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# The Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul: From Africa to the Heart of Islam

*Ehud R. Toledano*

## OTTOMAN EUNUCHS AND THE SLAVE TRADE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Slavery in its various forms has long fascinated the minds of the moderns, both scholars and non-scholars. This fascination becomes even more intense when we cross the cultural lines of East and West: the many travel accounts of Europeans and Americans who visited the lands of Islam rarely failed to comment on the phenomenon of slavery, with special reference to harem-slavery. In most of these accounts, the need of both writer and reader to satisfy their curiosity defied the inaccessibility of harems to foreigners and produced descriptions which often belonged to the realm of sheer fancy. To complicate the picture further, scholarly works have not always paid sufficient attention to the problem of terminology. Thus, non-Western slavery was depicted in terms loaded with meaning – frequently too negative – derived from Western experience with the practice, mostly that of the American South and the West Indies.<sup>1</sup> However, in recent years there have been a number of attempts to treat Islamic harem-slavery in its own cultural context, a task made possible also by the availability of archival material, especially in the Turkish state archives, and the existence of some insightful travel accounts.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most curious and intriguing aspect of harem-slavery has always been its use of eunuchs. Eunuchs were not an Islamic innovation, but as with slavery itself and other borrowed institutions, Islam endowed the employment of castrated men with its own special character. While medieval Islamic military slavery and the role of the eunuchs in it received proper attention in modern scholarship,<sup>3</sup> the same can hardly be said about harem-slavery in the Ottoman Empire. This vast and long-enduring Muslim state dominated the history of the Middle East and Eastern Europe for five centuries and greatly influenced the social, economic, and political institutions in these regions. By the nineteenth century, military slavery was no longer practised by the Ottomans, and as agricultural slavery was never common in the Empire, the only form of servitude extant was household slavery. In its royal and upper-class manifestation, the institution was termed harem-slavery. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, a traffic of varying levels, but averaging about 10,000 slaves annually, was required to meet the demand of the Ottoman market.<sup>4</sup>

The great majority of slaves imported into the Ottoman Empire during those years were African women, although African men in small numbers were still being acquired until the 1890s. Black and brown, that is, Ethiopian, slaves reached the urban centres of the Empire via Egypt, present-day Libya, the Red Sea, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf. They served mostly in menial jobs, with the exception of some Ethiopian women who joined

middle-class harems as concubines and wives. White women came from the Caucasus, where they were often sold by their own families in the hope that they would rise to prominence in the Imperial or upper-class harems. Quite a few actually did, especially those who were beautiful and talented. The rest served in household duties, never realizing the dreams and high aspirations of their youth. White slaves fetched higher prices than their African counterparts, and African women were more expensive than African men. Eunuchs, by then only African, were hard to acquire and quite dear.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the slave trade to and in the Ottoman Empire was gradually being suppressed. Trafficking in Africans was prohibited in 1857, but lingered on at varying degrees of intensity until the last decade of the century. The role of Great Britain in inducing the Sublime Porte to enact such a policy was crucial. Nevertheless, British success was limited to the suppression of the African slave trade. The trade in whites, as well as the very legality of the status of slavery in the Ottoman Empire, were not significantly affected. In these areas, the Ottomans refused to allow British interference. Instead, they adopted policies which suited their own interests supplying Ottoman answers to problems arising from the continued existence of the practice.

We must remember that Ottoman household slavery was milder than its Western version. Although it, too, is best understood in terms of ownership and property, the Ottoman institution formed an integral part of the social fabric and was deeply imbued with the intimacy of the traditional family. In addition, there prevailed within the Ottoman Muslim elite a general sense of moral and spiritual superiority towards Christian Europe, a feeling which co-existed with the recognition of Ottoman inferiority in the military, technological, and economic fields. All this produced a clear disinclination in government circles to yield to British pressures regarding slavery and the slave trade. Thus, even when a number of edicts were promulgated by the Ottoman Porte, their enforcement lagged behind and often required reiteration and re-enactment. The situation was quite different when it concerned white slavery and the traffic which kept it alive. Here, the Ottomans were faced with yet another difficulty caused by the re-introduction of agricultural slavery into the Empire.

