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## **RA Reviews Editorial Voice:**

### **Debating Anti-Blackness in the Arab-Muslim World: The Case of Arab-Islamic Slavery**

By Hassan J. Ndzovu, Research Africa Reviews Associate Editor, Moi University, Kenya.

Following the cruel killing of a black man, George Floyd, in May 2020 by a Minneapolis white police officer, protests erupted in numerous parts of the world. For several weeks the demonstrations brought Black Lives Matter (BLM) consciousness to the global arena and inspired conversion and criticism on all forms of racism and anti-Blackness. One such forum that generated debate on this subject is the Research Africa listserv. The listserv was full with rich and substantive discussion on the dreadful condition of Anti-Blackness in the Arab-Muslim societies. Scholars of different disciplinary background engaged in the debate, which centered on the merits of using **Arab-Islamic Slavery to describe the legacy of black enslavement in the Arab-Muslim world.**

In the process, new terms such as “Blackification” (Moses Ochonu, July 21, 2020) were coined to suggest the idea that in the Southwest Asia and the North African Muslim societies slavery is mostly conflated with Blackness. Many literature suggestions were shared for further reading and critical reflections on blackness, racism, and slavery. In their passionate and sometime emotional discussion, scholars in the forum problematized the issue of “Arab-Islamic slavery (AIS)” and “anti-Blackness” in the Arab-Muslim world. As demonstrated in this editorial, we would like to allow their voices to speak out for themselves on this timely subject while tying together their divergent views. Right from the onset, the concern was (1) if it is correct to use the term “Arab-Islamic slavery” in describing a particular form of slavery (Jeanette S. Jouili, July 11, 2020); and (2) to establish if there is a distinction between “Arab-Islamic slavery” and “Arab-Muslim slavery” (Mamadou Youry Sall, July 20, 2020)

Explaining the choice of the term “Arab-Islamic slavery”, Fallou Ngom of Boston University maintained that it is suitable to use it in reference ‘to the Arab-initiated and religiously-justified enslavement of Black populations and its dehumanizing legacies (including in Africa)’ (Ngom July 23, 2020). The reason is that ‘Islamic justifications have been central in the legitimization of the enslavement of Black populations and their mistreatment by Arabs and those who claim Arabic identity’ (Ngom, July 23, 2020). In Ngom’s understanding, if people opt to use the term “Arab-Muslim slavery”, it will distort ‘key aspects of the problem: the religious dimensions of Arab slavery and its legacies’ (Ngom July 23, 2020). In her tacit opposition, Jeanette S. Jouili of University of Pittsburg cautioned that, ‘while I agree completely that the scourge of anti-Blackness in the Arab world needs to be unapologetically and radically opposed, I think the argument of the centrality of the term AIS in order to do so is problematic on several levels. The term Arab-Islamic is reductive, essentializing and historically incorrect...because it subsumes...a number of different ethnicities under this vague umbrella term’ (Jouili July 11, 2020). Here Mohamed Mathee of the University of Johannesburg added, ‘I think the notion/term

Arab-Islamic slavery can be questioned and in its stead placed Muslim slavery of Black people without that resulting in a (the) denial, downplaying, unnecessary nuancing of Arab/Muslim anti-Black racism' (Mathee July 25, 2020).

One could ask: what is the purpose of proposing an alternative conceptual formulation i.e. Arab-Muslim slavery instead of Arab Islamic slavery? Such suggestion of an alternative term has been interpreted as the persistent denial of the existence of anti-blackness in the Arab world by a section of Muslims and efforts to "sugar-coating Islam" (Matory, July 26, 2020). 'It is precisely and partly the denialism around naming the dominant human agents and theological justifications in this system of enslavement...that makes it imperative to designate it appropriately by signaling the racial and religious elements that underlined it', Moses Ochonu of Vanderbilt University observed (July 17, 2020). Ngom's views resonates with those of Ochonu who posits, 'I find Arab Islamic slavery or a denotative variant of it quite useful and accurate as a term of description even if I concede that, like all identifying terms of analytical convenience and descriptive utility, it is imprecise and it essentializes and fixes identities while homogenizing a fairly diverse demographic' (Ochonu, July 11, 2020). In his contribution with regard to the term, Rüdiger Seesemann of the University of Bayreuth concludes that the choice of the term "Arab-Islamic slavery" is useful as it refers to a specific 'history of violence, oppression, and injustice that is indeed rooted in a longstanding tradition of interpreting Islam and in a widespread sense of Arab supremacy over black people, regardless of the Prophetic example and Qur'anic principles' (Seesemann, July 24, 2020). He added that this approach of 'speaking of "Islamic slavery" should not be viewed with skepticism because it 'does not mean that "Islamic" is necessarily a negative qualifier' (Seesemann, July 24, 2020). Without doubt, the search for a better term and construct that captures the reality of Arab's enslavement, prejudice and subjugation of Black people has begun.

