

## ARAB VIEWS OF BLACK AFRICANS AND SLAVERY

by

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Black Africans were the earliest type of slave known to Arabs, and were the latest imported into the Arab-Islamic Middle East. One of the very first black Africans known to have been in slavery in the Arabian peninsula, and to have become one of the first converts to Islam., was the Abyssinian called Bilāl [b. Rabaḥ], who was owned and then freed by Abū Bakr, the Prophet Muḥammad's father-in-law and later successor, to whom he gave his freed slave, who then accepted the Prophet's message and was given the position of muezzin - "caller to prayer" by Muḥammad. Soon after North Africa was occupied by Arab Muslim armies in the late 7th century, black Africans were traded over the Sahara, and bought by Arab merchants as slaves - a practice which continued down to the early 20th century.

However, Arabs had no grounds for assuming that all black people were justifiably to be seen as slaves. The only enslaveable persons were those defeated in battle against Muslims. The basis of this may be gathered from what the Qur'ān said to the Prophet Muḥammad in defining what women it was lawful for him to live with: "We have made lawful unto thee... .those whom thy right hand possesseth of those whom Allah hath given thee as spoils of war". So it was captives in battle who might be "owned"- in this case females, but later applied to both females and males. Since war could not be fought against other Muslims, only "unbelievers" (*kuffār*) could be

captured and held onto as slaves, and no consideration was ever given in Islamic teachings to what color of skin made people enslaveable unbelievers. While the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān recognizes that human beings are of many different types: "We established you as peoples and clans, so you may know one another", and then defines the most honored as the most devout, i.e. no ethnic group is automatically favored by Allāh.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on this, the Prophet Muḥammad said; "'White has no preference over black, nor black over white, except through devoutness".<sup>2</sup> On another occasion the Prophet is said to have said: "The Arab has no virtue over the non-Arab, nor has the non-Arab over the Arab, nor has the White over the Black, or the Black over the White except in terms of devotion to God. Surely, the noblest of you in God's sight is the most devout."<sup>3</sup>

Such teachings, however, did not fully influence Arab minds over their views of black Africans. The first century and a half of Islam, as the Arabs went forth from the Arabian peninsula to conquer half of the known world, was marked by an overwhelming sense of Arab superiority over all other peoples. In this period even to become a Muslim one had to become a sort of fictive Arab by being adopted as the client of an Arab tribe.<sup>4</sup> The conquered peoples as a whole were in fact referred to as the 'clients' (*mawālī*), and Islam was viewed as the property of the Arabs. This, in turn, produced a reaction among the conquered peoples who rose to defend

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<sup>1</sup>. Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān, 33: 50.

<sup>2</sup>. Quoted in Muḥammad al-Sanūsī al-Jārimī, *Tanbih ahl al-ṭuhghyān ʿalā ḥurriyyat al-sūdān*.

<sup>3</sup>. *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> This may be compared to French and Portuguese policies of 'assimilation', ultimately based on Roman models, which conferred political rights on individual colonial subjects who achieved certain standards of education within the conquering power's system.

themselves and declare their equality with Arabs, using the adopted Arabic language to express themselves, and often adopting heterodox forms of Islam as the symbol of their opposition to Arab dominion. This had varying results. In the central lands of the Middle East populations 'became Arab' over the centuries. Speakers of languages such as Coptic in Egypt, Syriac and Aramaic in Syria and Palestine and Chaldean in Iraq adopted Arabic as their language of learning and of daily speech and, by and large, adopted Arab manners, customs and ways of thinking. Farther east the Iranians defiantly stuck to their ancient tongue in daily speech and much of their literature and created a distinctly Iranian Islamic culture. In the West the Berbers of North Africa either became arabised or, if they clung to their indigenous language and culture, became largely marginalised.

