Young slaves and servants in nineteenth-century Morocco

Every bourgeois house in Morocco had a substantial number of black servants. Visitors to the imperial cities, impressed by the refined lifestyle of these well-off citizens, were particularly amazed by the number of servant women of African descent: they gave prompt and reliable service, obeying the least command of the chief butler. These women were to be found in cities as well as in the country, and there were many more of them than is indicated by most reference works on the Muslim world.¹

But which literature? Slavery is a complex topic the world over, and especially in Muslim regions. Its memory is still too fresh in many parts of the globe. It was only in the sixties that Saudi Arabia abolished the institution of slavery. In Mauritania, where its consequences are still visible, the abolition dates from the eighties. In most Muslim countries, even those where slavery ended at the close of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth, its abolition was not the result of a fundamental line of thought or social movement. The relationship between slavery and religion has never been viewed from a critical and modern perspective. To deal openly with this question means to discuss some of the foundations of religion itself in its more traditional aspects.

The actual image of slavery is softened. Slavery in Muslim countries is known for its laxity: masters treating their slaves so humanely that observers were surprised by the harmony which reigned between them. Nothing that resembled the brutality reported in the United States. At least this is the picture given by the most current texts on the Muslim world. For example, A. Marcet, a French traveller in Morocco during the spring of 1882, wrote that slaves were not unhappy there. Another traveller of the same period, Oscar Lenz, painted the following idyllic picture:

One should not give to the term ‘slave’ a meaning close to that of the more or less extreme accounts of slaves in America. In Morocco, they are well fed and well treated servants who often hold very important positions in the household. Women slaves are treated extremely gently, the more so because of the polygamic habits in Morocco; and often they are one of the master’s favourites, even his first wife.²
But if one follows those arguments carefully, many questions arise and remain puzzling; for instance, why in the Gulf States today is so much violence done to servants and other private employees? What is the reason for all the deprivation suffered there? How can one account for the treatment of the young women who are employed today on housework or in those so-called ‘informal’ home industries? Where do these living conditions originate from if not in the old system of slavery? One should add that in any case the situation of women and especially young women in Muslim countries cannot be understood without studying the past.

There are deep-seated reasons for the conciliatory vision of the literature on slavery, since it mainly represents slavery in the Muslim world as it should be, which is to say according to the way in which the legal system conceives it: a well-organised, humane form of slavery, untainted by its most horrible aspects. As far as religious law is concerned, it is only the quality of one’s faith that gives one superiority; otherwise all believers are equal, whoever they are – black or white, free citizens or slaves. This ideal of equality hides the real status of slavery, which is therefore ignored or silenced.

Slaves did not actually live the idyllic life that was depicted in the literature of slavery. As in every place where slavery was practised, slaves suffered dreadfully, and the youngest among them most of all. First-hand documents and unpublished archive material have allowed me to question several clichés, and uncover some sombre aspects of slavery in the Muslim world. This research helps us towards an understanding of many present problems, and above all those involving women’s lives in Muslim countries.

Sexual objects

Even when destined for housework, young female slaves, not yet out of adolescence, did not escape the lust of the household’s males. For example, an anonymous buyer who was looking for experienced cooks made clear to the broker his wish for them to be very young and suitable for sex. Black concubines were particularly popular for their sex appeal, and as young as possible. Nothing could better satisfy the master’s desires. Thus, the state high dignitary Hassan Ben Mbark wrote to his friend Mohammed Ben Housayn, the merchant of Ilijih, who, from his fortress in the Moroccan foothills of the Atlas Mountains, at the threshold of the Sahara, ruled all trade with West Africa in 1900. Ben Mbark asked him to be personally responsible for purchasing for him ‘two women slaves, of superior quality, whose beauty would be perfect, and in early puberty, virgins showing the
stamp of the Creator'. There is also the story of a young girl who changed masters four times before puberty, and then got pregnant from the fifth. This story is told by the jurist Al-Majjâsi in his Ajwiba, which is a collection of answers to the questions his contemporaries asked him. In the past, and still today in folklore and story-telling, physical contact with a black concubine is considered to have healing power, as well as providing sexual bliss.

