In the nineteenth century, enslaved Sudanese interacted with European medical personnel in Egypt. Muhammad ‘Ali, the viceroy of Egypt, recruited European doctors as medical officers in his army, as physicians in his court, and quarantine monitors in his lazarettos. Beginning in 1827, he established an Egyptian medical school headed by the French surgeon, Clot-Bey. A further influx of French and other European medical personnel staffed the medical school (which included midwifery), provided support for new hospitals and smallpox vaccination programs in Egypt and staffed hospitals and army posts in the Sudan. These European doctors, pharmacists and professional midwives often described Sudanese slaves they treated, encountered or owned, and their accounts can be used to investigate slavery in nineteenth century Egypt and the Sudan.

Zennab was an enslaved woman from Dar Fur who became the female companion of M. Saint-André, a French pharmacist serving in the Egyptian army. Through an unusual set of circumstances, some of her words and actions have been preserved. Zennab and Saint-André were observed from December 1833 to February 1834 by the young Saint-Simonian traveler, Edmond Combes, who shared their cruise from Cairo to Dongola where Saint-André was posted. There were several other reports about one or both of them by Reboul (another Saint-Simonian) in 1834 and early 1835, and by an anonymous European (tentatively identified by R.L. Hill as Amadée D. Ryme.) in 1838.

---


3 In Combes’ text, her name is spelled both Zenneb and Zennab. This is likely to by his personal transliteration of the classical Arabic, Zaynab. I will stick with the received spellings.


Combes provided the most detailed information on Zennab, but together these sources reveal some of her views, her range of self-presentation, and the complexity and evolution of her position as a slave companion of a European male in Muslim Egypt in the 1830s.

The Narrator

Working with this material presents its share of challenges. The narrator, Edmond Combes is best known for his two year mission to Ethiopia with Maurice Tamisier beginning in January 1835. In 1838, they published their well-known account of their travels, *Voyages en Abyssinie, dans le pays de Choa et d’Ifar, precede d’une excursion dans l’Arabie heureuse(1835-1837).*  

It was only after he had achieved a certain degree of fame as an explorer of Ethiopia, worked unsuccessfully on behalf of the French Compagnie Nanto-Bordelaise to open up trade with Abyssinia, and then negotiated for the purchase of the port of Edd on the Red Sea, that he published the account of his earlier voyage. After his travel to Ethiopia, Combes kept company with Anna, a Galla woman, who was described as his widow at his death in 1848. Combes does not explicitly state that he had kept a journal of this first voyage, but he must have done so for he gives dates throughout his *Voyage en Egypte.* The noted British historian of the Sudan, Richard L. Hill, described this book as “a purple-tinted account of his journey.”  

Hill did not explain his reasoning for that evaluation, but Combes’ work seems complementary to the two fascinating and detailed accounts that Hill later translated and annotated in *On the Frontiers of Islam,* describing the lives and circumstances of Europeans living in the Sudan. Those accounts Hill admires as being “refreshingly free of cant”, and together they provide context and further details on Saint-André and Zennab.

Combes was just twenty-one when he began his voyage up the Nile, and he states that his youthful curiosity was strong but he knew little Arabic:

> I was still a child (I was twenty-one years old) but a curious child, eager to see and to know: I did not know then at what price one buys the satisfaction of such desires…. I had yet to learn the Arabic language, as necessary for a voyager in the Muslim lands as French is today in Europe. By the time I had finished this trip, I had attained my double goals – my strengths were developed and I spoke Arabic passably well.

This tone of an accomplished man looking back at his naïve and tentative beginnings obscures his preparations, cultural and linguistic for this journey.

---

10 Combes, *Voyage en Egypte,* 1:xi-xii.
Despite his youth, Combes was not as naïve and linguistically challenged as his self-description might suggest. In both his account of his trip up the Nile and in his later work with Tamisier, Combes downplays or neglects to mention how he (and Tamisier) came to Egypt as part of the Saint-Simonian movement. While the precise details of Combes’ preparations are not clear at this point, the Saint-Simonians delegation which accompanied Barrault to Constantinople as part of the Compagnons de la Femme, and also ended up in Egypt in 1833, had prepared themselves by beginning to learn Arabic and by reading about Muslim culture. Since this was part of a broader plan by Père Enfantin (the Saint-Simonian leader) to leave France, one can assume that other Saint-Simonians were also preparing themselves in similar ways for their new experiences.

Combes had very little money, so he was quite pleased to be able to accompany the French pharmacist, M. Saint-André, to his post at Dongola. The pharmacist traveled at the expense of the Egyptian Government, and offered Combes a free ride and to provide his food for the journey. Saint-André was not a newcomer to Egypt. Under the command of Ibrahim-Pasha, the son-in-law of the Egyptian ruler Muhammad Ali, Egyptian troops had been sent to Greece in 1825 to fight against the Greeks on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. The Egyptian contingent included both the newly enslaved black troops captured during the Egyptian invasion of the Sudan in 1820-1821 and subsequent slave-raids there, and various European medical personnel serving in the Egyptian army. In 1828, a French traveler in Morea, Mangeart met a group of the European medical men including six Frenchmen, two Piedmontese, and three Italians. They had all been engaged for four years’ service, were well paid and granted not only suitable food, but fine clothes. They had stipulated that they would not be forced to change religion, and that they would receive termination pay and a return fare to France. “Each one of them


had only one [slave] woman with the exception of Monsieur Saint-André of Lyon, who had three of them.”  