Equality of the believers, then could have different practical expressions. What, then, did it mean for black Africans? On this I will begin with a quotation from the writings of Bernard Lewis, one of the few contemporary scholars to deal with issues of race and color in Islam:

While the exponents of religion preached a doctrine of equality, albeit in somewhat ambiguous terms, the facts of life determined otherwise. Prevailing attitudes were shaped not by preachers and relaters of tradition but by the conquerors and slave owners who formed the ruling group in Islamic society. The resulting attitude of contempt—towards non-Arabs in general and toward the dark-skinned in particular—is expressed in a thousand

ways in the documents, literature, and art that have come down to us from the Islamic Middle Ages...This literature and, especially, popular literature depicts [the black man] in the form of hostile stereotypes—as a demon in fairy tales, as a savage in stories of travel and adventure, or commonly as a lazy, stupid, evil-smelling and lecherous slave. The evidence of literature is confirmed by art. In Arab, Persian and Turkish paintings blacks frequently appear, sometimes as mythological figures of evil, sometimes as primitives or performing some other menial task, or as eunuchs in the palace or in the household. Yet in spite of these attitudes and the resulting disabilities imposed upon men of African birth, they nevertheless managed to make a significant contribution to mediaeval Islamic civilization—and not only in their labor and services.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning with the last point Professor Lewis makes: the contribution made by men of African birth to medieval Islamic civilisation, let us examine the extent to which prejudice against them may have restricted their opportunities for making such contributions. The Arabs had black Africans living among them from before the days of Islam—mainly, it would appear as slaves. Some of the African women bore children from Arab fathers but the males among them seem to have had some trouble being accepted as full members of the tribe, despite the weight given to patrilineal descent. The sons of African mothers and Arab fathers, as well as slaves who had been given their freedom, were, or became, thoroughly arabised

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<sup>5</sup> B. Lewis, 'The African Diaspora and the Civilization of Islam', in M.I. Kilson & R.I. Rotberg, *The African Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 1976), 48-9.

in language and culture and sought to participate with ‘pure-bred’ Arabs on an equal footing. They were often to find, however, that their skin color stood in the way. Some took up the art of poetry, the quintessential Arab medium of artistic expression, and these black poets form the subject of a fascinating book by the Egyptian scholar ʿAbduh Badawī called [in translation] ‘The Black Poets and their Distinctive Characteristics in Arabic Poetry’.(*al-Shuʿarāʾ al-sūd wa-khaṣāʾiṣuhum fī ʿl-shiʿr al-ʿarabi*)

These poets were often known as ‘the ravens of the Arabs’ (*aghribat al-ʿarab*) because of their black color, and as one satirist pointed out, ravens were traditionally considered bad omens, and were especially associated with the parting of lovers. On the relationship of their color to their social status and to their poetic art, Badawī has this to say:

[T]here was a sharp sensitivity over color among the black poets before Islam. This was because they were a depressed and downtrodden group and because they were excluded, sometimes roughly, sometimes gently, from entering the social fabric of the tribe. Thus they lived on the edge of society as a poor and depressed group. They were only acknowledged under conditions of extreme pressure, as we know from the life of [the poet] ʿAntara. Although this poet was the defender of his tribe and its supreme poetical voice, his own tribe’s attitude towards him continued to pain him and weigh on his mind. The name ‘son of a black woman’ stuck to him, even when returning from victory in battle.

Although the tone of uneasiness becomes softened among the poets of the time of the Prophet as a result of Islam's raising the morale of the black man, yet the sensitivity over color is not altogether different. The poets saw themselves and their people as downtrodden and although this sense of being downtrodden varied from century to century and from poet to poet, yet the black man could not refrain from being a voice of protest against the life around him and the tragedy of his own situation. Later we see [black poets] exploding in the face of those who allude to their color as may be seen in the poetry of the 'three angry poets' al-Ḥayquṭān, Sunayḥ & ʿAkīm [of the early 8th century]. For them it was not enough just to defend themselves. We see them taking pride in their blackness and in the history of black people and the lands they came from and attacking the Arabs on the points on which they prided themselves.<sup>6</sup>

*[End of quotation]*

Here is an example of this. One of these poets who was insulted in some obscene verses by the Arab poet Jarīr responded in the following way:

Though I be frizzle-haired, coal-black of skin,  
 My generosity and honor shine yet brighter.  
 Blackness of skin does me no harm  
 When in battle's heat my sword is flailing.  
 Would you claim glory where there is none?

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<sup>6</sup> ʿAbduh Badawī, *al-Shuʿarāʾ al-sūd* (Cairo, 1973), 223-4.