Free women – white in the great majority of cases – were destined to produce the line of descendants and to keep it pure. Sexual pleasure was perceived as possible only with concubines, whom rich men could acquire without hindrance. The jurist Al-Wazzâni wrote: ‘I swear on my religion that concubines can be acquired at a lower price than the advantages that one gets from them. And there are no worries: one can take a large or a small number of them; one can treat them as equal or not; one can choose to be or not to be intimate with them’. The doctor of law Al-Sijilmâsi maintained that concubines were like ‘food and clothing’: one could use them according to one’s wish whenever and wherever one wanted. The judges, who were so haughty on the subject of the consideration due to the women who would become spouses, were extremely flexible when it came to negotiating the prices of the black bodies who were, it seemed, conceived for pleasure. A small bust was a drawback that would considerably decrease the value of the black concubine. The white woman was perceived as having a body as cold as snow, unresponsive to pleasure. The black woman, on the contrary, was fire from Gehenna. And between these two extremes was the Ethiopian woman, neither too cold nor too hot. As Al-Bokhâri from Mecca wrote in a book about the qualities of the Ethiopians: ‘Contact with the Ethiopian woman heals suffering bodies, appeases passion, protects against the pains of cold weather and dampness, and works as a perfect remedy for backache and rheumatisms’. There is no doubt that black concubines represented all types of physical pleasure. Initiating young men to sexual life was another of their attributes: high officials provided their male descendants with black women long before they got married. The Frenchman Lemoine remarked in his report to the Moroccan Committee that ‘well-off families put up their sons in a small house with a reliable black woman before they reach marriageable age’.

The sexual exploitation of black women started well before the end of childhood and continued for many years. After that, they were marginalised and relegated to household duties. The effects of that exploitation on the young black women were aggravated by the shattering of their family links.
In their families

The lack of any stable family relationship began at a very young age for those girls who were removed from their families so early. This brutal separation at a very sensitive age would determine their entire existence. From that moment, they would circulate endlessly from one market to another, from one house to another according to the needs and the moods of their masters. With each move their identity was further jeopardised. Every change of master, every time they were passed through the market, it meant a change of name. Throughout their entire life, each change seemed to move them a step further away from their family, their origins. Inexorably, they were chained to their solitude for ever, absolutely identified with their lonely fate: to serve other people, to exist in order to satisfy their masters’ many and various instincts and fulfil all their fantasies.

The European travellers who praised the humane conditions of Muslim slavery in general, strongly denounced the way in which the children were treated. Auguste Mouliéras reported that in some markets in the northern regions, the few items for sale were composed of very young black boys and girls, ‘with no family relationship between each other’.9 Children were sold in markets without any concern about their origins, without any human consideration. Religious law, in spite of its recommendations, was very conciliatory on this matter, agreeing that the child could be separated from its mother just after teething had begun, as it is written in Al-Yaznâsi’s Naważil.10

An untold number of young concubines suffered as a result of that premature separation from their parents, and in tribal societies where family represented everything socially and emotionally. The history experienced by ancestors was then in effect re-enacted. They had first been enslaved in black Africa, and then sold to merchants from Maghreb. They were sold in regions about which they knew nothing, and, completely uprooted, they were compelled to serve their masters and be in bond to them. This is the condition of slavery: the most brutal isolation with no protection whatsoever. Even for the children who were born in the same region as their parents, after quite a few generations, the same history was repeated: separation from their families – they were isolated from their roots and they had to undergo the same substitution of family bonds with the slave–master bond.

