

# PERCEPTIONS OF RACE IN THE ARAB WORLD

By Mark Perry

## Introduction

Throughout history the Middle East has been host to a wide variety of nationalities and ethnic groups. In the last half century, global social and economic forces have increased this diversity dramatically. New groups have migrated to the Middle East in search of economic opportunities. It is now common to see in the airports, city streets, secondary towns, villages and even families of the Middle East the faces of people native to countries half a world away. As the Middle East enters into this period of transition to unprecedented diversity, questions of social barriers and cultural identity have naturally arisen. Color prejudice is at the heart of these issues.

## *The Socio-historical Context*

Some of the prejudice and stereotyping that dark-skinned foreigners face in the Arab world is a result of the ancient tradition of dividing populations into discrete groupings based on religion, ethnicity, and even occupation. Typically each city in the Middle East until the mid-twentieth century was divided into “quarters” or neighborhoods based on religious and ethnic characteristics.

In the Middle East ethnic groups have maintained separate identities not only through religion, language and geographical barriers, but also through daily visible symbols such as occupation, hair styles and clothing. In the past Arab society centered on a complex division of labor, similar in some ways to a caste system, in which some occupations were highly honored and other were regarded as “base” and the subject of prejudices.<sup>1</sup> Albert Hourani documents the tendency of some ethnic groups to become identified with specific occupations, yielding an “ethnic division of labor.”<sup>2</sup>

These divisions were consistently reflected in styles of dress. Carleton Coon observed that ethnic groups in the Middle East “could have been distinguished, some forty or fifty years ago, by special costumes, special languages or dialects” and other visible and public features, despite the fact that westernization of dress and other aspects were beginning to take root.<sup>3</sup>

These visible symbols of division have not been eliminated by the globalization process. Iliya Harik has noted that ethnic and occupational division continue, as they were “inherited” by the newly-formed Arab states following the colonial period. Even in our age of modern telecommunications and intercultural and international exchange he found that in the Arab world “culture tends to engender particularistic loyalties, immobile and resistant to change.”<sup>4</sup> Dress remains in Egypt and other Arab countries a powerful symbol of status and cultural orientation, and a tool for political and economic purposes.<sup>5</sup>

In this context Africans were only one ethnic group among many who faced traditional forms of social discrimination. Following World War II gradually Arab societies opened, and many if not most groups have gained significant social and economic freedom in the twentieth century. Yet Africans and other dark-skinned foreigners have remained for the most part restricted to the periphery of Arab society and subject to forms of enslavement. Their enslavement has long been justified on the grounds that the Qur’an permitted the enslavement of converts and captives in

war. Non-Arab converts to Islam have generally held the lower status in Arab society, and were more likely to become enslaved. But the lowest social category was the converted and non-converted sub-Saharan Africans. Even today captives in war are considered enslavable according to some interpretations of Islamic law. Recently the former Sudanese Prime Minister Sadiq al Mahdi has stated: "It is true that the [Sudanese] regime has not enacted a law to [forbid] slavery as the traditional concept of Jihad does allow slavery as a by-product."<sup>6</sup>

### *An Academic Blind Spot*

Until the last several years there has been very little scholarship on the subject of slavery and Africans in the Arab world. Bernard Lewis refers to the "remarkable dearth of scholarly work" on the history of Africans in the Mediterranean and Arab world.<sup>7</sup> Another scholar of slavery in the Ottoman Empire describes the lack of work on the subject a "deafening silence."<sup>8</sup> John Hunwick attributes this to a variety of factors: political tension between countries in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa; lack of a strong academic constituency to promote the subject; excessive academic specialization that inhibits inter-disciplinary studies; the colonial and orientalist legacy that "Africa" and "the Middle East" are distinct and separate zones.<sup>9</sup>

What little scholarship has been conducted on minorities in the Arab world has ignored the presence of African and other dark-skinned peoples in the Middle East. Albert Hourani, in his 1947 *Minorities in the Arab World*, presented what he purported to be a complete listing of racial, ethnic and religious minorities in the Arab world, a list that is completely devoid of any mention of African and African-Arab minorities.

In his 1961 work, *A Vision of History*, Hourani provides the reasoning for his non-recognition of any Middle Eastern minorities with African ties. He argues that there are "no clearly separated 'races' in the Near East, and no 'racial conflicts'" as such, at least in the modern times. The Arabs have become too mixed over centuries to have any separation by race or color.

There may have been, in certain places, a certain social prejudice against those of black complexion, and that identification of "fair" with "beautiful" or "noble" which is to be found in many cultures; but when it existed it was due more to the association of blacks with slavery than to color itself, and it was never formalized into a doctrine, or taken so seriously as to become itself a cause of conflict.<sup>10</sup>

In *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* Bernard Lewis argues that race in the region has been a matter of "social snobbery" rather than of discrimination. He also finds "no significant numbers of blacks" except on the fringes of the Arab world, and "no recognizable, racially alien populations of slaves, ex-slaves, and their descendants, such as are found in the Americas."<sup>11</sup> Clearly this is a matter of degree, and hence the use of the qualifying terms "significant numbers" and "such as are found in the Americas." Significant numbers are in the eye of the scholar and historian.

### *Existence of African Minorities in the Arab World*

Contrary to this academic tendency to dissociate Africans from Arab culture, black African minorities have long been in existence in a number of regions of the Arab world. Recent scholarship has identified several well defined groups: the *haratin* in the western Sahara and the

desert fringe of North Africa, “dark-skinned persons—probably ‘aboriginal’ populations joined by ex-slaves”<sup>12</sup>; descendents of slaves who in Algeria live in primarily endogamous communities that continue to practice elements of pre-Islamic sub-Saharan cult traditions<sup>13</sup>; “distinct groupings” of descendents of slaves in the Arabian peninsula, among them the *banú khadīr*; and “African-Iraqis” in the south of Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

In order to answer the question why Africans and African-Arab minorities have been so marginalized and even ignored in Middle Eastern social life and scholarship we must examine the social forces that have given Arab society its form. The image of dark skin in the Arab world is constructed of a series of powerful historical associations, or layers of historical meaning: Islam, slavery, Western colonization, and the media and labor in a global society.

### The Influence of Islam

There is a long history of ambiguous relations between Africans north and south of the Sahara. On the one hand, Arab merchants were long perceived by Africans as exploitative opportunists. On the other hand, Islam’s strikingly positive attitude toward the African peoples became established on an early footing in the days of Muhammad himself.

Bernard Lewis cites two Quranic verses that are seen to have given the Islamic culture a clear direction away from the use of race or color as a means of social identification and ordering:

Among God’s signs are the creation of the heavens and of the earth and the diversity of your languages and of your colors. In this indeed are signs for those who know.

O people! We have created you from a male and a female and we have made you into confederacies and tribes so that you may come to know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God is the most pious, for God is omniscient and well-informed.<sup>15</sup>

Muhammad spoke approvingly of Africans and Africa. Edward Blyden, a nineteenth century religious historian, argued that the foundation of the Islamic world’s freedom from racial prejudice relative to the West was laid by statements and actions of the Prophet. He cites a hadith in which Muhammad said: “I admonish you to fear God and yield obedience to my successor, although he may be a black slave.”<sup>16</sup> Clearly the statement acknowledges the existence of a profound racial hierarchy in Arab culture, yet at the same time it subverts that hierarchy.

Muhammad’s recognition of Bilal as what may be considered the primary exemplar of a true believer set a standard for the full acceptance of Africans in Islam.

Muhammad appointed a Negro slave, Bilal, to call the faithful to prayer at the stated times. And from [Bilal] the beautiful sentiment found utterance—“Prayer is better than sleep. Prayer is better than sleep.” It is repeated every day throughout the Muhammadan world; and the most distinguished European of which history can boast is, in Asia and Africa, an unknown personage by the side of the slave, Bilal. Muhammad gave this man precedence to himself in Paradise. On one occasion the Prophet said to Bilal, at the time of the morning prayer, “O Bilal, tell me an act

of yours from which you had the greatest hopes; because, I heard the noise of your shoes in front of me in Paradise, in the night of my ascension.”<sup>17</sup>.

