

# New Light on Slavery in the Islamic World

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By Jacob Thomas

One of my earliest experiences remains quite vivid in my mind. My mother took me on a trip by train to visit her sisters who were at the time still living in southern Turkey, known in Biblical times as Asia Minor. I was impressed by the new sights in the big city where my aunts lived; it was there for example, where I saw my first fire truck! One day, when visiting some of my aunts' acquaintances, I was told by an elderly maid, "Be quiet, or else a black *'abdeh* will take you away!" What was unusual for me was not so much the order to behave, as I had heard that quite often. After all, in the Levant, children usually accompany their parents in their visits, but they must listen, and not talk! The new thing about that specific order was the reference to *a black 'abdeh (i.e. slave)*! I'm sure that the elderly maid did not imply at all that there were black slaves living in that city. But her words pointed to an age-long baggage, namely that black people, regardless of their status in society, were not called blacks, but *'abeed*, i.e. the plural of *'abd* (masculine) and *'abdeh* (feminine.)

Several decades later, and now living in America, I met a young Middle Eastern boy. He was at home both in English and in Arabic. So I asked him in Arabic, what his father did for a living? He answered, "My father runs a grocery store." Curious to learn where that store was located, I asked him about the location of the store. He uttered two Arabic words: "*M'a al-Abeed*," meaning that his father's store was in the African-American part of the city! It is worthy of note that even in America, young boys and girls, growing up in Muslim families continue to call African-Americans, *'Abeed!*

Perhaps some may say that I'm making too much of these experiences, but I don't think so. The continued reference to Africans as "*abeed*" (slaves) remains in the collective memory of Arabic-speaking people and points to the historical fact that Islam has practiced slavery for a very, very long time, a truth that should not be forgotten. However, the type of slavery that flourished in Islam was very different from the experience of the African slaves that were brought to the New World. Let me explain.

As a teenager, I was an avid reader of Arabic novels. I had ample opportunities to read stories about the lives of the Caliphs, both in Baghdad, and later on, in Istanbul. It didn't take long for me to notice that those who were employed in the palaces of the Caliphs were quite often called, *black eunuchs*. Those two Islamic metropolitans were quite distant from Africa, nevertheless, black men, having undergone the ordeal of castration and survived it, were considered very suited to serve in the harems of those potentates!

These early memories about the plight of the African slaves in Daru'l Islam became later on more troubling, as I began to read about the subject in scholarly works. In 1990, I picked up a book by Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*," published by the Oxford University Press. It was an eye-opener to read

through Lewis's thorough research of the subject. He even included in the book 24 original illustrations taken from historic Islamic sources.

I realize that some people would remark that the British scholar is prejudiced against Islam. This opinion has spread primarily due to the influence of Edward Said (pronounced Sa'eed), who taught English Literature at Columbia University. In his book, *Orientalism*, published in 1978, he claimed that all Western scholars who studied Islam and the Middle East were terribly biased, and acted as servants of European colonialism. Unfortunately, his influence became the standard of orthodoxy in most of the Middle East Studies Departments at North American universities. As a Levantine Christian, and having studied this subject for a long time, I am convinced that Edward Said committed a great disservice to the understanding of Islam in our times. The most glaring fact about him was that he was not an expert on Islam, or the history of the Middle East.

Introducing the subject of slavery in the Islamic world, Bernard Lewis wrote:

“In 1842 The British Consul General in Morocco, as part of his government's worldwide endeavor to bring about the abolition of slavery or at least the curtailment of the slave trade, made representations to the sultan of that country asking him what measures, if any, he had taken to accomplish this desirable objective. The sultan replied, in a letter expressing evident astonishment, that ‘the traffic in slaves is a matter on which all sects and nations have agreed from the time of the sons of Adam ... up to this day.’ The sultan continued that he was ‘not aware of its being prohibited by the laws of any sect, and no one need ask this question, the same being manifest to both high and low and requires no more demonstration than the light of day.’” P. 3

I dare say that works in English on the subject of “Slavery in the Household of Islam” are not that many. However, thanks to the Internet and the availability of Arabic-language websites, I continue to learn a great deal about this tragic phenomenon. In February, 2009, the *Al-Awan* website began publishing a series of articles under the general title of **“The Invisible Walls: Racism directed against Blacks.”** By March 7, twenty articles by Arab authors had appeared. I translated article number 17 that dealt with this subject: **“Does Slavery in the Lands of Islam, Originate from within Islam?”**  
<http://www.alawan.org/index.php?mode=article&id=3878>.

