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‘Arab-Islamic slavery’: a problematic term for a complex reality

A Literature Review by Nathaniel Mathews, Binghamton University.

The enslavement of Africans in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds is a topic of recurring interest to Africa’s scholars. The following is a criticism of the designation ‘Arab-Islamic slavery’ (AIS) to describe slavery in these regions. Drawing on Dahlia Gubara’s work, 1 I summarize arguments as to why Africa’s scholars should confront this history without resorting to the seductive language of AIS and its associated terms. Scholars have long warned against reducing patterns of collective violence to superficial motivations; the same holds for the language we use to analyze slavery. Even when used as a heuristic rather than asserted as an essential, AIS suffers from difficulties that compromise its analytical usefulness. 2 Critiques of the term can be organized into three basic themes: 1) AIS confuses religion and ethnicity; 2) AIS is a-historical; and 3) AIS is Islamophobic and Orientalist. Scholars and journalists writing about slavery might choose an adjective like ‘Islamicate’, reach for descriptors like ‘Saharan’ or ‘Indian Ocean’, or use names that denote the institutional setting of a given state. 3 AIS does not provide the conceptual toolbox necessary to engage the subject of slavery globally and comparatively, neither in history, nor in the present.

Confusing religion with ethnicity: AIS muddles religion and ethnicity into a polemical concept that does ideological work, (often inadvertently) re-dividing Africa across the Saharan boundary. 4 In the resulting matrix, Arabs are non-African, North Africans are non-black, sub-Saharan Africans are non-Muslims, and ‘blackness is a stable [and global] category referring to a historically coherent people whose experiences of violence are necessarily tied by a common ethnicity.’ 5 This is not to deny the existence in the canons of Arabic, of damaging and prejudicial stereotypes about dark-skinned people from Africa, nor of the need to confront them forthrightly. 6 But the AIS term not only allows the perpetrators of enslavement to stand outside the boundaries of ethnic, linguistic and religious community, it also elides important voices of critique that emerged from within the ‘Arab-Islamic’ milieu. Al-Jahiz, Ibn al-Jawzi, Al-Suyuti, Ahmad Baba, Musa Kamara and other Muslim writers who refuted black inferiority from within a framework, whether for better or for worse, of a shared linguistic, legal and intellectual culture that spanned Sudanic Africa, the Maghrib and beyond. 7

Other kinds of slaveries are commonly named for their victims—‘Circassian slavery’—or delineated according to the geographical dimensions of the trade—the Atlantic, Central Asian or Black Sea slave trades. But the term ‘Arab slavery’ only describes Arab slavers, never Arab victims. It is rare in the literature to use an ethno-linguistic or religious group as a descriptor of a mode of organizing labor relations; social scientists do not speak of ‘Arab-Islamic’ capitalism, nor refer to bondage in the Roman Empire as Latin-polytheist slavery. 8 Materialist and ideological bases of domination may well be co-constitutive, but AIS discourse pivots quickly to the latter in a totalizing manner. 9 This generally has a dampening effect on ongoing scholarly work of the definition, translation and contextualization of slavery in local archives. Relationships of servile bondage must still be explored in terms of their unique historical meanings and dynamics. 10

Does Muslim involvement in slavery make such slavery ‘Islamic’? It depends. Slavery within proscribed boundaries was sanctioned by Muhammad and long considered by Muslim scholars as ethically normal, if not exactly desirable as a condition. However, at least since the end of the nineteenth century, and certainly since 1960, the majority of Muslim governments, organizations and individuals
have accepted the abolition of slavery within the shariah. It bears remembering that those few states and regions today where this abolitionist consensus has lapsed are also those where state infrastructure is sparse or destroyed and the state lacks trust from the population. Islam is neither the major cause driving the return of slavery in these regions, nor the simple solution to prevent it. That said, refraining, even as a form of ‘strategic essentialism’, from calling contemporary slavery ‘Islamic’ is a tactic to encourage a critical Muslim attitude toward slavery’s theological justifications in Muslim traditions.

**AIS a-historical:** AIS discourse is generally uninterested in a comparative historical method for exploring the evolution of slavery or race, often jumping between different centuries and geographic contexts. Slavery practiced in Mecca and Medina at the dawn of Islam has more in common with slavery practiced throughout Eastern Sudanic Africa in the 600s CE, than it does with plantation slavery in the ninth century Abbasid caliphate. There is more continuity than rupture in the experience of slavery between Roman, Byzantine, Caliphal and Ottoman models in the Mediterranean, a continuity obscured by an insistence on marking slavery religiously. AIS fore closes historical investigation of categories—class, occupation, residence and gender—that were as determinative of slave status as Arab ethnicity or Muslim identity. Soldier, concubines, eunuchs and domestic slaves each had differing ideological rationales and stood in differing relations to forms of power and ethnic cohesion, in ways dissimilar to Atlantic patterns of racial governance. To interpret eighteenth century Cairo as “racially stratified”, operating according to a “racial distribution of power established by clash of arms” is to look into the Muslim past through the mirror of American race-craft. Gubara’s close reading of al-Jabarti ‘Aja’ib al-Athar suggests a very different picture.

