



Islam and Anti-Blackness: Leaving Ignorance Behind

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This essay is adapted from my forthcoming book Islam & Anti-Blackness (Oneworld, 2022), which will provide a comprehensive discussion of this important topic.

The son of ‘Imrān’s dark skin was of no matter,
since the Most Worthy of Worship chose him to speak to.

- Ibrāhīm bin Muḥammad al-Kānemī (d. 1212-13 CE), a scholar from Kanem who moved to Marrakesh, on the blackness of Moses¹

Introduction

Mālik bin Dīnār (d. *circa* 127/745) was a pious scholar of Basra. The son of a Persian slave, he lived off pennies made by copying the Qur’an.² Yet Basra’s wealthiest man, whose daughter had been courted by elite Arabs, offered Mālik her hand in marriage (it was her idea). He refused, saying that he had long ago divorced the world. On a different occasion, it was Mālik bin Dīnār who was the seeker. When he realized that a black slave in Basra was actually the truest ‘friend of God’ in the city, Mālik bought the slave and freed him so that he—Mālik bin Dīnār—could follow that slave and serve *him* as a student.³

I am fortunate never to have suffered racial discrimination. But I have experienced what both the wealthy Basran family and Mālik bin Dīnār knew, what all those who have ever sought knowledge (*‘ilm*) or blessing (*baraka*) quickly discover: that once one gains a taste for knowledge, one pays little heed to the shape or color of the vessel that bears it.

¹ *Wa lam yubāli Ibn ‘Imrān bi-udmatihi, ḥattā iṣṭafāhu kalīman khayr ma ‘būd.* Ibn al-Abbār, *Tuḥfat al-qādim*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1406/1986), 157. Thanks to Andrea Brigaglia for this citation.

² Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Ṣiyar a ‘lām al-nubalā’*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ūt et al., 25 vols. (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1992–98), 5:363–4.

³ Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, and Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1996), 2:365, 10:173–4.

Yet our prejudices are stubborn. We must combat them with the contempt they deserve. When some of the Companions lapsed into tribal chauvinism, the Prophet ﷺ decried what they were doing as “putrid (*muntina*).”⁴ Of all the names and visages most recognized and beloved in West Africa, none is more so than Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba (d. 1346/1927). A Wolof scholar and Sufi master from Senegal, he knew that some Muslims from the Arab and Berber north looked down on him. In the opening of his famous work *Pathways to Paradise (Masālik al-jinān)* he wrote, “Do not turn down [this book’s] benefits because I am from among the blacks. The most honored servant with God is, without a doubt, the most reverent. And blackness of body signals neither weakness of mind nor lack of understanding.”⁵

This essay is an effort to answer many queries diverse in their details but all begging the same question: Is Islam anti-Black?⁶ Others have addressed this question before, including Sherman Jackson in his *Islam and the Blackamerican*, Abdullah Hamid Ali in *The ‘Negro’ in Arab-Muslim Consciousness*, Ahmad Mubarak and Dawud Walid in their *Centering Black Narrative*, Dawud Walid on his own in *Blackness and Islam*, AbdulHaq al-Ashanti in his *Defining Legends: An*

⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-birr wa’l-ṣila, bāb naṣr al-akh ḡālīman aw maḡlūman.*

⁵ Rudolph Ware, Zachary Wright, and Amir Syed, *Jihad of the Pen* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2018), 140. See also Cheikh Anta Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 61–2.

⁶ Anti-Blackness is generally defined as a particular kind of racism, discrimination, and denigration, which is directed at people deemed (i.e., racialized as) Black. This, of course, raises the question of who is Black, who defines this, whether it is defined by phenotypic features like skin color or along political or social lines, and whether this Blackness is a fixed category in every society. The knot these questions form is evident in the debate over capitalization. Is Black just a description of skin tone and/or phenotype, which can convey value, judgment, or nothing at all beyond merely noting the shade of someone’s skin? Or is Black more than just an adjective? Since “Black” skin isn’t actually black, clearly there is a process of cultural construction going on when the word *black* is used. What else is going into that construction besides an effort to note a color, for example, labeling people as “other,” as lower, etc.? Although it seems often to be used in discussions simply to mean pervasive anti-Blackness, Afropessimism is an influential and interesting perspective on this issue. Afropessimists hold that Black is a category almost hard-wired into human culture: it is the oppressed and exploited half in an omnipresent equation of power, defined by and thus defining the powerful, the real, the White. In the view of Afropessimism, Black is the slave, the rightless, the inhuman that makes the idea of the free, enfranchised, and human White possible. It is part of the structure of how society defines itself, the category that is excluded and pushed down so that “we” can talk about who “we” are. The argument for this view is compelling, especially in the West and particularly in the United States. But Blackness has not been a stable category throughout history, and [critics](#) accuse Afropessimism of imposing a US-centric definition and experience of Blackness on others. See Moon-Kie Jung, João H. Costa Vargas, eds., *Antiblackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021). For an argument that the historical use of the word *black* to denigrate means that the word should be abandoned (as opposed to reclaimed), see Kewsi Tsri, *Africans Are Not Black* (London: Routledge, 2016).

Analysis of Afrocentric Writings against Islam, and Iskander Abbasi in an [essay for Maydan](#). Here I hope to update and expand on these efforts, particularly in light of recent debates and specific accusations of anti-Black sentiment in Islamic law and scripture.

Revelation takes the form of human language, and the tradition of scholarship and piety built on revelation is expressed and commemorated through the medium of language and text as well. In the language of the Prophet's ﷺ Arabia, in the scripture of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and in the normative tradition of Islamic law and theology, we find numerous examples of the diverse ways in which 'black' and 'blackness' function literally and as metaphor. A central theme in this essay is that it is wrong to assume that everyone, everywhere, has conflated 'blackness' as a metaphor with 'blackness' as a descriptor of skin tone, aesthetic preference with judgments of human worth. (In this essay, I will use black/blackness for a color descriptor, 'black'/'blackness' when those colors are being racialized to describe people like Africans, and Black and Blackness for the global racial concept so often discussed today.)

At the level of language, we find that anti-Blackness is extremely widespread, but not in the sense that one might expect. Looking at language globally, we find that the negative metaphor of blackness or darkness (and whiteness or light as its positive counterpart) is present in major languages the world over. But even in languages with a negative metaphor of blackness, this often does not apply when people describe their own or other's appearances. Particularly in languages spoken in Africa south of the Sahara, a person can be described as 'black' or dark-skinned without any negative connotation. By the other side of this token, sometimes we find that the metaphor of blackness as bad or inferior can bleed into physical descriptions *even though the person being described looks no different from others*. Finally, in some cases, the negative use of 'black' or related descriptors has nothing to do with a negative view of a racial or ethnic group. Instead, it comes from specific cultural idioms, customs, or aesthetic preferences. So, in language, anti-Blackness can be absent in talk of race and color but present everywhere else; it can be present in talk of race and color even though no one being discussed is

actually ‘black’; and it can express taste and aesthetics without a greater judgment of value.

There is no denying that anti-Black sentiment is rampant among many Muslims, as seen in Ahmadu Bamba’s introduction and in the deplorable habit of some Arabs to refer to Black people as ‘*abīd*’ (slaves). This is indefensible. But if this were a problem with Islam then it would be uniquely pronounced in Muslim communities. And it is manifestly not. Anti-Blackness is a global problem, just as present among Arab Christians as Arab Muslims, among Muslim and Hindu Indians alike. Anti-Black racism in Muslim communities is and must continue to be addressed. But here I am not addressing the prejudices of individuals or even communities. I am interested in the accusation that Islam *as a religion*, either in its founding scriptures or its normative law, is anti-Black.