During the late 1850s and early 1860s, the gradual occupation of the Caucasus by the Russians resulted in the displacement of a large Circassian population forced to emigrate *en masse*. The Ottoman government received the Circassians and absorbed them in various parts of the Empire. The migrating Circassians brought along their peculiar form of agricultural serfdom, which the Islamic law of the Empire recognized as slavery. Without going into much detail,<sup>5</sup> we may note that the Ottomans opted for an interesting process of gradual manumission of their newly acquired slave population in order to resolve the problems which emanated from this special situation. None the less, in that process they did not touch the sensitive institution of harem-slavery, by then almost completely nourished on Circassian recruits and inmates. Nor was the traffic in Circassian girls stopped, in spite of occasional British protests.

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Imperial Harem contained

between 400 and 500 female slaves, mostly Circassian, who resided in a number of palaces and were divided among the main harem compound and the suites of the members of the Royal Family.<sup>6</sup> To supervise and guard the women, and to maintain contact between them and the outside male world, there served in 1903 no less than 194 African eunuchs, both black and Ethiopian. For the role of eunuchs in medieval Islam we owe our knowledge mostly to Professor David Ayalon's studies,<sup>7</sup> which also provide an indispensable foundation for the understanding of the place of eunuchs at the Ottoman court. Of course, Ottoman eunuchs did not occupy any significant military position comparable to that of the eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, but Ayalon's two other observations hold true for the Ottoman Empire as well: all eunuchs were slaves, and all were imported from outside the Empire; an especially close relationship existed between master/mistress and eunuch, for not only were the eunuchs a foreign element in society, but unlike other slaves, in most cases they did not form alternative family ties by marriage.

Our information about the Ottoman eunuchs comes from works by five authors: Uzunçarşılı, Gibb and Bowen, Penzer, and Uluçay.<sup>8</sup> Penzer relied on European sources, Gibb and Bowen on the well-known account of d'Ohsson (eighteenth century) and on Tayyazade Ata's chronicle (mid-nineteenth century), Uzunçarşılı added more chronicles and some archival material, while Uluçay simply used Uzunçarşılı and Penzer with some additional documents. Except for Uluçay, all other writers did not venture in their treatment of the African eunuchs into the reform period of the nineteenth century, known as the *Tanzimat* (1839–1876). None of these writers made any reference to the single most important archival source for the history of the African eunuchs, namely the *Register of the Biographies of the Imperial African Eunuchs*. Although I have been able to locate at the archives of the Turkish Prime Ministry only one such Register, dated 6 May 1903, it is quite possible that others were compiled in the same genre for earlier periods.

The Register of 1903 is contained in the *Yıldız* Collection, which includes the documents housed in the *Yıldız* Palace, the abode and governing headquarters of Sultan Abdulhamit II (1876–1908).<sup>9</sup> It lists 194 biographies of the African eunuchs owned by the Ottoman Family and serving, or retired, at the time. The biographies vary in length and detail, with greater attention paid to the senior members of the Eunuchs Corps (*Ocak*). Information provided usually concerns the date of the eunuch's registration as belonging to the Imperial Household; his place of origin, or rather the Ottoman province into which he had been imported and whence he reached Istanbul; some indication as to how he entered the *Ocak*, that is, whether given as a present or purchased; information about his previous service, in case the eunuch had not reached the Harem directly after entering the Empire; in which section of the Royal Household or in which princely suites he served; in which of the Imperial palaces he was serving; whether he had ever been manumitted; and finally, if at any stage of his career he ever retired.

What the Register does not tell us is how and from where in Africa the eunuch was recruited, nor where the operation of castration took place. No

indication of the eunuch's age at registration or at any other time is provided. We cannot tell whether a eunuch was Ethiopian or belonged to one of the black races of the continent (this is why I preferred the designation 'African eunuchs' to 'black eunuchs', commonly used by Ottomanists). Finally, there is no information in the Register about the eunuch's property, nor about the lucrative and prestigious *waqf* endowments we know they traditionally supervised. Still, the Register is an excellent and rare source for the history of the African eunuchs at the Ottoman Court; it forms the basis of the present study. The necessary background information not provided by the Register was culled, for the most part, from the above-mentioned studies by Uzunçarşılı, Uluçay, Gibb and Bowen, and Penzer, as well as directly from the chronicles used by them.

