

# AfroMecca in History



# AfroMecca in History:

*African Societies, Anti-Black  
Racism, and Teaching in  
al-Haram Mosque in Mecca*

By

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and Teaching in al-Haram Mosque in Mecca

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بِأَيِّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَى  
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# INTRODUCTION

Just as the racist imaginary of Europeans about black Africans has centered since the 18th century until today on the term *monkey/ape*, that of Arabs has centered since at least the middle ages until today on the term '*abd*' (slave). According to this imaginary, any black person is, by definition, a slave.

In other words, the first thing that black Africans in Mecca and throughout Saudi Arabia complain about is the racism they face daily because of their black skin.

Black Africans in Mecca have made a great contribution in many areas of life. It is, therefore, unfair and racist to consider them "less indigenous" than other communities solely because of the color of their skin. The black people of Western countries also experience this logic of exclusion, which considers them as eternally non-indigenous due to the simple fact of the color of their skin.

The central subject of this book being inseparable from the question of anti-black racism, we therefore discuss this from the first pages. Furthermore, although much of this book is (as mentioned in the title) about Mecca, it also covers, to a lesser extent, Jedda and Medina, the two other major cities of the Hijaz. It presents everyday life in Mecca since the 19th century by focusing on two important aspects: (1) the African Diaspora, its ancient presence in Mecca and the surrounding region, and its impact; (2) the Islamic teaching and scholarship tradition in al-Ḥaram Mosque.

That being said, at the outset (Chapter 1, "From Aksum to Mocha and Mecca") the analysis of the book begins with a critical history of the relationships between Arabs and black Africans from before the advent of Islam until its very beginnings. Here, the focus is mainly on relations between the Axum Kingdom in Ethiopia (Ḥabasha) and Arabia, including Yemen and Hijaz to a lesser extent.

Then, the discussion turns to an explanation of terms long used by the Arabs to designate black people. Thus, a reminder is given of the genealogy and evolution of terms such as *aswad* (black), *Ḥabashī* (Ethiopian), and *Zinjī* (black from parts of East Africa other than Ethiopia). On this subject, the analysis is based on famous writings produced on this theme. Among these writings can be mentioned the work of Jamāl al-Dīn Abū Faraj b. al-Jawzī (d. 1208) entitled *Tanwīr al-ghabash fī faḍl al-sūdān wa al-ḥabash* (“Shedding Light on the Superiority of Sudanese and Ethiopians”) and that of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) entitled *Rafʿ shaʿn al-ḥabashān* (“Highlighting the Merits of Ethiopians”).

As for the contemporary period, the analysis is based on the important book by ʿAbdu Badawī (1976), *Al-Sūd wa l-ḥaḍāra al-ʿarabiyya* (“Black People and Arab Civilization”). Two other important works on the subject also make a significant contribution. These are Bernard Lewis’s book *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: A Historical Inquiry* (1971) and Gernot Rotter’s thesis, *Die Stellung des Negers in der islamisch-arabische Gesellschaft bis zum XVI. Jahrhundert* (1967).

While black slavery still persisted in the Hijaz until the beginning of the 20th century, no Arab scholar, no politician, no ʿālim, Sūfī or other religious figure, wrote a word to condemn this practice—with the exception of the Arab-American Christian Amīn al-Riḥānī in his book *Mulūk al-ʿarab* (“The Arab Kings”), which he published in 1924 after his 1922 trip to the Arabian Peninsula. He wrote: “I thought that the slave trade no longer existed in the world today, but when I came to this country [Hijaz and ʿAsīr] I saw it with my own eyes.”

However, despite Amīn al-Riḥānī’s humanism, he was not free from anti-black racist prejudices. This shows how deeply anti-black racism is anchored among the majority of Arabs—so much so that even those who say they are not racist are not free from anti-black racist prejudices. This is one of the reasons that I have integrated the story of Amīn al-Riḥānī here. The other reason is that he talks in his book about the political conflicts between the rulers of ʿAsīr, Hijaz, and Najd. The outcome of these conflicts was not only a crucial moment in the founding of Saudi Arabia but also at the same time an important element in the division of the region between the Western powers.

The discussion of the book continues on the theme of the position of Islam on slavery by positing the question clearly: why did Islam not ban slavery

outright, as it had banned so many other things? The discussion goes on to consider the history of slavery in the Hijaz before the conquest of the region by Ibn Sa‘ūd and after it.

In Chapter 2 (“AfroMecca Seen from Above”), the discussion focuses on certain famous Saudi personalities from Mecca of African descent. This includes:

- A representative of ‘ulamā’ in the person of Shaykh Muḥammad Amān (b. ‘Alī) al-Jāmī;
- A personality of the cultural and political scene in the person of Muḥammad Surūr al-Ṣabbān;
- Two others from the field of football, namely Muḥammad Nūr and Aḥmad b. ‘Īd b. Sa‘d al-Ḥarbī;
- A representative of the world of the media in the person of the famous journalist Ḥusayn al-Najjār; and
- A writer, namely ‘Abdallah Muḥammad Abkar.

Chapters 3 (“AfroMecca Seen from Below”) and 4 (“Life in ‘African Ghettos’”) recount the daily life of the majority of black Africans in the past and in the present. One learns, for example, what are the places and neighborhoods in which they have preferred to live since the 18th century, just as one also learns the kinds of jobs in which they were employed there. In these chapters, the focus is particularly on two important places where the lives of people of African descent can best be observed, namely the Shāri‘ al-Manṣūr district and its market, known as the Dūqan qidā.

