



AFRICAN STUDIES PROGRAM

SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Friday Colloquium Series

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“You Have Your Heroes! We Have Ours:” Asserting Autonomy and Negotiating Social Status in Post-Emancipation Mauritania

This paper takes the experience of Harāṭīn communities in Bousteila (a city in the eastern region of Mauritania) as an entry point to explore former slaves’ negotiation of their social position and understanding of changes in their status in post-emancipation Mauritania. By analyzing archival materials and information gathered in interviews in Mauritania, I explore the ways in which former slaves used their everyday initiatives throughout 20th-century Mauritania to defend their legal rights as free Muslims. I demonstrate how they have drawn on various religious and cultural discourses, depending on the social background of their former masters, to protect their rights and re-define the cliental relationship in twentieth-century Mauritania. While acknowledging that many former slaves continue to maintain close relations with former masters, I argue that they built their own independent settlements to achieve an identity equal to their masters within the institutional structure of Islam. As good Muslims, they aspire to greater autonomy and independence, but still want to adhere to the principle of silat-ur-rahim (maintaining the ties of kinship), which is so central in the Islamic religion.