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ABSTRACT: There is much to say about Chouki El Hamel’s Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race and Islam (2015), but I will focus the discussion below on six points: 1) the “ancient hatreds” argument he constructs to explain racism and slavery in Morocco, in particular the culturalist thrust running through the book, whereby complex economic and political processes are reduced to racist or theological beliefs; 2) El Hamel’s claim that much writing about slavery in North Africa claims the institution was benign; 3) how he categorizes Moroccans into three bounded categories—Black, Arab, and Berber; 4) his claim that the Gnawa Sufi order is a “diaspora” and a “distinct ethnic group” that longs for an imaginary homeland; 5) his questionable use of national archives, and selective rendering of classic writing on slavery and jinn belief in Morocco; and 6) his reluctance to address how colonial (and postcolonial) state policy affected ethno-racial politics in Morocco.

“CULTURE OF SILENCE”

“In his classic novel Mumbo Jumbo (1972), Ishmael Reed satirizes white America’s age-old anxiety about the “infectiousness” of black culture with “Jes Grew,” an indefinable, irresistible carrier of “soul” and “blackness” that spreads like a virus contaminating everyone in its wake from New Orleans to New York. Reed suggests that the source of the Jes Grew scourge is a sacred text, which is finally located and destroyed by a local Harlem leader named Abdul Sufi Hamid, “the Brother on the Street.” The opening chapter of Black Morocco by Chouki El Hamel recalls Ishmael Reed’s storyline except the psychic pathogen is Islam, more specifically an insidious mix of radical Islam and ancient Arabian culture, that spreads rapidly infecting far-flung lands with anti-black racism. The sacred text is presumably the Quran. El Hamel doesn’t mince words: “The phenomenon of race in Morocco is old; it is as old as the Arab invasion of North Africa is the 7th century.”

Black Morocco opens with a cri de coeur, a sweeping j’accuse. For almost a millennium and a half, North Africa has been plagued by a pernicious anti-black racism that was born in pre-Islamic Arabia, and then disseminated by Islam and Arab conquerors. And yet few are willing to talk about this. The author denounces the “culture of silence” in Morocco surrounding the country’s history of slavery and mixed identity, rebuking the countless historians who write about North African slavery, only to downplay its cruelty. El Hamel’s tone is incensed, his aims
are expansive, if ill-defined. “[M]y goal,” he states, “is to recover the silenced histories of slavery in ‘Islamic’ [sic] North Africa” and to challenge “conventional readings” of slavery in Islam and Morocco. He never defines the borders of “North Africa,” or explains why he focuses on “Islamic” as opposed to Christian or Jewish North Africa; is it because “Islamic Africa” is more silent on slavery than Christian or animist Africa? But throughout the book, Morocco, with its “refusal to engage in discussions about slavery, racial attitudes and gender,” serves as a stand-in for a broader denunciation of Arab and Muslim attitudes.

The author describes Morocco as a country defined religiously by Islamic doctrine and politically by “Arabic nationalism,” and depicted in “local historiography” as racially and ethnically homogenous. El Hamel never defines which “local historiography” or “Arabic nationalism” he is referring to. Given the Moroccan regime’s staunch opposition to Nasserism and Baathism, it would have been helpful to specify which strand of Arab nationalism the makhzen is upholding. The claim that there is a silence around gender and identity in Morocco is also baffling, given the very raucous debates since the early 1990s about language and identity, vernacular (darija) versus fusha, Arabic, French, or Tamazight, as well as around the moudawana family law, anti-sexual harassment laws and women’s rights. Yet El Hamel finds the silence overwhelming—and a lot flows from this contrived premise.

El Hamel doesn’t specify which local sources are silent on slavery, but he offers anecdotal evidence of the “denial and refusal.” He mentions a conference that he attended at Duke University in 1999, when a visiting Moroccan professor said that there was no “Africanity” (meaning “black consciousness”) in Morocco and Tunisia, and claimed that the Mediterranean is a “melting pot,” allegedly presenting the region as a “hybrid and harmonious society.” El Hamel says this thinking is tantamount to “eradicating the historical truths surrounding race and slavery” and does an injustice to those who were enslaved. He chastises another co-panelist, a Libyan scholar, who describes Western scholarship on North African slavery as Orientalist, for “discourage[ing] Moroccans from benefiting from the rich Western intellectual heritage in the field of race, gender, and slavery.” El Hamel’s calls for “more scholarly rigor” notwithstanding, Black Morocco’s introduction turns out to be a faithful harbinger of things to come: the “strawman” argument that North African writing on slavery is denialist goes unsubstantiated (as do a number of other blanket statements); critical concepts and labels (often American-derived) go undefined; Morocco becomes a stand-in for a wider discussion of the Maghreb, if not the Islamic world; and then there is a troubling defense of Western writing on race and slavery, some of it colonial and racist.

A sidenote on this essay’s title: in his masterpiece, Mumbo Jumbo published 50 years ago this month, Ishmael Reed satirizes the West’s fascination with black history in a fantastic tale that travels from Harlem to North Africa via the Caribbean (Haiti), and includes religious brotherhoods, voodoo practice, Harlem Renaissance figures. In this novel, mumbo jumbo refers to the beauty of syncretic black culture, the power of Mandingo “magic” to heal troubled
spirits, as well the mainstream American babble around West African cultural retentions in the New World. Reed’s book is a postmodern, Afro-futurist work of fiction, while El Hamel’s volume purports to be a comprehensive academic history. Yet Black Morocco often reads like an inverse-mirror image of Mumbo Jumbo, recounting a dizzying account that unfurls from Arabia across North Africa to the American South, featuring religious brotherhoods, Manding healing practices, and cultural/ideological infection across space and time. Following Reed, I use “mumbo jumbo” to probe the academic and political discourse surrounding Morocco’s historic ties to West Africa, a discourse that, at its most incautious, dabbles in essentialist, quasi-mystical tropes, depicting Morocco as a tree with roots in the Sahel and branches that sway to the European breeze, or positing Islam as a carrier of the virus of racism (and its antidote).

ANCIENT HATREDS

The first third of Black Morocco argues that anti-black racism arrived in North Africa, with the advent of Islam. “The phenomenon of race in Morocco,” he writes, “is as old as the Arab invasion of North Africa in the 7th century.” This anti-black racism had roots in pre-Islamic Arabia. His evidence of pre-Islamic anti-black hatred is that the majority of slaves on the peninsula were of East African origin (several historians have actually disputed this claim, most recently Hend Gilli-Elewy who writes, “The vast majority of slaves in pre- and early Islamic times seem to have been Arab prisoners of war”) (Gilli-Elewy 2017). El Hamel argues that while the Prophet Muhammad was alive, this hatred of black people disappeared, or went underground only to resurface after his death. He claims “throughout the history of Islam,” color prejudice was embedded in the Hamitic curse—allegedly absorbed from Jewish sources—which was used to “justify and extend” pre-Islamic Arab and Berber racial prejudices. Berbers may have resisted Arab conquests before the 7th century, but once the Arab invasion happened, “Arabic and Berber” cultures “found ideological convergence” and used Islam “to justify preexisting prejudice against black Africans.”

There is much to unpack in these sentences. First, methodologically, it’s not clear what the causal argument or causal variable is in Black Morocco, given the author’s use of impossibly broad categories like “Islam” and “cultural and ethnic factors.” El Hamel identifies “Islamic ideology,” but also speaks of “Islam” and “Islamic law,” as drivers of slavery and racial oppression, and adds that “other cultural and ethnic factors figure prominently into how Islam was engendered.” If the causal variables are hard to pinpoint, it’s clear that he is providing a cultural-theological account—not a materialist one. El Hamel is presenting a variant of the “ancient hatreds” argument, which claims that groups fight and brutalize each other, for centuries or millennia, because they despise each other due to differences in identity and culture—or in this case, a difference in skin color. Social scientists have largely discredited the “ancient hatreds” thesis, since describing racism as a timeless, atavistic habit does not explain spatial and temporal variations in ethnic or racial violence; how then to explain the period when there is no ethnic or racial violence? (Varshney 2009). Also, the “ancient hatreds” thesis smacks of essentialism as it suggests that certain communities are simply doomed to fight one another.

