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In an Era of Terror Threats

Negotiating the Governance of a (Trans)Local Islamic Heritage in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

Abstract: This chapter scrutinises the negotiation of various actors about the governance of the Mauritanian Islamic heritage. In the context of hopes for democratisation and the war on terror, social frictions are fuelled and lead to a quite confrontational mode of negotiating identity and citizenship. The traditional Islamic educational institution, the *maḥḍara*, plays a crucial role within these debates. Being perceived as an institution for (re)producing local tradition, the *maḥḍara* and its visions become the focus of conflict, praised by politicians and the ‘*ulama*’ (Islamic scholars) as a driver of social peace, feared by security experts as a breeding ground for terrorism, and finally, wished to be reformed by human right activists. The war on terror goes hand in hand with the threat of terror, producing more rumours than facts and spreading feelings of insecurity that foster violent action.

Introduction

[T]he places of worship and their related institutions, in particular the *maḥḍara*-s, which are made for the dissemination of knowledge, meditation, and prayers of the faithful must benefit from a sustained interest to consolidate (the fibre of) the unitary fabric and the social segments of the country. It is in these institutions where sentiments of the purity of the soul, Islamic brotherhood, social cohabitation and national solidarity between the citizens of the same country are raised and developed.

In fact, Islam must continue to be a constant source of inspiration for our way of thinking and acting. Islam condemns in its discourse as well as refutes in its practice obscurantism, intolerance, and extremism that spreads doubt and violence among the Muslim community, totally foreign to our traditions. Instead, Islam advocates social peace and peaceful co-existence between human beings.

Islam must continue to serve as a basis not only for our education and for our culture, but also for our youth, to avoid ostentatious excesses and fantasies of temptation. Islam must further serve as an irreplaceable legislative framework, a moral which organises our vision

of life and regulates our well behaving by imposing on us a passion for work, respect for the neighbour, (...).¹

Islam in Mauritania is an important issue in public discourse. Seen as the glue that holds the plural society together, Islam has often been interpreted as the only common reference point on which an idea of national unity could be built on.² In such kind of debates, Islam serves as a container, as a term with which various ideas within the country's political landscape are promoted. Despite being a religious practice, embedded in this case within a Sunnī Mālikī Ash'arī doctrine with which most Mauritians are raised, Islam has become a highly politicised topic, especially since the 'global war on terror' has drawn Mauritania into the circle of US allies fighting 'Islamic extremism'. As illustrated in the citation at the beginning of this chapter, the author El Haycen – a Mauritanian political scientist – defines Islam as beneficial for the Mauritanian society. According to his view, it brings peace and harmony to the society while preventing the youth from making serious mistakes. He sees Islam as the regulative measure for a good society. It has produced institutions, like the *maḥḍara* (Arabic: traditional institution of Islamic education),³ that consolidates the society by educating the people to become good Muslims and citizens alike. The values taught by such an institution stand, that is what El Haycen claims, in stark contrast to the bad citizen, the one who is obscurantist, intolerant, extreme, and spreads doubts and violence. If we read his lines against the background of the violent actions justified with reference to Islam, we understand that his text does not only define Islam in a certain way, it also defines what Islam is not about, and that activists who use violence in the name of Islam do not belong to Mauritanian traditions, they are foreign.

In this chapter, I will have a closer look at the Mauritanian Islamic heritage and the public negotiation about what this might be. A special focus is laid on how the Mauritanian Islamic heritage should be governed in the Era of a 'global war on terror'. The chapter aims at illustrating how the threats of terror produce

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1 El Haycen 2016, 232. Translated from French into English.

2 Pazzanita 1999, 44.

3 The term 'traditional Islamic education' as a descriptive terminology for the *maḥḍara* understands 'traditional' as a dynamic process. The *maḥḍara* is a practice that claims to have its roots in the Prophetic past. This past is mediated into the presence to build up the future. This process of mediating ideas and spiritual practice into the presence is a transformative process adapting to its cultural, social, and historical setting. Therefore, the term 'traditional', in my understanding, claims a static authenticity, yet it is also a highly dynamic and transformative practice.

substantial debates concerning identity issues and local hegemonies. The governance of the Mauritanian Islamic heritage is hereby understood as a complex and multi-layered process of regulation.⁴ Such a process is not limited to state-implemented regulations only. Rather, various processes of self-regulation within the Mauritanian society are the focus of this chapter. These processes are fostered by diverse social actors negotiating definitions of a Mauritanian Islamic heritage. Moreover, such processes contain hegemonic struggles between state authorities, various religious authorities, and social activists. I will argue that the dynamics of the intra-Mauritanian negotiations on the definition of Mauritanian Islamic heritage are gradually evolving towards a more confrontational discourse in the context of socio-political activists' and intellectuals' hopes for a transition to democratisation and Mauritania's integration into the 'global war on terror'. It would not be in the interest of this chapter to define ever ambiguous and contested terms such as terrorism, or to classify various acts of violence committed or defined as such. Instead, I look at the phenomena of terrorism from the perspective of the threat it poses. It is not the terrorist act itself that proves so powerful, but the threat posed by its occurrence, which in turn creates a certain atmosphere of tension and fear that fosters debates about the nature and defining characteristics of Mauritanian Islam. It appears that under the threats of terror more resolute arguments are raised that either serve to weaken a Mauritanian Islamic heritage in order to overcome traditions that are perceived as preventing democracy and social equality; or to strengthen it in order to achieve stability by defining Islam in contrast to destabilising measures that contradict local traditions. By an examination of representations of, positions towards, and regulations about the *maḥḍara* as one of the most representative example of the Mauritanian Islamic heritage, I will show how social frictions in Mauritanian society are becoming increasingly tense in the context of hopes for a democratic transition and the threat of terror.