The Ethiopians are more glorious than you.<sup>7</sup>

As contacts with sub-Saharan Africa expanded, Arabs in the broadest sense simply labeled such populations as *sūdān*, i.e. “blacks”, though peoples from some regions of Africa who were taken into the Middle East in slavery were given broad ethnic labels such as the Zanj from East Africa or the Ḥabasha/ Abyssinians from the Horn of Africa. Eventually some Arab writers made attempts to draw up an ethnography, relating “peoples” they had encountered to some scheme of humanity they were familiar with, initially grounded in what they viewed as religious authority. Wahb b. Munabbih, a south Arabian of part Persian origin (d. 728), who was considered an expert in Jewish legend (*isrāʾīliyyāt*), is credited the following statement:

Ham, the son of Noah was a white man, fair of face. God—Mighty and Exalted is He —changed his color and the color of his descendants because of the curse of his father. He went off and his offspring followed him and they settled on the sea shore. God increased and multiplied them, and they are the Blacks (*al-sūdān*).<sup>8</sup>

Not only were black Africans thought to be descendants of Ham through the curse of Noah, punishing Ham for observing his father’s nakedness as he bathed, but it also came to be believed that, in accordance with the account in the Old Testament or the Torah, the punishment made Ham and his descendants slaves of his brothers

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<sup>7</sup> Badawī, *op. cit.*, 123-4. The poet is al-Ḥayquṭān.

<sup>8</sup> In Quṭayba, *Kitāb al-Maʿārif*, n L.E.Kubbel & V.V. Matveev, *Arabskiye istochniki*, vol. I, Moscow-Leningrad, 1960, 21.

Shem and Japheth and their descendants, i.e. Arabs, Europeans, and central Asians. In fact the Old Testament and the Torah do not say Ham was turned black, but Arab thinking began to equate blackness with slavery.

Another theorization of the nature of black people of Africa also characterized them as inferior beings based on a Greek view of the climatization of the known world and the relationship of climate to intelligence. This theory divided the world north of the equator into seven latitudinal zones, the ideal one being the 4th or middle zone corresponding to the Mediterranean area, while the farther one got away from this zone, the more extreme the climate became, and the less civilized its inhabitants.

The great 14th century historian Ibn Khaldun did not find acceptable the theory of blackness being related to descent from Ham, and denied the soundness of the claim, as follows:

Some genealogists who had no knowledge of the true nature of beings imagined that the Blacks are the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah, and that they were characterized by black color as a result of a curse put upon him by his father (Noah), which manifested itself in Ham's color and the slavery that God inflicted upon his descendants. Concerning this they have transmitted an account arising from the legends of the story-tellers. The curse of Noah upon his son is there in the Torah. No reference is made there to blackness. His curse was simply that Ham's descendants should be the slaves of his brothers' descendants.<sup>9</sup> To attribute the blackness of Negroes to Ham, shows disregard for the nature of heat and

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<sup>9</sup> The brothers being Shem and Japheth. Shem is considered to be the ultimate ancestor of the Arabs, and Japheth of the Europeans .



cold and the influence they exert upon the air and upon the creatures that come into being in it.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Ibn Khaldūn fully accepted the theoretical division of the then known world into seven zones. He also basically accepted that this system had built into it a hierarchy of value judgements about the inhabitants of the various areas of the world, though he grappled with how most “scientifically” this could be explained.

Mediterranocentric theory had long taught that extreme heat in zone 1 and extreme cold in zone 7 produced distorted and savage human beings. As one got farther away from these regions, so climates became more moderate and people more civilized. It is not difficult to see where this led to. As already observed, the 4th zone, which was right in the middle of the seven, and hence the most moderate in its climate and the most civilized in its inhabitants, was the Mediterranean zone.

This view of the world can be illustrated by two quotations from earlier authors. The first is a Persian geographer of the early tenth century [Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī] who quotes someone whom he merely describes as “a man of discernment” in regard to Iraqis:

The people of Iraq have sound minds, commendable passions, balanced natures, and high proficiency in every art, together with well-

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, i, 169-70. Ibn Khaldūn does not, however, seem to have rejected the genealogical explanation for the “origins” of African peoples. In his *Kitāb al-ʿibar*, which the *Muqaddima* forms an introduction to, he names Ḥabash, Nūba and Zanjī as sons of Kūsh [b. Kanʿān] b. Nūḥ, on the authority of al-Masʿūdī and Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr. See the Beirut edition of 1956-61, IV, 410.