One wonders why Saint-André required three slave women. He was nicknamed Dragoon, as he had apparently served in a cavalry unit of the French army during the Napoleonic wars. Before joining the Egyptian army, he had been in the Greek army but quit and switched sides due to broken promises and mistreatment. One of the other French men had fathered a child by a very pretty Negro woman and intended to have his child naturalized as a French citizen when he returned home. She occupied herself with her child, and lavished attention on her man as well. Mangeart “especially noted in her a great deal of orderliness, cleanliness and economy.” Saint-André’s three women are not described, though they may well have been Greek as many men serving in the Egyptian forces bought Greek women as slaves. If this black slave woman made such an impression on Mangeart who only spent a short time with the medical unit, Saint-André had a longer period to observe her. At this point, little is known of Saint-André’s activities between 1828 and 1833, but it seems safe to assume that he remained in the service of the Egyptian army. And it appears that it was not long after his return to Egypt from Greece, that he purchased Zenneb. Although their relationship became more complex, Saint-André’s enthusiasm for female slave companionship, and his opportunity to observe the interaction between his French colleague and his African slave wife in Greece, may have shaped his initial intentions for his relationship with Zenneb.

**The Voyage**

On December 13, 1833, Saint-André left Cairo for Dongola where he was posted as a military pharmacist in the employ of the Egyptian government. He offered the young traveler Edmond Combes the opportunity to accompany him. Combes is the principal source on the relationship between the pharmacist and Zennab. In 1833 Combes described Saint-André as “a man of mature age, with an excellent heart” who treated Combes with every consideration during their voyage together from Cairo to Dongola. He also thought him a timid soul who feared that the Nile boat would capsize. The older man frequently ordered the crew to take in the sails and tie up the boat to the shore if the wind was blowing vigorously, and he rarely permitted them to sail at night, and stayed awake if they did.

In addition to the boat’s crew, the voyagers included an unnamed Spanish “renegade” who was to be a nurse in Dongola. The Spaniard tried hard to convince Combes that he had converted to Islam out of conviction, but Combes noted cynically that the Spaniard favored Islam because men were permitted to take four wives. The Spaniard’s first wife (who had produced two sons for him) began the voyage in Cairo, and the Spaniard married for the second and third times between Cairo and Dongola, to the alarm of his first wife. Despite this enthusiastic adhesion to Islam, he had not renounced the consumption of wine. Saint-André had left France essentially at the end of

---

13 Mangeart, Souvenirs de la Morée, p.29. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
14 Col. Seves, commonly known as Soliman-Bey, had trained the new black and Egyptian troops of the nizam al-jadid in Upper Egypt. He arrived in Greece with Arsana, a black slave woman, and bought three Greek women, one of whom became his new favorite, and Arsana after making a scene over her displacement was sent away. Charles Deval, Deux années a Constantinople et en Morée, 1825-1826, ou Esquisses historiques sur Mahmoud: les janissaires, les nouvelles troupes, Ibrahim-Pacha, Solyman-Bey, etc. (Paris: Nepveu, 1828), 210-211.
the Napoleonic wars, and had spent over twenty years in the Levant without ever managing to learn Arabic. The Spaniard served as his interpreter on the voyage.

**Saint-André’s Negress**

Monsieur Saint-André also had two male servants, one a fellah from the Cairo area, and the other a Nubian, named Moussa (Musa in English transliteration). According to Combes, their enthusiasm for service was based in part on the knowledge that domestics in the employ of Europeans, particularly those working for the Egyptian government could escape military conscription. The Nubian was quite religiously conservative and literate, and often entertained the crew and the voyagers with long recitations. There was one more voyager on their Nile-boat:

Monsieur Saint-André also had with him a pretty negress of whom he was quite proud: she was a young woman of considerable height, extraordinarily shapely and who could have made the Hottentot Venus jealous. She said that she was from one of the princely families of Darfour, and supported her pretensions with a show of grand airs. Made prisoner by the troops of the viceroy [Muhammad ‘Ali], she was taken to Egypt where M. Saint-André had purchased her in the slave market. But for a long time their roles had been reversed, and the negress had absolute dominion over her master.  

This was Zennab, M. Saint André’s female slave companion.

Zennab, Saint André’s slave woman had both a history and a considerable physical presence. She had been captured during the invasion of the Sudan. She was reportedly from a princely family from Darfour, the major sub-Saharan sultanate to the west of Kordofan. The Egyptian forces did not reach Dar Fur itself in this time period so she was probably captured in Kordofan, then a province of Dar Fur. From Combes’ account one cannot tell whether she was part of a noble family sent out from Dar Fur to rule over Kordofan, or one of the noble families of Kordofan. But her proud demeanor and interactions with Saint-André, her command of Arabic, and her adherence to Islam support this claim. After capture, she had been brought to Egypt where she was put on sale in the slave market presumably in Cairo and purchased by Saint André in about 1828. There is no further elaboration of her history from the moment of capture until the French pharmacist bought her, though as was common for slaves brought from the Sudan, she had several masters in the interval. It was quite common for Europeans

