In late nineteenth-century Morocco, European observers found ‘abid (sing. ’abd) “slaves” everywhere. Women were household domestics, concubines, and factory workers; men were artisans, shop assistants and transporters. Both were cultivators and herdsmen. Male slaves managed property for absentee ‘masters’ and served in armies of powerful chiefs. Most notable were the (allegedly thousands of) men, women and children owned by the Sultan himself.

‘Abid married and had children. It was difficult for Europeans to differentiate between their lives and those of the poor, haratin (sing. hartani, hartania) or recently freed slaves. Moreover, slaves were generally better off, and considered themselves superior to, these groups. The urban poor constituted a growing class of misery, who resented the ‘safety net’ masters provided slaves and fought the competition that freed-slaes brought to the labor market. Haratin (sometimes a ‘freed-slave’, more often in the Moroccan context, a ‘free person’, hur, literally of the ‘second’, thani, rank) occupied different social niches. In cities like Fez, haratin ranged from blond-haired and blue-eyed, to jet black and negroid-featured; they could work as skilled artisans, be wealthy traders, and even married into ‘free’ families. But in south, they were almost exclusively dark-skinned, negroid cultivators, communities at one time indigenous to the region, who had clearly welcomed many slaves into their ranks over the centuries. Slaves, who developed self-identity as ‘members’ of the families, who owned them, felt superior to haratin who lacked protectors and ‘ancestry’. Slaves were relieved by their masters of the responsibilities and expectations placed on non-slaves; that ‘patronage relationship’ extended to freed-slaves who often remained in the household even after manumission. This reality was not slavery as Europeans thought they knew it, and most nineteenth-century observers were reticent even to apply the term.

Slavery in Morocco dates to at least Roman times. ‘Morocco’ was the province of Mauritania Tingitane; prisoners from the incessant wars were enslaved as labourers and domestics, and enslaved captives (only a few of whom were black) may have constituted between 8% and 20% of the population. As trans-Saharan commerce with the agricultural regions south of the desert (the sudan, in Muslim times) grew in the post-Roman era, the region (whose frontiers shifted frequently) became an important source of African as well as Berber slaves, first supplying Constantinople, later (from about the eighth-century) the expanding Islamic world.

This ‘world’ was a fracturing one, and its internal ruptures gave added impetus to commercial dynamics. Revolt by Kharjites dissidents in the Sahara led to the establishment of Sijilmassa (southeastern Morocco) c.750; its commercial importance as a source of sub-Saharan gold and labor established the pivotal role of the Maghrib al-Aqsa (the ‘western Maghreb’) in the international Muslim economy. Berber Almoravids from the desert (eleventh c.) capitalized on the gold trade to finance a new empire extending into Spain and across the Sahara. Sijilmassa and its sub-saharan counterpart, Awdagust, housed wealthy merchants, landowners and thousands of slaves, who worked fields, provided domestic service and travelled with caravans.

Almoravid conquest of the Maghreb al-Aqsa heartland was achieved by creating the hasham, a special royal ‘horse cavalry’ of 2000 black slaves and 250 ‘purchased’ Andalusian Christians. This model was replicated by the Almoravid’s successors, the twelfth-century Almohads’ ‘abid al-Maghzen -- ‘slaves of the state’. Both states frequently faced rebellion by desert Berbers, providing their armies with legitimate opportunities to enslave the Berber women and children so much in demand in eastern markets. This era also marked the beginning of a trade in slaves from the sub-Saharan sudan to Europe via the Maghreb and Andalusia, which would continue into the fifteenth century.

With the decline of the unifying force of the Almohads (late thirteenth c.) distinguishing features of the domestic development of maghrib al-Aqsa emerged. North of the Anti-Atlas mountains, urban culture reflected Andalusian and oriental influences: female slaves were domestics and concubines; castrated male slaves, eunuchs, were harem keepers and administrators for the Sultan; males were servants and labourers in royal stables and farms. The southern plains of the Wadi Sous and Dra’a looked to the Sahara...
as their source of cultural influence and economic strength: haratin and slaves populated farming villages and a growing number of zwaya (religious centres), and in the Wadi Dra’a and oases of Tafilielt/Sijilmassa and Tuat, they cultivated date-palm groves.

