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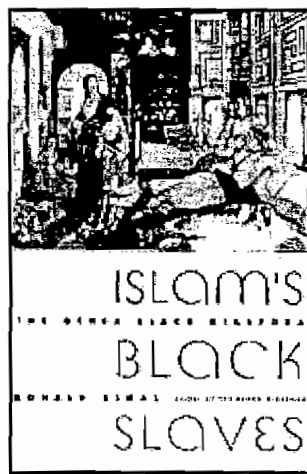
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Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora

The Harem by John Frederick Lewis, from cover of *Islam's Black Slaves*, courtesy of Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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Most Westerners have never heard of black cultural figures such as Israq As-Suwaida, a black Moorish girl celebrated in tenth-century Islamic Spain for her brilliant use of language, nor of Ziryab (789-857), the black poet, musician and artist in Islamic Spain who founded a school of music, introduced the use of toothpaste, underarm deodorants and new hairstyles, and made fashionable both the clean-shaven look for men and the habit of drinking wine.

They haven't heard, either, of the great Zanj rebellion. Led by Ali Ibn Muhammad, a freed slave, it took place in Iraq from 870 to 879. In 871 he captured and pillaged two Iraqi cities before being defeated in his bid to conquer the great capital of Baghdad. This massive black slave rebellion "resounded through Islam," according to the historian and author Ronald Segal, yet is virtually unknown among the great literature of slave uprisings that spans the Western black diaspora.

These are the gaps Segal hopes to fill with *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora*, a sequel to his earlier book, *The Black Diaspora*, which explored the more familiar story of Afro-Atlantic crossings and cultures. Unfortunately, this book is less successful than its predecessor -- perhaps inevitably, given the span and complexity of its subject.

And the span is remarkable. Undoubtedly the book's most interesting chapter is the one titled "The Farther Reaches," which looks at the legacy of African slaves taken to China, India and Persia. In India freed blacks, called "siddis," were employed as security forces for the Muslim fleets. Remnants of the African slave trade are still visible in Iran: small settlements of African descendants such as Zanjiabad and Deh-Zanjian (the name means "village built by Africans") in Kerman province. In Canton, where black slaves arriving in China were landed, it was the fashion to employ them as doorkeepers -- "and these, it was remarked, looked sad from homesickness." Chinese folklore, Segal writes, continues to feature blacks, who are "credited with peculiar strength and resourcefulness." Segal quotes the son of a shipping superintendent in 11th century Canton, who observed: "if the ship suddenly springs a leak, [the mariners] cannot mend it from inside, but they order their foreign blackamoor slaves [keui-nu] to take chisels and oakum and mend it from outside, for these men are expert swimmers and do not close their eyes when underwater."

These stories are indeed the farthest reaches, but even closer to home, African-Arab history and the heritage of the descendants of slaves in the Islamic world has been conspicuously absent from the wider discussion of the African diaspora, at least in the West. Segal attempts to address this silence. His book, he claims, "does not deal just with the nature and experience of black slavery in Islam -- a phenomenon deplorably not yet at an end -- but with the paradox of a black diaspora whose very existence is denied, though it survives in substantial numbers, and whose creative achievements have been no less real for the failure or refusal to recognize them."

This is the first in a number of assertions Segal makes for which no evidence is provided. A color prejudice undeniably exists in the Arab world, all too often dismissed with a reference to the inherent egalitarianism and race-transcendence of Islam. But in terms of cultural contribution, from the pre-Islamic odes of the black Arabian Antara to the music of Hamza al-Din, Sudan's celebrated Nubian singer, the creativity of what Segal calls "Afro-Arabs" has been celebrated. To this day, Arabs recall the verse of 8th century poet Nusayb ibn Rabah, who wrote:

Blackness does not diminish me, as long as I Have this
tongue and this stout heart. Some are raised by means of
their lineage; the Verses of my poems are my lineage! How
much better a keen-minded, clear-spoken Black than a mute
white!

Most treatments of slavery in Islam tend to lean towards an apologism, which argues that Muslim slavery was more benevolent than its Christian counterpart. Alternatively, others argue that Islam condones slavery, and point to the racial oppression that exists today in Sudan and Mauritania as evidence of the inherently supremacist and unchanging nature of Arab-Islamic societies.