الجدران اللامرئية: العنصرية ضدّ السّود (17) هل يتغذّى الرقّ في أرض الإسلام، من الإسلام؟

Here are translated excerpts from the article, followed by my analysis and comments.

“The study of slavery in Islam has been considered a taboo; even Western Orientalists avoided this subject. For example, **Louis Massignon** (1883-1962) the well-known French Orientalist, did not consider slavery a subject that was worth his great concern. He dealt primarily with abstract problems of Islamic thought, rather than focusing on some concrete situations in the Islamic societies, such as the scandal of racism that persists to this very day!

“Regardless of the efforts of Muslims and their friends to cover-up this subject, ordinary Muslims are fully aware of this continuing tragedy. Some Western scholars have not hesitated to discuss the general topic of Islam and its age-long slave trade. For example, the French historian, Robert C. Davis, published his book, “*Esclaves chrétiens, maîtres musulmans. L’esclavage blanc en Méditerranée (1500-1800)*” in 2006. This work dealt specifically with the history of the Muslim slave-trade of European Christians from 1500 to 1800, by their Muslim masters. 1

“What is rather new in our day is the fact that Muslim writers are now engaged in researching and writing about this subject. For example, the French-Algerian author, Malek Chebel, wrote a book in French on *Slavery in the Lands of Islam. Also, the Moroccan Mohammed Ennaji published his work, Le sujet et le mamelouk: esclavage, pouvoir et religion dans le monde arabe.* 2  
<http://www.bibliomonde.com/auteur/mohammed-ennaji-140.html> According to him, slavery is not simply part of an ancient heritage, but has infiltrated into the very core of the Islamic State, and controls its thinking. The Arab World is held hostage to a worldview that has not repudiated slavery. Relationships of all types are still conceived in the context of master and slave.”

The Senegalese author Tidiane N’Diaye published his book, *LE GENOCIDE VOILÉ*, in January, 2008. This work dealt with what he called *the “The Veiled Genocide,” i.e. the enslavement of Negroes by Arab-Muslims from the 7th to the 20th centuries.*

<http://www.tidiane.net/ouvrages/nouveautes.htm>

Here are some pertinent excerpts translated from the original French:

“The slave trade of Negroes as practiced by the Western nations is well-known. However, it must be recognized that historically, this crime against humanity was an invention of the Arab-Muslim world. It was the Arabs, Berbers, Turks, and Persians, who originated this infamous practice long before the Europeans began the African slave trade. For one thousand years, they were trading in African people, from the 7th to the 16th centuries. They resumed the practice from the 19th to the 20th centuries, long after the Western nations had abolished this trade.

“The demographic stagnation, the misery, the poverty, and the lack of development in the Dark Continent, are not the only consequences of this commerce, as many people imagine. Actually, the Islamic slave trade in Africa amounted to a planned genocide of Black people. It was a programmed ‘**ethnic extinction by castration.**’ Thus, the majority of the 17 million Africans who were brought to the Arab-Muslim world and transformed into eunuchs have disappeared, leaving no descendents at all.

“We would like to underline both the early date, and the great dimension of this trans-Saharan traffic that took place in the Eastern world, and to give an account of these forgotten facts. No amount of willful and selective amnesia will ever succeed to cover up the historical fact about the ‘Veiled Genocide.’”

## **Analysis**

*Al-Awan* website posted this series of articles to highlight the fact that racial prejudices continue to exist in the Arab-Muslim societies, as a result of the long history of the African slave trade. The 20 articles aim at demolishing “*the Invisible Walls*” that separate people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

## **Comments**

It is indeed a bold step that was taken by a group of Arab reformist intellectuals to broach the subject of the role of Islam in the slave trade in Africa. As far as I know, most of the original works on this subject have appeared in French, rather than in English. This means that the “unveiling” of the Islamic role in the infamous traffic in Africans is not adequately treated in the English-speaking world. I salute these courageous intellectuals who didn’t hesitate to express their strong condemnation of this inhuman practice that has lasted for too long, and still has many deleterious effects in the Sudan for instance. How deeply slavery seeped into the mores of Islamic people is evidenced by the vocabulary of many Arabic-speaking people who still refer to people of African descent as black *Abeed*.

**1. “Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean (1500-1800)”**

**2. “Slavery, Power and Religion in the Arab World.”**