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إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

**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.

**BIO** Dr. Zekeria ould Ahmed Salem is professor of Political Science at the Université de Nouakchott, Mauritania. He earned his Ph.D. from the Université de Lyon, France, in 1996. Among his recent papers and book chapters:

-«The paradoxes of Islamic Radicalization in Mauritania», in Goerge Joffe (ed.) *Islamic Activism in The Maghreb*, London, Routledge, 2011 (Forthcoming in September).

.-“Bare-foot activists: Transformations of The Haratines Movement in Mauritania”, in Stephen Ellis and W.M.J. van Kessel (eds.), *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa*, Leiden : Brill Academic Publishers, African dynamics ; vol. 8, 2009.

- “Islam in Mauritania Between Political Expansion and Globalization: Elites, Institutions, Knowledge, and Networks”, in B. Soares and R. Otayek, eds., *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

-“Mauritania: A Saharan Frontier State”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, Volume 10, Issue 3/4, September 2005, pp. 491-506, London, republished in Jeremy Keenan, ed., *The Sahara: Past, Present and Future*, London

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*.