Segal tries (ultimately in vain) to avoid these two extremes. In his introduction, he writes "Christian societies were responsible for an engagement to slavery in its most hideous, dehumanizing form.... Islam has been, by specific spiritual precept and in common practice, relatively humane in its treatment of slaves and its readiness to free them, even though individual Muslims have been among the most ferocious slavers in history." It's important, Segal writes, to avoid "demonizing either religion, along with its collective adherents."

Still, Segal points to crucial differences in the Western and Islamic systems of slavery. There was never a system of plantation slavery in Islam, he argues, partly because of an established system of peasant farming and partly because of incidents like the costly Zanj rebellion in Iraq. And in the Islamic world, he says, slaves and the descendants of slaves were more readily absorbed into the larger society, for a host of reasons including the higher ratio of female slaves, the manumission of children born to a slave mother and free father and the absence of institutionalized racism.

"The comparative smallness of a black diaspora in Islam," writes Segal, "is evidence not of the small numbers carried by the trade, but of the degree to which labor numbers were absorbed by the wider population." But Segal offers no numbers on the size of Islam's black diaspora, though the number of slaves transported is frequently estimated to be the same as in the West, about 11 million. It's also unclear how Segal defines "black," "Afro-Arab" and "diaspora." Is North Africa part of the African diaspora? Are all darker-hued Arabs in North Africa the descendants of slaves and hence part of a black diaspora? The fact that children of a free father and slave mother were considered free and "coopted upwards," to quote Ali Mazrui, makes the question of Arab versus African identity more fluid and complex - not the either/or instituted in the United States, for instance, by the notorious "one drop" rule.

Most important, Segal writes that "the treatment of slaves in Islam was overall more benign, in part because the values and attitudes promoted by religion inhibited the very development of a Western-style capitalism, with its effective subjugation of people to the priority of profit." Segal enumerates several Islamic injunctions, one calling a master to forgive his slave "seventy times a day," another declaring that "whoever separates a mother from her child, God will separate him from his dear ones on the day of resurrection."

Islam may indeed encourage a humane treatment of slaves, but then why did slave raids and chattel slavery take place to begin with? Why does slavery exist to this day in Mauritania and the avowedly Islamic state of Sudan? Religious precepts may guide people's lives, but economic and material interests often override all divine incantations, whether Muslim or Christian. Segal's assumption that "the religious dynamic" is what drives economic, political and social processes in Islamic societies blinds him to the complex economic and political factors that made slave-trading emerge.

"In Islam," Segal writes, as he states his book's central thesis, "slavery was never the moral, political and economic issue that it was in the West, where it engendered a multitude of tracts and books in denunciation or defense of the institution, and promoted racial attitudes that profoundly affected the development of Western societies." This contention is also problematic. Segal does not look at modernist religious texts in Arabic that advocated a reformist approach to Islamic law, and eventually led to abolition. His research consists of mostly, if not only, English language secondary sources rather than any original empirical research. His inability to read Arabic or Swahili -- the languages of blacks in Islam -- leads him to conclude that there are no writings on the issue. His focus on some essential, unchanging Islam also bars him from seeing the political and economic conditions of authoritarianism that existed and continue to exist in the Islamic world, to this day preventing open debate on issues of race and racism, and, more generally, identity politics and minority rights -- for example, the rights of Nubians, Coptic Christians and women in Egypt and elsewhere.

Throughout the book, Segal fails to provide a clear definition of what constitutes "slavery." In his introduction, he says his book is not about "what is coming to be called the 'new slavery,' applied to a form of captivity such as bonded labor through debt or through the survival of feudal practices, especially repugnant in its entrapment and exploitation of children... it is not slavery in the strict sense of the term, as the legal ownership of one person by another." Segal ignores the current practice of child slavery and trafficking, except where Muslims or people he defines as Arab are engaging in the practice, as in Mauritania and Sudan; he is silent on the child trafficking plaguing West Africa, except for his mention of the "Muslim member of the Lebanese commercial community in Freetown, Sierra Leone who in the late 1970s was combining the sale of clothes, radios, jewelry, cameras, Islamic texts, and copies of the Koran with supply of slaves to his compatriots in Beirut."

"There is a conscious and articulate black diaspora in the West that confronts the historical record of slavery and racism there. That Islam has no comparably conscious and articulate black diaspora to confront it with the reminders of slavery does not make that record any immune to examination and judgment," writes Segal in his introduction. "Islam owes such an examination and judgment not only to itself but also to its victims. They have the right, most precious of all for the voiceless, to be heard." It is unfortunate that in his shoddy research, Segal neglected so many of those voices.

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