Yet El Hamel also makes it a point to remind the reader that Islam as a religion is based on “egalitarian color-blind tenets” and cuts across all differences of ethnicity and color: “The Quran emphasizes the fellowship of humankind.” He emphasizes that the Hamitic curse does not even exist in the Quran, but entered Islam via Jewish texts and deeply entrenched “cultural mores” that resurfaced after the Prophet’s death (El Hamel, 64). El Hamel notes that there were abolitionist voices throughout Islamic history, but “mainstream male interpreters all over the Islamic world prevailed against this ethical voice and did exactly the opposite of what the
Quran intended.” Leaving aside how the author knows what the Quran intended, his claims that “neither the Qur’an nor the Hadith make any evaluative racial distinctions among human-kind,” is facile, given the long debate over how to interpret references to slaves and blacks in Sahih Al-Bukhari. El Hamel’s narrative contains a number of statements and their opposite: thus El Hamel exonerates Islam, and proceeds to place the blame on an ancient Arabian anti-blackness (“entrenched cultural prejudice”), that spread with Islam, and this racism was bolstered in “Islamic” North Africa by Maliki thought and Salafi Islam. To understand this racist “Islamic ideology,” El Hamel points to the Maliki school and Salafism, both traceable to Arabia. He favorably cites Nicole Cottait, a historian, who says Malikism shaped by its Bedouin roots, is hostile to rational explanations and took hold in the Maghreb, because it’s well suited for the “Berber mentality.” It’s initially surprising to see El Hamel, in his discussion of the “Hamitic curse,” favorably quoting the Israeli anthropologist Raphael Patai, author of the notoriously racist volume *The Arab Mind* (1976), that was reprinted in the lead-up to the Iraq War, providing the intellectual backdrop for the torture at Abu Ghraib. Yet as *Black Morocco* progresses, the reader realizes that El Hamel is also making an “Arab mind”-kind of argument looking at pernicious mental constructs that that have presumably travelled across centuries and continents like Ishmael Reed’s psychic virus in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

El Hamel presents an emphatically culturalist (non-materialist) argument, wherein primordial prejudice and religious texts explain not only historic racism and slavery in Morocco, but also the contemporary silence surrounding that history. Sophisticated culturalist arguments tend to define culture (as norms, discourse, or shared attitudes) and show how it interacts with political, economic, and institutional factors. El Hamel’s argument does not define Islam or culture, consider political economy or state-driven explanations of racism and slavery, or how economic or institutional contexts may shape understandings of the scripture he mentions. Likewise, the Arab invasion of the Maghreb figures so prominently in his argument, but he never examines the debate surrounding said invasion, its extent, its mythological representations.

It’s worth noting that El Hamel’s volume seems to be modelled on two books. The first is Bruce Hall’s *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960*, a sweeping intellectual history of arguments about race and slavery in the Sahel, that aimed to show how anti-black racism in West Africa preceded colonial rule. *Black Morocco* attempts a similar history of “racist ideology” in Morocco (or the Maghreb?) across the centuries, but as explained below, El Hamel geographic focus is too broad and vague, and, unlike Hall, he doesn’t engage with colonial policies sufficiently. The second book critical to understanding *Black Morocco* is Mohammed Ennaji’s *Soldats, domestiques et concubines: L’esclavage au Maroc au XIXe siècle* (1994) (translated as *Serving the Master: Masters and Slaves in 19th Century Morocco* (1999), which also purported to break the silence on slavery. *Black Morocco* reads as an interesting sequel, if not an Americanized version of Mohammed Ennaji’s book. Published two decades earlier, Ennaji’s volume—which El Hamel describes as “pioneering,” is similarly focused on Moulay Ismail’s slave soldiers, the curse of Ham, the Haratin, Islamic law, concubines, and the French colonialism’s well-intentioned, if unsuccessful, efforts to ban slavery. El Hamel, as we’ll see brings some American bells and whistles to Ennaji’s framework, for instance, emphasizing the role of “race” and “blackness” (Ennaji thought that in terms of relations between black and non-black Moroccans, social status played a greater role than skin color.) Both books are keenly interested in the endurance of religiously-inspired mental attitudes.

**ISLAM AND THE WEST**

El Hamel’s narrative rests squarely on an implicit—at times explicit—Orientalist framing, with slavery in “Islamic Africa” as a sort of mirror-image of trans-Atlantic slavery. It
soon becomes evident that El Hamel not only sees numerous parallels in how race operates in “Islam” and “the West” (references to Brazil, Haiti, and the American South abound in Black Morocco, as do concepts drawn from American sociology like Harvard scholar Orlando Patterson’s “slavery as social death”), but he also thinks that the very concept of “race” may have originated in the East and spread westward (this is another Orientalist motif: the East as source). As he writes, “a Euro-American concept of race and its critique are applicable to Islamic societies as this theory itself has roots in the adjacent Islamic culture in the Mediterranean basin.” El Hamel seems to have bought into historian James Sweet’s theory of race and “Muslim antecedents,” and cites Sweet’s argument that the racial ideology that underpinned American slavery originated in 8th century Islamic world and travelled to the New World via Muslim Iberia (Sweet 1997).

This argument was originally made by the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre in his seminal work, *The Masters and the Slaves* (*Casa-Grande e Senzala* 1933), which pointed to the Moorish roots of Brazilian civilization. Freyre, however, argued the opposite of Sweet—that Brazilian race relations were softer, more harmonious and amenable to “racial democracy” because of Moorish cultural influence (See Freyre 1964; Isfahani-Hammond 2008). Some decades later Latin American historians like Octavio Paz began arguing the opposite—that Moorish influence is what doomed Latin America to despotism and intolerance (Paz 1979, 128). Both versions of this Orientalist argument have now been largely discredited. As historians have shown, the interest in “Islamic slavery” began following the Barbary Wars, as American Abolitionists came to see the Orient as a mirror-image of America, and particularly “Islamic Africa” as a screen upon which to project their racial fears and fantasies (McDougall 2002). Depending on circumstances or interest, “Islamic slavery” would be depicted as either infinitely more cruel, or more benign than its Western counterpart. Operating within this binary, El Hamel proceeds to show how slavery in North Africa was just as cruel, and charges a range of contemporary scholars—who question the Islam-West framing—of either being defensive, or saying that slavery was “benign.”

El Hamel leans on a few rhetorical strategies to drive his primordialist account of Moroccan history. One of them is to “strawman” arguments that note any difference between systems of slavery in Africa and the Americas. He thus denounces Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, editors of the influential volume *Slavery in Africa: History and Anthropological Perspectives* (1977) which introduced a framework for viewing slavery in Africa along a “slavery-to-kinship continuum” wherein “the kinsman, the adopted, the dependent, the client, and the ‘slave’ abutted one another and could merge into one another.” El Hamel dismisses this argument saying it treats “African slavery as not particularly oppressive.” When Algerian historian Yacine Daddi writes that the French moved to abolish “white [European] slavery” in Algeria much faster than “black slavery,” El Hamel accuses him of intimating that slavery in the Algerian regency was benign, and that “Algeria was free of prejudice and racial discrimination against black Africans” (242). El Hamellobsa similar accusation at the late Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui, who wrote on how human bondage in East Africa and Arabia, differed from Brazil or the United States. Mazrui famously observed that the “system of descending racial miscegenation” of the American South, did not exist in “Arabized societies” where “there is no specific category of a mixed group such as the mulattoes, mestizos, or creoles in the Americas.” For identifying this rather obvious difference, El Hamel accuses Mazrui who wrote extensively on dictatorships in Africa and the Middle East, of portraying “the Arab system as inclusive and tolerant.”