Following Burton's translation of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Penzer cites three modes of castration: removal of both penis and testicles; removal of penis alone (reproductive capability retained without the means); removal of the testicles alone.<sup>10</sup> Almost all the eunuchs at the Ottoman Court belonged to the first category. It is quite clear that an operation of such a nature had far-reaching effects, both physical and psychological. With the medical methods and un-hygienic conditions of pre-modern times, mortality was high, especially as a result of pus clogging the urethra.<sup>11</sup> Throughout their lives the survivors suffered hormonal and psychological disorders and were said to have developed peculiar characteristics and an eccentric social behaviour. This had special significance since senior eunuchs had access to power, and during certain periods of Ottoman history exercised it to influence the course of political events.

Although hard to establish in fact, most writers believe that the eunuchs were often motivated by a deep sense of bitterness and sought to avenge the 'unnatural crime' perpetrated on their person. The rise to power of the African eunuchs at the Ottoman court occurred during the second half of the sixteenth century and lasted, with vicissitudes, well into the eighteenth century. Uluçay, who surveys in detail the many highly influential African eunuchs, calls the period the 'Sultanate of the African Eunuchs'.<sup>12</sup> He also attributes the decline and fall of the Empire to the corrupting role played by the eunuchs at the Court, associated with the rising influence of the Harem in Ottoman politics. This was evident during the first half of the seventeenth century, known as the 'Sultanate of the Women', and left its mark on Ottoman history in the following periods. Generally speaking, the more powerful the ladies of the Court were, the more influential the eunuchs became.

The great majority of the eunuchs whose biographies are listed in the Register served exclusively during the reign of Abdulhamit II (1876–1908). In that period, with its strong emphasis on personal access to the Sultan for the conduct of state affairs, two of the Head Eunuchs attained recognition of high standing in the government.<sup>13</sup> How important the eunuchs actually were in court politics is hard to determine, for the official correspondence at the archives does not normally reflect such matters. Technically, they still performed their usual Palace duties, which according to Abdulhamit's daughter were: 'to lock and unlock the doors of the Imperial Harem every evening and morning, to take shifts guarding the doors, to watch those

entering and leaving, and not to allow in anybody from the outside'.<sup>14</sup> They performed similar services at the various princely suites as well.

A question for which we cannot yet provide a satisfactory answer is where the African eunuchs were being castrated. For the Mamluk period, Ayalon found one such location in Ethiopia, outside the borders of the Sultanate.<sup>15</sup> A report by Dr Louis Frank, written in 1802, points out the Upper-Egyptian village of Abu Tig as the place in which these operations were performed. The Swiss Arabist J.L. Burckhardt adds a village near Asyut in Upper-Egypt, where Coptic monks regularly 'manufactured' eunuchs at the time of his travels there in 1813 and 1814. He also mentions a place west of Darfur, whence eunuchs were being imported into Egypt and the Hijaz.<sup>16</sup> Uzunçarşılı claims that most eunuchs were sent to the Imperial Harem by the governors of Egypt and were, presumably, also castrated in that province. He then cites Raşit's chronicle, where it is stated that the grand vezir of Sultan Ahmet III ordered the governor of Egypt in 1715 to put an end to the castration of Ethiopians in Egypt and the surrounding area.<sup>17</sup> However, the vezir died a while later and his order was never executed.

