

The Tools of the Master

Slavery and Empire in Nineteenth Century Egypt

Eve Troutt Powell

The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how—and under what conditions—the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

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Professor Troutt Powell was a Member during the year 1999-2000 (the editor regrets the delay in the publication of her paper). In that year, Members addressed the theme of the "universalism of human rights." Member projects took on questions such as: "What is the history of the idea that human rights are universal rights? What has been the political impact of recent human rights campaigns? What sorts of cultural (legal, religious, international) conflicts have emerged in the name of, or in opposition to, calls for the enforcement of human rights? Members were urged to examine these questions in concretely located examples or problems. Over the course of the year, in the comparative process of discussing their local cases with one another, the question came to be how a "universal" right can be determined or understood when weighed within specific historical or cultural situations—and why the staking of such transcendental claims may be necessary. This paper, and the longer work from which it is drawn, at first seems to examine the question as the history of a past era; by the end, one has a better sense of how the examination of "history" only better exposes the fundamentals of contemporary challenges.

The Tools of the Master: Slavery and Empire in Nineteenth Century Egypt

... the master's tools will never
dismantle the master's house.
—Audre Lorde¹

In August 1894, a Bedouin slave dealer named Muhammad Shaghlub led a small caravan to a stop in the village of Kerdessa, within sight of the Great Pyramids of Giza. The caravan consisted of six Sudanese women, purchased hundreds of miles to the south, who had made the slow walk barefoot with Shaghlub and three other traders along the Forty Days' Road, the old and well-traveled trade route that ended in lower Egypt. All were exhausted upon reaching Kerdessa, but Shaghlub persevered. After hiding the women on the top floor of a house owned by an accommodating friend he left for Cairo to negotiate buyers for the six women.² In his absence, the six women waited in this room, under admonition to be silent in the hot and cramped quarters.

Why such caution and secrecy? Shaghlub and the other traders were only too aware that being caught with six African women by the authorities of the Slave Trade Bureau would mean imprisonment. Trade in African slaves had been abolished in Egypt in 1877, and the Bureau had been created to search for unlawful caravans and enforce the abolition. When Muhammad Shaghlub left Kerdessa to scout the streets of Cairo for buyers, he would have done so with great care. Through whispered inquiries in a coffee shop, he found a carriage driver who dealt with the servants of elite households, a man in position to know which families were eager to buy a Sudanese slave woman or two. Within several days, Shaghlub had found four wealthy buyers, and the six women were placed into new homes. The most prominent of these buyers was Ali Pasha Sharif, the head of the Egyptian Legislative Assembly. In an irony that would quickly make this sale a cause célèbre, Ali Pasha had—only weeks before—used the floor of the Assembly to petition the government to close down the many offices of the Slave Trade Bureau. In his argument, he went so far as to say that the practice had been discontinued for so long that Egyptians had forgotten the very meaning of the words “slave trade.”

The authority to whom Ali Pasha appealed was the government of Egypt, but he was well aware that this was not a government run by Egyptians. Rather than sending his petition to the Egyptian khedive `Abbas Hilmi II, Ali Pasha sent it to Lord Cromer, the British consul-general who had run the economic and political infrastructure of the country since the British military occupation of 1882. While the petition's main point was to contrast the high salaries paid to all British civil employees and the very low wages paid to their Egyptian equivalents, he made a particular example of the bloated incomes of the British agents who worked for the Slave Trade Bureau, a commission set up in 1884 to manumit African slaves seeking their freedom. Why were there so many officials, Ali Pasha complained to Cromer, when there were hardly any slaves?

Unfortunately for Ali Pasha Sharif, Cromer did not agree with this line of reasoning. In response to Ali Pasha's petition, he ordered the Slave Trade Bureau to be doubly vigilant in

their search for illicitly purchased slaves. One can only imagine Cromer's pleasure when he learned from Colonel Schaefer, head of the Bureau, that, following an informant's tip, two of Shaghlub's six slave women had been discovered in the spacious Cairo villa of Ali Pasha himself. Three of Shaghlub's four clients were immediately arrested and jailed along with the Bedouin traders. Their trial, to be conducted in a military tribunal and presided over by a British magistrate, was set for early September. Ali Pasha Sharif escaped arrest only by claiming Italian citizenship and seeking asylum in the Italian consulate.

The trial began, on Sept. 4, 1894, amidst a hailstorm of publicity. The popular Egyptian nationalist and writer Mustafa Kamil quickly condemned the proceedings, and a diverse array of Egyptian newspapers sent correspondents to the courtroom and published daily accounts of the trial. The *London Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* also sent reporters, as did Italian and French newspapers. The trial of the Pashas, or *bashawat*, as it became known, was a scandal of international proportions. On one side were the defenders of the elite slave buyers, their lawyers and other nationalists who believed that there was no crime in buying Sudanese slaves and thus the case was meant to punish Ali Pasha Sharif for his petition. These nationalist writers insisted that purchasers of Sudanese slaves were actually conduits of a civilizing mission which taught uneducated and unkempt Sudanese girls the finer arts of domestic life and a sense of Islam not to be found in the Sudan itself. On the other side were British officials and abolitionists, who saw in the purchase of slave women another example of the barbarity and despotism that kept Egyptians from being able to govern themselves, thus justifying the British presence in Egypt.