Chapter 5 (“Teaching and Learning in al-Ḥaram Mosque”) is of course linked (perhaps indirectly) to the lives of black people of African descent in Mecca (and also in Medina). We know that these people did not leave Africa to settle in the holy cities of Islam for economic reasons, because during the times of their arrival in mass numbers, Mecca and Medina were very poor cities. They settled in these two holy cities, therefore, for religious reasons—for reasons of piety, to be closer to God. They spent months, even years, traveling by the trans-African pilgrimage route through Sudan (*ṭarīq al-sūdān*) to come to the two holy cities of Islam. Once they arrived, they performed the ḥajj (pilgrimage), visited the tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad in Medina and settled, for a time or

permanently, in Mecca or Medina. In their settlement, they made sure to be close to al-Ḥaram Mosque of Mecca, if they lived in Mecca, or near the Prophet's Mosque, if they lived in Medina. This is because what they were looking for, after completing the ḥajj, was to be *mujāwirūn* (living near the holy mosque). Being near the holy mosque allowed them to easily perform their religious rituals in the mosque often and for as long as possible. One of these rituals was to follow the religious teachings that the 'ulamā' taught through the system of study circles (*ḥalaqāt*) of the two mosques. Some of these new black African residents became teachers or students in these study circles; others took the courses as informal, attending in an irregular manner. For all, regardless of the capacity in which they took part in these courses, doing so was primarily an act of piety (*'ibāda*). In Islam, nothing is worth more in merit than the act of piety accomplished in one of these two holy cities. In addition, we cannot talk about Mecca and life in this city without talking about the life of the heart of this city, namely al-Ḥaram Mosque and the teaching dispensed there. All these reasons justify the presence of the last chapter in this book.

## CHAPTER ONE

# FROM AKSUM TO MOCHA AND MECCA: ANTI-BLACK RACISM IN THE HISTORY OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ARABS AND BLACK AFRICANS

“Neither in the East nor in the West has anti-black racism disappeared; on the contrary ...”

The African presence in Mecca has a very long history that dates back to long before the advent of Islam. The first Africans to come to Mecca were Ethiopians (Ḥabashī). But the important historical event that made this long presence more visible was the conquest of Mecca and the destruction of the *ka'ba* by the elephants of the leader of the Ethiopian forces, General Abraha, in AD 570, the same year as the birth of Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, in the same city. Indeed, in 524, the Ethiopian military forces of Aksum had conquered Yemen, remaining there until 590 when they were ousted by the Persian armed forces. It was during this period that General Abraha launched the conquest of Mecca from already-occupied Sanaa, with the help of these armed elephants. Thus, the year of the Prophet's birth is often simply named *ʿĀm al-fīl* (the year of elephants). In the 6th century, Ethiopia became the great power of the Red Sea region. Even before this period, the Ethiopian influence in Arabia and especially in Mecca was felt on different levels, including the two discussed below.

The first level on which this influence was felt was in the existence of intermarriage. We know, for example, that the poet ʿAntara b. Shaddād was born to an Ethiopian mother and an Arab father. ʿAntara has remained until today one of the fundamental figures of Arabic literature, and thus of Arab culture. The extent of intermarriage demonstrates how far the Ethiopian element in society had become nested in the Arab element in Mecca—something that showed in the physical appearance of Meccan people as well as in their language. This latter, however, is something that the majority of Meccans were not aware of then, and are not aware of even

now. Yet this influence on the language demonstrates the strong and long-standing presence of the Ethiopian community in Mecca as well as the intense exchanges that existed between Ethiopia and Arabia.

The second level of influence is the presence, until today, of vocabulary from different Ethiopian languages, including the Ge'ez language, in the Qur'ān and in the Arabic language in general. Among the oft-cited as examples of words mentioned in the Qur'ān which are from Ethiopian languages are “*yu'minūn bi al-jubt wa al-tāghūt*” (*al-jubt*: Satan; *al-tāghūt*: seer) and “*Yāsīn, Tāha*”/“*Ya rajul*” (O man).

This close relationship between Ethiopians and the people of Mecca continued after the advent of Islam. This can be seen first in the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, whose nurse when he was a child was an Ethiopian woman named Baraka Umm Ayman. She looked after Muḥammad from when he was very young until he married Khadija. After Khadija and Abū Bakr, the third important person to embrace Islam was Bilāl b. Rabāh, a former Ethiopian slave. He would become the first *mu'adhdhin* (the one who calls the faithful to prayer) of the Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Recall that he was not thereafter the only *ṣaḥābī* (companion of the Prophet) with Ethiopian parents: they were more than 20.<sup>2</sup> Add also those who had one parent of Ethiopian origin, such as Khalīfa 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ, the conqueror-hero and leader of the Islamization of North Africa (both of Ethiopian grandmothers). Ethiopian *ṣaḥāba* were either former slaves bought by Muslims who freed them to become Muslims themselves, or those converted by former Muslim refugees in Aksum who then accompanied these refugees to Mecca. One of them was Dhu Mahjar al-Habashī, a nephew of Najāshī Ashama, the king of Ethiopia.

Another important event that marked the importance of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian in Mecca was the emigration of the first group of the Meccan faithful of Prophet Muḥammad to Aksum, Ethiopia. Indeed, when the small group of the Meccan followers of Prophet Muḥammad were under increased repression by the majority of Meccans who were hostile to the message of the Prophet, this latter recommended to his followers that they seek temporary refuge in Aksum and wait there until God rescue them. He told them that in Ethiopia they would find a just and pious king. “If you go to Abyssinia, you will find a king under whom none is persecuted. It is a

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<sup>1</sup> Bilal had also participated as a *mujāhid* in the conquest of Syria. He died in Damascus and was buried there.