I could not find any specific indication that during the second half of the nineteenth century, young boys were being made into eunuchs on Ottoman territory. The fact that the anti-slave trade conventions signed between Britain and both Egypt (1877) and the Porte (1880) included clauses prohibiting castration is not sufficient proof that such operations were actually still being performed within the Empire. Importation of eunuchs lingered, nevertheless, well beyond the conclusion of these conventions. In Egypt, too, eunuchs continued to play a role in the governor's household, which was the closest imitation of the Sultan's Court. A book published in 1892 in defense of Islamic slavery noted the influence and prestige possessed by high-ranking eunuchs in Cairo. Foremost among these were the head-eunuchs who served the mothers of two Egyptian governors, Abbas and Ismail Paşas.<sup>18</sup>

#### THE CORPS OF AFRICAN EUNUCHS AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

During the years of their long residence in Istanbul, the Ottoman Sultans and their extended families did not stay in one palace. In the nineteenth century, changes of residence within the capital, and the considerable construction and expenditure attending every such move, were more frequent than in previous centuries. Following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Sultan Mehmet the Conquerer built the Old Palace (*Eski Saray*) where the main campus of Istanbul University is located now.<sup>19</sup> The New Palace, better known as *Top Kapi Sarayı*, was completed in 1478. Until the reign of Sultan Murat III (1574–1595), this palace served as the centre of government, though not as the Sultan's residence. From Murat III's time until the opening of *Dolma Bahçe Sarayı* in 1853, the Ottoman Sultans resided with their Harem at *Top Kapi*.

The Old Palace continued to host the women of non-reigning Sultans and to serve as a detention place for Harem inmates who, for political or other reasons, were banished from *Top Kapi*. In addition to their main residential

palace, the Sultans also maintained other palaces and mansions in and around the capital. In the nineteenth century, among the best known and most used of these were *Beşiktaş* and *Çiragan*, favoured by Mahmut II, *Dolma Bahçe* of Abdulmecit, *Beyleybeyi*, rennovated by Abdulaziz, and *Yıldız*, the abode of Abdulhamit II. Princes and princesses had their suites in some of these palaces, while the Imperial Harem was located where the reigning Sultan resided. According to our Register, Imperial Eunuchs resided in 1903 at four palaces: *Yıldız* (main Harem), *Beşiktaş*, *Top Kapi*, and *Çit* (an Imperial mansion). It is not always clear where each of the princely suites was located.

Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were 31 eunuchs serving at *Yıldız* with the immediate entourage of the Sultan, his mother, and his wives. At the auxiliaries to the main Harem in *Beşiktaş*, *Top Kapi*, and *Çit*, we note 19, 6, and 18 eunuchs respectively. The remaining 120 were divided among 13 princes and 11 princesses, whose suites were located in the various wings of *Yıldız* and *Beşiktaş*, as well as in a number of royal mansions in and around the capital. The largest suite, that of the Crown Prince, employed ten eunuchs, as did the suite of Abdulhamit II's eldest daughter. Lesser members of the Ottoman Family normally employed half that number of eunuchs.

As in the traditional system of corps-formation in the Ottoman ruling class, the eunuchs too had a 'school for eunuchs', where they began their career at the palace.<sup>20</sup> Like the Janissary recruits in previous centuries, and as the Caucasian slave-girls throughout the nineteenth century, the newly acquired African eunuchs had to be introduced to high Court culture and Palace etiquette. Under strict discipline, they also learned Turkish and the practical side of their duties. The young ones were allowed to play with the young slave-girls of the Harem, who were also in the course of training and education. Three retired eunuchs, one of high rank, are listed in the Register as assigned to the 'school', presumably to supervise and guide the young recruits. 'Graduates' began their way as Harem eunuchs with the rank of *En Aşagi*, meaning literally 'the lowest'.

The structure of the Corps of the African Eunuchs underwent several changes through the centuries of its existence, ascent to power, and decline. On the basis of the sources available to them, modern scholars have tried to reconstruct the hierarchy of the Corps and to sort out the various titles assigned to eunuchs in the Ottoman Court. Penzer attached no special significance to the meaning of titles, merely ranking them in descending order; on the other hand, Uzunçarşılı, Uluçay, and Gibb and Bowen attempted to relate the meaning of titles to the actual function, but could not settle all questions of rank and position.<sup>21</sup> All, it seems, relied on mid-nineteenth century and earlier sources, giving us only a general structure of the institution as it came to be by the beginning of the twentieth century. Earlier versions of the *Register of Biographies of the Imperial African Eunuchs* were unavailable to the above-mentioned scholars, and still remain to be searched and explored. The Register of 1903 throws more light on the problem of title and rank, although it, too, leaves a few questions unanswered.

