

Archives of Saint-Louis the Republique Islamique de la Mauritanie

E/2/124, "Memoires de Bou El Mogdad, jusqu'en 1903. Bureau Politique, Colonie de la Mauritanie." From a copy typed by Charles Stewart in the Mauritanian archives in 1969. The archival copy of this document has been lost or misplaced.

Excerpts translated from the French

"In writing this memoir of my time passed in Senegal (1887-1903) and then in Mauritania, it goes without saying that I am not presenting to the reader a document of interest to everyone or one from which everyone can profit. What I'm trying to write is meant only for the young of my own family or those of my young colleagues who want to know something of my life in the administration.

I was born in Saint-Louis 24/9/67.

My father, Bu El Mogdad, formerly interpreter for Faidherbe, and my mother, Cumba Anne, daughter of Ndiaye Anne, former qadi of Saint-Louis and founder of the present mosque, sent me at age 9 to the Moorish country, in Trarza, to the family of the Awlad Daiman, fraction of the Idabum, family of the Ahl Lamana, to study as my father had done as a youth. There I found my older brother Abdullay who preceded me, and there later my younger brothers, first al-hajj Aynina Seck, actual qadi of Saint-Louis and officer of the Legion of Honor, and then Suleyman Seck, who was professor of Arabic and the Medersa of Saint-Louis and later qadi of Saint-Louis before his death in 1914.

In the tribe where we were, there were several Koranic schools for the beginners and a school of higher education where they taught Muslim law, theology, grammar, Arabic history before Muhammad and then Muhammad's life, by specialized professors who were Mohamed Fall, father of the cadri superieur of Trarza now, Mohamed wuld Aliun, deceased, Ahmed wuld Jemad, still alive, Ahmed Salum wuld Mohamed, Mohameden wuld Ahmedu, etc, etc....

We stayed in Trarza, Abdullay and me, and lost contact with the south and blacks and even forgot our language [Wolof], living as we did with our professors who made no distinction between their own children and us, so that in the spirit of the Moors we were a Mauritanian family who (happened) to live in Saint-Louis where our residence, never empty of Moors, seemed to belong to those who had raised us, since when they came (to Saint-Louis) they acted as the masters.

These solid and old relationships involved not just our family but other tribes, both maraboutic and warrior, which explains the continuous frequenting of our home in every season by Moors, who have become family and kin.

Our adopted tribe, being nomadic, circulated in Trarza in every direction in search of

pasturage, as far as the limits of Brakna in the east and the Adrar in the north, especially during the hivernage, which permitted me and my brothers to know from our youth the Moorish country and its people, and among them a number of old chiefs and notables still alive now who were our classmates and playmates.

At that time I had no idea that one day I would have the honor and pleasure to be called to serve the great and generous France in these areas that I had frequented as a child. At the death of my father in 1882, the family, composed of women and children, was without a breadwinner and means. But at the request of the Administration, the General Council allocated a pension to my mother, on the local budget ("support of orphans Bu El Mogdad"), a pension which permitted us to pursue our studies and to survive as a household. Moreover, Colonel Briere de l'Isle, Governor of Senegal at the time, brought my brother Abdullay into the interpreter corps, knowing full well that he did not know any French and had virtually forgotten his mother tongue. But Abdullay in school made up for lost time and gave good service until his death in 1887.

After these generous gestures of the Governor and recognizing the many services of Bu El Mogdad and Amat Ndiaye Anne, both awarded the Officer of the Legion of Honor, many Mauritians, including Emir Ely wuld Mohamed Habib of Trarza, wrote letters to the Administration about the (generous) treatment of a family that they regarded as one of theirs.

.....Like Colonel Briere de l'Isle (toward Abdullay), Mr Genouille, then Governor of Senegal, made the same gesture towards me, and I was named interpreter 2nd class at a salary of 1800 francs, the same grade and salary that Abdullay had had. And this despite the fact that I had not had any contact with Europeans and did not know their language. On the same day as my nomination I was admitted to school, but I frequented it only irregularly because I was so often called by the Political Bureau to deal with Arabic correspondence, even though I was very deficient in French. Given my limitations I was placed alongside an interpreter, I gave him rough translations (from Arabic) into Wolof and he then translated into French. When it involved translating French letters into Arabic, we did exactly the reverse.

....[Just before I left on one mission from Saint-Louis] I was entrusted with a mission concerning Shaikh Sidiyya [in 1898]. The war between the Awlad Abyayri and the Ijaydba had obliged him to leave his normal circulation pattern and install himself two days northwest of Dagana. I went to this river port on the boat Citerne Akba with the purpose of accompanying this religious leader to Saint-Louis which he had never seen before. In fact, it was the first time that Shaikh Sidiyya saw the Senegal River and crossed it. It was from this moment that he became our most precious ally for everything we undertook in Moorish country.

During the several days he spent in Saint-Louis, he told me often how much he ignored of our [activity] and how much he was surprised about the way the French treated

Muslims and how much the freedom of religion was practiced in their capital. Shaikh Sidiyya expressed his astonishment about how the French in North Africa had great respect for the indigenous inhabitants and for the religion of Muhammad, and also how they aided [the Muslims] in all sorts of ways to fulfill their religious obligations. But then he noted that this was not so astonishing since the French found there [in North Africa] civilized and independent governments which had laws that called for the respect of their religion, whereas in the land of the blacks these things did not exist, since the only entities were little insignificant black kinglets which had never known civilization. It was therefore by generosity and noblesse that [the French] had acted towards the blacks.

One day the Governor of Senegal asked Shaikh Sidiyya to visit Saint-Louis and put at his disposition a carriage drawn by two horses and entrusted me to be his escort. During his visit, the marabout began by visiting the artillery building and seeing the cannon and the mules [for drawing them] as well as the European artillery specialists.

After the visit the Shaikh told me this: "If my father [sic; grandfather] Shaikh Sidiyya al-Kabir had known the French and seen what I witnessed today with my own eyes, he certainly would not have given his benediction and prayers to the Moors in their quarrels with Faidherbe."