Slavery and Colonialism: A Legacy of Racialization in the Maghreb

Hogra (حڤرة): An Intersectional Approach to Racism in the Maghreb – *Analysis*
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INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination in the Maghreb finds its roots in a complex history. Most of it remains unaddressed. Two principal historical episodes contribute to understanding the current racialized hierarchization of Maghrebi societies, Islamic slaveries, and colonialism. North Africa has been a crossroads between the African continent and the Mediterranean and Ottoman world, importing slaves from the Niger Bend, Lake Chad, Darfur, the Nile basin, and Ethiopia[1]. It has then been colonized by France, the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy during the 18th and 19th centuries. The following analyzes the reasons behind the "othering" of blacks in the Maghreb and their constant perception as subalterns or inferiors.
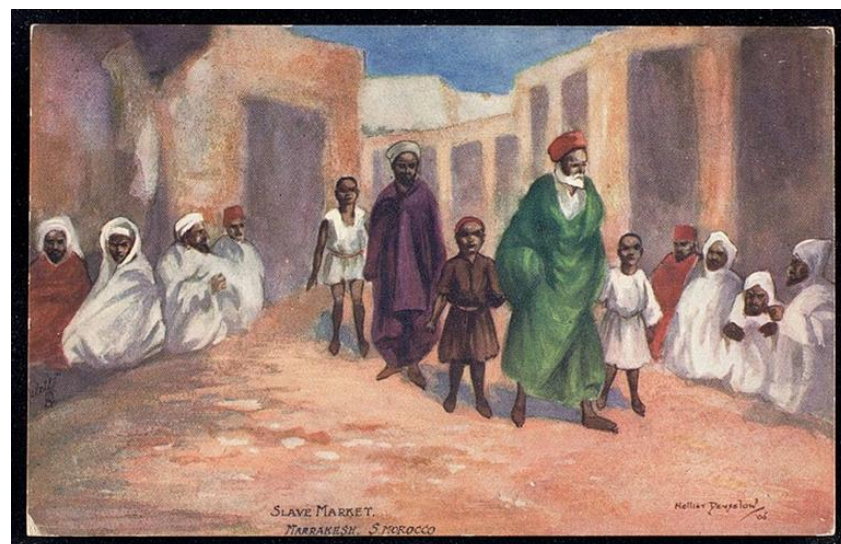
Slave Market. Marrakesh. S Morocco. Unknown author. Public Domain

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1 Toledano, Ehud R. (2016). The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression: 1840-1890.

1. AT THE ORIGINS OF RACISM IN THE MAGHREB: ISLAMIC SLAVERY

Although not comparable in scale or purpose to the transatlantic slave trade, Islamic slavery represented a significant historical episode of domination and oppression. The term refers to all forms of slavery that have been regulated by Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The existence of slavery is recognized by the Quran which "*regulates the practice of the institution and thus implicitly accepts it*"[2].

A first step to decolonizing Eurocentric conceptions of race is contextualizing the meaning of freedom to the African context. The status of slave primarily refers to the absence of belonging rather than to the classic antithesis of freedom. Being a slave involved being on a "continuum of marginality" and dependence that ranged from marriage and parentage to the harshest forms of labour slavery. Slavery hence refers to the opposite of kinship. Precisely, it is the absence of a clear, traceable Arab descent that rendered someone "enslaveable", rather than religion, as a significant number of slaves converted to Islam. Race in this context was a socio-cultural construct that went beyond mere skin color. It was based on the absence of Arab lineage, determined by the father's line, and on a presumed slavery past.[3]

Slavery in the Maghreb had a different gender demand and centred around concubinage. Women were enslaved mostly as dancers, singers, and domestic workers. Control over the reproductive and sexual capacities of slaves was the core of the institution of Islamic slavery. For this reason, slaves were never utter outsiders to the masters, prominently because individual property was hard to discern as it was borne by lineage groups and households which rendered easier the idea of slavery-to-kinship transition and the "absorption" of slaves into kinship groups after emancipation. The "one-drop rule", referring to the American social and legal classification that considered any person with any single black ancestor black, did not apply in north-African countries. Marriage between a free man and a slave woman was common. Children born out of this union were considered free and were integrated into society, always following a patrilineal logic. Clear phenotypical separation lines between blacks and whites have always been blurred in the Maghreb.

The regions of Djerid in Tunisia, Ghadames in Libya, and Tamanrasset in Algeria represented hubs during the slave trade. The most inhumane form of slavery, exerted in plantations in North America, the Caribbean and Brazil, was rarely practiced in North Africa. Slaves, who were not only blacks but also non-Muslim prisoners including *roumis* – white Europeans – were given diverse tasks. However, the difference of treatment between black and white slaves was considerable, as the former were given domestic or farming work, and the latter could be promoted as ministers, *aghas*[4], or

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2 Lewis, B. (1990). Race and Slavery in the Middle East. An Historical Enquiry, Oxford University Press.
3 Scaglioni, M. (2020). Becoming the 'Abid. Lives and Social Origins in Southern Tunisia. Milano: Ledizioni.
4 An honorific title for a civilian or military officer, or often part of such title, and was placed after the name of certain civilian or military functionaries in the Ottoman Empire.

treasurers.[5] Per instance, in the Southern oasis of Tunisia, tedious tasks (i.e. digging irrigation canals) were exclusively reserved to black slaves.

