



Pilgrimage to a New Self

The African Quarter and its people

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Early in the twentieth century, Adam Muhammed Jemma set out from the village of Tve in Chad to fulfill his duties in pilgrimage to Mecca and Jerusalem. The African man in his early twenties traveled with his nephew, who was just a teenager. They left behind a Chad in turmoil; the kingdoms of the Kanem-Bornu and Baguirmi stretching through modern Chad, Nigeria and Sudan had already been penetrated by the French, who would colonize the area for decades to come.¹ But these deeply religious men also arrived in a fomenting Jerusalem, and for

¹ The life story of Adam Jemma is based on an interview with his son, Mahmoud. The exact date of Jemma's arrival in Jerusalem is unknown, but Mahmoud has found a document among his father's belongings that places him in Palestine in 1922. The French first penetrated Chad in 1891, carrying out military raids against its Muslim kingdoms.

reasons of faith and devotion to the city, they decided to stay.

Jedda's story was repeated all over Arab lands, as African Muslims made pilgrimage to fulfill their religious duties, then settled from Iraq to Syria to Palestine. Their integration was made difficult by "color-struck" Arabs, some of whom held negative stereotypes of blacks; a history of Arab-African slave trade; and the destabilizing regional influences of colonialism and nationalism. Jedda and others like him in Jerusalem responded to that challenge by crafting a new identity: that of the Palestinian African.

God, Slaves and Gold

Islam came to Central Africa through a gradual process of Arab migration and Muslim conquest. By the late seventh century, the reach of the caliphs ruling after the death of Prophet Muhammad, most notably Caliph Uthman, extended to North Africa and moved south into the desert. Once Arab travelers began arriving from the east in the fourteenth century, Islam was already rooted in place.

Three things brought the Arabs to Africa: the expansion of the Islamic empire, a massive slave trade and West African gold to be had in the African kingdoms of Mali and Ghana.² It is important to note here that the African slave trade existed well before the advent of Islam. Muslim teachings changed the

² "[I]t is estimated that two-thirds of all the gold circulating in the Mediterranean area in the Middle Ages was imported across the Sahara," writes Pekka Masonen in "Trans-Saharan Trade and the West African Discovery of the Mediterranean World," a paper given at The Third Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies: Ethnic Encounter and Culture Change, University of Tampere, Joensuu, Finland, 19-22 June 1995.

institution by favoring manumission and dramatically improving the position of the slave, "who was now no longer merely a chattel but was also a human being with a certain religious and hence social status and with certain quasi-legal rights."³ In a sad twist in history, these changes actually boosted the slave trade, as slaves were no longer available inside the Islamic empire and were therefore trafficked instead from outside.



Central Africa served as the gatekeeper for the slave trade between the Mediterranean and local African tribes. Early on few Arab traders ventured to inland desert areas, where the elements and health conditions were notoriously hostile. Still, from 1500 to 1900, slave raids by the Arabs or their middlemen were common in the Chad region.

Not much is known of the African perspective of their encounter with Arab Muslim traders, since few written records

³ The issue of Arab slavery during the Islamic empire is a charged one. It touches an especially tender intersection between misunderstandings about Islam and Arabs, the African Diaspora's search to recognize and redress its grievance, and the legacy of colonialism as it persists today in Africa and the Middle East. As such, some writings on the subject are either unfair or, conversely, apologist. This article only skims the subject, but readers looking for a summary might start with the source of this quote, Bernard Lewis' *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 1994 (also excerpted on the internet).

have made it into the public sphere.⁴ However, travelogues such as the 14th century adventures of Ibn Battuta provide the outsider's perspective, complete with cross-cultural misunderstandings.

"I saw a crocodile in this part of the Nile [Niger], close to the bank; it looked just like a small boat. One day I went down to the river to satisfy a need, and lo, one of the blacks came and stood between me and the river. I was amazed at such lack of manners and decency on his part, and spoke of it to someone or other. [That person] answered. "His purpose in doing that was solely to protect you from the crocodile, by placing himself between you and it."⁵

Ibn Battuta, like many Arabs, referred to Africa as the land of the *Zanj*, a terminology that is viewed by the descendants of early African pilgrims as highly derogatory ("It's like the word *nigger*," one man told me.) Historically, however, *Zanj* does not appear to have held negative connotations. Some scholars say that the origins of the word lie with the Arabic *Azania*, which means "land of the

blacks." Still others believe the term originally came from Zanzibar, an East African island that was the jumping off point for slave ships heading to the Middle East.