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania – a successful regional leader of counter-terrorism

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania lies on the western edge of the Sahara and borders the Atlantic Ocean, Morocco, and Algeria to the north, Mali to the east, and Senegal to the south. The country's population is composed of various ethno-

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⁴ Maussen, Bader, and Moors 2011, 15–18.

lingual groups, the Ḥassāniyya speakers (an Arabic dialect) of Arab and Berber origins often called Moors, or in the local vernacular *bīḍān*. Further, the society comprises sub-Saharan African minorities, such as Wolof, Soninke, Pulaar, and Bambara speakers. In addition, the ethno-linguistic divide intersects with the identities of social status groups. Such identities might have been fluid in pre-colonial times but have become more fixed entities during the late 19th century and led to an emphasis on predominantly patrilineal kinship within structures of social inequality.⁵ However, in post independent Mauritania, the emergence of elites cannot be understood exclusively along the lines of kinship. Individual biographical trajectories of contemporary political elites, for example, demonstrate that social positioning in contemporary Mauritania is much more in flux than public discourse of some academics, activists, and human right organisations might suggest.⁶ Still, educational reforms have favoured certain ethno-lingual and social status groups, especially the Arab *zwāyā* (Ḥassāniyya: social status group of Islamic scholars) from the Adrar, Trarza, and Brakna region (south-western Mauritania) to maintain a strong influence within Mauritania's political, cultural, and economic elite.⁷ Social tension of varying degrees between Ḥassāniyya speakers and sub-Saharan African minorities have been reported in the past and present, as have tensions between social status groups, especially among the Ḥassāniyya speakers, their elites, especially the *zwāyā*, and their former slaves called Ḥarāṭīn.⁸ Social inequality, expressed in structural and institutional discrimination that limits the share of economic or political participation and public resources, affects these two groups in particular, according to numerous national and international human right associations: Ḥarāṭīn and sub-Saharan African minorities.

Nevertheless, as this brief introductory sketch on Mauritania already emphasises, the heterogeneous Mauritanian society contains several potential socio-political lines of conflict that complicate the analysis of socio-religious and socio-political transformation processes. Economic and ecological challenges as well as a political struggle to overcome the authoritarian rule by the military are also prominent themes in Mauritania's recent history.⁹ Since its independence in 1960, the country has witnessed a number of coups. A coup in

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⁵ Villasante-de Beauvais 1998, Villasante-de Beauvais 2000, 286, Villasante Cervello 2004.

⁶ Ould Ahmed Salem 1998.

⁷ Ould Cheikh 1998.

⁸ Diallo 1993, Fleischmann 1994, Boye 1999, Ciavolella 2010, McDougall, Brhana, and Ruf 2003.

⁹ Ciavolella 2009, Foster 2011.

1978 ended seventeen years of presidential rule and put Mauritania under military rule until 1992, when the country's first multi-party elections were held. However, the introduction of a multi-party system in the country did not lead to substantial political change, especially as the military elite maintained its grip on political control in the country. Examples include President Ould Taya remaining in power until his removal in August 2005. A military council that oversaw a transition to democratic rule took over for another two years, and in April 2007, a first democratically-elected government under President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was inaugurated.¹⁰ However, after sixteen months in power, the President was overthrown again by a military coup led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. One of the justifications was Ould Cheikh Abdallahi's alleged incapacity to maintain security in the country.¹¹ Ould Abdel Aziz was elected president in July 2009 and directly declared that he would focus on concerted counter-terrorism measures. He remained in power until August 2019, when the president Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, again a former general, won the elections with an absolute majority. Both generals – Ould Abdel Aziz and Ould Ghazouani – were implicated in both previous coup d'états. They represent a faction of old networks of the military regime that is mainly committed to the reintegration of the country into international politics after Mauritania's isolation due to its support of Saddam Hussein during the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003.¹²

The political turbulences of the last fifteen years were accompanied by a number of violent attacks allegedly attributed to GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) and after 2005 to their successor organisation AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). Between 2005 and 2011 various smaller attacks were carried out on the Mauritanian territory. These include clashes with the army, hostage-taking and the killing of Western foreigners, and attempts to attack symbolic public places, in particular the French embassy, whose compound also includes the French Cultural Centre and a French school. There have been no attacks attributed to terrorism since 2011, but the threat of terror looms large. The sudden discontinuity and lull in terrorist attacks has, on the one hand, created rumours about a secret agreement between the regime of Abdel Aziz and al-Qaeda¹³ and, on the other hand, allowed the regime to celebrate its successes and its efficient counter-terrorism strategies. Human rights organisation protest that this strategy contained arbitrary arrest without due processes

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¹⁰ For the awakening of the civil society during his rule, see Ciavolella and Fresia 2009.

¹¹ Jourde 2011, 5.

¹² Bisson 2013, 168.

