

Slavery and Slave-raiding in Africa in the Nineteenth Century: economics, ethics, amnesia and downplaying

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Aim: The General Assembly of the United Nations on 25 March 2026 adopted a resolution declaring “the transatlantic slave trade the gravest crime against humanity”. Leaving the political rhetoric of “the gravest crime” to one side, I note that the history of slaving and slave-hunting in Africa was completely neglected, as was the Islamic involvement in the African slave trade and slave employment (and the role of Western traders in the Islamic slave trade as well.). This paper seeks to fill these gaps by offering an overview of slavery and slave-trading in nineteenth-century Africa and the place of African slavery in the global economic system.

Research methods: It is a study in economic history that is not content with relating the bare facts but also tries to uncover the motives and excuses of the actors for their actions. Emphasis is on the nineteenth century. It pays attention to the plight of the enslaved and to the arguments used by Muslims, Christians and Jews to justify slavery. A short account of the practices around manumission and emancipation is followed by a report of the attempts to end slave raiding, slave trading and slavery and of the motives for rejection of slavery.

Findings: It is true that in the Western world people more and more are aware of the sins of the past, but mostly with regard to the Atlantic slave trade. There is furthermore little awareness of the fact that Western actions against slavery in Africa seamlessly morphed into the Western colonisation of Africa. Africa is singled out because it arguably suffered more than other continents, in the sense that slave-raiding and slavery led to a larger scale of depopulation than elsewhere¹.

¹ The depopulation of Latin America, which followed the European invasions of Latin America starting with the first voyage of Columbus in 1492, was on a much larger scale. The population possibly fell by more than 5/6th over a period of roughly one century, but this was mainly caused by the spread of diseases brought by the Europeans, not by slavery (Lovell 2020).

Implications of the research: Ignorance of the facts may foster moral superiority both among Muslims critical of the Western slave-trading past and among non-Muslim Westerners critical of resistance in the Islamic world to the abolition of slavery. Highlighting this history is also important in view of attempts by white-supremacist groups to downplay the horrors of slavery. The article therefore argues for a fuller confrontation with the past.

Keywords: Slavery, Africa, Middle East, Trade and Labor Market Interactions, International Migration, Colonialism, Coercive Labor Markets

JEL Codes: F16, F22, F54, J47, N35, N37

1. Introduction

Over the past four decades or so, slavery, the slave trade and their lasting impact on our present society have been more and more debated in the social media, the press and in politics. The collective memory of the Western countries where the slave traders and slave owners hailed from has been jolted awake. Apologies have been made, monuments have been put up, festivals celebrating the end of slavery are held and efforts are made to integrate the history of slavery in the curricula of educational establishments. The transatlantic slave trade gets pride of place, but the large-scale slave raiding and slave trading within Africa and the export of slaves from Africa to Asia and in particular to the Middle Eastern Islamic world so far largely remains under the radar outside a small band of academic specialists, in Western countries and even more in Muslim-majority countries. A couple of recent publications might have helped to bring about more awareness of the history of slavery, in particular as regards Africa. One recent book, *De Zanzibardriehoek; Een slavernijgeschiedenis 1860-1900* (The Zanzibar triangle; A slavery history 1860-1900), by Martin Bossenbroek (2023), focuses on East Africa, starting with the attempts by John Kirk (1832-1922) between 1866 and 1886, as a medical doctor and from 1873 as British consul, to get the sultan of Zanzibar end the slave trade and ultimately slavery itself. It's a shame this book has not been translated into English. Another well-researched and very readable book is Justin Marozzi's *Captives and Companions*, which, however, as the subtitle says, is *A History of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Islamic World*. It covers Islamic slavery from the start and is very strong on the experience of the individuals involved, slavers, slave-owners and slaves, which makes it a bit difficult to see the wood for the trees. These publications have had little impact. On 25 March 2026, the General

Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution declaring “the transatlantic slave trade the gravest crime against humanity”². I will not spill ink on the political rhetoric of ‘gravest’ and how one could ever make a ranking of this crime and the crimes committed by Genghis Khan, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, or the Germans in South West Africa, but I note that the Islamic involvement in the African slave trade and slave employment was completely neglected, even if it spanned a much longer period and was characterised by horrible cruelty. For another thing, the role of Western traders in the Islamic slave trade and the integration of a large part of Islamic slavery into the global production and consumption system will be new to most people. An alarming development is that white supremacist groups in Europe and North America are playing down the horrors of slavery, creating alternative ‘facts’. There is thus every reason to confront a wider public with African slavery, using a compact but wide-ranging format. One should bear in mind that much about slave-raiding and slave-trading in Africa (and elsewhere) and their demographic impact is still unknown, as many archives have not yet been studied (Hägerdal 2025: 245) and also that much will remain unknown because the slave-raiding and the slave trade often left no paper trail.

Africa stands out because it was bereft of a much larger part of its population than other regions that were sources of slaves, such as the Balkans, the Caucasus and various Asian regions. It is true that the Dutch *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC; Dutch East India Company) decimated the population of various islands in the region of present-day Indonesia, but that is of another order of magnitude than a whole continent. The emphasis will be on the nineteenth century, because slavery came more and more under attack after the start of abolitionist campaigns in the second half of the eighteenth century and the defenders of slavery were forced to justify their position with explicit reference to religious, ethical and societal principles, which will be discussed too.

I start with a review of slavery and slave-trading in Africa in the nineteenth century, with some extensions to the twentieth century (Section 2), and the place of African slavery in the global economic system (Section 3). This is followed by a

² UN resolution urges reparations for slavery’s ‘historical wrongs’, UN NEWS, Global perspective Human stories, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/03/1167199>

sketch of the plight of the enslaved (Section 4). The next section is devoted to the arguments used by Muslims, Christians and Jews to justify slavery (Section 5). This is followed by a short account of the practices around manumission and emancipation (Section 6), while the next section describes the uphill battle to end slave raiding, slave trading and slavery (Section 7). The motives for rejection of slavery are the subject of another section, paying attention in particular to the difficulty for Muslims to reconcile the rejection of slavery with the apparent acceptance of slavery in the primary sources of Islamic law and ethics, after all based on God's eternal commands (Section 8). Though not the subject of this paper, I add a note on Western colonialism (Section 9). This is because Western colonialism in Africa went hand in hand with abolition and the close connection between the two is one reason for a confrontation with the past (Section 10).

This is a wide-ranging literature study, in the sense that I did not only try to find general facts and figures, but that I was also after literature that zooms in on specific circumstances in different parts of Africa and the Middle East where African slave labour was applied. Furthermore, literature has been used on the religious and cultural background of slave raiding and slavery, and on the reasoning used as excuses by the actors for their actions.

If we discuss slavery, a definition of slavery is in order. The 1926 Slavery Convention of the League of Nations defined it as "the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised" (Quirk 2012: 58). This implies that, in the words of MacMaster, the masters of slaves owned them and could sell them separate from all other properties as chattel (MacMaster 2015: 83). Ownership is essential, but, as the League of Nations definition implies, neither the right to sell people nor the status of chattel was absolute (cf. also Spicksley 2024 on the status of chattel). It is consequently sometimes difficult to distinguish slavery from other forms of forced labour.

2. Slave-raiding, slave-trading and slavery in Africa

What do the figures tell us? Estimates of slave exports from Africa in the nineteenth century have been made by Paul Lovejoy, on the basis of a great number of studies (see Table 1). Exports, however, don't tell the whole story of African slavery. Slave trades also took place to internal African destinations, such as the Sokoto Caliphate (1804-1903)³ in west Africa, Zanzibar and Pemba and other places on the east coast, the Mediterranean coast, Sudan, the various Portuguese possessions with Portuguese-owned plantations (Lovejoy 2012: 129) and a number of oases in the Sahel. It has been estimated that roughly 800,000 slaves remained on the west coast (Lovejoy 2012: 151). Slave labour was used there in connection with the transatlantic slave trade, loading and unloading ships, and serving as soldiers and agricultural workers. Muslims were well-represented among the slave-owners. In Africa south of the Sahara they may have kept some four and a half million black slaves in total (Clarence-Smith 2006:12). In the Cape settlement the Dutch employed slaves from the start, which was in 1652, when the VOC opened a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope for its ships on their way to and from the Dutch East Indies.

Table 1. Slave Departures from Africa in the nineteenth century

Region	Number of slaves	
Atlantic	4,027,000	
Saharan	1,200,000	
Red Sea	492,000	
Indian Ocean	<u>442,000</u>	
total	6,161,000	

Source: P.E. Lovejoy (2012), *Transformations in Slavery; A History of Slavery in Africa*, 3rd edn, Cambridge University Press, New York, p.138.

As for the Atlantic trade, calculations by David Eltis, based on shipping data of individual slaving voyages that should cover the great majority of the forced

³ A Caliph is a successor of the Prophet Muhammad as the political-military ruler of a Muslim community, a Caliphate (Esposito 2004: 49).

migration, arrive at a total of 2,904.3 million arrivals in the Americas for the 1801-1867 period, against 3,316.4 departures (Eltis 2001: 44-45; I have subtracted the small number that were debarked in Africa). The difference between the two figures gives an indication of mortality during the voyage (12.4 per cent). After 1867, slaving voyages across the Atlantic were down to a trickle, as one country after another had banned the slave trade and the British navy was active in searching any ship that was suspected of carrying slaves. European and American companies bought slaves on the west coast of Africa from African slave raiders and traders, to be sold on slave markets, mainly to plantation owners. Among those African raiders and traders were the Ashanti, who captured people from the surrounding tribes in order to sell them to European slave traders (Bossenbroek 2023: 24). Large numbers were also provided by the kingdom of Dahomey (at first roughly present-day Benin, and later also occupying surrounding areas, especially in present-day Nigeria). It was a society ruled by the military class, very much focused on waging war and taking captives, who became enslaved (Law 1986).

The early nineteenth century was a revolutionary period in West Africa and various Muslim states sprang up. All were led by scholars affiliated with a Sufi brotherhood, the Qadiriyya. They protected people they saw as freeborn Muslims, but their economies were built on slavery, including by Muslim slaves. These slaves were, again, obtained through wars, raids, kidnappings and also through punishments for transgressions. Kidnappings and enslavement as punishment were illegal under Islamic law, but when these states fought each other, they easily branded their opponents non-Muslims (Lofkrantz 2023: 482). A large role was played by the Sokoto Caliphate, that included parts of present-day Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria. It attacked and conquered other Muslim states and enslaved great numbers of their non-Muslim inhabitants, but it made it illegal to sell slaves for the Atlantic trade, because one of their justifications for enslavement was to encourage the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam (Lofkrantz 2023: 479-481). Its slave population in 1900 was estimated between one million and two and a half million (Marozzi 2025: 227). What this means in relative terms becomes clear from a French census of 1904, which estimated that 30 to 50 per cent of the population in Islamic West Africa consisted of slaves (Clarence-Smith 2006: 12). The leaders protected freeborn

Muslims, but only if they shared their own interpretation and practice of Islam. The lofty ideals of conversion were easily forgotten. The highest prices were paid for eunuchs, as also was the case elsewhere (see Section 4).