The easy answer

For many Muslims, the answer to these accusations is simple. God tells humans that “the diversity of your colors and languages” is “one of His signs” (Qur’an 30:22), and His revelation clearly rejects ethnic and tribal chauvinism. God has created mankind “in peoples and nations so that you may come to know one another, and the most noble among you in God’s eyes is the most pious” (Qur’an 49:13). Indeed, this verse was revealed to the Prophet ﷺ in order to rebuke some recalcitrant Meccans who had mocked the Muslims for “having no one better” than Bilāl, “this black crow,” as they called him, to perform the call to prayer. This led the Prophet ﷺ to address the people of Mecca and tell them that God had driven from them the arrogance and pride in ancestry that was rampant in the *Jāhiliyya*, the Age of Ignorance before Islam. All people were the children of Adam, the Prophet announced, and “God created Adam from dust.”⁷ As the Prophet further

⁷ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥifnāwī and Maḥmūd Ḥamīd ‘Uthmān, 20 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1994), 8:605. For an early report about Bilāl being called a black crow, see *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1424/2003), 3:263. For the report about the Prophet stating that Adam was created from dust, see *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī, kitāb tafsīr al-Qur’ān, bāb min sūrat al-ḥujurāt*.

explained, it was the varied colors of that dust that gave humans their different skin tones.⁸

The rejection of racism in the Prophet's Sunnah is even more explicit. Abū Hurayra tells of a Black person who used to clean the mosque in Medina. When they died, no one told the Prophet ﷺ. When he asked how the person was and was told that they had died, the Prophet replied with sadness, "Would that you all had told me." Abū Hurayra explains that some Companions had viewed the person with contempt, but the Prophet asked to be taken to their grave so he could pray over them.⁹ When an Arab family would not accept Bilāl's proposal to marry their sister (their specific objection is not mentioned), the Prophet rebuked them and made them agree.¹⁰ The Prophet ﷺ told his followers, "By Him who sent down the book upon Muhammad, no one has any virtue over anyone else except by deeds."¹¹ And he reiterated this point during his farewell sermon, when he reaffirmed that all mankind descends from one ancestor and is beholden to one God, so no race or nation could be better than any other except through piety (*taqwā*).¹²

Tajul Islam, an 'ālim and PhD student at the University of Leeds, offers [profound insight](#) about how the Qur'an and Sunnah address the disease of racism. He notes how people often remark that there was no premodern word in Arabic for racism (incidentally, the word *racism* is novel in European languages too, appearing in the 1930s to describe Nazi ideology). But Tajul Islam points to a famous hadith that the Companion Abū Dharr recounted years after the Prophet ﷺ had died. When some Muslims find Abū Dharr sitting in his desert encampment beside his slave, both of them wearing the same simple clothes, they ask him why he didn't take

⁸ Al-Suyūṭī judges this hadith to be *ṣaḥīḥ* and the basis for understanding variations in human phenotypes. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Raf' sha'n al-ḥubshān*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb Faḍl (self-pub., 1411/1991), 371. See also Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa*, 7 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1995–2002), 4:172, no. 1630.

⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-janā'iz, bāb al-ṣalāt 'alā al-qabr ba'd mā dufina; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-janā'iz, bāb al-ṣalāt 'alā al-qabr.*

¹⁰ Abū Bakr Ibn al-'Arabī, *Ārīḍat al-aḥwadhī*, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.), 12:158–9. The *isnād* given for this report by Ibn al-'Arabī goes from Ibn Wahb Mālik 'an Dāwūd b. Qays 'an Zayd b. Aslam.

¹¹ Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-īmān*, ed. Muḥammad Sa'īd Zaghlūl, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990), 4:288; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. 'Umar 'Amrawī, 80 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995–1997), 10:464.

¹² Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (Maymaniyya printing), 5:411.

part of the slave's clothing to make himself a more dignified outfit. Abū Dharr replies by telling them how he had once insulted a slave by bringing up how his mother was non-Arab. When the Prophet was told about this, he confronted Abū Dharr and told him, "You are a person with *jāhiliyya* in you." He then instructed the Muslims that slaves "are your brothers. God put them in your charge. So whoever God has put in charge of his brother, let him feed him from what he eats, clothe him from what he wears, and let him not give him more work than he can bear. And if he gives them work that overwhelms him, then let him help him."¹³ Tajul Islam explains that there was a word for racism in classical Arabic. There was a word for assigning certain people to a group because of something those in power had declared unchangeable about their body or being in order to subordinate or belittle them. That word was *jāhiliyya*.

For all the long-standing and unacceptable anti-Blackness found in Muslim communities, we need to give credit to the many and renowned Muslim scholars who tackled the 'Is Islam anti-Black' question before it was ever formulated in its present sense. Indeed, pushing back against racism and prejudice in the Muslim world formed a veritable genre of scholarly writing. The first to address the issue was the famous Basran litterateur and overall man-about-town, al-Jāhiz (d. 255/869) in his epistle on *The Pride of Blacks over Whites* (*Fakhr al-sūdān 'alā al-bīdān*). This was followed by the *Treatise on the Virtue of Blacks over Whites* (*Risāla fī tafḍīl al-sūd 'alā al-bīd*) by the Baghdad intellectual 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad Ibn Shirshīr al-Nāshī (d. 293/906), the *Book on Blacks and their Virtue over Whites* (*Kitāb al-Sūdān wa faḍlihim 'alā al-bīdān*) by the Baghdad scholar Muḥammad b. Khalaf Ibn al-Marzubān (d. 309/919), the *Book on the Asceticism of Blacks* (*Kitāb Zuhd al-ṣūdān*) by Ja'far b. Aḥmad b. al-Sarrāj al-Muqrī (d. 500/1107), the huge *Illuminating the Darkness concerning the Virtue of Blacks and Ethiopians* (*Tanwīr al-ghabash fī faḍl al-sūdān wa'l-ḥabash*) by the famous Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), the *Embroidered Brocade on the Virtues of Ethiopians* (*al-Ṭirāz al-manqūsh fī faḍā'il al-ḥubūsh*) by the Meccan scholar Ibn 'Abd al-Bāqī (d. circa 993/1585), the *Boast-Off between the White, Brown and Black Women* (*Mufākhara bayn al-bayḍā' wa'l-samrā' wa'l-sawdā'*) by the Damascene

¹³ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, *kitāb al-adab*, bāb mā yunyā min al-sibāb wa'l-la'n.

Muḥammad Bahā' al-Dīn al-Bayṭār (d. 1328/1910), and no less than three treatises by the great Egyptian scholar al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505): *Raising the Standing of Ethiopians* (*Raf' sha'n al-ḥubshān*), *The Trellised Flowers on Reports about Ethiopians* (*Azhār al-'urūsh fī akhbār al-ḥubūsh*), and *Life's Promenade in Choosing Preference between the White, Black and Brown* (*Nuzhat al-'umr fī al-tafḍīl bayn al-bīḍ wa'l-sūd wa'l-sumr*).¹⁴

Defining some terms

There are several ethnonyms (names for ethnic groups), phenonyms (names for people with a certain 'look') and toponyms (names based on geographical location) used in the normative tradition of Islamic thought to denote people mostly referred to historically and today as Black, some of which overlap with one another or which can serve in more than one of these functions. Exactly how these terms are used across the centuries would require another book-length study, but generally the terms are the following.