Often, even the most basic attachment could not take place when children were deprived of a father because it was impossible to determine the conditions of their conception, as was the case when a master possessed one of his black slaves, who might never know whether the father was her
master or her husband. Paternity remained unknown when a slave who had several masters (mouchtarak) was abused by all of them. It could then never be determined of which father the child was born. And then of course there were also the cases of masters selling the children conceived by their concubines. The Polish traveller Jean Potocki told of a mountain dweller praising his slave by declaring: ‘She gives me more pleasure than two women, and more profit than two cows. I make her a child every nine months, and when the child is four or five years old, I take it to the city and sell it for a good price.’ Children and especially young girls were doomed to this life. The available data confirm that on average more children were separated from their parents than not. The data at our disposal consist mainly of the inheritance lists of the local civil servants, called caïds and pachas. Pachas were in fact dispossessed by central government of the power to hand on inheritance rights at their death.

One finds a large number of complaints in the documents about the splitting of children from their families. Very often, the reason for a slave’s escape was the desire to find a long-lost mother. One of the most striking stories appears in a letter from Chambellan Ahmad Ben Mousa (dated March 1881) to Pacha Sa‘id Ben Faraji. As a consequence of this letter, in the large Moroccan city of Meknès an old woman who repeatedly asked to be admitted to the Palace was finally taken in so that she could live with her daughter. Again in Meknès, another slave, who was completely blind, took shelter in a sanctuary, and agreed to come out only on condition that she was accompanied by her mother, ‘her sole support’, as she said. Another blind slave asked for the release of her imprisoned mother so that she could help her.

Thus the splitting of slaves from their parents took place when children were sold. This type of separation generally happened within the ‘natural’ order of things. But separation could also occur violently, as a consequence of abduction.

**Abduction**

Abduction was a common practice in Morocco during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; it was so commonplace that some traces of it remain to this day in the oral traditions. Popular storytelling still carries the scar of that activity, since it often includes the image of the kidnapper, who is much feared at dusk, and who is capable of stealing children away for ever.

There were in fact organised gangs working for profit, protected by the local powers. Their victims were mostly those children who were the
easiest to kidnap. The kidnappers would first attack the women, beating them in order to abduct their children. Stories of these events have been passed on through the witness of gang members. Once the loot was gathered, it was crucial to collect it together and dispatch it to the big cities where buyers were waiting for it. The convoy set out, preceded by two armed men, while two others closed the whole procession. The victims of the operation were chained to the pack saddle. Nobody would be able to free those children in a surprise attack. Sometimes the children were hidden in sacks lined with wool or palmleaves, on the backs of camels. Many stratagems were used in order to prevent any alarm being raised: for example, the gangsters would pretend to be discovered immediately after a simulated departure. One of the criminals made sure he could be heard by children while yelling: ‘What are you carrying there?’ And the victims’ cries for help were answered with savage beatings: a dissuasive tactic, the effects of which were guaranteed. These facts are related today by an old man of the Oulad Bousba tribe, originating from the Sahara.15

Both enslaved and free children were subject to kidnapping. Young girls were the favourite victims, since they were required both for house service and for reproduction. Caid set no limits on the amount of force used to get them. They sold them or used them for their own needs. And each caïd exercised in his district the right to spend the first night of a marriage with the husband’s bride (droit de cuissage): priests and husbands were compelled to submit to the caïd’s law by force if they did not do so voluntarily. The most reluctant ones must expect a prison sentence, according to a witness talking about the power of the sultan Mawlay ‘Abd’al’Aziz.16

The victims of food shortage

If the violence of abduction changed the whole course of people’s lives, separating children from their parents, often taking away for ever their freedom, there were other circumstances that were equally devastating; for instance, natural calamities such as water and food shortages. Many families were forced to give away their children to other people. The historian Mawlay ‘Abdarrahman Ibn Zaydane, who was on intimate terms with the royal family, wrote, in his book on the city of Meknès, about the terrible starvation of the year 1878. The whole situation was so unbearable that ‘people screamed, rebelled and almost ate each other. People ran away from their brothers and sisters, father and mothers. Fathers sold their children’.17 In a letter about this event, the Sultan wrote: ‘God help us, people . . . are as they must be because of this starvation: they put their children up for sale and feed themselves with what they get from their
serving price’. During that period, a visitor to the city of Fès reported that several families from the countryside went to see well-off families and, in exchange for a few measures of corn, entrusted their children to them. It was a disguised form of selling. In fact, parents never came back to rescue the children, and they became slaves, new slaves who swelled the numbers of the old ones, as noted by the brothers Jean and Jérôme Tharaud in their 1930 chronicle of Fès.