Of the 194 African eunuchs listed in the Register, 35 bear a title of some seniority which distinguishes them from the rest. Apart from the Head African Eunuch, whose biography is not included in the Register, we find ten different titles in actual use. In most cases, these no longer bear any relation to the services performed by the eunuchs who bore them; some of the titles seem to have signified a rank, and came to the holder with seniority and promotion. Thus, in the period under discussion, one could be a Head Eunuch of a prince or princess with the rank of *Hasilli*, *Onunce*, *Ortanca*, or without any of these ranks. The other titles, however, appear to have entailed some specific responsibilities, though not necessarily, or precisely, those discharged by the original bearer of the title in earlier centuries.

The remaining 159 eunuchs were not distinguished by any title or position. If we follow the chronicler Ata, considered the best authority on Palace structure, we ought to assume that they belonged to the two lowest categories of eunuchs: *En Aşagi* ('the lowest'), and *Acemi Aga*.<sup>22</sup> We may also note that certain positions previously filled – some even by eunuchs who appear in our Register – were left vacant at the date of recording. This may be explained by changes in the protocol, or by minor structural alterations made to suit the preference of high-ranking officers of the Corps.

Perhaps the data most indicative of the vigour and strength of the institution of Palace slavery are the dates on which eunuchs were admitted to the Imperial service and their names entered into the Register. Such dates are provided for 189 out of 194 eunuchs whose biographies we have. As will be shown later, many of the eunuchs had served in upper-class households, whether in Istanbul or in the provinces, before reaching the Palace. Some of these men had long years of such service on their record, while others came to the Imperial Harem directly from the province into which they had been freshly imported. Therefore, the registration date does not help us much to determine the eunuch's age. Still, we can cull out interesting information about recruitment patterns and the 'maintenance' of the eunuch population.

One would expect that by the turn of the century, after almost 50 years of official prohibition against trading in African slaves, the number of eunuchs being entered into the Register should have declined, reflecting the gradual demise of the institution of harem-slavery. None the less, the picture is quite different: the more we approach the Register's closing date, the larger the number of eunuchs entered. Whereas between the years 1865 and 1875, only 17 eunuchs were registered, we note close to 50 fresh entries for the years 1880–1890. During the last ten years of registration (1893–1903), no less than 100 eunuchs were put on the Imperial payroll. The longest-serving eunuch was registered way back in 1849, and the last eunuchs presented to the Ottoman Family were registered in 1901. Of course, we have no indication of recruits effected past the closing date of the Register. This pattern clearly reflects the fact that the demand for eunuchs at the Palace survived into the twentieth century, and that it was possible to obtain African eunuchs as late as 1901, if not later.

It is difficult to determine the exact places of origin of the African eunuchs. The most we can do is to state the provinces whence the eunuchs were brought to the capital, but not the areas in Africa where they had

actually been captured or purchased. For 114 of the 194 eunuchs we have a clear indication of the province of origin; in the remaining biographies this information is wanting. Perhaps it is not surprising that the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt supplied 103 of the 114 eunuchs, or more than 90 per cent (!). Roughly half of those (50 eunuchs) came to Istanbul from the Hijaz, 27 from the Yemen, and 26 from Egypt. The remaining 11 men were brought from the North African slaving province of Tripoli (six), from Iraq (two), Tunis (one), the Sudan (one), and one eunuch from, though more likely via, Aleppo.

Clearly, there is a correlation between the provinces from which most of the African eunuchs were imported and the provinces in which the slave trade was most rife. It is plausible to assume that the better part of the Africans traded at the Hijazi, Yemeni, and Egyptian marts were captured or bought in the Western Sudan, the Nile basin, and other East African regions, including Ethiopia. Racially, the eunuchs, as the rest of these slaves, were either black or brown. We may note again that, in all probability, they had already been castrated by the time they reached Ottoman territory.