The different parties to the trial not only represented competing interests, they deployed very different discourses with which to discuss slavery. Each reveals a facet of the social and political complexities underlying the questions and ironies of slavery in late nineteenth century Egypt because it was, in that period, inseparable from the problem of who should rule Egypt. Most symptomatic of the forces at work were the ways in which the six women were characterized. The traders, trying to exonerate themselves, claimed that the six women were actually their wives. The pashas' lawyers claimed that the women were beneficiaries of generous and educational domestic employment. For men like Frith Bey, one of the English trial judges, the slave women could only be described as victims: innocent and ignorant prey to marauding slave raiders and unscrupulous Muslim elites. One Egyptian writer, a Copt, questioned how Egyptians could sanction slavery, while others wrote of the singular gentleness of Islamic slavery in comparison to its counterpart in Western Europe and the United States. Hardest to read was the statement by one of the women, Zanouba, who testified before the court that she came from Islamic territory in the Sudan, an assertion which implied her identity as a Muslim and thus disputed the legality of her status as a slave. Zanouba's self-identification as a slave, un-coached and unencumbered by fear unlike so many other slave women encountered, was then doubly iconoclastic (for all that it made sense to a man like Frith Bey). Her assertion further undermined many of the assumptions of the others and was, accordingly, difficult for them to hear—not least because she had trouble raising her eyes to meet those of her interlocutors. This last detail was reported in many of the newspaper accounts where it was taken as a sign that she had been taught to avert the gaze of those considered her social superiors. But perhaps it was the writers who averted their gaze from a pressure too great to face directly: the outcome of the trial, overlaid with ramifications for the political sovereignty of Egypt, rested on the significance of her physical presence on Egyptian soil.

Her physical presence also raised the vexed question of whether or to what extent the status of "slave" was congruent with racial identification. During the Pashas' trial, Herbert

Kitchener, the sirdar of Egypt, suggested that Ali Pasha Sherif's harem be searched for three other slaves. During this search, "white women [would be] identified by their hands and allowed to pass without being examined."³ In the eyes of these officials, the black hands and black skin of any woman living in an Egyptian household automatically signified a slave; black women in Egyptian homes could thus only have been brought there in a state of criminally induced bondage. So heightened had racial sensitivity become for the British that even the unauthorized presence of unmarried black women on the streets of cities like Cairo sounded alarms. Foreign Office officials registered their fears that, once freed from slavery, black Sudanese women with few skills and fewer familial connections would fall back into the clutches of Muslim households, prey once more to either slavery, concubinage or prostitution. To circumvent this, the Home for Freed Black Slave women which was founded in Cairo in 1886 to help situate freed Sudanese and Ethiopian women in appropriate domestic employment.⁴

A different sensitivity to color informed Egyptians' sense of servitude. Documents of mid-nineteenth century court cases exist which show that blacks who could not prove their free status were often taken by the Cairo police back to the slave market in the Khan al-Khalili district of the city.⁵ But as these markets were increasingly closed down, it seems that subtler factors than skin color indicated the physical and social marks of enslavement. As Terence Walz's research shows, the owners of Sudanese slaves always provided them with a particular type of clothing. As became clear during the testimony of witnesses who were questioned about the comings and goings of the slave women from the Pashas' houses, it was this clothing that made the slaves immediately recognizable.⁶ For instance, during the trial, a defense lawyer asked the carriage driver to describe the color of clothing he saw on one of the slave women leaving Ali Pasha Serif's house. Were they or were they not recognizable as "Egyptian" clothes?⁷ Another lawyer asked the doorman how he recognized that it was a slave girl being brought into the household he guarded. "From her clothes," he was quoted as saying in the papers. "She came in a black robe [*milayah*] and a white veil—like the clothing of a slave [*ka labas al-jariyya*]."⁸

Whatever hints skin color or clothing could provide about the actual status of the women, these were complicated by bewilderment over the legal nature of the pashas' actions. As the pashas' defense lawyers insisted, the 1877 Treaty clearly delineated the punishment for the slave trader and his accomplices but said nothing at all about the buyer—a gaping inconsistency. Of the Egyptian newspaper editors, all of whom were deeply sympathetic with the pashas for the indignity the tribunal inflicted on them, only the Coptic paper *Al-Fayyoun* condemned both buyer and seller of slaves as barbarians. The editor, Ibrahim Ramzi, also chided Ali Pasha Sherif and another co-defendant, Shawarby Pasha, as members of the Legislative Council and therefore as representatives of the nation, men in whom an entire community had placed its faith. They must, he said, be among the most diligent observers of the community's basic truths. If they are corrupt, then so is the entire nation!⁹

The editor of *Al-Fayyoun* touched on a highly charged word when he mentioned "barbarity," for the question of slavery's abolition was always rhetorically intermingled with the idea of "civilization" in the debate about slavery then being argued throughout Egyptian society. The measurements and proofs of this civilization were vague, yet it seemed clear that the possibility of Egyptian independence from the British rested on Egyptians' ability to prove social and moral compatibility with Western Europe. As the English editor of the *The Egyptian Gazette*, a paper heavily subsidized by Lord Cromer, made clear in his article written during the trial, the relation of owner to slave was pertinent to the larger question of

which culture, British or Egyptian, was better equipped to control the Sudan itself? For the Gazette editor, Egyptian society was irrevocably tainted by Islamic despotism both publicly and privately, a factor which made Egyptians as incapable of governing others as they were of managing their own political independence:

Surely it would not be safe to entrust persons with so slight a sense of moral and political responsibility with more power than they now have. They are clearly not yet educated up to the positions which they hold. These incidents, though ludicrous at first sight, warn us how unwise it would be to remove the authority which exposes and checks practices like these.¹⁰

But in the view expressed by the summary argument that Shawarby Pasha's lawyer made before the English court, buying slaves performed a benevolent mission of rescue and buyers were civilizing agents for the wretched of the Sudan:

[. . .]what guilt is there for the man who takes the kidnaped from misery to happiness, from hunger to ease of life, replacing their ragged clothes with beautiful robes, supporting them with money, treating them with the kindness that both his religion and his sense of humanity dictate to him. He does not buy them for trade, or for profit.¹¹

