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Communication and value systems in traditional societies (Mauritania)

The following outline refers to the *Hassaniya* or Arabo/Berber community only, not to the Negro-African part of the population, which has their own specific communication and values and hierarchical structures, and emphasizes the role of women.

Two basic assumptions: (1) Communication is a life saving essential in a nomadic desert people – knowledge about pastures, movement of friend and foe are essential for survival of animals and hence the tribe. (2) The tribal hierarchy clearly distinguishes between the realm of men and women. Examples of the validity of assumption one are manifold. The presentation shall dwell more on assumption two. While distinct, it is an error to believe that in Mauritania society the women is without influence – a proverb says, “what the braid whispers at night, the beard carries out by day”. The communication systems of men and women are different, and the information circulated is also different. They reflect the various interests and values of each gender, and of each person’s position within tribe/society. Crucial information – such as rainfall and attacks – is confirmed or disputed by intersections of both information streams within families.

Modern customs in cities only gradually replace the ancient, traditional communication forms. Modern life also emphasizes the difference among genders, and necessitates more current information for women about state initiated laws and regulations, which are outside the “traditional knowledge”. This is where modern communication systems (radio, television, telephone, newspapers) have a role, and where women participation in these media becomes important to safeguard their rights.