Aswad (black) means either very dark skinned or having a 'classical' sub-Saharan African phenotype. The plural, **sūdān** ('blacks,' with the term *sūd* replacing this in the twentieth-century in Arabic) means people with the generally dominant phenotype from Africa south of the Sahara. For Muslim scholars, including those living in these lands, the *bilād al-sūdān* is the Sahel and south into Africa's forest zone. **Zanj** (a toponym as well as an ethnonym, with *zanjī* as a singular and *zunūj* as an occasional plural) refers to east Africa/Africans, the people coming roughly from the area between Mozambique until the Horn of Africa and extending inland and up into the upper Nile.¹⁵ *Zanj* can also be used more generally as a synonym for *sūdān*. **Ḥabash** are the people from the Horn of Africa (an area called *Ḥabasha*). From the ninth through the sixteenth centuries CE this was often used only for the region/inhabitants of modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, but it has often

¹⁴ Kātib Chelebī, *Kashf al-zunūn*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1429/2008), 2:256; al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-'umr fī al-tafḍīl bayn al-bīḍ wa'l-sūd wa'l-sumr* (Damascus: al-Maktaba al-'Arabiyya, 1346/1927), 2; al-Ziriklī, *A'lām* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li'l-Malāyīn, 2005), 6:211.

¹⁵ See Marina Tolmacheva, "Toward a Definition of the Term Zanj," *Azania* 26, no. 1 (1986): 105–113.

included people from Somalia and even northern coastal Kenya. *Ḥabashī* (the adjective) is first and foremost defined by a certain ‘look’ well known among Ethiopians and Somalis, including cedar-colored skin and an aquiline nose.¹⁶

What about explicitly anti-Black hadiths?

If matters were as simple as the Prophet’s clear teachings in his farewell sermon, there would be little debate. But there are some Hadiths attributed to the Prophet ﷺ that denigrate Black Africans (referred to as *zanj*), stating that they are lazy, stupid, beholden to their base appetites, and even disfigured. These supposed sayings of the Prophet, however, do not appear in mainstay Hadith collections. More importantly, leading Muslim Hadith critics have denied their authenticity. Since the 1300s CE it has been an uncontroversial point in manuals of Hadith criticism that any hadith belittling a race or ethnicity cannot come from the Prophet and must be a forgery or error.¹⁷ Though Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) was the first to articulate this as a rule, it can be seen even among earlier critics like Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889). When asked about a narrator who had said that ‘Ā’isha had said, “Beware of Zanj [people, i.e., east Africans], for they were created disfigured (*mushawwah*),” Abū Dāwūd replied, “Whoever narrates this, accuse them [of unreliability].”¹⁸

We do find such alleged hadiths included in uncritical Hadith collections and histories, such as the *Muʿjams* of al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971) or the works of Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣbahānī (d. 430/1038), both prominent Hadith scholars of Isfahan. But such authors made no pretense that they considered the material in their Hadith books to be reliable. Indeed, they were criticized by noted Muslim scholars for misleading people by including such dubious content.¹⁹

¹⁶ See Daniel Ayana, “Re-Mapping Africa: The Northern *Zanj*, *Damadim*, *Yamyam*, *Yam/Yamjam*, *Habasha/Ahabish*, *Zanj-Ahabish* and *Zanj ed-Damadam*: The Horn of Africa between the Ninth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *History in Africa* 46 (2019): 57–104.

¹⁷ Jonathan A. C. Brown, “The Rules of *Matn* Criticism,” *Islamic Law and Society* 19 (2012): 362–4.

¹⁸ Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 12 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1415/1994), 10:135.

¹⁹ Jonathan Brown, “Even If It’s Not True It’s True: Using Unreliable Hadiths in Sunni Islam,” *Islamic Law and Society* 18 (2011): 24.

There are some instances when such racist ideas are attributed to major scholars like al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820), but such attributions are also unreliable.²⁰ It is, of course, troubling that the scholars who made such attributions or repeated them found nothing objectionable about the ideas they were reporting. Sadly, anti-Black sentiment has a long history and has affected even respected Muslim scholars. Part of this essay will explain the widely held understandings of climate and culture that explain why such beliefs would have been accepted.

Race and racialization

One cannot respond to questions about anti-Blackness without first talking about race. [Race](#) is an immensely complex notion, with ongoing scholarly debates over whether it is a continuation of ancient categories like ‘nation’ and ‘people’ or if it arose only in early modern or modern Europe. One succinct understanding of race is that it is a system of categorizing people based on some common characteristic. It was long assumed that, with race, this characteristic must be tied to the body, biology, or descent.²¹ Observing how race functions, however, it is more accurate to think about this common characteristic as anything ascribed as essential to a person or a group and considered unalterable. Who defines that characteristic and endows it with importance is, of course, crucial, particularly when race is the basis of some form of discrimination or deprivation (i.e., racism). That race is defined by some and applied to others points to an intrinsic element of race and racism as lived concepts: racism is a framework created and maintained by the powerful and applied to those over whom they exercise power.²²

Race is constructed by people, so it is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. But that does not mean it is not real. Indeed, since race is often a tool for the

²⁰ See my forthcoming book *Is Islam Anti-Black?*

²¹ Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11. Miles and Brown see as key the way that racialization attributes “meaning to somatic characteristics,” but they insist that such characteristics are constructed through “signifying processes.” Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown, *Racism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 88–92.

²² For an excellent review of the knot of questions around academic definitions of race, see Adam Hochman, “‘Race’ Modern? Disambiguating the Question,” *Du Bois Review* 16, no. 2 (2019): 647–65.

application of power and control in society, it is a very *real* thing in people's lives. People are often confused by the established idea that race is socially constructed because, when they see a random person from Kenya and a random person from Norway, they can see undeniable and obvious differences in how the two look. This is what Michael Hardimon has termed **minimalist race**—the obvious differences in skin color, hair texture, and common facial features that correspond to ancestry and geographical origin.²³ But race as something that has meaning—the decision about what physical characteristics matter—is a social construction. The person from Kenya may have earlobes while the person from Norway may not, but no one would notice because these physical distinctions have not been made racially meaningful by societies. In the modern world, it is skin color and hair texture that have been rendered significant.

Race can be elaborated along all sorts of lines, from ancestry (Arabian tribal notions of *nasab* [lineage] and *irq* [bloodline]), to [ethnicity](#) (Irish), to (though some might debate this) caste. Even religion can be racialized, as with the categorization of Muslims within the Russian Empire as the race/nation of Tatars, with early modern Europeans labeling all Muslims as Moors or Turks, and 'Muslim' becoming a [racialized identity](#) in the modern West. In this last case, 'Muslims' are placed in that category, their acts and words are interpreted through the ways that Western society has defined it (e.g., terror, extremism, honor killing, etc.), and they are dealt with as such by the power structures of their societies. This kind of racialization erases what any given Muslim actually believes or thinks. Their 'Muslimness' already defines them.²⁴ Sometimes a racialized identity might look no different from others. Serb nationalists, for example, carried out genocide against Bosnian Muslims who looked and spoke just like their Serbian and Croatian neighbors. But they had been demonized as 'Turks.'²⁵

²³ See Michael O. Hardimon, *Rethinking Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

²⁴ For more on this, see Arun Kundnani's excellent *The Muslims are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (New York: Verso, 2015); Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood, "The Racialisation of Muslims," in *Thinking Through Islamophobia*, ed. Salman Sayyid and AbdoolKarim Vakil (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 78–9. Iskander Abbasi sees medieval/early modern European perceptions of Islam/Muslims and their relationship to it/them as laying the groundwork for early modern conceptions of race and the power structures built on them. Iskander Abbasi, "Muslims, and the Coloniality of Being: Reframing the Debate on Race and Religion in Modernity," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 33, no. 2 (2020).

