Islam and Slavery

William Gervase Clarence-Smith

Tens of millions of people were placed under the Muslim yoke over the centuries, and yet servitude remains marginal to general accounts of Islamic history. The consensus is that slaves consisted mainly of female domestics and concubines. Some concubines rose to positions of considerable wealth and power, as did male officers and officials. Manumission was common, and servitude left little social trace. Where rural slavery existed, it took the form of forced family colonisation, rather than gangs of male workers typical of Western estates.

It is undeniable that servitude in Islam exhibited distinctive traits, but it still remained recognisably a slave system. As in Roman law, these were people reduced to the status of livestock, who could be freely sold, ceded, inherited and so forth. Their humanity was recognised to a greater degree than in the Roman case, constraining the owners' rights in legal terms. However, this was a difference of degree, not of kind, and it was reflected in the evolution of Christian and Jewish servitude. Moreover, the extreme privacy of the Muslim harem made it difficult to enforce legal constraints on owners.

In addition, productive slavery was more extensive in Islam than traditional accounts allow for. Even if large estates were rare, they were not absent. More striking were the numerous slaves on middling and small properties, a phenomenon about which surprisingly little has been written. Servile labour was also common in workshops, construction, mining, water control, transport by land and sea, and the extraction of marine resources. Whether a 'Slave Mode of Production' ever existed in Islam is moot, but the economic role of slavery was substantial, at least in certain places and at specific times.

It could of course be argued that Islam was incidental to all this, merely happening to be the religion of particular groups of slave owners in global history. Fred Cooper has perhaps provided the most sophisticated version of this approach, detailing how the nineteenth century East African owners of large clove, coconut and millet plantations manipulated Islam to defend their class interests against those of their slaves.

An alternative approach, favoured here, is that an autonomous worldview developed in what Marshall Hodgson has called 'Islamdom.' From this, a number of values, rules and laws were derived. These impacted upon the economic use of slaves in real ways, both permitting and limiting forms of labour exploitation. To be sure, the shari'a, or holy law, was rendered less consistent by sects, chiefly Shi'i, Isma'ili and Khariji, and by Sunni divisions into four schools of law (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali). Such sectarian and scholastic divisions counted for less than the shari'a's uneasy co-existence with 'Islamicate' accretions. Customary law and the decrees of rulers could be quite divergent on the issue of bondage.

One initial point, often missed, is that the shari'a allowed for no other forms of labour coercion apart from slavery, for serfdom and corvée were contrary to the rights of free Muslims. Even more constraining was that such coercion could not be applied to free 'people of the book,' a category extended over time, in many cases, to include all the peaceful infidel subjects of Muslim rulers. Custom and decree rarely managed to breach this taboo.

Slavery, in contrast, was indubitably legitimate in holy, customary and statute law, albeit not always within the same parameters. Even those who converted to Islam after being reduced to servitude were not freed in terms of the shari'a, but custom might be more lenient on this point, especially for second-generation slaves. Turkic custom even enshrined the Hebrew notion that a slave, especially a male sharing the true faith, should be freed after seven years. Certain ethnic groups were also be deemed to be protected from slavery, such as Arabs, Somalis and Javanese. However, custom

might also allow for self-enslavement, the sale of children, and enslavement for debts and crimes, all banned in the shari'a.

Other aspects of slavery caused fierce debates between the ulama, the specialists in the holy law, and these disputes were far from marginal in their impact. It was never resolved whether 'bad Muslims,' and more especially their dependants, could be enslaved. Similar arguments arose about 'people of the book' who broke their pacts with Muslim rulers, and non-combatants in the lands of obdurate infidels. The ulama often questioned the use of concubines, slave soldiers, eunuchs and slave officials.

Slaves themselves were not entirely absent from such debates. However, the leaders of the famous Iraqi servile rebellion of 869-83 did not seek to abolish slavery. Rather they sought to subject to servitude those who had unjustly deprived the common people of their fair share of the economic and social fruits of the Islamic religious revolution. Indeed, this seems to have been a recurring theme of slave rebellions in Islam through the centuries.