Ralph Austen has provided estimates of slave trading across the Sahara and down the Nile Valley to the North of Africa (but excluding Sudan) and out of Africa on the basis of a great number of sources, including customs records from Cairo and Tripoli (Libya). Most of these slaves remained in the Islamic world (Austen 1992: 214-215). Austen provides estimates for long periods, and the quality of the sources allows no more than a very tentative estimate of the order of magnitude of the numbers involved. On the basis of Austen's data, Ferguson and Toledano estimate that more than 1.3 million slaves were taken from Africa into Ottoman territories in the nineteenth century (Ferguson and Toledano 2017: 202). Montana even argues that around two million slaves were transported from sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East and North Africa (Montana 2023: 468). These numbers thus include those people who did not leave Africa but ended up in Morocco and the Ottoman territories in North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria).

On the east coast we again see various actors. Sultan Said bin Sultan of Muscat and Oman (1791-1856, r.1806-1856), which also comprised large swathes of the east African coast, moved his capital in 1840 to Zanzibar and turned it into a massive slave trading post, while on the Kenyan coast Swahili families from Mombasa were heavily involved in slave trading (Freamon 1998: 60). In the 1830s other Muslims also became involved as traders, including Arabs. One of the most notorious was a man known as Tippu Tip (1830s-1905), who first built a trade empire around ivory, for which there was a growing demand in Europe and North America. To this end, he organised ruthless men-hunts because he needed people to carry the elephant's tusks he had caught to the east coast. He became a large-scale slave hunter and slave trader who in the end owned large clove plantations on Zanzibar where he employed thousands of slaves (Bossenbroek 2023: 9, Marozzi 2025: 372). He and other slavers built up extensive networks (Lovejoy 2012: 225). The greater part of the slave transports to Zanzibar in the 1860s came from Kilwa, about 300 kilometres to the south. Kilwa in turn was the destination of one of the great caravan routes that started far from the coast, for instance, Lake Nyassa (Bossenbroek 2023: 85). East coast

buyers included French merchants, who bought slaves for sale on the French island of Réunion to the owners of spice plantations (Egger 2018: 319). Slaves were also sold to French planters on Mauritius, but this ended when the British expelled the French from Mauritius in 1810.

The slaves exported across the Red Sea came from Ethiopia and areas further to the South. War was endemic in Ethiopia and war prisoners were a valuable export good. Furthermore children were kidnapped or sold by their kin in exchange for grain during a famine (Martin 2022: 201-2) and tribal chiefs sometimes sold their own people, for instance when these had been convicted for theft or banditry (Martin 2022: 201). They were transported by Muslim traders to Jeddah and sold there or in Mecca to pilgrims and also to local buyers. Slave trading had always played a large role in the holy cities. Slaves imported in Jeddah were sold to pilgrims on their way to Mecca for the *hajj*, the pilgrimage that every Muslim with enough money for the trip should make once in their life (Howard 2017: 204). A European consul in Benghazi noted in 1850 the arrival of a sultan with a party of 40, bringing with him 100 slaves destined to be sold to pay for their expenses (Wright 2007: 108). Muslim and also Jewish festivals in south-west Morocco likewise combined pilgrimage with fairs where slaves were sold (Wright 2007: 149).

In Madagascar, slaves were used, and slaves were also exported. Slaves were captives from raids by tribes on neighbouring tribes. If more slaves were captured than a tribe needed, the surplus was sold to Arab, Indian and European traders on the coast. Foreign trade even started with the export of slaves. One route was to the Americas, mainly Brazil, till the early 1860s, when demand from Brazil and also the United States collapsed. Another route was via the Comoros and north-east Africa to the Gulf and Persia. A third one was to Mauritius and Réunion, and to India. The British drove the French from Mauritius in 1810, but the British governor Farquhar would rather stay friends with the local elite than stir unrest by actively suppressing the slave trade, the more as his relatives owned the largest slave-run plantation on Mauritius. He also concluded treaties with one king on Madagascar, with the idea that slave transports remained necessary until Mauritius had found other labour supplies and Madagascar had built up legitimate, that is non-slave, export production. In 1820 a treaty was concluded banning the export of slaves and the British-supported king

received compensation for lost export taxes on slaves. An unintended consequence was that a surplus of slaves ensued. The king's armies continued to increase the area of the kingdom, and the military chiefs had received permission to loot cattle and slaves, as a substitute for wages. How to get rid of the surplus of slaves? It was decided to kill all male captives older than ten years, they were mercilessly executed (the king was not a Muslim, Jew or Christian) (Campbell 1981: 207-210). When later the economy perked up and not enough free labour was available, the demand for slaves increased again. After the death of the British-supported king on Madagascar, Radama I, in 1828, a period of rebellion, military campaigns, infighting and foreign interventions followed, but the slave trade did not subside. When emancipation was enforced in 1877, a clandestine slave trade continued (see Campbell 1981).

It has been estimated that between 1811 and 1848 between 70,180 and 88,835 East Africans were transported to Mauritius and Réunion, mainly to work on the sugar plantations. Most of them had been captured in Mozambique (Boyer-Rossol 2025: 225-226). Again, kidnapping was widespread; local rulers were not above such practices. It seems that a Muslim ruler in northern Mozambique, for instance, kidnapped his own people as late as 1880 (Clarence-Smith 2006: 45).

A forceful impetus to slave raids in Africa was given by the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 1783 and of Caucasian territory in the early nineteenth century, c.1801-1828, which substantially reduced the supply of white slaves. Not only did this lead to more numerous raids in Africa, but other gruelling methods to replace the supply of white slaves were also found. A Tunisian traveller who visited Darfur related that rich town dwellers there owned farms with up to 600 males and females who had to produce children that would be sold as soon as they were old enough (Lewis 1990: 72). Old enough could be as young as six years.

We should realise that all these figures don't take account of the mortality during the slave raids and the caravan journeys to the slave markets and from the slave markets to the final buyers, see Section 4 below. Any number of victims of enslavement in the literature thus is a gross underestimate.

Just like other people, Muslims were not above racial prejudice. No less than the famous historian and social scientist Ibn Khaldun (Abd Ar Rahman bin Muhammed

ibn Khaldun, 1332-1406) stated in his *Muqaddimah* (Prolegomena or Introduction), a study of the rise and decline of nations, that:

“the Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because (Negroes) have little (that is essentially) human and have attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals”.

(Ibn Khaldun n.d. [1377], Chapter 2, Section 23)

(Ibn Khaldun is even-handed enough, even if himself an Arab, born in Tunis, to describe the Arabs as “a savage nation, fully accustomed to savagery and the things that cause it”, in the next section, entitled “Places that succumb to the Arabs are quickly ruined.”). Already in the fourteenth century, such racial prejudice was apparent in the perception of Muslims in the Middle East that Africa was a legitimate source of slaves, (Lewis 1990: 53). Black slaves were cheaper than white slaves and could generally not, like white slaves, fill higher positions. The situation did not improve over time. In North Africa and the Middle East black was seen as inferior (Cronin 2016: 958-959). In line with this perception, emancipated black slaves generally remained dependent on their former masters, whereas emancipated white slaves were fully free, without any restriction (Lewis 1990: 56-60). In cities such prejudices played a lesser role (Lewis 1990: 90). Still, lightly-dark-skinned people fared better than pure dark-skinned. Concubines in Mecca and Jeddah were always Abyssinian slaves, and if they got a child, the slave owner generally married her. In Mecca many men even didn’t marry an Arab wife but contented themselves with Abyssinian concubines or wives, who were more pliable – and, one might add, did not bring meddlesome in-laws with them. The better treatment of Abyssinians seems to have been quite general. Arnold Kempl, British assistant-resident in the Persian Gulf, wrote in 1842 in a report on the African slave trade that male Abyssinian slaves were sent to school and then employed in the performance of house duties and, if intelligent, they might represent their masters as superintendent in various situations, for instance when a ship was loaded. Females were retained as concubines or employed in the lightest duties as attendants in harems (Lewis 1990,75).

3. Slavery and international commodity markets

Many of the slaves captured in Africa and employed in Africa and beyond got jobs in households and in economic activities for local markets, for instance as porters or masons. There was also a demand for slaves for other ends. Muhammad Ali, who ruled Egypt from 1805 to 1848, raided slaves in the Sudan for his armies that were busy conquering Syria and Arabia. Between 1820 and 1824 over 25,000 Black African slaves reportedly were forced to serve in the army, of whom 6,566 are known to have died during those years (Montana 2023: 464). In the late 1830s, each year some 10,000 to 12,000 slaves arrived in Egypt (Lovejoy 2012: 149). He also kept numerous slaves in the Sudan as soldiers and as workers in agriculture, animal husbandry and ivory trade (Clarence-Smith 2006: 110). Agricultural products were partly for domestic use, but also for sale on world markets, and ivory was very much in demand on world markets. Later in the nineteenth century, slave labour in Sudan was mainly for domestic ends. In 1877, the *khedive* (Egypt's Ottoman viceroy) Isma'il, the Egyptian ruler of the Sudan, concluded an anti-slave-trade pact with Britain and appointed Major-General Charles George Gordon as governor of the Sudan. However, in 1881 an uprising started under Muhammad b. Ahmad (1848-85), who proclaimed to be the Mahdi⁴. He took Khartoum, defended by Gordon, who lost his life, in 1885 and Sudan became an independent state till 1898 (more on this in Section 7). The Mahdi enslaved Muslims who refused to follow him and after the fall of Khartoum he gave female captives to his followers. He died in the same year. His successor Abdallah al-Ta'a'ishi kept some 500 women in his harem. Slavery became widespread under his rule, even poor families reportedly kept a slave girl (Clarence-Smith 2006: 157-158). Slave owners and slave merchants had actively supported the Mahdist revolution, because Gordon's anti-slavery actions threatened their livelihood. Agrarian and artisanal production depended on slave labour (Manning 1983: 855).

⁴ The Mahdi is a saviour in Islamic popular culture, who appears in the world to bring justice, restore the true faith and defeat the enemies of Islam before the end of time, when the world suffers under irretrievable corruption (Esposito 2004: 185).