¹³ Hosenball 2016.

of young suspects from poor social classes.¹⁴ They further reported that the confessions of the detainees were often obtained through torture and other forms of coercion.¹⁵ In 2018, the head of the DSE (Direction de la Sûreté de l'État), Sidi Ould Baba al-Hacen, praised the success of Mauritania's counter terrorism strategies in a public interview. He emphasised that the success was due to the combination of military and security measures as well as ideological, religious, legislative, and socio-economic ones. According to him, this strategy has – after nearly ten years of implementation – led to positive results: the control of Mauritania's vast desert borders, securing the territory and population, the dismantling of all 'sleeping cells', arresting 650 suspects and their prosecution before courts of law, the reintegration of repentant terrorists, and the curbing of further attacks on national territory since 2011.¹⁶ A month after this interview, the Mauritanian general Hanena Ould Sidi took over the head of the G5 security force. The G5 is a regional multilateral organisation established in 2014, consisting of Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, working together with the support of international donors with the aim of improving governance, infrastructure, agriculture, youth employment and, above all, security in the Sahel region.¹⁷

The threats of terror

Until the 1980s, terrorism was more or less absent in the Mauritanian criminal code. On July 9, 1983, a law was enacted that aimed at preventing coup d'états. This law condemned in a general manner any acts against state authorities and the integrity of the national territory. It was this law that was modified in July 2005 and adapted to fight terrorism along new, globally envisioned lines. Therefore, the term 'terrorism' was introduced into the legal text and defined in a vague way that theoretically takes no consideration for violations of human rights. It literally allowed for a definition of a flexible broad range of 'anti-state' activities as terrorism. Moreover, the law went beyond proscribing attacks

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¹⁴ For the reports on torture, see Amnesty International 2013. For the social composition of detainees in Mauritanian prisons imprisoned for terrorism, see Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 161.

¹⁵ Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 161. Torture practice for confessions of terrorism has been reported already from the period 2005–2008, see i.e. Amnesty International 2008, Foks, Laurion, and Messaoudi 2007.

¹⁶ Aidara 2018.

¹⁷ Airault 2018.

against the nation-state but included activities such as recruiting, training, and planning of terrorist acts on the national territory that hints at targets within the country or abroad.¹⁸ The anti-terrorism law of 2005 eventually proved to be ineffective, therefore, in 2010, this law was replaced by a new version enlarging the capacity of the state to fight terrorism, but its vague definition of terrorism remained the same.¹⁹

Nevertheless, even though anti-terrorism laws are employed against social activists as well, the violation of human rights and restrictions to free speech and social activism did not start with the introduction of these laws in Mauritania. According to Freedom House, an organisation that has a special focus on civil liberties and political rights, Mauritania is classified as “not free” since 1973, and only during the two short periods of 2001–03 and 2006–08 its status raised to “partly free”.²⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising that other social activists experienced detentions during the last decades. The most famous example is Biram Dah Ould Abeid (b. 1965), the head of the IRA (Initiative pour la Résurgence du mouvement Abolitionniste) who ran as presidential candidate in the elections in 2014 and 2019 with increasing success.²¹ In 2015, Ould Abeid and two fellow human rights defender, Brahim Bilal and Djiby Sow, were “charged under the anti-terrorism laws for belonging to an illegal organisation, leading an unauthorised rally, and violence against the police”.²² Still, I would like to argue that the problem of the terror threats is not simply the establishment of legal frameworks to counter terrorism. The main problem is the vague frame that the nebulous existence of terror produces. A terror whose actors cannot be easily identified, whose motivations are not clearly understood, and whose beginning and ending is ill definable. Since 2011, no violent attack happened on the Mauritanian territory but the Mauritanian government continuously informs its population through state-controlled media about threats of terror. Such information is especially given after 2009, so after the high number of terror attacks on Mauritanian territory. This climate of impending threats of terror is further maintained by the international media that regularly refers to the insecurity within Mauritania. It was only in 2018 that France and other countries began to lift the travel advisories that has discouraged tourists from visiting since 2007, when

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¹⁸ Foks, Laurion, and Messaoudi 2007, 13.

¹⁹ Tamburini 2018, 1241–43.

²⁰ Freedom House 2012. More about the pros and cons of such measurement of democracy and the specific methodology of Freedom House, see Höglström 2013.

²¹ Topona 2019.

²² *The Guardian* 2015.

French travellers had been shot on the road near Aleg (Brakna, southwest Mauritania).²³ Jourde warns against oversimplifying the complexity of the problem of insecurity in the Sahel, where local, national, and regional dynamics often intersect.²⁴ This is not to say that there are no security threats at all, but as Jourde convincingly argues, we need to keep in mind that the role of security is often played out by local elites to uphold their rule.²⁵ The ‘security argument’ can serve the regimes in power to command greater authority.²⁶ In the meantime, it seeks and leads to the establishment of international support for such authoritarian rulers in the Sahel.²⁷

From vague information about the reality of the terror threat to the undefined and steadily shifting boundaries between ‘moderate Islamists’ and ‘extremists’, the destructive power of terror threats lies in the state of insecurity they create in people’s minds. Vium looks at the effects of fear spread by the possible existence of terrorism in Oualata, an oasis town in eastern Mauritania that lies within what the French government has defined as a “red zone” of high risk border regions.²⁸ He emphasises that the “nebulous nature of AQIM and the way ‘it’ produces terror in the minds of the local population represents a – if not the most – significant threat, which may progressively undermine the fabric of society itself”.²⁹ Such fear is not only present in regions classified as being at high risk but also in the rest of the country. From 2005 to 2008, when a series of violent incidents happened that were classified as terrorist attacks, most people were not yet convinced about the capacity of AQIM on Mauritanian territory. There were numerous rumours circulating that hinted at the regimes’ interest in deliberately overestimating the terror threat in order to gain access to international assistance funds.³⁰ This changed after the summer of 2009, when a suicide attack was carried out in front of the French embassy in Nouakchott.

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23 France 24 English 2018.

24 Jourde 2011, 2.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 4

27 Ibid., 5.

28 For the “red zones”, see Fig. 1.

29 Vium 2013, 110.

30 Such doubts were not only mentioned in personal conversations, but also in international media (i.e. Copnall 2008), by think tanks (i.e. International Crisis Group 2005), and academics (i.e. Jourde 2005 and 2007). The doubts in the reality of the terror threats are not only prevalent in the Mauritanian context. Even in Algeria, where all signs began to point to the opening of a second front in the war of terror, such rumours about the involvement of US and government secret services in the production of local terrorism can be found, see i.e. Keenan 2007, 131.