Moreover, Blyden cites Muhammad’s positive attitude towards the continent of Africa in general:

Muhammad not only loved the Negro, but regarded Africa with peculiar interest and affection. When in the early years of his reform, his followers were persecuted and could get no protection in Arabia, he advised them to seek an asylum in Africa. “Yonder,” he said, pointing towards this country, “yonder lieth a country wherein no man is wronged—a land of righteousness. Depart thither; and remain until it pleaseth the Lord to open your way before you.” This recalls to us Homer’s “blameless Ethiopians,” and the words of the Angel to Joseph: “Arise and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word again.”<sup>18</sup>

Such pro-African statements and actions set a pattern for the entire history of Islam. While they did not eliminate all racial prejudice, the historical record clearly shows they prevented the kind of extremist racism common in North America, and they allowed slaves of African and other ethnic origins to rise to the highest ranks of society. Blyden cites several examples of prominent Muslims in Islamic history of African background. Kafur (d. 968 CE), a dark-skinned African eunuch, governed Egypt for 22 years and was famed throughout the Arab world. He was, however, referred to by his enemies as “the black stone.”<sup>19</sup> “His dominion extended not only over Egypt, but Syria also; and public prayers were offered up for him, as sovereign, from the pulpits of Mekka, Hijaz, Egypt and the cities of Syria, Damascus, Aleppo, Antioch, Tarsus, etc.” A ninth century khalife of Baghdad of African origin was celebrated for his integrity and scholarship.<sup>20</sup> Blyden also cites the common practice of Arab-African intermarriage as key to the expansion of Islam in Africa, quite unlike the strict sexual separation of the races seen in Christian missionary practice on the continent.

...the Arab missionaries often entered into the bonds of wedlock with the daughters of [Africa]; and by their teaching, by their intelligence, by their intermarriages with the natives, by the trade and generosity of their merchants, they enlisted so many interests and such deep sympathies, that they rapidly took abiding root in the country. Some of the highest names in the annals not only of Islamic but of pre-Islamic literature, are those of the descendants of Arabs and Africans.<sup>21</sup>

#### Pre-Modern Slavery in the Arab World

However, while racial prejudice in the Islamic world was and is far less than in the West it nevertheless has been a consistent and prominent feature. The historical record shows that the spirit embodied in these verses was not translated into social practice in daily life.

The positive relationships between Arabs and Africans was consistently undermined by the Arab practice of enslavement of Africans. As we shall, see the past and present trade in African slaves to the Arab world has been, contrary to the commonly held view, severe and has left a long and bitter memory in African society to this day. Black Africa “was the earliest source for slaves and the last great reservoir to dry up; already in the 640s slaves were part of the “non-aggression pact” between Arab conquerors and Nubian rulers, while as late as 1910 slave caravans were still

arriving in Benghazi from Wadai (in Chad).” As Europe’s power arose following the Renaissance, white slaves became rarer, until “by the seventeenth century blackness of skin [or] African origin was virtually synonymous in the Arab world with both the notion and the word ‘slave’; they were *‘abid*. Even to this day the word for Africans in many dialects of Arabic remains just that—*‘abid*—“slaves.” Even as late as the end of the nineteenth century saw the preservation of this concept; a Moroccan scholar observed, “People have become so inured to [slavery], generation after generation, that many common folk believe that the reason for being enslaved according to the Holy Law is merely that a man should be black in color and come from those regions [of Africa].”<sup>22</sup>

There was a hierarchy of slaves paralleling and mirroring the hierarchy in the free society. In Aleppo the preferred slaves were white-skinned from Eastern Europe. The least desirable were black-skinned Africans from south of the Sahara. Of middling prestige were the Abyssinians (Habash), who were regarded as having dark skin but also “sharp” Arab facial features. Europeans were taken as concubines or even wives; Abyssinians were preferred as concubines; and sub-Saharan Africans were assigned the most menial domestic work and as servants to upper-class women. Sub-Saharan African men were likewise assigned the most coarse tasks, and were sporadically used as soldiers, and as eunuchs, while white-skinned male slaves could rise to very high positions in society.

Contrary to Blyden’s view, and to the common conception of Islam today, Lewis found centuries-old racial stereotypes of Africans, whether they were Muslim believers or not, that are virtually identical with those found in the West. Africans and blackness of skin in general are considered ugly. Africans are known as lazy, untrustworthy, bearing a foul body odor, prone to violence and barbarity, of lesser mental capacity, tending toward sexual excess and depravity.<sup>23</sup> Even the concept of the half-African or “mulatto” has striking similarities in the West and Islamic culture.<sup>24</sup>

It seems clear that these negative stereotypes of the African served to justify his enslavement by drawing attention away from his Muslim identity, an identity that according to shari’a law precludes enslavement. The stereotype—and the more lurid the better—was simply a red herring to conceal the exploitation of the foreigner’s labor, an abuse condemned by the Holy Book.

The harshness of slavery in the Arab world was less pronounced than in the West due to a number of factors. It was common for slave owners to manumit their slaves after only several years, following an Islamic tradition. To do so was considered a means of assisting the slave owner to gain reward in Paradise. Moreover, many of the children of free fathers and slave mothers were free. Such practices have no parallel in North American slavery.<sup>25</sup> Slaves in Islam were able to rise to all social ranks, including the highest levels of government. Moreover, slavery in Islam for most of its history was not color-specific; indeed, the preferred slaves, as the very word indicates, came from the Slavic regions of Europe.

Bernard Lewis points out that the target of most racist prejudices in the Islamic culture was the African male. The African female, especially if she were from Ethiopia, was commonly taken as a concubine or even as a wife, and her children—especially the males—enjoyed all the benefits and honors of the father’s family.<sup>26</sup> In the West there was no such distinction between male and female among African slaves: both were considered chattel and were identified by law as such.

Nevertheless, as shall be discussed, recent scholarship has emphasized that even if Islamic slavery was less oppressive than its transatlantic counterpart, its image as essentially benign is a myth. From the earliest centuries of the Arab practice of slavery it was known as a devastating influence on Africans individually and socially. While Hourani asserted that Arab prejudice against African slaves was never “taken so seriously as to become itself a cause of conflict,” Victor Kiernan emphasizes the historical importance of the Zanj rebellion, a slave revolt in ninth-century Iraq. Along with Toussaint L’Ouverture’s revolution in Haiti, and the Spartacus uprising in Roman Italy, he ranks it as one of “the three most tremendous slave revolts in all history.”<sup>27</sup>

The Arab culture therefore exhibits an ambivalence regarding the African people. On the one hand, the desire for cheap labor has motivated Arabs to practice slavery from ancient times, and the modern free-market economy has preserved this desire. On the other hand, Arab society, under the influence of Islam, has never codified slavery as a total system of production. The fate of slaves, whether European or African, in the Arab world has paralleled most closely not the Protestant slavery of the United States, in which the legal and spiritual identity of the African was obliterated, but the slavery of the Catholic colonies, wherein the slave’s spiritual identity was protected by the laws and the well-maintained social structure of the church. Just as in the Catholic states, where the church was partially effective as a check on the ambition and potentially limitless greed of planters, so too in the Arab world the Islamic legal and spiritual practices prevented the complete despiritualization of the slave and afforded some protection of his or her rights.

#### *Doctrine of Racism: Arab-African Intermarriage*

Hourani’s 1961 assertion that anti-African racial prejudice was “never formalized into a doctrine” has been echoed more recently by John Hunwick. He argues that “There is a lack of a consistent literature that theorizes the inferiority of black people.” Referring to the mid-nineteenth century French philosopher of racial difference, Hunwick states that “Islam did not have its Gobineau.” Moreover, traditional Christian theological justifications of African enslavement did not take root: “The so-called ‘Hamitic myth’ in which Ham is cursed by his father Noah and hence his descendants are made black does appear in a number of early Arabic writings, but by the fourteenth century it is firmly refuted [by Ibn Khaldún], in favor of a theory of the effect of climate on skin color.”<sup>28</sup>

However, other recent research has found evidence that indicates at least the outlines of various forms of racial doctrine. David B. Davis argues that the Arab slave trade led directly to the development of racial categories and consciousness in Arab society. Arabic literature from the eighth and ninth centuries stigmatized blackness of skin and identified it with all that was offensive, repulsive, animalistic and evil. Black poets, known as the Crows of the Arabs, wrote of blackness as a stigma in their society.<sup>29</sup> Davis concludes that the Arab attitude towards Africans was that of “a ‘white’ ruling race intent on celebrating its own progressive civilization while keeping slaves or an underclass of freedmen in a state of permanent subordination. Racial stereotypes ... were clearly nourished by a long-term flow of slave labor from sub-Saharan Africa.”<sup>30</sup> In this regard it should be noted that the trade of slaves from Africa to the Arab world was much longer than its counterpart across the Atlantic: it was well established in the pre-Islamic period, while the transatlantic trade began in earnest only in the sixteenth century. Davis’s thesis of the centrality of racial stereotyping in the Arab society is therefore supported by

the sheer factor of time, a difference of at least one thousand years. It is also supported by the statements of African scholars, discussed below, referring to the ingrained negative image and impact of Arab culture on African societies.