El Hamel reserves the brunt of his ire for Mohamed Hassan Mohamed, a Sudanese scholar of Morocco. In 2010, Mohamed, then a visiting researcher at the University of Agadir
Morocco researching trade networks in southern Morocco, published a lengthy two-part review article in the *Journal of North African Studies* looking at the history of the comparison (“the analogy”) drawn between the trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades. (The first part was titled, “Africanists and Africans of the Maghrib: Casualties of Analogy.”) (Mohamed 2010). Mohamed made several points: the comparison between the trans-Atlantic and “Islamic slavery” began with the Abolitionist movement; treating the “trans-Sahara” as similar to the trans-Atlantic rests on a colonial Hegelian partition of Africa, that divided Africa into “European Africa,” the territory which lies north of the Sahara, “Egypt,” that land which is connected to Asia, and “Africa proper,” the land below the Sahara. This mapping not only separated North Africa from “real Africa,” but also, to quote the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne viewed the Sahara as an empty space and as “a wall it has never been” (Diagne 2016). Because of this mapping, black people in the Maghreb (such as the Haratin) are viewed as outsiders of sorts, a “diaspora,” a “residue of anonymous slaves from West Africa,” or in Mohamed’s words, the ultimate “casualties of the analogy.” (Mohammed also noted that the term Haratin is an exonym, that people in this region do not use to refer to themselves.)

In reviewing Western writing about “Islamic slavery” from the 18th century to the current era, Mohamed points to the acute “textuality” of these narratives, that is, the belief that a medieval fatwa, or utterance by Ibn Khaldun or Ibn Battuta, shapes ethno-racial reality centuries later, more than contingent economic or political factors. Mohamed also questions the “statistical projections” of scholars like Ralph Austen, John Hunwick and Philip Curtin who estimated that millions of slaves were taken from “sub-Saharan Africa” to North Africa and the Middle East: in 1969, Philip Curtin offered 11 million as an estimate for the trans-Atlantic slave trade; inspired by Curtin’s work, Ralph Austen would estimate that 17 million were trafficked across the Sahara, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean. (Historian H.J. Fisher, in turn, thinks that the number is “possibly greater in total than that across the Atlantic.”) Mohammed questions the models these scholars use to arrive at these disparate figures, and notes the cul-de-sac that they—by their own admission—arrive at: if millions were transported across the Sahara, the Red Sea, and Indian Ocean, then how to explain the absence of large black populations in North Africa and the Middle East, comparable to the half-billion-strong African-descent population in the New World? The explanation given for this discrepancy, for the “absence” of a significant black “residuum” in the MENA region is concubinage. Mohammed respectfully queries how the institution of concubinage (and by extension, harems), can explain the alleged disappearance of millions of African-descent peoples.

Rather than addressing Mohammed’s critiques of Western writing on trans-Saharan slavery, El Hamel in the introduction of *Black Morocco*, dismisses the Sudanese scholar as “a clear example” of someone whose work “attempts to deny the history of the trans-Saharan slave trade and slavery in North Africa in general and in Morocco in particular and to accuse the West of fabricating the social ills of racism and slavery in Islamic Africa.” El Hamel then proceeds to reproduce the very frames and Orientalist tropes that Mohammed cautions against—a fixation on Islamic Africa, seeing blacks in North Africa as a “diaspora,” speaking of “the middle passage of the Sahara” and describing “Morocco and black West Africa, [as] two regions separated by a sea of sand.” El Hamel also puts a premium on textuality (the book has long passages on racism in the writings of Ibn Khaldun, Al Jahiz, and Ibn Battuta). But shortly after brushing off certain scholars for downplaying the horrors of slavery, El Hamel casually coopts their insights into his argument. Thus, in discussing identity formation and genealogy in Morocco, El Hamel uses Mazrui’s idea of upward cooptation, and Miers and Kopytoff’s “slavery-to-kinship” model to explain the role of concubinage.
Worth recalling that Ennaji’s book *Serving the Master*, whose approach El Hamel adopts, also begins with a broad, nebulous geographic focus, lamenting the “silence” and the “idealization of the past.” Ennaji says the historic silence “in these regions of the globe,” is due to a lack of documentation and a lack of racial conflict in the Arab world, and an “artificially sweetened view of slavery in the Muslim world.” He also emphasizes the influence of pre-Islamic beliefs and practices, and uses the same Orientalist language, claiming that the “pebbly sea of the Sahara” was an “impenetrable barrier for the Berbers, a frontier between whites and blacks.” These suppositions echo through *Black Morocco*.

**GENESIS**

*Black Morocco* is filled with grand pronouncements about the origins and identity of black Moroccans. For example, El Hamel writes, that “from the 16th century to the beginning of the 20th century,” that is, “over the course of four centuries blacks migrated voluntarily, and many of the Haratin were indigenous to the northern Sahara, but most were victims of the slave trade across the Sahara to Morocco.” It’s not clear how Haratin can be both indigenous to the Sahara, and descendants of slaves brought across the Sahara. This is an age-old debate among colonial ethnographers: with some following the Hamitic hypothesis and tracing the origins of the Haratin and other Berberophones to East African Kushites. Others like the anthropologist Gabriel Camps spoke of the “strictly autochthonous origin of the Haratin” as descendants of Ethiopians and Libyco-Berbers (Camps 1970 cited in Silverstein 2020), and others yet claimed the Haratin were descendants of emancipated slaves from across the Sahara (Nicolas 1977).

El Hamel can’t seem to decide which side of this old colonial debate to take, and which term “indigenous” or “diaspora” conveys more suffering. Either way, he offers no evidence for the claim that most Haratin are descendants of the trans-Saharan slave trade. Part of the problem again is he never bothers to define “black,” implying that the label—like the institution of slavery—is the same on both sides of the Atlantic. In this vein, El Hamel wants to argue that as in America, where European settlers-qua-Christian pilgrims brought anti-blackness and enslavement, slavery in North Africa was similarly propelled by the arrival of Islam and Arab invaders. The “Islamization of North Africa led to a huge increase in trade, especially in the trans-Saharan region,” he writes without offering a shred of evidence. After asserting that most black Moroccans are descendants of slaves from the Sahel—a “diaspora of black West Africans,” El Hamel observes that, “Blacks generally occupy a marginal position in Moroccan society: they were historically stigmatised and occupationally segregated.” He offers no data on the economic or political precarity of blacks in Morocco, saying simply that their subordination grows out of slavery, and parallels that of African-descendants in the Americas.

The black Moroccan’s dislocation, El Hamel argues, fits “the transatlantic Afro-diasporic patterns.” The ensuing paragraph where El Hamel tries to shoehorn Moroccan history into a trans-Atlantic “pattern” contains a string of odd assertions. After highlighting the precarity of black Moroccans, he says that “black consciousness in Morocco is analogous to Berber consciousness and shares the Arab notion of collective identity.” It’s not clear how collective identity is an “Arab notion,” but to the extent that there is a black consciousness in Morocco—presumably expressed through Gnawa music?—it is not similar to Berber nationalism, which centers around language and a narrative of pre-Islamic existence in North Africa. El Hamel digs himself deeper, stating that blacks in Morocco have absorbed, “some [my italics] of the Arabo-centric values expressed in the dominant interpretation of Islam in order to navigate within the Arabo-centric discourse.” It’s not clear what Arabocentric “values” he’s referring to, but the implication is that slaves brought to Morocco were not Muslim or sufficiently Muslim,
and adopted the dominant society’s values in order to survive; and as in the Americas, slaves in Morocco developed their own syncretic belief system. More academic mumbo jumbo follows: “Black Moroccans perceive themselves first and foremost as Muslim Moroccans and only perceive themselves secondarily as participants in a different tradition and/or belonging to a specific ethnic, racial, or linguistic group, real or imagined.” It’s not clear what “different tradition” or ethnic or racial group “black Moroccans” belong to, assuming there is one such an undifferentiated group. The author insists, again with little evidence, that Moroccans of slave descent have a separate collective identity.

