
(doi: [10.1017/jbr.2021.165](http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2021.165))

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Deposited on: 18 October 2021

As the subtitle of *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* suggests, M’hamed Oualdi’s account of the life and death of Tunisian official Husayn Ibn Abdallah is less about slavery than it is about how people negotiated the different imperial regimes of North Africa. In addition, this account encompasses relations between North Africa and southern Europe and provides brief glimpses into Husayn’s time in the United States and the United Kingdom. Thus, from the life and death of this enslaved and later emancipated Muslim convert, a global history of the reform of the Ottoman Empire appears.

Extending from his childhood, when Husayn Ibn ‘Abdallah was enslaved, through his emancipation and role as a Tunisian dignitary, *A Slave between Empires* encompasses an extended period of reform, centralization, and inter-imperial competition in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Using Husayn’s life story as the narrative thread, in the first part of the book Oualdi weaves together Arabic, French, Italian, and Turkish language archival documents, to “reconstitute social worlds and networks that tend to be hidden from view when colonization is the sole focus” (13). This global history methodology, which Oualdi explicitly lays out in the introduction, allows him to show how “histories that are often studied separately—were in fact deeply entangled” (13).

The second part shifts the focus onto his death and its aftermath, which is traced through the eventual disposal of his contested estate and the ensuing disputes over his property. In death, the issue of Husayn’s enslavement again becomes key, as his former master attempted to assert his rights over the estate. Oualdi then follows Husayn’s estate through the family of the Tunisian scholar Shaykh Bu Hajib, who made the successful claim to his inheritance and Angiolina Bertucci, the mother of Maria/Myriam (Husayn’s ward),
who was assimilated into the Bu Hajib household. Following the estate after Husayn’s death allows for a further exploration of an elite Tunisian household and how it negotiated, rather than was dominated by, French colonial rule.

Husayn was a part of the last generation of mamlūks (Arabic for “owned people”) in the Ottoman Empire. Like many others, he had been enslaved in Caucasia as a child and converted to Islam. Other mamlūks were from Italy or Greece, or freeborn Muslims from Tunis and served a wide variety of functions in Ottoman imperial households, businesses, government, and agriculture. Husayn’s life and career spanned a period of reform and abolition that characterized many imperial formations through the mid- to late nineteenth century.

Husyan’s life, as Oualdi observes, left a rich archive of his diplomatic and business interests, which speaks to the professional and personal networks he was able to forge and how he attempted to serve these (sometimes competing) priorities throughout his tenure, first as a mamlūk and then as an emancipated functionary of the Tunisian state. Less is documented of his personal life or thoughts, and significantly, although he occasionally ponders slavery in his political correspondence, he says little about his early life as a child enslaved and transported to the center of the Ottoman Empire.

Where his personal life is documented, the heart of it lies in Husayn’s affection for and protection of two young girls who he took on as daughters. His adoption of a fatherly role for these children allowed him to construct a transnational family. The two mothers (one Franco-German, one Italian) were both unsuccessful claimants on his estate after his death, and Oualdi uses their claims to demonstrate how colonial rule failed to homogenize or entirely displace religious and lineage-based legal systems.
For those interested in slavery studies in and beyond North Africa, the significance of this book lies in Oualdi’s comparative study of different forms that ownership of people could take in different contexts in three key areas.

First, is the role played by enslaved people in government and public life. While private enterprise occupied the majority of enslaved labor in the Caribbean and Americas, there were numerous and significant examples of enslaved people leased out to government institutions or wholly owned by government bodies and used for forced labor of many forms. In the Ottoman Empire, mamlûks were integral to defense and administration. The system was substantially weakened by the creation of a paid professional army and a new, professionally trained generation of the civil servants.

Second, the book sheds light on the interplay between state reform, professionalization and centralization, and the abolition of slavery. In the Ottoman Empire, abolition is part of a broader modernizing movement that bridged the gap between ancient regime and the modern. Husayn was firmly part of this transitional, and transitory, reforming set. In this context, abolition was not only a way for a state to prove modernity or civilization to the pressing European powers like Britain, it was also an integral facet of the changing nature of the state. Emancipated people were recruited into new professional government functions, such as the nascent civil service, and formed a useful (semi)-captive workforce for the infrastructure projects a vibrant modernizing state required.

Third, as Oualdi explains, the transnational and transimperial life of Husayn offers a new perspective on the history of slavery in North Africa. Rather than offering reinterpretation of European history, Oualdi decenters and destabilizes the top-down analysis of relations between colonial ruler and colonized people. In the realm of slavery studies, this approach is significant because it helps to reveal some of the non-Eurocentric drivers of the abolition of slavery in the Ottoman Empire. During Husayn’s life, his relationship with
British consul Richard Holt and his sojourns in the United States brought him into close contact with Western abolitionism. Husayn’s status, both as mamlūk and after his emancipation, had a significant impact on his property rights and arrangements. Most tellingly, his former master (the former governor of Tunis) emerges after his death to lay claim (though unsuccessfully) to his estate. The manner in which Husayn, when emancipated and even when dead, is denied the comfort of kinship ties connects his highly educated and mobile experience of enslavement to that of others enslaved people who suffered worse material conditions.

From the extant correspondence, Husayn did not appear to be terribly concerned about his status as a “slave between empires.” But this status influenced his life and death in greater and lesser ways throughout, and so his life-and-death story is of interest to comparative slavery scholars. The approach taken to an individual life, traversing imperial borders and religious and social worlds, will also be of great methodological interest to those trying to situate new global histories between empires.

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