

Shaykh Muhammad al-Hasan al-Dedew (b. 1963), a Salafi Scholar in Contemporary Mauritania

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Introduction

The Mauritanian Shaykh Muhammad al-Hasan al-Dedew is a leading scholar in his own country and, increasingly, in Salafi circles in the Arab world. As a religious authority, he is especially known for his specialization in hadith. In the social and political arenas, he is noteworthy for four reasons. First, his intellectual trajectory has combined traditional and university education, representing long-term changes in the accreditation of scholars within his own family and in Mauritania as a whole. Second, his connections to Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and other countries showcase the transnational character of Salafi intellectual networks, as well as the prominence of Mauritians within such networks. Third, his negotiation of a public Salafi activist presence in Mauritania, including his role as a spiritual mentor to the Islamist political party Tawassoul, highlights the complex choices Salafi clerics make when they engage in politics. Finally, his sophisticated television and internet presence offers a case study of how Muslim leaders are using new media to convey their spirituality, authenticity, and relevance.

Biography

Shaykh Dedew was born in Boutilimit, a centre of Islamic learning in southwestern



Mauritania, on October 31, 1963. As a child and a young man, he studied the Qur'an, principles of law and language, and other Islamic sciences. His teachers came initially from his extended family, which included many prominent scholars, especially his maternal grandfather Shaykh

Muhammad 'Ali Ould 'Abd al-Wadud (d. 1982)¹ and his maternal uncle Shaykh Muhammad Salim 'Abd al-Wadud (1929-2009, also known as Shaykh Muhammad Salim 'Adud). The latter served as head of the Supreme Court from 1982 to 1988 and as Minister of Culture and Islamic Orientation from 1988 to 1991, as well as head of Mauritania's Supreme Islamic Council.² Part of Shaykh Dedew's "charisma," to use Max Weber's term, is inherited. Shaykh Dedew also studied with scholars outside Mauritania, receiving a scholarly authorization (*ijaza*) from figures such as Saudi Arabia's Shaykh Hamud ibn 'Abd Allah al-Tuwayjiri (1916-1992) and Syria's Shaykh 'Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda (1917-1997).

In 1986, Shaykh Dedew received his baccalaureate and enrolled in the College of Law at the University of Nouakchott. He took first place in competitions held by the state-run Higher Institute for Islamic Studies and Research (ISERI) and Saudi Arabia's Imam Muhammad bin

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Saud University, and was invited to enroll in the College of Shari'a at the latter institution. He graduated with a Master's degree from the University, writing his thesis on "The Public Addresses of Judges" (*Mukhatabat al-Quda*) in Islamic jurisprudence.³ In Riyadh, he served at one point as the imam of a mosque and as a professor at the University.⁴

Within Mauritania, Shaykh Dedew has attracted a substantial following, especially among urban youth, for his preaching. His popularity reached new heights when he issued a fatwa in 2002 stating that Muslim states could not enter into relations with Israel (Mauritania had recognized Israel in 1999). Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem writes, "Henceforth, proponents of the re-Islamization of Mauritania would see in him a leader who linked not only charisma, popularity, and youth but also family connections and social legitimacy." Anti-Israel

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activism in the early 2000s, Ould Ahmed Salem continues, brought Sheikh Dedew close to Jamil Mansour, an Islamist politician who was elected mayor of Nouakchott's Arafat neighborhood in 2001.⁵ Mansour would go on to found Tewassoul, which was legalized in 2007. Shaykh Dedew has complemented his roles as an activist and a preacher with formal institutional roles, notably as head of the Center for the Training of Islamic Scholars (*Markaz Takwin al-Ulama*) and head of 'Abd Allah bin Yasin University, both located in Nouakchott.⁶ Shaykh Dedew has built an international scholarly profile through publishing books (he has authored seven published books, on subjects such as hajj and love of the Prophet Muhammad), attending conferences, serving on bodies such as the jurisprudential assembly of the Muslim World League, and appearing in the international media; for example in his programme "A Jurisprudence for Our Times" (*fiqh al-'asr*) on Iqra' Channel.⁷