<sup>2</sup> See Ṣādiq al-Mu'ayyad al-'Azm, *Riḥlat al-ḥabasha*, Cairo, Dār al-tanwīr, 1890.



land of righteousness where God will give you the relief from what you are suffering.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, these Muslims were welcomed by the Ethiopian king and remained in Ethiopia until the year in which Muḥammad made his emigration (*hijra*) to Medina. After this, his supporters who were refugees in Aksum went to join him in Medina. This emigration to Ethiopia, considered the first *hijra* in Islam and a major event in the history of Islam, was reported by classical Muslim historians such as Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Hishām, Ibn Kathīr, al-Ṭabarī, and others. This episode shows that after Mecca, Ethiopia (and Africa, in the general sense) was the second place in which Islam was established. It also shows the equity and tolerance expressed by the Ethiopian king and Ethiopian people, who were Christians, toward the Meccan refugees in granting them asylum though they were non-Christians and non-Ethiopian and persecuted by their own. This event expressed also the high level of tolerance of those Muslims who agreed to live under the authority and domination of Christians without causing major difficulties. ‘Uthmān, the son-in-law of the Prophet and future Khalīfa, together with his wife Ruqīyya (daughter of the Prophet) and Baraka Umm Ayman, the old nurse of Muḥammad, were also among the refugees of Aksum. This shows how far the Prophet had confidence in the king of Aksum. The latter was probably Adriaaz, also known by the name Ella Saham (610–630) and well known in the Islamic tradition by the name Najāshī (meaning sovereign, leader of state). Ibn Ishāq names him al-Najāshī Asham b. Abjar.<sup>4</sup> The group of these refugees from Mecca numbered 83 people (not including the children), led by Ja‘far b. Abū Ṭālib, a cousin of Prophet Muḥammad and brother of (future Khalīfa) ‘Alī b. Abū Ṭālib.<sup>5</sup>

When Muḥammad had made his *hijra* in 622, 60 of the Aksum refugees left to join him in Medina. The others stayed in Aksun until 628, when they returned to Mecca led by Ja‘far b. Abū Ṭālib. Of course, by this time many of these people were married to and had children with local women, a phenomenon which by itself had strengthened the relations between the Meccan Muslims and Ethiopia. As for Najāshī the king of Aksum, there are divergent opinions about whether he converted to Islam or not. The official history of Aksum denies any conversion of the king to Islam.

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<sup>3</sup> This sentence, like other similar ones, is well known and is to be found in the biographies of the Prophet.

<sup>4</sup> See A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muḥammad. A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh. With Introduction and Notes by A. Guillaume*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 657.

<sup>5</sup> Guillaume, *The Life of Muḥammad*, p. 148.

Islamic tradition, however, confirms the conversion but stresses that Najāshī did not publicize it, but rather kept it hidden because he did not want to alienate the leaders of his soldiers and those of the Ethiopian Church. Islamic tradition advances as evidence for this the fact that when the Prophet learned of the death of Najāshī, he prayed for the peace of his soul and ordered his companions to perform the “prayer of the absent dead person” called in Islam *ṣalāt al-ghā’ib*. Overall, the image of Ethiopia and Ethiopians among Arab Muslims remained more or less positive. On the contrary, the image of the black person in Arab-Islamic culture in general is not positive, as shown by the texts left by Muslim writers of the middle ages.

### **Aswad (Black), Ḥabashī (Ethiopia), and Zinjī/Zanjī (Black from Parts of East Africa Other Than Ethiopia)**

Except perhaps for Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304–1369), any Arab geographer-traveler of the middle ages knew black Africa not from personal experience, but rather by hearsay. We must also remember that Ethiopia (Ḥabasha) was the only part of Africa that had close ties with Mecca and Muslims from the beginning of Islam. The importance of Ḥabasha and its inhabitants disappeared when the capital of the Islamic state moved to Damascus under the Umayyad caliphs. But Ḥabashī (pl. Aḥbāsh or Ḥubbūsh) who were already living in Arabia and in the newly conquered territories did not disappear from Islamic discourse. The discourse on the black person in Islamic literature emerged mainly in the middle ages and was first dedicated notably to the Aḥbāsh because they were the black people that Arabs knew best. Unfortunately, very few copies of these writings survived. Among those works we should mention the work of Jamāl al-Dīn Abū Faraj b. al-Jawzī (m. 1208) entitled *Tanwīr al-ghabash fī faḍl al-sūdān wa al-ḥabash* (“Lighten the Darkness on the Merits of the Blacks and the Ethiopians”) and that of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (m. 1505) entitled *Raf‘ sha’n al-ḥabashān* (“Highlighting the Importance Status of the Ethiopians”).

