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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.’⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ Materialist and ideological bases of domination may well be co-constitutive, but AIS discourse pivots quickly to the latter in a totalizing manner.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Gubara’s close reading of al-Jabarti’s *Aja’ib al-Athar* suggests a very different picture.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ The benefits of a unified territorial state and civic equality among citizens has obscured the often brutally coercive roots of centralized sovereignty.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶ Gubara calls AIS an ‘incitement to discourse’, and its conflation of Arab and Muslim is tied to Islamophobic currents of the ‘terror-industrial complex’.²⁷ In the aforementioned regions and beyond, it functions in the wider media environment as part of what Thomas Maguire called an ‘Islamic simulacrum’.²⁸ The simulacrum both creates and feeds on a notion of Islam as uniquely ideological, as exceptionally racist and in denial of slavery.²⁹

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.³⁰ 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

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- 2For previous critiques, see: E. Ann McDougall, "Discourse and Distortion: Critical Reflections on Studying the Saharan Slave Trade." *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire* 89.336 (2002): 195–227; Rudolph Ware III. "Slavery in Islamic Africa, 1400-1800," in David Eltis and Stanley Engerman (eds.) *Cambridge World History of Slavery, vol. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011); Hisham Aidi. "Slavery, Genocide and the Politics of Outrage: Understanding the new Racial Olympics." *MERIP* 234 (Spring 2005); Mohamed Bakari, "Review: John Alembillah Azumah *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for Inter-Religious Dialogue*." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14.3 (September 2003): 381–87.
- 3 Rather than 'trans-Saharan', see McDougall, 196; Ware, "Slavery in Islamic Africa," 53.
- 4Gubara, "Revisiting", 231; Ware, 52-3; Mohamed H. Mohamed, "Africanists and Africans of the Maghrib I: Casualties of Analogy." *Journal of North African Studies* 15.3 (August 2010): 349-374, 365; Hisham Aidi, Marc Lynch and Zachary Mamphilly (eds.) "And the Twain Shall Meet: Connecting Africa and the Middle East," in *Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides, POMEPS Studies 40* (New York: Columbia University SIPA, June 2020): 1-82, 8.
- 5 M.H. Mohamed, "Africanists and Africans of the Maghrib II: casualties of secularity." *Journal of North African Studies* 17.3 (June 2012): 409-431, 428.
- 6 The phrase is from Annie Olaloku-Teriba, "Afro-Pessimism and the (un)logic of anti-blackness" <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/articles/afro-pessimism-and-unlogic-anti-blackness>, reading Frank Wilderson.
- 7 Abdullah Hamid Ali, *The 'Negro' in Arab-Muslim Consciousness* (Swansea: Claritas Books, 2018), 172; see also Haroon Bashir, "Black Excellence and the Curse of Ham: Debating Race and Slavery in the Islamic Tradition." *ReOrient* 5.1 (October 1, 2019): 92–116, 101 and passim.
- 8 Rudolph Ware, "Slavery in Islamic Africa", 53
- 9 John Phillips, "Some Recent Thinking on Slavery in Islamic Africa and the Middle East." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 27. 2 (1993): 157-62, notes that as far back as 1990, a conference in Kaduna, Nigeria on global slavery recommended that "the Middle Eastern slave trade not be referred to as 'Islamic', since this is no more accurate than the use of the term 'Christian' to describe New World plantation slavery." For a summary of the conference, see John E. Phillips, "World Conference on Slavery and Society in History, organized by Arewa House, Ahmadu Bello University, Lugard Hall, Kaduna, Nigeria, March 1990". https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/ajames/6/0/6_KJ00004403539/_pdf
- 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,

“Twentieth Century Reflections on Death in Zanzibar.” *IJAHS* 20.1 (1987): 45-60, 45-49; Robert Harms contextualizes these arguments for the study of slavery in Africa, “Slave Systems in Africa.” *History in Africa* 5 (1978): 327-35.

¹¹ See Fred Cooper, “The Problem of Slavery in African Studies.” *Journal of African History* 20.1 (1979): 103-125, 105-106, for preferring the term ‘slave’ to other western terms like ‘captive’ or ‘serf.’

¹² Mauritania formally abolished slavery in 1981. For a flavor of nineteenth Muslim abolition debates, see Amal Ghazal, “Debating Slavery and Abolition in the Arab Middle East: Between Muslim Reformers and Conservatives” in Behnaz Mirzai, Ismael M. Montana and Paul E. Lovejoy (eds.) *Islam, Slavery and Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2009). Compare a more optimistic reading of abolition in Islam in Jonathan Brown, *Slavery and Islam* (London: Oneworld, 2019), chapters 5&6, with a slightly more pessimist reading from Bernard Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand: The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), chapter 9.