El Hamel concludes this section with a non-sequitur: “Berbers are to some extent in the same boat as black Moroccans, but neither is in the same boat as the dominant Arabs.” This sentence, with its three-way categorization, captures arguably the book’s main problem: El Hamel divides Moroccans into three “bounded” groups—black, Berber, and Arab, as if one cannot be black and Arab, black and Berber, or all three at once. He doesn’t bother to define these categories—is Berber a linguistic identity, ethnicity, or phenotype? Identities are simply taken as a given, unchanging and presumably genetic. His claim that blacks and Berbers are both victims of the Arabs, also goes unsubstantiated (as many of said dominant Arabs are Arabized “Berbers” and “blacks”), but again this is reflective of his attempt to force Moroccan history into a New World framework whereby Arabs are European settlers, Berbers are Native Americans, and blacks are an African diaspora.

Another problem with El Hamel’s analysis—besides a searing lack of ethnographic data—is there is no discussion of Moroccan authoritarianism, of the regime’s role as the greatest purveyor of oppression and violence, and manipulator of ethnic and racial difference. There is no concept of class, as if there are no poor, disenfranchised Arabs, or powerful blacks or Berbers in the Moroccan state or society. In lieu of examining state power or labor hierarchy, El Hamel prefers essentialist explanations, advancing peculiar etymological explanations for modern social phenomena. Thus he sees a link between the etymology of the term Amazigh (which he says means “white”) and the Amazigh’s anti-black racism. He offers no source for this claim. The term Amazigh (plural: Imazighen), adopted by the Berber movement in the 1990s at the United Nations’ International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, means “free man.” The leading activists were well aware that in pockets of northern Mali and southeast Morocco, the term Amazigh meant not simply “free,” but “freeborn” (as in, not slave), and carried racist, supremacist connotations. But the argument was made that these are hyper-local uses of the term, and not the general meaning of the term Amazigh (Chaker 1986). Today multitudes of black people from Morocco to Mali to Niger describe themselves as Amazigh, and in all likelihood don’t think of themselves as white. Racial exploitation and labor hierarchy in southeast Morocco are well-documented. As Abdellah Hammoudi, Hsain Ilahiane, and Paul Silverstein have shown, indentured dark-skinned Moroccans (Haratin) have long been exploited by lighter-skinned Berber landowners and religious elites. A focus on class and political economy would provide a more compelling explanation of Amazigh racism, than pop-etymology. (Worth recalling that, in Mumbo Jumbo, Ishmael Reed also riffs on Arabic etymologies, praising a group called the Mu’tasikah (a play on the Arabic al-muthaqaf/a, that sounds more like muthafucka), an internationalist liberation movement dedicated to taking non-Western artifacts from Western museums back to their original homelands.)

El Hamel also tries to essentialize Arab identity as White. He criticizes Ali Mazrui who argued that métissage in Arabia worked differently than in the New World, that mixed children were coopted upwards provided the father was Arab, producing “Arabs” of different complexities. El Hamel excoriates the Kenyan scholar for portraying Arab slavery as inclusive, when the truth is “Arab society” could absorb Copts and Berbers, but blacks—as the example
of Morocco shows—remained the “other within.” And, in another fit of linguistic Orientalism, El Hamel argues that not only does “Arab society” have a category for mixed race individuals (muwalad), but muwalad inspired the New World concept of mulatto. This too is mumbo jumbo. The scholarly consensus is that mulatto derives from mula, meaning mule, the hybrid offspring of a horse and a donkey (Francis 2005). And there’s little evidence that the Arabic language shaped the Alabamian or Peruvian racial hierarchy. El Hamel either misunderstands or misrepresents Mazrui. As a Swahili (of Kenyan-Omani descent), Mazrui was all too aware of the term “muwallad;” his argument was that there was no institutional category for mixed-race Arabs. Mazrui was not denying racism or colorism, but suggesting that Arab identity, was based on lineage and language.

After repudiating Mazrui, El Hamel then proceeds to erroneously apply Mazrui’s argument of upward cooptation to Morocco, claiming that it is the “one drop rule” that allows for the ascending absorption of mixed Moroccan children.

The Moroccan definition of race accepts the other or blacks in the Arab family as long as they possess a drop of Arab blood seemingly ignoring their other ethnic or racial affiliations. In the name of abstract virtues, this process of assimilation camouflaged the dismissal of the natural affiliation of the “other” and manufactured Arab hegemony and political unity by insisting on the sacredness of the language of the Qur’an: Arabic. (Black Morocco, 95)

This statement is grotesquely untrue, a projection of a peculiar American institution onto North Africa, which is what American observers of Islamic African slavery have done since the 18th century. Orientalists have long seen the East as a reverse mirror of the West. El Hamel states this almost verbatim, “The Moroccan system of racial definition was clearly ‘racialist’ and was in fact a curious inversion of the Western racial model.” This reverse mirror is a tired Orientalist trope. The irony of course is that Mazrui’s oeuvre on slavery was largely intended to distinguish the Swahili racial regime from its New World counterparts—arguing explicitly that that there is no “one drop rule” in Islam, or as he put it, no “Chicken George” syndrome, alluding to the mixed character in the 1970s television series Roots. El Hamel accuses Mazrui of portraying “Oriental slavery” as benign, then misrepresents the Kenyan scholar’s insight about upward cooptation, to argue that the racial order in Morocco mimics the American one—the opposite of what Mazrui was saying.

ONE DROP ISMAIL

The peculiar American institution of the “one-drop rule” is alas at the crux of El Hamel’s argument about race and the founding of the Moroccan state. “To illustrate Mazrui’s argument I cite a typical example of Moroccan rulers: Sultan Mawlay Ismai’il (1646–1727), whose mother was a black slave (umm al-walad) but who nonetheless perceived himself a descendant of Muhammad and therefore not black,” writes El Hamel. How does the author know whether Moulay Ismail identified as black or not? What does it mean to identify as “Black” in 17th-century Morocco? How does he know Ismail identified as Arab? Why does he assume one cannot be dark-skinned and of sharifian descent? In discussing Timbuktu, El Hamel doesn’t argue that the great monarch Mansa Musa of Mali, was not black due to his owning 10,000 slaves, because for El Hamel it is Moulay Ismail’s presumed Arab identity which is the problem. Arabness is inherently supremacist and incompatible with “blackness,” however the latter is defined. This argument, to reiterate, is implausible on multiple grounds.
The claim that black people cannot claim sharifian descent is belied by the presence of tens of thousands of sharifian families across the Sahel, West Africa, the Nile Valley, and the Swahili Coast. The idea that a black person should identify by skin color, and not by lineage, tribe or language, or that a black person cannot be Arab (because Arabs are White, or White-adjacent, as implied here) reflects a very particular and essentialist American understanding of Arabness, in part shaped by the American Census Bureau’s classifying people from the Middle East and North Africa as White since the 1920s (Gualtieri 2009).

The passage on Moulay Ismail not being black despite his dark skin also reflects American understandings of race in the Islamic world, and recalls Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates’ polemical Wonders of Africa PBS series (1999), where he visits Zanzibar and says a black man who identifies as Shirazi (Persian) looks about as “Persian as Mike Tyson” (Aidi 2005). El Hamel appears to be working with a stringent black nationalist definition of Blackness, whereby being black and “Semitic” or “Hamitic” are incompatible. Perhaps this is a sop to contemporary politics, but it allows him to say that Moulay Ismail was not black, and his enslaving of the Haratin was a foundational racial moment, when Morocco became a racist state and society. “Slavery in Morocco took a racist turn under Moulay Ismail,” writes El Hamel. It was this “color-coded religious racism” that led Ismail to round up dark-skinned Haratin for enslavement “although he knew they were Islamized.” And this is when the Haratin became “black.” El Hamel proclaims: “It is indeed a story of a great injustice against a particular group of Moroccans who happened to have a different complexion, slightly darker than those of the Arabs and Berbers.” This claim that Morocco became racist only with Moulay Ismail’s policy is bizarre, but again it echoes Ennaji: the latter also saw Moulay Ismail’s enslavement of the Haratin as a pivotal political-ethical moment in Moroccan history: “This fact reveals a centrally important aspect of Moroccan society: the enslavement of its own people” (Ennaji 1995, 85).