Opposition to slavery did not begin as a result of Western influence, as is so often assumed, for the Druzes abolished slavery in the eleventh century. However, they were such a heterodox Isma'ili sect as to have little or no impact on the wider community. They were in any case confined to the mountains of Greater Syria.

More striking, albeit less radical, were notable reforms in the 'gunpowder empires' that arose from the sixteenth century. At best, in the case of Akbar, Mughal emperor of India from 1556 to 1605, there was a possibility that slavery might have withered away, if his reforms had been continued. At worst, the questioning of forms of enslavement and slave use, from Timbuktu to Sulawesi, became part of a tradition that later reformers could draw upon.

The emergence of fully-fledged Islamic abolitionism from the 1870s was no mere response to Western pressure. Reformers of various kinds

returned to the original texts of the faith, especially the Qur'an, as part of a broader movement of revival and renewal. Rather to their surprise, they discovered that the foundations for slavery in holy writ were extremely shaky, not to say non-existent. The Qur'an nowhere explicitly allowed the making of any new slaves by anybody save the Prophet himself, and called repeatedly for the manumission of existing slaves. The Hadith literature was scarcely more supportive of slavery, and many reformers queried the authenticity of some of these traditions. The entire edifice of slavery, accounting for a third of the compendium of holy law most used in Inner and South Asia, was found to be built on a cumulative set of dubious exegetical exercises.

The reformers split into four broad groups. In more rural and remote areas, some ulama, usually with a Sufi background, evolved a quasi-abolitionist stance. In its most extreme form, as enunciated by Ahmad b. Khalid al-Nasiri of Salé in Morocco, no wars since the times of the companions of the Prophet could be dignified with the epithet of holy, and thus no slaves had been taken legitimately after those early years. As unbroken servile descent from the slaves of that time could not be proven, all slaves should be freed. Musa Kamara later spread such notions in West Africa.

An even more radical version of liberation emerged from millenarian Mahdist movements. One, based in what are today Nigeria and Niger in the 1900s, called for the root and branch abolition of slavery. This was part of the process of filling the earth with justice prior to the imminent last judgement. Other millenarian movements were rarely so explicit, but often contained an emancipatory potential.

Gradualist modernists were often more urban and middle class, and less likely to be drawn from the ranks of the ulama. They became more numerous and influential as the twentieth century progressed. They were particularly inspired by Sayyid Amir 'Ali, a Shi'i lay reformer from Bengal, and Muhammad 'Abduh, grand mufti of Egypt. They argued that the Prophet

personally opposed slavery. However, he risked losing his following had he explicitly banned the institution. Since the infidel had adopted abolition, the time was now ripe for the command of God and the desire of his messenger to be fulfilled.

Radical modernists, in contrast, held that the Prophet had openly prohibited the making of new slaves, and ordered the freeing of existing ones. Subsequent generations of Muslims had therefore sinned grievously by failing to heed his commands. Indeed, this might have been one of the reasons for which the infidel had become so powerful relative to the believers. The early torchbearers of this strand of abolitionism were Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Maulvi Chiragh Ali, in India, and Musa Jarulla Bigi, in Russian Tatarstan. The Lahori branch of the Ahmadiyya took a similar position, but its 'heretical' status limited its influence.

The Williams thesis, that the needs of emerging capitalism called forth abolitionism, has been challenged in the context of Atlantic history, and is even harder to apply in Islamdom. The great capitalist boom of the nineteenth century, allied with the short-term effects of abolition in the West, created a powerful engine of demand for raw materials from Islamic areas. Time and again, the response was to intensify the exploitation of slave labour to meet this demand, extracting an economic rent from the ready availability of servile labour. This rent was all the larger as there was a chance glut of captives, resulting from a wave of Neo-Sufi inspired holy wars from Senegal to Yunnan, and depressing the short term supply price of servile labour.

