

THE RISE AND FALL OF SLAVERY ON A MEDITERRANEAN LITTORAL

The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia.

By Ismael M. Montana.

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Key Words: Tunisia, Sahara, international relations, Islam, law, race, slavery abolition.

Like all the African countries on the Mediterranean littoral, Tunisia is buffeted by spheres of influence both landward and seaward. Its history and culture reflect the vicissitudes of those influences as neither the sea nor the Sahara acted as barriers. *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia* nicely illustrates the transit of peoples and ideas that affected this corner of the North African coast while providing a deep analysis of slavery, abolition, and its aftermath. Ismael Montana brings to the study of this North African state the fresh perspective of an Africanist. His book uses the work of historians of the Atlantic slave trade, the slave trade in the Ottoman Empire and other parts of the Middle East, and the more recent research by trans-Saharan specialists who emphasize connections across the desert. His published writings include studies of the substantial trans-Saharan community in Tunis, which for many years maintained a distinctive identity and culture reflecting bygone roots in Sudanic kingdoms.

Tunisia before the Ottoman conquest in 1574 was a country that had ‘no deep Saharan hinterland’, Montana states, and its contact with the Sudan was severed by the Hilali invasions of the eleventh century. In the aftermath of the Ottoman conquest, janissary troops and officials introduced *kul* slavery, in which Mamluks of Eastern European (usually) Christian origin were recruited to serve in the army and in the administration. The janissaries also encouraged corsairing, or the plundering of European ships in the Mediterranean, as a means of raising revenues. The first century and a half of Ottoman rule was marked by internal disputes among the new Turkish chieftains and only in the seventeenth century was order restored and a stability enforced first by Uthman Bey (r. 1598–1610) and then his successor Yusuf Bey (r. 1610–37), the latter building the Suq al-Birka which became the central market for Sudanese slaves in Tunis until the slave trade was ended in 1841. The construction of the market in the seventeenth century marked the effective resumption of the trans-Saharan African trade, as well as the trade in other goods that typified the Sudan trade – gold, ivory, feathers, and senna. The market fed not only local needs and a renewed demand for African slaves by the local elite, but also Tunisia’s developing trade with Europe and the Ottoman Empire, which grew dramatically in the course of the eighteenth century.

One strength of this book is the author’s correlation of the slave and caravan trades with Tunisia’s economic resurgences and declines in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He follows the fluctuations of the trans-Saharan trade, now dominated by merchants from Ghadames, as they grappled with of the competition from other routes and with disruptive political developments in the Sudan. The largely European documentary sources on this trade are as always problematic: the number of slaves imported into Tunisia appears to vary greatly depending on the source (consuls, travelers); local customs records are not available; no merchant archives have yet come to light; and only for

the latter part of the nineteenth century are the writings of Arabic travelers available. These problems are typical of those encountered by historians of northern Africa and Montana carefully alerts his readers to them.

Montana also focuses upon the integration of Tunisia into the wider Ottoman political and economic arena, particularly as the trade in slaves across the Mediterranean to Istanbul, Izmir, and Crete became the subject of intense international concern in the nineteenth century. The abolitionist cause was championed by Great Britain, whose consuls in Tunis and elsewhere in the Mediterranean applied steady pressure upon local rulers to abolish the slave trade. In Egypt their efforts to move Muhammad Ali toward abolishing the slave trade failed; in Tunisia, Consul Reade had a notable victory when he persuaded Ahmed Bey (r. 1837–55) to first abolish the trade in 1841 and then abolish slavery altogether in Tunisia in 1846.

Slavery is enshrined in the *sharia* and justifications for its abolition have had to rely on interpretations of the law, some based on religious considerations and specific codes of behavior, others on borrowing from non-Islamic sources. One argument used in Ahmed Bey's decree was based on the supposition that most of the slaves came from *bilad as-Sudan* which had been Islamicized for centuries. Because the enslavement of Muslims was forbidden, the enslavement of these blacks was contrary to *sharia*. To his credit, Ahmed Bey was ahead of his time in abolishing slavery, but it is not surprising that Tunisian society as a whole was not an enthusiastic as he was. Slavery continued to exist, albeit illegally, until the French moved into Tunisia in 1881 and the 'second abolition' of slavery ensued. This book provides a careful analysis of the history of slavery in Tunisia during the Ottoman period and allows the reader to place Tunisia in the larger contexts of African, Middle Eastern, and the Mediterranean worlds.

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PUTTING CINEMATIC DIRT IN ITS PLACE

Trash: African Cinema from Below.

By Kenneth W. Harrow.

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If dirt is 'matter out of place' in the oft-quoted phrase of Mary Douglas, then Kenneth Harrow's new monograph puts trash firmly back in the picture for African cinema studies. Harrow discusses trash in all of its complex cinematic manifestations, from the presence of actual rubbish as a visual component to signify poverty, to 'trashy' as a metaphor that viewers might apply to particular types of urban subjectivity, to trash as a filmic metonym for postcolonial social relations and global economic relations.