Abolition was more an outcome of foreign pressure than of a genuine internal reformist will. There were strong French and British pressures to abolish slavery. Many contend the actual aim was to justify colonization in the name of western imperialism's civilizing mission.[6] Scaglioni rather talks about a collective manumission which transformed rather than abolished the asymmetry of slave-master relationships.[7] The latter simply took more implicit forms, mainly through clientelism and patronage. In Tunisia per instance, ruler Ahmed Bey, observing the conquest of neighboring Algeria, wanted to deter French colonialism. He thus initiated a series of rules meant to abolish slavery. On paper, Tunisia abolished slavery in 1846, two years prior to France. A second abolition was necessary to completely suppress the practice in 1890 as most southern provinces did not comply with the abolition. Slaves maintained a clientelist link to their former masters because it was hard for them to economically survive. Yet it was also hard for them maintain a decent social status as they needed to belong to a lineage. The more recognized the lineage the more chances of upward social mobility a former slave had.[8]

2. COLONIALISM'S UNDERPINNING: WHITE SUPREMACISM

"Neutral is white. The default is white"[9]

Peter Ekeh[10] warns against the confusion between colonization and colonialism: the former is a historical event, limited by nature in time, the latter is a process, a social movement perpetuated through the persistence of the social forms stemming from its original sequences.[11]

European colonialism entrenched the idea that whiteness is both the norm and the reference. The closer to it, the wider the privileges. This ideology is referred to as white supremacism. Postcolonial thinker Edward Said links its persistence and durability to the West's cultural hegemony, what he first coined as Orientalism. Said defines Orientalism as the acceptance of "*the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, {…}, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind', destiny and so on*".[12]

A permanent reiteration of "*European superiority over oriental backwardness*"[13], orientalism has been internalized to regulate exchanges amongst dominees. When

5 Mrad Dali, I. (2009). De l'esclavage à la servitude. Le cas des Noirs de Tunisie.
6 Scaglioni, M. (2020). Becoming the 'Abid. Lives and Social Origins in Southern Tunisia. Milano: Ledizioni.
7 Ibid.
8 Scaglioni, M. (2020). Becoming the 'Abid. Lives and Social Origins in Southern Tunisia. Milano: Ledizioni.
9 Eddo-Lodge, R. (2017). Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race. Bloomsbury Publishing.
10 Ekeh, P. (1983). Colonialism and Social Structure. An Inaugural Lecture. Ibadan University Press.
11 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni. (2018). Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization, 1st ed. London: Routledge.
12 Said, E. (1978). Orientalism, Pantheon Books.
13 Ibid.

creating the foundational North-South division, subdivisions followed and have been appropriated by the powerless to attempt gaining further agency. Often, it is categories inherited from colonial times that are remobilized. In this instance, because whiteness is dominant, the closer an individual or social group is to it, the more those who are phenotypically or ethnically identified as dark-skinned are considered inferior. Maghrebis' reluctance to identify as Africans might be understood in this framework as Africanity is equated with blackness. The perception of black communities in the Maghreb hence combines the status of former colonized to that of presumed former slave.

Scholars have linked the colonial enterprise's "divide and conquer" motto to several post-liberation civil wars, genocides, and other humanitarian disasters in the African continent. Perhaps the Tutsi genocide is amongst the most horrifying contemporary examples. The Belgian colonial administration in Rwanda has set a hierarchy between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, the socio-economic and political status of each group depending on the shades of its skin color, its height, and the size of its skull. Starting from 1933, this social stratification was encoded in Rwandan identity cards, creating social privileges based on racialized biological traits.[14]

Libya's slave market, revealed by CNN in 2017, is a daunting example of the legacy of both institutions, slavery and colonialism. Sub-Saharan African migrants fleeing conflict and poverty are incapable of reaching Europe. The institutional dissuasion rationale is supported by militarized interceptions in the sea, bilateral readmission agreements into authoritarian regimes and even support to armed military groups in Libya as to increase their migrants' detention capacities in utterly inhumane facilities. By their categorization as "outcasts", irregular black African migrants contribute to strengthening a nation's political borders and ensuring national cohesion. [15] Mustapha el Miri argues these migrants are not black by essence but become so[16] on migration routes.

Gharyan detention center, Libya, October 2017. (Hani Amara/Reuters)

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14 Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native. Journal of Genocide Research 8, no. 4.
15 El Miri, M. (2020). Devenir « noir » sur les routes migratoires. Racialisation des migrants subsahariens et racisme global. Sociologie et sociétés.
16 By analogy to Simone de Beauvoir's ""One is not born a woman, one becomes one", a concept developed in her 1949 book "The Second Sex".

The relevance of conversations on the legacy of systems of oppression and domination is acute in today's Maghreb. Unravelling its complex status as both oppressor and oppressed is necessary to acknowledging the reality of racism in its modern forms. In a region welcoming an increasing number of Sub-Saharan African migrants, becoming a host region comes with a lengthy, yet inevitable process of self-reassessment.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Hogra (حڤرة): An Intersectional Approach to Racism in the Maghreb

This project takes critical aim at the racism problematic in the Maghreb from an intersectional prism: 1. The intersection of gender and race 2. Environmental racism 3. The heritage of slavery 4. The subsaharan African migration presence.

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