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Former Slaves Becoming Imams
Citizenship, Islam and Ethnicity in Contemporary Mauritania

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Abstract

The access of traditionally marginalized groups is sometimes a hotly disputed debated in contemporary Africa. In some post slavery societies such as the Mauritanian one, the issue is even more shaped by the social transformations affecting the religious realm. This paper explores the case of the new imams from slave descent (haratin) and their contributions to the ongoing debate about social citizenship, inequality, race and Islamic renewal in that country. The research looks in particular at the trajectories of few men from this marginalized group that have succeeded recently in taking up positions as imams in several mosques in the country. I consider some of the important facets of the construction of religious authority among these social actors who have been traditionally and, until recently, explicitly excluded from the mere religious subjectivity. Some of them I interviewed in length in 2010 went through a long journey in order to achieve some social, and religious recognition. Yet this recognition continues to be debated and sometimes contested. The imams from slave descent are even accused of being “barely literate”. Using recent data, I propose herein an analysis of one of the most striking changes affecting the construction of grassroots Islamic authority in a contemporary Saharan Muslim society.

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He is also the editor of Les Trajectoires d'un Etat-frontière: Espaces, évolutions politiques et transformations sociales en Mauritanie (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004). He is completing currently a book to be published next December by Karthala in Paris. The title is: Prêcher dans le désert: Savoirs, violences et changement social en République Islamique de Mauritanie.