Al-Suyūṭī subsequently wrote two other works on the same topic. In one of these writings, he attributed to the Prophet the following Ḥadīth: “The Khilāfa [political authority] is the business of the Quraish; the judicature is

that of the Anṣār; the propagation of Islam [da‘wa] is that of the Ethiopians.”<sup>6</sup>

Bernard Lewis’s book *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: A Historical Enquiry*<sup>7</sup> remains one of the few studies on this issue. However, Lewis himself mentions two other studies that he considered important. The first is the doctoral thesis of the German Gernot Rotter, *Die Stellung des Negers in der islamisch-arabischen Gesellschaft bis zum XVI. Jahrhundert*. The second is the work of the Egyptian ‘Abdu Badawī, *Al-Sūd wa l-ḥaḍāra al-‘arabiyya* (“Blacks and Arab Civilization”).<sup>8</sup> According to Lewis, the ḥadīths and the literature of the middle ages on this subject emphasize the egalitarian and supraethnic character of Islam and the primacy of spirituality and piety over race and skin color. Indeed, one oft-quoted ḥadīth of the Prophet reaffirms this idea in a very eloquent way: “The only merit which distinguishes the Arab from the non-Arab is piety.”<sup>9</sup> The problem is that, as Lewis has noted, the mere fact that Muslim authors of the middle ages felt the need to emphasize issues of skin color, and preached the equality of ethnic groups and races, suggests that racism among Muslims was a big problem. Without looking much further afield, we can see that even the medieval authors who wrote against the racism which black people suffered were not completely free from racism in their own imaginations and unconscious. For example, along with the ḥadīths of the Prophet which praise the Ḥabashī cited often by these authors, they mention others that denigrate the same Ḥabashī, such as for example:

When the ḥabashīs are hungry they steal, when they are sated they fornicate. There are, however, in them the following two qualities: they give food to those who are hungry and are brave in war.<sup>10</sup>

Listen and obey the holder of political authority even if he is an Ethiopian slave whose head looks like a raisin.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Al-khilāfa fī quraish wa al-ḥukm fī l-anṣār wa al-da‘wa fī al-ḥabasha.”

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: A Historical Enquiry*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990 [first edition New York, Harper and Row, 1971].

<sup>8</sup> ‘Abdu Badawī, *Al-Sūd wa l-ḥaḍāra al-‘arabiyya*, Cairo, al-Maktaba al-‘arabiyya, al-Hay’a al-miṣriyya al-‘amma li al-kitāb, Wizāra al-thaqāfa, 1396/1976.

<sup>9</sup> “Lā faḍla li al-‘arabiyyi ‘alā al-‘ajamiyyi illā bi al-taqwā.”

<sup>10</sup> “Lā khayra fī al-ḥabash in shabī ū zānū wa inna fīhim khaṣlatān ḥasnatān it‘ām al-ṭa‘ām wa ba‘san fī al-ba‘ṣ”: ḥadīth marfū’ reported by Ibn ‘Abbās (see Badawī, *Al-Sūd wa l-ḥaḍāra al-‘arabiyya*, p. 96).

Another relevant ḥadīth is the one in which Muḥammad promises pious Ethiopians that they will become white in the afterlife.<sup>12</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī wrote in *Tanwīr al-ghubsh fī tārikh al-sūdān wa al-ḥubsh*: “I met nice Ethiopian people but who had been living in deep sorrow because of the color of their skin. So I told them that merit is in goodness not in beauty”<sup>13</sup>—as if black people could not, by definition, be beautiful, just because of their skin color. In fact, all racist ḥadīth denigrating black people (sūdān), the Ḥabashī, and the Zinjī are false ḥadīths and must be completely rejected.

To counter accusations of Arab racism against black people, some Arab intellectuals have produced writings (books, pamphlets, articles, etc.) challenging what they see as unjustified accusations. Indeed, they do not deny that there are racists among the Arabs, but they argue that this is not a product of Arab-Islamic culture but rather the result of individual bad behavior. Instead, they argue, Arab-Islamic culture is by definition against all kinds of racism, particularly against black people. We have already considered writings produced in the middle ages. As for the contemporary period, the phenomenon continues. An important text is the book by ‘Abdu Badawī, *Al-Sūd wa l-ḥaḍāra al-‘arabiyya* (1976), which we have mentioned above. The purpose of the book was rather ideological and political. To support the African politics of Nasser, the Egyptian President, Badawī wanted to show that relations between black people and Arabs had a long history and were generally positive before and after the advent of Islam. In Badawī’s book, black people, especially Ethiopians (because it is about them in the first place), are presented in unquestionably positive terms. Wanting to show once again how the Ḥabashī element had entered Mecca, and especially southern Yemen, Badawī relates the following anecdote reported previously by Ibn Sa’d.<sup>14</sup> One day, members of the clan Awlād al-Ḥārith b. Ka’b of Najrān came to the Prophet Muḥammad to declare their conversion to Islam. When Muḥammad saw them he was surprised by the dark color of their skin and their imposing stature and said, “Who are these people who look like Indians?” The presence of the

<sup>11</sup> “Isma‘ū wa aṭī‘ū wa law istu‘mila ‘alaykum ‘abdun ḥabashiyyun ka anna ra’sahu zabībatun”: ḥadīth in Imām al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Riyadh, Darrussalam, 1999 (7142).

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> “Al-i’tibār bi al-iḥsān lā bi al-ṣuwar al-ḥisān”.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Sa’d (Muḥammad b. Sa’d b. Munī’ al-Zahrī), *Ṭabaqāt Ibn Sa’d*, volume 1, Maktaba al-Khanjī, Cairo, 2001/1421, p. 207; Badawī, *Al-Sūd wa l-ḥaḍāra al-‘arabiyya*, p. 85.

Ḥabashī element was also predominant in music and dance. Islamic tradition relates that the Prophet was pleased by Ḥabashī slaves' performance of music and dance before him to celebrate his arrival in Medina. Similarly, it is reported that Ja'far b. Abū Ṭālib danced a Ḥabashī dance named *al-ḥajal* before the Prophet, and the Prophet did not prohibit him from doing so.