Racial doctrine is particularly visible in the history of Arab-African intermarriage. Arab males commonly kept African concubines, and freely married them. The marriage of African males with Arab women also existed, though it steeply declined and eventually disappeared after the advent of Islam. The ambiguous Arab perception of Africans is illustrated in a ninth century essay by Abu Uthman al-Jahiz on the *zanj*, the ancient Arab term for the natives of East Africa. He identifies what he regards as their chief good qualities: generosity, poise, eloquence, politeness, physical strength, courage, energy, cheerfulness, morality and nobility. He also describes their own feelings towards the Arabs:

The Zanj say to the Arabs: You are so ignorant that during the jahiliyya you regarded us as your equals when it came to marrying Arab women, but with the advent of the justice of Islam you decided this practice was bad. Yet the desert is full of Zanj married to Arab wives, and they have been princes and kings and have safeguarded your rights and sheltered you against your enemies.

The Zanj say that God did not make them black in order to disfigure them; rather it is their environment that made them so. The best evidence of this is that there are black tribes among the Arabs, such as the Banu Sulaim bin Mansur, and that all the peoples settled in the Harra, besides the Banu Sulaim are black. These tribes take slaves from among the Ashban to mind their flocks and for irrigation work, manual labor, and domestic service, and their wives from among the Byzantines; and yet it takes less than three generations for the Harra to give them all the complexion of the Banu Sulaim. This Harra is such that the gazelles, ostriches, insects, wolves, foxes, sheep, asses, horses and birds that live there are all black. White and black are the results of environment, the natural properties of water and soil, distance from the sun, and intensity of heat. There is no question of metamorphosis, or of punishment, disfigurement or favor meted out by Allah.<sup>31</sup>

This text clearly evidences both color-consciousness in Arab society and systemic prejudice against the dark-skinned Zanj.

But this sort of reluctance to intermarry was not limited to the earlier centuries of the Islamic period. The Banú Khadír are a coherent group in Arabia of mixed African and Arab ancestry. They have been for the most part confined to the peasant class and are rarely landowners, though some of have achieved positions of high status. Their inferiority to “pure” Arabs is clear:

In the old Arabia, Banú Khadír were subject to a strong tabu: no matter how high a status in life a Khadírí held, any Arab of pure descent, humble though his circumstances might be, would flatly refuse to give him a daughter as his bride. In the new Arabia of the later twentieth century, with great changes taking place in the economic and social structure, this tabu may be weakening.<sup>32</sup>

Louise Marlow points out that eighth-century Islamic legal scholars debated the issue of intermarriage between Arabs and *muwallí*, feudal tenants. Although some were more inclined to

egalitarian standards and acceptance of intermarriage than others, it appears that there was a general consensus that “black women” and others, including “converts, poor women, *nabati* women and client women,” could not ever fall into the category of “woman of position” and were not required to meet the highest standards in contracting and arranging a marriage. They were considered “lowly women.” Thus legal scholars “took differences in social standing for granted,” one of which clearly was based on skin color.<sup>33</sup> Marlow also notes that the issue of racial intermarriage in certain *hadīth* is ambiguous:

Instructive are certain *hadīth* recorded by al-Kulīnī and Ibn Bābawayh on the subject of marriage: the Prophet marries a poor and ugly black man to a woman of the Ansār, on the grounds that “By Islam, God has brought low those who were noble in the *Jāhiliyya* and ennobled those who previously were low”; the believing man is declared to be the equal of the believing woman; decay and sedition are said to be the inevitable outcome if people refuse to marry pleasing persons of suitable religion, regardless of their social station; the requirement of marriage equality is said to be satisfied as long as the man is chaste and possesses adequate means...<sup>34</sup>

But Marlow also states, “Certainly, there are also Shīʿite traditions that suggest the opposite social outlook,” and cites *hadīth* of Al-Kulīnī “that discourage marriage with blacks, Kurds and others.” She concludes that taken together these *hadīth* “suggest the prevalence in most legal circles of a strong sense of social differences,” and “a profound consciousness of social rank among scholars in many environments.”<sup>35</sup>

Despite any scholarly reservations, intermarriage became widespread. Hunwick himself notes that “even if on one level black Africans were considered inferior human beings, their womenfolk were often thought fit to be concubines (and sometimes wives) and to be the mothers of “Arab” children, even of Arab rulers.”<sup>36</sup> The legacy of Arab-African mixing is seen throughout East and Northeast Africa. The peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea are descendents of an influx of Arabs dating from the fifth century BCE. “Abyssinia” is a form of the word Habashan, the name of a prominent Arab tribe that settled in Ethiopia. Similarly, the Swahili are essentially a mixed community of Arabs and Africans dating from the seventh and eight centuries when wars in Arabia caused a wave of Arab refugees to settle in East Africa. Not only is their language a mixture of Arabic with African tongues, but until the advent of Western colonization the Swahili language was from at least the ninth century written using Arabic script.<sup>37</sup> Intermarriage was central to Zanzibar’s African-Arab society, yet it did not prevent a profound cultural and political clash between them in the mid-1960s.<sup>38</sup> One can conclude that this intermarriage of Arabs and Africans, at least in Zanzibar, was more an expression of systemic power relations, not of deep spiritual unity between two groups.

We can conclude the following: 1) Racial doctrine did exist in the practice of slavery among the Arabs, although it was less formalized and detailed than its counterpart in the West. 2) Slavery was harsh, at least to the point where Africans spoke and wrote of their plight. 3) The treatment of African slaves was worse than the treatment of European slaves, and the sub-Saharan African slaves were treated worst of all. Historians must therefore be careful not to confuse issues, and to mistakenly draw the conclusion that benign treatment of one group of slaves implies benign treatment of the entire population of slaves and absence of racial discrimination.



### Modern Slavery in the Arab World

The practice of slavery still exists in the Arab and must be seen as a continuity with the pre-modern forms of enslavement. Many particular aspects of slavery have changed in the modern period, yet the fundamental structure remains similar if not identical to the old traditions.

Although slaves in the Arab world were for centuries taken from black and white populations, and from Middle Eastern ethnic groups as well, the identity of European or Middle Eastern ethnicities with slave status faded and the practice of African slavery continued, firmly entrenching the association of black skin with the lowest social status. Bernard Lewis explains that the trade in white slaves from the Caucasus “came to an end with the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 1783 and the extinction of Tartar independence.” There was no corresponding power in Africa to cut off the flow of African slaves, and thus it continued nearly unhindered, and today is experiencing a revitalization.

By the late nineteenth century slavery in Egypt, for example, was widespread throughout the society. Slave owners came from all social ranks. One survey of slave owners at the time has found “bedouins, 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,” including Christians, Jews, and even Europeans, such as the French Consul.<sup>39</sup> Not only was slave-ownership widespread, it was considered a rule among status-seekers. One contemporary visitor to Egypt wrote:

So inwrought, indeed, is the institution into the domestic and social life of the country, that the possession of one or more slaves is as essential to “respectability” amongst one’s neighbors as is that of a servant for menial work in a European family; and this social consideration has, probably, more to do with the maintenance of the institution than any question as to the relative cost of slave and free labor.