The slave trial ended without resolving any of these questions. One pasha who had actually confessed to buying one of the slaves was convicted. The bedouin traders were also found guilty, and sentenced to five years' hard labor. The court acquitted the other pashas of all charges, a verdict which the majority of Egyptian newspapers heralded as a national victory. Not all of the slaves had been as clear as Zanouba about the identity of their former buyers, and one had not recognized Shawarby Pasha at all in court. This weakened the prosecution's charges against him. The Khedive ordered Ali Pasha Sherif to resign from his position as president of the Legislative Council, and it was widely believed that he had lost all popular support. Certainly his image was sharply tarnished in the Egyptian nationalist press when he claimed citizenship in another—a European—country (an appeal denied by the Italian government). After making a confession, he was soon acquitted on the grounds of his age and his poor health.¹² He died of a heart attack two years later. Zanouba and the other five women walked out of the courtroom free. The Slave Trade Bureau gave them their manumission papers, and they rejoined each other for a time in the Cairo Home for Freed Women Slaves, where their stay was subsidized by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.¹³ When they left the Home, either for employment as domestics or for marriage, they walked out into historical oblivion. The Legislative Assembly made no more appeals to close the Slave Trade Bureau.

For several weeks, however, these six women had appeared like mirrors before the Egyptian and British public, reflecting how deeply both cultures had invested in the image of the civilizing savior of African peoples. The figures of these women also reflected other fears: British anxieties about black women as agents of sexual licentiousness and crime; Egyptian fears of being identified with these women as uncivilized and so of being made slaves to the British. These apprehensions became clear in the representation of the slave women in both newspaper and official accounts of the trial; the verdict left the question of the actual ownership of these women—and of the Sudan—wide open. The perimeters of Egyptian geography, its form and its limits, the full extent of the body politic, were still to be mapped.

The trial took only ten days. Following Lord Cromer's recommendations, Frith Bey and

the other judges decided that the trial itself had taught Egypt an humiliating lesson. But the issues of race, slavery and colonialism that the tribunal had exposed were not as summarily dispensed with. The position of Egyptian nationalism had been revealed as perched upon a peculiar nexus: eager to be rid of British colonization and yet eager to re-colonize the Sudanese in some form or another. The racial constructions inherent in these circumstances were also complex. Muhammad Shaghlub, the Bedouin slave trader, could claim Zanuba as his wife without fear of invoking the taboo of racial miscegenation that a similar marriage would have borne in Great Britain or the United States. Still, she was a slave. Moving up the economic and social ladder, we see the pashas and their defenders reformulating the intimacy of connections to the slave women inside a more paternalistic and political framework where the boundaries of difference were bridged by the civilizing mission. Yet slaves incorporated into these households were understood neither as equals nor as children but as blank beings in whom the proper conduct and behavior would be instilled. For many of the British observers, it was their skin color that made the six slave women vulnerable to enslavement (where slaves were understood to be victims). But to Egyptians, the status of their faith was equally important because Egyptian culture took polytheistic religious practices to be nearly the equivalent of racial distinction. Thus the women knew themselves to have been purchased, and considered themselves wrongly enslaved because the profession of their religion should have removed them from the categories of the enslaveable.

Triangulated Conquest

The scandal of the slavery trial arose at the beginning of British imperial expansion in the Middle East. Egypt was a focal point. The British had occupied Egypt in 1882, shortly after the emergence of the first Egyptian patriotic rebellion, known as the `Urabi revolt. Although the incorporation of Egypt into the British empire was informal, it was efficiently executed. Two years later, a Sudanese religious leader known as the Mahdi completed his own revolt, seizing Khartoum and evicting Egypt from territory it had ruled since 1821. The British occupation remained confined to Egypt until 1898, when British-led armies invaded the regions of the Sudan held by the Mahdist government, and annexed it again to Egypt. British officials continued to run or supervise the administrations of both countries for decades. The ideologies of race, empire and nation that formed during this period must be read in the frame of these crises.

The Egyptian colonial experience in the Sudan was an encounter that took place in two conjoined but very different territories: the Sudan and Egypt itself. The administration of the Sudan was known as the "Turkiyya" by generations of Sudanese because it was initially conquered by Turkish-speaking officers for Muhammad `Ali (also known as Mehemet Ali), the Albanian Ottoman officer who was acting as a governor of Egypt for the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century. The "Turkish" characterization of the administration, made by people unfamiliar with the nuances of Egypt's population, also disguises the fact that native-born, Arabic-speaking Egyptians participated in the colony's administration (and more notably as decades passed and the administration strengthened its roots). Many Egyptians served in the army in the Sudan, finding there opportunities for promotion impossible to duplicate in Egypt itself during the 1860s and 70s. Muhammad `Ali and his successors tried periodically to create Sudanese battalions, and although these efforts had only varied success, they continued for decades. Many regiments of Egyptian soldiers were created which trained alongside the Sudanese in Upper Egypt.¹⁴ Egyptian notables often considered postings there a terrible exile, yet continued to regard the Sudan as an intrinsic

part of Egypt. The expansion of Egypt's educational system as a result of the government's project to "civilize" the Sudanese also caused Egyptians to travel there as teachers. The journey in the other direction was undertaken by thousands of Sudanese doormen and wagon-drivers, servants and slaves as well as by the wealthy caravans of Sudanese traders. Those groups of Sudanese who worked in Cairo and Alexandria often belonged to their own guilds and were well-integrated into urban economic life. From the early days of Muhammad `Ali's reign, Sudanese students had also made the trip to Cairo to study at al-Azhar. There were many ways for Sudanese in Egypt to earn their livelihoods and participate in urban culture and they represented a familiar part of the demographic landscape.