Before we proceed further on the subject, a question could be posed: Is there racism and anti-Blackness in the Arab-Muslim world (read Middle Eastern societies)? While affirming that it is true, Mohamed Elaskary of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies advised that the most imperative thing to be taken into consideration as one grapples with the subject is 'to differentiate between Islam and Arabic culture' since 'Islam does not tolerate racism of any type or degree while Arabic culture does.' He continued, it is important that 'we need to bear in mind as well the historical context' when addressing the issue of Arab-Muslims enslavement of Africans (Elaskary July 15, 2020). Such responses were interpreted as 'simply trying to defend or obfuscate the reality of centuries-old Arab-Islamic slavery and its anti-Black racist legacies in the Arab world' (Ochonu, July 23, 2020). What concerned Ngom, Ochonu and the like-minded during the debate is the seemingly 'double standard' employed 'in both the academia and the Muslim world' whenever 'honest discussions on Arab-Islamic slavery and its consequences on Black people' arises (Ngom, July 20, 2020). Particularly, Ngom wondered why scholars who are critical of the Arab-Islamic slavery are anticipated to be "nuanced", "scholarly", and "analytical" in their 'rejection and criticism of the evil of Arab-Islamic slavery and its legacies', but allowed to express their indignation 'when it comes to Euro-Christian slavery and its outcomes' (Ngom, July 20, 2020). Such posturing in his assessment is 'unjust and complicit in the perpetuation of the centuries-old oppression and dehumanization of Black people in the Arab and Muslim world, where the darker your skin, the less valued and more oppressed you are' (Ngom, July 20, 2020).

It is an objective fact that no scholar is capable of erasing ‘that many Muslims [particularly Arabs] held Africans in contempt’ (Rudolph Ware III 2014). This could be illustrated in the interpretation of the Prophetic hadith, ‘Emulate the blacks, for among them are three lords of paradise, Luqman the Sage, Negus (Emperor of Abyssinia), and Bilal the Muezzin.’ For the progressive, the meaning of this hadith is the Prophet characterizing ‘black people as exemplars of knowledge, justice and piety in Islam’ (Ware III 2014). But some Arab-Muslims doubting the ‘intellectual achievements of African Muslims’ in Islam substituted the term “emulate” with “look after” to portray a paternalistic attitude toward Africans (Ware III, 2014). Clearly, there is no doubt that Black slavery is ‘being rationalized and legitimized’ through ‘selective reading of Islamic jurisprudence’ (Abdulbasit Kassim, July 10, 2020). Some Muslims have even insinuated that ‘the slavery practiced by Arabs or Muslims was one ideological phenomenon, or was of a uniquely benevolent and enlightened character in world history’ in the view of Martin Klein (July 5, 2020) of the University of Toronto. This is a wrong and inaccurate reading of the problem of anti-Blackness in the Arab-Muslim world. It important for all Muslims of goodwill ‘to re-examine [Islamic] juristic canons on slavery as a route to intellectual transparency’ (Kassim, July 10, 2020), even if some scholars believe that ‘these canons are not the main reason slavery was perpetuated yesterday or today’ in the Arab-Muslim world (Nathaniel Mathews, July 10 2020). It is a historical fact that ‘Christianity and Islam developed in societies that were deeply involved in slavery’ (Klein, July 27, 2020). Arguably, this explains why the Qur’an and hadith, ‘goes further and limits the conditions under which people can be enslaved, it condemns harsh treatment, and it encourages manumission’ (Martin Klein, July 27, 2020). It is against this background that some Muslims, especially Arabs, find doctrinal approval from their sacred texts for subjugating Black people into slavery. Thus, for Arab-Muslim ‘blackness became a symbol of enslavability’ (Klein, July 27, 2020). Those who subscribe to this reading of the texts believe it to be the correct interpretation of their religion. It is this understanding of the texts that should be condemned for violating the spirit of the Qur’an because “it is religiously and morally baseless” (Esseisah as quoted by Nathaniel Mathews, July 10, 2020). This editorial is not an effort to stigmatize Islam in Africa. But it would be perplexing to find Muslims’ ‘tendency to resist examining their own often religiously rationalized legacy of oppressing Africans and non-Muslims’ (J. Lorand Matory, July 13, 2020).

