

Debating Islam: Ethnicity, Belonging and Muslim Politics in Mauritania

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In my book manuscript in progress, “Islam, Politics and Social Transformations in Contemporary Mauritania,” I am exploring some of the various ways in which religion, personhood and social hierarchies play a role in political mobilization among the *Haratin*, a demographically important, black, and Arabic-speaking national group. Arab-Berber Moors make up the majority of the population in Mauritania, and refer to themselves as *bidhân* (Whites) even though more than half of them are, in fact, *Haratin*, that is black Moors of servile or slave origin.

More specifically, I look at the ways in which individuals claiming a servile origin strive to carve out a place for themselves and their community in the multiethnic nation of Mauritania by various means, including—but not limited to—Islamic revival and radicalism. Many individuals and activist groups of the *Haratin* community tend to label their individual or collective actions as a “fight against slavery,” a stigma as well as a vestige of a historical institution that is still entrenched in Mauritanian social hierarchies. This is further complicated by the fact that such hierarchies are at times sanctioned by local interpretations of Islamic law.

I am studying three aspects of this complex topic: First, I am reconstructing the endless debate on Islam and slavery in the Mauritanian public sphere as it appears in the discourse of political and social movements, and especially when this debate features an Islamic argumentation. Paradoxically, this debate is becoming even more tense in recent times, as the *Haratin* community has been progressively emancipated.

Secondly, I am examining aspects of



Muslim family law, ethnicity and politics in the light of some cases that have recently come before the judicial system in Mauritania, and involving cases in which some “prestigious” families have brought cases against young married couples from different social and racial backgrounds. In doing so, these families have tried to force the couples to divorce by invoking *sharia* law provisions regarding the ambiguous and controversial notion of *kefâa* (equality), that in their view should prevent in particular the marriage between a “noble” woman and a man whose origin is “tarnished” by a servile status. I explore how the judicial system in Mauritania, which is supposed to be based on *sharia* law, deals with this type of claim. I reconstruct the ways in which conflicting arguments grounded in the same *sharia* provisions are elaborated by the various persons and institutions involved in these trials. I examine also the final outcomes of these officially judicial processes, but which are

simultaneous highly controversial political and religious issues.

The final and third aspect of this work is a case study of the large numbers of *Haratin* who have recently become imams of mosques in the country. In particular, I present the life stories of two of these imams, which I recently recorded, and which serve to illustrate the entanglement of debates about Islamic leadership at a grassroots level and the question of legitimacy as a religious leader, as well as overlapping issues of citizenship, human rights and belonging in modern-day Muslim Africa.

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