²⁵ Meer and Modood, "Racialisation of Muslims," 77.

Of course, phenotype—how one presents physically with hair, skin color, bone structure, etc.—is a convenient vector for defining race because it is immediately visible to everyone, and everyone can know your category. The way we look—the somatic realities of our bodies—may be part of nature. But our ‘color’ is still a social construct, often within the overarching construct of race. Linguists debate whether humans share a universal template for labeling colors at the basic level of language (e.g., do all societies see the same basic colors in the world, etc.).²⁶ But there is no debate that societies differ in how they deploy colors to describe people’s appearance and, more importantly, to place them in social categories and hierarchies. The United States and Brazil provide useful contrasts. In the US, the racial categories of Black and White were developed by a society deeply invested in exploiting and controlling enslaved people from Africa. In 1656 a Virginia court issued a simple ruling that established what became known as the ‘One Drop Rule’ (technically known as hypodescent). This would define the two classes of Black and White, enslavable and free, rightless and possessing rights.²⁷ [Brazilian society](#) has construed color and race very differently, with many more color- and ethnic-based racial categories than in the US. In Brazil, there is much more weight given to how people identify themselves, and they can even choose to switch identifications. Alongside the longstanding social tradition of identifying oneself by an array of colors and ancestries, the last two decades have seen the Brazilian government introduce a parallel system that divides Brazilians into five official racial groups.²⁸

²⁶ Ida Raffaelli et al., “Introduction,” in *Lexicalization Patterns in Color Naming: A Cross-Linguistic Perspective*, ed. Ida Raffaelli et al. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2019), 1–19.

²⁷ Christine B. Hickman, “The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census,” *Michigan Law Review* 95, no. 5 (1997): 1174.

²⁸ Habeeb Azande, *Illuminating the Blackness: Blacks and African Muslims in Brazil* (London: Rabaah, 2016), 22–28.

Race and Blackness in Arabia in the time of the Prophet ﷺ

Differences in how race and color function in other societies often present obstacles for Westerners, especially Americans. The latter in particular tend to impose American racial categories on other times and places, a mistake that distorts discussions about Islam and Blackness.²⁹

Let us take ‘whiteness’ as an example. As Abdullah Hamid Ali has shown, white (*abyaḍ*) was not primarily used by Pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabs to describe phenotype (color) but rather as a metaphor to convey nobility and purity.³⁰ It often functioned alongside black in a good/bad binary pair, as in the Qur’an’s use of the image of blackened and whitened faces. The holy book upbraids the Quraysh for their disappointment at having female children: if they are told of a female child “their face becomes black” (16:58). And the Qur’an distinguishes between the fates of those who believed during their earthly life and those who disbelieved “on the Day when faces will be whitened and faces will be blackened” (3:106).

The metaphoric binary of white and black, however, was about value and morality. For many Muslim scholars of the Qur’an, the faces of the believers being whitened on the Day of Judgment and the faces of the disbelievers being blackened was strictly metaphorical, not literal. The blackening and whitening of the face expressed the desolation or joy of coming to terms with how one had lived one’s life on earth. Even for those scholars who held that people’s faces would literally become black or white on the Day of Judgment, there was no notion that this was connected to an African or ‘white’ phenotype. As Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) describes, the blackness of their faces on the Day of Judgment will be the darkness of the heart that results from ignorance and then manifests in the face.

²⁹ See, for example, a noted historian insisting on applying American understanding of race and color to east Africans: Michael C. Mbabuike, “Wonders Shall Never Cease: Decoding Henry Louis Gates’s Ambiguous Adventure,” *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 2 (2000): 234.

³⁰ Al-Jāhīz, *Rasā’il al-Jāhīz*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Hārūn, 4 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1384/1964), 1:207.

It will be totally unearthly, “a blackness differing from all other types of blackness.”³¹ Similarly, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) and others provide a report that those whose faces are whitened will have faces “white as ice,” not ‘white’ in the sense of some conventional ‘white’ phenotype.³²

The black/white metaphorical binary did not have a parallel in early Arab descriptions of phenotype. Nor, in fact, was white even the term Arabs used to describe those with the lightest skin tones in early Islamic Arabia or the phenotypes closest to ‘White’ people today. In fact, when white was used in regards to skin color, it was not necessarily positive. It was often used to describe the loss of pigmentation caused by vitiligo (*baras*).³³ Otherwise, as the famous Damascene scholar al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) explains, when early Arabs described someone’s skin as white (*abyaḍ*), they meant “wheat colored (*al-ḥinṭī al-lawn*) with a darkish hue (*bi-ḥilya sawdā*)”—a sort of dark olive tone in our terms. Arab-Islamic authors described the fairer and ruddier complexions seen in Syria and Anatolia as red (*aḥmar*) or fair and ruddy (*ashqar*). It is very important to note that when black (*aswad*) was used to describe the color of a person, it could mean either the range of browns associated with an African phenotype **as well as such a color for someone who had no link to Africa.**³⁴ As Ahmad Mubarak and Dawud Walid have shown, when early Arabs described someone as ‘black (*aswad*)’ or ‘very dark (*ādam*),’ this did not necessarily mean they were African or even that they had any African ancestry.³⁵ It described skin color. These color descriptors did not automatically connote other features stereotyped as part of ‘Blackness’ today, such as tightly-coiled hair, a wide nose, or full lips.

³¹ Al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1420/2000), 27:469.

³² Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 2:524.

³³ Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, *The ‘Negro’ in Arab-Muslim Consciousness* (Swansea, UK: Claritas, 2018), 39. Two hadith narrations are interesting in this regard, showing that “redness” was not somehow more praiseworthy than a darker tone. Ibn ‘Umar corrected another companion who quoted the Prophet describing Jesus as “red”; he was actually dark in tone (*ādam*). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb aḥādīth al-anbiyā’, bāb wa’dhkur fī al-kitāb Maryam*.

³⁴ Al-Dhahabī adds that, to denote the darker brown “color of Indians,” Arabs would use “brown (*asmar*)” and “dark brown (*ādam*).” “Black (*aswad*)” meant the color of sub-Saharan Africans or a similar color.” Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’*, 2:168.

³⁵ Ahmad Mubarak and Dawud Walid, *Centering Black Narrative: Black Muslim Nobles among the Early Pious Muslims* (USA: Itrah Press, 2016), 25–26.

In the Hadith corpus, the chief color categories for describing humans are not white and black but either the bipartite ‘red and black’ or the tripartite ‘red, white, and black.’ When the Prophet ﷺ comes out of his quarters and finds his Companions reciting the Qur’an, he says, “Praise be to God! The Book of God is one, and among you there are red (*aḥmar*), white (*abyaḍ*) and black (*aswad*)....”³⁶ In the case of the ‘red and black’ division, evidence suggests that the early Arabs considered themselves part of the ‘black’ group.³⁷ And if among the Companions the Prophet ﷺ saw red, white, and black, and if the lightest skinned were Syrians or Greeks and the darkest were Africans, then the middle group, the ‘white,’ were average Arabs of the day. This supports what al-Dhahabī stated, that ‘white’ skin color in the context of early Islamic history was what we would today call an olive or wheatish tone.