Between 2006 and 2014, I had regularly completed short fieldwork visits of three to eight weeks in the country. In the beginning, an alternative story to the official terrorist attack was created for any violent incident, dismantling it as a mere criminal act without jihadist involvement. However, after the suicide attack at the French embassy in August 2009, the critical voices denying the problem of AQIM on the territory of Mauritania became increasingly silent. After 2010, I was all of a sudden asked by friends to wear a *malahfa* (Arabic: a long fabric wrap, to cover head and body) when visiting certain quarters in Nouakchott. They were afraid that I could be in danger if I was easily identifiable as a foreigner by jihadists. Another time, when I spent a weekend in the desert of Adrar (northwest Mauritania) with a Mauritanian friend, we stopped close to a village to cook some tea under a tree. After a while, people approached us with great caution and were relieved when we started chatting with them. Soon they admitted that they were scared when they saw a stranger with a European woman thinking that this might be a terrorist holding a hostage. The feeling of insecurity in Nouakchott became additionally fuelled by cases of robbery, drug trafficking, and rape, leading to fundamental changes in socialising habits. While until 2009 it was common in Nouakchott to have the door of the house open and to find strangers sitting in your salon, drinking a cup of tea and chatting, this has since stopped. People started locking their houses even when they were at home and the custom of serving tea in your salon to strangers who just dropped by to say hello has disappeared.

The *maḥḍara* and its propagation of a Mauritanian Islam

As vague as the threats of terror are, the definition of what describes Mauritanian Islamic heritage is not clearly definable, but is constantly negotiated among various groups within Mauritanian society. I argue that the perception of insecurity, the fear of terror that originates from within the society and the continuous sentiments of exclusion and marginalisation among certain social status groups fuels public debate about the nature and the position of the Mauritanian Islamic heritage within national identity. Even though Mauritania is called “Islamic Republic of Mauritania”, the legal framework of the country is a bricolage of Islamic and French law, and does not exclusively conform to sharia law. Nevertheless, the Mauritanian *‘ulamā’* have an important influence on government decisions. In other, formerly colonised, Muslim countries, traditional

Islamic education as represented by the *maḥḍara* have been marginalised by post-independent governments. This is different in Mauritania. With the foundation of the ISERI (Institut Scientifique des Etudes et Recherche Islamique), funded by Saudi Arabia in 1978, students from *maḥḍara*-s were enabled to conduct higher education without ever having entered state-affiliated schools before. These students later become teachers in state schools, work in the field of jurisprudence, state administration, state media, or in the now growing field of administrative posts in various ministries and agencies dealing with 'Islamic affairs'. The influence of the *maḥḍara* on the fabric of Islamic heritage is as strong as it is in government institutions in general.

The dynamic of the fabric of Mauritanian Islamic heritage becomes formative for the reality of social order. It not only supports the trend towards 'Arabisation' which leads to conflicts with sub-Saharan non-Arabophone communities, but also fosters the Islamic framing of political arguments and social grievances as a common form of expression, especially among members of the Ḥassāniyya-speaking communities in Mauritania.³¹ It is especially among this ethno-linguistic setting that Islamic heritage is hotly debated and numerous etiquettes restrict critical statements, especially when touching on issues that fight social inequality due to matters of kinship (i.e. tribalism, social status group), gender segregation, and jihadism. The *maḥḍara*, as an important religious institution, has been promoted as contributing to national unity, the fight against illiteracy and thus poverty.³² However, during the era of war on terror, Islamic education has become increasingly scrutinised due to its alleged role in spreading doctrines that justify violent actions in the name of Islam. The Mauritanian government has been actively involved in setting up a (re)evaluation of the cultural heritage. Since the military came to power in 1979, the 'Arab' nature of the Mauritanian cultural heritage has been emphasised and its 'Islamic' nature amplified.³³ There were two bigger projects launched during the military rule reminding us that the domain of cultural heritage is, just like the global war on terror, projected within the framework of international funding programmes. The first project for the safeguarding of the old caravan towns in the desert (Chinguetti, Ouadane, Tishit, and Walata) was launched in 1979 with UNESCO, and in 1999 the second project for the safeguarding and valorisation of the Mauritanian cultural heritage was financed by the World Bank (PSVPM, Projet de

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31 Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 16.

32 Frede 2016.

33 Ould Cheikh 2017, 282–83.

Sauvegarde et de Valorisation du Patrimoine Culturel Mauritanien, 1999–2003).³⁴

Both projects encompassed a mixture of policies, diversifying the country's economy through cultural tourism and defining what the Mauritanian heritage is about, how much weight to lay on its Islamic and Arabic aspects, and what kind of values it represents. The *maḥḍara* is of course not missing from this debate. When the PSVPM was launched, it was represented as an institution that promotes freedom (*liberté*), democracy, and equality (*démocratie et égalité*), while being free of charge (*gratuité*).³⁵ Moreover, the methodology of memorisation as the main pedagogical emphasis was classified as the authentic way of Islamic learning, in contrast to the Graeco-Roman methodologies that were later adopted in most parts of the Muslim world.³⁶ Finally, the *maḥḍara*, while found throughout Mauritania among all social and ethnic contexts, is an important institution for building unity among the various ethno-linguistic communities.³⁷ The presentation ended with a security argument, reminding us that the later 1990s were already a prelude to the 'war on terror':

This is how the *maḥḍara* will radiate by reconciling authenticity and modernity, making the *maḥḍara* a tool for development, a means for the maintaining of populations and the preservation of their moral and spiritual values, characterized both by centrism and balance away from extremism and overstatement. It should be noted that the followers of the *maḥḍara* cannot, under any circumstances, become terrorists even if they need to become Mujahideen [combatants] that is to say that the teachings of the *maḥḍara* alone are sufficient to instil such spirit, not only in our dear country but beyond and throughout the north and west of Africa to contribute greatly to the advent of an enlightened, authentic and open spirit.³⁸

The international recognition of the *maḥḍara*: Perspective of knowledge seekers

The Mauritanian *maḥḍara* is obviously a projection surface for quite contradicting visions: from the driver for democracy and tolerance, and a propagator of 'moderate' Islam, as seen in the quotation from the PSVPM launching event in

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³⁴ Ould Cheikh 2017, 284–90.