However ambivalent their representations, the Sudanese were clearly considered by many Egyptians to be a part of Egypt. This connection developed into a pronounced sense of possessiveness about the Sudan by the late nineteenth century. In an article published in Paris several years after the famous slavery trial of the pashas, the charismatic nationalist leader Mustafa Kamil wrote that "the Sudan, as is clear to the reader, is a piece of Egypt and has been stripped from her without legal right." Fearing that the British were ready to conquer the Sudan—a fear shared by many in Egypt and soon to be proven correct—Kamil characterized the country as "Egyptian property" to which the British had no right. So as not to leave doubts about the forcible nature of Egypt's potential reconquest of the region lost to the Mahdi, Kamil announced that "our army, even less than our whole army, would have been enough to accomplish this result."¹⁵ While echoing similar assumptions about knowledge of and power over the Sudan that a British statesmen like Lord Balfour held for Egypt, the article also carries the stamp of anger and defiance against the British.

What Mustafa Kamil expressed, as did many other theoreticians of Egyptian nationalist ideals, was the perspective of the colonized colonizer. The world in which these men lived, and the nation they imagined for the next generation of Egyptians, was structured by a Janus-like vision of an Egypt whose past greatness and regional power could be grasped once again in the Sudan, thus freeing Egyptians from the political and economic control of the British government. For Mustafa Kamil, the Sudan was Egypt's by right and by nature; British control of Egypt was all the more tyrannical for its denial of Egyptian rights of sovereignty over the Sudan. The defenders of the pashas during the slavery trial spoke from this vantage point when they condemned the trespass of the British authorities into Egyptian households and when they upheld the custom of domestic slavery as a civilizing mission that saved the Sudanese—women in particular—from the supposed barbarity in which they had been born.

This dualistic nationalism did not begin in 1894 with the slavery trial, nor did it reach its culmination with the untimely death of Mustafa Kamil in 1908. The outlook of the colonized colonizer began to take shape in the last decade of Muhammad Ali's reign, and emerged in full bloom by the 1870s. Nationalists developed these themes through the rest of the nineteenth century, but they were evoked with more urgency in 1898-99, the period of the British reconquest of the Sudan. By 1919 there was a well-established slogan that called for "the unity of the Nile Valley." Although there were important exceptions, such as the nationalist writers or leaders who disliked the idea of colonizing the Sudan or who feared its implications of racial discrimination, most of the nationalists explored in this study agreed that what made the Egyptian struggle for independence undeniable was its unique relationship of mastery over the Sudan.

By the late nineteenth century, Egypt had experienced imperialism on many levels. Conquered by Sultan Selim I in 1516, Egypt was by the early nineteenth century a country steeped in the traditions of Ottoman empire, with a ruling class of Ottoman governors,

officials and descendants, an Ottoman-Egyptian elite. Although many had been born in Egypt, they were often most comfortable speaking and writing in Turkish. As mentioned above, Muhammad `Ali himself came from this group, and he and his successors did not identify themselves as Egyptians¹⁶ even as Muhammad `Ali succeeded in making the rule of Egypt the dynastic right of his family and his successful conquest of the Sudan incorporated it under Egyptian auspices. The new class of bureaucrats he created thus grew up with the Sudan as an Egyptian colony. His grandson, the Khedive Isma`il, continued both policies, the expansion of Egyptian control of the Sudan, and the institutionalization of a native-born bureaucracy. But his expansionism exceeded his budget, and having drawn loans from British, French and other European banks that he could not repay, Isma`il made Egypt vulnerable to the economic, then the political control, of foreign governments, eventually leading to his deposition in 1879 and the British occupation in 1882.

The vulnerability to external control brought on by Isma`il's debts incurred the wrath and fears of a group of army officers who led Egypt's first patriotic rebellion in 1881. At the same time, Egyptian control of the Sudan, often enforced by high-ranking European army officers, provoked the rebellion of the Sudanese Mahdi which successfully took control of almost all of the Sudan by 1884. In just four years, Egypt had become a *de facto* colony of Great Britain and lost its own colony in the Sudan. It is in this period, and in response to these struggles, that certain pivotal groups of Egyptians began to distinguish themselves culturally and ethnically from the Ottoman-Egyptian elites who occupied the highest posts in the country. From the first, the development of Egyptian nationalism was marked by a triangular colonialism.

Invasive Abolitionism

The British investigation of African slavery in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire had begun in the middle of the nineteenth century but took on greater momentum with the reign of the Khedive Isma`il. Although there was an ages-old traffic in white slaves as well, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society did not pursue the issue of trade in Circassian and Caucasian slaves with the Ottoman sultan or the Egyptian khedive, so deeply connected to the entire infrastructure of the military and the royal families had this system become.¹⁷ It was also clear that by the middle of the nineteenth century increased Russian hegemony over the Caucasus mountains and ensuing struggles with Circassian populations had cut off most of the potential supply of those slaves. What few remained came from within Anatolia itself.¹⁸ African slavery was treated as an entirely different matter. Isma`il's efforts to expand Egyptian authority beyond the source of the Nile into East Africa coincided with the close attention that British abolitionists were paying to the trade in African slaves as, having been successful in ending the practice in British territory, they tried to abolish the trade network in other parts of the world.