---

15 Combes, *Voyage en Égypte*, 127-128.
16 For comparative information on this generation of enslaved Sudanese women see La Rue, “African Slave Women in Egypt,” entire.
living in Egypt to buy slaves. Several other European medical officers purchased African slave women, and then formed very stable unions and had children with them.\(^{18}\)

Combes followed a common circumlocution in describing physically attractive Negro slave women, by referring to Venus, the Roman goddess of love. The Venus de Milo was often invoked to suggest the physical attributes of the woman in question. But here Combes goes farther and refers to the Hottentot Venus, Saartjie Baartman, the well-known woman from Southern Africa, whose physical appearance had impressed the French to such a degree, that after her death her body was preserved, and put on display in Paris. Her body had been described in clinical detail by the famous French doctor, Georges Cuvier, and had been cited in many subsequent studies and essays on race and related matters. Her caricature was also frequently published in newspapers and journals.\(^{19}\) Literate French men and women of Combes’ day would have immediately been able to conjure up an exaggerated mental image, based on Combes’ brief description of Zenneb.

Aware perhaps that others had written extensively about their Nile voyages, Combes does not provide a complete running commentary on the sights and sounds of the journey, but does give some historical background on Muhammad Ali and his modernization efforts, on his admirers and his critics. There was an Egyptian crew to sail, and as necessary haul the Nile-boat, and Combes was aware of their very basic diet featuring raw onions, salted cheese and Nile water. Near Beni Suef, Saint-André purchased a sheep and gave three-quarters of it to the crew as encouragement.\(^{20}\) Combes also discoursed on the proselytizing zeal of Muslims, but felt that there was still a distinction in their minds between those who were born Muslim and new converts, with “the latter ordinarily considered less than the others.”\(^{21}\) When it came to slaves:

The first concern of a believer is to learn what [the slave’s] religion is, and to impose on him his own, which is a meritorious act in the eyes of God. The jallabas for their part are the most intolerant and despotic missionaries on earth: difficult conversions are accomplished with blows of the whip. Fortunately, the timid and credulous slaves do not generally put up much resistance for they have enough martyrship already as slaves. The Muslims do not raise any doubts about

---

\(^{18}\) See the marriages of Dr. Dussap and his wife Halima, Dr. Del Signore and his wife Catherine, and Dr. Alfred Peney and his wife. The broader phenomenon of Europeans owning slaves in Egypt will be discussed in La Rue, “My Ninth Master.”


\(^{20}\) Combes, Voyage en Egypte, 1:132.

\(^{21}\) Combes, Voyage en Egypte, 1:126.
the good faith of the African neophytes and they are right, but they are less certain about the Europeans converted to their faith.\textsuperscript{22}

One early incident of their trip revealed something about Zenneb’s empathy for others, and her interactions with Saint André. As the Nile-boat moved slowly up the river, they spotted a young woman on the bank with an infant in her arms. Exhausted she hailed the passing boat, and the crew stopped to offer assistance. She approached the boat, clambered on board without a word and collapsed on the deck. Zenneb and the Spaniard’s wife, moved quickly to help her as the boat resumed its voyage. It turned out that she lived in Beni Suef, but her husband had been absent for six months. Pregnant and increasingly aware that her delivery date was approaching, she had hoped to go up river to Minieh to her parents’ house to get her mother’s assistance, but had started to deliver enroute, producing the child she carried with her, and had hailed their boat half an hour later. All aboard did all they could to care for her.

Conversations
This situation gave rise to a conversation between Zenneb and Musa the Nubian servant who thought her too tolerant of the Europeans, which he believed showed that her faith was weak:

“You see, said the negress, that the Christians are not so bad as you keep telling me; you weren’t paying any attention to this poor woman who was about to die of fatigue, and it was they who had the charity to collect her.”
“In the eyes of the all-powerful the actions of the infidels are indifferent, only Muslims will find grace before him on Judgement Day.......”

After a few exchanges in this vein, Zenneb responded:
“I don’t really understand all that fancy talk, but you will not stop me from thinking that my master is the best of men, and you will not persuade me that these Muslims that you revere are more cherished by God than my master who only does good. I have often changed masters, none of whom spared me insults and blows, yet all were fervent Muslims. Allah and the prophet finally had pity on me, and I became the wife rather than the slave of one of these Christians who you want to make me hate and mistrust. With him, I have never been unhappy, liberty has been given back to me, and I would have nothing to desire, if the memory of my family didn’t return to me at times to make me sad.”\textsuperscript{23}

Musa found this evidence that Saint-André would make a good Muslim, and the conversation turned to the fine clothes that Zenneb wore and the luxurious goods which the Europeans had brought into Egypt. For Musa, these were only signs of a pact between the Europeans and Satan, who had shared his secrets for a price.\textsuperscript{24}

Zenneb’s end of the conversation showed several things about her. Not only did she retain her humanity and empathy for others, she recognized Saint-André as a benign

\textsuperscript{22} Combes, \textit{Voyage en Egypte}, 1:132.
\textsuperscript{23} Combes, \textit{Voyage en Egypte}, 1:139.
\textsuperscript{24} Combes, \textit{Voyage en Egypte}, 1:139-140.
person, not only in his compassion for the new mother they brought aboard, but in his treatment of her, compared to earlier Muslim masters she had encountered who had beaten and injured her. While she appreciated his comparative kindness and the quality of the clothing he provided her, she still regretted her kinless condition, as an enslaved person removed from all her original familial and social context.