When confronted by what we call a ‘white’ phenotype today, namely that of northern or western Europeans, scholars and travelers of the early Arab-Islamic world were at the edge of their descriptive envelope. They had to categorize them either as fair and ruddy (*shuqr ḥumr*), as Ibn Faḍlān did when he encountered Rus (Scandinavians or Slavs) on the Volga River in 921-2 CE. Or they went so far as to describe them as verging on blue, as al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956) described Slavs and Germanic peoples.³⁸ One ninth-century Muslim scholar disparaged the complexions of Slavs and their ilk as “between light-skinned, ruddy, albino, and ugly white (*mughrab*).”³⁹

Black crows: Why was Blackness bad in Arabia?

³⁶ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan, kitāb al-ṣalāt, bāb mā yujzi‘u al-ummī wa‘l-‘ajamī min al-qirā‘a*. See also Ibn Sa‘d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 1:41.

³⁷ Al-Jāḥiẓ insists that Arabs considered themselves among the “blacks,” not “red.” Al-Nawawī seems to favor this as well because “of the preponderance of brownness (*sumra*)” among Arabs, but he also notes opinions to the contrary. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā‘il*, 1:216; al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1987), 5:7–8.

³⁸ Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh wa‘l-ashraf*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Ismā‘īl al-Ṣāwī (Cairo: Dār al-Ṣāwī, 1357/1938), 22; Ibn Faḍlān, *Kitāb risālat Ibn Faḍlān* (Abu Dhabi: Dār al-Suwaydī, 2003), 101.

³⁹ Quoted in Ibn al-Faqīh (d. circa 290/900), *Kitāb al-buldān*, ed. Yūsuf al-Hādī (Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1416/1996), 199.

Though the Qur'an may have clearly opposed discrimination on the basis of tribe or nation, and though the Prophet ﷺ may have rebuked the Arabs around him for looking down on Bilāl and others they felt were below them, there still seem to be clear expressions of anti-Black racism in authenticated Hadiths. For example, in one hadith, the Prophet instructs his followers to obey their commanders even if that commander is an African slave.⁴⁰

It is inaccurate, however, to judge hadiths like this hastily. To assume that all negative references to 'black' skin are expressions of anti-Black sentiment is to fall into the American trap of assuming that everyone in history has understood race, color, and value like we do. In our records of early Islamic (and some pre-Islamic) history, we find instances of someone's 'blackness' being referred to pejoratively, but we also find it referred to in a matter-of-fact way with no negative connotation at all. Authors of some of the earliest works in the Islamic tradition, like Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204-6/819-20) and his student Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/245), often mentioned that an Arab of respected lineage was 'black' or that their mother was 'black' without any hint at negative signification.⁴¹ Often a report notes a person was 'black' while recounting some unrelated matter.⁴² The *Muwatta'* of Mālik (d. 179/795) contains a report of a man who brings "a black slave girl" to the Prophet ﷺ to see if she was Muslim because he needed to free a Muslim slave to expiate (*kaffāra*) a sin he had committed (for some sins, the Qur'an specifies freeing a Muslim slave).⁴³ Her 'blackness' was irrelevant.

But then why is someone's 'blackness' invoked negatively in some instances, like the command to obey a commander even if he is a 'black' slave? In order to

⁴⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-aḥkām, bāb al-sam' wa'l-tā'a li'l-imām mā lam takun ma'siya*. For an in-depth discussion of this hadith, see my forthcoming book *Is Islam Anti-Black?*

⁴¹ Hishām ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamharat al-nasab*, ed. Nājī Ḥasan (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1407/1986), 52, 94; Ibn Sa'd, *al-Juz' al-mutamam li-ṭabaqāt Ibn Sa'd al-ṭabaqa al-rābi'a min al-ṣaḥāba*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz 'Abdallāh al-Sullūmī (Taif: Maktabat al-Ṣiddīq, 1416/1996), 282, 423; 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan'ānī, *Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A'zamī, 11 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1403/1983), 7:72, 133. According to Ibn Sa'd, the mother of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (d. 81/701) was either an Arab woman captured from the enemy Ḥanīf tribe at the Battle of Yamāma or a "black, Sindī woman" who was a slave of that tribe taken as a prize. Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 5:91.

⁴² Al-Ṣan'ānī, *Muṣannaf*, 4:57; Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Wāqidī, *Maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones (Beirut: Dār al-A'lamī, 1409/1989), 2:681.

⁴³ *Muwatta'*, *kitāb al-ṭiq wa'l-walā'*, *bāb mā yajūzu min al-ṭiq fī al-riqāb al-wājiba*.

understand this, we must remember that tribe was everything in western Arabia, where the Prophet ﷺ lived and delivered his message. There was no government or formal mechanisms of law as we would recognize them. There was only the family and tribe to offer security and only the customs and the ways of the ancestors to distinguish right from wrong. To be part of a powerful or large family and, on a larger scale, tribe, was to be safe. Those who lacked such support lived precariously. Outsiders, whether people with no tribe or people from a distant place whose family was far away, were the most vulnerable and the least respected.

And there was no greater outsider than the slave. In fact, many scholars of slavery in world history have argued that it is marginality in society that defines slavery.⁴⁴ Arabia at the time of the Prophet ﷺ was not a society in which slaves played a crucial economic role, like the Roman Empire or the American South. Slaves were found throughout Arabia but not in huge numbers. Some were bought at markets like those near Mecca, and some were people captured on raids and then either kept as slaves or sold as slaves in the market. A study of Medina at the time of the Prophet shows that many slaves were from Ethiopia and some were from the Byzantine world of Syria. But the largest group was captives from other Arab tribes.⁴⁵

These slaves were all marginal outsiders, regardless of their skin color or place of origin. When a delegation of noble Arabs comes to see the Prophet ﷺ in Medina they find him with Bilāl, Ṣuhayb, Khabbāb, and ‘Ammār, seated among “the weak of the believers.” These Arabs complain to the Prophet because they do not want other Arabs to see them “with these slaves.”⁴⁶ The four Muslims named in the group were among the earliest and most committed converts to Islam. What joined them was not their skin color. Bilāl looked African and ‘Ammār’s mother may have been Ethiopian. But Ṣuhayb was “extremely reddish,” hailing from northern

⁴⁴ See, for example, Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, “African ‘Slavery’ as an Institution of Marginality,” in *Slavery in Africa*, ed. Miers and Kopytoff (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 8–84.

⁴⁵ Hend Gilli-Elewy, “On the Provenance of Slaves in Mecca during the Time of the Prophet Muhammad,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 1 (2017): 164–67; Noel Lenski, “Captivity and Slavery among the Saracens in Late Antiquity (Ca. 250–630 CE),” *Antard* 19 (2011): 248, 259.

⁴⁶ Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān li-āy al-Qur‘ān*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir, 24 vols. (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1420/2000), 9:59.

Syria. And Khabbāb was an Arab from the Tamīm tribe who had been captured and taken as a slave to Mecca.⁴⁷ What joined them in the eyes of the Arab delegation was their marginality in Arab society, their “weakness.” Hence those Arabs erroneously calling them all slaves, the ultimate outsiders (most in the group had, in fact, been slaves who had converted to Islam and were then bought and freed by other Muslims). In this and other instances in which the Prophet ﷺ affirms that what God esteems is not wealth, family, or status but rather faith and good deeds, we see that what is in common among those Muslims he embraces is not color or slave status but marginality, their status as outsiders in a tribal society.