Slave employment of Africans employed elsewhere in Africa or beyond was, however, for an important part closely connected with international commodity markets. The afore-mentioned Sultan Said bin Sultan of Muscat and Oman did not only move his capital to Zanzibar in order to profit from the slave trade, but also to start his own clove plantations, alongside those of the local elite, including Tippu Tip (Bossenbroek 2023: 82-83). The cloves they produced were a valuable export product. The Civil War in the United States from 1861 to 1864 led to a collapse of US cotton exports, to which Egyptian cotton producers reacted with large-scale expansion of their production. In the years of the Civil War roughly 25,000 to 30,000 slaves were imported from the Sudan to work on cotton plantations in Egypt (Cuno 2009: 186-187, Ware 2017: 346). They also worked in sugar cultivation (Austen 1992: 240).

Kidnapped Africans who were sold on the Eastern Gulf coast often got to work on date plantations or as pearl divers (Hopper 2015: 62-65). The British had a major impact on the development of these activities. After suppressing piracy, they wished to maintain friendly relations with the local rulers and open the region to British commerce, and also to integrate the region into the global economy. This should help to bring prosperity and prosperity in its turn should facilitate the employment of free labour instead of slave labour. However, British steamers brought British and British Indian goods and traditional dhow owners (a dhow is an Arab sailing vessel) and other entrepreneurs could not compete. Pearl diving and date farming with their promising export markets then provided jobs and business for local ship owners. British and British Indian sources estimated that the 2,500 boats and 30-40,000 people directly engaged in pearl diving in 1841 had grown to 4,785 boats and 74,000 people around 1914 (Plaxton 2022: 294-295). Date growing also increased markedly, though exact figures are elusive. Available free labour was insufficient and when in 1873 slave imports from East Africa were officially outlawed, clandestine imports partly took over (Hopper 2015: 39).

In this section and the preceding one the plight of the enslaved was touched upon in passing. The next section goes more systematically into the subject.

4. The plight of the enslaved

To give a better idea of what lay behind the figures in Sections 2 and 3, some facts about the employment of the slaves and circumstances *en route* to the slave markets and the final buyers are in order.

Slave raiders were especially interested in young children. They were highly valued, as they could be brought up as obedient and submissive servants, and girls would make a good price because they could provide sexual services. Heart-rending tales can be found in the literature about young children who were lured away from their village by men strewing tasty fruits, suddenly leaping on them and carrying them away. It was a plague already known among the Romans, emperor Julian (r.361-363) referred to it in passing in a letter (Nixey 2024: 184). Clarence-Smith (2006: 31) cites Darfur as a place where that still happened in the nineteenth century.

Children and other victims of raids, war or sale were transported to slave markets, often to be sold to traders who took them to coastal regions where they either were employed or sold on for transport to destinations overseas. Transportation of slaves across the Sahara to the Mediterranean coast was especially gruelling. Slave traders, African Muslims, such as Berber merchants of the widely spread Ibadi sect (Wright 2007: 24), joined ad hoc caravans with their captured human merchandise. The slaves, young children included, had to travel for two or three months on foot, suffering from heat during the day and cold in the night, lack of food and especially water, and from swollen feet and other complaints. If they literally fell by the wayside they were left to their own devices to die miserably (de Bellaigue 2018: 190, Wright 2007: 35). Reports from around 1850 give the impression that it was far from uncommon for a quarter of the enslaved to die *en route* (Marozzi 2025: 221). In 1849 a particularly disastrous journey took place from Bornu (near Lake Chad) to Murzuk, where caravans rested for a time before going on to Tripoli, when all 1,600 slaves, and their dealers, died of thirst (Wright 2007: 75). A Sufi brotherhood, the Sanusi Order, was heavily involved in these slave trades, in concert with two tribes that had given up their robbery past thanks to the Islamic revival message of the Sanusi (de Bellaigue 2018: 190, Wright 2007, 105).

After they had reached their destination, the slaves' tribulations were not over. Weakened from the Sahara crossing, poorly fed and scantily dressed, they easily succumbed to all kinds of afflictions. Life was anyhow miserable for slaves. Slaves who ended up in North Africa or the Middle East would easily fall victim to a plague outbreak or a cold and damp winter. Tuberculosis took many lives too (Wright 2007: 23). According to a British observer in the late 1840s, three-quarters of the black slaves who had arrived in Tripoli after a journey through the Sahara and were sent to the Levant died there of consumption (Wright 2007: 121).

The boys who had been captured in Africa and were employed as pearl divers from their early teens did not have an easy life either. Diving started early in the day and went on till sunset, with a break of an hour in the afternoon. Each diver worked with an hauler. The diver had to go down to the sea floor, usually between 15 and 25 metres deep, with a heavy stone weight strapped to one foot. During the one to two minutes of the dive he collected a few pearl oysters with his knife. By tugging a rope which was fastened around his body he gave a signal to the hauler and was pulled up as fast as possible. The stone weight was pulled up separately. After a few minutes the diver had to go down again. This went on almost without break from April or May till early October, a period when the water was not too cold. Not all the divers were slaves, there were also poor Arabs and descendants of slaves among them. Divers suffered almost universally from ruptured eardrums. Blindness, bronchitis, scurvy and skin problems were quite common, and divers could also fall prey to sharks, stingrays and jellyfish (Hopper 2015: 81-89). Furthermore, payment was low to start with and slaves had to surrender their earnings to their masters. They had no opportunity to bring with them food stuffs for the weeks at a time on sea, in addition to the meagre meals provided by the captain. Free divers often hardly fared better, for they had to borrow money from their captains to survive the off season, on unfavourable conditions, remaining in perpetual indebtedness (Hopper 2015: 101-102).

Life in sub-Saharan Africa also was hard. A source cited by Lovejoy mentions 20 per cent annual slave mortality on the island of Pemba in 1883, 10-12 per cent on Zanzibar in 1883, and 10 per cent at Malindi (a town on the Kenyan coast, North of Mombasa), with probably higher rates in the 1850s (Lovejoy 2012: 269). Work and

living conditions of slaves, especially those employed in agriculture and even more in mines, generally were abominable, the Mediterranean coast west of Libya not excepted. In 1862 a French traveller reported much disease among black slaves doing irrigation work in Algeria (Austen 1992: 238). In other respects, treatment could be cruel as well. In the nineteenth century, Egyptian slave-owners marked the faces of slaves in order to prevent them from fleeing. Sufi slave owners in Libya burned the word 'Allah' on their slaves. In northern Nigeria, born slaves got facial scars as a sign of servitude even in the 1950s (Clarence-Smith 2006: 4). The slaves who were hired out to work as seamen, fishermen, porters, dock worker, blacksmiths, carpenters, among other jobs, were like the agricultural workers at the mercy of their owners and their employers. Former slaves and their children on the East African island of Lamu told an interviewer in 1980 and 1981 that Hadrami slave owners (who had come from Hadhramaut) shared a part of their profits with their slaves. Good years and bad years could thus follow each other (Romero Curtin 1983: 862). Some women were hired out as prostitutes to visiting sailors (Romero Curtin 1983: 873). The recollections of the interviewed pertained to the early twentieth century, but very likely similar arrangements and situations existed in the nineteenth century as well. On the other hand, in the nineteenth century slaves on ships could rise to the position of captain and act as agent for their masters (Romero Curtin 1983: 874). House slaves, who had worked in their masters' homes and also lived there, were generally also treated better than field and mine slaves (Romero Curtin 1983: 859).

A special niche was trade in eunuchs, in high demand for service in the harems of the better-off. The victims came from the Caucasus and from Africa. De Bellaigue mentions a village near Mecca in the mid-nineteenth century with a hospital owned by slavers who had captured African boys castrated there, with one in three not surviving the operation (de Bellaigue 2018: 193-194). Castration is forbidden in the Sunna⁵. *Sunan an-Nasa'i*, one of the six canonical hadith collections (collections that are deemed reliable), makes the prophet Muhammad's condemnation of castration crystal-clear:

⁵ The *Sunna* consists of the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, as recorded in *ahadith*, traditions, sing. *hadith*, collectively known as the *Hadith*. Sometimes Sunna includes sayings and practices of the Prophet's close collaborators, his Companions; these *ahadith* are slightly less authoritative. The Sunna is next to the Quran one of the two primary sources of the Muslim faith.

It was narrated from Samurah that the Prophet of Allah said:

"Whoever castrates his slave, we will castrate him, and whoever mutilates his slave, we will mutilate him".

(*Sunan an-Nasa'i* Book 45, Hadith 49.)

Therefore, some merchants preferred to buy boys that had already been castrated by non-Muslims. After all, there was nothing in the Quran or the Sunna clearly forbidding to buy eunuchs who had been castrated by non-Muslims. Reputedly Mu'awiya, the first Ummayyad Caliph (r.661-680), had already legitimated this practice (Clarence-Smith 2006: 46-47). For some Coptic priests in Upper Egypt this provided a business model (Brown 2020: 118). By the nineteenth century eunuchs were overwhelmingly recruited from Africa. According to one observer, Louis Frank, writing in 1802, between one and two hundred African boys were castrated every year at Abu Tig in Upper Egypt, on the slave route from the Sudan to Cairo. They were usually between eight and ten years old. A eunuch, he noted, could be sold at double the price of an ordinary Negro (Lewis 1990: 76). The Swiss Arabist J.L. Burckhardt found on his travels in Upper Egypt and the Sudan in 1813 and 1814 two places where boys were castrated. One was west of Darfur and a much more important one at Zāwiyat al-Dayr, a predominantly Coptic village in Upper Egypt. Two Coptic monks performed the operation, apparently with a lot of experience: of the 60 boys castrated in the autumn of 1813, between eight and twelve years old, only two died. They had been bought at some 300 piasters and castrated were worth 1,000 piasters. The Coptic monks were paid 45 to 60 piasters for an operation. In general, some 150 boys a year were castrated (Lewis 1990: 76). Later, castration was forbidden on Egyptian soil, and eunuchs were bought ready-made from Sudan. The boys that survived could obtain high positions and, if employed in the household of the Ottoman sultan, become very influential. Eunuchs were in fact virtually the only black Africans attaining high office (Lewis 1990: 76).

A special role for eunuchs was reserved in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Eunuch guardians in Medina served in the holiest sanctuary of *Al Masjid al Nabawi*, the Prophet's Mosque. The eunuch society of Medina dates back to the twelfth

century and functioned till far in the twentieth century. Though Saudi Arabia abolished slavery in 1962, eunuchs that had been castrated and sold in the 1940s remained in function as long as they could do some useful work. The last one was still alive in 2022, according to a Saudi newspaper (Marozzi 2025: 137-139). In Mecca eunuchs are said to have been guardians of the holy black stone, the Kaaba, already since the 680s (Marozzi 2025: 138).