Perhaps because of his Saint-Simonian background, the young Combes is working on the question of race himself, and this makes him an interesting observer of the Sudan, and a curious interlocutor with Zenneb who often pursues issues of race and hierarchy. One interesting feature of the book is that there is a bit of tension between the young Combes’ idealistic views as seen in his eye-witness reporting of what he experienced in 1833-1834, and the digressions which seemingly reflect the views of the Combes as he was writing the book after extensive acculturation through travel in the Horn of Africa, associating with both local people and the range of Europeans in the area. In one of his digressions, the experienced Combes reveals he considered whites superior to blacks: “While there exist notable difference between the various black races and even greater differences between the negro with thin legs and wooly head, and the Nubian, the Abyssinian, the Galla, and most of the tribes of Africa’s East coast, one can boldly affirm that the black populations in general are inferior in nature in comparison to white populations.”

Combes is a bit uneasy with this, and talks about aptitudes of specific peoples and individuals, he counters the notion of the brotherhood of man with the notion that some are elder brothers and others, younger brothers and extends this analogy to peoples. Saint-André’s views on race were not expressed explicitly, but he certainly showed no qualms about owning slaves, and he may well have acculturated to a combination of the local attitudes towards slaves and the pragmatic view of other long term European residents of the Sudan who lived with slave women.

Reconstructing the views that Zenneb held on race is a challenge, but there are several general clues in Combes’ account as well as specific statements that he attributes to her, and revealing situations. Combes cites a folk story that he first learned from a slave woman from the Dar Fur region. He does not state this was Zenneb, but she may have heard a version of this either at home or since her enslavement:

A naïve tradition preserved by a few African tribes proves that they did not have any choice in their color, and if the Creator would have consulted them before forming them, they would have been white like us. This tradition was told to me for the first time by a black slave woman from the region of Darfour. It is common knowledge that in blacks the soles of their feet and hollows of their hands are nearly white. One day I asked this black woman why that was so.

Long ago at the beginning of the world, there was only color in the world – all humans were black like me. But in one country then uninhabited there was a large lake whose marvelous waters could whiten skin. The populations which are now white like you were the first to arrive in this favored land, and plunging into the waves of this enchanted lake, changed colors. But each diver absorbed a bit of the precious water, and the lake was already nearly dried up when the populations

25 Combes, *Voyage en Egypte*, 1:244.
who stayed black came to take their turn. Despairing of arriving so late, they threw themselves on the wet mud of the lake bottom, and that mud still had the ability to whiten the bottoms of their feet and hands.\(^{27}\)

Combes may have found this story charmingly naïve and gratifying, as it reinforced his sense of racial superiority, and symbolically showed that whites had advanced by washing away their primitive origins. One can also question whether it reflected the folklore of the Sudan, or was offered by others to enslaved Sudanese as an explanation of racial differences and hierarchies.\(^{28}\)

No doubt based on his later experiences, Combes wrote several discursive passages on race, using the well-known racial hierarchy of Muslim harems in Egypt and the extension of those preferences to Abyssinia and Dar Fur as proof that black Sudanese accepted that hierarchy.\(^{29}\) The crew of his Nile-boat consisted mainly of Nubians and Egyptians, but included one sailor who claimed Arab descent and felt superior because of it, despite the fact that his skin color was as dark as fellow sailors.\(^{30}\) Combes reported that the Nubians accepted this racial hierarchy without question, but denied that this specific sailor was white, which led to endless discussions.

It was in this context that Combes decided to press Zenneb on her racial views:

> I profited from the circumstance to ask the negress [Saint-André’s slave woman] the following question: “If you had the ability to choose your color, would you prefer to be white or black?” But with such good sense that it disconcerted me and momentarily shook my convictions, she answered, “I would want to be white if I were born in the midst of whites, and I am satisfied to be black as I am undoubtedly destined to live among blacks,” and after a moment’s reflection she added, “but as I belong to a European master, I would prefer to be white….” A white who was asked the same question would not have hesitated over the choice, boldly and without hesitation, he would have declared that he preferred to be white, because he would have had the vague or rational belief in his innate superiority.\(^{31}\)

This response speaks volumes about Zenneb’s understanding of the position of the “other” in European, Egyptian and Sudanese societies.

**Local interactions**

Not long after these discussions, Zenneb moved by empathy for a young Nubian woman, played the role of intermediary for her as she sought help from the pharmacist

\(^{27}\) Combes, *Voyage en Égypte*, 1: 246.

\(^{28}\) Another similar story involving the washing of hands and feet in a river, collected from a Muslim pilgrim in Asyut, portrays whites and blacks as created by God and Satan respectively, Marie Théodore Renouard de Bussière, *Lettres sur l’Orient écrites pendant les années 1827 et 1828* (Paris: Levrault, 1829), 2:71.


