



M'hamed Oualdi.- *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 248p.

M'hamed Oualdi's *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* critically probes into the transimperial life and the after-life of Husayn Ibn Abdallah, more usually known as General Husayn, (pictured on the book cover). Husayn was a slave born in Circassia, in the northern Caucasus, in the late 1820s; he was sold as a slave, *mamlūk*, to agents of the Bey of Tunis, raised and trained there, ultimately rising to hold some of the most senior positions in the government. By following this case study, Oualdi manages to tackle the thesis that the history of North Africa as a “contact zone,” to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's words, is more than a fragment of a French/European history. Rather, it is the outcome of broad trans-imperial histories and debates that deeply involved North Africans, Middle Eastern Ottoman subjects, Italians, and other African-Mediterranean societies. As a statesman and a manumitted slave, characters like Husayn contributed to the push for the demise of slavery. In the same vein, while the French colonial system resulted in major land appropriation for the sole benefit of European settlers in Algeria, this colonial dispossession in Tunisia occurred against the backdrop of Ottomans' reforms that had been implemented since the 1850s, reconfigurations of public land and private property as in other empires at that time. Drawing on a wide range of Arabic, French, Italian, and English sources, the book as a groundbreaking transimperial microhistory deployed a trans-imperial life to open up new historical perspectives and reconnect a regional history to the history of surrounding societies.

Debunking the grand narratives of Europe, the book therefore underscores an entangled history of the Maghreb written not only by European colonial powers but also by provincial Ottoman people. Oualdi follows the track of the two famous Maghrebi historians: Abdallah Laroui and Mohammed Chérif Sahli, who, in the 1960s, the eve of postcolonialism, aimed to “de-colonize history” via grand syntheses and historical pamphlets. These Maghrebi historians abjured what they considered to be colonialist standpoints toward North African history. They felt an urgent need to acknowledge the extensive physical and mental violence the colonizer wreaked upon the colonized subjects for decades, especially in Algeria. Their goal was to deconstruct and destabilize colonialist discourse that boasted about the superiority of European culture over others. Over the course of the 2000s, in the wake of “subaltern studies,” scholars again asked questions about the conditions in which colonized populations produced written sources and raised their voices.

Like any other human being, General Husayn carried his various historical experiences with him throughout his life. The author initiates his book by recovering those experiences at each major step in Husayn's life: his birth on the outskirts of the Ottoman Empire, in Circassia, a region located in the northern Caucasus along the Black Sea, between Russia and Georgia, his arrival in Tunis as a slave and Ottoman

dignitary in the 1820s and his exile in Tuscany from the mid-1870s to 1887. General Husayn's life is divided into two main stages: the major episodes of the first stage of his life – from his childhood in the 1820s to his becoming an important statesman in Ottoman Tunisia in the 1850s – are wedded with the implementation of what historians have called the Ottoman reforms (*işlāḥ*, *tanzīmāt*). The second stage of Husayn's life began in the mid-1870s when he left Tunis to represent his government's interests on missions in Europe, first in Paris in the 1850s and then in Italy in the 1870s. As the years passed, Husayn spent more and more time in Tuscany, finally going into exile there after the French colonized Tunis in 1881. During this period Husayn became an important go-between empires.

Exploring Husayn's relationship with Ottoman and European material cultures from the mid-nineteenth century to 1887, Oualdi broaches in greater detail another dimension of Husayn's journey and experiences by examining Husayn's assets, comprising real estate, movable goods, and credit. Historians have correctly perceived Maghreb subjects as having been dispossessed and reduced to material poverty in the colonial context.

The author sets Husayn's life and legacy even more broadly against the backdrop of the second half of the nineteenth century, when conflicts over Tunisian dignitaries' estates resulted in major litigation involving both European and Ottoman states. Oualdi traces Husayn's political actions through his involvement in significant precolonial and colonial-era court battles over the assets of two former dignitaries from Ottoman Tunis: Mahmud Ibn Ayyad and Nessim Scemama, the two figures at the center of the major legal disputes relating to the misappropriation of Tunisian public funds from the mid-nineteenth century onward, who were, successively, in charge of the Tunisian treasury during the Ottoman reform period, from the 1830s to the 1860s. Indeed, the disputes over the estates of Tunisian dignitaries contributed to the great increase of written evidence from both sides of the Mediterranean in the era of print, contradicting the idea of a dearth of North African sources often encountered in studies about colonial North Africa. In this vein, Oualdi argues that we cannot fully understand the beginning of French colonization in Tunisia and Husayn's agency during the colonial period if we do not consider these two major cases, demonstrating that these conflicts strengthened the legal and financial relationships between France, Italy, and Tunisia more than three decades before the French conquest of Tunisia in 1881.

Oualdi investigates the disputes surrounding Husayn's estate and their outcomes after Husayn passed away, in order to disclose how colonized North African Muslim and Jewish individuals kept or reshaped their agency beyond the colonial scene and across the Mediterranean. He continues on to reveal a new line of inquiry into a history of North Africa that would take into account the many places used by various Muslim, Jewish, and Christian populations across the Mediterranean to assert their legal and political rights. The author also sheds light on the many diplomatic conflicts over Husayn's legacy, involving four main players: France, Tunisia, the Ottoman Empire, and, to a certain extent, Husayn's host country, Italy.

Not only does the author disclose these diplomatic conflicts, but he also scrutinizes more personal levels of litigation. He brings into sharper focus four groups of individuals who claimed portions of Husayn's estate: the former bey, or governor, of the province of Tunis, who argued for his family's rights of ownership over the emancipated slave Husayn; Angiolina Bertucci and Eva Keusch, the Italian and Franco-German mothers of two girls that Husayn raised in the Tuscan city of Livorno; a well-known Tunisian scholar (Shaykh Bu Hajib) and his sons, who were close to the deceased; and an Algerian Jew, Léon Elmilik, who served Husayn for a decade.

Accentuating the thesis that we need to contextualize the history of these colonized societies of North Africa with regard to their Ottoman legacy, *A Slave Between Empires* does not arise solely from a desire to balance our understanding by adopting a more exhaustive approach toward the modern history of North Africa. The need to bring the Maghrebi people back to the center of North African history is a political necessity. Concentrating exclusively on the colonial period as the prime moment of access to modernity and of full interaction with European societies can only reinforce the now widespread preconception that has taken root in Maghrebi societies: that the Frenchified and Europeanized components within North African societies – which use European languages and adopt customs perceived as being European – emanate directly from colonization and are thus external to some supposed preexisting Islamic substrate.

A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa has deployed Husayn's life and the history of his estate after his death as a means to go beyond understanding the modern history of the Maghreb solely through the prism of European colonization. Husayn's case offers different historical alternatives; Husayn's story brings to light the local and imperial dimensions that complement the colonial version of this history. By highlighting how the Ottoman Empire, the wider Muslim world, and individual households remained significant foci for the hopes and actions of Tunisians and other North Africans at the height of the colonial period, this study opens up new lines of inquiry and, hopefully, new historical interpretations, dismantling, hence, the white mythology of grand narratives.

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