Slavery, the State, and Islam

Mohammed Ennaji; trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan
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Slavery, the State, and Islam is Fagan's English rendering of Mohammed Ennaji's 2007 work *Le Sujet et le Mamelouk: Esclavage, Pouvoir et Religion dans le Monde Arab*, a historical study of the economics of power in the relationship among slavery, Islam, and monarchy. Ennaji investigates the structure and nature of the "bond of authority" as it manifests itself in servitude between the king and subject, master and slave, God and believers. The bulk of his primary historical material belongs to the first few centuries of Islam. However his intention, as he notes in the introduction, is to also make sense of contemporary modes of power that govern the scene of authority in the individuals' proximity to the state and, in some instances, to one another.

The opening chapter tells an anecdote of a nineteenth-century Moroccan official who was stripped of his title as Local Governor (in Arabic, *Qaid*), declared dead to the public, and kept as a slave in the sultan's palace. Ennaji challenges the official narrative and weaves novel threads of the story to show the degree to which the bond of authority between the sultan and his servants depends upon uninterrupted flat obedience.

The second chapter questions the issue of slavery during Islam's early years. The author claims that the new religion made little practical changes to this institution and, in certain cases, made slaves even more abjectly submissive to their masters. Ennaji particularly details Islam's termination of the statuses of *sa'b* (a *sā'ib* is a slave who has attained full unconditional freedom) and *ṭalq* (repudiation) and its admission of *mawlā* (freed slaves must remain loyal to their ex-master). He also elaborates on the non-provision of part of the public funds to free more slaves, as well as the practice of depriving freed slaves of the spoils of war and discouraging people from marrying them.

In the third chapter, Ennaji undertakes the king-subject relation in light of the notion of servitude. He probes the sociolinguistic roots of several conceptualizations, including *'ibādah*, *ra'īyah*, and *ṭā'ah* (translated successively as adoration, people, and obedience). He also examines the semiotics of various expressions of servitude and presents a prolonged discussion of the different uses of the hand in this context. Ennaji contends that the transition to Islam barely changed anything in the structure of authority and the master-slave relationship. As he puts it, with the advent of Islam there was "a reorganization of the authoritarian space that reshuffled the division of power between the king and the divine authority" (p. 82). This redistribution of power is elaborated in the fourth chapter, where the author draws on concepts used

in royal circles and that seem to imitate God and His kingdom. He looks into different modes of praising and greeting the king, and probes the symbolism of the throne and the royal veil (*ḥijāb*).

The fifth chapter extends a deeper investigation of the ways of resemblance between the king's immediate entourage and the divine's presence. Ennaji first unpacks select names of the king, including *ṣinḍīḍ* (valiant leader), *sayyid* (master), *mundhir* (warner), *'āhil* (sovereign), and *qayl* (undisputed chief). He then examines embodiments of the king's mastery, particularly the *hayba* (aura), as a tool used to incur fear in the subjects' hearts and *qayl* as the quality of possessing the "privilege of imperative speech" (p. 143). In this regard, Ennaji refers to the mastery of the speech of command as an essential part of the formation of royal power. At the end, he reasserts that during Islam the caliphs (he particularly elaborates on Umar ibn al-Khattab) and their successors lived in a world defined by servitude in which freedom can only be evaluated by its antonyms: the king's word is heard and goes undisputed, for his subjects live in complete silence.

The sixth chapter discusses servitude as it reveals and/or conceals itself in select constitutive elements of the king's immediate surroundings. The author illustrates the signification of the majlis (and means being in the king's company or presence), *ḥāshīyah* (retinue), *aḥibba* (close companions), and *mawālī* (immediate dependents including women, children, slaves, servants, etc.). The seventh and last chapter looks into forced servitude (vis-à-vis directional servitude in the previous chapter), and discusses the power of inflicting death as a tool for maintaining domination.

The crux of Ennaji's analysis may be summarized as follows: The common belief that equality dominated with Islam's advent and that endeavors of freeing slaves drastically increased is mere myth. Power mechanisms were simply restructured in accordance with Islam's culture of submission to God and obedience to the ruler. This placed the religious in the heart of the relationship between the master and the servant. In Arab and Muslim societies today, similar power dynamics persist. However, they are masked by the "illusion" of modernity and modern institutions. Arabs and Muslims still have not undergone the real sociopolitical changes that can bring true democracy and freedom. The main obstacle is Islam's influence on the political domain. So, in order to understand and approach the history of Muslims objectively, a secular and desacralizing historical reading is required.

It is somewhat disappointing that Ennaji does not explain why a secular reading is the answer and especially how such a reading can be carried out. Nowhere in the text does he explain what he means by "secular" and "religious," which leaves both categories floating in complete vagueness. To assert

that a historical approach to Muslims' history must separate the religious from the political discourse is a sound, but insufficient, observation.

The book's thesis is very much contingent upon the claim that power modalities were restructured with Islam's rise in light of the accentuated divine-faithful relation. This is, of course, not inconceivable. But because Ennaji makes no mention of the religious scene and the role that religion had played in the master-slave relation prior to Islam, he gives the impression that the presumed re-division of power between God and king is a distinguishing attribute of the Islamic state. It is well documented that religion played a significant role in peoples' lives before Islam. A brief intervention in this vein would have cleared up the issue and enriched the overall debate.

A more serious shortcoming, in my opinion, is the absence of a discussion, or even a hint, of agency and resistance as constituents of the power relations he examined. The slave in Ennaji's world repeatedly appears as a passive, highly moldable character who, by his/her nature, does not protest against maltreatment; "a transfixed lover bending to the demands of his beloved" (p. 55). Even the king's top servants who have to speak and execute his orders have been confirmed by Ennaji to do so silently, for they are the "living dead" who "spoke with the voice of the dying and starving" (p. 145). The only time a form of resistance is indicated is when he discusses escape from prison toward the end of the last chapter. But even there, Ennaji tells the story of a white prince who escaped prison with the help of his slave (p. 235).

Throughout the book, the subaltern never speaks, resists, or attempts to escape. He is a "depersonalized individual dependent upon the mercy of his master" (p. 241). Ennaji has presented slaves, servants, and subjects as possessing absolutely no from of autonomy. On the contrary, his kings and masters never lose control and unfailingly demonstrate domination through punishment. Such a view is at best essentialist and reductionist. The truth, however, is that power, direct and physical or indirect and discursive, has never been a uniform, symmetrical property. Its exercise is a problematic, interlacing set of processes that are always open to transformations, mutations, and internal and external modes of resistance.

In general, *Slavery, the State, and Islam* is an important study of the history of slavery in Islam. Its highlight is the laborious linguistic work of excavating the Arabic lexicon of slavery and servitude. Readers will also have an opportunity to discover how several aspects of contemporary human relations of proximity (e.g., marriage and greetings) are deeply rooted in the culture of servitude.

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