³⁵ Ould Boye 1999, 37.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁸ Ibid., 38. Translated from French.

1999, to the evaluation of the *maḥḍara* as a breeding ground for terrorism, by some experts of counter-terrorism in Arab media.³⁹ Based on the little substantial research done on the institution and its role in past and present Mauritania, everybody seems to project whatever they want into this institution. Nevertheless, one has to admit that the *maḥḍara* as an institution does encompass very diverse projects. The curriculum of education is not strictly regulated and varies from institution to institution, the financial support is organised by the scholars running the institutions, and state control remains superficial.⁴⁰ Further, the *maḥḍara* is entangled in translocal networks and cannot be understood as a static institution immune to any transformation. On the contrary, the *maḥḍara*'s pedagogical methodology as well as its curriculum has developed through the intellectual exchange between scholars from the Mauritanian desert with scholars in North Africa and the Middle East. Such exchanges have not been a one-way project that transferred knowledge from 'centres' of learning in North Africa and the Middle East to the Sahara, but took place and still takes place in all networked directions. As much as texts, pedagogies, doctrines, and ideas had been imported, Mauritanian '*ulamā*' have contributed substantially to the development of Islamic education at least since the 19th century, e.g. at al-Azhar in Egypt or at educational institutions in Saudi Arabia.⁴¹ Mauritanian '*ulamā*' have been and still are prominent among Sufi movements like the Qādiriyya, the Tijāniyya, within the Arab Nahḍa, or the development of Salafi doctrine. We find them too among jihadist groups, most infamously, the religious scholar Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, who acted as the religious adviser for Osama bin Laden for a while. Still, as much as Mauritanian '*ulamā*' have actively imported global trends in Islamic doctrine and conversely contributed to its development, they have even attracted international students. During the 19th century, these students mainly came from the Sahel region. Since the later 20th century, students increasingly came from various parts of the world: North Africa, the Gulf States, North America, and Europe. Especially in contemporary Mauritanian *maḥḍara*-s, run by '*ulamā*' of various doctrinal orientation, students join from all corners of the world, and only a small percentage of these students later join jihadist movements in Libya, Sudan, Algeria, or other regions.⁴²

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³⁹ Bensaid and Ladjal 2019, 157–58.

⁴⁰ Frede 2021, 362.

⁴¹ For al-Azhar, see Bensaid and Ladjal 2019, 152–53; for Saudi Arabia have a look at Ahmed 2015, Farquhar and Thurston 2018.

⁴² Wehrey 2019, 3.

I would like to contest the evaluation of the *maḥḍara* as a breeding ground for terrorism per se, even though biographies indicate that studying in a *maḥḍara* was part of most life paths of the inmates jailed for terrorism.⁴³ Moreover, there is a kind of study tourism going on in the Islamic world in general, attracting students who are searching for Islamic knowledge. Places like Mauritania, that has preserved traditional educational institutions of Islamic learning like the *maḥḍara*, appear to be especially attractive to these contemporary knowledge seekers. A few among them are vulnerable and at risk of being recruited by jihadist movements, others are simply looking for alternatives to take their lives in a new direction. The promise of detachment from Western influences and instead deep immersion in the study of Islamic knowledge and piety in a way that is perceived as authentic is remarkably attractive to contemporary knowledge seekers if they choose to go on the *riḥla* (journey). Some Mauritanian *maḥḍara*-s have become very prominent in a global trend of knowledge-seeking Muslims. Former students propagate the experience of their *riḥla* to Mauritania via Youtube, and other channels. Listening to one of these reports, like the one by the American convert Abdul Haqq, discussed in the following, reveals that the Mauritanian *maḥḍara*-s are well-connected within the Muslim world and attract all sorts of people.

Abdul Haqq runs the Youtube channel *Manhaj al-Tulaab* and regularly reports on his study experiences in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and finally in Mauritania in 2018. In Mauritania, he studied in a small village, named Noubaghiya, in one of the most prestigious contemporary *maḥḍara*-s run by a Tijānī scholar. On funding websites like Patreon⁴⁴ and GoFundMe⁴⁵, Abdul Haqq solicits funding for his journey and presents himself and his aims to become a scholar to teach American Muslims the ‘right Islam’ and to fight against ‘extremism’. He also broadcasts his ideas from his ‘knowledge journeys’ via Facebook and Twitter and gives private lessons via WhatsApp and Telegram. He is an archetypical contemporary seeker of Islamic knowledge. He describes the nature of Muslim plurality within the Mauritanian *maḥḍara* institutions as following:

[T]o say that you can’t go to study in Mauritania for this reason or that is complete *bāṭil* [Arab., false]. *Al-Muhimm* [Arab., the important point is], when you go to Mauritania you will meet every type of individual and ideology, because the *maḥḍara* accepts everyone, except they don’t accept people who cause issues. When you come into a *maḥḍara* they

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⁴³ Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 161.

⁴⁴ See Patreon profile “Abdul Haqq”: <https://www.patreon.com/Abdulhaqq>.