In one respect Islam brought an immense improvement in the lives of slaves. Before Islam, human sacrifices were quite common in large parts of sub-Sahara Africa, human slaves were simply one species of potential sacrificial animals. The kingdom of Dahomey was notorious for its treatment of war captives. A British observer reported on the sacrifice of 400 war captives by decapitation in 1727, amidst a pile of thousands of heads from sacrifices after a war won earlier in that year. In the nineteenth century, these sacrifices still took place on an undiminished scale (Law 1986: 252). Other observers told about similar atrocities (Law 1986:248-249). Mass sacrifices took place after a war and also at royal funerals and annual ceremonies in honour of dead former kings of the dynasty. Dahomey was not the only state guilty of such practices, but it stood out for the scale on which it happened (Law 1986: 251, 265). Elsewhere it was also common to sacrifice slaves to deities at funerals. In one Nigerian town, Uburu, a slave was sacrificed to the supernatural protector of the salt lake at the annual opening of the salt season, while in another Nigerian town, Asaba, slaves were sacrificed when people became members of the nobility and assumed the associated titles. In 1881, for example, there were 400 such titleholders who each sacrificed one slave, and when titleholders died, another two were sacrificed. In Calabar in present-day South Nigeria, hundreds of slaves were killed at important funerals in the nineteenth century (Lovejoy 2012: 181).

One may wonder whether slaves did not run away. They did, but there were few opportunities for a decent life on their own, and the risk of arrest or renewed capture was very high. In West Africa, the additional risk was that caught runaways most likely were first in line for sacrifices. But that slaves did not feel very attached to their masters was made abundantly clear when governments dragged their feet in abolishing slavery early in the twentieth century. In French West Africa, for instance, several hundred thousand people ran off in 1905-1906 (Lovejoy 1983: 266-7).

It should be realised that slaves were not the only ones living in grim circumstances. Life could be merciless for slavers and their personnel too, especially but not exclusively those at the bottom of the pile. A House of Commons committee found that on 350 Bristol and Liverpool slave ships between 1784 and 1790, 21.6 per cent of the sailors died. Roughly 20,000 British slave-trade seamen died between 1780 and 1807 (Dalton 2018). Tropical diseases took their toll when slavers waited for their cargo on the West African coast, and food and living space for the sailors, unlike their officers, was grossly insufficient. A fundamental difference with slaves of course is that the sailors had not been kidnapped by slave traders or captured in wars, though many will have been forced by circumstances to sign up.

5. Religious acceptance of slavery – who could be enslaved?

Slavery existed in most parts of the world for thousands of years (Pargas 2023). It was seen as completely normal, the three monotheistic religions had no problem with it either. In the Old Testament, or Tenach, Leviticus 25:39-43 tells the Israelites that fellow-Israelites who sell themselves to them should not be treated as slaves but rather as hired workers or temporary residents. Leviticus 25:44-46 allows them to buy slaves from other nations. St. Paul writes in Ephesians 6:5: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ.”, at the same time admonishing their masters: “Masters, act in the same way toward them, and stop bullying, knowing that both they and you have a Master in heaven and that with him there is no partiality.” (6:9). It may be noted that St. Paul included slaves as members of the church, which, as Karin Neutel argues, implied that both masters and slaves should abstain from sex outside of marriage (Neutel 2012: 139-142). In other parts of the Bible, too, slavery is accepted as a fact of life. However, the institution of slavery was not seen as given by God, and later Christians felt free to reject it. Pope Gregory I (c.540-604, r.590-604) freed his slaves, because he reasoned that slavery was not God’s original design for humankind (Balkenende and Buijs 2024: 331 nt. 8). The Church disapproved slavery in principle and applauded manumission, but saw it as a custom that was hard to eradicate. On the European continent, climatic and economic developments from about the middle of the tenth century till the middle of the

thirteenth century (the Medieval Warm Period) made it attractive for landowners to replace slavery with serfdom, and slavery declined. The English church forbade buying and selling of slaves in slave markets in 1102, though children of slaves born in slavery remained slaves (Mortimer 2024: 76-79). John Calvin (1509-1564) also reasoned that slavery is a consequence of sin, comparable to murder, and that God had tolerated it because of people's hardness of heart. Old Testament law such as given in Leviticus 25 was meant to regulate an abuse, better than to let slaveholders have their way without limits. Still, it is against God's order, which says that all human beings are equal (Biéler 2006: 148-152).

All these good intentions were largely forgotten, or ignored, when the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope and what from a Eurocentric point of view was called the 'discovery' of America resulted in a period of globalisation. The lure of profits from silver and gold and tropical agrarian products led to large-scale entrepreneurial activity and when the large scale required forced labour, this requirement trumped ethical considerations. Jane Anna Gordon argues that European political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, de Montesquieu, Rousseau and Diderot stated that slavery was against nature. Montesquieu and Diderot added, however, that in despotic regimes, where liberty was anyhow severely restricted, slavery could hardly be seen as a fundamental loss of liberty and thus as an abomination. Even these enlightened philosophers were not above racial prejudice, because they harboured the idea that very hot climates engendered excessively servile characters (Gordon 2015). Less enlightened people, among them pious and less pious Christians, all too easily accepted that slavery is against nature for Europeans, but not for other people.

When employing black Africans as slaves, consciences were further salved by referring to Noah's curse of Ham, which was interpreted as a punishment for all generations of Ham's descendants for Ham's sins (which implies a rather negative idea of God's mercy and compassion). Even if you believe that everything in such texts from a mythical past reflects God's eternal law, it is a rather feeble argument for defending slavery, as reading the texts themselves will reveal. Genesis 9 related that Noah got drunk and that Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers Shem and Japheth what he had seen. When Noah got sober and learned what Ham had done, he curiously enough cursed Canaan, son of Ham, and

not Ham himself, condemning him to serve both Shem and Japheth (Genesis 9: 21-27). The reference to Canaan can be seen as a politically motivated passage aimed at the Canaanites whom the Israelites, putative descendants of Shem, had to fight when they conquered the promised land (Lewis 1990: 5). There is no reason to think those Canaanites were dark-skinned. Moreover, the curse was Noah's, not God's, and in Genesis 10 it is related that the descendants of Ham were dispersed over a large area, and, approvingly, that one of them, Nimrod "was a mighty hunter in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 10:9), who reigned over Babel and many other cities and built Nineveh, among other cities (Genesis 10:10-12). The Lord apparently did not bear a grudge against Ham or his descendants, and moreover was completely colour-blind. Not only Christians and Jews referred to Genesis 9:21-27 when defending slavery, Muslims did the same (Clarence-Smith 2006: 72). Muslims, however, won't believe that Noah was drunk, as he is pictured in the Quran as a prophet (Quran 4: 63, 7: 59), so Canaan is punished in some Islamic literature for other sins – or not Canaan but Ham is cursed. Islamic commentators from the ninth and the tenth centuries gave various stories about what later was called the 'curse of Ham', or the 'curse of Canaan', picking up some elements from Rabbinic literature (Firestone 2007; see for other approaches on this subject from the Rabbinic literature Goldenberg 2005). One for instance was that Noah was sleeping and that his garment slipped off him. No drunkenness was involved. Another one is that Noah instructed his family during the great flood not to have sexual relations and noticed that Ham had not obeyed. One strand in the story was that Noah prayed that Ham's colour be changed and his descendants become slaves to the children of Shem and Japheth. Anyhow, as Reuven Firestone shows, the stories are quite convoluted and he argues that the problem of 'the curse of Ham' was a non-issue in antiquity (Firestone 2007). Slavery was not a curse, but a normal phenomenon. After a war the victor enslaved the vanquished, or some of them, and skin colour played no role in it. It should be noted that neither the Quran nor the Hadith mentions the 'curse of Ham'. Like in the Jewish and Christian world, it was used as an argument to humiliate dark-skinned people, in flagrant disregard of the primary sources.

What does the Quran say about slavery? Taking prisoners in a war obviously looked an attractive way to recruit slaves. One of the commands about prisoners of

war is found in *Sura* (Chapter) 47 of the Quran, which says in *ayah* (verse) 4 that prisoners taken in a war against infidels should, after the fighting ends, be given their freedom, either against ransom or without payment. However, *Sura* 33 *ayah* 49 allows the Prophet to keep female prisoners of war and have sex with them as he pleases. Furthermore, though the Quran shows God's eternal word, God is free to abrogate verses and substitute them by something better (Quran 2: 106). Thus *Sura* 8 *ayah* 39, or Quran 8:39, which admonishes the Prophet to clobber his adversaries and, according to the generally accepted interpretation, leave no one alive, is used as a welcome argument to ignore the call for clemency in Quran 47:4. Enslavement could then be presented as a merciful substitute for death (Clarence-Smith 2006: 26).

When a war is ended with a victory by the Prophet's army, the victors are free to take the spoils of war home. Quran 8:41 says that "one-fifth of the booty is for Allah, His Messenger (the Prophet), close relatives of the messenger, orphans, the needy and the wayfarer". By implication, the rest can be divided among the troops. The booty included women and children, who generally will not have been participants in the fighting. Thus the whole population of a conquered territory was declared enslaveable. Another development was that Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybānī (749-805), a judge and adviser of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809), developed a model of Islamic international relations (*siyar*), dividing the world in three domains: *dar al-Islam* or the abode of Islam, *dar al-harb* or the territory of war, also known as *dar al-kufr*, the abode of unbelief, and various forms in-between these two, later known as *dar al-ahd*, the abode of covenant, and *dar al-sulh* (abode of treaty). *Dar al-Islam* is the territory under Islamic rule, *dar al-ahd* and *dar al-sulh* are the territories under non-Islamic rule but with treaties and alliances with Muslim rulers, and *dar al-harb* is the territory under non-Islamic rule without such treaties and alliances. Conflicts with the non-Islamic world could furthermore be kept in check with the help of *hudna* (truces) and *amān* (safe-conduct or security guarantees) (Khan 1997, Bsoul 2026). A firm basis for this rule was Quran 9:1: "A *declaration* of immunity from Allah and His Messenger is hereby made to those of the pagans with whom you have made a treaty" (text in italics is explanatory and not part of the original). Already in the ninth century jurists argued that the inhabitants of *dar al-harb* therefore were all enslaveable, the more so as slavery could in their eyes be seen as a

punishment for unbelief (Clarence-Smith 2006: 27-28). The Quran provides one exception: if non-believers convert to Islam, they should be left free, and if any of the converted ask for asylum, they should be given a safe place (Quran 9:3-6). The Islamic jurists, however, feared that conversions would not always be sincere and they only accepted automatic liberation when slaves ran away from pagan owners to Muslim territory (Clarence-Smith 2006: 40). And even then liberation was not guaranteed, as enslavement came to be seen as a God-given opportunity to learn about the true faith. Conversion then was a blessing in itself, which needed no reward (Clarence-Smith 2006: 41). And so the categories that could be enslaved continued to increase.