\(^{31}\) Combes, *Voyage en Égypte*, 1:276.
Saint-André. The Nile boat had been tied up at “Tééffah” a village on the Nile’s left bank, south of Aswan. As the travelers were about to re-embark, Zenneb approached Saint-André to ask him to help the young Nubian woman who had been married for six months. Because she had not yet conceived, her husband was threatening to divorce her as infertile. The Nubian thought that she had been cursed, and Zenneb asked Saint-André to break the spell. Saint-André, taking the rational, medical approach explained that it was too early to despair after only six months, and that she might soon be complaining of being too fecund! The Nubian woman left dissatisfied, and Zenneb turned her back on the pharmacist, obviously displeased with his refusal to honor her request. Zenneb had tested her position as client to Saint-André, her patron, to ask his help to benefit the Nubian woman. His refusal to act was embarrassing and humiliating to her as it put her status in question.

If her failure to enlist Saint-André’s help in aiding the worried young Nubian woman was an illustration of her status as his client, Zenneb’s position in the broader upper Egyptian society was demonstrated by an incident that occurred when the Nile boat tied up at the village of “Dekkeh” south of Dendour:

The negress of M. Saint-André who intended to go on shore, dressed herself in her best clothes. I said earlier in speaking of black races that it was false that for blacks perfection consisted of having big lips and a very crushed nose. The pharmacist’s slave, glorious in her brilliant outfit, had remained for long time in front of a small mirror which unfortunately only allowed her a partial view of herself. After having admired with a naïve satisfaction the richness of her attire, she looked at her face, and could not prevent herself from a revealingly wry expression. She pinched her lips, and pressed her nose with her fingers. “Here’s what spoils everything,” she said turning towards us and trying to smile to hide her discontent, “no nose and too much lips. What do you do in your country,” she added to me, “to have such long and soft hair?” One must agree that the world is very extraordinary.

“It is likely”, I told her “that you would not have thought of that if you had always lived among blacks.”

“Maybe,” she said with a worried expression, “but my countrymen know that whites exist, and they speak ill of them, no doubt out of jealousy and to console themselves for being black.”

The negress again ran her eyes over her pretty clothes and refound her gaiety. “No matter what color—white or black – we are all the children of Adam and the servants of God, let’s go ashore and stop talking about ourselves.”

Again Combes captures Zenneb’s growing self-awareness, her sense of multiple standards of beauty, and her ability to re-frame differences not only as they related to different social contexts, but also in light of a larger divine plan. But ashore, not everyone was as tolerant of her position.

---

33 For a discussion of master-slave interactions as patron-client relationships, see Ehud Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent: bonds of enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), esp. 23-34.
34 Combes, *Voyage en Egypte*, 292-293.
Generally in Egypt and the Sudan there were implicit sumptuary standards. Everyone dressed in a manner that reflected their standing in the society. The royal families of Egypt, Dar Fur and Sennar dressed in expensive finery, wealthy merchants dressed well, peasants dressed simply, and slaves reflected the rank of their masters, with the slave women of royal harems dressed in finery, and the ordinary slaves of poor households dressed in rags and barefoot. Zenneb stepped ashore into a rich mix of standards by which she would be evaluated. She was judged by racial type, by sumptuary display, by her comportment and speech, and of course by her presumed religious beliefs.

It is in this rich context that her expedition ashore must be seen:

M. Saint-André’s slave wore the clothes of the great ladies of Cairo. As soon as the Barabra [Nubians] of Dekkeh saw her she became the center of a crowd of men and women whose surprise and admiration must have flattered her self-worth. With an envious curiosity the Nubian women examined the various elements of her outfit one by one, and were astonished that a black woman, who in their view occupied the lowest rank of the human hierarchy should have managed such a fate. One of them told her, “you had a happy fate,” her hands touching her silken clothing and gold bracelets, “your master must be very rich or very loving.”

We left Zennab (that was the slave’s name) alone to enjoy her triumph. M. Saint-André sat in the shade of a palm tree, while I went to visit the temple of Dekkeh….

When I returned to the slave woman, the scene had changed. A cruel disdain had replaced the admiration to which she had been subjected. Blacks in general are not fanatics, but like all weak natures, they let themselves be carried along by evil. Among the Barbarins gathered into a mob around her was a hajji (pilgrim) who had brought back from Mecca those narrow ideas and the affected intolerance which distinguish the majority of Muslims. According to him and his co-religionists, all blacks without exception belonged or should belong to Islam. A Christian owner of a black slave encroached on their rights and was in their eyes very guilty. Despite the fact that a slave was everywhere sacred property, the Muslims never neglected to incite those who had infidels as masters to flee. In many provinces under their domination, Christians are prohibited from buying slaves, and those who possess them are obligated to get rid of them. In no country do good Muslims ever see without displeasure a black slave pass into the hands of an infidel, and the seller and buyer have thus an equal share in their scorn. The pilgrim in Dekkeh, like all those who have performed the pious journey to Mecca and Medina, and who live among the blacks enjoyed in his village an enormous consideration and a great influence. Jealous, no doubt to no longer be in this moment the exclusive object of the attention of his compatriots, he wanted to avenge himself for their indifference towards him by trying to trouble the innocent joy of Zennab. He started by insinuating to her that her cohabitation with a European was crime in the eyes of men and of God and that she would be punished for it sooner or later. “If you still have in your heart,” he added loudly to
make himself heard by the onlookers, “the feelings of a good Muslim woman hasten to abandon your master, come into our houses, where you will find asylum and protection. We’ll know how to shield you from the pursuit by the infidels, and you will be free like us. No doubt you will not find here the rich clothing and silk garments like those you are now wearing, but you will live in the midst of good Muslims, instead of being the slave of these Christian dogs.” These words were welcomed with a greater favor since the women had viewed the slave woman’s clothes with envy. Grateful towards her master, she had thought it necessary to defend him, and the Nubian women glad to humiliate her, showed no pity. Excited by the pilgrim, they shouted invectives at her and left her alone like a leper. Zennab stunned and saddened had tears in her eyes and when I got close to her, I heard the pilgrim who had been the last to move away from her, say triumphantly, “That’s what happens when you choose infidels over believers.” Seeing the slave’s face, I didn’t even take the time to understand what it was about, and throwing myself on the insolent pilgrim who had hastened his steps when he saw me, gave him a blow of the whip across his body. I told him, “Here’s what happens to a real believer who insults an infidel’s woman. I took a risk in striking a man that everyone in Dekkeh respected, but in the East an energetic act is rarely compromising, and there is even a high regard for anyone who thinks himself strong enough to obtain justice himself. In the view of the Nubians, I must be a powerful person, since I dared to attack a Muslim who had performed the pilgrimage, and the furious pilgrim although disconcerted, contented himself with throwing me a look full of hate and kept moving away while cursing....