Many of these Africans were kidnapped or sold into slavery, chained and then shipped to Iraq where they were used to build canals to feed local cotton fields. For fifteen years, from 868 to 883, these enslaved Africans, aided by black soldiers in the employ of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, revolted in what has been called "the Zanj rebellion." Occurring early in the institution of regional slavery, the Iraqi rebellion significantly altered the way that slaves were used in the Middle East by dampening enthusiasm for plantation-type bondage similar to that found in the New World.⁶

The Arab slave trade in Africans (not to mention Persians, Jews, Caucasians, Abyssians and others⁷) became so extensive that by the middle of the ninth century, there were as many as three million Africans enslaved in the Middle East.⁸ Indeed, some scholars estimate that as many as 9.3 million black slaves, including the many who died crossing the desert, were trafficked in the thousand years of trans-Saharan slave trade to the

⁴ Masonen writes that, "it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the West African idea of the world, contemporary to that of the medieval European and Arab, because those West Africans who crossed the Sahara left no documents, and all that is known about them is based on accounts written by others." But a September 2002 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Decaying Manuscripts Reveal Africa's Literate History," (see <http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i02/02a02601.htm>) also proposes that the void comes from a lack of interest in challenging the notion that Africans were illiterate.

⁵ *Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, tr. and ed. by H. A. R. Gibb, Broadway House, London, 1929.

⁶ *African Presence In Early Asia*, ed. by Runoko Rashidi & Van Sertima, Transaction Publishers, 1997.

⁷ John W. Blassingame's book, *The Slave Community* (Oxford University Press, 1979), summarizes the literature available on Europeans and Americans who were enslaved by Africans and Arabs. He says, for example, that in Algiers between the 16th and 17th centuries, there were between 25,000 and 40,000 white slaves. Some of these Western slaves were emancipated and went on to write descriptively of their experiences. The Americans "repaid" those encounters by also enslaving Arabs in their own extensive human trade.

⁸ "African Heritage extends across the Arab world," *News Journal*, Sunni Khalid, 21 February, 2000.

north. That means the actual number of captives rivals the number of slaves trafficked in the Atlantic trade, albeit over a much longer period of time. Slavery in the Middle East differed in one other important respect: often it was not life-long and black Africans were eventually freed or able to work for their independence.

"[N]o great black communities were born in Northern Africa in the same sense as those in the American colonies," writes Pekka Masonen, "for most of the slaves were women whose fertility in slavery was low. The offspring of black concubines with their Arab masters were free and merged gradually into the North African population." As such, slaves often had to be "replaced" and new Africans "imported." These factors constrained the population of black African slave communities in the Middle East and help explain why their descendants are not a more visible presence today.⁹ Finally, the brisk trans-Saharan trade in humans and goods slowed in the 15th and 16th centuries after the collapse of the key African kingdom of Songhay, subsequent West African political breakdown, North African economic decline, a shift to Atlantic slave routes and the advent of the locomotive.¹⁰

⁹ Masonen.

¹⁰ Some elements of the trans-Saharan trade persist even today, as noted in the resolution of the NGO Forum at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, August 27-Sept 1, 2001: "[T]he trafficking of African men, women and children for forced labor and enslavement is still ongoing in Cameroon, Mauritania, Niger and Sudan whilst these and other forms of involuntary servitude of Africans and African Descendants have resulted in substantial and lasting economic, political and cultural damage to the continent."

The Royal Hajj and the Common Pilgrim

Chad itself was originally ruled by a confederation of black tribes called the Kanem, who were replaced by the Kanuri confederation. Leader Mai Dunama Dibbalemi (1221-1259) was the first of the Kanuri to convert to Islam and his rule was one of the most dynamic periods of conquest in African history. At its height, the Kanuri controlled land from Libya to Lake Chad to Hausaland (modern northern Nigeria)-including their lucrative trade routes.

When the nearby kingdom of Songhay fell, the Kanuri grew even more powerful, uniting with areas west of Chad and creating the Kanem-Bornu empire, led by another Muslim ruler. But, as Masonen reports, the characterization of a ruling empire as "Muslim," did not necessarily mean that Islam was widespread.

