between a “noble” woman and a Moulamine is considered, in the traditional order of things, to be a mismatch, a violation of the compatibility ideally required for an acceptable marriage (compatibility recognized by Muslim law as kafa’ah), the agnates [descendants from the same male ancestor, belonging to the same family] of a woman who is guilty of this type of mismatch may intervene, including through the law, to annul the relationship. (professor 24 Jan. 2018)

A report on Mauritania, produced by the Musawah, “the global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family” (Musawah June 2014, 1), for the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, reports the following case:

In 2007, Ould Mohamed Alweimnatt (23 [years old]) and Mariem Mint Eljili (26 [years old]) were married. Mariem’s father opposed the marriage because Mohamed was of a “lower caste.” A judge in the city of Kiffa allowed the couple to marry as they both had reached the age of majority. In 2008, the couple came under pressure from the father of the bride, and the court annulled the marriage. After fighting the court’s decision, Mohamed eventually was arrested, and then had to divorce his wife, who was in advanced stages of pregnancy. (Musawah June 2014, 7)

In the article on secret marriages, Dune Voices reports the following about the 48-year-old bank director born
into the blacksmiths caste, who married a woman from a more noble caste than his: [translation] “[This] union ... did not last, because Mohamed lived in permanent terror of seeing his beloved betrayed and abused because of him. He was persuaded that if her parents learned about their marriage, they would kill her” (Dune Voices 29 Nov. 2015b).

5. Protection Available

Scarce information on the protection available to Moulamines in Mauritania could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The professor at the Université de Metz explained [translation] “that, in theory,” the Moulamines may be protected by the Mauritanian authorities (professor 24 Jan. 2018). That same source added the following: [translation]

In practice, Mauritanian authorities, who are quite hierarchical and corrupt, intervene only to protect those who have the required alliance or acquaintance networks or who have the financial resources to enable them to purchase the services of the “law” and its intermediaries. (professor 24 Jan. 2018)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching the Information Request.

Notes

[1] Jadaliyya is an Internet site that publishes articles on the Arab world (Jadaliyya N.d.).


[3] The LAS, located in Paris, addresses [translation] ”all the major themes of ethnology and social anthropology” and ”researches most parts of the world,” including Africa (LAS N.d.).

[4] Maurifemme is a Mauritanian Internet site that works for gender equality, namely by organizing [translation] “online discussions on civilian and feminists subjects” (Genre en action N.d.)

References


Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Anthropologist specializing in West Africa; Association mauritanienne des droits de l'homme; Centre national de recherche scientifique – Groupement d’Intérêt scientifique des études africaines, research engineer; ethnologist and anthropologist specializing in Moor society; geographer specializing in Mauritania; lecturer in geography, specialist in Africa and the Arab world; research director at the Institut de recherche pour le développement; researcher at the Institut de recherches et d’études sur le monde arabe et musulman.

Internet sites, including: ecoli.net; Factiva; Freedom House; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; Minority Rights Group International; Radio France internationale; United Nations – Refworld; Université Laval – Aménagement linguistique dans le monde.

Tips on how to use this search engine.