The great majority of the young girls given away in the periods of economic depression and need would never be free again. In most cases, it was difficult to keep track of them; but even when they were found again, it was extremely difficult to get them back. The law favoured the rich, while judiciary procedures were an insurmountable barrier for the poor. Once enslaved, a human being could become free again only in exceptional circumstances. For powerful people, helping the hungry was a guaranteed loan, which the poor risked having to pay back with their submission and the loss of their freedom for ever.

As in the case of kidnapping, and for the same reason, that is, the huge demand, the youngest women fell prey to the rich as the best choice in those transactions of misery. There were some women whose husband for some reason had disappeared, and who found themselves married to another man thanks to the intervention of enterprising friends who exchanged them for cash. Sometimes the entrepreneur was the husband himself. These practices became so widespread at that time that the Sultan needed to hire jurists to put some order into the legal repercussions of that trade. Lawyers ruled to impose sanctions on those husbands who sold their wives. But the attorney Ibn Qâsim declared in his Ajwiba that the pressure of starvation and the wife’s agreement were good enough reasons to forgive husbands.

A question of status

Actually, starvation was not the only cause of all these legal problems. Their most profound reasons were to be found in the status of women within Muslim society. For the young woman the situation was aggravated by the excessive and despotic power of her father and the abuses it provoked especially in the countryside. Light is thrown on the whole phenomenon of the female condition by the study of the relationship between wife and husband, and father and daughter.

In many regions, women were regularly deprived of any inheritance rights, even though that was against the Muslim laws of inheritance. The deplorable condition of women was so striking that in 1893 Sultan Hassan I wrote about it in a letter to a judge from Marrakech named Mawlây al-
Mostafa. In the countryside, people were known for their despotism and the scorn they had for the law dealing with personal rights. It was always in the country that the law was particularly unable to protect women. In most cases, wedding certificates were not even written, which meant that they were absolutely not in accordance with the prescriptions of Muslim law. Al-Wazzâni reported in his Nawažîl that, in some regions, where a judge was not available, weddings were carried out orally in front of the tribal council. He gives several examples of women abandoned to fend for themselves, arriving from unknown areas, begging for charity, imploring, scarcely surviving: they would say that they had obtained a divorce, but had no written document to prove it. Al-Wazzâni mentioned also that the most attractive women were often taken up by ‘charitable’ people, who, in the absence of a legal alternative, volunteered themselves as their guardians.

At the same time, fathers did not forego the profit they could earn from young women of marriageable age. Actually, many parents did not even wait until their daughters had reached puberty to marry them off. At the beginning of the nineteenth century this practice increased at an alarming rate. Close relatives would arrange the marriage of orphan girls under their guardianship at the age of 9, pretending that they had reached puberty. After they had settled the dowry and received the money from the husband, the relatives would take the girl back on the evidence of her youth. At that point the law was on their side, and the husband was forced to accept a divorce. This procedure was repeated over and over again in order to extract the maximum profit from it. The law in fact allowed marriage only at the age of 10, and then only in cases where there was cause for concern about the future of young orphans with no income or those who were prematurely developed. Al-Wazzâni reports that Sultan Mawläy Slimâne asked chaykh Rhouni in 1806 to respect the minimum legal age for marriage to 10 years in order to disqualify those requests for the divorce of 9-year-old girls.