In Western Africa, Islam remained for a long time as a cult of the courts and commercial centres: Mali, Songhay and Bornu were not Muslim states, although medieval Arabic writers depicted them as such. Actually, the rulers were not anxious to spread the new religion among their subjects, since it endangered their position. Contrariwise, the West African rulers had to play a double role: in relation to Arab traders and rulers they acted as pious Muslims, but in relation to their own subjects they carefully fulfilled their duties as divine kings. In this way, Islam caused an internal tension in West Africa societies, which occasionally broke out as civil wars, if the ruler

could not maintain the balance between the Muslim and traditionalist cliques. However, the adoption of Islam had not only political consequences but it also linked Western Africa culturally to the Islamic world and gave West Africans a concrete reason to cross the Sahara for the first time in their history.

Fulfilling their duties as good Muslims, Africans began to make pilgrimage to Muslim holy sites (sometimes stopping along the way to meet with political and trade route allies). Ibn Battuta repeatedly refers to leaders he meets in the great African kingdoms of Mali and Songhay as a "negro, a pilgrim, and a man of fine character."

But few African pilgrims could upstage the great Mansa Musa of Mali, who we are told by Arab historian al-Umari made a journey to Mecca lugging 100 camel-loads of 300 lbs. of gold each; 500 slaves, each carrying a 4 lb. gold staff; his senior wife and her 500 attendants; and thousands of his subjects. Al-Umari reports that Mansa Musa "gave out so much gold that they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its value to fall." The entourage also departed flat broke.

Mansa Musa's visit made quite an impression in international lore; suddenly, in 1339, the West African kingdom of Mali appeared on a world map drawn in Europe. In 1367, another map showed a road leading from North Africa through the Atlas Mountains into the Western Sudan.

Mansa Musa returned to Mali to establish an Arabic library and to build great mosques in both Gao and Timbuktu. (According to Masonen, however, Mansa

Musa's hajj is remembered in West African oral tradition largely for the magic charms and fetishes he brought with him from Mecca).

Because there were few local opportunities for higher learning in Islamic shariah, West Africans also frequently studied at Arab universities. In the 12th century, African Muslims were learning in Spain and Morocco; one hundred years later, a hostel for West African students maintained by the rulers of Bornu was opened at Cairo's al-Azhar university. Still, common Africans did not begin regularly making the hajj until the 15th century, when the religion of the courts became more widespread.

Jerusalem on the Mind

When Africans came to the holy city of Jerusalem, many of them stayed in the quarters just beyond the large arch on Bab al-Majlis street, an area now referred to as the "African Quarter" by those who live there (or less sensitively by outsiders, as the quarter of the "blacks" or "slaves").

The two sides of the African quarter, one on each side of the main thoroughfare just before the Aqsa Mosque Compound, date to the Mameluk era. One of its sections was built in 1267 by Prince Ala' Deen Aydooghdi; the other constructed in 1282 by Sultan Qalawoon as a hostel for pilgrims as they performed their religious obligations.¹¹ By the Ottoman era (1516-1918), Africans were deemed important caretakers of the mosque, and held keys to the holy site. According to Aref Al Aref's history of Jerusalem, *Al Mufasa'il Fiyye Tarikh Beit Il Maqdis*, when a European notable visited the city, the African guards

¹¹ See "Out of Africa," *Palestine Report*, by Joharah Baker, July 24, 1998.

refused to stand aside to allow the foreigner entry to the mosque area. In order to solve the embarrassing quandary, the city's Ottoman leaders had the guards jailed until the notable made his rounds.

As Adam Jedda made his way to the holy city, the Ottoman era was beginning its decline and Arab resistance against Turkish rule was at its height. The African quarter itself was transformed into a prison for the rebels - one section for long-term incarceration and another for executions. It was into the shifting alliances of a city changing hands that the young Jedda men of the Arabic-speaking Salamat tribe arrived.¹²

Jedda, too, considered the Turkish rule a heavy-handed one. He spoke later of how the Turks cut down olive trees to feed the fires of their steam locomotives. He also was nostalgic for the relative harmony between Jews, Christians and Muslims. During his early years in the city, Jedda made his home in what are now West Jerusalem neighborhoods - Talpiot and Katamon.

In his village in Chad, Jedda would have practiced a syncretic Islam blended from the Maliki school of religious law and tradition and the African religions that came before it. He spoke of life in Chad as poor, but with a close communal base for family and prayer. Jedda was deeply religious, and despite living through two Arab-Israeli wars, he never pursued the idea of returning to his native village community on the edge of Chad's capital N'djamena. "He really thought, 'What more can I want from this world than to stay near the Al Aqsa Mosque?'" remembers his son Mahmoud. Early in his

time in Jerusalem, Jedda was himself a guard at the Al Aqsa Mosque.