Blackness or Africanness was not negative in and of itself in Arabia of the Prophet’s time. Blackness could provoke contempt or prejudice because it was a strong marker of being an outsider. We see over and over again in the life of the Prophet ﷺ that it is outsider status that is denigrated, not Blackness, even if Blackness is invoked. Bilāl, the “black crow,” had trouble finding a wife in Medina. But there are even more stories of Salmān the Persian being rebuffed for marriage.⁴⁸ Salmān was not ‘black’ like Bilāl. But he had been a slave like Bilāl, and like Bilāl he was totally out of place in Arab society. When challenged about his ancestry, Salmān would respond that he was Salmān the son of Islam.⁴⁹ Indeed, what being demeaned as ‘black’ was to Bilāl, being asked to state his ancestry was to Salmān: a cruel reminder of their outsider status in Arabian tribal society.

In Arabia at the dawn of Islam, the worst situation to be in was to be an outsider, to be marginal, whether one was a captive taken from near Antioch or from Ethiopia. Blackness could thus be negative because it marked the outsider. But we should not confuse a possible indication of a cause with the cause itself. The famous Pre-Islamic poet-warrior ‘Antara bin Shaddād referred to his own Blackness—he

⁴⁷ Ṣuhayb (d. 38–9/658–9) was “very red,” a slave from northern Syria who was later freed. Khabbāb b. al-Aratt (d. 37/657–8) was an Arab of the Tamīm tribe who was a sword maker and had been captured and enslaved; Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Iṣāba fī tamyīz al-ṣaḥāba*, ed. ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd and ‘Alī Aḥmad Mu‘awwad, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1415/1994), 3:65, 2:221–2. Slaves made up the bulk of the first converts to Islam. As ‘Ammār recalled, “I saw the Messenger of God, and there was no one with him except five slaves, two women and Abū Bakr.” *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb faḍā’il aṣḥāb al-nabī, bāb 6*.

⁴⁸ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilya*, 1:186–7, 200.

⁴⁹ Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī‘āb fī ma’rifat al-aṣḥāb*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1412/1992), 2:134.

was the son of a noble Arab of the ‘Abs tribe and his African slave woman—and the contempt with which he had been treated until he won the respect of his father and tribe through his deeds in battle. But ‘Antara was not treated with contempt because he was ‘black.’ He was treated with contempt because he was the son of a slave woman (and thus a slave himself) whose father had long refused to acknowledge him as his son.⁵⁰ He was thus a marginal outsider.

In fact, ‘blackness’ was insignificant when it did not indicate outsider status, as we see in cases of individuals ensconced in the tribal system. Noting that a noble Arab’s mother was ‘black’ meant nothing, since their belongingness, indeed their nobility, was assured by their father’s standing. Noble Arabs of Quraysh like Ṣafwān bin Umayya, ‘Amr bin al-‘Āṣ and ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb were either ‘black’ or of African descent. Ṣafwān’s mother was Ethiopian, while ‘Amr’s and ‘Umar’s mothers were Arab but black (*sawdā*). ‘Amr was even described as “short and tinted with blackness (*sawād*),” and ‘Umar’s paternal grandmother was from Ethiopia as well.⁵¹

Blackness ceased to have meaning when a person’s standing in the tribal system was affirmed. Compare ‘Antara’s precarious situation with that of ‘Arār, the son of another Arab poet, ‘Amr bin Sha’s, from his ‘black’ slave woman. ‘Amr’s wife belittled the son her competitor bore him, so ‘Amr replied:

She sought to punish ‘Arār, and those who seek
His punishment, by my life, they’ve wronged [him].
For if ‘Arār is not fair (*wāḍih*),
I do love blackness (*jawn*) in one full in form (*dhā al-mankib al-‘amam*).
And if ‘Arār doesn’t bridle himself,
I’ve taken this from him; I cannot conceal.
So, if you are with me or wish my company,
Be to him like butter, readied in its bowl.
Otherwise, depart! Like the rider

⁵⁰ Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shi‘r wa’l-shu‘arā*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1423/2002), 1:243.

⁵¹ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 3:56; al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Kamāl Ḥasan Mar‘ī, 4 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Aṣriyya, 1425/2005), 2:241; Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī‘āb fī ma‘rifat al-aṣḥāb*, 3:1184; al-Suyūṭī, *Raf‘ sha’n al-ḥubshān*, 373.

Rushing their thirsty mount [to water], on the road without ease.⁵²

Another telling example of this appears in a set of questionable hadiths, which reveal much about the dynamics of early Arabic Islamic society even if they are not reliable. One hadith describes how the Prophet ﷺ supposedly delayed the departure of all the pilgrims from the plain of ‘Arafa during Hajj so that his Companion Usāma bin Zayd could return from an errand. When he returned, the people there from Yemen saw that Usāma was “flat-nosed and black.” They complained to the Prophet ﷺ, “This is the reason you detained us from departing today?” The narrator, ‘Urwa bin al-Zubayr (d. 93/711-2), adds that the people of Yemen rebelled against Islam in the Ridda Wars because “they had contempt for the Prophet’s ﷺ command,” meaning, we are meant to understand, his command regarding Usāma bin Zayd.⁵³

This Hadith suffers from a clear break in its chain of transmission, and it is an isolated report via one chain, so it is not historically reliable. Yet it was nevertheless circulated by at least some Muslims during the early Islamic period and seems to express real anti-Black sentiment. But to stop at this conclusion is to miss the real cause of tension and controversy that shaped this report. Once again, Blackness here is merely a proxy for being an outsider. Usāma’s father, Zayd bin Hāritha, was one of the first converts to Islam and one of the few individuals mentioned by name in the Qur’an. He was raised by the Prophet ﷺ and was beloved to him, as was his son, whom the Prophet adored. When Zayd grew to adulthood, the Prophet saw him as a capable leader and put him in charge of important campaigns. There was even some notion in the years after the Prophet’s death that, had Zayd outlived him, the Prophet ﷺ would have made him his successor.⁵⁴ The Prophet’s affection and esteem for Usāma matched that for his father. Usāma was raised like a grandchild of the Prophet, who doted on him as a child and who saw him as an effective commander and leader as an adult.⁵⁵ The

⁵² Ibn Sallām al-Jumhī, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu‘arā’*, ed. Maḥmūd Shākir ([Cairo?]: Dār al-Madanī, n.d.), 1:199–200.

⁵³ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Tārīkh al-kabīr*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1422/2001), 2:17.

⁵⁴ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* 1:228; *Musnad Aḥmad*, 6:281.

⁵⁵ In one famous hadith, the Prophet ﷺ doted on the young Usāma and said that, if he were a girl, he would dress

“command of the Prophet ﷺ” that ‘Urwa bin al-Zubayr mentioned regarding Usāma, which angered some Muslims, was not him delaying leaving ‘Arafa. It was the Prophet putting Usāma in charge of missions even when more senior Companions were present, including a mission that the Prophet ﷺ assigned to Usāma from his deathbed. After the Prophet’s ﷺ death, his successors continued to hold Usāma in high esteem. During the Ridda Wars, the caliph Abū Bakr left him in charge of Medina.

Zayd and Usāma had high standing in Islam, but they were very much outsiders in the tribal society of the Hejaz that still dominated the early Muslim community. Not only was Zayd not from the Quraysh or from any major tribe, he had come to Mecca through its slave market. He had been enslaved in Yemen as a child and sold in Mecca, where the Prophet ﷺ had bought him and freed him. Authentic hadiths reveal how controversial it was for the Prophet ﷺ to put such an outsider in command over noble Arabs of Mecca and Medina, and the Prophet ﷺ had to face this outrage again when he granted Usāma bin Zayd the prominence he felt Usāma merited.⁵⁶

We are not sure how Zayd looked, in part because it seems clear that claims about his appearance functioned to emphasize his outsider status. All available reports are that both Zayd’s parents were Arabs from Yemen, but there is an early report that he was short, extremely dark (*shadīd al-udma*) and had a flat nose. In contrast, Ibn Sa‘d notes that it was also reported that Zayd was light skinned (*abyaḍ*), and scholars like al-Dhahabī consider this to be the most reliable position.⁵⁷ On the other hand, scholars agreed that Usāma was dark skinned (*aswad*), like his Ethiopian mother. But while this was unremarkable in the case of noble Arabs like Ṣafwān bin Umayya, ‘Amr bin al-‘Āṣ and ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb, reports circulated

her up, ornament her, and find her a husband. *Sunan Ibn Mājah, kitāb al-nikāh, bāb al-shifā‘a fī al-tazwīj; Musnad Aḥmad*, 6:222.