Some AIS discourse conceives of the origins of the African slave trade in the psychologically violent character of Arabs and Muslims, rather than in an existing but limited property right in humans. That slave-raiding profoundly affected many communities in Africa is beyond doubt, however the quasi-theological link between Arabs, Islam and predatory raiding, helps contain the effect of another analogy—that between slavery and racism. Opening that analogy would anachronistically render pan-African historical icons like Mansa Musa, Uthman dan Fodio and Shaka Zulu as ‘anti-black racists’. Menelik II, the ruler who preserved Ethiopia’s independence at the battle of Adwa, but also enslaved Oromo rebels, would be similarly reduced. Yet, even if we granted the Oromo of that time the justness of their historical grievance, it would be wrong to attribute their ethnic marginalization in Ethiopia today to the psychologically violent and racially exclusive character of the Amhara. A better lens would be to examine the ambivalent effects of coercive state power centralization on those expelled outside, or marginalized within, the state. The benefits of a unified territorial state and civic equality among citizens has obscured the often brutally coercive roots of centralized sovereignty. The fact that many Muslim reformers of 18th and 19th century West Africa turned to violence in order to root out the evil of Muslims enslaving Muslims, should lead us to compare and contrast the interventionist practices of the reformers’ states and the colonial states’ later ambivalent abolitionist agenda.

**Islamophobia and Orientalism:** In the last two decades, the War on Terror has ruined millions of lives and contributed to widespread scapegoating against Muslims, and those mistaken for Muslim, particularly in the US and Europe. Gubara calls AIS an ‘incitement to discourse’, and its conflation of Arab and Muslim is tied to Islamophobic currents of the ‘terror-industrial complex’. In the aforementioned regions and beyond, it functions in the wider media environment as part of what Thomas Maguire called an ‘Islamic simulacrum’. The simulacrum both creates and feeds on a notion of Islam as uniquely ideological, as exceptionally racist and in denial of slavery.

The invocation of AIS is Orientalist, insofar as AIS discourse often relies uncritically on European abolitionist accounts as evidence. Scholars have expressed skepticism about eighteenth century European travelogues in Africa used as pro-slavery propaganda, they have also scrutinized nineteenth century sources, used as anti-slavery propaganda. Totalizing linkages between Arab and Islam begin to appear in these texts with increasing frequency in the nineteenth century, as part of
abolitionism’s project for Christian moral reform of a benighted Africa, the so-called ‘civilizing mission’.31 The implications of abolitionist discourse for modern African history are beyond the scope of this article.32 The germane point, for this abbreviated discussion, is that the AIS proponents remain naïve to this influence on the term’s definitional coherence, and thus unable to transcend its limits for writing a holistic account of African history from the perspective of independent Africans.

Works Cited
3. Rather than ‘trans-Saharan’, see McDougall, 196; Ware, “Slavery in Islamic Africa,” 53.
8. Rudolph Ware, “Slavery in Islamic Africa”, 53
10. Ware, “Slavery in Islamic Africa”, 55 argues for slavery as primarily a socioeconomic institution, rather than a religious one; for similar arguments see Barbara Fields “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America.” New Left Review 1.181 (May/June 1990): 95-118; Ibrahim Sundiata,


Jonathan Brown, Slavery and Islam, 124-146.


William McKee Evans posits, with some qualifications, but little to no historical context, that ‘Muslims lived in ‘racially stratified societies’.” Evans, “From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the ‘Sons of Ham’.” The American Historical Review 85.1 (February 1, 1980): 15–43, 31, 42.

Gubara, 237; All else aside, we might prefer Gubara’s interpretation to Evans (at least for Cairo) for the simple reason that Evans’s article relies heavily on other’s translations as well as German, French and Italian secondary sources, whereas Gubara closely reads and translates directly from a primary source written by a Cairene, in the language of the day.


For slavery, race and the state in Ethiopia, see Mekuria Bulcha. The Making of Oromo diaspora: A Historical Sociology of Forced Migration (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2002); Wendy James and Donald Donham. The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social


23 Recent scholarship from Paul Lovejoy emphasizes that the jihads helped ‘shield’ some Africans from the Atlantic slave trade. Jihad in West Africa During the Age of Revolutions (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016). There is a parallel argument made for older empires, see Jeffrey Fynn-Paul, “Empire, Monotheism and Slavery in the Greater Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the early Modern Era.” Past & Present 205 (November 2009): 3-40.


26 Ironically one of the first US victims of a post-9/11 hate crime was a Sikh man, Balbir Singh Sodi, mistaken for Muslim. For the racializing impact of the ‘war on terror’ on Somalis in Kenya, see Keren Weitzberg, We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017), 167-174.


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31 Gubara, 242; McDougall, 197; Boulukos, 247.