In his book,<sup>15</sup> 'Abdu Badawī recalls something very important, namely that Ethiopian Muslims who were present alongside the Prophet and enjoyed a level of equality that they had not experienced before, had, after the death of the Prophet, almost disappeared from public space. This is because the equality they enjoyed when the Prophet was alive all but disappeared after his death.<sup>16</sup> Disappointed with the situation, some preferred to isolate themselves completely from the people, as was the case for Bilāl. He went, indeed, to Damascus and lived there completely isolated from the world until his death between 20 and 21 after the Hegira (AH). This situation of the re-marginalization of black people in Arab-Islamic societies after the Prophet's death was also manifested in the slavery to which they were subjected, which, while it had not completely ceased when Muḥammad was alive, had decreased to an extent. But, in relation to this point, a question must be asked: why did Muḥammad not prohibit slavery completely?

### Why Did Islam Not Ban Slavery Outright?

Muslims argue that Islam actually prohibited slavery except for the enslavement of non-Muslim prisoners taken by Muslims in war. However, once these prisoners converted to Islam, they were to be freed. Moreover, it is said, where the Qur'ān pronounces any judgment on the possession of slaves, the statement is always constructed with a verb in the past tense, as if God wants to show us that the right to own slaves is a right of the past, before Islam. It is a right of the time of *jāhiliyya*, apart from, as stated above, a Muslim's right to take a non-Muslim enemy prisoner after a battle. In other words, a person captured in war was considered from the time of his capture as if they were living under the laws of the past—that is to say, the laws before Islam. In other words, as we often hear, although Islam issues rules for the liberation of slaves and encourages Muslims to

<sup>15</sup> Badawī, *al-Sūd wa 'l-ḥaqāra al-'arabiyya*, pp. 99–100.

<sup>16</sup> The same could be said concerning women. A ḥadīth in Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, mentions that male companions say that as long as the Prophet was alive, they treated women well, but when he passed away they reverted to the old ways.

follow them, it does not issue rules for enslavement.<sup>17</sup> In fact, if we understand the explanation according to which Islam was against slavery but did not want rush the Arabs who practiced it widely too much, and therefore established measures only to *encourage* the liberation of slaves; if we understand that Islam permitted only the slavery of non-Muslims; we cannot therefore understand why until recently in Arab Muslim countries, many people possessed, sold, and bought slaves who were (in most cases black) Muslims! There is no excuse or justification for a Muslim to possess another Muslim as a slave. As Badawi wrote,:

To say that in the Islamic Orient slaves were considered a part of the family; they could marry free women of the family; they could climb through all the echelons of the social hierarchy ... saying all that ... can not excuse the fact that a great injustice has been committed against the black person. Moreover, it should be remembered that slaves in general and especially the black slaves, were often blocked before a track, precisely because they were black slaves.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the general trend of Arab Muslims in this respect is actually to minimize the importance of black slavery in Islam and in the Arab world. One of the clichés often advanced to minimize the phenomenon and clear the Arabs of their responsibility is the discussion between the Caliph Hishām and Zayd b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abū Ṭālib (the founder-leader of the Zaydiyya). Caliph Hishām, who was worried about Zayd’s ambitions to his position of Caliph, once said this to him:

O Zayd, I have heard that you want to become Caliph; but how can you become so when you are of a slave mother? And Zayd replied: O Commander of the faithful, the Prophet Ishāq was not of a slave mother and Prophet Ismā‘īl was of a slave mother. Now God has distinguished the descendants of Ismā‘īl in making them Arabs, who have continued to multiply and have even produced the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Shara‘a al-islām al-‘itq wa lam yashra‘ al-riqq.” Badawī, *al-Sūd wa’l-ḥadāra al-‘arabiyya*, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Badawī, *al-Sūd wa’l-ḥadāra al-‘arabiyya*, p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Badawī, *al-Sūd wa’l-ḥadāra al-‘arabiyya*, pp. 139–140. The same opinion is also mentioned by Prince Dr. Sayf al-Islām, son of the Saudi king Sad‘ūd b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz by a Baluchī slave woman. The prince has written a biographical novel of his mother with the title *Qalb min Banqilān* (“A Heart of Banqilān”), Dār al-Fārābī, Beirut, 2004. Banqilān is the native village of his mother. The novel was banned upon its release in Saudi Arabia.

In any case, after the advent of Islam, the number of black Africans who mingled with Arabs increased more and more, especially among the ranks of Muslim fighters. They were, for example, many black Africans in the army of Abū Muslim (in the 8th century), who ended the Umayyad Empire and facilitated the arrival of the Abbasid Empire. Many black people were also among the fighters of the 8th-century Muslim conqueror of Andalusia, Tāriq b. Ziyād.

Because they believed more than many others in the ideals of justice and equality that Islam preached, black Africans were the first to rebel against any ruler they saw as governing in injustice—hence also their sympathy with the Khawārij movement, which they considered “democratic,” egalitarian, and fair. For example, in 140/757, blacks had founded the Dawlat Banī Midrār. This was a Khawārij state in southwestern Morocco whose capital was Sijilmasa. In the last period of the Fatimid state (10th–12th centuries), the army of this state was composed mainly of black people, particularly Sudanese and Ethiopians. There were 100,000 black soldiers during the reign of Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn al-Ayyubī.<sup>20</sup> During the same period, an Ethiopian kingdom named al-Dawla al-najāḥiyya existed in Yemen with Zabīd as its center. But after the period of the first three caliphs and the long period of anti-black racism that followed, black people disappeared gradually from the public eye, even from military activities where they had almost dominated. As they withdrew, they concentrated themselves in activities considered less prestigious, such as music-making, an activity in which they produced geniuses such as Ziryāb.<sup>21</sup> Some were completely isolated from the world, devoting themselves only to the ritual practices of Islam. This process occurred especially once the Umayyads exaggerated the precedence attached to “Arab racial purity.”