proportioned limbs, well-compounded humors, and a pale brown color, which is the most apt and proper color. They have been well baked in wombs that do not expel them [prematurely] with a blondish or reddish color, with grey-blue eyes and whitish eyebrows such as occurs to the wombs of the Slav women or those like them or comparable to them. The wombs of their women do not overcook them until they are burnt, so that the child comes out something black or pitch-black, malodorous and pungent-smelling, with peppercorn hair, unbalanced limbs, a deficient mind, and depraved passions, such as the Zanj, the Ethiopians, and other blacks who resemble them. The Iraqis are neither unbaked dough nor one cooked and burnt, but between the two.<sup>11</sup>

Europeans, then, are seen as unbaked (or half-baked), and Africans as burnt; but while the author seems to hold only the Europeans' color against them, his description of Africans reveals prejudices which go beyond color and are formulated by racial stereotypes. Descriptions such as 'malodorous..... with unbalanced limbs, a deficient mind and depraved passions' include indictments of moral character, but they are not uncommon in writers of the medieval period. a fourteenth century Syrian writer (d. 1327), the geographer Al-Dimashqī, who draws copiously on earlier writers and adds little which is original, echoes some of these prejudices:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn al-Faḡīh al-Hamadhānī, *Mukhtaṣar kitāb al-buldān*, ed. M.J. De Goeje, Leiden, 1885, 162. Translation by JOH, partly based on that of Bernard. Lewis in his *Islam from the Prophet Muḥammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, Oxford, 1987, II, 209.

The equatorial region is inhabited by communities of Blacks who are to be numbered among the savages and beasts. Their complexions and hair are burnt and they are physically and morally deviant. Their brains almost boil from the sun's excessive heat..... The human being who dwells there is a crude fellow, with a very black complexion, burnt hair, unruly, with stinking sweat, and an abnormal constitution, most closely resembling in his moral qualities a savage, or animals. He cannot dwell in the 2nd zone, let alone the 3rd and 4th, just as the people of the 1st zone live not in the 6th, nor those of the 6th in the 1st, or the equatorial region, because of the difference in the quality of the air and the heat of the sun. God knows best!<sup>12</sup>

Later he expands upon this:

We shall now give an account of what has been said about the inhabitants of the seven zones in regard to their physique and their moral qualities, and the reasons for this. The 1st zone is from the equator, extending to what lies beyond it and behind it. It contains the following nations: the Zanj, the Sūdān, the Ḥabasha, the Nūba, etc. Their blackness is due to the sun . . . Since its heat is extreme and it rises over them and is directly over their heads twice in a year, and remains close to them, it gives them a burning heat, and their hair, pursuant to the natural processes, becomes jet-black, curly and peppercorn-like, closely resembling hair that has been brought close to a fire until it has become scorched. The most convincing proof that it is scorched is that it does not grow any longer. Their skins are hairless and smooth, since the sun cleans the filth from their bodies and draws it out. Their brains have little humidity for similar reasons and

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<sup>12</sup> See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī (d. 1327), *Nukhbat al-dahr fī 'ajā'ib al-barr wa 'l-baḥr*, ed. A. Mehren, Leipzig, 1923, 15-17.

hence their intelligence is dim, their thoughts are not sustained, and their minds are inflexible, so that opposites, such a good faith and deceit, honesty and treachery, do not coexist among them. No divinely revealed laws have been found among them, nor has any divine messenger been sent among them, for they are incapable of handling opposites together, whereas divine laws consist of commanding and forbidding, and creating desire and fear. The moral characteristics found in their belief systems are close to the instincts found naturally in animals, which require no learning to bring them out of the realm of potentiality into that of reality, like the braveness to be found in a lion, and the cunning in a fox.<sup>13</sup>

In an attempt to grapple with some of these stereotypes and explain them in a more scientific fashion, Ibn Khaldūn had this to say:

We have seen that Negroes are in general characterized by levity, excitability, and great emotionalism. They are found to dance wherever they hear a melody. They are everywhere described as stupid. . . . Al-Masʿūdī<sup>14</sup> undertook to investigate the reason [for this]. However, he did no better than to report on the authority of . . . al-Kindī<sup>15</sup> and Jālinūs<sup>16</sup> that the reason is a weakness of their brains which results in a weakness of their influence they exert upon the air and upon the creatures that come into being in it.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 273.