...In most places the position of a person is measured by the number of slaves he possesses—especially is this true in the case of the women who take peculiar pride in telling how many slave girls they have under their command.<sup>40</sup>

Slavery is very much a part of today’s global economy. It rivals and in some regions eclipses the international narcotics trade. According to a very conservative estimate there are about 27 million slaves in the world today, generating \$13 billion in annual profits. About 15 to 20 million of these are debt-bonded laborers in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Some estimates show a world slave population as high as 200 million.<sup>41</sup> The other major centers of slavery are Southeast Asia, northern and western Africa and regions of South America. A 2000 US government report estimated that between 700,000 and 2 million women and children are annually trafficked between countries. Trafficking destinations include Europe, Japan and the United States; the Home Office conservatively estimated in 2000 that between 142 and 1420 women slaves are brought into the United Kingdom every year.<sup>42</sup>

The trading of slaves from the Sudan to the Arab countries, which arose before Islam, remains today a vibrant enterprise and shows no signs of collapse despite increasing pressure from human rights groups and the international community. Some 100,000 Sudanese are chattel

slaves in Sudan, and many more are held in other forms of slavery in the country.<sup>43</sup> John Eibner states: "Slavery is found today in many parts of the world... But Sudan is the only place where chattel slavery is not just surviving but experiencing a great revival."<sup>44</sup>

A Sudanese teenager recalled a similar experience. At the age of seven Francis Bok was sold to an Arab family in the Sudan. He described his first days: "I was given as a slave, and they took me to his family, and beat me with sticks. All of them—the women too. They laughed and called me 'Abeed, abeed.'"<sup>45</sup>

Slavery in the Arab world is not limited to a single ethnic group. Kevin Bales notes that in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, for example, the slave population is comprised of Sri Lankan Hindus, Filipino Christians and Nigerian Muslims, among others.<sup>46</sup> In Lebanon most foreign workers are natives of Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Egypt and the Philippines. In 1998, 160,000 Sri Lankans became workers outside Sri Lanka, most of whom went to the Gulf Arab states, Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>47</sup> The BBC reported in 1999 that in Beirut there were an estimated 15,000 female domestic workers from Ethiopia alone. Some 2,000 Ethiopian women and girls entered Beirut that year over a three-month period.<sup>48</sup> Not all of these foreign workers are treated as slaves. However, many of them face chronic abuse from employers and fall into various forms of slavery that have been recognized by international human rights agencies, including the United Nations.

### European Colonization and Racial Identity in the Arab World

European colonization no doubt left its mark on the Arab world though perhaps less clearly than elsewhere. Its primary contribution to the issue of race was the construct whiteness.

The colonial era was a turning point in modern history, for it was the point when Europeans—especially the English—began to refer to themselves as white in order to distinguish themselves from other populations intended to be reserved as slave labor pools. Prior to the advent of the construct of whiteness, colonialists referred to themselves and others by nationality—Englishmen, for example—and by religion. When the justification for enslavement was based on the excuse that the slave was not Christian, the slave system was vulnerable to the process of religious conversion—which, after all, was one of the stated aims of the colonies. The legalistic mentality of the colonial intellectuals simply shifted the justification from the variable quality of religious identity to the more or less fixed physical quality of skin color. Thus the colonialists took advantage of a convenient accident of nature.

Skin color was chosen for practical reasons. It was highly visible and it was permanent. Referring to slavery in Europe's colonial period, Victor Kiernan reasons, "An urbanized aristocracy wants its servants very distinctly marked off from it, as a different species of humanity..."<sup>49</sup> Of particular value, for the sake of capitalist enterprise, it passed on to the next generation, that is, it enabled slave status to be easily and cheaply reproduced. Christian colonists argued that dark skin color was the mark placed by God on descendants of the sinful Ham; thus it was not only a convenient brand for ease of identification, it was also divinely ordained. The practical political shift became gradually loaded with ideology, until over the centuries skin color in Europe was completely mystified in popular culture, bearing countless meanings. Under the evolving system of racist philosophy in Europe, the Americas and wherever European colonies were established, each shade and hue of skin became a heavily weighted text. Children were taught from a young

age to read and understand these texts; it was a primary duty, the failure of which they knew brought severe punishment.

The colonial period brought to the Arab world the notion of European superiority, and the identity of whiteness with superiority. The issue of whiteness in the late colonial experience is well described in Tayeb Saleh's *Season of Migration to the North*; a detailed political, cultural and psychological analysis is given in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

### Race and Colonization in Syria and Lebanon

From its very beginning in 1920 the period of French colonization in Syria and Lebanon was charged with racial overtones. Elizabeth Thompson has found that opposition to the French was seen in sexual and racial terms. Women were considered suddenly to face severe and constant threats of rape by French soldiers; and the most fearsome of these soldiers were natives of France's West African colony of Senegal. French military power in Syria and Lebanon was heavily dependent on Senegalese soldiers who had fought for France during World War I.<sup>50</sup> In interviews conducted in 1992 Thompson found that memories are long of the racial quality of the mandate period.

Senegalese soldiers are often singled out in women's memories of the mandate period as especially threatening. Parents warned girls to avoid them on the streets, and would even keep them home for fear of assault. "When they wanted to care the children, the French would say 'The Senegalese will come to you now!'" recalled one woman.<sup>51</sup>

Not only the French were involved in this racializing process. Lebanese and Syrians also fomented rumors that Senegalese soldiers would rape women and kill children.<sup>52</sup> A 1943 cartoon depicted a fair-skinned, European woman representing Lebanese women being menaced by a leering, rifle-carrying Senegalese soldier.<sup>53</sup> They perceived the "use of Senegalese troops first to expel Faisal I of Syria and then on garrison duty" as a sign of the French power's "contempt for the Arabs."<sup>54</sup> They felt "alienation and humiliation" as they "daily encountered the French state in the form of thuggish colonial troops, not as enlightened administrators guiding them toward the mandate's promised political maturity."<sup>55</sup> Thompson elucidates the conflation of sex and race in the Syrian-Lebanese anti-colonial ideology:

For the remainder of the mandate, the Senegalese would become a regular target of nationalist propaganda in sexualized and racialized imagery that fused men's gender anxieties with outrage at French domination. This imagery reinforced an understanding that the nation was a nation of men, tacitly excluding women. Rooted in the crisis of paternity, it reasserted male protection and control over women.<sup>56</sup>

### Race and Colonization in Egypt

#### *Westernization of Upper Class Culture*

As perhaps the most influential culture in the Arab world, Egypt has played a central role in forming the attitudes of Arabs towards Africans. Egypt has long evidenced cultural tension

regarding its relationship to Africa and Africans. The royal family was Albanian and maintained a distinct separation from the native Egyptian population. In 1870 Khedive Ismail stated: "My country does not lie in Africa but in Europe."<sup>57</sup>

The Khedive's concept of Egypt remained in vogue among the upper class until Nasser's revolution. The royal family as a whole identified themselves not with Egypt but with Europe, and the upper class followed suit.

The royal family, of Albanian–Ottoman origin, and the old Turkish elite were famous—even in folklore—for looking down on the indigenous population, and the sizeable European community in Egypt exhibited western civilization's unabashed feelings of superiority and self-certainty. The contact of the Egyptian upper class with elements of both led them in many ways to try to move away from the manners and customs of the indigenous populations and to emulate those of the court and Westerners. As happened in Ottoman Turkey, the West was the subject of emulation and set the standards of desirability in dress, food, residence, etiquette, and so on.<sup>58</sup>

As shall be seen, these standards also included concepts of race, skin color, class, culture and civilization.

Intellectuals also looked to Europe as the pinnacle of culture. Taha Husayn expressed in detail this Egyptian feeling of inadequacy in the face of Europe's hegemony in the colonial and post-colonial period. He saw that Egypt's future was necessarily dependent on the development of Western "culture and science," for these alone were the basis of civilization, wealth and strength. Echoing the Khedive he wrote, "Egypt has always been a part of Europe in all that relates to intellectual and cultural life."<sup>59</sup> Egypt was a society in which Europeans "represented a refined and distinguished class. They were looked up to as races that are superior by nature. It was the utmost ambition of any Egyptian to imitate them..."<sup>60</sup> Abdullah Al-Nadim wrote that Westerners continuously glorify their own cities and culture, and claim that they are "the masters of the human race; that guidance is theirs and misguidance the lot of others... [So] we accepted their exaggerations with credulousness and resignation, without search or contemplation, and explained all they do as wisdom and rightness and opened before them approving souls upon which is reflected all that which they imagine for us..."<sup>61</sup> Of course not all Egyptians in the upper class or other strata subscribed to this attitude; many prominent figures spurned westernization and remained devoted to Arab and Egyptian traditions. Yet it was this attitude that prevailed for the most part in forming both Egypt's relationship to the West and the Egyptian's self-identity. A 1929 Egyptian political cartoon showed America, represented by Uncle Sam, attracted to Egypt, represented by a stereotypical European or American woman dressed in the flapper style.<sup>62</sup>

Parliamentary debate from the 1930s shows that the very antithesis of the European ideal was seen by the upper class to be the indigenous fellaheen. They were believed to exhibit in their behavior and personal qualities the negation of the high civilization of Europe. They were spendthrifts, lazy, irresponsible, unworthy of education except industrial training. The upper class cited the Qur'an<sup>63</sup> to support their contention that the fellaheen should remain in their low rank, and thus should not have access to elite education. And they were stereotyped as easily spoiled, that is, desiring to rise above their position. Parliamentarians were deeply concerned that the fellaheen would forget their place in society, and eventually seek to abandon the

*galabiyya* and skullcap and adopt “effendi clothes complete with tarboosh,” and stockings and shoes. One group of ten deputies introduced an amendment to an education bill that would prevent peasant children from entering a school if they were not wearing *galabiyyas*.<sup>64</sup> Any student of race relations in America would recognize that these stereotypes were exactly those used by defenders of white superiority in the South and elsewhere.