Slaves of nineteenth century Muslim owners thus produced sugar, cotton, cloves, black pepper, coffee, sesame, groundnuts, coconuts, dates, millet, wheat, and other crops for export, often on large estates. Slaves also dived for pearls and other marine produce in the Red Sea, the Gulf, southern South Asia and eastern Indonesia. Tin, copper, gold and salt were significant in some regions. Moreover, slaves grew foodstuffs for regional markets, wove cloth in towns and rural areas, carried goods on their backs

or heads, crewed ships, and served in households. Indeed, Islamic servitude drew closer to New World models, even as novel Western forces loomed up to force through its abolition.

Emancipatory legislation was pushed through by a combination of Western colonial governments, puppet Islamic rulers, and secularist Muslim politicians, but there was a wide gulf between the law and social reality. As with narcotics, it was one thing to proclaim an international campaign, and quite another thing to enforce it. Ultimately, an Islamic dynamic of renewal and reform spawned varieties of abolition, which turned the shadow of legislation into a lived reality. Where this failed to happen, slavery persisted, typically in the Sahelian belt from Mauritania, through the Sudan and the Arabian Peninsula, to the confines of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

A more worrying trend is that 'fundamentalists,' better described as literalists, have called for the reinstatement of slavery, as an integral part of the shari'a in an Islamic state. This is inspired by the dogged refusal of Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, founder of the Jamaat-i Islami in South Asia in 1941, to give up on slavery. The evasions and silences of the Muslim Brothers on the subject, notably in the Egyptian Muhammad Qutb's widely quoted work, have not helped. However, this neo-slave ideology has been vigorously contested by rationalists, most famously Pakistan's Fazlur Rahman and Ghulam Ahmad Parwez. More recently a set of Indonesian intellectuals have also raised the anti-slavery banner, notably Munawir Sjadzali.

Islam has thus mattered to servitude, and continues to do so, albeit not as some monolithic juggernaut imposing one model uniformly on believers across time and space. Fractures in Islamic beliefs were of multiple and complex origins, often originating in non-economic factors, but they could effect who became a slave, how they were treated, and under what conditions they, or their descendants, were freed. Such ideological debates undoubtedly meshed with specific economic interests, but causality by no means simply flowed from the base to the superstructure.

References

Abdillah, Masykuri (1997) *Responses of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals to the concept of democracy, 1966-1993*, Hamburg: Abera.

Abu-Izzedin, Nejla M. (1984) *The Druzes; a new study of their history, faith and society*, Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Abul Fazl, Allami (1972) *The Akbar Nama of Abul Fazl*, Delhi: Rare Books.

Ahmad, Aziz (1967) *Islamic modernism in India and Pakistan*, *1857-1964*, London: Oxford University Press.

Ali, [Syed] Ameer (1891) *The life and teachings of Mohammed, or the spirit of Islam*, London: W. H. Allen.

Ali, [Syed] Ameer (1917) *Mohammedan law*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co. [4th ed.]

Ali, [Moulaví] Cherágh (1883) *The proposed political, legal and social reforms in the Ottoman empire and other Mohammadan states*, Bombay: Education Society's Press.

'Arafat, W. (1966) 'The attitude of Islam to slavery', *Islamic Quarterly*, 10, 1-2, 12-18.

Awde, Nicholas (2000) *Women in Islam; an anthology from the Quran and Hadiths*, New York: St Martin's Press.

Ayalon, David (1999) *Eunuchs, caliphs and sultans, a study in power relationships*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press.

Ba, Amadou, and Daget, Jacques (1962) *L'empire peul du Macina, volume 1*, Paris and The Hague: Mouton.

Babaie, Susan, Babayan, Kathryn, Baghdiantz McCabe, Ina, and Farhad, Massumeh (forthcoming) *Slaves of the Shah; new elites of Safavid Iran*, London: I. B. Tauris.