One such widening was that slaves could also be bought. The sources of Islamic law are silent on this point, and what is not forbidden is, in principle, allowed. Purchase was allegedly already permitted at an early stage in Islamic history, by Caliph Mu'awiya (Clarence-Smith 2006: 33). Children sold by their parents in times of need were welcome, and tribute was also paid in the form of slaves. Rulers in East Africa, pagan, Christian or even Muslim, sold people who had become enslaved for witchcraft or non-payment of fines to Arab traders (Clarence-Smith 2006: 34).

6. Emancipation

Remarkably, the Quran and the Sunna fully accepted slavery, but saw freeing a slave as a very laudable act, which in a number of cases even was required from Muslim slave owners. Freeing a slave is the first thing mentioned in a list of good deeds a Muslim does who has chosen the narrow path to paradise instead of the evil path leading to hell (Quran 90, the two paths parallel those in Matthew 7:13-14). Further, slaves, that is, Muslim slaves, must also be set free if a Muslim kills someone by accident. If the victim was also a Muslim or belonged to a tribe or a people with which there was a treaty, wergeld had to be paid as well. The family of a Muslim victim might decide to forgo the wergeld, as a charity. If one does not own a Muslim slave and lacks the means to pay wergeld, one must fast for two consecutive months (Quran 4:92). For those Muslims who kill other Muslims intentionally, there is no remission; they will have to repent their sins in hell, forever (Quran 4:93). Similarly,

if one breaks a solemnly sworn oath, one must make amends. One way is, again, to free a slave (Quran 5:89). In this case, there is no requirement that the slave should be a Muslim. In the same vein, if a man tells his wife “you are to me like my mother” – a pre-Islamic practice for divorce among Arabs, called *zihar*, unlawful in Islam – and retracts his words, he has to free a slave before he and his wife may touch each other. If he does not own a slave, he will first have to fast for two consecutive months and if that is not possible, he must feed sixty poor people (Quran 58:1-4). Slaves could also be bought free with the proceeds of *zakat mal*, the annual wealth tax that Muslims are expected to pay (see on *zakat* Visser 2019: 31-36). Quran 9:60 mentions as one of the uses of *zakat* ‘ransoming the captives’. Presumably such captives were prisoners of war or the victims of buccaneers or raids by gangs.

A special case were the children an owner begot with a slave woman. If he recognized his paternity, which any decent man should do, they would be born free. Most jurists did not allow a man to deny paternity. The mother of the child, the *umm al-walad*, would be free after the death of her master and could not be sold before (Brown 2019: 133; Montana 2023: 470,471; Özkoray 2023: 255). This was a rule introduced by a decree of Caliph Umar (r. 634-644), the second of the so-called Rightly-Guided Caliphs, the first four leaders of the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad (Islamic views on concubinage 2025). Many slave owners nevertheless tried to sell or bequeath an *umm al-walad*, as numerous court records show (Özkoray 2023: 255).

The Sunna too sees manumission as praiseworthy. *Sahih Bukhari*, one of the two most authoritative canonical hadith collections, devotes a whole book, book 46, to manumission. It is depicted as a gesture of offering thanks. It may be remarked that jurists of the Maliki law school, one of the four main Sunni law schools (which have been instrumental in developing Islamic jurisprudence) did not insist on manumission if a slave would lack the means to live a decent life when free. That would come down to abandonment instead of an act of mercy, and manumission was intended to be just that (de la Puente 2008: 205). It was quite understandable if slaves opted to stay with their masters, if these treated them not too badly. Life was generally extremely hard for labourers who had nothing to offer than their brawn, and for women prostitution might be the only way to stay alive (for a time). Decent Muslim slave owners were

therefore expected not to send former slaves away, but to change the ownership into a patron-client relationship, providing work and an income, and care for them if they were no longer able to work (Özkoray 2023: 253). Indeed, this had been the practice already far before the nineteenth century (Veinstein 2020: 37) and the Hadith did not even give the former slaves the freedom to choose another patron:

“whoever [freed slave] befriends [take as masters] other than his manumitters without their permission incurs the curse of Allah, the angels, and all the people, and none of his compulsory or optional good deeds of worship will be accepted”.
(al-Bukhari Book 30, Hadith 4)

It is not clear how to chime this with the full independence obtained by emancipated white slaves (Section 2). Former slaves in some cases remained part of the household, in an inferior position. A museum guide in Qatar told a Dutch visitor about an ‘aunt’ who in his parental household had looked after two generations of children. He knew she was not a real aunt, but only after he got his job at the Bin Jelmud House, devoted to slavery, he realised that she had entered the household as a slave (Sijpesteijn 2017). The Bin Jelmud House in Qatar, established in 2015, seems to be the one and only museum in a Muslim-majority country devoted to slavery (Freer 2020).

Slaves could also buy themselves free. Just like in the Americas, slaves in the Islamic world might get the opportunity to earn money and buy their freedom after some time. Buying one’s liberty is expressly allowed in Quran 24:33:

“As for those of your slaves who wish to buy out their liberty, execute the deed of liberty with them if you find them deserving, and give them some of the wealth which Allah has given you”.

In the African plantation economies magnanimous gifts upon manumission will have been extremely exceptional. It may have happened more frequently in the Ottoman heartlands, especially when a slave had occupied a function with a high degree of responsibility, for instance as a trade agent. Emancipation after a certain

period, say seven or nine years, was seen as praiseworthy in the Islamic world. It was, however, far from universally applied. In the Balkans and Anatolia black African slaves, who were cheap and anyhow often did not survive long periods of cold weather, were manumitted after seven years. More expensive and more resistant white slaves had to complete nine years (Clarence-Smith 2006: 67). Apparently replacement costs were decisive. Jennifer Lofkrantz states that it took slaves, if their owners cooperated, five to seventeen years to regain their freedom (Lofkrantz 2023: 487). The information is a bit confusing and fails to provide an overall picture. It is also argued, for instance, that African women had the choice to be manumitted after seven years, but Circassian women, from the Caucasus, after nine years. They could be manumitted if they wished, but could also opt to stay with their masters (Howard 2017: 259). In Anatolia, slaves who married were manumitted. In the Arab world devout Muslims would free their slaves, in most cases if these had converted to Islam, but there was no customary standard time period that had to be complied with (Clarence-Smith 2006: 67). In Egypt, slaves employed by the state were freed after seven or nine years, but private owners did not follow suit, nor did Syrian slave owners, who are reported to have resented the attempts by the Ottoman rulers to apply the rule (Clarence-Smith 2006: 67). There may have been customs and even rights, but it was not always easy to enforce them. And if manumission took place, there was also a downside: it made for an increased demand for slave replacements.

7. Abolition

Muslims should not enslave other Muslims. We've seen that this was a principle more honoured in the breach than in the observance, but some took it seriously. Already in the second half of the eighteenth century the Islamic state in Senegambia did indeed abolish slavery for Muslims (Brown 2019: 208-209, 213). But this was an exception.

Abolition in Africa and in the Ottoman lands was a long and complicated process. Large sections of the Muslim world stubbornly resisted the attempts of the British, later, not always wholeheartedly, supported by the French and other Western nations,

to push back and ultimately end slavery. This pressure was very much resented by the better-off households, who saw themselves as compassionate and humanitarian patrons caring for the needy and poor and integrating them in their households (Kotil 2023: 65). The Western attempts to end slavery were seen as a conspiracy against Islam, and as a pretext for foreign intervention (Kotil 2023: 68). And this was far from far-fetched (see Section 9), even if British governments generally had little stomach for costly military adventures.

In Türkiye sympathy for the anti-slavery movement came up in the course of the nineteenth century among progressive elites who were inspired by European Enlightenments ideals, though Ceyda Karamursel (2024: 617) notes that a critical attitude vis-à-vis slavery mainly concerned Caucasian slaves, and hardly ever Africans. After a period of much unrest and fierce battles between modernisers and the traditional ex-slave Janissary soldiers, who in fact had run the state as dictators under his predecessor, his cousin Mustafa IV (r.1807-1808), Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839) began modernising the state (Howard 2017: 237-239). It took until 1826 for him to finally get the Janissaries out of the way. He proclaimed a new army set-up, which was not accepted by the Janissaries. In the ensuing disturbances he had around 6,000 of them killed and some 15,000 survivors were banned to far-away regions (de Bellaigue 2018: 59, Howard 2017: 243). His sons Abdülmecid I (r. 1839-1861) and Abdülaziz (1861-1876) implemented reforms in the political organisation, known as ‘Tanzimat’ (which means Reform, or Reordering), which echoed some Enlightenment ideals, such as the rule of law (see for the rather chaotic history of these reforms Howard 2017: 248ff). Reform-minded elites saw in the Tanzimat an argument for ending the slave trade, if not perhaps a rapid ending of slavery itself (Montana 2023: 461). For all that, the Ottoman government took action only slowly and haphazardly, more often than not under pressure from Western powers, Great Britain in particular. Sultan Abdülmecid closed the Istanbul slave market in 1847 and banned slave imports through the Persian Gulf (Howard 2017: 259), though the closing of the slave market was only a cosmetic one. Actually, it was a only closing of the public slave market, because of the bad impression it made on European visitors, market activities simply were moved indoors (Disestablishment of the Istanbul Slave Market 2026). Anti-slavery measures were often the result of

international treaties and agreements. The ban which was promulgated in 1857 for instance was a condition for the participation of the Ottoman Empire in the Concert of Europe, a loose coalition of the great powers that tried to stabilise European politics in the nineteenth century by organising congresses and concluding treaties after crises. The Ottoman Empire acceded at the 1856 Congress of Paris, convened after the 1853-1856 Crimean War (Karamursel 2024: 611-612). As a result, all trade in African slaves was prohibited in the Ottoman empire in 1857 (Ferguson and Toledano 2017: 200). Some measures were taken autonomously by the government, such as bans on traffic in white slaves from Georgia and Circassia issued in 1854 and 1855, which however were not very effective (Lewis 1990: 79-80). The enslavement of Circassians went on. They were victims of ethnic cleansing in the Caucasus by Russia from the mid-1850s to the mid-1860s and an easy prey for slave traders (Ferguson and Toledano 2017: 203). Later on, sultan Abdülhamid II (r.1876-1909) stymied all attempts to end slavery and his foreign minister defended slavery because it was a way to convert infidels to Islam (Clarence-Smith 2006, 108). His government even succeeded at the 1889-1890 Brussels Anti-slavery Conference, which was convened to put an end to African slavery, to get Islamic domestic slavery excluded (*Conférence internationale de Bruxelles* 1891: 220, 224, 227). Even Kemal Atatürk's secular Turkish republic did not ratify the 1926 League of Nations convention on the suppression of slavery before 1933, and specific legislation against slavery had to wait till 1964.