El Hamel is aware of the vast debate surrounding the term “Haratin.” Of the multiple hypotheses and definitions about the origin of the term, he settled on “dark color” because it aligns with his overall argument. He asserts that: “Moroccan Arabic sources assert that all black people in Northwest Africa were originally slaves who had been freed under different circumstances through time. However, one group of black people—namely the Haratin—might not have been of slave origin from sub-Saharan Africa, but native to southern Morocco.” El Hamel offers no source for this claim, resorting instead to more pop-etymology, and saying that Haratin derives from “aharadan” meaning dark skin (some say, “red skin”). Per El Hamel’s account, Moulay Ismail sent criers through the streets of Moroccan cities, calling on the slaves (abid) who had served Sultan Mansur al-Saadi to rejoin the royal army, this time under Ismail’s leadership. The call drew 5,000 men who were “given clothes, horses, weapons, and a salary.” El Hamel says their number was not sufficient—“so the officials coerced more black people to join the army.” The monarch ordered his officials to enslave “all blacks, even those who were free including the haratin [sic].” The category “Haratin” he says includes free slaves and ex-slaves, who were legally entitled to their freedom. “The color of their skin and their slave origin status were the grounds for enslavement, regardless of the blacks’ long integration in Moroccan society.”

El Hamel’s claim that Ismail was motivated by a racist (or colorist) logic is interesting as it signals a shift in academic portrayals of the Moroccan monarch. A strand of Afrocentrist-qua-black nationalist thought has long depicted the North African state-builder as a black leader who deliberately recruited black Moroccans into his army because he had a particular affinity for the Haratin, due to his putative roots in southeast Morocco. (El Hamel quotes a Spanish official, captive in Morocco from 1708 to 1728, who reports that Ismail had survived an assassination attempt by “white Moroccans,” and thereafter swore he would trust only blacks.) In a similar spirit, the Guinean historian Baba Ibrahim Kaké argued over 50 years ago
that blacks pledged loyalty to Ismail because his mother was a black slave. El Hamel disagrees with this argument, saying that the black soldiers may have been motivated by “racial solidarity” but Ismail certainly was not: “The color and origin of the slave army was just a coincidence as a significant marker.” Leaving aside again how El Hamel knows what Ismail’s motivation or attachments were, the shift in portrayal of Moulay Ismail from being a pan-African hero to an anti-black villain is more the result of American culture wars, a reflection of the shift from 1960s pan-Africanism to current Afro-pessimism, than to new evidence emerging from the Moroccan national archive. Worth noting that this view of the founder of the Alaouite dynasty as a black monarch is still held by a segment of the Moroccan intelligentsia. As M’barek Bouchichi, Morocco’s most preeminent black artist, told an interviewer last year, “Sultan Moulay Ismail for instance was a black king. Yousef Ibn Tachfin was black. Morocco is black…” (Soulimani 2020).

ARCHIVES

One of the strengths of Black Morocco is that unlike most American writing on North African slavery which relies on secondary sources, El Hamel actually consults two official registers Daftar Mamalik as-Sultan Mawlay Isma’il (The Registers of the Slaves of Sultan Mawlay Isma’il) held at the Bibliothèque Générale in Rabat, Morocco. He focuses on one register ‘Abid al-Manatiq ash-Shamaliya (The Slaves of the Northern Region) as a case study representing a census of a partial number of slaves, purportedly of black origin from the early 18th century. The irony is that for all of El Hamel’s insistence that Moulay Ismail was driven by anti-black racism (the chapter is titled “Racializing Slavery,” implying that prior to Ismail, slavery in Morocco wasn’t racial) few of the enslaved individuals whose profiles he highlights are described as “black”—but range from “light” to “brown.” One list of slaves held in Ksar el Kbir includes these individuals:

Muhammad b. al-wasif Musa b. al-wasif ’Isa b. al-wasif ’Ali al-Hajjam (the barber). His description: Light brown or copper-colored (safari)…

His wife is al-wasifa Maryam bint al-wasif ’Isa al-Hajjam. Her description: Light brown…

Al-‘abd ‘Ali. His description: Light brown…

Who is married in slavery to al-ama Fatima bint al-wasif Ahmad al-Jamal. Her description: Light brown and thin-limbed.

Al-Wasif Qasim b. al-wasif Umar b. al-mamluk Musa b. al-‘abd ’Isa Harraq al-Hafidh. His description: Brown (ahmar al-lawn, literally red-skinned)…

Al-Wasif Yusuf b. al-wasif Musa b. al-qinn ‘Umar b. al-mamluk al-Hasan al-Harraq al-Hafidh. His description: Dark brown (kabdi, literally the color of liver)…

What does it mean for El Hamel’s argument that only one person on this list of slaves is labelled “dark-skinned”? How does this archival document support the author’s claim that Moulay Ismail associated “blackness with slavery?” What was the local term for “black” in 18th century Morocco? Perhaps he mentions these lighter-skinned slaves to underscore again that Moulay Ismail was driven by an American-style one-drop rule—where any hint of color made one fully Black and enslaveable? He doesn’t explain, but says rather cryptically: “Blackness in this discourse became an ambivalent category excluded from the community of Muslims and therefore denied freedom.”
This isn’t the only time where El Hamel draws an unlikely race-label conclusion from a primary source. Others have drawn attention to El Hamel’s problematic translation of historian al-Bakri’s (died in 1094) account of the Saharan town of Awdaghust. Al Bakri reporting on the wealth of this trading center, refers to the North African and West African merchants: “They owned great riches and slaves so numerous that one person from among them might possess a thousand servants or more?” Al Bakri mentions “Sudan women” who were good cooks and beautiful “unusually sexual” white women. El Hamel inserts the word “black” in square brackets rendering the phrase “Sudan [black] women.” As the Canadian historian Ann McDougall has observed, El Hamel is trying to make the case for “racially designated roles,” but the original text doesn’t quite convey that (McDougall 2018). El Hamel’s “interpretation is ambiguous at best. Yet by building on it so confidently and coupling it with his interpretation of al-Bakri’s ‘occupational roles,’ El Hamel ensures that our earliest understanding of Saharan slavery will be racially defined.”

Another example of El Hamel fudging quotes and translations is in dealing with Mansour al-Dahabbi’s soi-disant conquest of Timbuktu. The official Moroccan account of the kingdom’s expansion into West Africa recounts that al-Dahabbi led an expedition through the Sahara, conquering Timbuktu and bringing back an army of thousands of people from the conquered Songhai Empire. The two main critics of this official narrative are historians Lansiné Kaba and Allan Meyers. In 1977, Kaba published a study questioning the scale and import of this “capture,” arguing that al-Dahabbi’s campaign triggered the downfall of the Saadian dynasty. Meyers, in a series of articles, argued that Moulay Ismail, faced with European and Ottoman competition, began to recruit the Abid Al-Bukhari, “a large mercenary army with undivided loyalty to himself and the state.” Asking “whether the soldiers [in Moulay Ismail’s army] were native Moroccans or whether they came or were brought to Morocco from Western Sudan,” Meyers concludes that the Moulay Ismail’s army drew on local Haratin, rather than Songhai migrants. Abid al Bukhari was made up of an estimated 150,000 troops, and its racial composition was distinctive in that it was composed “entirely of black slaves and a people of ambiguous social and racial status called Haratin.”