⁴⁵ See Abdul Haqq’s funding campaign “Abdul Haqq, Student of Knowledge”, <https://www.gofundme.com/abdulhaqq>.

accept you so you will meet [people following ideas] from this ideology and that ideology and it is the common rule in the *maḥḍara* that the people don't enter into matters of *khilāf* [Arab., dispute]. So, for example, we mentioned before that the *maḥḍara* is known to master '*ulūm al-'ālā* [Arab., advanced sciences, here methodology], the tools and order to understand the Qur'ān and Sunna. So, when they teach, everybody comes there and studies that same thing. Conversations begin and end with Arabic Grammar. So, you might not know what this one's '*aqida* [Arab., creed] is or that one's '*aqida* except if you talk with him about it privately.⁴⁶

The religious training conducted while studying at a *maḥḍara* attracts Muslim students of any doctrinal orientation, whether the teaching scholar is Sufi or not. The common agreement not to cause problems is an important aspect of the behaviour taught along with the content at these institutions. Such behaviour at least allows for the co-existence of multiple worldviews and interpretations of Islam, among these there may be some followers of jihadist doctrines as well as Sufis or Salafis.

Doubting in Mauritania's Islamic heritage: Could it breed terrorism?

Generally speaking, going to study religious knowledge (of any kind and level) is perceived as something good and beneficial in Mauritanian society. Therefore, if young members of the family state that they are going to study in a *maḥḍara* in the desert, the elders will be proud, but not worried. In the film "The Disappeared Friend" ("Mon ami disparu" by Zine el Abidine Ould Mohamed), screened at Nouakchott's film festival in 2009, the purely pious intention of studying in a *maḥḍara* was openly questioned for the first time. The plot of the film tackles the phenomenon of home-grown terrorism. The film provoked public anger in the aftermath of the premiere. Especially religious elites accused the film makers of having defamed the *maḥḍara* in a scandalous way.⁴⁷ The film is an Arabic-French fictional short film, that is made in a documentary style, tells the story of a young student who has gone abroad to study and, after some time returns and sets out to find his friend from his neighbourhood because he had lost his traces. Asking other friends and the mother of his friend what happened, the story develops as follows. The friend became interested in

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⁴⁶ Lipham 2019.

⁴⁷ Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 144.

religious studies. After a while, he approached his friends with some books about Wahhabi doctrine and tried to convince them to join the group he is going to. From one day to the next, he left his friends and family and told them that he was going to study in a *maḥḍara* out in the desert. He comes back once briefly for a visit but seems to have changed his personality completely. Shortly after his return, he leaves again for his ‘study’ and disappears without traces. The film ends with the suicide attack on the French embassy in Nouakchott implicating that the young man of the film had been the one who conducted the attack.⁴⁸

The main message of the film is that the international phenomenon of jihadism spared no-one. It is not only the violence conducted by strangers that had arrived in the capital – no – it is the home-grown youth that never travelled abroad that was recruited by a global terrorist organisation. What the plot of the film debunks is that at this point Mauritania faced the same problems as Muslim communities did elsewhere: young people from ordinary families and neighbourhoods were being recruited by jihadist organisations. Families and friends were left behind in a state of shock and grief, asking themselves what they could have done differently to avoid their son, daughter, or friend to disappear. The film had marked a turning point in the public perception of the threats of terror in Mauritania and what had been largely perceived as a foreign problem brought into the midst of society. The anger that arose as a first reaction after the screening was settled shortly afterwards by the intellectual head of Mauritania’s Muslim Brothers, Mohamed Hassan Ould Dedew (b. 1963), who discussed with the filmmakers, mediated between the ‘*ulamā*’ and artists, and finally judged the film as “important and useful.”⁴⁹

In the very same year of the suicide attack in front of the French embassy, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs started conducting a general survey (2009–10) for registering and counting institutes of Islamic education all over the country. The survey indicated the date of their establishment and the number of students enrolled in the institution. The number of foreign students were counted and the GPS data of the institution’s location was noted. The timing of the survey is interesting, as it reveals that Mauritania’s engagement within counter terrorism did not spare the *maḥḍara*-s. A first step undertaken by the government to steer Islamic education in new directions was the opening of a second Islamic university on the eastern edge of the county: the Islamic University of Aïoun, inaugu-

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⁴⁸ Mohamed 2013.

⁴⁹ Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, 144.

rated in January 2012.⁵⁰ Interestingly, it is exactly this Islamic university where a centre for Islamic extremism studies was inaugurated in the autumn of 2019, illustrating the ruling regime's emphasis on security issues.⁵¹ The establishment of a new Islamic university in 2012 went hand in hand with the threat to close down ISERI in Nouakchott, which led to an immediate halt in enrolment of first-year students.⁵² This attempt to restructure Islamic education by closing down ISERI in favour of a newly set up university far from the capital provoked numerous protests for a couple of weeks, some of which turned into violent clashes with police forces. Finally, at the end of February 2012, the ministry for Islamic orientation declared that a complete closure of ISERI had never been envisaged and that they did not want to call into question ISERI's outstanding position as a centre for Islamic studies in the country.⁵³

Towards the end of 2015, a first direct involvement in regulating *maḥḍara*-s by the government was undertaken. Around forty *maḥḍara*-s were closed in the eastern part of the country. The reason given was that they lacked operating permits from the respective ministry. Again, the governmental intervention provoked angry reactions in the Mauritanian media. The teaching of Islamic knowledge is considered a duty for pious Muslims and was widely viewed as not requiring a licence from the government.⁵⁴ The closing of *maḥḍara*-s by the government was perceived as "crossing a red line", as Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Ematt from the RFD (Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques) said.⁵⁵ However, the most intense response came from the Muslim Brotherhood in the country: Mohamed Jemil Mansour (b. 1967), still the leader of the Tawassoul Party (RNRD, Rassemblement national pour la réforme et le développement, known as Tawassoul) in 2015, declared the undertaking as an attack on the centrepiece of Mauritanian fame in the Muslim World, and that it equalled an attempt to erase Mauritania from the international Islamic intellectual history.⁵⁶ Ould Dedew called for protests against the government's attack on *maḥḍara*-s stating that:

It is impossible to make these Qur'ānic institutions disappear in a country like Mauritania (...). The Qur'ānic schools, which have been disseminated in the country since the fifth

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⁵⁰ Alakhbar 2012b.

