CHAPTER 19

Reconfiguring Household Slavery in Twentieth Century Fes, Morocco

R. David Goodman

In the early twentieth century, domestic slavery was practiced throughout Morocco. Domestic slave labor sustained basic features of daily life in Fes, its then most powerful and populous city. For over a millennium household slaves were integral to the functioning of this dense and complex North African medina, famed for its concentration of religious and political authorities who lived and worked cheek by jowl beside the characters and activities of an international center of crafts production, trade and commerce. Centuries of


2 See for example Eugène Aubin, Le Maroc d’aujourd’hui (Paris, 1904); Gabriel Veyre, Au Maroc. Dans l’intimité du Sultan (Paris, 1905); G. Saint-René Taillandier, Les origines du Maroc français. Recit d’une mission 1901–1906 (Paris, 1930); Jérôme Tharaud et al., Fès ou les bourgeois de l’Islam (Paris, 1930). It remains difficult to accurately estimate the number of slaves in Fes, or Morocco as a whole, at this time. In 1900 Fes had approximately 100,000 inhabitants and some 6,000 households. It has been suggested that as much as two-thirds of its male population worked for wages in this period, see Stacy Holden, The Politics of Food in Modern Morocco (Gainesville, 2009), 20. Holden cites research presented by Louis Massignon, who concludes that earnings from 9,000 artisans supported half the total population of Fes, “Enquête sur les Corporations Musulmanes d’Artisans et de Commerçants au Maroc,” Revue de Monde Musulman 58 (1924), 1–13. Even if this offers a premise that one-third of Fasi households used slave labor, we are still left without a systematic basis to account for or verify the numbers of slaves within households. Considering all available sources, including the legal records and oral history gathered in my research, it stands that there were well over 6,000 domestic slaves in Fasi households in 1900. Additionally, it is estimated that there were several thousand palace slaves and slave soldiers in the early part of the century, see Tharaud and Tharaud, Fès ou les bourgeois, 18. Including Dar Makhzan slaves, as much as ten percent of the total Fasi population was enslaved at this time.

3 See the classic study by Roger le Tourneau, Fès avant le Protectorate: Etude Economique et Sociale d’une Ville de l’Occident Musulman (Casablanca, 1949), and the more recent work of
wealthy and privileged Fasi notables made the medina emblematic throughout the region for the powerful families and luxurious homes they maintained. Domestic slave owners emulated and networked among each other and the extended administration of the monarchy (Dar Makhzan), using and exchanging slaves as social and political currency to validate and circulate their prestige. The gradual and extensive twentieth century social changes experienced within influential Fasi households and across widely dispersed Fasi families were deeply embedded with those occurring throughout Morocco.

During the French Protectorate over Morocco (1912–1956) the Moroccan elite continued to own and use domestic slaves, and the largest slave owner was the Dar Makhzan. Colonial policies and royal decrees proclaimed that slavery had ended, but these statements, such as a 1923 Protectorate Circular and several Moroccan Dahirs (decrees) of that era, were limited by design and remained unenforced. French authorities maintained a position of prohibiting the public sale of slaves while not interfering within Moroccan households. Ending the ongoing clandestine trade became no one’s priority, and slavery was redefined by administrators and slave owners as a “voluntary” condition. Yet despite durable realities and no meaningful official acknowledgement of

---

4 This conception has been employed by Nicolas Michel, Une économie de subsistances. Le Maroc précolonial (Cairo, 1997) and Rita Aouad Badoual, “Esclavage et Situation des ‘Noirs’ au Maroc dans la première moitié du XXe siècle,” in Laurence Marfaing et al. (eds), Les relations transsahariennes à l’époque contemporaine-un espace en constante mutation (Paris, 2004), 337–361. Madeline C. Zilfi offers a parallel within the Ottoman empire in Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference (New York, 2010).

5 The term Dar Makhzan is used here as a synonym for the Moroccan monarchy. The term has also been widely used to refer to the Moroccan political authorities and the political elite. For consideration of the historic and contemporary relations between the Dar Makhzan and Moroccan political culture the see Hind Arroub, Al-Makhzen fi al-ththaqafa al-ssiyasiya al-Maghribiya (Rabat, 2004). Also see Abdellah Hammoudi, Master and Disciple: The Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism (Chicago, 1997).

6 Circular 17 S.G.P., 21 September 1923, Bibliothèque Générale et Archives du Maroc (hereafter BGAM). Handwritten drafts and official copies, listing the offices to which this circular was distributed, all confirming this date, are deposited at the BGAM in Rabat. Perhaps due to a long compounded confusion caused by poor handwriting in memos concerning the circular, it was erroneously cited as 1922, both by some subsequent Protectorate administrators and scholars in general. Also see Commandant Noël Maestracci, Le Maroc Contemporain: Guide à l’usage de tous les Officiers et particulièrement à l’usage des Officiers des affaires indigènes et des Fonctionnaires du protectorat (Paris, 1928), 164.