In Great Britain, the abolitionists were aided by a tight network of information about Africa which was fed through the cooperation between the Royal Geographic Society, the British Anti-Slavery Society and the Church Missionary Society. In a triangular trade of information, explorers—such as Dr. David Livingston, Speke and Grant, Charles Gordon and Samuel Baker—became celebrated experts of the Geographic Society for the first-hand information they brought or sent home from the Nile Valley or Lake Victoria. Their stories about the victimization of innocents that slavery wrought inspired both Protestant and Catholic Church missionaries to set up stations in different African heartlands. Sketches they sent home of enslaved Africans encouraged the urgent appeals of the Anti-Slavery

Society and were reprinted in newspapers, giving readers opportunities to view the human faces of slavery.

It was a tremendous and very evocative human rights campaign and it helped to shape the view of Africa for much of the British public. Many people gained what little they knew about Africans from the writings of Dr. David Livingstone, the explorer and missionary who so carefully and passionately related his experience of the slave trade and thus contributed profoundly to the Anti-Slavery Society's campaign in East Africa.¹⁹ Dr. Livingstone was deeply outraged by the slave trade; he documented example after example of the suffering the trade caused to Africans. In his last diaries, he described how African slaves often so affected him that he felt himself a part of their lives. Take this interesting passage which he wrote in Zanzibar:

On visiting the slave-market, I found about three hundred slaves exposed for sale, the greater part of whom came from the Lake Nyassa and the Shire River; I am so familiar with the peculiar faces and markings or tattooings, that I expect them to recognize me.²⁰

Using his position as a foreigner, Dr. Livingstone often did try to intercede, to rescue or to buy the freedom of as many slaves as he could. In his writings, slaves became an archetype of victimization and, as the above quote shows, he considered himself an archetype of their salvation. He went so far as to imply that no one before him had tried to help them or to free them. He painted in detail a terrifying world in which he envisioned the slaves living, where Arabs and Muslims alternatively become the personification of evil: barbaric slave-raiding villains.

Livingstone was unimpressed with arguments that Islam had brought greater knowledge and civilization to eastern and central Africa. He was struck by what he considered an absence of Muslim missionary activity among the pagan Africans, and wondered at the missed opportunity this lack of proselytizing created. He wrote in his diary: "As they [the Arabs] never translate the Koran, they neglect the best means of influencing the Africans, who invariably wish to understand what they are about."²¹ Livingstone reasoned that Islam had only attained a superficial influence among the natives of Africa, and that their religious practices in mosques were pantomime, or as he put it "a dumb show."

These ideas gained widespread currency in England. For the newspaper-reading public in both Europe and in Egypt, for visitors to the free lectures at Geographic Societies, or for strollers through the exotic panoramas of international World Exhibitions, Central and East African territories unofficially bore the imprint of Dr. Livingstone's illustrious name and reputation.²² The name of Sir Samuel Baker clung to the upper regions of the Blue Nile, even while he ceremoniously affixed that of his monarch to Lake Albert Nyanza. In direct contrast to the monumentalization of these European and British men as explorers and liberators of Africa, Egyptian or Muslim leaders whose names were connected to sub-Saharan Africa were almost always implicated as agents of the slave trade.

The primary accuser was the aggressive Anti-Slavery Society of London which took full advantage of its political clout to lobby for particular British policies in Egypt and East Africa.²³ The Society's influence eventually reached so far that it felt itself able to pressure and petition the Khedive Isma'il directly when it learned of his plans to expand Egyptian influence along the Nile. Isma'il was a ruler whose goals of raising Egypt to the level of Europe were well-known. The Anti-Slavery Society was thus in a position to aim its words effectively. They praised the Khedive for statements he had made against the slave trade in 1867, but questioned the lack of movement towards the abolition of the institution since

that time. They allowed that in the crushing of the trade in slaves, “Your Highness would thus become the pioneer of liberty, and Egypt being a land of freedom would take rank among the most civilized nations of the world.”²⁴

The members of the Society were also well aware that they had public opinion on their side. The pressure they exerted, which often had the support of members of Parliament, resulted in the Anglo-Egyptian Convention of 1877, which abolished the trade in African slaves on all territory held by the Egyptian government, although it did not outlaw the institution of slavery itself. The Anti-Slavery Convention was posted by decree throughout Egypt’s cities and the Sudan, and allowed for the creation of slave trade bureaus in Cairo, Alexandria, the Delta and Upper Egypt. These bureaus were intended to not only record the manumission of individual slaves but also to find suitable employment for freed slaves and possible education for their children. The authorities of these bureaus were also responsible for the punishment of “any person depriving a freed slave of his freedom or taking from him his manumission certificate”; such a person was to be handled as a slave dealer.²⁵

The Anti-Slavery Convention may have provided a clear date from which the trade in slaves was no longer permissible, but it left open wide-ranging and important questions about the nature of the trade in Egypt. It also created a stark divide. On one side stood the British officials of the occupation who were quickly coming to believe in a pro-slavery solidarity among the Muslims of Egypt such that, in their opinion, the provision of aid to any of the officials of the slave trade bureaus would be considered tantamount to treason by other Egyptians. On the other side stood the majority of Egyptians, who saw slaves as closely connected to their households, often as part of their families, and who often believed that the more gentle domestic bondage of Egypt was of actual benefit to the slaves themselves. There were Egyptians deeply ambivalent about slavery who nonetheless considered the officials of the slave trade bureaus to be trespassers, broaching the privacy of the Egyptian family and revealing its secrets to the outside world.²⁶

This sense of an invaded privacy put nationalists who called for the re-conquest of the Sudan on the defensive, for the British authorities in Egypt and participants in the anti-slavery movement in England heard with suspicion the nationalists’ rhetoric that linked the Sudan corporeally to Egypt and interpreted such calls as a defense of slavery. Indeed the issue of slavery and its intrinsic connectedness to the Sudan raised difficult questions for the nationalists about their own society and their own sense of communal unity. The expression of the corporeal connection between Egypt and the Sudan also reflected then current debates and anxieties about more intimate customs like marriage, and social notions about gender and race. With so much of the political and physical geography in question, literary constructions of the Sudan were often all that kept intact Egyptians’ sense of the borders of their own land, and culture.