In Egypt the Ottoman viceroy Muhammad Ali (r.1805-1848), who modernised Egypt with an iron fist and eliminated the Mamluk military class that stood in the way as ruthlessly as Mahmud II had done in Türkiye, prohibited castration in 1841 and closed the Cairo slave market in 1842, but that had not much impact (Clarence-Smith 2006: 111). Egypt remained heavily involved in the slave trade during the better part of the nineteenth century. Under the khedive Ismail Pasha (r.1863-1879) renewed attempts were made to dismantle the institution of slavery, under pressure from the British, but events intervened. Ismail Pasha made a mess of the public finances and debts could no longer be repaid. Representatives of France and Britain thereupon took over control of Egypt's finances, but Ismail Pasha stirred up anti-French and anti-English feelings among the population. In 1879 he was therefore deposed by the

British. Political instability led to an explosion of violence in 1882, with some 300 casualties. The British sent an army and occupied Egypt (though meant to be short-term, the occupation lasted till 1956). The British ruler, or Consul-General, from 1883 to 1907, Sir Evelyn Baring, later Lord Cromer, took more determined measures against slavery. Though he understood that he had to tread gently, in order not to rub up the religious and political elites the wrong way, he repressed imports of slaves and saw to it that manumission on demand would be granted (Clarence-Smith 2006: 113). He also forbade the castration that took place in upper Egypt, though the effect was only a migration of this activity to other places. Still, in the 1890s slavery declined at a rapid pace in Egypt. Demand for slaves, and therefore (illegal) imports from Africa, dwindled, partly thanks to Barings' measures, but also because of economic developments. Rural labour surpluses reduced the demand for slave labour and the dissolution of guilds in 1887-1890 led to lower labour costs in the cities. A conviction among the more modern parts of the population that slavery was no longer acceptable in a decent society will also have played a role. The final act in this process was the guarantee of individual liberty included in the 1923 constitution (Clarence-Smith 2006: 114). The manumitted could for instance find employment as domestics. One source of supply were schools for former captives, created under British occupation from 1882 by missionaries, where girls learned such things as sewing, ironing and Arabic. They easily found employment (Hargal 2024: 847).

The 1857 prohibition of trade in black slaves caused much unrest in the Hijāz, the region of the holy cities of Mecca and Medinah. The ruler of Mecca and the chief of the *ulema* (Muslim legal scholars, sing. *alim*) there stated that the Ottoman rulers acted very un-Islamic and had in fact become apostates. It was not only the ban on the slave trade that enraged them, but also such measures as giving women the right to initiate divorce proceedings and to go outdoors unveiled. In their interpretation of Islamic law it was lawful to kill them and take their children as slaves (Lewis 1990: 80). At the end of 1855, already before the promulgation of the ban, they started a holy war against the Ottoman rulers. The rising was crushed in June 1856, but the Ottomans thought it wise to exempt the Hijaz, Saudi Arabia's western coast area, which includes Mecca and Medinah, from anti-slavery measures for fear of a secession (Freamon 1998: 60). And so slaves continued to be shipped across the Red

Sea and from Tripoli and Benghazi to Arabia and also on to Iran (Lewis 1990: 81). To supply the slave trade the slave raids continued too (Lewis 1990: 82). Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, or Ibn Saud, the first king of Saudi Arabia (r.1932-1953) reluctantly took some measures in 1936, under pressure from the League of Nations, prohibiting imports of slaves by sea and permitting imports overland only if it could be proved that they had been slaves already, but enforcement was far from strict. Slavery was abolished only in 1962 (Clarence-Smith 2006:182-183).

Saudi Arabia was not unique in the Gulf region. Slave trading in kidnapped Africans to be sold in the Eastern Gulf coast, often for work on date plantations or to be sold on as pearl diver, continued till the 1920s or even 1930 (Hopper 2015: 62-65). According to Wright (2007: 104), the main route across the Sahara to the Mediterranean from the mid-nineteenth century, from the sultanate of Wadai, west of Darfur, to Cyrenaica and Benghazi, lasted into the 1920s.

The Ottoman political organisation was quite complex and policy could also take various directions. Sultan Abdülhamid II may have lacked the will to abolish slavery, in the 1890s the Ottomans increased their efforts, started in 1857, to curb the slave trade from Libya. This was required by the Final Act of the 1889-1890 Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference, and non-compliance would easily provoke interference by European consuls that might result in military operations. The Ottomans already had used the 1857 ban on the slave trade as a weapon to get a better grip on their North African territories (Hargal 2024: 839). They appointed governors who actively acted against caravans with captured slaves. The manumitted could not be left to their own devices. The governors of the Libyan provinces had to take care of them, but lacked the means to do so satisfactorily and in 1890 they sent thousands of former slaves to Izmir and Istanbul, shifting the burden to the Porte (as the central government in Istanbul was called, after the building that housed the most important government agencies). The solution found in 1892 was to place them in foster homes. For the underaged, vocational training centres with dormitories were created, whereas girls were assigned to families as servants (Hargal 2024: 847). Still, slavery was not rooted out and survived the demise of the Ottoman empire. It ended officially when the king of Libya, head of the same Sanusi order that had been such an active slave trader in

the nineteenth century, included a guarantee of personal liberty in the constitution of 1951 (Clarence-Smith 2006: 104).

More to the west on the Mediterranean abolition took off much earlier, in Tunis. The ruler of Tunis, Ahmad ibn Mustafa, or Ahmad Bey (r.1837-1855), prohibited export of slaves from Tunis and closed the slave market in 1841-1842. He also ended the sending of slaves as tribute to Istanbul (Clarence-Smith 2006: 100-101). De Bellaigue interprets these measures as a means of getting support from Western countries for Tunisian independence from Ottoman rule (De Bellaigue 2017: 191). The Ottomans had imposed direct rule in Libya in 1835 and Ahmad Bey did not want to suffer Tunisia the same treatment. At first he hesitated to ban slavery completely, as he lacked the means to compensate the owners. However, he decreed in 1846 that every slave who desired so should be set free, on the grounds that Muslim jurists were unhappy with the cruel treatment of slaves, which conflicted with the Quranic requirement to treat slaves well. An important argument was that the Sharia did not allow enslavement of Muslims by other Muslims, and the majority of black slaves was at least nominally Muslim. Furthermore, a situation in which black slaves would seek protection with foreign authorities – first of all British consuls – should be prevented (De Bellaigue 2017: 191, Lewis 1990: 79). That would undermine Ahmad Bey's efforts to retain his *de facto* independence vis-à-vis the central Ottoman government. Maintaining friendly relationships with the British would also help to keep the French at bay. The French had invaded Algiers in 1830, gradually followed by the rest of Algeria, under the pretext of defending Europe against Barbary piracy in the Mediterranean, as part of a strategy to regain a prominent place under the European powers after the defeat of Napoleon (see on this strategy de Lange 2021). Still, there are reasons to suppose that Ahmad Bey was seriously committed to abolish slavery. According to Clarence-Smith he wanted to be known as a 'civilised monarch', on a par with Western European ones. Furthermore, his mother was a slave from Sardinia, probably a victim of a raid, which may have influenced him too (Clarence-Smith 2006: 101). After his death there was further progress at first. In 1861 what Clarence-Smith calls the Islamic world's first modern constitution guaranteed equality before the law. But tax increases caused a great rural rebellion in 1864 and the constitution was temporarily withdrawn (Clarence-Smith 2006: 102)..

The French in Algeria followed the example of the Tunisians in 1848. There was, however, little reason for celebration. Slave owners did not get compensation and the governor-general would rather have officials look the other way than create trouble with the slave owners. It took till 1880 before the high court in Algiers declared that owning slaves was against the law. Nonetheless, in 1905-1906 the practice was far from extinct. The failure to suppress slavery in Tunisia provided a welcome justification for the French to interfere in Tunisian politics after all (Clarence-Smith 2006: 100-102).

Morocco did not even consider any step in the direction of a ban. The Sultan bluntly refused in 1844 to meet representatives of the Anti-Slavery Society (a British NGO founded in 1839, now Anti-Slavery International) and a Moroccan minister declared in 1884 that a ban of slavery would conflict ‘with the bases of Muslim law’ (Clarence-Smith 2006: 103). Slavery was not banned before 1956, after the internal slave trade had been prohibited in 1922 (Brown 2019: 223).

Other places in Africa not under direct European rule did not fare much better. The British had left Sudan to the Egyptians, who under khedive Ismail Pasha occupied not only large swathes of Sudan but also territories beyond. He could not do this without European support – given the sorry state of the Egyptian public finances –, European weapons and European organisation. He appointed the British officer and explorer Samuel Baker (1821-1893) as Governor-General of what is now South Sudan and Northern Uganda, but had of course a price to pay. The Europeans demanded anti-slavery action (Wesseling 1999: 79-80). Baker’s successor Charles Gordon appointed Austrians as provincial governors, raided slave markets and took the slave traders captive. Manumission Bureaux provided some 18,000 slaves with freedom papers between 1877 and 1889. Gordon was an extremely energetic, dauntless, far from tactful military man and ruler, with very strict Christian principles, who went his own way. His ruthless suppression of slavery created much unrest and the economy suffered. Ismail Pasha did not put his full weight behind the actions against slavery, though his complaint of opposition from local Muslims most probably was well-founded. The Sudanese population, not very happy with Egyptian rule to start with, had no need at all for what looked too much like a crusade. The Sudanese Arab Zubayr al-Mansur enslaved many people in brutal razzias and forced

them to convert at the point of sword, which is not allowed in Islam (Clarence-Smith 2006: 112). Ismail Pasha even saw himself forced to appoint Zubayr governor of newly conquered land west of Sudan in 1873. Gordon succeeded in getting him out of the way in 1877. However, when raids in Sudan had ended, slavers swept to Lake Chad and captured thousands of people, preponderantly Muslims, again flouting the sharia (Clarence-Smith 2006: 113).

