
By Nathaniel Mathews, Binghamton University

In this slim volume, Mohamed Oualdi has written a brilliant historical biography of a Tunisian mamluk in exile, closely reading court and estate records to arrive at a deep understanding of the conflicts engendered by clashing legal regimes in the colonial Mediterranean. Oualdi takes us into the life and death of Husayn b. Abdallah, an Ottoman notable and manumitted slave who served the Ottoman government in Tunisia and later died in exile in Florence. Using this life of an Ottoman provincial notable and his legal entanglements as a case study, Oualdi is able to showcase the shared elements of legal discourse underlying the transition of sovereignties under colonialism, and the difficulties and complexities raised by competing legal claims and stratagems of Ottoman elites as they sought to protect and advocate for their interests. Oualdi argues that elite male householders in the Ottoman Empire, at least some of whom were former slaves like Husayn, continued to exercise authority in the face of rising French colonial power.

Oualdi begins by considering how the historiography on North Africa has evolved to look beyond European archives and European languages, to uncover how diverse communities actually experienced colonial rule, rather than assuming the nationalist unity of the colonized. Oualdi also seeks to pay attention to the local context and production of sources, while at the same time situating them within the movement of subjects across the Mediterranean. Oualdi acknowledges that Husayn’s case is in many ways unique, if only for the voluminous paper trail it left across at least four different cities around the Mediterranean rim. Husayn is the most central of many transnational lives that Oualdi unravels, from North African Jews such as David Santinilla, who played a central role in the work of legal translation and mediation in colonial North Africa, to the Italian Angiolina Bertucci, the mother of one of Husayn’s daughters, who later became the wife of another Tunisian notable and ended up as the greatest beneficiary of Husayn’s estate (134).

While still emphasizing colonialism as a violent shock, Oualdi argues that the historiography on colonialism is often overdetermined by a focus on conquest and resistance rooted in the nationalist historiographies of the independence era (4). Building on recent historical and anthropological work on North Africa, he shows how in most of the provinces of the Ottoman empire in Africa, the roots of colonial control were more insidious than its most violent episodes. The beginning of colonial sovereignty usually involved the public debt of the state and efforts by European bankers to recoup their loans through restructuring state bureaucracies.
In this manner, control over most of these public finances was lost to both local and Ottoman control. By focusing on colonial rule as a technology of law, rather than simply as a moment of conquest, Oualdi uncovers an ambiguous space between resistance and acquiescence in the lives of many North Africans at the end of the nineteenth century.

Oualdi focuses on the overlapping regimes of legal order shared between Ottoman elites like Husayn and the newly established colonial power in Tunis. The book draws on legal documents, letters, and reports in Arabic, French, Italian, and Ottoman Turkish, revealing the web of legal and financial relations that connected Husayn to wives, associates, rulers, and creditors. These archival readings enable Oualdi to reframe the colonial moment as a process partly continuous with a broader evolution of the concept of private property increasingly shared between Ottoman and European regimes (14). The result is an elegantly narrated fusing of local and regional history through the life of an official navigating overlapping legal regimes, defending Islam, and protecting his assets and his legacy. Oualdi successfully illuminates the motivations of Husayn in life as well as the broader impact of his death.

The first three chapters examine Husayn’s life and career. With origins in the Circassian region, along the northeastern rim of the Black Sea, Husayn became one of the last Circassian male slaves to be sold to Ottoman notables in North Africa. Brought to Tunis as a mamluk and educated in the administrative languages of the empire – Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, Husayn notably also attended the Tunisian Military School among free Tunisians, where he studied mathematics, French, and engineering. Husayn became part of a generation of local reformers, committed to modernizing the Tunisian state as it came under fiscal, political, and eventually military pressure from French colonial officials. After a distinguished imperial career, the reformers’ attempts failed and Husayn eventually self-exiled to the Italian province of Tuscany in the late 1870s, where he lived until his death in 1887.

The latter half of the book examines the machinations over Husayn’s estate, and how his previous legal maneuverings had tried to anticipate the possible claims that might be made on his voluminous estate. As Oualdi notes, Husayn’s status as an emancipated slave with no descendants meant he was obliged to leave his estate to the Ottoman governor of Tunisia, his former master (44). The book assesses his various strategies to get around this by naming a prominent Tunisian family as administrators of his lands, by establishing fictive kin relations and by reserving certain lands as hubūs or waqf. The resulting debates around Husayn’s estate were also complicated by the French conquest of Tunisia in 1881, only a few years after Husayn’s exile and retirement from Tunisian politics. It is impossible to do justice to the complicated trajectories of the legal cases involving Husayn’s estate in this short review. Suffice to say, Oualdi makes a convincing case that there were
significant forms of political and cultural continuity in the formerly Ottoman provinces of North Africa, in spite of the disruption of colonial rule.

In the final part of this review, I want to briefly summarize the implications of the book’s arguments for debates about Islam and modernity. In a brief epilogue and conclusion, Oualdi makes clear that, even after colonial rule, Muslim scholars and elites maintained epistemological commitment to their unique forms of life, and that France was but “one of many protagonists in a competition between Muslim elites supporting what they considered to be Islamic orthodoxy and those, like Salim, who were in favor or *īṣlāḥ*, or reforming Islam and its modes of government” (137).

For Muslim elites of the late nineteenth century like Husayn, the adaptation to, and adoption of new forms of legal or scientific technology did not entail a necessary epistemological alienation from Islam. Rather, Husayn and other Tunisian reformers were one wing of a complex debate within the ummah. This is an essential reminder for those interested in the project of developing critical Muslim studies to meet contemporary challenges. As Oualdi argues, the period of Ottoman political reforms at the end of the nineteenth century deserves to be reappraised as a moment as significant to the present as the colonial conquest that came after it. There is a need for more historical analysis of the intellectual and ideological perspectives of Ottoman state officials and other Muslims elites who embarked on this partial rapprochement with the new legal and financial structures of western European powers. Oualdi’s book provides an excellent example of this new and emerging historiography.