How were the eunuchs acquired? Eighty-two of the biographies provide interesting information about the nature of this branch of the traffic. Only ten of these 82 eunuchs were actually purchased by the Ottoman Family; the rest were given as presents to various members of the Imperial Household. Of those purchased, three were bought from slave dealers in the capital and its vicinity, three bought at Medina by a Palace official, one at Jidda, and one eunuch was purchased in the Yemen by a member of the military, who later sold him to the Palace. It is of interest to note that one of the eunuchs, purchased from a slave dealer near Istanbul, was said to have been manumitted before. He was, most probably, as interested in the deal as were the parties who concluded it.

The overwhelming majority of the African eunuchs were not purchased, but rather given as presents. Here we have information about 72 cases, which reveals the nature of the practice. In the upper echelons of Ottoman society, as in the lower classes, presents were an important *legitimate* means of securing the goodwill and concomitant co-operation or intercession of powerful persons and of people with access to such persons. Because eunuchs were expensive, difficult to obtain, and highly sought after, they were especially suited to attract the favours of the Royal Family. Thus we find among the high personages who presented eunuchs to the Ottoman Sultan and his immediate relatives the *Khedive* of Egypt and members of his family, grand vezirs, governors-general of the Hijaz and Tripoli, not a few *Serifs* of Mecca (guardians of the Holy Cities), army generals, and other high functionaries.

There are also a few cases in which eunuchs had been presented to high officials, who at a later stage gave them to the Imperial Family. One such eunuch was given by the governor of Tripoli to the grand vezir Ali Paşa, and another was given by *Khedive* Ismail of Egypt to the grand vezir Fuat Paşa, the two most prominent reforming grand vezirs of the third quarter of the nineteenth century. All eunuchs presented as gifts were received long after

the prohibition of the African traffic had been introduced in 1857. No specific regulation prevented the transfer of slaves from one family to another, nor was it illicit to travel with one's own household slaves.

Not for all the African eunuchs – whether purchased or given as presents – was the Imperial Court the first place of service. Only 47 biographies make it clear that their subject never engaged in any service prior to his registration as a Palace eunuch. At least the same number served in provincial households, mostly those of governors and *Şerifs* of Mecca. Twenty-four eunuchs were employed by military families in the provinces, often families of generals or other high-ranking officers. Fifty-five eunuchs had served in upper-class households in Istanbul before joining the Royal Harem. Among such households were those of grand vezirs, cabinet ministers, and other dignitaries. Some eunuchs who had served in provinces accompanied their masters to the capital and continued to serve them there. Many of the officials purchased or received their eunuchs long after the prohibition came into effect; some, such as ministers of the interior, were even in charge of enforcing that prohibition.

Another revealing aspect of the institution is the mobility of the African eunuchs within the Ottoman Family after their registration. We take the basic unit of service to be the 'princely suite' (*daire*), and count every movement into the unit or out of it as one transfer. In such a count, a remarkable stability in the service patterns of the African eunuchs emerges. Of course, the longer the eunuch's life, the higher his chance of being moved, mostly as a result of the death of master or mistress. Still, over 55 per cent of the eunuchs were never transferred even once; 23 per cent were transferred once; 12 per cent were transferred twice; five per cent were transferred three times; 2.6 per cent were transferred four times; only two eunuchs were transferred five times in their careers, and one eunuch was moved between suites six times. This may be taken as an indication of the personal attachment of master or mistress to their eunuchs, and of the eunuch's loyalty to their employers.

Two interesting phenomena in the careers of the royal eunuchs were manumission and retirement. Regarding 27 eunuchs, or roughly 14 per cent, it is said in the Register that at one point of their service they were manumitted. All of them had been freed before their names were entered into the Imperial Register. It is likely that their manumission had no real effect on their careers, since the wealth and prestige which attached to the position of Palace eunuchs required no coercion on the part of their masters. This rendered almost irrelevant the fact that legally they were no longer slaves. The physical damage inflicted upon them could not be remedied by a mere certificate of manumission; their employment and prosperity were practically guaranteed by their handicap.