The deposition of Ismail Pasha was a sign for Charles Gordon to resign, leaving Sudan in the hands of a weak Egyptian Governor-General (Wesseling 1999: 82). Sure enough a revolution broke out, under the self-proclaimed Mahdi Mohammed Ahmed. Britain was the dominant power in Egypt, but Prime Minister Gladstone left the Egyptians to deal with Sudan. Gladstone even had sympathy for the Mahdists, as he had for liberation movements in general. The situation deteriorated to such an extent that not only the British, but also the Egyptian government came to the conclusion that they better abandoned Sudan. Charles Gordon was again sent to Sudan, with vague instructions. The British government only wanted him to do a report on the military situation, but the British ruler in Egypt also wanted him to organise an evacuation. Gordon himself, however, had other ideas. He was resolved on liberating Sudan from the rebels. In 1884 the Sudanese Islamist nationalists under the Mahdi started to beleaguer Khartoum and instead of organising an evacuation Gordon permitted everybody who preferred to flee or join the Mahdists to do so, but remained himself in Khartoum with a small army, as we saw in Section 3. The Mahdists took Khartoum early the next year and massacred an estimated 10,000 people, among whom general Gordon (Wesseling 1999:83-89). Notwithstanding enormous popular adulation of Gordon and a cry for revenge, the British government had little stomach for costly campaigns against the mahdi and his successor Abdullah, who enlarged the territory under his rule at a rapid pace (Wesseling 1999: 90-92).

After a period full of squirmishes and battles the British decided that they should recapture Sudan, in order to pre-empt other European powers, first of all France, intent on restoring its influence in Egypt. General Herbert Kitchener battled Abdullah from 1896 and recaptured Omdurman in 1898. Late in 1899 Abdullah was killed in action, which ended the war. Under joint Egyptian and British rule from 1899 to 1956 (with Egypt the junior partner), steps to abolish slavery now were taken more slowly

than surely. Much was left to sharia courts from 1902, which were not in a hurry. The British further decided to treat all female slaves as concubines. Clarence-Smith (2006: 114) calls this surprising, but there is some logic in it, because what would become of female slaves after they had been set free? The danger that they would end up in prostitution was all too real. There was furthermore a steady supply of new slaves, but the authorities looked the other way.

In Zanzibar and Pemba sultan Hamid b. Muhammad (r.1896-1902) officially abolished slavery in 1897, after earlier attempts, initiated by John Kirk, the British medical doctor from 1866 and consul from 1873 till 1886 mentioned in the Introduction, had created fierce resistance (described in great detail by Bossenbroek 2023). The measure was extended to the mainland in 1907, but there were many loopholes and enforcement was weak. Concubines were excluded, for fear of prostitution again, and the authorities here too left cases of slavery to sharia courts for a long period (Clarence-Smith 2006: 124-125). The practice of slavery lingered on in the region. Even in the 1950s men on the island of Pemba on the Kenyan coast were selling their slave servants to other men (Romero Curtin 1983: 865). In Ethiopia large-scale slavery also persisted till well into the twentieth century. The Italian occupiers in 1936 freed an estimated 420,000 slaves, both in Christian and in Muslim areas, in order to give their 1935 occupation an humanitarian gloss (Clarence-Smith 2006: 125).

Unlike in Sudan, one indigenous ruler in West Africa was bent on abolishing slavery. Abdul-Qadir Kan led a revolution from 1776 till his death in 1806 in the Senegal River Valley state of Fuuta Toro. He first of all tried to stop the supply of slaves for the Atlantic slave trade but also strove to root it out in the lands he controlled. He seems to have been successful, but after his death rivals and successors undid his revolution. It was an isolated phenomenon (Ware 2017: 349).

In South Africa, the British took over the Dutch possessions during the Napoleonic Wars. They banned the trade of slaves in 1807 and freed the slaves in 1834 (though these had to work for their former masters for up to another six years without receiving payment, Anson and Bennet 2022: 1). When Parliament in London in 1833 abolished slavery within the British Empire, more than 800,000 enslaved Africans were emancipated. The British government set £20 million apart to

compensate slave owners for the loss of their ‘property’ (the slaves themselves received nothing, they had after all not paid anything for the privilege of enslavement). Claims had to be lodged by the slave owners with the Slave Compensation Commission in London. After claims had been screened the amount of compensation was determined, the National Debt Office (NDO) had to finalise the compensation payment. £1,247,401 was allocated to the Cape of Good Hope for 38,427 enslaved (Anson and Bennet 2022).

Under British rule of the Cape Colony from 1806, groups of Dutch descendants, known as Afrikaner, but also people of French or German origin, trekked to what later became Orange Free State and Transvaal, in order to free themselves from British dominance, and, most probably, from the introduction by the British of legislation to improve the treatment of slaves (Ekama et al. 2020: 3). The abolition of slavery in the Cape Colony helped to continue the trek. Compensation was not on a *per capita* basis, but on the basis of the value of each slave as established by local appraisers. This of course took years, as the appraisers had to visit each individual farm. Slaves were divided into task- or skill-based groups and the average slave value per class would be used as the basis for each owner’s share of the total compensation sum made available for the Cape Colony. The end result could not be but a disappointment for the slave owners. Ekama et al. found for instance that one slave owner received £178 for seven slaves who had been valued at £569 by the appraisers (Ekama et al. 2020: 7). On top of that, costs were incurred for submitting claims to the NDO in London and for agents to collect the money, as the NDO was not a bank with offices or correspondent banks abroad. For owners of one or two slaves it hardly would be worth the effort to pursue their efforts to receive compensation and they could sell their claims to agents against a discount (Ekama et al. 2020: 8). As the Afrikaner generally were small-scale farmers with only a few slaves, the whole process of compensation was a strong incentive to pull the pin and move north. When the British subjugated the Afrikaner republics in 1902, the Afrikaner could no longer keep their slaves, but other forms of dependency and discrimination took the place of slavery here too, culminating in the official introduction of Apartheid in 1948. This only ended in 1991. Abolition was a laborious process, not only because of opposition from the slaveholders, ulema or the rulers, but sometimes also because the slaves didn’t want

to be set free. As recently as 1943 a group of royal slaves in the Aden Protectorate revolted when the ruler wanted to free them, as it meant that they would lose their privileges. The ruler had to call in British Indian troops from Aden to compulsorily liberate them. The resistance of the slaves was not so strange. As servants of the ruler they may have had a quite comfortable life while if left to their own devices it may have been hard to make ends meet. Sometimes it indeed happened that recalcitrant slaves were threatened to be manumitted without continuing patronage or gifts (Cronin 2016: 961-963). Such cases will, however, have been exceptional. Most rulers will not have been intent on sending away their slaves, and the British in Aden and its protectorates were all too ready to buy the so-called 'good treatment thesis', the thesis that slaves were treated so well that manumission was not in their interest. This was because they did not want to create opposition among the local rulers against their dominant position in the region. Testimony by slaves in archival material studied by Benjamin Berman-Gladstone (2025) far from supports the good treatment thesis, but for some lucky groups it may have been true.

8. Rejection of slavery and Islamic amnesia

Christians who believed that slavery was not what God initially intended could easily fall in with abolitionists such as the British parliamentary group led by William Wilberforce and the Quakers and the Methodists, who rejected slavery on the basis of the fundamental equality of people as creatures of God (Strehle 2023, Coke and Asbury 1798: 169-171). Followers of the monotheistic religions who see the acceptance of slavery in the holy scriptures as a divine ordinance are faced with the problem how to square this conviction with present-day ethics. Non-believers and more liberal believers are spared such harassing questions, because they suspect that divine beings are products of their time and their utterings reflect the opinions of the worldly and clerical elites of that time.

Jewry, like Christianity, counted abolitionists and anti-abolitionists among its adherents. Even in the late twentieth century, a leading Jewish writer on Jewish ethics restricted himself in a text on Jewish economic ethics to biblical and rabbinical

sources, and on slave-holding of Jews by Jews in biblical times or Jewish slaves held by non-Jews and how to redeem these (Tamari 1987: 62, 265-269). The role of Jewish slave traders in Africa and in the Atlantic slave trade and Latin American plantation economy goes unmentioned, even if it was in some cases, notably in Surinam and on Curaçao, quite considerable (Emmer 2021: 78). Still, Jews were active in abolitionist circles and denounced slavery from the pulpit and in publications (Aron 2004), nor did they gloss over the role of Jewish traders in the Atlantic slave trade (Köhler 1906: 650-652, Jewish Museum London 2019).

Muslims in particular have found it difficult to condemn slavery, as we have seen above in Section 5. In the past it was widely believed by Muslims that slavery as practised in the Islamic world differed fundamentally from the horrors that characterised Western slavery (De Bellaigue 2018: 188). That is a sentiment that probably is still simmering among those Muslims who have some, but not a very detailed, knowledge of history. However, the truth was largely different and even if it were not, that would not solve the tension between the acceptance of slavery in the primary sources of the faith and its present-day total rejection. Some solve the tension by not totally rejecting slavery. Clarence-Smith (2006: 129-150) notes that some ulema even after the Second World War condemn the excrescences of slavery, but not the institution *per se*. Not all governments of Muslim-majority countries endorsed the U.N.'s 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and its *Supplementary Anti-Slavery Convention* of 1956 (Clarence-Smith 2006: 11). Saudi Arabia did not formally abolish slavery until 1962, as mentioned above, and Oman until 1970 (Cronin 2016: 954). In Mauretania one time was not enough, it abolished slavery three times, the first time in 1981 and the last time in 2014 (Sijpesteijn 2017). Thousands of domestic servants may still in fact be slaves (Turning over a new leaf 2021).

As Mathews notes, the idea that the abolition of slavery should be a goal of the sharia, is a thoroughly modern idea (Mathews 2019: 238) and it is interesting to see what reasoning those that no longer want to accept slavery follow. Brown (2019: 218-221) notes that progressive Muslims tend to follow the Pakistani Islam scholar Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), who maintained that the wording of the Quran and the Hadith is a product of specific historical processes and that one should try to distill the eternal ethical truths contained in them and apply them to one's own time (Birt 1996, Akbar

2020). Fazlur Rahman's non-traditional views were met with death threats from fiercely aggressive traditionalists and he had to leave Pakistan. Threats or not, if the Quran and the prophet Muhammad accepted slavery, how can a present-day Muslim reject it? Better to neglect the issue, the more as jihadist groups such as Islamic State, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram refer to the Quran and the Sunna as a justification for treating their captives as slaves. And the less is talked about Islamic slavery, the fewer people know about it. Only a few Muslims, Jonathan A.C. Brown prominent amongst them, seem to be seriously wrestling with the acceptance of slavery in the Quran and the Sunna. Fazlur Rahman's solution is a bridge too far for him, instead he reasons that the Sharia always aimed at the emancipation of slaves (Brown 2019: 263). His reasoning is that total abolishment was not conceivable in the past, and that the idea only came up when it started to become economically possible, that is, in his view, the late 1600s (Brown 2019: 264). Brown accepts that "not everything in history that we've termed 'slavery' was intrinsically, grossly morally wrong" (Brown 2019: 269). Slavery is now morally wrong for Muslims "not in the sense of being an intrinsic, universal moral wrong in all times and places but in the sense of violating our existing standards of right conduct and propriety" (Brown 2019: 273). He observes that if slavery is not a wrong that God intended to prohibit, then it could lawfully be reintroduced again, and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) could hardly be condemned for its treatment of women and girls in its occupied territories (Brown 2019 pp. 255-257). By contrast he sees the various passages in the Quran as a call to continuously drive back slavery (Brown 2019: 263). To Brown's credit, he is not easily satisfied and still finds it difficult to accept, even as a thing of the past, the right of the slave owner to have sex with his female slaves (Brown 275-286). In parenthesis, it may be observed that any divine approval of the institution of slavery would be enough to justify the ISIS's treatment of women and girls is a non sequitur.