To allay the fear of stigmatization of Islam, it is necessary for those engaging in this subject to maintain a delicate ‘balance between countering’ unchecked ‘Islamophobia and presenting an idealistic picture of Islam’ (Seesemann, July 24, 2020). But even as we strive into attaining this sense of balance, it is difficult ‘to deny that there are scholars’ and some Muslims who are eager to downplay oppression and subjugation of Black people ‘in many Islamic communities past and present’ (Seesemann, July 24, 2020). Their efforts notwithstanding, ‘it is true that many custodians of the Islamic tradition condoned slavery for a very long time; yes, it is true that there has been and still is a conflation of slavery and blackness in many Muslim societies’ (Seesemann, July 24, 2020). While the forgoing assertion is true, this should not be viewed to ‘mean that all Arabs are racist or all Muslims defend slavery’ (Seesemann, July 24, 2020). In the same vein, this does not suggest of lack of prejudice towards Afro descendants in the Arabo-Islamic world. The hypocrisy evident in this part of the world lies in ‘pseudo inclusiveness of Islam’, which supposedly creates an impression of ‘brotherhood and solidarity between Muslims regardless of the color of their eyes or skin’ even though the reality is different (Ibrahima Sy July 25, 2020).

It would be ‘insincere and hypocritical’ of ‘the defenders of Islam’ to ‘refuse to

acknowledge' a pattern of racial prejudice and Black slavery 'in Islam except the most self-flattering portraits of how much kinder and more reasonable the ideals of Islamic slavery are than the ideals of comparable systems' (J. Lorand Matory July 26, 2020). In his candid fashion, J. Lorand Matory of Duke University observed that 'the argument that real, authentic Islam is fair and pure, tainted only by the errant misdeeds of a few people acting un-Islamically, is as anemic and insincere' (Matory July 26, 2020). Such views of Muslims are common whenever acts of Muslims violence occur targeting members of the other faiths, insisting that such atrocities would not have been sanctioned by Islam. Such a 'defensive argument falls short because the fact that a group or an individual makes recourse to a religion' then their actions 'does indeed have something to do with that religion' (Gudrun Kramer 2015). One cannot, therefore, dismiss the dehumanizing violent acts of some Arab-Muslims evident in various parts of Southwest Asia and North African societies as being un-Islamic because these Muslims insist on invoking of Islamic sacred texts to justify their actions. The language, concepts, and inter-textual references they have applied have a strong foundation in the Islamic tradition.

Going through some of the contributions made during the debate, reveals 'how painful it is for black people and people of color to explain over and over again the nature of the discrimination they are exposed to' (Seesemann, July 24, 2020). In some instances, religion has been used to rationalize and offer justification for their oppression. There is evidence that 'Islam has been used to justify all sorts of horrific things, and it has also been used as a powerful resource for justice and anti-racism [and Abolitionism as well]. Whether to reduce the actions of all its adherents as (inherently) racist enslavers or (necessarily) exemplary angels are both dangerous forms of essentializing denialism' (Mona Hassan, July 14, 2020). While it is true BLM movement received "reciprocal sympathy" from the Arab-Muslims as demonstrated with the 'Palestinians continuing protests' of 'support after the murder of George Floyd' (Hassan July 14, 2020), there was concern that the problem of anti-Blackness has not been candidly discussed in the Arab-Muslim world. Time has come for all people of good will to courageously address the repulsive reality of Arab-Islamic racism and its legacies. This effort should be considered as both a 'moral and academic obligation' where all of us are expected to 'stand up against the long denial and cover up of the horrors of Arab-Islamic slavery and its anti-Blackness legacy' that a section of Muslims would 'prefer to conceal and stifle conveniently' (Ngom, July 26, 2020). It is our obligation as scholars and global citizens 'to ensure that discussions on the evil of Arab-Islamic slavery and its legacies are no longer silenced and left unchallenged' (Ngom, July 26, 2020). Other than just viewing the entire debate in our "ivory towers" as just an abstract academic exercise – 'we should live that resistance, live that humanity' (Hassan July 14, 2020).

*Research Africa Reviews* invites scholars to continue this discussion through its seminal publication. Essays pertaining to approve or disapprove the usage of the term Arab-Islamic Slavery are most welcome as well as essays that look at the literature of anti-blackness in the region. We will initiate this reflection with Nathaniel Mathews' essay on '*Arab-Islamic slavery*': *a problematic term for a complex reality*. It is our hope that reflections from other participants will be forthcoming as we sought to enrich both the debate and dialogue through a vibrant scholarly work.

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