Jedda was so committed to the city, that even after fleeing Jerusalem for Jordan during the 1948 War, he did not return to Chad. Instead, he and his family of five (Mahmoud was born that year as a refugee on the run), stayed in Jordan until it became safe to return. Jedda had married a Jordanian villager, Yusra, from west of the river dividing Palestine.

Judging from Mahmoud's early memories of the African Quarter where he grew up, however, his father replicated many Central African customs right here in Jerusalem. By that time a group of Africans from Senegal, Chad and Nigeria had shaped themselves into what Mahmoud knows as "family."

Our life there and our relationships were very close. We considered each other brothers, although there was no blood relation between us. If somebody died, then everyone would come for condolences, and if there was an expense like a wedding, then everybody paid.

On Fridays, we would usually have lunch together. Somebody would go to all the houses and gather money from everyone - no matter how much - and they would go to the market and three or four people would prepare for lunch, while the rest went to work or prayer at the mosque and then everyone would meet together. Sometimes, others in the neighborhood would come and join. After lunch, we would stay for a religious discussion and they would tell us about Muhammad and the Quran. Then we would go to the

¹² Ironically, Mahmoud says his father learned to speak Swahili, an East African language, in Jerusalem.

*mosque and pray the 'Assr prayer, and then after the prayer we would sit and talk about politics.*¹³

Mahmoud says that these customs have died out in the Quarter, as the original members passed away. Indeed, there is only one first generation African now living in the African Quarter, and he is thought to be over 90 years old. Slowly, the Africans have married Palestinians and their children increasingly identify with the Palestinian cause. "We are an organic part of the Palestinian people," says Ali Jedda, Mahmoud's cousin.¹⁴

As culture and identity were shaped over three generations, the African pilgrims' physical identification papers were also altered by circumstances out of their control. When Chad became independent from French colonial rule in 1960, the Jedda family lost the French passports that they had carried. "I said to my father, 'Look why don't we just get rid of it?'" remembers Mahmoud. His father agreed and the family went to the Jordanian authorities to apply for passports, since East Jerusalem at that time was under Jordanian control. "It was a shock for me," remembers Jedda. "They treated us like foreigners, despite the law that stated that if you has lived here for so many years, you were a citizen. I really got nervous [angry] then. We were here before the Hashemites and now *they* were telling *us* we didn't belong!"

Suddenly finding himself a stranger to the only home he knew, Mahmoud told his father that he wanted to leave Jerusalem

and return to Chad. But his father cooled his temper. "There is enough ignorance and poverty in Chad," Mahmoud says he told him. "I don't want to add more ignorance and poverty. Stay here and get educated and then go so you can contribute to the building of the country."

On the Edge of Acceptance

It was not the first nor the last time that these black Palestinians would feel the prejudice of a Middle East that continues to carry a pronounced color consciousness. "Fair and Lovely," a "skin lightening" product once popular (and now considered decidedly passé) in the United States is advertised regularly on Arabic satellite television. Some Palestinians still refer to those with dark skin as "*abeed*," literally translated as "slaves." Racial slurs against blacks are oddly frequent in a society that has experienced its own share of prejudice and discrimination at home and abroad.¹⁵

Scholars disagree on the source of these ideas among Arabs. Some argue that their roots lie with the European colonizers who brought their own racist theories and baggage to the Middle East, using them to subjugate those darker. Take the diaries of Englishwoman Emmiline Lott, who set out to Cairo in 1860 to serve as a governess to the son of Ismael Pasha:

"Black slaves were there, disgusting-looking negresses with low foreheads, sure sign of cunning, malice, deceit and

¹³ Readings in the habits of Muslims in Chad and surrounding regions emphasize the communal nature of their practice.

¹⁴ Interview with Ali Jedda, 29 April, 2001.

¹⁵ Once while sitting in a shared taxi, I noticed the woman next to me pulling her body halfway onto my seat. It was only much later in the trip did it slowly dawn on me that she was doing her utmost to avoid touching the young black Palestinian woman next to her. At another sitting, I was told by two young "white" Gazans that, "The ugliest children are those of mixed parentage."

treachery, sunken over the eyebrows, not unlike those hideous-looking beings the Cretins, with large rolling heavy, inexpressive eyes, the unmistakable mark of want of intelligence which renders women almost akin to animals..."¹⁶ Unfortunately, that was only the beginning of Lott's vitriol.

