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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Esclavages et abolitions en terres d'islam. Tunisie, Arabie Saoudite, Maroc, Mauritanie, Soudan

Roger Botte

Brussels, André Versaille Éditeur, 2010, 389 pp., €29,90, Paperback

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Esclavages et abolitions en terres d'islam is a thorough survey of the abolition of slavery in a number of significant regions of the Arab and Islamic world, and a work that considers deeply the factors that determine its survival in some cases, and its discriminative consequences in others, more than 150 years later. It starts with a necessary and brilliantly executed chapter that examines Islamic legal doctrine on slavery as well as the argumentation used by jurists of the main four law schools or *madhahib* in order to abolish the practice, which is well established and discussed in detail in the Koran. What Botte considers the legal *ruses* used to overcome the obstacle of the firm roots of slavery in the shari'a are examined in the context of abolitions carried out at the same time in Europe, and of the pressure of colonial powers such as Britain and France over subject territories in North Africa and the Middle East. The five following chapters explore this process in five different contemporary Arab and Islamic countries: Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Mauritania and Sudan.

In the case of Tunisia, the first Islamic territory to decree the abolition of slavery (in 1846), the author describes the pressures of British abolitionist groups on the regency of Ahmad Bey, as well as the Bey's sensitivity to British political support against French colonial aspirations. Botte also details the religious arguments provided in the abolition decree, which followed previous measures that had banned war on trade (*guerre de course*, 1816), the capture of Christians (1819) and their enslavement, regardless of their nationality (1830). The abolition of slavery in Tunisia began, as Botte rightly highlights, with its recognition as an institution permitted by Islamic law. What was questioned by the Bey's abolition decree was the (ill) treatment of black slaves (*mamluk*, pl. *mamalik*) by slave owners, which was held as opposed to the spirit of Islamic law as prescribed in the shari'a. Botte then considers the unequal status of emancipated black Africans, whose adherence to Islam was traditionally put into question in North Africa. The engagement of black Africans in Sufi practices was viewed as a sign of impiety (*kufri*) and as a remainder of old pagan religious practices, an argument that probably tried to justify what was most likely a racist prejudice.

According to Botte, the abolition of slavery in Saudi Arabia (1962), as the abrogation of a principle previously held as inviolable by a theocratic system, motivated one of the most elaborate arguments against the institution. Abolition in the land of the Two Holy Mosques involved a great deal of religious debate, in which the Koranic exhortations to manumit slaves were predominant. But it also had to face the opposition of the flourishing slave trade, favoured by the role of Mecca and Medina as meeting places for Muslims and Muslim traders of all regions. Botte points out that the opposition of local merchants was strong enough to

resist the efforts of the Saudi authorities until the second half of the twentieth century, when the denunciation of slavery by Nasserist media such as the *Sawt al-‘Arab* radio station and the Egyptian press motivated the final step: one of the latest abolitions in the Arab and Islamic world.

The end of slavery in Morocco took place with a *de facto* abolition, implicit in the first *loi fondamentale* of 1961, according to which all Moroccans are considered equal, with the same rights and obligations. As Botte shows, in the case of Morocco the institution of slavery proved highly resilient, even if nineteenth-century jurists recognised the impossibility of a lawful supply of slaves (which should be captives taken in war against the infidel), and authors such as al-Nasiri (d. 1897) were active critics not of slavery itself, but of the denigration and abuse with which it was practiced. The chapter includes a thorough description of what textual evidence reveals about the sale of slaves in the market in the nineteenth century, and also of one of the main figures in the practice of domestic slavery in at the time: the *‘arifa* or *maîtresse femme*, supervisor of female slaves in the harem.

Mauritania is the subject of the fifth chapter of the book, where the relationship between the survival of slavery today¹ and social stratification is emphasised by the author. A chronological analysis of the different attempts at abolition in the context of colonisation and decolonisation is also included in the chapter, with a final consideration of the recent developments on the subject following the rise of radical interpretations of Islam in the area. This phenomenon also plays a significant role in the revival of slavery in the midst of the wars between North and South in Sudan, the subject of the sixth chapter. The slave raids of which the populations of the South, and more precisely the Dinka groups, were victims as a means of punishment for their support of the South Sudan Liberation Movement are described in the chapter, which also considers the international response to the problem. This is made with emphasis on the humanitarian fiasco that took place with the international slave-ransoming campaigns led by North American Christian NGOs, which most of the supposedly redeemed slaves had never actually been captured.

The final chapter is a comprehensive glossary, including a description of slavery as discussed in the Koran and the shari‘a, as well as definitions of Islamic legal terminology about slaves and the practice of slavery (sale of slaves, legal treatment, obligations of the master, etc.). It closes a work of fine and elaborate research, a thoroughly documented exercise of comparative history that visualises the diversity of the institution of slavery in the history of the Arab and Islamic world, and focuses on the economic and social aspects of the trade and its abolition, whether finally accomplished or still in process. A blow of fresh air in a field where generalisation often serves value judgments, *Esclavages et abolitions en terres d’islam* is a necessary reference for the study of the end of slavery in the Arab and Islamic world.

¹ Attested, among others, in the annual reports of the NGO *SOS-Esclaves*, available online at <http://www.sosesclaves.org/Pagecentrale.htm>.