Meyers was probably the first to underscore the difference between the Moroccan account and the European account of the creation of Moulay Ismail’s army. European texts claimed that the soldiers came from West Africa, and that a race consciousness led the ‘abid to develop a collective consciousness, an esprit de corps. For over three centuries, foreign (non-Moroccan) sources held that the ‘Abid were Sudanese captives or refugees, most likely Bambara from Timbuktu (Morsey 1967; Kaba 1969). In the late 1700s, European observers mentioned that some members of the army were “Bambareens” from “Coasts of Guinea.” More detailed accounts began appearing in the late 18th and early 19th century. Louis de Chernier claimed that the ‘Abid were Bambara soldiers from the vicinity of Timbuktu who returned with Moulay al-Rashid (Ismail’s half-brother and predecessor, and the first Alaoui sultan) to Morocco after his campaign to conquer Timbuktu, was stopped by the local king’s forces (Meyers 1977, 10). Meyers disputes these accounts saying there is no evidence that Bambara soldiers followed Moulay Rashid back to Morocco—or of another figure u-Ali leading a Sudanese force a year later into Morocco. Likewise, Meyers argued that George Mouette’s influential text L’histoire des conquêtes de Moulay Rachid et Moulay Ismaël (1683) description of Sudanese campaign is false, noting that no Moroccan or Sudanese sources, or Bambara oral traditions, speak of a major Moroccan expedition to Timbuktu in 1670, nor do they mention a large migration of soldiers.
or slaves to Morocco. The majority of Abid al-Bukhari were probably Haratin, aboriginal inhabitants of North Africa and Western Sahara, described as Numidians in Greek and Latin texts, and whose history is little known. Meyers insists there is little evidence supporting the European claim that the ‘abid were foreign born.

Moroccan sources give a different account: Moulay Ismail was in Marrakech in 1670, he spotted a register of the slaves who had served in al-Mansour’s army, and wondered if these slaves were still alive. Some of the first black soldiers recruited, says Meyers, may have been of Sudanese origin—though “nothing in the text proves this was so” (Meyers 1977). Ismail recruited a core group of about 14,000 soldiers which he provided with arms, equipment, and wives. Ismail’s agents purportedly assembled everyone until there were no more black people in Morocco (who were not in the army), neither slave nor free. Ismail then ordered a second body of recruits near Meknes. In 1678, the last significant contingent joined the slave army—2000 Haratin, who came back with Ismail’s troops sent to pacify Sahara. Meyers notes that Moroccan sources don’t indicate whether these Haratin soldiers were captured or joined voluntarily, or were given as a tribute by the Saharan peoples. Small groups of black slaves and Haratin continued to join. Meyers notes that while their origins are obscure, “evidence suggests that most of the original recruits were Moroccan slaves and Haratin, rather than Sudanese.” If the slave army grew after 1680, Moroccan sources mention no further large-scale recruitment. Meyers finds aspects of the Moroccan version contrived, but he agrees more with the Moroccan narrative than the European one: “We have virtually no proof that a significant proportion of the Abd al Bukhari came from the Sudan.” And the fact that the ‘Abid were Moroccan “in origin and not foreign makes it unusual, if not unique, among slave armies in Islamic history” (Meyers 1977).

I have outlined Meyers’ interpretation in some detail because while El Hamel, subscribes to the European account of the Abid al Bukhari, he repurposes Meyers’ argument to support his case. Meyers writes:

> Whatever their origin, the ‘Abids [slave soldiers] status in Morocco—with reference to both to the makhzen and to urban and tribal groups—was substantially the same: they were landless, vulnerable, and despised, and therefore they had neither sentimental nor material commitments to groups with interests independent of the Makhzen’s. (1974, 114)

El Hamel renders this quote differently, making Meyers’s description not about slave soldiers, but blacks (however defined) in Morocco. El Hamel writes:

> [Allen Meyers] points out that most of the blacks in Morocco ‘were landless, vulnerable and despised … independent of the Mahzan’s [central authority]’. (159)

El Hamel inserts the qualifier “blacks” broadening Meyer’s claim about the ‘Abid slave soldiers, to include all dark-skinned peoples of Morocco together, perhaps so he can argue that resentment against the regime’s slave soldiers was a product of a timeless racism, rather than due to their role as the state’s enforcers, which is what Meyers says: “Abid al Bukhari were despised because of their status, and hated and feared because of the functions they discharged” (Meyers 1977, 440). Popular resentment against the Abid al Bukhari was widespread, with acts of violence against the regime’s black tax collectors. The regime benefited from the animosity between the slave soldiers and the rest of the population. El Hamel reduces the animosity to racism: “Arabs and Berbers in Morocco perceived the ‘Abid al-Bukhari’s high upward mobility as a transgression against the social order and at times reminded them of their origins, slavery, and blackness” (299). El Hamel also reports that the black slave-soldiers “received regular
payments. Indeed black soldiers saw their status as free and generally behaved accordingly.” (This may have been a good place to expound on the differences between Ismail’s slave army and the institution of slavery in the New World.)

“THIS FASCINATING PEOPLE”

El Hamel laments the lack of written slave narratives in Morocco—and the “Islamic world” more broadly—saying rather dubiously that this is due to the lack of a local abolitionist movement. Given the absence of such manuscripts, El Hamel maintains that Gnawa music is the only vestige we have today of the Moroccan slave’s voice, the musical equivalent of a slave narrative. Given the “culture of silence,” he opines, “the most revealing testimony of slavery and its legacy in Morocco is the very existence of the Gnawa: a spiritual order of traditionally black Muslim people who are descendants of enslaved sub-Saharan West Africans.” El Hamel of course doesn’t define the term “Gnawa,” speaking interchangeably of “the Gnawa,” “blacks,” and “haratin,” and describing Gnawa rather awkwardly as “traditionally black and Muslim,” when the group historically drew censure for its heterodox practices.

Invoking the cultural diffusion thesis, El Hamel argues that the Gnawa are a “distinct social group” that have “retained many of the rituals and beliefs of their ancestors, expressed through [their] unique musical traditions.” He claims “this fascinating people” have a connection to their Manding heritage, stressing that “Gnawa” and “Griot” (apparently) have a common etymological root. (Here the author is evoking the dictionary definition of mumbo jumbo as being about healing in Mandingo belief to make another dubious etymological claim.) El Hamel not surprisingly views Gnawa music through a trans-Atlantic prism, as “analogous” to the blues and Negro spirituals sung by black Americans. To that end, he describes practitioners of Gnawa music as a “diaspora,” an ethnic group, “a racialized minority” even though, by his own account, members of the Gnawa order don’t define themselves as such. He refers to this Sufi order today as a “distinct ethnic group,” with “ethnic solidarity” at a time when few of the leading practitioners are black, and when the ritual is changing rapidly and becoming commercialized. El Hamel defines “diaspora” as a shared identity that transcends geographic boundaries, and articulates a desire for return to their original homeland. Another addled sentence follows: “The Gnawa do not appear to have any desire to return to their ancestral homeland; their diaspora is positively constructed around the right to belong to the culture of Islam, and it is Islam and not their consciousness of their ancestral roots and forced migration that has allowed the Gnawa to integrate into their new homeland.”

After noting their integration, El Hamel underlines “the Gnawa’s” alienation and dislocation again. Quoting the late theologian James Cone, he says Gnawa is very similar to black spirituals which enabled slaves in America to “retain a measure of their African identity,” in an alien land. El Hamel’s account of Gnawa music echoes the story of Negro spirituals and the blues in the Antebellum South, replete with maroon communities and “lodges.” During the reign of Moulay Ismail, he says, there was a “great dispersion of the blacks across Morocco,” as they “scattered” across the kingdom, “they founded communal centers where their culture is celebrated.” El Hamel offers no description or evidence for said communal centers. (The first official Gnawa cultural center established in Morocco is Dar Gnawa of Tangier founded in 1980.) The Gnawa, like other African diasporas try to “reconcile themselves with a fragmented past”—and once “connected with their origins, they have a sense of location.” He claims that the Gnawa are excluded but gained acceptance ostensibly through their music: “Over many generations … the Gnawa created acceptance within the Moroccan social landscape while at the same time maintaining their ethnic and group solidarity.” Thus after building the case that black Moroccans are
excluded and segregated, El Hamel says they are integrated and have found “legitimacy” and “acceptance.” He also asserts without evidence or explanation says that Gnawa ceremonies happen on a regular basis because, “Slavery itself was the initial wound and because it was never officially recognised or healed it was therefore destined to repeat itself.” It is unclear where the author gets this functionalist claptrap—but it raises the question: if the Moroccan authorities were to recognize slavery, would that end the need for lila healing ceremony?