In such an atmosphere, a huge literature of prejudice against non-Arabs, especially against black people, appeared. For example, Ibn Khaldūn speaks about black people in the following terms: “We noticed that blacks are distinguished from others by their lightness of spirit and by too-rough

<sup>20</sup> Badawī, *al-Sūd wa 'l-ḥadāra al-'arabiyya*, p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> Abu 'l-ḥasan 'alī b. Nāfi', the greatest musician of Muslim Spain. His nickname Ziryāb (a black bird) is said to have referred to both his dark-colored complexion and his versatile tongue. Born, probably around 175/790, into a family of *mawālī* of the caliph al-Mahdī, Ziryāb was educated, at an early age, by Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī. Ishāk al-Mawṣilī introduced him to Hārūn al-Raṣhīd (170–193/786–809), who, as later sources tell us, was greatly impressed by the young musician.

emotion. This is the reason that we find them excelling in all kinds of dance.”<sup>22</sup> In his book *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, al-Jāhīz wrote “I love eating dates with two kinds of people: black and Asfahānien. Because the black does not make a selection but eats what his hand first seizes. As for Asfahānien, he eats only the handful he has seized.”<sup>23</sup>

The story of Abū al-Misk Kāfūr al-Ikhshīdī (905–968) is a vivid example of the racist anti-black narrative left by Arabic literature. Kāfūr al-Ikhshīdī was, originally, an Ethiopian slave. He was promoted to the position of grand vizier of the Ikhshīdī state in Egypt and Syria by his master and protector Muḥammad b. Tughj, ruler of that time. After the death of the latter in 946, Kāfūr became the sovereign of the country. When Kāfūr is mentioned in the Arabic literature of that time, it is often in terms of racist insults referring to his black skin, his name, his origins, and the form of his body. Al-Mutanabbī, the famous Arab poet adored by all Arabs, is also known for his racist poems against Kāfūr. Yet Kāfūr was the best ruler of the Ikhshīdī dynasty.

Racial prejudice and all the forms of exclusion which black people were subject to did not occur without reactions from the black people themselves. One of the reactions recorded by history is the famous revolt in Baṣra known under the name of the Zanj Revolt (Thawrat al-Zanj), between 869 and 883. This was a revolt of black slaves against the Abbasid power. According to Badawī, if the revolt had succeeded it would have been a blessing for the Arabs, because it would have delayed the decline of Arab civilization.<sup>24</sup> The majority of the Zanj were natives of East Africa. They were forced to work hard in agricultural activities, especially around marshy waters. At the beginnings, they showed solidarity with the Shīʿa communities, who were also persecuted and marginalized. However, the ideas that motivated them to action were those of the Khawārij. In the end the Zanj Revolt was crushed, but its existence was not without benefits. The revolt had demonstrated for the first time in the history of Muslims the validity, even the obligation, for Muslims to revolt against unjust power. Also, after this revolt, the Abbasid rulers launched some reform measures which improved to some degree the lives of those who worked the land, including slaves. In light of all this, one

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<sup>22</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, p. 86, cited by Badawī, *Al-Sūd wa al-ḥaqāra al-ʿarabiyya*, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, p. 196, vol. 2, cited by Badawī, *Al-Sūd wa al-ḥaqāra al-ʿarabiyya*, p. 178.

<sup>24</sup> Badawī, *Al-Sūd wa al-ḥaqāra al-ʿarabiyya*, p. 202.



wonders why Muḥammad Ibn ‘Alī, the leader of this revolt, has not found in the memory of Arab Muslims the place that Spartacus occupies in Western memory, though the actions of the two are almost the same.

Until today, the question of slavery of black people and the racism they continue to face in Arab societies remains the most important issue dividing black people and Arabs despite the background of the principles of Islam and of humanism that both groups claim and pretend to defend. Nevertheless, the majority of Arab Muslims do not like the issue to even be discussed. They often argue that it is the enemies of Muslims, especially Christians and/or Westerners, who want to set black Africans and Arabs against each other—in order, according to this view, to continue their hegemonic and imperialist policy toward Arabs and Africans after having colonized them for decades and, even worse, after the slave trade of black Africans to America. While some black African Muslims share this opinion, the majority of black Africans, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, continue to complain of the racism to which they have been subjected by the Arabs. Indeed, this racism can be seen in written texts of the past and present as well as in oral speech. A troubling point in this story is the opinion expressed by certain Western commentators on the subject. These people, when they raise this issue (and they often do), always give, implicitly or explicitly, the impression that they want to say the following: do you see, you who accuse Westerners of racism toward black people and of having enslaved them? The Arabs were and are worse in both cases. In fact, it is as if they want to excuse the whites for their enslavement of black people and for their racism against them; as if they want to say that these things are not so serious, because the Arabs took black people into slavery before the white people did it, just as they were and are more racist toward them than white people are. This amounts to a relativization and a trivialization of the phenomenon.

But this also proves that anti-black racism has remained unchanged in the unconscious minds of most Arabs and white people alike. For the former, the racist imaginary remained in the medieval stage, with black people still considered *‘abd* (slaves), and for the latter, it rested, since the 18th century, on the comparison of black people to monkeys. This again justifies the epigraph of this chapter: “neither in the East nor in the West has anti-black racism disappeared; on the contrary ...”