<sup>14</sup> An early 10th century encyclopaedist who actually visited East Africa.

<sup>15</sup> A philosopher and contemporary of Masʿūdī .

<sup>16</sup> I.e.Galen, a 2nd century Greek physician.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, i, 169-70. Ibn Khaldūn does not, however, seem to have rejected the genealogical explanation for the “origins” of African peoples. In his *Kitāb al-ʿibar*, which the *Muqaddima* forms an

He goes on to explain that heat expands the “animal spirit” (i.e. the emotional side of human nature) and gives the example of the merry drunkard whose animal spirit is heated by wine and the man who breaks into song when immersed in a hot bath. Hence it is to be expected that people who live in hot climates will be merrier than those who live in colder climes, and to make his point he contrasts the “cheerful” Egyptians with the “gloomy” Moroccans. So, though he endorsed the stereotype of the light-hearted, light-footed emotional black African, he sought to deny that such characteristics are due to inherent mental inferiority and to give these alleged racial characteristics what he considered a “scientific” explanation related to climate.

We have come some way from theories about Slavs being undercooked in the womb and black Africans being overdone, but these quote/ unquote “scientific” explanations for color or other characteristics do not alter the fact that in medieval Arab eyes extreme whiteness and extreme darkness of skin were considered aberrations from the norm and were to be connected with extremes of climate. These extremes, in turn, were thought responsible for other departures from the “golden mean” which was, by definition, what prevailed in the Mediterranean lands.

For all his inquiring mind and his attempt to apply scientific and materialistic principles to the explanation of human behaviour and social organization, Ibn Khaldūn still could not escape from the clutches of the ancient theory of the division of the world into seven

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climatic zones, and in fact sought to use this as a basis for what he thought was a scientific explanation for the alleged characteristics of different peoples. But this was, in reality, nothing more than a new way in which to rationalize stereotypes and to make prejudices respectable. In his celebrated *Muqaddima*, or “Prolegomena” to his universal history, he gives an explanation for what he (and no doubt the majority of his Arab contemporaries) considered to be the barbarous characteristics of the black Africans of the 1st zone and their reflection in northern Europeans of the 7th:

The inhabitants of the zones that are far from temperate, such as the 1st, 2nd, 6th and 7th, are also farther removed from being temperate in all their conditions. Their buildings are of clay and reeds, their foodstuffs are sorghum and herbs. Their clothing is the leaves of trees which they sew together to cover themselves, or animal skins. Most of them go naked. The fruits and seasonings of their countries are strange and inclined to be intemperate. In their business dealings they do not use the two noble metals [silver and gold], but copper, iron, or skins, upon which they set a value for the purpose of business dealings. Their qualities of character, moreover, are close to those of dumb animals. It has even been reported that the Negroes of the first zone dwell in caves and thickets, eat herbs, live in savage isolation, and do not congregate, and eat each other. The same applies to the Slavs[i.e. northern Europeans in general] . The reason for this is that their remoteness from being temperate produces in them a

disposition and character similar to those of dumb animals, and they become correspondingly remote from humanity.<sup>18</sup>

From this we might understand that Nigerians and Norwegians, or Ghanaians and Germans share parallel traits. He then contrasts the characteristics of the people of these outer zones with those of the middle zone—the Mediterranean lands—and the two zones adjacent to them:

The inhabitants of the middle zones are temperate [i.e. wellbalanced] in their physiques and character and in their ways of life. They have all the natural conditions necessary for a civilized life, such as ways of making a living, dwellings, crafts, sciences, political leadership, and royal authority. Thus they have [the various manifestations of] prophecy, religious groups, dynasties, religious laws, sciences, countries, cities, buildings, horticulture, splendid crafts, and everything else that is well balanced.<sup>19</sup>

This passage is remarkably self-congratulatory and, by implication, very dismissive of the peoples whose lands lie outside the middle zones. However, its strict application created paradoxes that forced Ibn Khaldūn into some re-thinking and the formulation of a rider to his theory. For him there were two problems. First, Ibn Khaldūn knew from both personal experience and historical investigation that his theory about the barbarism of black Africa and its peoples simply did not hold water. He had gathered a great deal of information about the kingdom of Mali and had met men who had had close

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, i, 168-9.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, i, 172.

contacts with the great ruler of Mali, Mansa Mūsā during his early 14th century pilgrimage. He had also met other West Africans in various places in North Africa, including emissaries of rulers, and could not comfortably dismiss them and their countries as barbarous. Secondly, it must have been something of an embarrassment to have to admit that the Arabian peninsula, the home of the Arabs and the cradle of Islam, lay partly in the 1st zone and partly in the 2nd zone—regions that were supposed to be, by reason of their harsh climates, zones of barbarism whose people were remote from civilisation and humanity.