One Man’s Slave is Another Man’s Wife

The nature of the slavery lived by black men and women in Egypt in the nineteenth century is rarely if ever discussed without being compared to the searing experiences of African slaves in the United States and in the Caribbean. From all accounts, it is clear that African slaves in Egypt did not suffer the brutality that so characterized the treatment of blacks in the American South. There was no similar plantation culture, no ritualized public violence to punish rebellious slaves. Few could argue, however, that the initiation into slavery, the raids of the traders, the abrupt and traumatic dismembering of families had a terrible effect on the slaves. Nor could it be denied that the trek along the Forty Days’ Road was often a

harsh and violent experience as well, resulting in many slaves' deaths. But once safely ensconced in Egypt, almost all sources agree that the experience of Sudanese slaves was considerably milder than that suffered by African slaves in the Americas.

There is no agreement on the exact number of black slaves in Egypt during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the trade in slaves from the Sudan reached its peak. Gabriel Baer wrote that while it was impossible to establish the exact number of slaves in Egypt at any time in that century, he could estimate—on the basis of contemporary British accounts, the census of 1850 and from the records of the Slave Trade Bureaux established after the Anglo-Egyptian Convention in 1877—that throughout the century the number of slaves remained between 20,000 and 30,000.²⁷ Judith Tucker never arrived at a total figure of slaves, although she posited that between 1877 and 1905, 25,000 slaves were manumitted in Egypt.²⁸ The majority of African slaves in Egypt were women who served as domestic workers in private homes, although in upper Egypt there were documented examples of agricultural slavery, and many slaves were recruited for military service early in the century as well.²⁹

There was a well-established hierarchy of labor which constructed the work and world of the slave in Egypt in the nineteenth century, itself a construction of stereotyping about the qualities of different races and ethnicities. White Circassian women were at the top of this ladder and were welcomed into the harems of the wealthiest and most prestigious households. Ethiopian women came next, bought often as concubines for the middle class. They were not prized for their household work as were other African women, who came lower on the scale.³⁰ There is, surprisingly, much less information about the nature of black males slaves' work in Egypt in the late nineteenth century. After the resolution of the American Civil War, when Egypt's cotton industry faced intense competition, the large-scale plantation projects that the Khedive Isma'il had encouraged, and on which black slaves were employed, shrank. Little record is left about the future of work for those slaves.

What the historical record makes clear, however, is that once purchased, most African slaves in Egypt worked in the homes of the middle and the upper classes. Baer cites examples of slaves during the 1860's and 70's working for "beduins, village notables, *fellahs*, millers, butchers, shopkeepers, a bookseller, all kinds of merchants, a banker, clerks, all grades of officials and government employees, all ranks of army officers, religious functionaries, some *muftis*, a judge, a physician and others." Some would have been a part of large households with many slaves and servants, but the majority would have been part of a living situation where they were the only slave. These might become a member of an intimate group, privy to all of the family life and dependent on its other members for their health, well-being, food and clothing. She or he would perhaps help raise the children and, in some cases, have children with the head of the household. Both Egyptian and British accounts testify to the fact that black slaves definitely formed part of the family.³¹

What did the enforced domesticity of slavery mean? For many European observers, the intimacy of this relationship and extension of family ties to slaves provoked a mixture of titillation and disgust, reactions similar to those elicited by the idea of the harem in Muslim societies. And slavery was very closely connected to the exoticism of the harem for European observers of the Middle East. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the idea of the Egyptian family's structure had become politicized within Egypt and sharply scrutinized from without, particularly in Great Britain and France. European scholars like Ernest Renan debated the concept of marriage within Islam, with the legality of polygamy, often drawing conclusions that these marriages were examples of a reflexive tendency

towards Islamic despotism, that the inferior position of women in Muslim societies proved Islam's incompatibility with social reform, and progress. Within official British circles, particularly those concerned with administering Egypt and the Sudan, slavery was understood to remove all opportunities for real family life from slaves even after they were freed. Fears circulated about manumitted Sudanese women turning to prostitution in the streets of Cairo; these fears lay behind the founding of the Cairo Home for Freed Women by Lord Cromer in 1886, two years after the creation of the Slave Trade Bureaus.

The debate over marriage and family was conducted just as fiercely in Egypt, especially after the 1897 publication of Qasim Amin's *Tahrir al-Mar'a* (The Emancipation of Women) which pleaded for the social emancipation of Egyptian women. The customary arrangements of marriage were also widely debated, beginning with the plays of Ya'qub Sanu'a.³² Romantic novels circulated in whose pages heroines fell in love and chose their husbands, a revolutionary prospect for many of the more traditional members of Egyptian society.³³

But even as intellectuals in Egyptian society were beginning to consider possibilities for different and new roles for women, and as Egyptian women began to insert themselves more and more into the discussion, the position of the majority of British administrators in Egypt—most of whom had difficulty believing any of these changes as long as slavery existed—hardened. Many in fact felt that Egyptians were constitutionally unable to oppose slavery or even to manage without it. As one highly placed and experienced administrator phrased it in a letter to the President of the Anti-Slavery Society:

I need scarcely remark to you that no Turk and no Egyptian whether Moslem or Christian in his religion can be trusted to desire or carry out effective measures for preventing the introduction of slaves into the country, because [he] neither has any conscientious feeling or opposition to the system itself as existing in the Turkish Empire. No native Egyptian official has any heart in anti-slavery movements.³⁴

From its very inception, the nationalist movement was forced to respond to this question.