⁵⁶ In a well-known hadith, the Prophet expresses his disapproval over people second-guessing his putting Zayd and Usāma in charge of campaigns when more senior companions were present. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-maghāzī, bāb ghazwat Zayd b. Ḥāritha; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba, bāb faḍā’il Zayd b. Ḥāritha*.

⁵⁷ Al-Dhahabī favors the report that Zayd was light-colored and his son dark, since there were reliable reports that the two looked nothing alike. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 1:222–3. See also Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan, kitāb al-ṭalāq, bāb fī al-qāfa*.

in the early Islamic period that referenced Usāma's color functioned to denigrate him.⁵⁸ In this tension around Zayd and Usāma, Blackness stands in as a proxy for the resentment over the Prophet's ﷺ estimation for someone's merit as opposed to their station in tribal society.

The rise of anti-Blackness?

The 700s and 800s CE saw an unusual phenomenon in Arabic literature: interest in a group of Pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic poets who were dubbed 'The Crows of the Arabs,' three poets whose fathers were Arab but whose mothers were African slave women (or very dark-skinned Arabs) and whose appearance was 'black' ('Antara, Khaffāf bin Nadba, and Sulayk bin 'Umayr, along with a few others sometimes mentioned as well). A theme that appeared in much of their poetry was contrasting what they seemed to admit as the ugliness and lowliness of their appearance and sometimes slave status with the nobility of their character.

Though he has been criticized for many things, the Orientalist Bernard Lewis was quite right when he observed that the 'Crows of the Arabs' theme was a momentary fad in Arabic poetry. And he was even more correct when he explained that much of their poetry and the stories around them betray traces of later invention as opposed to being authentic expressions of Pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arab culture. As we have reiterated here, for Arabs of the time of the Prophet ﷺ, skin color and appearance were not important in and of themselves.⁵⁹ And the Qur'an and the Prophet ﷺ had made clear that invoking someone's lineage or color to draw attention to their status was unacceptable. When Meccans had mocked their former slave Bilāl, now conqueror, as a 'black crow,' the Prophet and the Qur'an had rebuked them. In the 800s, however, noted Muslim scholars wrote books on poetry that fetishized the Crows of the Arabs.⁶⁰ As al-Jāhīz wrote,

⁵⁸ There is a unique version of the hadith mentioned above about the Prophet talking about marrying off Usāma. In this version, a black (*aswad*) son of Usāma enters in upon the Prophet ﷺ, and Umm Salama (allegedly) said that, if he were a girl, he would never get married. Al-Wāqidī, *Maghāzī*, 3:125.

⁵⁹ Bernard Lewis, "The Crows of the Arabs," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 92, 96.

⁶⁰ Interest in the "Crows of the Arabs" was part of this aesthetic of exoticizing Blackness. This appealed to some Muslim scholars of poetry and not others. Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī (d. 232/846) and Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) were

Africans were now wondering, “You [Arabs] saw us as matches for your women during the Age of Ignorance. But, now, when the justice of Islam has come, you decide that was wrong?”⁶¹ What had changed?

For all his faults, Bernard Lewis offers a compelling and sound explanation. In Arabia of the Prophet’s time, Ethiopia was not seen as some primitive land of primitive people. It was a respected neighbor and refuge where the Muslims had sought safety and lived for years.⁶² The Old Ethiopian language and culture was familiar to Arabs in the Hejaz, who regularly referenced its vocabulary and customs.⁶³ Many of the Ethiopians that Arabs in the Hejaz would have seen would have been slaves, captured in raids or bought in the market. But Ethiopians were present in places like Medina for other reasons as well, as visitors or delegations.⁶⁴

Whatever their origin (the largest group seems to have been Arabs), slaves were present throughout Arabia of the Prophet’s time, though not in great numbers. They were the result of raids and small-scale trade in labor. When the Muslims conquered the greater Middle East, however, they found themselves right in the middle and in charge of a region in which slave labor had been a significant part of the economy and society for centuries and in which the international slave trade was a major commerce. Most of these slaves were not Black Africans—they were Berbers, Persians, Turkic peoples, Germanic folk, Slavs, etc. But the Muslims (still mostly Arab) began encountering Black Africans from faraway regions like the east African coast and the Upper Nile Valley, and they encountered them mainly as slaves.⁶⁵ Even though most of the slaves brought into the central Islamic lands of

both early Sunni scholars from non-Arab backgrounds who wrote histories of Arab poets. Ibn Qutayba was very interested in the “Crows of the Arabs” as a phenomenon and in their poetry playing on their color. Ibn Sallām, on the other hand, showed no interest in “the Crows” or Blackness in general. He doesn’t even mention ‘Antara’s appearance and mentions that Nuṣayb was black only offhand. Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shi‘r wa’l-shu‘arā*, 1:244, 329, 353, 396; Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu‘arā*, 1:152, 2:675.

⁶¹ Al-Jāhīz, *Rasā’il*, 1:197.

⁶² Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 1:203, no. 1764.

⁶³ See the Ethiopian words referenced in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *kitāb al-janā’iz*, *bāb binā’ al-masjid ‘alā al-qabr*; *kitāb al-ḥajj*, *bāb zuḥūr al-ḥajj*; *kitāb al-tafsīr*, *bāb sūrat al-anbiyā’*; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *kitāb al-salām*, *bāb lā ‘adwā wa lā ṭīyara*; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-ashriba*, *bāb al-nahy ‘an al-muskir*.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Ibn Ḥibbān’s narration of the hadith of the Ethiopians dancing in the mosque. Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 2:564.

⁶⁵ Lewis, “Crows of the Arabs,” 92; Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 50–6. Black African slaves started appearing in the slave markets of newly conquered

the Middle East and North Africa were Slavic, Turkic, Greek or others, the association of Blackness with slavery grew stronger and stronger in the central Islamic lands of the Middle East and North Africa.

It is not clear to me exactly why this happened. Why didn't Muslims in the 700s and 800s CE start associating Turks, Indians or Slavs—all groups from whom slaves were drawn in massive numbers—with slavery? It's possible that, because the Abbasid Empire abutted Turkic regions and had commercial links with India that Muslim interactions with these groups were too complex for simplistic stereotypes to form. But that does not explain why Slavs were not associated with slavery (like they would be in western Europe, where the name literally came to mean 'slave'). Perhaps the phenotypes of Africans brought from south of the Sahara or the interior of the east African coast were distinct enough from how 'average' Muslims in Baghdad looked that an association of slavery formed. But such thinking makes a lot of assumptions about what 'average' Muslims in a city like Baghdad were used to seeing, and we already know that African or dark-skinned Arabs were not at all unknown.