## **Africans in Mecca and the Hijaz: African Saudis in General and Those of the Hijaz in Particular**

The Ottoman law on Ottoman citizenship published in 1869 stipulated (Article 9) that any person living on Ottoman land was considered Ottoman until he showed evidence of another citizenship. After the accession of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Sa‘ūd to the throne, the following Act was published: No. 20 of al-Qibla, 26 Dhu al-Hijja, 1334/October 1926. This law (of 22 Rabī’ al-Awwal 1345/October 1, 1926) stated that anyone living in the Hijaz who was an Ottoman subject would always be considered Hijazi. Every adult Muslim who lived in the Hijaz for three years without interruption could obtain Hijazi citizenship (*al-tab‘iyya*) if he demanded it. Then, in 1931, a law of Najdī citizenship was added to that of the Hijaz, with the same conditions. This remained the case even after the official proclamation of the foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Then, on 13 Shawwal 1357/December 1938, a new law of citizenship abolished the previous two citizenships (Hijazi and Najdī) and established Saudi citizenship, stipulating that anyone would be Saudi who lived in the current Saudi territory and who had previously been an Ottoman subject.

### **A Brief History of Slavery in the Hijaz**

After the end of the Crimean War, which from 1853 to 1856 opposed the Russian Empire to a coalition comprised of the Ottoman Empire, France, and the United Kingdom, the Ottoman Empire was under pressure from its two European allies, which demanded of it reforms and the abolition of slavery. This external pressure for reforms was in addition to an internal pressure from the Westernized Turkish elites, who were also asking for substantive reform of the empire, including the abolition of slavery. In 1855, the Sultanate declared the abolition of slavery throughout the territory of the Ottoman Empire, including in the Hijaz, whose *wālī* (governor) at the time, Kamāl Pasha, was a member of the Turkish elites who had been demanding reforms. Pasha, who resided in Jedda, asked his *Qāmqaṁ* (“man Qāma maqāmahu”: his representative in Mecca), to convey information about the decree to Mecca’s slave traders in order that they would cease their business.

When the people of Mecca learned about the prohibition of the slave trade, they revolted against the decision because, for them, it was like forbidding them what God had allowed them. People gathered in the streets and went

to the home of the Ḥanafī mufti, asking him to go with them to the qāḍī to ask him not to accept the decision. As they headed to the qāḍī, the disaffected ranks became bigger and bigger. The uprising transformed itself into rebellion against Ottoman rule, and clashes occurred between the masses and the Turkish elements of the police around al-Ḥaram Mosque, causing deaths and injuries on both sides. The masses, supported by the religious people, rejected the decision not only because they considered it against Sharī'a law but also because they saw it as a concession toward the Christians, the enemies of the Muslims, and therefore a confession of weakness on the part of the Sultan and the *wālī*. It was also an opportunity for those who were against Ottoman power to be able to express themselves openly. When the Sharīf of Mecca 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, who had for some time withdrawn to Taif, learned of the situation, he gathered a number of Bedouin tribes to go to support the Meccans against the police and Turkish soldiers. When the latter heard news of this, they left Mecca and took refuge in Jedda. In fact, Sharīf 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib was already in disgrace and wanted to take advantage of this event to return to power. He had been accused earlier of having ordered the assassination of Sayyed Ishāq 'Aqīl, the Naqīb of the Ashrāf of Mecca and a loyal ally of the Ottomans. Kamāl Pasha, the *wālī* of Hijaz, announced a decision that had reached him from Istanbul to appoint Sharif b. Muhammad b. al-Mu'īn b. 'Awn as the Sharīf of Mecca instead of Sharīf 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib. In the end, Sharīf 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib was arrested by the Ottoman authorities, who then banished him to Salonika in Greece. The decision on the abolition of slavery in Mecca was suspended for a later time.

In 1877, Egypt and Britain signed an agreement for the abolition of slavery throughout the Egyptian territory. The agreement also gave England the right, if the need arose, to stop Egyptian boats to monitor whether slaves were aboard.

In 1877, a Nubian slave named Marjan escaped from his owner and swam to a boat anchored in the waters of Jedda to seek refuge. Marjan belonged to someone named 'Ajlān, who used to send him to the port to work as a porter and assistant to dhow travelers. Of course, 'Ajlān received the money paid for the work of his slave, who received nothing. Although he was not mistreated by his master, Marjan complained of being cold at night given that the piece of cloth that he wore was very flimsy and did not protect him from the elements. At least, that was the reason given by Marjan to justify his escape, which failed because the legal framework of that time stipulated that in such cases, the escaped slave must be returned

to his owner. Indeed, an agreement was signed in August 1876 between the British and the Ottomans stating that English or other European powers should not retain a slave seeking refuge with them, but must instead return him to his owner. This was the reason that the captain of the dhow on which he sought refuge brought Marjan to the English Consul in Jedda, who in turn returned him to his original owner, ‘Ajlān. However, after learning of this, Western associations fighting against slavery took up the issue and asked for an amendment to this absurd law that required the return of an escaped slave to his owner. Thus, Marjan’s case was the first case of a runaway slave seeking refuge in the European consulates in Jedda, in particular in the British consulate. This case would speed the abolition of slave trade in the Hijaz.

We must remember that at that time the slave trade was flourishing between the two shores of the Red Sea, that is to say, mainly between Jedda and the ports of Tajura (Djibouti), Zayle (Somalia), and Barbara and Masawa (Eritrea).