M. Saint-André was asleep where I had left him. When Zenneb told him of the insult that she had just received, the pharmacist wanted to make a complaint to the local shaykh, but I let him know that he could be satisfied with my actions, and we thought of nothing more than continuing our voyage.35

Zenneb was an unusual other in Dekkeh. At first she attracted a crowd because she was an obviously black woman from Dar Fur dressed in elegant Egyptian clothes. Combes does not detail her outfit so it is impossible to say for certain whether she was dressed a la Turque or a l’Europeenne, though the former seems more likely. The local people admired her gold bracelets and fine silken clothes, and combined with her height and ample figure, she must have been quite an unusual sight for them.

Her two French companions left her on her own: Saint-André settled in for a nap under a palm-tree, and the young Combest off to see the local ruins. When he returned, he found her again the center of attention, but this time being harangued by a devout Muslim who perceived her as having turned away from Islam to associate with The foreign Christians, tempted by the luxurious clothing she had so proudly worn. Zenneb at first defended her master, but was soon quite rattled at this unexpected turn of events. The crowd had also turned against her, and when Combes returned to find her in tears, he resorted to using a whip, and his superior European status, to rescue Zenneb. Saint-André

35 Combes, Voyage en Egypte, 1:293-298.
had slept through the whole incident, and now wanted to complain to the local shaykh about this treatment, but they chose instead to sail on.

One might think that such an incident would make Zenneb decide to stick with her status as the slave/client of the European pharmacist who was in turn protected by his status as the employee of the viceroy Muhammad ‘Ali. But she remained open to other options.

Into the Sudan

As they neared Wadi Halfa and the second cataract, the travelers were going to follow the common practice of leaving behind the Nile-boat, to travel overland. To renew their provisions, Saint-André applied at the government depot and got new supplies. The young Combes was excited to travel by land, but Saint-André, older, diminished in vigor and less impatient would have preferred traveling further by boat if possible. But his status enabled him to apply to the local kachef in Wadi-Halfa for the necessary camels. Zenneb who already traveled this route in a slave caravan under the eye of the jallabs, appreciated the opportunity to cross it again, this time as a “princess as the pharmacist put it when in his better moods.”

They joined a small caravan about depart and they soon settled into the routines of desert travel which were made more challenging because it was the month of Ramadan. Just before they reached the watering spot of Sakiet-al ‘Abd about halfway through the land leg of their journey, it was the last day of Ramadan. One of their fellow travelers had made an extra effort to obtain a goat for the feast, and they had taken the extra precaution of sending someone up a hill to look out for the new crescent moon. Soon they were feasting, and celebrating and including the Europeans in the festivities:

To celebrate, they thought of organizing dances, and everyone, Turks and Nubians alike, set themselves with good grace to compose a dance. Of course, music was lacking, but someone dug out an old cracked tarabouka [drum], and the clapping of hands, singing and rhythmic shouts supplied the rest. Those gathered took turns performing warlike dances and grotesque pantomimes.

M. Saint-André’s negress wanted to participate, and to give us a sample of the dances of her native land. I have already said that this slave woman was tall and sturdily built, and I was more than mildly astonished that I saw her join these festivities. She nonetheless delighted the assembly, and I must admit that I never sa a stranger, or more outlandish dance. The undulations of her body showed a fascinating flexibility, and she perfectly embodied the movements of a walking camel.

Zenneb was revisiting familiar ground, and was once again in the Sudan. She appeared not as the polished, and well-groomed female slave companion of the European, but as a fellow traveler in the caravan, as a Muslim Sudanese celebrating the end of Ramadan with a traditional dance. This scene astonished Combes, but was familiar to the others,

---

and very comfortable for Zenneb who was able to reclaim at least some of her pre-enslavement identity.

Soon enough they were in Dongola. M. Drouart, a Doctor stationed at Dongola with the Eighth Regiment and an old friend of Saint-André, had heard of their imminent arrival and sent one of his servants to announce that he would come out to meet them. They arrived in his company on 17 February 1834 at Dongola –al –Ordi after 13 days of travel in the desert. Combes gives some description of Drouart’s living arrangements in Dongola, but the young traveler only stayed in Dongola until 6 April 1834. While in Dongola, he provides no further mention of Zenneb.