⁵¹ Ould Soueid Ahmed 2019.

⁵² Alakhbar 2012a.

⁵³ ANGOP 2012.

⁵⁴ Guèye 2016.

⁵⁵ Alakhbar 2016a.

⁵⁶ Alakhbar 2016b.

century AH, reflect the identity of Mauritania and no one can easily erase the identity of a people or a nation.⁵⁷

The protest did not help. However, interestingly, these *maḥḍara*-s had not been closed due to an accusation of spreading ‘extremism’. Two and a half years later, the first educational institutions were shut down because of terror threats. In September 2018, the Markaz Takwīn al-‘Ulamā’ in Nouakchott was closed on the grounds that it spreads ‘extremism’.⁵⁸ Established in 2009 by Ould Dedew, the Markaz was not a classical *maḥḍara*, but a traditionalist institution inspired by the *maḥḍara*. Financed privately by numerous conservative merchants, the Markaz financed the study of around 500 students by stipends. A significant number of students came from abroad. With forty-five teachers and a curriculum of eighteen years, the Markaz, organised like a boarding school, quickly rose to successful fame and was well-known throughout Islamist circles in the Muslim world. Via Facebook and Twitter, the Markaz promoted Ould Dedew and his institution effectively on a global scale. Yet, another educational institution of Ould Dedew was shut down: the Ibn Yacine University.⁵⁹

Questioning the *maḥḍara*’s curriculum: Social grievance and the quest for equality

The struggle about the question of regulating Islamic education tells us much about the drama of the threats of terror. By accusing Islamists openly of spreading ‘extremism’ while leaving the *maḥḍara*-s out of the ‘extremism’ debate, the ruling regime navigates the complex entanglements of Islamic education with processes of identity making. The centrality of the debate on Islamic heritage becomes even more evident when looking at the human rights movements within the country. One of the main problems are contradicting legal codes: the 1981 and 2007 secular law, which forbids slavery, and the constitution of 1992, which places Islamic law above secular law, allows slavery. Ould Abeid, the leader of the antislavery organisation IRA, therefore calls to attack the ‘*ulamā*’ who he accuses of spreading teachings of inequality as guardians of Islamic law.⁶⁰ Accusing the religious elite of teaching and spreading discrimination through

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⁵⁷ Alakhbar 2015. Translated from French into English.

⁵⁸ RFI 2018.

⁵⁹ Ould Soueid Ahmed 2018, Kane 2018.

⁶⁰ Frontline Defenders 2012.

Islamic texts, the anti-slavery movement was the first to openly attack the curriculum of the *maḥḍara*. In this curriculum, Mālikī law texts constitute an important foundation. One of the most common texts taught is the *Mukhtaṣar al-Khalīl*, a comprehensive work on Mālikī law. On Friday, April 27, 2012, the IRA under the leadership of Biram Dah Ould Abeid, organised a public burning of pages of this text as a symbolic act in order to free Islam from the institution of slavery. This open attack of a revered Mālikī text taught throughout all *maḥḍara*-s of the country provoked public anger and hundreds took to the streets in the following days to demonstrate against such actions. The burning of Mālikī texts was condemned by the general public, including by all political parties.⁶¹ Just like the government's intervention into issues of Islamic education, as described above, the attack of the *maḥḍara*'s curriculum by human right activists crossed a 'red line' of acceptance by a majority of 'ulamā', politicians, and intellectuals.⁶²

However, despite the noisy protest, the anti-slavery activists have recruited a broad range of sympathisers from various social layers of the Mauritanian society as well, who took to the streets demanding the release of IRA activists imprisoned after burning religious texts allegedly threatening state security.⁶³ Among these sympathisers, who obviously did not feel offended by the critic on the *maḥḍara*'s curriculum, is Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir (b. 1986). He grew up in Nouhadibou and originates from a family of blacksmiths, a social status group often marginalised and associated with Jewish lineages. He received religious and secular education and successfully studied economy at the University of Nouakchott. He worked in the mining sector after receiving his diploma. In December 2013, he published a text online called "Ad-din wa-t-tadaiyun wa-l-m'allimīn" (the religion, the religiousness and the blacksmith) signed with Muḥammad ash-Shaikh b. Muḥammad.⁶⁴ In this text, he invokes events from the Battles of Badr, Yathrib, and Banū Quraīḥa in the 7th century and describes how the Prophet Muḥammad treated converts, who had killed Muslims in these battles, differently. According to his interpretation, the different treatment had to do with the origin of the enemies. While the Prophet pardoned members of the Quraish, he could not have the same mercy with Abyssinians and Jews. He

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⁶¹ BBC 2012.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The text is available on Facebook, see Multaqā 21 Ağustos/Āb 2013. Further numerous web-sites spread copies, i.e. Ould Mkhaitir 2014. An English summary can be found here in Bullard 2014, 2–3.

then turns back to the entry statement where he had distinguished the human nature of religiosity from divine religion and reminded us that this difference is superficial, it is religion that acknowledge social difference. He then turns to the situation in Mauritania stating that Ḥarāṭīn, the small minority of Imraguen, and blacksmiths are suffering from discrimination due to the teachings of the local ‘*ulamā*’. In his opinion, this needs to be changed urgently.