There is some evidence that color prejudice was involved in this criticism and fear of the fellaheen. A 1950 cartoon, expressing the threat of revolt by peasants in the turmoil resulting from World War II, stereotyped the fellah as a black-skinned ogre.<sup>65</sup>

The critical issue, however, is that in their adoration of Europe and European culture, a culture which historically involved deeply entrenched racist concepts against Africa and other colonized regions of the world, it was only natural and inevitable that upper class Egyptian society would express their Europe-dreaming in both positive and negative ways: positive, in seeking to emulate the Europeans in their cultural achievements; and negative, in their imitation of European anti-African racism.

#### *Nationalist Reaction*

But this concept of Egypt as separate from Africa and closer to or part of Europe was attacked by the revolutionary movement of the early 1950s. It came to be seen as a “legend,” “a foreign conception hiding imperialism, religious missions, and monopolies...” Egyptian nationalism under Nasser began to embrace Africa, and to champion its liberation and unity with the Arabs in a strategic alliance against Western imperialism. Nationalist polemics argued that “Egypt has always been the heart of the continent” of Africa, a complete reversal of the traditional Egyptian self-identity. At the Casablanca Conference of January 1961, Nasser proclaimed the essential union of Africa, and “the collapse of all imperialistic maneuvers to divide Africa into two parts, North Africa and Negro Africa.”<sup>66</sup> Under the anti-imperialist program, Egypt rendered development, cultural and educational assistance to African countries.

But the hope of an Egyptian-African unity in the struggle against the West was short-lived. Political rhetoric and strategizing proved unable to halt the traditional anti-African prejudices.

To wed Arabism to Africa was not an easy task—many obstacles stood in the way, and some of them, popular and traditional, were difficult to overcome. Until [the early 1960s], many Egyptians referred to the Negro only as *barbari* (barbarian). They felt a deep sense of superiority towards any black man, and did not try to hide it. Mr. Mohammed Aly Nacef, Egypt’s drama censor, even felt compelled, in October 1960, to send a note to all film-producers and directors, requesting them not to give servants’ parts exclusively to Negroes. Commenting on this, the Egyptian review *Nahdatu Ifriqya* wrote in its November 1960 issue: “The age of African servants is over. Now begins that of the Africans as thinking individuals....”<sup>67</sup>

This optimism of racial integration of Egyptian cinema has also proved unfounded. Contemporary Egyptian film—and one could argue the entire history of the genre—is almost completely bereft of any significant presence of dark-skinned or obviously African actors and actresses in prominent roles, one exception being Ahmed Zaki. On the contrary, Egyptian movies often portray the physical features of actors as tending towards or approximating European characteristics.<sup>68</sup>

In any case, Africans were not convinced by the Egyptian brotherly rhetoric. A 1960 article in Senegal's *Paris-Dakar* daily newspaper stated:

There are two Africas, white Africa and black Africa. To liberate black Africa is to free it from the yoke of former colonial power and to avoid Arab imperialism. Expansionist ambitions can already be detected. It is therefore necessary to check their progress.

...

Militant Pan-Arabism is essentially racist and therefore is bound to favor slavery. It should not appeal to black Africans.<sup>69</sup>

From this African perspective, the Arabs were viewed as racist economic exploiters no different from Europeans.

#### *Whiteness and Contemporary Egyptian Society*

There have so far been no systematic studies of skin color and status in Egypt or any other Arab countries; however, a number of sources provide critical observations that point to the relevance of whiteness in the construction of class status and cultural identity. One source, dating from 1977, supports the concept of skin color differentiation in Egyptian society:

Until the Nasser revolution ... a small group of Turks, including the royal family, remained at the apex of society. They boasted of their Turkish blood and retained a sense of social superiority over the Egyptian, or the "fellah" as they often called him. Standards of personal beauty emphasizing Turkish standards, such as lighter shades of skin, eyes, and hair were still prevalent. Egyptian reaction against this residue of Turkish superiority could be seen in the lampooning that the Turks suffered in popular jokes and plays, and in the tribute that novels and folks songs repeatedly paid to the dark beauty of the Egyptian.<sup>70</sup>

The most direct statement on the subject is found in a recently published sociology textbook:

There is no doubt that light skin is a source of prestige [in Egypt]. Before the 1952 revolution, many families in the landowning elite were aristocrats descended from Egypt's earlier rulers (including Greeks, Turks, and Macedonians). They were conscious of their lighter skin and sought similar spouses for their children. Today light skin is still associated with elite status, with wealth and power. Movie stars and women in advertisements tend to have light skin. On the other hand, skin color is only one of many sources of prestige in Egypt, including gender, education, occupation, family background, and city origins. Furthermore, while Egyptians are aware of skin color, they are not race-conscious. That is, they do not classify people by race...<sup>71</sup>

The authors conclude that in Egypt although there is color consciousness, race per se is not a "master status" as it has been, for example, in North American and South Africa; that is, it is not a feature that takes priority over all others in determining status. Here we see again the Arab ambiguity regarding race. Bates and Rassam state that this is the case for the entire Arab world: "Even though in much of the [Middle East] light skin is considered a mark of beauty and higher status, there is no prevailing ideology of race based on color."<sup>72</sup>

### Post-Colonial Arab-African Relations

Arab-African tensions and conflicts have existed throughout the fringes of the Arab world, most recently in Zanzibar in the 1960s, and today in Sudan, Libya, Chad, Somalia and Mauritania.<sup>73</sup> Dunstan Wai argues that much of this tension is a legacy of colonialism. Colonial policies aimed specifically to separate the colonized by “race” and function. Race was a controlling myth that served its purpose, led to “differential modernization,” and even today perpetuates serious cultural “competition and conflict” between Arabs and African in countries such as Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Chad.<sup>74</sup>

Arabs and African are in fundamental disagreement regarding the history of Arab enslavement of Africans. Scholars have found that for political reasons Arabs tend significantly to understate or gloss over the harshness of the slave trade, and otherwise present apologies. African society views Arab society and culture negatively as a result of the long history of slavery.

The twelve centuries of contacts between sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab Middle East have been asymmetrical. Arabs have penetrated Africa, enslaved some of its inhabitants, and imported their religion and language. They have felt superior as the conveyors of a “civilized” culture, and have generally tended to be condescending towards those regarded as “inferior.” In their turn, many Africans today still view Arabs as cunning, crafty, dishonest, and untrustworthy, not least because their racial and cultural arrogance continues to revive “memories” of the rampages of slave traders in their region.<sup>75</sup>

Ali Mazrui found that in Zanzibar even in 1977 slavery was still “a memory of bitterness and humiliation.”<sup>76</sup> Dunstan Wai summarizes African-Arab relations: Arab exploitation of Africans; resultant long-term and inter-generational psychological scars in Africa; and the failure of Islamic unity as a means to reconcile the conflict, which parallels the failure of Christianity to completely unify Europe or Latin America.<sup>77</sup>

In a paper delivered at a 1983 academic conference one Sudanese scholar wrote:

Slavery is slavery and cannot be beautified by cosmetics. It left extreme bitterness in the central parts of the [African] continent against the Arab minority which lived on the coast. Because this issue disturbs Afro-Arab relations it should be studied courageously and objectively.<sup>78</sup>

In response to this African position, an Arab scholar presented an apologia redirecting the discourse into a different subject: the transatlantic trade.

The issue of slavery should be addressed, and emphasis on the Arabs’ humane and familial treatment of their slaves compared with other slave-owning people. The contrast, especially regarding transatlantic slavery is so striking, that it should be emphasized in this context.

Most Arab scholarship in the past half century has tended to present this sort of defense of Arab slavery.

However, Arab human rights workers have recently placed the Arab practice of racial prejudice on the international human rights agenda. A July 2001 Cairo meeting held in preparation for the United Nations World Conference Against Racism was cited by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies as the first occasion on which “a consensus on combating racism in Arab countries was reached.” The group agreed that among the minority populations at risk in Arab states were Kurds, Palestinian refugees, Bedouin, and Asian women workers.<sup>79</sup>

### Contemporary American Mass Media

Overlaying the colonial construction of whiteness is its modern expansion in the very recent explosion of Western mass media, particularly television and film.

