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CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds
Studies

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Panel 27

Islam and Activism in the western regions of the Sahara: continuities, ruptures, new actors

The papers in this panel will analyze the interplay between Islamic traditions in Saharan geographies - the predominant role attributed to scholars of Islam ('ulama) and Sufism in particular - and conventional social norms associated with the hereditary distinction between those of "free" and "dependent" status. In this relatively understudied region, various social actors - political activists as well as specifically Islamic actors - have recently made public interventions, directly questioning a well-known model of social stratification and critiquing locally accepted justifications of such stratification through Islamic textual sources. The panel will discuss different Islamic models used in Saharan landscapes while connecting these with specific social milieus, agendas, and actors. Such a reassessment is both important and timely, given how crucial the present conjuncture is, whether in the redefinition of state practices, strategic political realignments, and, perhaps even more importantly, through the presence of an expanded public sphere in which Islam is employed to demand the renegotiation of social conventions.

Person in charge : Francisco Freire (Universidade Nova de Lisboa / Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia) and Benjamin F. Soares (University of Florida)

Discussant: Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh (University of Lorraine)

Program

Ould al-Bara Yahya (University of Nouakchott)

The impact of Islam in post-nomadic western Saharan region

After the widespread sedentarization of hassanophone populations during the last 40 years due to the migration of people to the outskirts of large urban centers, changes in lifestyle following recurrent drought and more direct contact with the broader Arabo-Muslim world, religious life traditionally observed in the Sahara has gone through significant transformations. These transformations are felt on the level of ritual obligations ('ibâdât), transactions (mu'âmalât) and comportment (maslakīyyât). The socio-cultural analysis of such transformations can contribute to a better understanding of the current manifestations of Islam in the western regions of the Sahara in social and political spheres.

Fortier Corinne (CNRS-LAS, Collège de France)

Islam and "ethnicization" of the ḥarāṭīn question in Mauritania: from the local to the global

Among the Moors of Mauritania, the ḥarāṭīn status group is comprised of former slaves and their descendants. Traditionally the ḥarāṭīn are included in Moorish (bīḍān) society. Against the inclusion of ḥarāṭīn into Moorish society and its different tribes, a political movement identifies haratines with Black Africans based on the color of their skin, establishing an ethnic-racial category of "Blacks" (sūdān).

The political struggle of the ḥarāṭīn is thus transformed in the ethnicization of their cause. This process of ethnicization can also be observed in other relevant cultural contexts, making it part of a larger contemporary trend that goes beyond the case of Mauritanian ḥarāṭīn. Otherwise, one ḥarāṭīn political actor of international standing has not only introduced ethnicity into the debate but also religion, stating that Islam has been used to legitimize slavery – a very polemical subject.

Taleb Moustapha (CAPSAHARA project, Universidade Nova de Lisboa)

Artisanal mining in the Mauritanian north-west: Islamic sources, beliefs and baraka

Since 2016 the northwestern regions of Mauritania have seen an artisanal gold mining frenzy that has mobilized thousands of people (Mauritanians as well as immigrants), creating new economic opportunities. Currently, this activity is in a period of growth in terms of its geographic scope, financial benefits and intensifying competition among actors, and it has already started incorporating elements closely associated with the religious sphere. This presentation is based on three months of fieldwork (2019-2020), and it will analyze various elements of Islamic jurisprudence concerning gold (its economy, transactions, and local practices) and the implications and adaptations observed in artisanal mining camps in northern Mauritania.

Malluche David (Bayreuth University, Germany)

Reconfiguring Islam in the Sahara: Haratin activism and religion in Mauritania

This presentation debates Haratin (hassanophone slave-descendants of Black African origin) activism in Mauritania and its interrogation of “traditional” Maliki jurisprudence; it will also interrogate how the various abolitionist movements and organizations established in the country since the 1970s have tried to redefine certain religious norms which have historically served as a moral justification for slavery. Special attention will be paid to the recent contestation of the religious authority of the zwaya (“religious”) hereditary status groups by novel Muslim actors, especially by the still small but growing number of Haratin who managed to acquire formal religious education and establish themselves as imams. Finally, I will also consider the influence of new media and the global accessibility and dissemination of Islamic knowledge and their role in the reconfiguration of Mauritanian hassanophone social spheres.

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