Baer, Gabriel (1969) 'Slavery and its abolition', in Gabriel Baer, ed., *Studies in the social history of modern Egypt*, 161-89, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brown, L. Carl (1974) *The Tunisia of Ahmad Bey, 1837-1855*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Brunschvig, R. (1960) ''Abd', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, 24-40, Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Chafik, Ahmed (1938) *L'esclavage au point de vue musulman*, Cairo: Imprimerie Nationale, 2nd ed.

Chattopadhyay, Amal K. (1977) *Slavery in the Bengal presidency, 1772-1843*, London: The Golden Eagle Publishing House.

Clarence-Smith, William G., ed., (1989) *The economics of the Indian Ocean slave trade in the nineteenth century*, London: Frank Cass.

Clarence-Smith, William G., (forthcoming) *Islam and the abolition of slavery*, London: Hurst.

Cooper, Frederick (1981) 'Islam and cultural hegemony: the ideology of slave-owners on the East African coast', in Paul Lovejoy, ed., *The ideology of slavery in Africa*, 271-307, Beverley Hills: Sage.

Delanoue, Gilbert (1982) *Moralistes et politiques musulmans dans l'Égypte du XIXe siècle*, Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale.

Ennaji, Mohammed (1999) *Serving the master; slavery and society in nineteenth century Morocco*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Erdem, Y[usuf] Hakan (1996) *Slavery in the Ottoman empire and its demise, 1800-1909*, London: Macmillan.

Fisher, Humphrey J. (2001) *Slavery in the history of Muslim Black Africa,* London: Hurst.

Ghoraba, Hammouda (1955) 'Islam and slavery', *Islamic Quarterly*, 2, 3, 153-9.

Habib, Irfan (1988-89) 'Slavery in the Delhi Sultanate, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; evidence from the Sufi literature', *Indian Historical Review*, 15, 1-2, 248-56.

Hargey, Taj (1981) 'The suppression of slavery in the Sudan, 1898-1939', DPhil Thesis, Oxford University.

Heers, Jacques (2003) *Les négriers de l'Islam; la première traite des Noirs, VIIe-XVIe siècle*, Paris: Perrin.

Hodgson, Marshall G. S. (1974) *The venture of Islam; conscience and history in a world civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hourani, Albert (1970) *Arabic thought in the liberal age, 1798-1939*, London: Oxford University Press.

Hunwick, John (1999) 'Islamic law and polemics over race and slavery in North and West Africa, sixteenth to nineteenth century', *Princeton Papers, Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 7, 43-68.

Imber, Colin (1997) *Ebu's-Su'ud; the Islamic legal tradition*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Inalcik, H. (1979) 'Servile labour in the Ottoman empire', in Abraham Ascher et al., eds., *The mutual effects of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian worlds; the East European pattern*, 25-52, New York: Brooklyn College.

Jumare, Ibrahim M. (1996) 'The ideology of slavery in the context of Islam and the Sokoto jihad', *The Islamic Quarterly*, 40, 1, 31-8.

Kamal-ud-Din, Khawaja (1925) *The ideal Prophet*, Woking: The Basheer Muslim Library.

Kanlidere, Ahmet (1997) *Reform within Islam: the Tajdid and Jadid movement among the Kazan Tatars, 1809-1917; conciliation or conflict?* Istanbul: Eren.

Khadduri, Majid (1955) *War and peace in the law of Islam*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.

Khalil, Mohamed I. (2002) 'Human rights and Islamization of the Sudan legal system', in Yusuf Fadl Hasan and Richard Gray, eds., *Religion and conflict in Sudan*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.

Khuri, Ra'if (1983) *Modern Arab thought; channels of the French Revolution to the Arab East*, Princeton: Kingston Press.

Klein, Martin A., ed. (1993) *Breaking the chains: slavery, bondage and emancipation in modern Africa and Asia*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Klein, Martin A., (1998) *Slavery and colonial rule in French West Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kurzman, Charles, ed. (1998) *Liberal Islam, a sourcebook*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Kurzman, Charles, ed. (2002) *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940, a sourcebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lal, K. S. (1994) *Muslim slave system in medieval India*, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan.