Perhaps Saint-André was following the model of Dr. Drouart who had a comfortable house in Dongola, and lived in the “oriental style” with slaves, and the habit of keeping his favorite female slave, an Abyssinian woman in Drouart’s case, out of sight.

**Other Sightings**

Although Combes says no more about Saint-André and Zenneb, other sources provide some glimpses of one or both of them. On June 12, 1834 Reboul arrived in Dongola with Georges Thibaut, a French traveler and collector of exotic animals, and met up with M. Drouart a medical officer there, and Saint-André (“the Dragoon”). Thibaut and Reboul stayed with Saint-André in “his commodious house” until July 1, 1834 when they left for Kordofan. Reboul also mentions that Reboul and Saint André had share a residence in Cairo, presumably while they were both working there. They were to also stop in Dongola for six months (Feb. 5 to August 3, 1835) on the return trip with six giraffes, and found Drouart and the Dragoon “as full of health as ever.”

By 1837, Drouart is no longer mentioned, having been replaced by a Dr. Iken. The Eighth Regiment has become substantially Sudanese. Puckler-Muskau, who visited Dongola, never mentions Saint-André by name but he does mention the apothecary there “who used to be a French captain of the Dragoons” and told some stories of his time in the French Army. Dr. Iken’s predecessor had been a Dr. Germain, and the apothecary calmly recounted how he had been present when Dr. Germain had been poisoned by a slave woman he had married:

> The poison had been prepared from the juice of the noxious shrub, which is everywhere at hand, and it was so potent, that in a few moments vomiting and convulsions ensued, and the unhappy victim expired the same night, retaining the use of his faculties to the very last. He pardoned the negress, though she manifested little contrition for what she had done and only made an awkward attempt to deny it. However she thought proper, as M. Germain, with great

---

magnanimity, had hindered her from being arrested to collect everything of value that she could lay her hands on, and to abscond before daybreak.\textsuperscript{44}

Saint-André’s comments on this are not recorded, but the mere fact that he felt compelled to tell the story suggests that it had made quite an impression on him, and may have changed his perception of his own situation.

Other Europeans present in the Sudan also make note of Saint-André’s coming and goings. He was mentioned by A.D. R. as arriving in Kurusku on 19 December 1837: “Saint-André, formerly a captain of the Dragons Napoléon and now pharmacist to the 8\textsuperscript{th} Regiment, has arrived.”\textsuperscript{45} He was reportedly in Wad Madani on 6 September 1838, and again on 18 October of that year. This suggests that he may have shifted his home base from Dongola to Wad Madani where the Eighth Regiment had been newly stationed as part of the general preparation for war in Abyssinia.\textsuperscript{46} By 12 December 1838, it became apparent that the pharmacist was thinking of leaving that town as well:

Gassier and Saint-André had each bought a house and had afterwards exchanged houses but without notifying the Qadi. Saint-André now wants to sell his house, but the qadi refuses to recognize Gassier’s title, which is quite absurd of him.\textsuperscript{47}

Gassier was the principal medical officer of the Eighth Regiment, thus the successor to Drouart and Germain, Saint-André’s earlier colleagues in Dongola.\textsuperscript{48} Another European doctor, Sulayman-Effendi (known as Dr. de Pasquali before his conversion) accompanied him to Khartoum, leaving Wad Madani on 24 December 1838:

Dr. Sulayman Effendi left this evening for Khartoum in company with Saint-André who has got leave to go to Cairo without having to hand in his resignation and at government expense on account of his health. Saint-André is abandoning his putative daughter and his black woman Zaynab who, in collusion with his Berberine servant Musa, has robbed him of nearly everything. At least Saint-André has had his eyes opened, for the black woman was living with Musa and took no trouble to show her attachment to Saint-André in spite of the fact that she has been with him for ten years and that Saint-André was over 60.\textsuperscript{49}

Several new pieces of information emerge here. Zenneb had a daughter who was believed to be Saint-André’s. Zenneb and Musa, his long-time Berber servant, are thought to have conspired against him to take control of his possessions. Moreover they have been living together, without even the pretense of loyalty to Saint-André, despite his advanced age and their decade-long association. He is in poor health and retreating to Egypt for medical leave. Two days later on 26 December 1838, the rumor was confirmed:

\textsuperscript{44}Puckler-Muskau 1:170; Dr. Germain is also mentioned in Ed. Cadalvène and J. de Breuvery, \textit{L’Égypte et la Turquie de 1829 à 1836} (Paris, 1836), II, 141-142.
\textsuperscript{45}Hill, \textit{On the Frontiers}, 129.
\textsuperscript{46}Hill, \textit{On the Frontiers}, 125, 169, 173.
\textsuperscript{47}Hill, \textit{On the Frontiers}, 176.
\textsuperscript{48}Hill, \textit{On the Frontiers}, xiv.
\textsuperscript{49}Hill, \textit{On the Frontiers}, 177-8.
Saint-André’s black woman has been married to Musa, his Berberine servant, with all possible nuptial ceremony. Some months before she went to the doctor to undergo female circumcision in order to simulate the condition of a Nubian virgin.\textsuperscript{50}

Zenneb has not only abandoned Saint-André completely to take up with the devout Muslim Musa to whom she used to defend the pharmacist as a good man despite his Christian religion and European ways, but she has made the decision to conform to the Nubian marriage customs to please her new man. She has had an operation that was ordinarily performed on girls before the age of 12, to guarantee “illisit sexual intercourse.”\textsuperscript{51} Of course in a small town like Wad Madani, everyone knew that she had undergone the operation.

