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Black Africans

Profile

Sub-Saharan African groups, sometimes collectively referred to as Kewri, primarily inhabit Southern Senegal including the densely populated fertile Chemama land on the Mauritanian bank of the Senegal River. Toucouleur are the largest group and are related to the Peulh in language and culture. Their mixed and complex oral tradition also link them to Soninké and Mali empires. Fuuta Tooro (Fouta Toro) was a major Toucouleur geopolitical state, which has its seat in northern Senegal and is also in Mauritania. Soninké are currently concentrated in southern Mauritania and speak their own language, which belongs to the Manding group. These groups have highly stratified social systems encompassing warrior, scholar, artisan and slave castes, and are all nominally Muslim. Ethnically, southern black Africans are closer to populations in Senegal and Mali than to other groups within their own national boundaries.

Historical context

Due to early French contact and education, a large number of southern black Africans, particularly Toucouleur, work in the educational sector and the middle levels of civil administration. Since independence, Beydan have controlled the top level administrative and military positions. The mid-1960s saw ethnic violence in response to Arabization policies. In 1966, Arabic was made compulsory in secondary schools. Haratine were used by the Beydan to attack black people and crush a revolt of black students in Nouakchott. Several ministers and black civil servants were purged and discussion of ethnic problems was banned. A resurgence of ethnic unrest began in early 1979, again centring on the Arabization issue. The results of the 1977 census were suppressed and black students fared badly in exams that favoured Arabic-speakers. Teachers and students rebelled, supported by a black opposition movement, the Union Démocratique Mauritanienne (UDM), based in Senegal. Some minor concessions on the use of French were made but arrests of black people continued into 1980 and the government has pressed ahead with full implementation of Sharia law.

In April 1986, the Dakar-based Forces de Libération Africaine de Mauritanienne (FLAM) published the 'Oppressed Black Minorities' manifesto. Distribution of this document provoked the arrest of 30 prominent black Africans in September 1986; 20 were sentenced to prison. The document accused both the government and the Maures of 'systematic discrimination and hostile acts' towards blacks, and demanded an end to racial discrimination in public schools and government jobs. As a wave of civil disturbances swept across the country in October, the military regime responded with further arrests. In municipal elections in late 1986, lists of black candidates were by-passed in favour of government-sponsored lists and black people were allegedly intimidated when trying to vote. After a failed coup attempt by black officers in 1987, 51 Toucouleur officers were arrested. Three were executed and riots followed in Nouakchott, Borghe and Kaedi. A state of emergency existed in Borghe for six months, while Toucouleur officers were purged from the police and army.

In April 1989 two Senegalese farmers were allegedly killed in a dispute over rights to grazing with Mauritanian herders in the Senegal River valley border region. Riots broke out in Dakar and both countries Senegalese and Mauritanians expatriates were attacked. More than two hundred people died in Mauritania, several dozen in Senegal and tens of thousands fled. On 3 May 1989, the Mauritanian government announced that it would begin repatriating Senegalese who had settled there since 1986. However, the expulsion of Senegalese also seemed to affect the Mauritanian black population. Of the estimated 80,000 who appeared to have fled or been forced to leave Mauritania by July 1989, at

least 30,000 are thought to be Mauritanian, a minority of whom are middle-class black people and a few senior government officials. Many black people were rounded up in their villages, stripped of their possessions and identity cards, and shipped across the river to the Senegalese bank. More than 90 per cent of them were Peulh agro-pastoralists and nomadic herders. Many were long-term residents.

In August 1989, Senegal referred grievances over the crisis to the UN Security Council, demanding a settlement that would resolve border disputes and end the expulsion of black people. While 200,000 penniless Mauritians returned from Senegal, others remained as refugees. The main road from St Louis to Bakel became the focus of refugee settlements. These refugees cut wood to make huts and gathered straw over a 20 kilometre area; camps of the refugees, who number between 50,000 and 100,000, stretch over several hundred kilometres from Dagana to Bakel. The availability of food aid has upset the local trade as refugees sell some of it, causing agricultural prices to fall. The environment has been degraded through deforestation and there is extreme pressure on water supplies.

In early 1991 President Taya undertook some political reform. He resumed diplomatic relations with Senegal and granted amnesty to political prisoners most of whom were black. A national referendum in July 1991 provided for universal suffrage and elections for president, senate and prime minister. Political parties, banned since 1978, were authorized soon afterwards, but could not be racially-or regionally-based, nor could they be opposed to Islam. FLAM contested the result of the constitutional referendum, claiming it took place under police violence and intimidation of black Mauritians. After the 1992 elections Taya appointed several black politicians to his cabinet but his regime was still criticised for discriminating against blacks and suppressing national census results that would increase the proportion of blacks in parliament.

Current issues

After the election of Sidi Ould Sheikh Abdallahi in March 2007, Mauritania and Senegal signed a deal on 12 November 2007 that could allow the repatriation of 12,000 refugees from the 1989 crisis, administered under the auspices of the UN High Commission for Refugees. The agreement seemed to mark the end of Africa's most protracted refugee crisis - but there will also be difficulties ahead, especially where the return of land and property is concerned.

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