But while the 'Urabi leaders claimed to be stamping out the slave trade in the Sudan, the government was beginning to receive news that the Mahdi was gaining control of more and more territories. There was little they could actually do in the face of increasing British military pressure and the political atmosphere of intense suspicion and fear being fomented by the Khedive Tawfiq. Months later, their proclaimed efforts to wipe out both slavery and the slave trade were completely laid to rest by the British occupation of Egypt. The British now took on a more direct responsibility for the issue of slavery, and changed the terms of the debate: slavery was linked to Egyptian independence; nationalists had to prove their capacities for self-government within the context of Egypt's long history of enslaving Sudanese and Nubians.

Slavery: A Pillar of Society?

The Slave Trade Bureaus sanctioned by the Anglo-Egyptian Anti-Slavery Convention of 1877 now answered directly to the British Agent and Consul-General of Egypt, Sir Evelyn Baring, soon to be named Lord Cromer. He funded them amply and supported their director, Colonel Charles Schaefer, enthusiastically. But Cromer was not easily persuaded by the Anti-Slavery Society whom he in fact considered unacquainted with the political realities of Egypt and the Sudan.³⁵ Part of his impatience with the Society stemmed from his sense that

slavery was practically respectable in Egyptian society. Colonel Schaefer helped convince him of this, as shown in a letter that Cromer later forwarded to London for its valuable insights:

It must not be forgotten that, in this country the selling of slaves from a Musulman point of view is considered legal, that amongst the natives, the custom of employing paid female servants is far from general: so that the possession of slaves or even the selling of them, does not offend public morality as it would in a civilized country so that the public has no interest in helping us as they would in cases affecting the general security.³⁶

Egyptians heard these ideas and accusations in a variety of ways: through the press, in speeches and in meetings with British officials. Many chose the same venues to argue publicly with European interlocutors about the legality of slavery itself. They, like the British, focused on the construction of the Egyptian family.

As one example, there is Ahmad Shafik, a French-educated lawyer, who was deeply offended in 1892 by an anti-slavery sermon given by Cardinal Lavigerie, at the Cathedral of Sainte Sulpice in Paris. His response, in French, was made to the Khedivial Geographic Society of Egypt. It argued that Islam, in comparison to all of the other systems of slavery in the world, whether contemporary or historical, was much kinder and milder because it gave to African slaves, or any slaves, new ties to a new adoptive family.

ʿAbdallah al-Nadim, another well-known Egyptian writer, wrote from a different perspective. In an 1892 article entitled “Sa`id wa Bakhita,” published in his popular journal, *al-Ustaadh*, al-Nadim presented two freed Sudanese slaves trying to figure out where to go with their lives now that their status had changed. While one, Bakhita, mourned the loss of comfort and regularity she had found with her mistress, the other, Sa`id, remembered only cruelty and alienation. Even more importantly, however, Sa`id reminded Bakhita that the Egyptian government owed them the rights to plots of land and sufficient equipment for them to begin their own farms and their own communities. Sa`id asserted that the Sudanese deserved to marry each other, to create their own families, to be independent of the patronage of their former Egyptian owners. Of all of the figures I’m discussing today, ʿAbdallah al-Nadim was the loudest champion of a different kind of family, a Sudanese intercommunal bond that had been broken by slavery and had to be fixed. But even while he detested the institution, he thought slavery was an internal matter for Egyptians to settle. It is notable not only that he wrote his protests in Arabic, but in the spoken dialect of urban Egyptians. This was not intended to be a conversation to which the British were invited. In al-Nadim’s discussion, slavery presented a painful and troubling history to Egyptians, a part and parcel of Egypt’s historic relation with the Sudan with whose ramifications they had not even begun to cope. Nowhere in al-Nadim’s poignant dialogue, or earlier articles on similar subjects, do the British appear.

This sense of British intrusion was felt keenly by the mid-1890’s, as it became clear to both the Egyptian and British public that the Mahdist state in the Sudan—then being run by the Mahdi’s successor, the Khalifa Abdullah al-Ta’yishi—was overwhelmed with famine and war. British officials waged a propaganda campaign to garner public support for the reconquest of the Sudan, brandishing the memory of General Charles Gordon like a sword. General Reginald Wingate, intelligence commander in Egypt, spearheaded his own literary campaign for colonizing the Sudan with his translations and popularizing of works by the Mahdi’s escaped prisoners.³⁷ His propaganda campaign horrified Egyptian nationalists who wanted the Sudan returned to Egypt, but not to an Egypt subdued and occupied by the

British. They were no less mollified by abolitionists' prescriptives for the Africans of the Sudan: European mercantilism

Epilogue

What happened when the British did take over the governing of the Sudan? This answer would take us to another paper. Suffice it to say, by way of conclusion, that the repercussions of their occupation are the sources for problems still current today. The most pressing of these is probably the continued alienation of the South from the North, due in part to what one historian has called the active "reviving the memories of and publicising Arab complicity in the detested slave trade" the "colonial rulers and their evangelist allies further alienated the south from the north by exacerbating racial distrust, promoting tribal antagonisms, emphasising cultural contradictions and sowing the seeds of separate southern self-determination." It is not so clear to me that these sorrowful memories of slavery were exacerbated by of activist abolitionists alone—slavery left lasting impressions on both Arabs and Africans in the Sudan—but these were certainly institutionalized by the Sudanese Government.³⁸