What new theories could he propound to deal with such contradictions? In regard to the Arabian peninsula he produced a climate modification theory under which it was argued that because the Arabian Peninsula was surrounded by water on three sides, this reduced the dryness of its air and hence the intemperance of character that the dry heat would otherwise cause. As we have seen, a combination of heat and dryness in the air was thought to dessicate brains and produce perverted temperaments.

His explanation for the evident fact that the peoples of Sahelian West Africa (the only ones he had direct knowledge of) were civilized people with kingdoms, dynasties, crafts etc.—in short all those attributes that made for a balanced, ‘temperate’ way of life—relies on a completely different type of argument. Indeed, the whole theory of the effect of climate on human character and culture was thrown overboard in favour of an argument based on religion. Following the passage quoted earlier on the barbarity of the inhabitants of tropical Africa and northern Europe, he further



castigates these peoples for being "ignorant of prophecy" and lacking in a religious law, meaning they are not Muslims nor do they belong to a religion recognized by Muslims as being of divine inspiration, such as Christianity or Judaism. For al-Dimashqī the very barbarism of such peoples, induced by climatic factors, was the reason why they had not been favored with prophecy. Ibn Khaldūn, however, does not view their barbarism as irredeemable; on the contrary, they may escape it through the adoption of a revealed religion. Hence he could then make exceptions to the rule of barbarism for denizens of the climatically extreme zones who had adopted Christianity, such as the Ethiopians and certain peoples of Europe or those who had become Muslims, such as the people of Mali, Senegal, and the Middle Niger area. In short, faith was to be the touchstone of civilized humanity and, as far as West Africa was concerned, what served to exclude some of its peoples from their otherwise "natural" categorization as barbarians was, in the eyes of Ibn Khaldūn, their profession of the faith of Islam.<sup>20</sup>

The bond of the brotherhood of the faith not only meant that a black man/woman who was a Muslim ought no longer to be regarded as a barbarian, but that s/he should no longer be regarded as an inferior in any way when compared to an Arab.

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<sup>20</sup> cf. the conclusions reached by Drissa Diakit , reviewing medieval Arab authors writing about black Africa: "[L]a religion, les coutumes et moeurs des peuples Sudan [sont] g n ralement pr sent es . . . comme une n gation de la vie, sans valeur, signe d'ignorance, de sauvagerie, de mal diction divine. Les valeurs r elles suivent les traces de l'Islam qui . . .  l ve les Sudan . . . au nombre des hommes civilis s. [L]es Sudan n'ont acquis les vertus fondamentales de l'Homme que par l'influence du monde arabo-islamique." See his "Le 'pays des noirs' dans le r cit des auteurs arabes anciens, Notre Librairie, 95 (oct-d c. 1988), 16-25.

There was, however, a different approach to one group of black Africans, who were not, in the main, Muslims. that is the people known as Habasha - a name no doubt semantically related to the English term "Abyssinia [ Habashinia]. Although medieval Arab writers might sometimes use the term simply as an equivalent of the term *sūdān* (i.e. black Africa), its primary focus was on the area we now call "Ethiopia". A considerable literature was produced on the virtues of Ethiopians, even though many slaves originating from that area were owned in the Arab world (particularly in Arabia and Egypt). The reason for this is no doubt that Ethiopia was a refuge for Muslims who were persecuted during the Prophet's lifetime, and the king of Ethiopia at that time was thought by some to have embraced Islam. The Prophet Muhammad glorified him by naming him as one of the three blacks, or Ethiopians, who were, in his words "masters (*sādāt*) of Paradise", one of the others being his adopted freed slave and first muezzin of Islam, Bilāl.