Retirement, too, had a curious angle to it when applied to the royal eunuchs. In all probability, retirement was related to the eunuch's age and his physical condition. Still, retirement was not always final, and quite often a retired eunuch would be re-appointed to an active position after some time. At the signing of the Register, ten eunuchs were listed as retired. Another 14 were re-assigned to active duty after having retired at an earlier

point. Retired eunuchs continued to reside in the various palaces of the Ottoman Family, but it is not clear if they had any duties. On the other hand, the three retired eunuchs assigned to the 'school of eunuchs', mentioned above, were, presumably, entrusted with the training of the young and newly acquired members of the Corps.

## CONCLUSION

We have already noted the dual structure of the Eunuchs' Corps. The study of the Imperial Register emphasizes even further the problematic nature of that phenomenon. It is clear that the eunuchs owed allegiance both to their royal master or mistress and to the senior officers of the Corps. If they were not attached to a particular princely suite, their situation was less awkward, but otherwise, they had to maintain a delicate 'balance of loyalties'. Their position and influence depended on the manipulation of information, being as they were, inextricably woven into the intricate network of Court politics.

Clifford Geertz' observation concerning the centrality of access to information in the bazaar<sup>23</sup> is even more apt with regard to the Ottoman Court. Information about personal and political connections was guarded with great zeal by those who possessed it, while people who had not such information strove most diligently to obtain it. And at the Court, personal and intimate information was in itself politically significant. Thus, the eunuchs were advantageously positioned at the crossroads of sensitive information, privy to the innermost secrets of many Court figures. Serving as a conduit for such information was one of their main tasks at the Palace. They were trusted, suspected, and manipulated at the same time, but if deft, often benefited in the process.

A great deal of the political influence of the African eunuchs depended on the status acquired by the Head Eunuch. Although at the end of the nineteenth century the 'Sultanate of the Eunuchs' was but a faded memory, two of the Head Eunuchs attained the high rank of vezir during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamit II.<sup>24</sup> Thus, they were placed officially near the top of the administrative pyramid with considerable influence and prestige. Nevertheless, the eunuchs' position at the turn of the century, as before, was predicated upon their access to the Sultan and the other powerful figures in the Ottoman Family. This was even more so during the highly personal government of Abdulhamit II. The importance of the royal personage whom the eunuch served determined the level of political intercourse at that particular princely suite. This, in turn, decided the significance of the information the eunuch could acquire and, consequently, his influence, too. Since promotion was also determined by the highest ranking officers of the Eunuchs' Corps, personal and political information must have circulated within the unit, serving to attract favours and patronage from the senior eunuchs.

The changes brought about by the reforms of the nineteenth century affected almost all spheres of life in the Ottoman Empire. However, it is perhaps a reflection on the depth and efficacy of these reforms that one of the most central and traditionally sensitive institutions in Ottoman society hardly showed any signs of transformation: the basic structure of the Sultan's

household, the subject of emulation for the upper classes, remained much the same. Not only did the traditional segregation of women persist at the Imperial Court, but harem-slavery continued to be the rule of the house. Although it became increasingly difficult to obtain slaves of any kind or colour,<sup>25</sup> the Imperial Harem refused to yield the principle. So much so that it continued to replenish its Corps of African Eunuchs, acquiring no less than 100 new recruits in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Here, we are not interested in passing any value-judgement on such a culture-bound practice as harem-slavery. The important point is the tenacity of old habits – those concerning the family structure and relations between the sexes – shown by the Ottoman House and, consequently, by the rest of the urban upper classes, especially in Istanbul. By the end of the nineteenth century, anti-slave trade conventions and geo-political conditions put a stop to the importation of African slaves into the Empire. The Westernization of the upper classes brought about a certain change in the outlook of many Ottomans on traditional ways. Yet, the prestige of the Ottoman House kept its social structure and patterns of conduct out of public criticism and preserved them as a source of emulation for the wealthy and powerful. This, of course, is related to the fact that family life in Ottoman society, as in other traditional societies, Muslim and non-Muslim, was considered most intimate and sensitive and, therefore, was also the last to yield to reform. It was one thing to change dress, modes of transportation and communication, or even military and bureaucratic techniques, but quite another to amend family laws.