Important Features of Shaykh Dedew's Biography and Public Engagement

The first significant feature of Shaykh Dedew's biography is the combination of traditional and modern education that he represents. A comparison between him and his uncle Shaykh 'Adud indicates that Shaykh Dedew represents an ongoing, long-term

trend in the 'credentialization' of Mauritanian Islamic scholars. Shaykh 'Adud initially studied and taught in the traditional, informal Islamic school (*mhadra*) of his father, who had received a traditional education. In the 1950s, Shaykh 'Adud joined the Islamic Institute of Boutilimit,⁸ founded in 1955 as the first formal higher level institution for advanced Islamic studies in the country.⁹ Shaykh 'Adud was later sent as part of a delegation of Mauritanian judges to Tunisia, where in 1965 he obtained a diploma (license) in law. The Shaykh later taught at the University of Nouakchott and at ISERI.¹⁰ Shaykh Dedew, who attained a higher level of formal modern education than his uncle, represents the second generation within his family to pursue modern university education in Mauritania and internationally. His and his uncle's paths suggest not that modern university education is replacing traditional Islamic

education or rendering it irrelevant, but rather that the two forms of education have become complementary and mutually reinforcing in some prominent Mauritanian Islamic scholars' intellectual and religious personas.

Second, Shaykh Dedew is an international figure and presents himself as such. His official biography states that he "has lectured in most of the countries of the Arab and Islamic world, and in Europe, Africa, Asia, and America, and has on preaching trips (*rihlat da'wiyya*) visited more than fifty states." He has built important linkages with Salafi intellectual networks in Saudi Arabia, holding attestations of his good record (*tazkiya*) from figures like Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh, the Grand Mutfi of Saudi Arabia, and Dr. 'Abd Allah al-Rukban, an instructor at Muhammad Ibn Saud University.¹¹ Intellectual linkages between Mauritania and Saudi Arabia are not new; prominent Mauritanians of previous generations, such as Shaykh Muhammad al-Amin al-Shinqiti (1907-1973) and Shaykh 'Abd Allah bin Bayyah (b. 1935), have achieved prestige in the Kingdom, where Mauritanian scholars seem to enjoy strong reputations for their learning. Unlike such figures, however, Shaykh Dedew is based in Mauritania rather than in Saudi Arabia.

A third noteworthy feature of Shaykh Dedew's career is how he has approached public activism. The

Shaykh is, despite his association with Tewassoul, not a “politician” in the sense of someone who competes for formal political office. Yet, through his public pronouncements and appearances he often takes stands on controversial social issues and policy debates. He has also played a political role through his interactions with the state. Given the combination of oppositional politics and religious stature he embodies, his relations with the state have included both conflict and cooperation. Shaykh Dedew was arrested in April 2005 and detained for four months as part of a government crackdown on Islamists during the last months of the regime of military ruler President Maaouya Ould Taya.¹² Yet under the regime of current President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who took power in a military coup in 2008 and was elected as a civilian in 2009, the Shaykh has mediated between the state and prisoners, including imprisoned Salafis accused of links to terrorism¹³ and businessmen accused of corruption.¹⁴ Relations between the Shaykh and the President have been complex, with Abdel Aziz and the Shaykh sometimes making strategic use of each other’s respective positions but, at other times, moving toward open enmity. After the Shaykh pronounced a fatwa around December 2011 legitimizing revolutions against “corrupt rulers,” the Mauritanian newspaper Taqadoumy wondered whether relations between the state and the Islamists were returning to the levels of tension that had existed under Ould Taya.¹⁵

The Shaykh’s role in civil society has also been complex. Particularly controversial was his statement on Saudi Arabian television in April 2012 that “slavery, as a practice, does not exist at the present time in Mauritania.”¹⁶ These remarks drew an outcry from anti-racism and anti-slavery groups in Mauritania, where *harratine* or “black moors,” as well as non-Arab-speaking ethnic groups, face ongoing discrimination from *bidan* or “white moors.” Despite Shaykh Dedew’s stature as one of the foremost Mauritanian religious authorities of his generation, then, he has at times been a highly divisive figure in public life. He sometimes seems to embrace this status.