The titles of a number of writings in the medieval period express the superiority of black (or at least "dark-skinned") people over whites (or "light-skinned") people. One of the earliest was by a famous Iraqi writer of the 9th century, al-Jāḥīz, whose short treatise was called "The Glory of Blacks compared to Whites". In the 12th century another Iraqi writer, Ibn al-Jawzī, wrote a book with the title "Illumination of darkness concerning the merits of the Sūdān and the Ethiopians". In the 15th century, a celebrated Egyptian writer, al-Suyūṭī, wrote a book called "Raising the status of the Ethiopians". Another work of his deals with preferences for skin color - light, dark and brown, forming an anthology of verse in praise and satire

of women of different skin colors. This clearly indicates that color was an issue in the medieval Arab world, but some of the poetry emphasises the admiration for black women, as may be seen from these poetic quotations :

Pearl is the name of many a black girl  
 How amazing it is to have a black pearl.  
 Night of union with a black woman is shiny bright  
 How amazing to have a night that is white.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, although black Africa was largely a “region of the mind” creating negative images of black people, personal contact, especially with women as concubines, could produce love and appreciation. Another poet in love with a black woman called Tuktum humorously praises her color, comparing it implicitly to the blackness of musk and of darkness:

I love black women for Tuktum’s sake.  
 For her sake I love all who are black.  
 Show me anything with scent that's as sweet as musk,  
 Or better for resting than after dusk.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, attitudes towards black women were generally more positive than they were towards black men, even if the women were of slave origin. More female slaves were taken across the Sahara to North Africa than men, and such women were then retained as concubines by Arab men. Some were even made mothers of children for rulers.

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-ʿumr fī l-tafḍīl bayn al-bīd wa l-sūd wa l-sumr*, Cairo, n.d.,44. Poet is Muḥammad b. Yūnus al-Bīsānī.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in ʿAbduh Badawī, *al-Sūd wa l-ḥaḍāra al-ʿarabiyya* [‘Blacks and Arab Culture’], Cairo, 1976, 161. The poet is Yaʿqūb b. Rāfiʿ,

In such cases the children born were considered free, since their fathers were free, and patrilineality was the social norm in Arab society. In one case such a child, a male, became a successor to his ruling father—Sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr, whose mother was a Fulani concubine, and he ruled Morocco 1578-1608.

Such tolerance for wholly black persons, even when technically "free" was not so common in Morocco. In fact, the notion that to be black meant to be a slave became a commonly held belief. Sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr began to set up a black slave military force for his kingdom after the conquest of the Songhay empire and the exportation of men considered to be slaves. Nearly a century later Mūlāy Ismāʿīl b. al-Sharīf decided to do a similar thing, and initiated such a force by searching for descendants of those who had been part of the earlier slave army. The search, however, collected anyone viewed as a "black" throughout certain areas of Morocco. This included some who were said to be *ḥarātīn*, that is free blacks who had lived in Saharan oases, being perhaps original inhabitants of such areas, but many of whom later migrated into Moroccan locations including some cities—not least of which was Fez. Objections from scholars of Fez were rejected by Mūlāy Ismāʿīl, who argued that he had proven that such persons (or their ancestors) had originally been slaves, but had deserted their owners and scattered themselves around the country. Such an argument clearly bases itself on the assumption that to be black is to be a slave. Finally several thousand blacks were purchased or captured and trained as soldiers forming a group known as "Abīd al-Bukhārī" ("Slaves of al-Bukhārī"), and then black women were gathered and the ruler arranged marriages

between these women and the armed blacks so as to eventually produce later generations of black "slave origin" men to continue serving in a military force.

Mūlāy Ismāʿīl, as referred to earlier, tended not to accept that any black Africans were free people. Those he obtained for his military force were called "Slaves of al-Bukhārī" because, he said, displaying a copy of al-Bukhārī's *ḥadīth* collection, both he and they were "slaves to the *Sunna* of the Messenger of God (Muḥammad)", an expression that seems to assume that the recruited blacks were Muslims.

The notion that blackness of skin meant that a person was a slave continued to be assumed by many Moroccans down to the late 19th century. Evidence for this comes from the experience of a Muslim scholar [Muḥammad al-Sanūsī b. Ibrāhīm al-Jārimī] [ *Tanbīh ahl al-ṭughyān ʿalā ḥurriyyat al-sūdān*] from the Timbuktu region who visited Morocco apparently in the 1880s, and later wrote a small book (in the mid-1890s) about his experience, and said at the beginning: "I found there some uncivil Maoroccans who claimed that all blacks (*sūdān*) were absolutely slaves, and that they did not deserve to be free; how would they deserve that being black-skinned?" . He then devoted the main part of his book to arguments against such a claim, arguing for the fundamentally free nature and human equality of black Africans, basing himself on sayings attributed to the Prophet, one of the most convincing of which is when the Prophet said: "O people, your Lord is One, and your ancestor is one. The Arab has no virtue over the non-Arab, nor has the non-Arab over the Arab, nor has the White

over the Black, or the Black over the White except in terms of devotion to God".