Others ascribe negative Arab ideas about blacks to the many years of Middle Eastern slave trade - prejudice was needed to sustain the trade, and in turn, the captivity propagated prejudices. Even famed thinker Ibn Khaldun succumbed, writing, "[T]he Negro nation are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because [Negroes] have little [that is essentially] human and have attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals, as we have stated."¹⁷

But not all Arab-African relations were characterized by such racism. Ibn Battuta remarks on his journey of the fairness, honesty and piety of the Africans he meets (nor does he idealize them, recounting several unpleasant encounters, as well). More commonly, relationships followed the rules of mutual respect and tribal separation - still strong in the Middle East not only along racial lines, but divisions of family and region. Writing in "The Essays," Abu Uthman al-Jahiz reports:

The Zanj say to the Arabs: You are so ignorant that during the jahiliyya [the era before Islam] you regarded us as your equals when it came to marrying Arab women, but with the advent of the justice of Islam you

¹⁶ *Veiled Half-Truths: Western Travelers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women*, ed. by Judy Mabro, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., London, 1991.

¹⁷ *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun, 14th century CE.

*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... 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.*¹⁸

When asked about racism among Palestinians today, the descendants of Africans ascribe discrimination to "ignorance" or, in the words of Ali Jedda, that "people are in some way primitive."

Mahmoud tells of a rare childhood visit to the house of a friend (with his own eight-member family cramped into one room, he deigned to bring guests home). When he walked in the door, the mother turned on his friend, "How dare you bring

¹⁸ *The Essays*, Abû Uthmân al-Jâhîz, 860 CE.

¹⁹ Some of the pilgrims' descendants have married into families from Jericho, where there is a black Arab community. Other Africans in the area include Ethiopian Christians and Jews, who Palestinian Africans identify with as the victims of racism in Israeli society ("They call them [the derogatory name] *kushi*," says Ali Jedda), but do not actively associate with. Some Palestinian Africans *are* on good terms with and regularly visit the "Black Hebrews," a group of African-American converts to Judaism who immigrated to Israel and were shunted off to the Negev desert to live.

a 'slave' to our house?" Her insult and choice of the word "abed" was a gauntlet thrown before him, says Mahmoud. From that day forward, he visited his friend's home often, to the point that, "I even stopped knocking on the door; I entered like I was family."

Still, the problem of joining two families persists. "We have really great friends - except when it comes to marriage," says Mahmoud. Often when a member of the African quarter seeks a spouse outside the community, he or she meets solid resistance. "In the end, it usually is up to the strong will of the couple and whether they can stand up to their families."¹⁹

There are now over 350 people living in the confines of the African quarter. Homes have been expanded into the once open courtyard, then built upwards on top of each other until there is little room left to grow. But few of the quarters' residents want to leave the area for suburban homes; there is a pull to stay close to the holy sites, they say, despite the fading draw of religious life. No longer do any Palestinian Africans guard the holy site. Indeed, many of the quarter's residents are politically affiliated with secular leftist Palestinian factions. Mahmoud himself expected to spend his entire life in Israeli prison for his activism, and was only released after 18 years in a 1985 prisoners' exchange. His brother has now spent nearly 20 years in exile.

Through the years, it seems, the religious devotion to Jerusalem of the original African pilgrims has been replaced by a political commitment to the city and the Palestinian cause. "If you look deep in our hearts, we are very attached to Jerusalem," says Mahmoud. "We have really sacrificed for this city. Maybe that is something that we inherited."



African-Palestinians at the opening of a mosque in the Old City in the 1970's.

And it is not only the eye of the outsider and repeated prejudice that reinforces the African identity of the pilgrims' descendants, even after generations of integration into Palestine. Still, they cling to values that they see as a legacy of their roots. When one asks Mahmoud what it was about his father that was distinctly African, he says, "The way that [my father and his nephew] looked at religion was something that I can't say that I feel in our Palestinian community here. When they talked about religion, for example, they talked about their own way, and I never felt that they were trying to pressure someone. This was the essence of what made him different."

It is clear that this same attitude of acceptance is the kind of "difference" that Mahmoud hopes to instill in his own progeny as they decide what it is that makes them African, and what it is that makes them Palestinian. In some ways, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem will be repeated many times again.