There is no doubt that Gnawa music has preserved the memory of slavery in Morocco, with lyrics speaking of suffering and privation, but El Hamel does not show how Gnawa is an ethnicity or even a distinct social group (as opposed to a Sufi organization, or musical culture, or lineage). He stresses the Gnawa’s exclusion and segregation, but then accents their assimilation and “long integration” into Moroccan society. Haratin have been described as an “ethnic” group, but how are Gnawa an ethnicity? If excluded because of skin color, then why not call them a race? The conceptual fuzziness is in part because El Hamel never defines the concepts of race or ethnicity. The history of Gnawa music that he outlines is more a description of what happened in the United States post-Reconstruction, a process of historical recovery and identity formation that allowed descendants of slaves to mobilize for rights as Black Americans in a partial democracy. No such mobilization by descendants of slaves has occurred in Morocco.

El Hamel also never addresses which Gnawa rituals or musical practices may have come from the Sahel. This is a complex, specialized debate—and El Hamel needs to engage more with the work of ethnomusicologists like Philip Schuyler, Tim Fuson, and Chris Witulski, who have considered which elements of the Gnawa repertoire, musical (pentatonicism) or linguistic, may have come from the Sahel (Witulski 2018, 154). (In Gnawa Lions, ethnomusicologist Chris Witulski writes (in response to El Hamel), that Gnawa practice is more about piety and earning a living, than nostalgia for a homeland). Yet El Hamel places himself solidly within the “cultural diffusion” camp, claiming that Gnawa music not only came from West Africa, but echoing anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano’s famous argument, that Gnawa went on to influence other Berber and Arab “mystic [sic] orders” in Morocco as well, bringing Sahelian practices like trance, “contacts with spirits” and named jnun to brotherhoods like the Issawa and Hamadcha. To make this argument, El Hamel cites the Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck’s voluminous ethnography Ritual and Belief in Morocco (1926) as saying that “this influence [on other mystic orders] is very conspicuous [from] the rites of the Gnawa, and will probably prove to have had a considerably larger scope than is known at present" (Square brackets in El Hamel). Except that Westermarck doesn’t quite say this. In parsing myriad influences in Morocco, Westermarck notes Arab, Christian, and “ancient Mediterranean cultural” elements, but also highlights “Negro” cultural influence—saying Gnawa were influenced by currents from southern Morocco. This is the original quote:

There has also been a Negro influence, which among the Berbers of the South no doubt commenced at a very early period when the southern border of their territory was more northerly than it is now, and which has been maintained in later times through the influence of Negro slaves. This influence is very conspicuous in the rites of the Gnawa, and will probably prove to have had a considerably larger scope than is known at present. (Westermarck 1926, 12–13)

By adding “from” and “on other mystic orders” in square brackets to the final sentence, El Hamel changes the meaning of Westermarck’s original statement—which pointed to cultural flows from southern Morocco to Gnawa culture—to having Westermarck say influence flowed from Gnawa culture to other “mystic orders.”
Westermarck says there is “no doubt that various practices connected with the belief in jnun have Sudanese origin,” but nowhere does he speak of Gnawa influence on other “mystic orders.” Instead he underscores that jnun belief existed already in Morocco, such “that the black slaves who came to Morocco found the Moorish belief in jnun particularly congenial to their own native superstitions.” He speculates that the custom of dyafa (the sacrifice) probably came from the Sudan since it has no parallel among Eastern Arabs, but “on the other hand, a custom very similar to the Moorish dyafa-saafie is reported from Timbuctoo.” Westermarck also never says that trance or named jnun came from West Africa—noting repeatedly that spirits with names exist in the Maghreb and the Arab East; and noting that the Arabian equivalent of Aisha Quandisha is a desert jinn named Sa-lewwah Gule. Overall, Westermarck was much more circumspect than subsequent scholars of Gnawa: “Owing to our very deficient knowledge of the ancient Berbers, however, it is frequently impossible to say what is Arab by origin and what is Berber, and it may be futile to make a conjecture on this point” (1926, 12).

The claim that Gnawa order influenced other Sufi groups appears to have a European origin inspired by the colonial claim that the Abid al Bukhari came from the Sahel. As Meyers noted decades ago, the question of whether the Abid came from West Africa or southern Morocco has implications for “the matter of black Sudanese so-called survivals in popular Moroccan Islam” (1977, 457), because “it is widely contended that many of the animist aspects of Moroccan religion are the result of cultural diffusion from the Sudan, that these heterodox features were introduced into Morocco by Sudanese migrants, slaves presumably, from whom they diffused to the larger population.” He emphasizes how vague the “diffusionist” scholars (from colonial ethnographers to Vincent Crapanzano) were about how “a Sudanese complex of traits” was established in Moroccan religious practice, “with good reason; the evidence for Sudanese origins was virtually nil. In Algiers, Tripoli and Tunis—on the other hand—not only has religious behaviour been shown to have originated in the Sudan, it has also been shown to have been associated with slaves and freed migrants from particular parts of the Sudan …There is no such evidence from Morocco” (Meyers 1977, 437).

El Hamel nonetheless favorably quotes René Brunel the French colonial Commissioner of Oujda, who wrote on Moroccan Sufi tariqas, and claimed that the Issawa master healers had adopted Gnawa rituals, especially the use of blood (Brunel 1926). Brunel also held that in the 1900s the ‘Abid Al-Bukhari tended to affiliate en masse with the same order. Meyers reminds us that the Abid al-Bukhari was reconstituted by the French after the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1912, but just because black troops congregated at a particular zawiya in the 1900s, “great care must be taken before projecting these data into the past. There is no evidence that the ‘Abid had been affiliated with any particular religious order before that time” (Meyers 1977; Arnaud 1941). Also, no evidence exists to show that the Abid introduced these brotherhoods and rites into Morocco, “nor for that matter, has large-scale Sudanese immigration to Morocco in historical times proven to have occurred” (Meyers 1977, 438). French colonialism’s keen interest in Gnawa practice needs to be explored further. El Hamel doesn’t discuss the colonial state or the Moroccan regime’s support for Gnawa after independence, but notes, rather capriciously, that their “very existence” is a marvel.

**COLONIAL EFFECTS**

In Morocco, criticism of El Hamel’s book has not surprisingly centered on two points: his grafting of an American-style “one drop rule” onto the Moroccan context, and his rather celebratory treatment of the colonial era (al-Harrak 2018). In Black Morocco, French colonialism is the agent of capitalist modernization and abolitionism. Slavery was first abolished in France
in February 1794, and soon thereafter in France’s colonies—but Napoleon reinstated slavery in 1802, and it was not abolished until April 1848, in all its colonies including Algeria. El Hamel says European abolitionism grew out of the European enlightenment, “which brought with it many humanitarian reforms, and in part because of the growth of industrial capitalism which brought with it new labor relationships based on wages rather than servitude.” At a time when scholars are writing about how the Enlightenment exported Kantian notions of race and racial hierarchy around the world—it is disorienting to see an author defend European colonialism for its Enlightenment-inspired capitalism. As historian Fatima L’Madani has written, El Hamel lays blame for racial slavery at the feet of Moulay Ismail and the marginalization of minorities in contemporary Morocco at the feet of the Istiqlal—yet he neglects how colonial rule shaped Moroccan views of “Africans.” El Hamel portrays colonial rule as having softened racism in Morocco, limiting slavery to the household, and, as L’Madani observes, conflates the treatment of black Moroccans with sub-Saharan—as he never defines what “black” means in Morocco (L’Madani 2021).