The late 19th century Moroccan historian Ahmad b. Khalid al-Nasiri also strongly protests against enslavement of black Africans, and condemns Moroccan attitudes and practices:

Thus will be apparent to you the heinousness of the affliction that has beset the lands of the Maghrib since ancient times in regard to the indiscriminate enslavement of the people of the Sūdān and the importation of droves of them every year to be sold in the market places in town and country, where men trade in them as one would trade in beasts—nay worse than that. People have become so inured to that, generation after generation, that many common folk believe that the reason for being enslaved according to the Holy Law is merely that a man should be black in color and come from those regions. This, by God's life, is one of the foulest and gravest evils perpetrated upon God's religion, for the people of the Sudan are Muslims having the same rights and responsibilities as ourselves.

Even if you assume that some of them are pagans or belong to a religion other than Islam, nevertheless the majority of them today as in former times are Muslims, and judgment is made according to the majority. Again, even if you suppose that Muslims are not a majority, and that Islam and unbelief claim equal membership there, who among us can tell whether those brought here are Muslims or unbelievers? For the basic assumption in regard to the human species is freedom and lack of any

cause for being enslaved. Whoever maintains the opposite is denying the basic principle.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, elsewhere in the Arab world, the relationship of blackness of skin to slavery continues to be reflected in many dialects; i.e. *‘abīd* = blacks. In 1995 in Nigeria, when I was speaking in Arabic with a Lebanese, the man simply referred to Nigerians as *‘abīd*, and a modern dictionary of Egyptian spoken Arabic also defines *‘abd* as, first "slave" and "secondly "negro".<sup>24</sup>

Of course, this did not apply to black Africans who were clearly Muslims, especially those who were learned. Many West African Muslims made their own way to the Middle East for pilgrimage to Mecca. None are known to have been captured and enslaved, though occasionally such pilgrims would bring with them some slaves to use as "travelers checks", selling them when necessary to obtain money for their travels. On the other hand, those who were scholars in Islamic sciences were accepted and allowed to stay in an Arab society. The most celebrated of these was a Fulani scholar from Futa Jallon (modern Guinea), Ṣāliḥ b. Muḥammad al-‘Umarī, who in the late 18th century traveled to Arabia and settled in Madina, where he taught some local, and some "foreign", scholars, including some Indians, who adopted, and later published, his teachings on *sharī‘a*, that favored study and application of regulatory *ḥadīth* rather than full acceptance of judgments through law schools (*madhāhib*).<sup>25</sup> Another Fulani scholar, Muḥammad al-Kashināwī al-Dānrankāwī (d.

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<sup>23</sup>. al-Nasiri, *Kitab al-istiḡsa’ l-akhbar duwal al-Maghrib al-aqsa*, Casablanca, 1955, v, 131.

<sup>24</sup>. See El-Said Badawi /7 Martin Hinds, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1986

<sup>25</sup>. See, *Arabic Literature of Africa (ALA)*, IV, 504.

1741), coming from Katsina (modern Nigeria), settled in Cairo after pilgrimage and was befriended by the father of historian ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī, to whom he bequeathed his library, and in whose household he died.<sup>26</sup>

There were certainly other black African scholars who visited for short or long periods Arab lands in North Africa and the Middle East. In addition, many enslaved black Africans ended up in North Africa, often converting to Islam either before final arrival, or after serving a master for some time. Although many such converts were probably emancipated, how they were later regarded is not known, although the Moroccan ruler Mūlāy Ismāʿīl tended not to accept that any black Africans were free people.

There have been different Arab ways of looking at black Africans over the centuries, Muslims, either scholars or women, being least disfavored, but otherwise African physical appearance has tended to implicate inferiority and enslavability, as it has done frequently in Europe and America.

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<sup>26</sup>. See *ALA II*, 37.