It may be noted that Fazlur Rahman had some precursors; only they did not go as far as he did. One such precursor was Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935), a reformer who tried to modernise Islam, though he later in his life departed from the liberal Islam propagated by his mentor Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), who helped modernise the organisation and the curriculum of al-Azhar University and became Grand Mufti of Egypt in 1899. Rashid Rida argued that slavery was part and parcel

of ancient societies and that it was simply impossible to abolish in one stroke (Brown 2019: 236). A similar view is held by Bernard Freamon (Freamon 1998: 21). In his view Quran 49:13 declares the equality of all humankind – which might be a somewhat biased interpretation, as the text only says:

“O mankind! We created you from a single *pair* of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another. Surely the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous”.

Equality is in the eyes of the reader. Freamon’s further reasoning is also somewhat convoluted. He argues that the Quran and the Sunna take slavery as a fact of life, implicating that they are silent on the case of a slaveless world. That would create room for a new *ijma* (consensus of the jurists). The jurists are free, thus Freamon, to label a practice that was *makruh* (blameworthy but not forbidden) henceforth *haram* (forbidden), though that would require unanimity among the scholars. If that does not work, bans within restricted regional areas should be possible (Freamon 1998: 63-64). Freamon in this passage in fact says that Muslims better accept the ban on slavery brought about by Western activism, implying that they would not have gone that far on their own.

All this reasoning still remains a bit constrained. If an almighty god had been convinced that slavery was bad, he would have had the means to impose his will. The argument that people needed time to accept the idea is perhaps the only way to reconcile the alleged eternal law of God on slavery with stubborn reality, but it undermines the almighty of God. The alternative is to accept that slavery was a fact of life and that it is not against any eternal divine law.

9. The Aftermath

For Africans and for the Muslim world outside Africa, the Western (incomplete) victory in getting slavery abolished left a nasty aftertaste, as it went hand in hand with increasing Western dominance and Western rule, in other words, colonialism. One

manifestation was the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, convened by the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in order to prevent armed conflict between the various powers that were looking for natural resources and potential markets for their industries (Heath 2010, Craven 2015: 32). The partitioning of Africa is a complicated story, which is not the subject of this paper. For an exhaustive treatment, see Wesseling (1999). Very briefly, one might say that at the Berlin Conference the powers involved partitioned Africa among themselves (for a detailed analysis of the Berlin Conference see Craven 2015).

An especially curious phenomenon was the Congo Free State, created by the Belgian King Leopold II (1835-1909), which received recognition at the Berlin Conference (Craven 2015: 32) and was a full participant at the Brussels Conference five years later. Both the Berlin and the Brussels conferences devoted fine words to free trade and the fight against slavery (even if King Leopold had made use of the services of one of the most successful and most cruel slavers, Tippu Tip, Marozzi 2025: 370), but trade (in the end it was not free) meant an explosion of Western economic activities and for these activities indigenous labour was required. Liberated ex-slaves found employment in Western-run mines and agriculture, not always voluntarily, and were not always treated well. The Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs welcomed the delegates with highfalutin phrases about the great and pure work to be done, without any self-interest, only aimed at liberating the oppressed from the revolting barbarism from which they suffered (*Conférence internationale de Bruxelles* 1891: 2-3). What, however, happened in the enormous area occupied by King Leopold's Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908, was that indigenous people were forced to pay taxes in kind. A major product was rubber. Many were mutilated or killed if they did not bring the required amounts from the trees in the jungle, even if they had been forced to venture deeper and deeper into the jungle to find new rubber trees, without enough food and without means to defend themselves against predators. Large areas were depopulated as a result of the killings and because the remnants of the population fled (Anstey 1971). Private companies that had obtained concessions were not better. Reports of the cruelties led to international outrage and the Belgian state saw itself forced to take over the colony (Stanley 2012, see further on the colonisation of Congo Schreurs and Ceulemans 2025).

Though not as cruelly as in the Congo Free State, other colonies used forced labour as well (Wickins 1986: 56-58). One popular form was contract labour. This was for instance applied on Mauritius and Réunion. When slavery on Mauritius was officially abolished in 1835, many planters imported contract labour from Madagascar and east Africa. The French authorities on Réunion in 1843 concluded a contract with the Sultan of Zanzibar to send contract labour. Contract labour was, indeed, what took the place of open slavery in much of the plantation economies in Africa after emancipation (Campbell 1981).

The story of Western colonialism in Africa is quite messy. One salient fact is the role of private business firms in Africa, which often preceded involvement of the governments of their home countries (which Great Britain generally, and certainly at the time of the Brussels Conference, tried to evade). Important players were the *Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft* and the *Imperial British East Africa Company* in East Africa and the *British South Africa Company* in the South. The same John Kirk, now Sir John Kirk, who had spent so much energy in pushing back the slave trade in Zanzibar was one of the two British delegates at the Brussels Conference and also represented Zanzibar, jointly with the German consul-general (Bossenbroek 2023: 310 and *Conférence internationale de Bruxelles* 1891 p.71). At the same time he was a board member of the Imperial British East Africa Company and apprehensive of German hegemonical plans in Africa (Bossenbroek 2023: 307, see Bossenbroek 2023: 310ff on how the British eventually succeeded in stopping the Germans). One leading idea among British support for Western hegemony in Africa was the earlier plea by the legendary British missionary David Livingstone (1813-1873) to bring Christianity, commerce and civilisation to Africa (see for a detailed description of Livingstone's activities in Africa and the role of Henry Morton Stanley, who famously succeeded in tracing him when he had disappeared from the radar, Bossenbroek 2023). In the 1880s a fourth c was added to this trio: control. British humanitarian imperialism should protect the Africans from the brute exploitation by the European rivals of Great Britain (Bossenbroek 2023: 361). But imperialism it still was (more on imperialism in Africa in, for instance, Davis and Huttenback 1988, de Lange 2021, Wesseling 1999 and Wickins 1986).

10. Conclusion: Why rake up the past

Activists in the Western world have succeeded in getting the message across that we should not forget our past involvement in slavery, but that it should be remembered. No such soul-searching exists in the Muslim world, apart from Jonathan Brown and a handful of others. The Muslim world largely keeps mum about its history of slave raids, slave trade and slave labour. Bernard Lewis noted in 1989 a lack of scholarly research on Islamic slavery due to “the extreme sensitivity of the subject” (Lewis 1990: vi). More than a third of a century later, one can no longer complain of a lack of research, but the sensitive it still is. Bilal Ali Kotil notes “the pervasive amnesia and persistent erasure of the history of slavery in Muslim societies” (Kotil 2023: 64). The website of Bin Jelmud House in Qatar (see Section 6) tells us that “The House explores the role Islam played in providing guidance for humane treatment of enslaved people, their integration into society and the eventual abolition of slavery” (<https://msheirebmuseums.com/en/about/bin-jelmood-house/>, accessed 22 July 2024), but there is no mention of the dark reality of slavery under Islam and of the tough resistance against abolition especially in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Petra Sijpesteijn too, describing her experience with Quatarese and Dutch students, notes that Muslims generally seem to be ignorant about Muslim slavery (Sijpesteijn 2017). The only Arab political leader who publicly acknowledged that Arab Muslims had been involved in the most cruel forms of slave trade in Africa appears to have been the then president of Libya, Moammar al-Gaddafi, who apologised at the Second Arab-African Summit on 10 October 2010 which he hosted (Bossenbroek 2024). Nonetheless, in recent times slavery in the Ottoman world is no longer completely neglected by historians from the region (Marozzi 2025: 253), but that does not seem to have reached the public at large. In the Western world there is no such tendency to forget, but nevertheless there is not much knowledge about the Western use of slaves in Africa itself, or about the slave raiding or the Western involvement in other trades than the Atlantic one. And if some Westerners still contrast Europe’s anti-slavery activity with Islamic resistance, they should remember that the Western world replaced slavery with colonisation.

Why should society at large, whether (post-)Christian or Muslim-majority, remember the sins of the past and give it a place in the museums, history textbooks and in the national holiday calendar (and possibly, at the wish of the descendants of the slaves and the victims of other forms of forced labour, in other forms)? Even if present generations cannot be held responsible for the cruelties of past generations, it is part of our history, and our past has had a profound influence on the present world. It has dawned upon us that the history of Western countries is not a source of unmitigated pride. First, the descendants of the slaves are part of the population and their history should be told as much as the history of the others. Second, facing the facts of our past actions is indispensable as an antidote to aggressive nationalism and self-aggrandisement. Knowledge about past sins, as of present ones by the way, is bound to be sobering and help keep feelings of superiority at bay. This goes for Western countries as much as for Muslim-majority countries.

There are two reasons that make it even more imperative to face the historical facts. In the Western world, the colonial past, closely connected with slavery, is still often seen as a source of pride, as a fine example of the adventurous spirit of the national merchants, and white supremacists, who become ever more vociferous, try to stymie efforts to give the negative side of the colonial past a place in the national consciousness. In the Islamic world, there is a tendency to trumpet the superiority of ethical Islam over the perfidy of the materialistic Western world. A glaring example is a paper in which the author contrasts an idealised picture of pious islamic man with the bleakest possible picture of selfish acquisitive Westerners (Zaman 2019). This conveniently allows him to gloss over the horrible human-rights violations in some Muslim-majority countries, the endemic corruption in some of them and the full participation of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in murderous fighting in Yemen and Sudan. No wonder that any reflection on a not so glorious past is conspicuous by its absence. However, both the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world were, and are, a mixture of good, bad and horrible. For all of us, a fair dose of humility would be appropriate. It would go a long way in making the planet a friendlier place.

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