The public reaction to Ould Mkhaitir’s text was furious. He was accused of blaming the Prophet himself and was eventually charged with apostasy. His wife was forcibly divorced, Ould Mkhaitir was sentenced to death in the first instance. A sentence that was later reduced to two years of jail in 2017. Nevertheless, he was only released in September 2019 after almost six years in prison and was soon sent into exile to France.⁶⁵ The lawyer who represented him was threatened with death.⁶⁶ Public intellectuals and their families who took a stand for him also had to fear death.⁶⁷ Moreover, rumours doubted the originality of Ould Mkhaitir’s text and suspected an Israeli mission behind it.⁶⁸ There were many public demonstrations and numerous ‘*ulamā*’ calling for the prompt execution of the accused. The violent reaction of the religious public was putting pressure on the ruling regime to carry out the sentence while international human right organisations actively campaigned for his immediate release. This sandwich position of the ruling regime illustrates that the Islamic heritage is not exclusively governed by the ruling elite in power, but is negotiated by various actors who envision a broad range of goals, from the demand for reform of Islam for social emancipation to the demand for a consistent implementation of the Mālikī sharia law.

Ould Mkhaitir’s text can also be read as an attack on the *maḥḍara*’s curriculum, as early Islamic history from the core curriculum is taught in lessons on the *sīra*, the prophet’s life path. Since arriving in France in autumn 2019, he has returned to social media platform, posting critical statements on Twitter and Facebook criticising the ruling regime’s harsh policies against feminists, homosexuals, and anti-slavery activists. But his criticism does not end there, as he also criticises the ‘*ulamā*’ who justify the marginalisation due to gender, sexuality, and ‘caste’, and the international community that silently tolerates the injustice to follow their own interests in the region. On January 22, 2020 he tweeted

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⁶⁵ Ouest France 2019.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Amnesty International 2017.

⁶⁸ Freire 2017, 328.

about a conference in Mauritania attended by numerous African ‘*ulamā*’ to promote the ‘real moderate Islam’ to counter ‘extremism’⁶⁹:

The conference for peace, religious reform, and peaceful coexistence has been held in Mauritania. Nothing new. The conference has ended with the following results: – A death sentence for the one who leaves Islam and doubt in the validity of Islam; – A detention of five years in prison for the one who does not obey the Sunnite order in his private life. Like the usual habit, the international organisations and the European diplomats have participated and assisted financially and morally.⁷⁰

This statement sums up very well the social frictions that fuel the threats of terror in Mauritanian society. The disappointment among activists fighting for democratisation and social justice faced with a conservative religious trend that rejects emancipatory quests from human right activists combined with policies that criminalise their political engagement and international donors that support these policies. The case of Ould Mkhaitir illustrates that even other social status groups, like blacksmiths and griots among the Ḥassāniyya speakers, increasingly complain about societal disadvantages. They speak out loudly against the hegemony of Arab ideology and the conservative ‘*ulamā*’, who are accused of acknowledging social inequality with reference to religion.

Negotiating the *maḥḍara* in an era of terror threats

In contrast to other Sahelian countries, Mauritania has not been heavily affected by terror attacks during the last decade. However, the terror threats have unleashed their impact on the public negotiation of Mauritania’s Islamic heritage, especially on the local institution of traditional Islamic education, the *maḥḍara*. As Sounaye outlines in his chapter, Islam in the Sahel “has been a major source of inspiration for various socio-political agendas.”⁷¹ Policies of de-radicalisation link to these traditions of policy making within the framework of Islamic arguments. The Mauritanian government has developed into an important player within the Sahelian fight against terrorism. Moreover, in the Mauritanian case, Islam is also an important element in the creation of a na-

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⁶⁹ APA 2020.

⁷⁰ Translated from French: @Cheick_Mkhaitir, January 22, 2020.

⁷¹ Sounaye in this book, 105.

tional identity that seeks to break away from the established ethno-linguistic hegemonies and social stratifications that form an obstacle to national unity. A discourse about ‘good’ Islam in Mauritania and foreign Islamic ‘extremism’ therefore helps to intervene in the landscape of (trans-)locally established religious elites. It defines citizenship along a government-approved concept of Islamic norms and values. In agreement with some conservative ‘*ulamā*’, the ruling regime has set up an argument against ‘extremism’ to maintain the status quo of elites, in politics, economics, and public debate.

Mauritania’s ‘*ulamā*’ have been drawn into the state’s administration through the integration of students of the *maḥḍara* into state institutions like schools and ministries, the creation of state-affiliated counselling, the regulation of organisations like the Islamic High Council (IHC, 1991–2017), which dissolved in 2017 into the High Council for Fatwa and Administrative Appeals (Haut Conseil de la Fatwa et des Recours Gracieux) created in 2012,⁷² and ‘*ulamā*’ led programmes for social reintegration of former jihadists. In the era of the terror threats, Islam is increasingly drawn into politics, not only by Islamists and jihadists, but also by actors who counter them. The public debate about the preservation of a Mauritanian Islamic heritage creates distrust among the social strata that feels marginalised and deprived from their human rights by the ruling regime, the Islamist opposition, and the state incorporated ‘*ulamā*’ alike. As a consequence, Islam is increasingly alienated in public discourse from its original essence: the spiritual relationship between the believer and the divine.

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72 Tamburini 2019, 9–10.

Fig. 1: French Government advice for travels to Mauritania. Source: France Diplomatie 2020.

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