The age of globalization can be said to have begun in earnest during and after World War Two. The victorious United States commenced an expansion of market influence and control unprecedented in world history. A key element in this expansion has been the use of popular media. Propaganda techniques became well established as early as World War One,<sup>80</sup> but it was with the advent of global communications and transportation technologies in World War Two and after that the full power of suggestion and persuasion in popular media was unleashed. Conscious and unconscious beliefs of color prejudice have, virus-like, migrated to all regions of the world using the extremely efficient vehicle of American popular media. It is not merely coincidental that the first “great” motion picture, *Birth of a Nation*, takes as its theme a powerful and oppressive depiction of anti-African stereotypes. American films, television, advertising and marketing schemes have all consistently fostered in America and around the world racist concepts—some gross, others subtle—that insist on the inherent inferiority if not evil of Africans and other “dark” peoples.

By the simple method of constant repetition, American media efficiently define and reinforce roles for women, ethnic groups, and white males. Although these roles were intended to influence primarily American consumers, as exports to the Arab world and elsewhere they reproduce racial and gender stereotypes with the same efficiency and influence for Arab consumers as for Americans. However, it can be argued that Arab and other non-American consumers are perhaps more susceptible to being influenced by American mass media stereotypes because they generally do not have access to countervailing voices, are unaware of the debates on prejudices and arguments presented by, for example, African Americans, and therefore are more likely to view American media uncritically.

By exposure to a steady stream of powerful media images defining stereotypes that marginalize the other while centralizing the white male perspective, Arab consumers, naturally, tend to identify with the “white male” perspective. By absorbing white media—and American culture in general—they become white.<sup>81</sup>

Therefore, to be influenced by the American-led global economy, to adopt its cultural principles, its artistic forms and expressions, its diet, its clothing style, is to become imbued with an overarching racial philosophy positing the supremacy of “white” people. In a critique of the fast food industry Eric Schlosser and Jeremy Rifkin write:



[T]he American experience is viewed with anticipation and longing by millions of people in other countries in search of “the good life.” Many continue to view membership in the exclusive beef club as a sign of having arrived, of being part of the chosen few. For that reason, they line up at McDonald’s in cities around the world, the utilitarian spirit of the age drowning out any reservations they might entertain about the Faustian bargain they are entering into.

The idea that you are what you eat has been enthusiastically promoted for years by Den Fujita, the eccentric billionaire who brought McDonald’s to Japan three decades ago. “If we eat McDonald’s hamburgers and potatoes for a thousand years,” Fujita once promised his countrymen, “we will become taller, our skin will become white, and our hair will be blonde.”<sup>82</sup>

Fujita went on to say, “And when we become blonde we can conquer the world.”<sup>83</sup>

Arab consumers are not conscious of this gradual identification with the white American perspective, just as they are not conscious of being swayed by mass media advertising in general. Yet the effect is perhaps all the more powerful precisely because the Arab consumers are unaware that what they face is essentially propaganda. Not recognizing it as propaganda, they internalize it as reality, “the real world.” American mass media and marketing, the vast century-long wave of corporate invasion across the globe by Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Levis, Disney and others, is nothing less than systemic, globalized, technology-driven cultural colonization, the child of the colonization of gunboat days.

### Construction of Race in Lebanon

As a crossroads not only of the Middle East but of three continents Lebanon is an excellent locale in which to observe the operation of racial constructs. Color prejudice is a consistent and widespread feature throughout Lebanese society, though it is generally practiced unconsciously.<sup>84</sup>

### *Language*

Lebanese commonly refer to Africans using the derogatory term *`abid*. Householders in Lebanon refer to their foreign maids by their nationalities. They do not say, “my maid,” but rather, “my Sri Lankan.” National identity has thus become reduced to a signifier of class, status and power relations, in the same way that Slavic ethnicity became the signifier of slavery.

Colloquial language in Lebanon refers not to a foreign worker’s employer but rather his or her “owner” (*sahbu*). One hears the question, “Who is his owner?” This linguistic construction prevents the worker from being understood as a worker; indeed hardly ever is the foreign worker in this context referred to as an “employee.” Such language reinforces the relationship between foreign worker and employer as one not contracted freely in an open labor market, but rather as an arrangement between a powerful individual and a feudal vassal, indentured servant or slave.

In newspaper advertisements domestic workers are not referred to as employees; rather, the language parallels that of slavery. Classified advertisements regularly list female foreign workers



elementary school James Weldon Johnson, an African American who later became a prominent writer, was made painfully aware of his “racial” status for the first time in his life. The principle of his school entered his classroom and simply called upon all the “white scholars” to stand up. When he stood along with the majority of the class he was told by his teacher to sit down and stand with “the others.” It was a moment he later referred to as a “sword-thrust” that was “years in healing.” More recently the psychologist’s own six-year-old daughter participated in a class exercise on using graphs to chart information. The teacher asked in succession: “Stand up if you are white,” “Stand if you are black,” “Stand if you have blond hair,” and so on. Although ostensibly an exercise in mathematics and society, it actually created a new consciousness of color and “race”, of “black” and “white” that previously had not existed among the children and that immediately led to conflicts within and without the classroom.<sup>89</sup>

In Lebanon children’s textbooks provide evidence of a similar construction of racial identity in schools. One textbook compares two pairs of illustrations. The first pair are colored cartoons depicting two smiling, similarly dressed elderly couples, one apparently European American with white skin and one African American with dark brown skin. The second pair are photographs: one shows four smiling white European executives wearing business suits striding through a leafy corporate campus. The other is a view down a lane in a shanty town, and shows three dark-skinned children and two women living in absolute poverty. The text accompanying the illustrations reads:

What is the color of the man and woman who are in the first illustration [the elderly African American couple]? And what is the color of the two people in the second illustration [the elderly European American couple]? How does black human differ from us? How does he resemble us? What is the difference between the third and fourth pictures [the photographs]? How does the poor person differ from the rich one? How does he resemble him?<sup>90</sup>

The context of the lesson in which these illustrations are found is a discussion on sympathy for those who suffer from poverty. However, the key issue here is that the text stresses a clear and categorical distinction between the “black human” and “us.”

### *Migrant Labor Force*

Foreign workers are typically denied basic human rights in Lebanon. Upon their arrival in Beirut, most female domestic workers find that their travel documents are confiscated by the employer and thus they are deprived of the freedom to leave the country. They are also often prevented the freedom of movement out of the home in which they are working. Their contracts are not guaranteed, and often they are not paid. Their salary is withheld supposedly because the employer—who is often referred to as the “owner”—has been required by the contracting employment agency to pay in advance the worker’s travel and administrative expenses. Once the employer deems the “debt” to have been paid off by the worker then the salary begins to accrue. Clearly this is a form of debt slavery.<sup>91</sup>

As in the slave society of America, the recruitment of foreign workers with darker skin color is a practical advantage for Lebanese employers because it allows the easy identification and control of the work force. Consequently in every day life the Lebanese culture has established a more or less indelible identification between relatively dark skin color and a state of disempowerment, especially for women foreign workers.

In recent years journalists have regularly produced articles drawing attention to the living conditions of foreign workers and their being subject to racial abuse.