This rather rosy-eyed view of the French Enlightenment and early capitalism misses the ethno-racial policies introduced by French colonialism. For a book that repeatedly quotes French colonial administration favorably, it is a serious lacuna that he does not address how French colonial rule defined Arab, Berber, and Black, creating different genealogies and legal systems for each ethnicity, and a distinction between “Islam Noir” and “Islam Maure” that underpinned French colonial thought into the 20th century. In a book concerned with the origin of the Haratin and black Moroccans, the author neglects a significant ethnographic and legal literature on how colonialists constructed black Moroccans first as “indigenous” and then as a “diaspora” that originated in West Africa (Gernier 1924). As Silverstein has shown, colonial military and scientific logic divided the “autochthonous” Berbers and “allochthonous” Haratin along racialized lines as “White” and “Black” groups—or “castes”—and this divide continues to shape intercommunal relations in southeast Morocco today. Another glaring absence in a book that attaches great importance to the founding of the Black Guard is a discussion of how the Abid Al Bukhari was rebuilt in 1912 by the French. La garde noir, as a ceremonial unit, would become central to the imagery of colonial Morocco (one such colonial painting graces the cover of Black Morocco). Why did the French rebuild this Black Guard army, and did they push the black troops towards particular Sufi orders? Why did French colonials, in the name of abolitionism, attribute a foreign origin to black Moroccans?

SLAVERY AND “THE ARAB MIND”:

Much of the criticism of Black Morocco has come from outside the United States, indicating just how politicized this field of study (race and slavery in the Middle East and North Africa) is in America. Few scholars want to publicly criticize a minority scholar who claims to be breaking the silence on “Islamic slavery,” but it is doubtful that Cambridge University Press would publish such a careless text were it about the history of race in America. Black Morocco has unfortunately prompted like-minded writing about slavery and race in North Africa that begins by bemoaning “the silence” and then proceeds to write “race” into 17th-century Morocco, treating Moulay Ismail’s building of a slave army as a foundational racial moment (Becker 2020). El Hamel’s book starkly illustrates how current politics permeates the scholarship on trans-Saharan and trans-Indian Ocean slavery. The book combines the race reductionism associated with Afro-pessimist thought with the War on Terror’s “culture talk” and an antipathy to “Arabian Islam.” The author, a Moroccan-born French-educated historian now at Arizona State University seems to be pandering to a French laicité camp, as well as to an American identity
politics, that sees racism as a transhistorical cultural phenomenon, trumping economic and political factors.¹⁷

As mentioned, El Hamel is deeply influenced by Ennaji’s book Serving the Master, which also sees the history of Moroccan slavery as rooted in the rise of Islam and 7th-century Arabia. More recently, Ennaji has argued that slavery is at the heart of Islamic governance, and critical to understanding contemporary Arab despotism (Ennaji 2007, 2019). Ennaji’s interest in breaking the supposed silence on slavery is thus part of a larger project of secularism. A number of secular Francophone Maghrebi writers seem to have honed in on slavery as a catch-all concept to expose the suffocating effect of religion in the Maghreb (and call for ending the “silence” surrounding the centuries-old mentality of servitude) (Chebel 2010; Daoud 2016, 2020; Jelloun 2021).¹⁸ El Hamel also adopts what he now calls “an epistemology of silence,” using a presumed public silence as premise, puzzle and framing device for an analysis of slavery. This strategy does quite a bit of work: it allows him to extend the culturalist argument that religion is not only at the root of the racism but also responsible for the silence around it. By declaring the archive silent, it also gives him permission to speculate wildly about Moulay Ismail’s identity, Gnawa rituals and so on. Finally, for all the talk of centering the “subaltern,” the claim of a silent past and present allows the author to silence local Moroccan scholars and activists (who are serving African migrants, organizing legal clinics to help victims of racism, etc), and to “center” himself, as the great protagonist slaughtering a sacred cow. (This is what activists call “Columbus-ing,” the art of “discovering” what is not new.) One of the more unsavory arguments presented in Black Morocco is that Arab and Muslim scholars, “blinded” by “prejudice” have avoided writing about Gnawa and spirit possession because it’s seen as “an inferior form of Sufism—a cult influenced by pagan black traditions and embraced mostly by lower-class people.” This is a canard. Gnawa music is probably the most written about music in contemporary Morocco, because of its globalization and rise in the Moroccan cultural hierarchy in recent decades. El Hamel namechecks a couple of studies, which he dismisses as making a “benign” slavery argument, but does not engage with the writings of sociologist Abdelhai Diouri who has been researching and defending Gnawa practices for 40 years, or younger scholars like Meriem Alaoui Btarny (Btarny 2012), and musician-journalist Reda Zine, who is doing fascinating work on Gnawa and Afro-futurism (Zine 2009).

El Hamel maintains that the reason people don’t discuss “slavery, racial attitudes and gender issues” in Moroccan society, and why schools don’t teach the subject is because “slavery is against Islamic law” (El Moussouab 2020). He offers no support for this tautological argument (Islam spreads racism, Islam forbids discussing racism). The book, as mentioned, contains multiple arguments and their exact opposite. There are other “taboo” stigmatized topics in Morocco, so-called muharamat—atheism, homosexuality, the regime’s economic predations—and yet these topics are addressed in magazines and social media, and journalists are often imprisoned for doing so. Where is the evidence that activists who speak of racism or slavery are being silenced? Books on slavery and Gnawa (including the French translation of Black Morocco) are sold openly in Moroccan bookstores. If anything, since Morocco’s return to the African Union in 2016, El Hamel’s narrative has been embraced by the regime, since it highlights the ruling Alaoui dynasty’s centuries-old ties to West Africa, and also because he doesn’t address who does the silencing in Morocco, or the regime’s role in deporting African migrants, and reproducing ethno-racial inequality in the country—preferring instead to speak of ancient mentalities.
ENDNOTES

1Hassan II made these comments during a speech on Crown Day March 3, 1986. See Hibou and Tozy (2020, 631 footnote 752).

2An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Trans-African Slaveries workshop held at the Makerere Institute for Social Research in Kampala, Uganda on July 25–26, 2015. I am grateful for comments from Mamadou Diouf, Ann McDougall, and Brinkley Messick.


4See David M. Goldenberg, The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Princeton University Press 2003) Goldenberg argues that the Genesis story—where Noah curses his grandson Canaan (Ham’s son), made no reference to skin color of Africans, but came to serve as a justification of black Africans. The author contends that as Biblical exegetical traditions circulated through the Near East, mistaken interpretations of the original Hebrew scripture arose, this imputing the meaning “black” or “dark” to the term Ham.

5Hunwick asks “what became of the millions of Africans who were taken as slaves into the Mediterranean domains of Islam over the centuries?” cited in Joseph E. Harris, Global dimensions of the African diaspora (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993, 309).


8For background on this debate, see Silverstein (2020); Brémond (1950).


10Ann McDougall says the original text draws a distinction between the female slaves and khadem, showing both black- and white-complexioned women were appreciated and potentially selected for sexual services: “these women were almost certainly of mixed origin.” In the context of Awdaghust, this implies relations between men of North African/Saharan origin and Sudanic women.
The first Abid came from Marrakech, Hawz and the Dir, “but their origins were ultimately unknown” (Meyers 1977, 180). There is circumstantial evidence of black African participation in the Abid a-Bukhari but many years after Moulay Ismail’s death.

Here El Hamel is tapping the dictionary definition of mumbo jumbo as “the belief of some Mandingo peoples in the western Sudan that a high priest called the ‘Mumbo Jumbo’ had the power to protect his village from evil spirits” (The Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins by William and Mary Morris (HarperCollins, New York, 1977, 1988).


Crapanzano (1973, 87) also cites Brunel, but as Meyers put it “Crapanzano draws a similar conclusion although with less force.”


Moroccan scholars still disagree on whether the Haratin should be categorised as a caste or ethnicity or race. Hammoudi (1974) used “caste” in his study of this community, while Hsain Ilahiane (2004) speaks of ethnicity instead of “race.”

Adherents of the Afropessimist critique, and other race-reductive thinkers, posit a commitment to a transhistorical white supremacy as the cornerstone and motive force of the history, and prehistory, of the United States, as well as imperialist and colonialist subjugation in other areas of the world” (Reed 2020).

Daoud writes: “Le racisme qui, au nord, a tué George Floyd, laisse, au sud, mourir le Noir s’il n’est pas musulman.”

REFERENCES