Finally, there is the importance of new media to the Shaykh’s ability to reach audiences in Mauritania

and internationally. Ould Ahmed Salem writes that the circulation of cassettes of Shaykh Dedew’s lectures was crucial in his rise to prominence even before his anti-Israel activism brought him into the political spotlight.¹⁷ As noted above, the Shaykh appears regularly in Arab regional media, especially television. Additionally, he maintains a sophisticated internet presence. This includes the YouTube channel he established in 2009. As of November 2012, videos at this channel had been viewed nearly 500,000 times. The videos, most of them capturing remarks the Shaykh gave to live audiences, cover topics such as endowments (*waqf*, pl. *awqaf*), hajj, and various fatwas the Shaykh has issued. In many videos the Shaykh speaks in modern standard Arabic (*fusha*), rather than the Hassaniyya dialect that is widespread in Mauritania. This linguistic choice demonstrates his facility in the language of classical scholarship and makes his words intelligible to a broad Arab audience.¹⁸

The Shaykh’s website, www.dedewnet.com, extends his self-presentation as a leader who personifies Mauritania’s tradition of Islamic learning in the present, global age. While he states the internet’s potential for both evil and good, he writes that his site “takes upon itself a pioneering global role (*dawr ‘alamira’id*) in instruction, preaching (*da’wa*), and Islamic culture, and reflects the truth of the cultural diffusion and the intellectual and scholarly distinction by which Mauritians have been known throughout the ages (*ya’kis haqiqat al-ish’a’ al-thaqafi wa-al-nubugh al-fikri wa-al-’ilmi alladhi ‘urifa bihi al-shanaqita ‘ala marr al-’usur*).”¹⁹ The website offers content in a variety of Islamic scholarly disciplines,

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such as jurisprudence, language, Qur’an, and hadith. A news section gives updates on the Shaykh’s travels, media appearances, conference presentations, and other activities. It would be possible to follow key moments and statements in the Shaykh’s career from a distance.

Conclusion

The career of Mauritania’s Shaykh Muhammad al-Hasan al-Dedew calls attention to both long-term and short-term trends in the religious landscape of Mauritania and the broader Islamic

world. The long-term trends include shifts in the educational paths of Mauritanian scholars and their increasing international connections, while the short-term trends include the new public visibility and oppositional politics that Mauritanian Islamists have pursued since the early 2000s. A leader who combines a traditional family scholarly pedigree with education at modern universities, Shaykh Dedew has attained national and regional prominence through his use of new media, his international ties, and his willingness to intervene in political and social controversies. With his forays into the spheres of politics and new media, Shaykh Dedew has risked alienating parts of his audience and, as noted above, has experienced arrest and aroused the ire of Mauritanian heads of state. Nevertheless, he has also built new audiences among young urban Islamists and among media consumers throughout the Arab world. A relatively young man, the Shaykh will probably remain an important figure in Mauritanian political and religious life for some time to come.

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Notes

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- 3 Dedew 2010a.
- 4 Ould Ahmed Salem 2007: 31.
- 5 Ould Ahmed Salem 2007: 31.
- 6 Dedew 2010a.
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- 11 Dedew 2010a.
- 12 "La junte nomme un nouveau Premier ministre en Mauritanie," *Associated Press*, August 8 2005. Available at: http://www.africatime.com/mauritania/nouvelle.asp?UrlRecherche=archives.asp%3FRech%3D1%26no_pays%3D34%26no_categorie%3D%26keyword%3D%26BtGo.x%3D7%26IsPanafricain%3D0%26IsAfrique%3D&no_nouvelle=206044; accessed November 2012.
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