There are numerous cases of apparently legal marriages that were a disguised way of selling the women and this ended the childhood of young girls, enslaving them for the rest of their lives. Citizens who could read and write sometimes denounced vigorously those horrible transactions. Profits were made by the people charged with the duty of marrying them off, and these people were often the girls’ fathers or their legal guardians. Besides the wedding present, which was supposed to cover the bride’s needs, they would oblige the groom to offer them a gift and a sum of money (ma’kûla). That practice was common among those fathers who came down from the mountains to sell their daughters to the equally ruthless nomads. Their only
aim was to earn money. The young bride was abandoned to her husband with nothing, not even a suitable outfit, since her entire dowry had been seized and divided among the family members. Obviously, the fact that she was in that state made her situation as a bride worse and forced her to endure the worst deprivation from her husband. She could only escape from him if she had the money to buy her freedom. Marriage in that situation meant total enslavement for the woman. It is not surprising therefore that the escape of women was such a widespread phenomenon in nineteenth-century Morocco, according to Al-Wazzâni.25

The list of maltreatments suffered by women and children would be endless. In 1855, the administrator Mawlây Ahmad wrote to Chambellan Ahmad Ben Mousa that in the southern dominion there was a group of slaves inadequately fed by their masters: ‘Children especially are atrociously starved; one fears that the worst could happen.’26 Women, enslaved or free, were victims of physical brutality. Muslim civil rights authorised, with certain limitations, the use of the whip, in addition to severe reprimands, for disobedient wives.27 It was customary to use violence against wives and children within the family, in the harsh atmosphere of patriarchal power. The documents of this epoch team with descriptions of the physical traumas inflicted upon women: broken teeth, cut fingers, shaved heads, thrashings and floggings.28

The study of these documents cannot be reconciled with the official image of a society without problems. The condition of young women and children, which is radically changing today in the Arab world, has to be perceived in a different way in the light of the abuses endured in the past. Confronting that past allows us to establish more clearly what the problems are.

translated by Patrizia Lombardo

Notes
1 The most complete summary of the literature on slavery in the Muslim world is given by Bernard Lewis, Race and Color in Islam (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).
3 Letter of Hassan Ben Mbark (Hegirian calendar 6.5.1319; Gregorian calendar 1.9.1900). Unpublished manuscript. Dates are given first according to the Muslim calendar, then according to the Gregorian one.
4 Al-Majjâsi, Ajwiba, MS 3310, Bibliothèque Hassaniya (hereafter cited as BH).
5 Al-Wazzānī, Ajwiba, vol. 2, pp. 11–12. See also Tsouli, Nawāzīl, vol. 3, pp. 62 and 247. Nawāzīl, the plural of nāzīla (different), are texts similar to ajwiba.

6 Al-Sijimāsī Ibn Hilal, Nawāzīl, MS 8983, BH.

7 Al-Bokhārī al-Makki ’Aja’dīn Mohamed, al-Turaz al manquch fi mahasin al Hubuch, MS 5888, BH.


10 Al-Yaznāsī, Nawāzīl, MS 8187, BH.

11 Al-Warzāzī, Ajwiba, MS 6516, BH.


13 As, for example, the succession of caīd Housayn Ben Bihi (dated 18.4.1285/8.8.1866) (k. 664), BH. For the many cases of succession, see Mohammed Ennaji, Soldats, Domestiques et Concubines (Casablanca: Editions EDDIF, 1994), ch. 3, pp. 61–76, bibliography pp. 205–6.


15 This is an oral communication of al-Hāj Bouzid.

16 Anouar Mohammed’s letter to Mawlāy ’Abd’al’Azīz (23.6.1319/7.10.1900) (document 17), Fonds Moulay Abdalaziz, BH.


20 Letter from Sultan Hassan I to the qādī (judge) Mawlāy al-Mostafa (24.10.1310/11.5.1839) from the Kunnach (register) in the Fonds Hassan I, BH.


22 Ibid., 105.

23 Ibid., 15–17.

24 Kazimirsky, Dictionnaire Arabe–Français. The term means gain or shared gain.


27 Al-Wazzānī, al-Miyār, vol. 10, p. 34.