Nor, despite the rhetoric, did slavery end for decades under the British. The regime had to cope with the interests of the large slave-owning classes of Khartoum and the Northern Sudan. It was considered "premature" to disrupt Sudanese society further, after the 18 years of the Mahdiyya, and new classifications were created to reflect the imminent—and yet impossible—end of the slaves' status: British authorities used words like "crypto-servants" or "indentured labourers" or "volunteer slaves" (or "detrribalized negroids").³⁹ Patience, in the name of practical control, was the message now sent by the Foreign Office, by the Sudan administration, and by the majority of Parliament, to the resentful members of the Anti-Slavery society.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 112.
- 2 The summary of the slave trial follows closely the account in Salah `Issa, *Hikayat min deftar al-watan* (Stories from the Record of the Homeland , Cairo: Kitab Dar al-Ahali, 1992), pp. 217-245. I have written a more detailed account of the press coverage, including the newspaper and the British Foreign Office reports, in a later chapter of the book of which this talk is a sketch.
- 3 F.O. 407/127 Rodd to Kimberly, 17 September, 1894.
- 4 F.O. 84/1770 Report by C.G. Scott Moncrieff, May 1886.
- 5 Terence Walz, "Black Slavery in Egypt", *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, vol. 2, ed. John Ralph Willis (London: Frank Cass, 1985), p. 149.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 7 *Al-Muqattam*, 6 September 1894.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 10 September 1894.
- 9 *Al-Fayyoun*, 6 September 1894.
- 10 *The Egyptian Gazette*, 31 August 1894.
- 11 This translation is quoted from *Al-Muqattam*, 10 September 1894, but all of the papers, except the *Gazette*, gave this portion of Khalil Bey Ibrahim's speech great prominence.
- 12 F.O. 407/127, no. 125 and 126 Rodd to Kimberly, Cairo, Sept. 24, 1894.
- 13 *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, vol. 14 (July-August 1894), p. 246.
- 14 Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmet Ali, his army and the making of modern Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 88-90.
- 15 Mustafa Kamil, *Al-Maqalat*, ed. `Abd al-`Azim Ramadan (Cairo: Matba`ah al-Hi`yyah al-`Ammah lil-Kitab, 1987), p. 298; excerpted from *Le Clair*, 19 April 1898.
- 16 For the interesting debate on the nationalist dimensions of Muhammad Ali's (or Mehmet Ali's) ethnicity, see Khalid Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men* ; Ehud Toledano,

“Muhammad `Ali or Mehmet Ali” in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (1984), which is a review of Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot’s *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Her response can be found in *IJMES* (1985).

- 17 Ehud Toledano, *The Suppression of the Ottoman Slave Trade* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 169-71.
- 18 Gabriel Baer, “Slavery and Its Abolition” in *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 167.
- 19 For insights into the influence of Dr. David Livingstone on Western European understandings of the African slave trade, see Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade*, revised edition (Boston & New York: Back Bay Books, Little, Brown & Co., 1980), pp. 200-201; Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, eds. *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), p. 17; and Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 24-25.
- 20 Horace Waller, ed., *The Last Journals of David Livingstone in Central Africa* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875), p. 21.
- 21 *Ibid*, p. 224.
- 22 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) pp. 10-13.
- 23 Taj Hargay, “The Suppression of Slavery in the Sudan, 1898-1939” (Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Oxford University, St. Antony’s College, 1981), pp. 26-27.
- 24 Petition to His Highness Isma’il Pasha, Viceroy of Egypt, (N.D.—probably 1869 or 1870), *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society Papers*, British Empire 522, Box G-26, Rhodes House, Oxford University.
- 25 Baer, “Slavery and its Abolition”, p. 179.
- 26 *Ibid*, p. 184.
- 27 *Ibid*, p. 167.
- 28 For more on this, see Judith E. Tucker, *Women in nineteenth-century Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 29 See Tucker, p. 167; Baer, p. 165; John O. Hunwick, “Black Africans in the Mediterranean” in *Slavery and Abolition*, 13:1, April 1992, p. 21.
- 30 John Hunwick, “Black Africans”, p. 15.

- 32 Baer quotes one quite typical observation from British officials sent back to the Foreign Office: “[. . .]since most of the slaves were an integral part of the families in which they lived, their manumission involved a breach in the secretiveness of the Arab family, so dear a value to the Egyptians [. . .]” [Borg to Cookson, Cairo, Oct. 21, 1877, F.O. 141/112], in Baer, “Slavery and its Abolition”, p. 184. But similar quotes can be found in the treatise on slavery of Ahmed Chafik Bey, “De l’esclavage au point de vue musulmane”, *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de l’Egypte*, vol. 5 (1892), p. 460.
- 32 For instance *Al-Darra*, 1874, in which Sanu’a dramatized the difficulties of multiple marriage for the first wife. Sanu’a was the best known, but certainly not the only playwright for whom this issue was important. Other playwrights also focussed on the issue of arranged marriages, re-evaluating the rights of fathers over daughters. Two of these were Mahmud Wassif, *‘Aja’ib al-Aqdar*, (Cairo: 1894) and Khalil Kamil, *Dhalim al-‘Aba’* (Cairo, 1897).
- 33 Beth Baron, “The Making and Breaking of Marital Bonds in Modern Egypt” in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, Beth Baron and Nikki Keddie, eds. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).
- 34 BFASSP, Box G-29, Vivian to Allen, Cairo, 18 July 1881.
- 35 Taj Hargay, “The Suppression of Slavery in the Sudan, 1898-1939,” p. 80.
- 36 (Public Records Office) F.O. 84/1770, 19 April, 1886, from Lord Cromer to the Earl of Rosebery, with enclosed extract from Schaefer to Cromer, April 18, 1886.
- 37 Gabriel Warburg, *Historical Discord on the Nile Valley* (London: Hurst & Company, 1993), pp. 15-16.
- 38 Hargay, p. 455.
- 39 *Ibid*, p. 80.