**New developments?**

Quite obviously something happened in the relationship between Saint-André and Zenneb in the time-period from 1834 and the end of 1838. At this point there is no direct evidence of what occurred. One of them could easily have violated the other’s trust. Saint-André was very likely not a saint, for he was the only one among his group in Morea to have three females slave, and in Dongola there is a sexual undercurrent among his visitors’ reports that he is “very healthy.” His selection of the amply proportioned Zenneb also suggests that he was at the very least aware of her physical attractions at the time he bought her. One can imagine that Saint-André took other lovers, and that he may have acquired syphilis or some other sexually transmitted disease. There is no specific reference to the nature of the disease which led him to leave the Sudan.

On the other hand Zenneb was also aware that she was physically attractive, and Saint-André’s job as pharmacist to the Eighth Regiment put her in close proximity to many Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers. It seems at least possible that she attracted their attention, and may have found a lover there. The reference to Saint-André abandoning his “putative daughter” (presumably Zenneb’s child), leaves open the possibility that she took a European or some other lighter skinned lover at some point. Perhaps Saint-André had lost some of his youthful vigor, or she had retaliated for his sexual wanderings?

But it is interesting that Zenneb moved to marry Musa. He may have been merely a convenient option as Saint-André was leaving, but the fact that she was willing to voluntarily undergo circumcision as an adult woman to please him suggests that choosing him was not her easiest option. She could have found another man to take her in. She must have selected him, either for his familiarity through long association, for his piety or possibly because he was the father of her child or for some other reason.

The perception that she and Musa had been robbing Saint-André blind suggests that both felt betrayed by the pharmacist for some violation of their trust. There is one

\textsuperscript{50} Hill, *On the Frontiers*, 178.

\textsuperscript{51} Hill, *On the Frontiers*, 25. There is a detailed description of the operation.
story that may fit this situation, told in the context of a description of various instances of bad behavior of European in the Sudan towards their slaves:

A French pharmacist who lives in Dunqul a got very angry one day with a slave of his (I call him ‘slave’ for thus they are treated by the Europeans who employ them, though our law does not recognize them as slaves) because this slave had gone to see some girl who was his lover. In his anger the Frenchman wrote a note to the doctor of the place asking him for the loan of his box of instruments in order to castrate his slave. The doctor sent to him telling him that he hoped the sight of them would cause him to change his mind and be more humane. The doctor did wrong in sending them for the Frenchman carried out the crime and was not punished.52

No dates are given, and the pharmacist involved was not named, though the document covers events from 1822-1841. Although it can not be proved that Saint-André did anything of this sort, nor that Zenneb was involved, such information is at least suggestive of the sorts of events that may have occurred to drive a wedge between the pharmacist and the slave woman, Zenneb, while gaining the sympathy of the devout Musa.

Conclusion

Zennab’s words and actions reveal her views, her range of self-presentation, and the complexity of her position as the slave companion of a European in a Muslim society. She was adjusting to living in a world that was more racially varied than the one she was raised in. She remained appreciative of kind treatment, and open to the suffering of others, especially young women and used the behavioral models of her culture to become an intermediary for those she sought to help.

She could defend Saint-André against Musa’s accusations praising his kindness to her which she compared favorably to her earlier Muslim masters, who had insulted and beat her. She did acknowledge that her enslavement still caused her pain, due to the separation form her family. Her own views of racial differences are not known, but she may well have heard the explanatory stories about the original universality of black skin and the mythical use of lake or river water to create white skinned people. Contesting versions emphasized superficial differences or deeper similarities between races.

Aware of cultural differences in the perception of racial hierarchies and standards of beauty, she sought to present herself to her best advantage according to the culture of the places she was in. In Egypt, she had adopted the dress and habits of elegant Egyptian women. But in upper Egypt and the Sudan, some local people “read” her clothing as an indication that she had abandoned Islam for the lure of European material goods, and she was chastised for renouncing Islam. This reaction caught her off guard. Later, she embraced the opportunity to behave like a daughter of the Sudan. To celebrate the end of Ramadan, she joined her fellow travelers’ party and chose to dance for them, doing a stunning imitation of a camel in motion.

52 Hill, On the Frontiers of Islam, 38.
After Combes left to continue his travels, there is less detailed information about her, and the conditions of her daily life in Dongola and later Wad Madani can only be suggested. But the available information suggests that her attachment to Saint-André has been severed, and her trust in him has ended. The reasons for this are not clear. She apparently had a child, perhaps by him. He became ill. Zenneb took up with Musa, the pharmacist’s Berber servant. Together they had been “robbing him blind.” To please him, she arranges to have an operation, a “female circumcision” so that she could present herself as a virgin bride.

Although Saint-André mistreated her, it is Zenneb who makes changes in her domestic arrangements, making financial arrangements for her own support, picking a new partner, and remaining in the Sudan. Saint- André, the Frenchman, has to leave the country for medical reasons, but Zenneb remains. She is free of his control, and sets about to make a new life in the Sudan for her child, her new man, and herself.