Leone, Enrico de (1973) *Riformatori musulmani del XIX secolo nell'Africa e nell'Asia mediterranee*, Milano: Giuffrè Editore.

Lévi-Provençal E. (1960) 'Ahmad b. Khalid b. Hammad al-Nasiri', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, 290-1, Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Lewis, Bernard (1990) *Race and slavery in the Middle East, an historical enquiry*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Lovejoy, Paul E. (1983) *Transformations in slavery, a history of slavery in Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lovejoy, Paul E., and Hogendorn, Jan S. (1993) *Slow death for slavery; the course of abolition in northern Nigeria, 1897-1936* , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maududi, Abul A'la (1972) *Purdah and the status of woman in Islam*, Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd.

Maududi, Abul A'la (1977) *Human rights in Islam*, Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd.

Meillassoux, Claude, ed., (1975) *L'esclavage en Afrique précoloniale*, 183-220, Paris: François Maspéro.

Miers, Suzanne (2003) *Slavery in the twentieth century; the evolution of a global problem*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira.

Miura, Toru, and Philips, John E., eds. (2000) *Slave elites in the Middle East and Africa, a comparative study*, London; Kegan Paul International.

Moosvi, Shireen (1998) *Episodes in the life of Akbar; contemporary records and reminiscences*, New Delhi: National Book Trust.

Moroney, Michael G., ed. (2003) *Manufacturing and labour*, Aldershot: Ashgate [Vol. 12, *The formation of the classical Islamic world*].

Muhammad, Shan (1969) *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a political biography*, Begum Bridge, Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan.

Parwez, Ghulam A. (1989) *Islam, a challenge to religion*, New Delhi: Islamic Book Service.

Peirce, Leslie P. (1993) *The imperial harem; women and sovereignty in the Ottoman empire*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Peters, Rudolph (1979) *Islam and colonialism; the doctrine of jihad in modern history*, The Hague: Mouton.

Pipes, Daniel (1981) *Slave soldiers and Islam; the genesis of a military system*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Popovic, Alexandre (1976) *La révolte des esclaves en Iraq au IIIe/IXe siècle*, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

Qutb, Muhammad (1967) *Islam, the misunderstood religion*, Kuwait: al-Assriya.

Rahman, Fazlur (1982) *Islam and modernity; transformation of an intellectual tradition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Renault, François (1989) *La traite des noirs au Proche-Orient médiéval, VIIe-XIVe siècles*, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

Rosenthal, Franz (1960) *The Muslim conception of freedom prior to the nineteenth century*, Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Sagaster, Börte (1997) *'Herren' und 'Sklaven'; der Wandel im Sklavenbild türkischer Literaten in der Spätzeit des Osmanischen Reiches*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Savage, Elizabeth, ed. (1992) *The human commodity; perspectives on the trans-Saharan slave trade*, London: Frank Cass.

Schneider, Irene (1999) *Kinderverkauf und Schuldknechtschaft; Untersuchungen zur frühen Phase des islamischen Rechts*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft.

Siddiqi, Mazheruddin (1982) *Modernist reformist thought in the Muslim world*, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute.

Sivan, Emmanuel (1978) 'Arab revisionist historians,' *Asian and African Studies*, 12, 3, 283-311.

Tabandeh, Sultanhussein (1970) *A Muslim commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, London: F. T. Goulding.

Talbi, Mohamed (1981) 'Law and economy in Ifriqiya (Tunisia) in the third Islamic century: agriculture and the role of slaves in the country's economy,' in A. L. Udovitch, ed. *The Islamic Middle East, 700-1900; studies in economic and social history*, 209-49, Princeton: The Darwin Press.

Toledano, Ehud R. (1998) *Slavery and abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Warren, James F. (1981) *The Sulu zone, 1768-1898: the dynamics of external trade, slavery and ethnicity in the transformation of a Southeast Asian maritime state*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Willis, John R., ed. (1985) *Slaves and slavery in Muslim Africa*, London: Frank Cass.