A typical case, reported to Human Rights Watch in 1997, stated that a 27-year-old Ethiopian woman was held against her will in Beirut by her employers and forced to work and suffer abuse. In the span of two years her body weight fell from 150 pounds to 90 pounds. She was repeatedly referred to by the employer, his family, and guests, as “slave.” *An-Nahar*, one of the major daily newspapers in Lebanon, reported the case on 21 May, and on 29 May published an article stating that the Lebanese authorities investigated the matter and found the complaint unjustified.<sup>92</sup> But later articles continued to point out the prevalence of racial prejudice against foreign workers, particularly those with darker skin (\_\_\_\_\_\_).<sup>93</sup>

African athletes have also complained of racism. In 1996 African professional soccer players on Lebanese teams cited in a letter to FIFA regular abuse on the field and off.<sup>94</sup>

#### *Constructing the Lebanese-American Self as White*

During the course of emigration and settlement to foreign countries, particularly in America, Lebanese were faced with questions of status and identity in societies that were highly racialized. Although it is a vast and little known aspect of Arab history, studies are now beginning to appear on the subject of Arab identity in foreign countries. Arab Americans have documented not only their subjection to racial discrimination and “lumping” with other ethnic minorities and low-status racial groups, but also their efforts to achieve recognition as “white.” Ellis Cose has summarized this process in a cogent statement of fact: Arabs “went to court to declare themselves white.”<sup>95</sup>

Court cases in America served to define the whiteness of Arab Americans. In 1942 a United States District Court in Michigan hearing an Arab man’s plea to become a naturalized citizen rejected his application because his Islamic culture prevented his assimilation into America’s Christian society. The court argued that if he were Armenian his application would have been successful, because Armenians have had a long history of Christian practice and intermarriage with Europeans. Legal John Tehranian comments, “Therefore, the court [based] its ruling not on any scientific notion of race ... but on the performance of whiteness through religious practices and intermarriage.”<sup>96</sup>

But in 1944, just two years later, another United States District Court in Massachusetts found that an Arab could be accepted as a naturalized citizen using another approach to performance criteria, emphasizing cultural affinity. The Court argued:

The names of Avicenna and Averroes, the sciences of algebra and medicine, the population and the architecture of Spain and of Sicily, the very words of the English language, remind us as they would have reminded the Founding Fathers of the action and interaction of Arabic and non-Arabic elements in our culture.<sup>97</sup>

#### *Encountering the Dark-Skinned Other Abroad*

Many Lebanese have spent decades in Africa pursuing businesses throughout the continent, and have followed the colonial mentality established by the British, French and Belgian powers. As foreign entrepreneurs they have become included in the colonial class structure, ranking lower than the Europeans yet superior to the native Africans. Arab middle class entrepreneurs in Africa have a mixed reputation. While many have ignored the European example and established close personal ties with Africans leading to friendships, business partnerships, adoption into tribes and intermarriage, many others have followed the racist patterns set by European colonial culture.

Several students of the Lebanese diaspora present evidence that in constructing the Arab self as white Lebanese tended to follow the prevailing racial norms. David Nicholls finds that in Jamaica, Lebanese-Jamaican intermarriage was rare. Though it did occur fairly regularly, it also faced severe opposition from within the Lebanese traditional society. One man's brothers threatened to shoot him if he married a native Jamaican, but he did so, and the marriage was accepted.<sup>98</sup> Didier Bigo argues that in the Ivory Coast the economic success of Lebanese merchant families resulted in a gradual tendency to exhibit "an aggressive display of power which wealth confers upon them. In popular areas, the worst of it is the attitude of young Lebanese men towards native women whom they pursue while tending to despise them." Such young Lebanese men would refuse to marry the Ivorian women, and would also refuse to allow Ivorian men to marry or approach Lebanese women. "This is the main grievance, the most deeply withheld and carefully concealed one..." Not all Ivorians have felt opposed to the Lebanese; many have enjoyed excellent relations with Lebanese in a variety of social circumstances. Yet the sense of injustice has predominated in Ivorian-Lebanese relations.<sup>99</sup>

#### Prospects for the Middle East

While slavery in the Americas endured for some four centuries, in the Arab world it has been practiced for at least 1300 years, and still goes on in some places. Throughout that period Africans, especially those from south of the Sahara, were assigned the lowest status. It cannot be reasonably asserted, therefore, that such a long history of enslavement and negative treatment of Africans, no matter how relatively benign compared to Western slavery, would leave little or no trace of racist attitudes among Arabs. Scholars and leaders of thought in the Arab world have begun to address this subject with vigor.

The field is wide open to many scholarly studies. Research needs to be conducted on present-day attitudes toward skin color in Arab society; the issue of skin-color in Arab film and television; the application of human rights guarantees to foreign workers; the prevalence or absence of intermarriage. Ethnographies of coherent African and African-Arab communities in the Arab world and in Africa are essential. The ongoing practice of slavery, in all its forms, needs to be brought to light by Arab scholars. Comparative studies must be conducted relating the Catholic Church and Islam in their respective practices of slavery.

The Middle East is one of the most culturally diverse regions of the world. It stands at a global crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa. Its population is composed of representative of many ethnic groups. Clearly the interaction of peoples and the exchange of vast resources in these three regions are the key to prosperity here as elsewhere, but are of such magnitude as to be unmatched anywhere else in the world. If diversity is a characteristic of a successful economy, then it is possible to argue that the Middle East will become the world's most prosperous region.

It is perhaps more than a mere coincidence that anti-African racism in Brazil has only recently come to the world's attention in scholarship and in media reports. Perhaps we are now living in a global society in which nuances of the human race, people who are neither black nor white, neither African nor Arab, but both, are now worthy of attention and recognition, both in society and in scholarship.

<sup>1</sup> Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> A. Hourani, *A Vision of History*, pp. 78-79; Iliya Harik, "The Ethnic Revolution and Political Integration in the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 3 (1972), p. 306.

<sup>3</sup> Carleton Coon, *Caravan: The Story of the Middle East* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. 3, 162.

<sup>4</sup> Iliya Harik, "The Ethnic Revolution and Political Integration in the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 3 (1972), pp. 304, 312.

<sup>5</sup> Mamoun Fandy, "Political Science Without Clothes: The Politics of Dress or Contesting the Spatiality of the State in Egypt," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 20, no. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 87-104.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Nyambune, "What Have Governments Done to Stop Slavery?" 7 December 2001, <http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200112070477.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), preface.

<sup>8</sup> Ehud Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> John Hunwick, "The Same But Different: Approaches to Slavery and the African Diaspora in the Lands of Islam," *Saharan Studies Association Newsletter*, December 1999, vol. VII, nos. 1-2, pp. 2-4.

<sup>10</sup> A. Hourani, *A Vision of History: Near Eastern and Other Essays* (Beirut: Khayats, 1961), p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (New York: Schocken, 1998), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad al-Hádí al-Juwaylí, *Mujtama'át li'l-dhákira, mujtama'át li'l-nisyan* [Societies to be Remembered, Societies to be Forgotten] (Tunis, 1994); John Hunwick, "The Same But Different," p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> John Hunwick, "The Same But Different," p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> D. Bates and G. Rassam, *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*, p. 89; G. Rentz, "Khadír," in E. van Donzel, B. Lewis and C. Pellat, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. IV (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 905-906; Sunni Khaled, "African Heritage Extends Across the Arab World," 13 December 2001 [www.delawareonline.com](http://www.delawareonline.com).

<sup>15</sup> XXX:22 and XLIX:13, quoted in Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford, 1990), p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968 (1887)), p. 244.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, p. 327.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, p. 231.

<sup>19</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Edward Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, pp. 20, 245.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> John Hunwick, "The Same But Different," pp. 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, pp. 92-94.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis quotes the Egyptian al-Abshihí (1388-1446): "My grandfather on my mother's side used to say: The worst use of money is bringing up slaves, and mulattoes are even worse and wicked than Zanj [East Africans], for the mulatto does not know his father, while the Zanj often knows both parents. It is said of the mulatto that he is like a mule, because he is a mongrel.... Do not trust a mulatto, for there is rarely any good in him." Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, p. 93. In *Forbidden Love: The Secret History of Mixed-Race America* (NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1999), Gary Nash found that mulattoes and other mixed-race people were stereotyped as unpredictable, volatile personalities.

<sup>25</sup> Gabriel Baer, *Fellah and Townsman in the Middle East: Studies in Social History* (London: Frank Cass, 1982), p. 226, and *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 161-64; Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 52-53.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, pp. 85-91.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes to Other Cultures in the Imperial Age* (London: Serif, 1995 (1983)), p. 207.

<sup>28</sup> John Hunwick, "The Same But Different," p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> See Abduh Badawi, *al-Súdu wa-al-hadaráh al-'Arabíyah* (Cairo: Dar Qiba, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> D. Davis, quoted in Paul Laurin, *Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination* (Boulder: Westview, 1998 (1996)), pp. 7-8.

<sup>31</sup> "Medieval Sourcebook: Abu Uthman al-Jahiz: From *The Essays*, c. 860 CE," [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/860jahiz.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/860jahiz.html).

<sup>32</sup> G. Rentz, "Khadír," in E. van Donzel, B. Lewis and C. Pellat, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. IV (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 905-906.

<sup>33</sup> Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Louis Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>35</sup> Louis Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism*, p. 33, no. 123.