From the rise of the Muslim Saadien dynasty (16th C.), through the Alawites (from the 17th C.), sultans fought these fragmenting tendencies, seeking to concentrate power in a court and an army capable of rivalling the Ottomans. Slaves of many origins remained central to palace life: concubines, wet nurses and mothers to royal personnages; male soldiers (including Christian prisoners-cum-slaves); eunuch hareem-keepers and administrators. The Saadien conquest of Songhay, south of the Sahara, in 1591 was led by a former-Christian ‘freed-slave’ and included many such ‘slaves’ among its soldiers. The great Alawite sultan Moulay Ismail (1672-1727, himself born of a slave mother), created a veritable black slave army, the ‘Abid al-Bukhari. Resembling Ottoman devshirme more than earlier Almoravid or Almohad guards, the ‘abid were to become a self-reproducing ‘class’: slave soldiers were given wives, and their children were brought up in palace service. Male slaves in the kingdom were requisitioned (for a nominal remuneration) from their masters. Haratin and ‘blacks’ of uncertain origin were also dragooned, causing the ‘ulamma (Islamic legal scholars) of Fes to object vigourously (and in vain) that the sultan was enslaving free Muslims, a contravention of sharia (Islamic law). Slaves who were obtained directly from the sudan continued to supplement the ‘slave corps’ on a regular basis. Following Moulay Ismail’s death, the ‘abid soon became political powers unto themselves, and consequently, many met the same fate as their overly ambitious Ottoman cousins. This ‘royal slave culture’ extended to local centres of power, including the zwaya, which never ceased to challenge the centralizing tendencies of maghzen authority.

Over the nineteenth century, the most significant events affecting Moroccan slavery were not European abolitionist efforts but rather French colonial conquests to the east (the Ottoman regencies, Algeria and Tunisia) and south (the West African sudan). As the French occupied Mediterranean coastal regions and extended their presence into the desert, traditional markets supplying sub-Saharan Africans as slaves (e.g. Tuat) closed. Annual slave imports to southern Morocco increased between the 1860s and 1880s to between 4,000 and 7,000; merchants in Timbuktu began ‘training’ slaves in Islam and Arabic to raise their sale price in the north. Royal tax revenues drew heavily on these sales; on occasion, markets were ‘leased out’ like tax farms!

In the 1890s, French conquests succeeded in closing off ‘production’ of slaves in the sudan, but Moroccan slavery continued, turning to local sources for its recruits. In the face of much reduced imports, Moroccan merchants exploited inter-tribal raids to produce Berber women and children; haratin cultivators were favoured prey of locally organized ‘kidnapping’ parties (often with the consent of local chiefs or caids); and in the Sous, slaves were ‘raised’ for domestic sale. Even the Sultan, the single largest proprietor of humans, marketed his ‘excess slaves’. Re-sale of southern slaves in northern markets became a profitable and growing business.

By 1912, when the French established a formal protectorate over the Moroccan monarchy, European abolitionists had succeeded in forcing the sale of slaves from public markets to private courtyards. A questionnaire on ‘the condition of slavery’ subsequently administered affirmed Europeans’ impressions that Moroccan slavery was not “real”, that slaves were a “veritable part of the family” and of Muslim culture. In 1922, a colonial government circular emphasized that administrators were to reinforce the ‘freedoms’ the sharia advocated and protect those who claimed such rights. Marketing slaves was illegal, though slavery itself was not. Kidnapping of children was still common in the south in the 1930s; domestic slavery, including concubinage, continued in towns and villages. It was only in the 1940s that freed-slaves and haratin gradually replaced slaves per se. The vast majority of unskilled manual and menial labour created by the colonial economy was the domain of this new ‘underclass’. Men and women managed to buy property and even establish small businesses. Those who could found work with the French administration; haratin in particular were adept at ‘parleying’ this opportunity into local political advantage. Freed-slaves generally cultivated contact with their former family for assistance with customary needs like marriage expenses, credit, and legal problems.
Contemporary distinctions between ‘haratin’ and freed-slaves may in part be products of that recent period of social transition. But difficult economic circumstances during the 1950s pushed both groups to emigrate from the south in search of work. Whereas northern cities had frequently absorbed such population influxes, and their haratin populations occupied as many economic niches as they represented racial mixes, southern society was less accustomed to having its servile population directly access independent revenue. The differential investment between the advantaged north and largely marginalized south first by the colonial, then by the independent Moroccan regime (from the 1960s), exacerbated the social tensions incubating between ‘blacks’ and indigenous Berbers. Emergent contradictions between the increasing material wealth of non-noble families and the lack of a comparable increase in social and political status have not been lost in local politics. Contemporary democratic elections promise to play increasingly on these tensions.

Recently, there seems to be a renewed interest in annual ‘slave moussem’ (fairs) as cultural events. This celebration of the ‘slave’ heritage is a development of some import, whose significance in terms of social identity formation is not yet clear. The contemporary ‘slave’ is just as likely to be the suit-clad young migrant returning from France, or the college-educated woman in jeans and African braids, as their aged father who retired from the French army to the local village. “Slavery” -- broadly understood as the basis of many identities in the Moroccan context -- seems poised to carry yet another generation into the twenty-first century.

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E. Ann McDougall (University of Alberta)
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