

Invoking the Invisible in the Sahara

In this innovative new history, Erin Pettigrew utilizes invisible forces and entities – esoteric knowledge and spirits – to show how these forms of knowledge and unseen forces have shaped social structures, religious norms, and political power in the Saharan West. Situating this ethnographic history in what became *la Mauritanie* under French colonial rule and later the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, Pettigrew traces the changing roles of Muslim spiritual mediators and their Islamic esoteric sciences – known locally as *l'ḥjāb* – over the long-term history of the region. By exploring the impact of the immaterial in the material world and demonstrating the importance of Islamic esoteric sciences in Saharan societies, she illuminates peoples' enduring reliance upon these sciences in their daily lives and argues for a new approach to historical research that takes the immaterial seriously.

Erin Pettigrew is Assistant Professor of History and Arab Crossroads Studies at New York University Abu Dhabi. She is a cultural historian of colonial and postcolonial West Africa, with a focus on the history of Islam, slavery, race, gender, and nationhood.

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Invoking the Invisible in the Sahara

Islam, Spiritual Mediation, and Social Change

Erin Pettigrew

New York University Abu Dhabi



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Western scholars learned, professionally at least, to suspend moral judgement on spirit beliefs and witchcraft (even in their bloody manifestations) by learning to grasp their rationality – all the while believing the beliefs to be false.

– Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2014), 220

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In memory of Biri N'Diaye and Aissatou Thiam

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Notes on Orthography and Translation

For most terms in Arabic, I rely on Brill’s simple Arabic transliteration system for spelling and diacritics in the Latin alphabet. As place names were often translated into the Latin alphabet through French, I maintain well-known names of places, such as Nouakchott and Rosso, found in most current maps in English or French. I otherwise rely on diacritics to guide pronunciation of less well-known places. For known authors or figures, I maintain the most public spelling in French. Terms in Ḥassāniyya, the Arabic dialect of Mauritania, are written in the closest approximation in the Latin alphabet with diacritics. Terms in either form of Arabic, Hassāniya or *fusha*, are written in italics. Terms in Soninké, Pulaar, Wolof, or French are written in Latin letters and in italics. Place names from among these language groups follow French convention, which is the local convention. I retain original sources’ spellings. The glossary includes both singular and plural forms of terms, though only those used in the plural in the book itself are included as such. Unless otherwise noted, terms in the glossary are from the formal Arabic. Translations from interviews and texts, except where otherwise indicated, are my own.

In most Arabic-speaking countries, men’s first names are usually followed by *ibn* or *bin* (b.), meaning “son of,” followed by their father’s first name. In Mauritania, the convention is to use *ould* or *wuld*, terms that also mean “son of.” The same convention is followed for women’s names, though here the term *bint*, meaning “daughter of,” is replaced with *mint*. Some sources, especially those written in Arabic, will also use the *ibn/bin/bint* structure, in which case I followed my sources in their practice.

Abbreviations

<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
ANRIM	Archives nationales de la République Islamique de Mauritanie
ANS	Archives nationales du Sénégal
AOF	Afrique-Occidentale française
APC	Archives provinciales de Chinguetti
Ar.	Arabic
ARA	Archives régionales d'Atar
<i>ASR</i>	<i>African Studies Review</i>
<i>BCAFCM</i>	<i>Bulletin mensuel du comité de l'Afrique française et du comité du Maroc</i>
<i>BCEHSAOF</i>	<i>Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française</i>
<i>BIFAN</i>	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire</i>
BNF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>CEA</i>	<i>Cahiers d'Études Africaines</i>
CHEAM	Centre des Hautes Études sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Moderne
CNRS	Centre national des recherches scientifiques
Fr.	French
FRANOM	Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer
IFAN	L'Institut français d'Afrique Noire / L'Institut fondamental d'Afrique Noire
<i>IJAHS</i>	<i>International Journal of African Historical Studies</i>
<i>JAH</i>	<i>Journal of African History</i>
<i>JNAS</i>	<i>Journal of North African Studies</i>
ONS	Office national de la statistique