

My First Seven Months as a Unification Church Missionary in Mauritania

A 1975 Unification Church Missionary

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It is now entering the seventh month since we arrived here. It hardly seems possible that the time could have passed so quickly.

We each can, however, sense the change in ourselves and in our understanding of not only the Mauritanian people, but of Africa in general. I know for myself that the guy that stepped off the airplane on May 15, in such a state of shock that it was difficult to even take in the whole situation, and the guy who is sitting here typing to you right now are very different.

You come fresh from a fast moving highly developed society that you have lived your whole life in and are quite accustomed to, and come to an underdeveloped society, with people who are hardly educated, or if they are, they are so separated from the lives of the "masses" that they hardly recognize the existence of the other.

Little by little the ways of the people and their mentality become a little more familiar and the things that used to frustrate you about the way they did things are now a part of everyday life. I can't say that I will ever get used to some of the things they do or some of the ways they do things, but I have and will continue to understand them more and to live with them more easily.

The standard is indeed low, though. Most of the people who live in Mauritania are of that lower relatively uneducated stock. Like I said, there is quite a separation between those who have it and those who don't

here. Those who have it consider themselves more on the same level as the foreigners who are here. They are definitely Mauritanian in their mentality, but they really separate themselves from the common man in the way they live. Our landlord, for example, saw when we were moving in that we had no refrigerator or no air-conditioners and furniture, and he was shocked. He couldn't understand it, and exclaimed, you are living just like the Africans! Also in the markets or in a taxi or on the street, it is easy to tell them apart. They wear the same clothes (everyone wears blue flowing robes), only the fabric is finer.

But they carry themselves differently and like to show their stuff by ordering the commoners around. It is really sad, and is another example of what I have commented on in the past, the "boom town" effect of cramming a country from the twelfth century into the twentieth. Like the Indians (or some of them) in the West, they become drunkards on the firewater of progress, when they could partake of it in degrees that would benefit all. The result is a vast gap in Mauritanian society. The haves have it and the have nots don't or they are resigned to the fact that they are of a lower breed or class and won't get it. Naturally this is a generalization and there is a gray area and exceptions, but on the whole this is how the situation looks.

As you know we are living in a new place, and are in the process of constructing furniture for it. We have a hammer with a broken handle and a saw that looks like a children's toy. It hasn't been easy, but so far we have made a table, three low couches, a guest bed that doubles as a storage cabinet, and a desk with three drawers and a typewriter shelf. We still have two cabinets 'o finish, shelves, and a closet of sorts. Our house has three rooms, a living room, which also is the dining room and sleeping room, a workroom/storage room, and an office/guest room. The wood was mostly given to us, but we did buy about \$20 worth.

I am really learning the heart of Jesus in this way, in a desert country banging my hands with primitive tools and constantly bothered by little kids crowding the windows to watch what I am doing. It has been fun though. We are wiring the whole thing with switches and plugs all over the place. It is really fun to make it all just like we want it. When local folks come by they are shocked at the system we are setting up. They have never seen anything like that and usually make some comment about the way Western people do things. It is really funny sometimes.

While working at the Embassy I had to take some pictures of the workers on the Embassy grounds with a Polaroid camera. Well, these people are amazed at a normal photograph as it is, but then on top of that to see one instantly. They were truly shocked; they couldn't believe their own eyes. The mechanic finally shook his head in resignation and muttered something like "America" in a disbelieving sigh. It's a lot of fun.