From the other side of the Red Sea, the human commodity was brought to the ports of al-Hudayda, Mocha (Yemen), and Jedda. Other non-African slaves were also brought into the Hijaz, such as the Jāwī (from Java), natives from Central Asia, and those from India and Iran who were brought during the period of pilgrimage to Mecca (ḥajj). Some of these slaves remained in the Hijaz while others were dispatched via the ḥajj caravans to other areas of the Arabian Peninsula, to Turkey, and to Egypt. Each house of Mecca, Medina, and Jedda had slaves. They were employed to search, carry, and distribute water, in the construction of houses, and in everyday tasks for families. Others worked in the trade of their masters, as managers or as fishermen, including in pearl fishing. Female slaves were used for household work and as concubines.

Following the pressure exerted by Western associations against slavery, which had been reactivated during the escape of Marjan and for other reasons, Western consulates in Jedda (especially that of Britain) decided to give refuge to any slave who escaped from his master to seek refuge with a Western power.

They would send the slave back to his country of origin after having issued a release certificate (or certificate of manumission). Remember that these slaves came from countries under European colonization and therefore were subjects of these countries. This decision, of course, met with the objection of the owners of the slaves, and thus a long crisis

emerged between these countries and the people of the Hijaz. The slave owners, including members of Bedouin tribes from the Hijaz such as the Harbs, took to the streets and wanted to rush to the European consulates in Jedda and demolish them. But the Sharīf of Mecca stood against them and stopped their fury. In November 1891, the British Consul in Jedda openly appealed to the Hijazi people to free their slaves. Of course, the Ottoman authorities did not see this British activism in a positive light, as it increased the discontent of the Hijazi vis-à-vis the Ottoman. Still, the slave trade continued despite the activism of European consulates in Jedda, especially that of Britain.

### **Duqqat al-raqīq: The Slave Market in Mecca**

The slave trade increased in intensity after the Mahdi strongly established his power in Sudan in 1885. The Mahdists sent thousands of slaves in the Hijaz to sell in order to feed the budget of their new state. This upsurge in the sale of slaves was also accompanied by a wave of manumission, due on one hand to the activism of the British consulate in Jedda and on the other to owners emancipating their slaves out of piety—for this is a highly recommended pious action in Islam. Gradually, therefore, whole neighborhoods of Jedda, Mecca, and Medina became full of freed former slaves. In some places they formed the majority of the inhabitants. This was the case, for example, in the city of Khaybar (near Medina).

At that time, slaves were sold at the market of Mecca like any other goods, in full sight of everyone. This market, called Duqqat al-raqīq, was in Suwayqa near al-Ḥaram Mosque, at a gateway of the mosque called Bāb al-dirayba. The slaves were exposed during the day and slept at night in cages adjacent to the market, constructed for this purpose. These cages, without roofs, were no different to those in which animals were kept.

As stipulated in fiqh law, the purchase of the slave was done in the presence of two witnesses and an assessor from the Mecca Court of Justice. The administration of the Sharīf of Mecca received a tax on the sale of each slave. Besides the slave market in Mecca, there were slave markets in other cities, such as in Jedda, Medina, and Taif in the Hijaz, Sūq ‘Arad in the Tiḥama, and Sūq Mīdī in Yemen.

Despite the inhuman aspects of this trade, it had found a European champion at that time (1884–1885) in the person of the Dutch orientalist so revered by many, C. Snouck Hurgronje, alias Abd-ul-Ghaffar. He wrote, for example, the following:

On the benches near the wall sit girls and women, the adults slightly veiled; before them sit or stand on the ground male slaves of riper years ... One of the spectators is giving special attention to a small black boy. The broker charged with the sale of this boy calls him up and shows the stranger his hair, his legs, his arms, makes the boy show his tongue and teeth, and meanwhile praises his style and his skill.<sup>25</sup>

Hurgronje minimized the evil of this trade in Mecca and in the Orient, describing the slaves' supposed pleased acceptance of their fate and claiming also that the purchase of a slave could take place without the consent of the latter: "Before the deal is closed, the customer asks the slave: Are you willing to serve me (ente rādī)?"<sup>26</sup> Logically, if Hurgronje were correct, one would expect that if the slave said no, the transaction would not take place. But this was not the case: the response of the slave did not allow or prohibit the purchase. The question was only a formality, clearly aimed at defining the psychology of the slave and allowing the purchaser to make a decision accordingly. Hurgronje did not realize this fact. Indeed, he writes:

[E]ven though [the slave's response is] negative, experienced men can almost always understand whether he is really willing or not, whether his "No" means dislike for his future position or merely a human disinclination to any unknown change. But no one would buy a male slave against his will, and still less a female slave against her will.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, here and in other places in his book, Hurgronje supports the idea that the conditions of slavery in Arab regions (and especially in Mecca when he was there) were less severe than those of the slavery of black people by Europeans in America (which is true), and that often the slave wanted to remain a slave because the owner was so humane and kind to his slave that the slave's condition was better for him than his freedom, (which is completely false and absurd). This confirms what Hurgronje thought about black people: they were, according to him, "big children" who were happy to have an Arab master who provided for their need for food and shelter. This is clearly a racist idea. Moreover, Hurgronje suggests that slavery among the Arab Muslims was permitted by the Qur'ān and the ḥadīths, so that to be against it would be against Islam. The

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<sup>25</sup> Snouck Hurgronje, C., *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century. Daily Life, Customs and Learning. The Moslems of the East-Indian-Archipelago*, Leyden, Brill, and London, LUZAC and Co., 1931, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Snouk Hurgronje, *Mekka*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka*, p. 15.