#### NOTES

\*Although all transliterations follow modern Turkish spelling the author has reluctantly agreed to drop all diacritical marks. This is due to the high cost of printing. Only ç and ş have been retained.

1. On the question of terminology, see Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa* (Madison, WI, 1977), pp.76-78 (the editors' Introduction).
2. See for example: Gabriel Baer, 'Slavery and Its Abolition', in his *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt* (Chicago, 1969), pp.161-89; Nada Tomiche, 'The Situation of Egyptian Women in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century', in W.R. Polk and R.L. Chambers (eds.), *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East* (Chicago, 1968), pp.171-84; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'The Revolutionary Gentlewomen in Egypt', in Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie (eds.), *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), pp.261-76; and my 'Slave Dealers, Women, Pregnancy, and Abortion: The Story of a Circassian Slave-girl in Mid-Nineteenth Century Cairo', *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol.II/1, pp.53-68. For some of the better travel accounts, see: Demetra Brown, *Haremlik* (Boston and New York, 1909); Melek-Hanum, *Thirty Years in the Harem* (Berlin, 1872), 2 vols.; Emine Foat Tugay, *Three Centuries: Family Chronicles of Turkey and Egypt* (London, 1963); Lucy Garnett, *The Women of Turkey and their Folk-Lore* (London, 1891); idem., *Home Life in Turkey* (New York, 1909); and Lady F.J. Blunt, *The People of Turkey* (London, 1878), 2 vols.
3. Our debt here is mostly to David Ayalon for his contributions: 'The Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate', in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp.267-95; and 'On the Eunuchs in Islam', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol.I (1979), pp.67-124.

4. For more detailed information, see my *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression: 1840-1890* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), especially Ch.II.
5. This whole issue is elaborated upon in *ibid.*, Ch.V.
6. The registers of the Imperial Harem are currently being studied by the writer.
7. See note 3 above.
8. İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı devletinin saray teşkilatı* (Ankara, 1945); H.A.R. Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West* (Oxford, 1969), Vol.I, Pt.I; Norman H. Penzer, *The Harem* (Philadelphia, 1936); Çagatay Uluçay, *Harem II* (Ankara, 1971).
9. *Başbakanlık Arşivi/Yıldız Collection/XXI/11-140*.
10. Penzer, p.143.
11. Ayalon, p.281; Burckhardt, on the other hand, minimizes the death rate, cf. his *Travels in Nubia*, as quoted in Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York, 1971), pp.85-86.
12. Uluçay, pp.120-26 ('*Kızlar Ağalari Saltanati*').
13. For the structure of government during the reign of Abdulhamit II, see: Carter V. Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 1980), pp.221-90.
14. Ayşe Osmanoglu, *Babam Abdulhamid* (Istanbul, 1960), p.85.
15. Ayalon, *op. cit.*, pp.280-82.
16. Frank's and Burckhardt's accounts are cited in Lewis' *Race and Color in Islam* (see reference in note 11 above).
17. Uzunçarşılı, p.172.
18. Ahmad Shafiq, *al-Riqaq fi 'l-Islam* (trans. from French by Ahmad Zaki, Cairo, 1892), pp.98-99.
19. For concise information about the palaces of Istanbul and previous Ottoman capitals, see Uluçay, pp.1-4.
20. *Ibid.*, p.118.
21. Penzer, p.132; Uzunçarşılı, pp.172-74; Gibb and Bowen, pp.329-31.
22. Tayyazade Ahmet Ata, *Tarih-i Ata*, Vol.I (Istanbul, 1874), pp.257-69.
23. Clifford Geertz *et al.*, *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* (Cambridge, 1979), pp.124-25.
24. Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Vol.II (Cambridge, 1977), p.214.
25. For the efforts of the Palace to purchase white female slaves in the early 1890s, see Ch. V in my *The Ottoman Slave Trade* (full reference in note 4 above).