- <sup>36</sup> John Hunwick, "The Same But Different," p. 7.
- <sup>37</sup> R. Rashidi, "Africans in Early Asian Civilizations: an Overview," in R. Rashidi, ed., *African Presence in Early Asia* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1988), p. 32; B. Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 178-79; J. Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven: Yale, 1992), pp. xii, 2; J. Allen, *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993), p. 137.
- <sup>38</sup> Dunstan Wai, "African-Arab Relations," p. 190.
- <sup>39</sup> G. Baer, *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt*, p. 167.
- <sup>40</sup> G. Baer, *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt*, p. 166-67.
- <sup>41</sup> Michael Platzer of the United Nations Center for International Crime Prevention, quoted in Michael Specter, "Traffickers in Women Find a Rich Source in Slavic Lands," *International Herald Tribune*, 12 January 1998, p. 7; Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 8-9.
- <sup>42</sup> Kevin Bales, *Disposable People*, pp. 8-9, 23; "Anti-Slavery: Trafficking Questions and Answer," at [www.antislavery.org/archive/other/trafficking%2Dqanda.htm](http://www.antislavery.org/archive/other/trafficking%2Dqanda.htm), viewed 7 November 2001.
- <sup>43</sup> John Eibner, "My Career Redeeming Slaves," *Middle East Quarterly*, December 1999, p. 6.
- <sup>44</sup> John Eibner, "My Career Redeeming Slaves," p. 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Jane Nyambune, "What Have Governments Done to Stop Slavery?" 7 December 2001, <http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200112070477.html>.
- <sup>46</sup> Kevin Bales, *Disposable People*, p. 11.
- <sup>47</sup> "Nearly 160,000 Lankans Found Employment Abroad Last Year," *Daily News: Internet Edition*, [www.lanka.net/lakehouse/1999/04/20/new16.html](http://www.lanka.net/lakehouse/1999/04/20/new16.html), viewed 8 November 2001.
- <sup>48</sup> "Ethiopian Maids 'Abused in Middle East,'" [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/africa/newsid\\_467000/467949.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/africa/newsid_467000/467949.stm), viewed 13 October 1999.
- <sup>49</sup> Victor Kiernan, *Lords of Human Kind*, p. 204.
- <sup>50</sup> "France after 1870 was short of manpower to face Germany with, and conscripted Africans to fill the gap. Conscription was one of those new forms of slavery that Europe was inventing for itself and others in place of the old. It took a heavy toll of health and family happiness in more backward European countries like Spain or Russia, and in Africa the toll must have been far heavier. Senegalese and other Negro troops were put to good use on the Western front in 1914-18; they were sometimes unsteady under heavy fire, but their habit of killing prisoners on the spot helped to unnerve the Germans." Victor Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes to Other Cultures in the Imperial Age* (London: Serif, 1995), p. 218.
- <sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 48.
- <sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, pp. 47.
- <sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, figure 19.
- <sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, p. 48.
- <sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, p. 185. French military troops also included nationalities other than Senegalese: Moroccans, Algerians, and Indochinese.
- <sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, p. 49.
- <sup>57</sup> Jacques Baulin, *The Arab Role in Africa* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1962), p. 42.
- <sup>58</sup> Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class between Revolutions 1919-1952* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998), pp. 141-42.
- <sup>59</sup> Quoted in Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class*, pp. 83-84.
- <sup>60</sup> Quoted in Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class*, p. 151.
- <sup>61</sup> Quoted in Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class*, p. 142.
- <sup>62</sup> Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class*, p. 169.
- <sup>63</sup> A thorough discussion of this subject is Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- <sup>64</sup> Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class*, p. 266-67.
- <sup>65</sup> Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class*, p. 237-38.
- <sup>66</sup> Jacques Baulin, *The Arab Role in Africa*, p. 40, 42-43.
- <sup>67</sup> Jacques Baulin, *The Arab Role in Africa*, p. 43.
- <sup>68</sup> "Today [in Egypt] light skin is still associated with elite status, with wealth and power. Movie stars and women in advertisements tend to have light skin." L. Schneider and A. Silverman, *Global Sociology: Introducing Five Contemporary Societies* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), p. 211.
- <sup>69</sup> Jacques Baulin, *The Arab Role in Africa*, p. 101.
- <sup>70</sup> Laila el-Hamamsy, "The Assertion of Egyptian Identity," in N. Hopkins and s. Ibrahim, eds., *Arab Society: Social Science Perspectives* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1977), pp. 52.
- <sup>71</sup> Schneider and Silverman, *Global Sociology*, pp. 211-212.
- <sup>72</sup> D. Bates and G. Rassam, *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 89.
- <sup>73</sup> Dunstan Wai, "African-Arab Relations: Interdependence or Misplaced Optimism?" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 21.2 (1983), p. 190.
- <sup>74</sup> Dunstan Wai, "African-Arab Relations," pp. 192-200.
- <sup>75</sup> Dunstan Wai, "African-Arab Relations: Interdependence or Misplaced Optimism?" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 21.2 (1983), p. 189.
- <sup>76</sup> A. Mazrui, *Africa's International Relations: The Diplomacy of Dependence and Chage* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), pp. 130-31.
- <sup>77</sup> Dunstan Wai, "African-Arab Relations," pp. 190-91.
- <sup>78</sup> John Hunwick, "The Same But Different," p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Ittijah Online Newsletter No. VII, July 2001. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ittijah/message/34>;

"Arab Activists Demand End to Israeli 'Apartheid,'" 24 July 2001, <http://www.namibian.com.na/2001/july/africa/012EF2FA3.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York: Knopf, 1927).

<sup>81</sup> Only on occasion is this white identity disrupted by jarring negative stereotypes of Arabs. Most such images are banned or heavily criticized, as for example the recent animated films *Aladdin* and *Prince of Egypt*.

<sup>82</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 271; Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), p. 231.

<sup>83</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *Beyond Beef*, p. 271.

<sup>84</sup> See for example articles by Ghassan Ghosn, "Al-Beid la As-Sud hum almulawwan!" *Al-Hayat*, 13 March 1997, p. 12; "Al-Lebnaniyyun Aidan Mulawwan," *Al-Anwar*, 29 January 1995.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Reem Haddad, "A Modern-Day 'Slave Trade': Sri Lankan Workers in Lebanon," *Middle East Report*, Summer 1999, p. 2, at [www.merip.org/mer/mer211/211\\_haddad.html](http://www.merip.org/mer/mer211/211_haddad.html), viewed on 7 November 2001.

<sup>86</sup> *Ad-Diyar*, 7 November 2001, p. 13; 20 February 1998, p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> Majid Ziad, "Huquq al-insan fi libnan: al-mar'a al-mustithna," *An-Nahar*, 6 March 1998, p. 19.

<sup>88</sup> "Naddid bi'l-occasion 'ala al-khadimat as-siri lankiyat," *An-Nahar*, 3 March 1998, p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> M. Wright, *I'm Chocolate, You're Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), pp. 148-50.

<sup>90</sup> *Al-hadif fi'l-qar'ati wa't-ta'bir*, Year 1, Part 2 (Jounieh: Daru'l-maktabati al-ahliyyah, 1998), p. 102.

<sup>91</sup> For a description of modern debt bondage see Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>92</sup> "Ethiopian Domestic Worker Held in Beirut,"

<http://msanews.mynet.net/MSANEWS/199705/19970519.3.html>, viewed 3 December 2001; "Human Rights Watch: Ily hard an mustakhdma ethiopia fi beirut ta'mul fi dhuruf al-abid," *An-Nahar*, 21 May 1997, p. 7; "Al-'amul taraddu 'ala human rights al-khadima al-ethiopia," *An-Nahar*, 29 May 1997, p. 12.

<sup>93</sup> See articles cited in the section "Construction of Race in Lebanon" above.

<sup>94</sup> Majid Ziad, "Qadaya huquq al-insan fi libnan," *An-Nahar*, 9 September 1997, p. 13; Majid Ziad,

"Huquq al-insan fi libnan (part 7): al-'umm al-ajanib," *An-Nahar*, 2 December 1997, p. 13.

<sup>95</sup> Ellis Cose, "What's White, Anyway?" [wysiwyg://458/http://stacks.msnbc.com/news/457898.asp](http://www.wysiwyg.com/458/http://stacks.msnbc.com/news/457898.asp).

<sup>96</sup> John Tehranian, "Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity in America," *Yale Law Journal*, January 2000, v. 109.

<sup>97</sup> Tehranian, "Performing Whiteness."

<sup>98</sup> David Nicholls, "Lebanese of the Antilles, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Trinidad," A. Hourani and N. Shehadi, eds., *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992), p. 347.

<sup>99</sup> Didier Bigo, "The Lebanese Community in the Ivory Coast: A Non-Native Network at the Heart of Power?" in *The Lebanese in the World*, pp. 523-24.