¹³ Khaled Esseissah, “Paradise Is Under the Feet of Your Master: The Construction of the Religious Basis of Racial Slavery in the Mauritanian Arab-Berber Community.” *Journal of Black Studies* 47.1 (2016): 3-23, 9

¹⁴ Gubara, 235-6; David R. Goodman, “Demystifying ‘Islamic Slavery’: Using Legal Practices to Reconstruct the End of Slavery in Fes, Morocco.” *History in Africa* 39 (2012): 143–174, 153.

¹⁵ For ethnicity and slavery in Mecca and Medina, see HendGilli-Elewy, “On the Provenance of Slaves in Mecca during the Time of the Prophet Muhammad.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49 (2017), 164-168; Ghada Osman, “Foreign Slaves in Mecca and Medina in the Formative Islamic Period.” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16.4 (October 2005): 345–59. For the transformations in slavery under the Abbasids, see Freamon, *Possessed*, 194-205. For recent scholarship on the Zanj revolt against the Abbasids, see Abdul Sherriff, “The Zanj Revolt and the Transition from Plantation to Military Slavery.” *CSSAAME* 38.2 (August 2018): 246-260.

¹⁶ Freamon, *Possessed*, 85-87; Hannah Barker. *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260-1500* (Philadelphia: UPenn, 2019).

¹⁷ Jonathan Brown, *Slavery and Islam*, 124-146.

¹⁸ Gubara, 237; Saleh Trabelsi, “Eunuchs, Power and Slavery in the Islamic World” in Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne (eds.) *Sex, Power and Slavery* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014), 541-557, 554.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ See for instance Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 BC to 2000 AD* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1974), 158. For the limited property relation and slavery, see Thomas Kelley, “Unintended Consequences of Legal Westernization in Niger: Harming Contemporary Slaves by Reconceptualizing Property,” *American Journal of Comparative Law* 56.4 (Fall 2008): 999-1038, 1028; John Thornton. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74.

²² 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*

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²³ Gwyn Campbell, *Africa and the Indian Ocean World: From Early Times to Circa 1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 218-225.

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ Gubara, 242; Phillips, 158; Ware, *Slavery in Islamic Africa*, 65-66; see also Ware, “Slavery and Abolition in Islamic Africa, 1776-1905,” in *Cambridge World History of Slavery vol. 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 344-371.

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

²⁷ Gubara, 233; Junaid Rana, “The Racial Infrastructure of the Terror-Industrial Complex.” *Social Text* 129 34.4 (Dec 2016): 111-138.

²⁸ Thomas E.R. Maguire, “The Islamic Simulacrum in Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s ‘Into Africa’.” *West Africa Review* 1.2a (2000). See for instance the positive reception given by the French press to Tidiane Ndiaye’s indictment of ‘Arab-Muslim slavery’ in *Le Génocide Voilé*, perhaps in part because of the book’s heavy reliance on 18th and 19th century French and other European travel accounts. See the book’s review by Moritz Behrendt, “Selective Theses on the Arab slave trade”,

<https://en.qantara.de/content/tidiane-ndiayes-the-veiled-genocide-selective-theses-on-the-arab-slave-trade>. The simulacrum is also a rhetorical weapon in polemics between Christians and Muslims in postcolonial African states like Nigeria, see Samaila Suleiman, “The Dangers of History”

<https://dailynigerian.com/the-dangers-of-history-a-rejoinder-to-abdulbasit-kassim-by-dr-samaila-suleiman/>; See also the stimulating original critique: Abdulbasit Kassim, “Edward Colston, History Wars and the Legacies of Slave Owners In Nigeria”

<https://opinion.premiumtimesng.com/2020/06/13/edward-colston-history-wars-and-the-legacies-of-slave-owners-in-nigeria-by-abdulbasit-kassim/>.

²⁹ Brown, *Slavery and Islam*, 204, 395n18; Lamin O. Sanneh, “Slavery and Islam.” *Historically speaking* 8, no. 6 (2007): 20–21; Bakari, “Review”, 384.

³⁰ For the eighteenth-century writers use of travelogues to support a pro-slavery agenda see: George E. Boulukos, “Olaudah Equiano and the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Africa.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 241-55. For critical attention to the travelogue genre as a historical source, see Gérard Chouin, “Seen, Said, or Deduced?: Travel Accounts, Historical Criticism, and Discourse Theory: Towards an ‘Archeology’ of Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Guinea” *History in Africa* 28 (2001), 53–70.

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

³² But see Jonathon Glassman, “Racial Violence, Universal History and Echoes of Abolition in Twentieth Century Zanzibar” in Derek R. Peterson (ed.) *Abolition and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 175-206.

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