In the medieval Islamic world the most widely held ideas about cultures and their characteristics certainly were not very positive about Africans, as we have seen in the widespread reports about their unconstrained appetites, their disfigured forms, and their stupidity. But people held similarly negative views about the Slavic peoples and Turks. The geography and related climatic-based ethnology that predominated in Islamic civilization was based on the Greco-Roman medicine and geography of Galen (d. *circa* 216 CE) and Ptolemy (d. *circa* 170 CE), with its division of the world into different climatic zones and the theory that climates shaped bodies and temperament. A common Greco-Roman explanation for the dark skin of Africans was thus that the heat of the sun had burned their skin or caused their blood to boil up close to their skin's surface. Greco-Roman authors certainly saw Black Africans as distinctive-looking and came up with theories to explain this and other phenomena of human phenotypes, but their view of Africans

Muslim north Africa at the end of the 600s CE. Elizabeth Savage, *A Gateway to Hell, a Gateway to Paradise: The North African Response to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 73–5.

was not fundamentally negative. Black Africans were different but not any better or worse than others.

The strong negative associations of blackness/Africaness only appeared in the early centuries of Christianity (commonly referred to by historians as the Late Antique period) in the Mediterranean. This was at least in part due to a blending of physical description with the metaphorical association of blackness with sin in Christian discourse. The Old Testament told of the infamous Curse of Ham, when Noah cursed the descendants of his son Ham, who were understood to have populated Africa, to slavery. This story transformed into Ham's descendants being cursed with black skin as well as slavery, a version which first appears in the Talmud in the fourth and fifth centuries CE and in an early seventh-century Christian text.⁶⁶ We can see the blending of this lore about the Curse of Ham to blackness and slavery with Greco-Roman 'scientific' theories about skin color and environment in the writings of influential Church Fathers like Augustine (d. 430 CE). He explains that Ham's descendants, who had inherited the hot, southern parts of the world, still dwelled apart from the righteous, blazing with impatience and heresy.⁶⁷ If blackness was cursed and sinful, then its opposite was pure and pious. A famous bishop from Cappadocia, Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395), thus claimed that Christ had come into the world to make 'blacks' 'white' and that in the kingdom of heaven Ethiopians would become 'white.'⁶⁸

When Muslims moved into the greater Mediterranean and Persian world and started mingling with its cultural heritage, it became common for medieval Muslim authors to claim that the middle zones containing the modern Middle East were the most temperate and thus produced people with the most balanced minds and bodies. The people who inhabited the extreme north (Slavs, Turks and others) and extreme south (Black Africans) were both characterized by stupidity and an

⁶⁶ David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 172–74, 197; David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 25–27.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, bk. XVI, ch. 2.

⁶⁸ Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1970), 198, 205. Incredibly, Snowden does not see these expressions as negative but rather as a continuity of the Greco-Roman idea of the Ethiopian as an extreme of difference (197–215).

inability to reason, though Slavs were of a cold disposition, while Black Africans were ‘hot’ and savage.⁶⁹ Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī (d. 727/1327), whose geographical compendium cites Galen directly for its explanation of phenotype and character, and whose description of Black Africans is among the most negative, notes how the most distant Ethiopians share some customs with the Slavs.⁷⁰ Ibn Khaldūn’s (d. 808/1406) Greco-Roman scientific description of why the Africans living in the extreme south were primitive of mind and never received revelation applied equally to Slavs, he notes.⁷¹ Ibn Mājid (fl. mid 1400s) in his navigational guide says that south of Kanem lived ‘whites’ who were such because of their distance from the sun, just as the Turks were.⁷²

The Islamic scholarly and cultural heritage also absorbed the Curse of Ham, which became a regular part of their explanations for the African phenotype. But it was rejected by many Muslim scholars, including major ones. They saw that it contradicted reliable hadiths and was scientifically unfounded. Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Suyūṭī and other leading Hadith scholars noted that the Curse of Ham came from Biblical lore and had no sound *isnad* to the Qur’an or Sunnah. The Prophet ﷺ had explained in a sound hadith that the variety of human skin tones comes from the different colors of dust from which Adam was created.⁷³ Scholars like Ibn Khaldūn rejected the Curse of Ham because they believed that skin color was conditioned by environment (which is actually correct!). Despite the objections of such Muslim scholars, it is clear that even in the 700s CE Muslims were being influenced by the belief that Noah cursed his son Ham’s descendants, Africans, to be both ‘black’ and slaves.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ J. T. Olsson, “The World in Arab Eyes: A Reassessment of the Climes in Medieval Islamic Scholarship,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77, no. 3 (2014): 500–1.

⁷⁰ Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī, *Nukhbat al-dahr fī ‘ajā’ib al-barr wa’l-baḥr*, ed. M. A. F. Mehren (St. Petersburg: M. M. Eggers et Comp., 1866), 268, 273.

⁷¹ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N. J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 59.

⁷² J. F. P. Hopkins, trans., *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, ed. N. Levtzion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 367.

⁷³ Al-Suyūṭī judges this hadith to be *ṣaḥīḥ* and the basis for understanding variations in human phenotypes. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Raf‘ sha’n al-ḥubshān*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Faḍl (self-pub., 1411/1991), 371. See also Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa*, 7 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 1995–2002), 4:172, no. 1630.

⁷⁴ Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 61–71.

Some have leveled the accusation that the negative views of Black Africans that became prevalent in the West were imported from the Muslim world along with Islamic sciences and philosophy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But this claim hinges on the false assumption that such negative views were unknown to Western Christendom before its medieval encounter with Islamic civilization. As we have seen, long before any Western Christian read a page of Islamic scholarship, they would have come across the notion that an African phenotype connoted sin and immoderation in the works of pillars of Western Christianity like St. Augustine.

Conclusion

Writing his book on the virtues of Ethiopians, the Meccan scholar Ibn ‘Abd al-Bāqī was not shy in showing how enamored he was of women from the Horn of Africa (apparently he was not alone, considering how many of his peers he quotes). But he had no such esteem for women from further south along the east African coast and its interior. His book on the virtues of Ethiopians includes a warning against having children with these *zanjiyyāt*, parroting the worst stereotypes about Black Africans circulating at his time throughout the Eurasian world, inside and outside the Abode of Islam: they are lazy, base, and submissive, but also volatile and unreasonable. He cites unironically the forged hadiths of east Africans as disfigured, stealing when hungry, fornicating when full. But Ibn ‘Abd al-Bāqī then strikes a totally different note. Turning away from such stereotypes, he says, “Such talk is the convention of some sophisticated folk. But what is the truth (*ḥaqīqa*) and what is held by those on the path of guidance is that ‘The noblest among you in God’s eyes is the most pious (Qur’an 49:13).’” He then runs through a list of numerous sound hadiths in which the Prophet ﷺ praises Africans and enumerates pious exemplars among them.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Ibn ‘Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Ṭirāz al-manqūsh fī maḥāsīn al-ḥubūsh*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (Kuwait: Mu’assasat Fahd al-Marzūq al-Ṣaḥāfiyya, 1995), 107–9.

These few lines from this sixteenth-century book offer a concise answer to the question ‘Is Islam anti-Black?’ Ibn ‘Abd al-Bāqī was an educated Muslim scholar, esteemed enough to serve as a *khaṭīb* in Medina. But he had no problem repeating awful expressions of anti-Blackness rooted in Near Eastern traditions about climate and character erroneously justified by hadiths ascribed to the Prophet ﷺ. But Muslim scholars far more respected and influential than Ibn ‘Abd al-Bāqī had long before him exposed as forged those hadiths cited as evidence for demeaning Africans and had thoroughly rejected the ideas they supported. And even as his pen moved across the page, Ibn ‘Abd al-Bāqī turned away from his anti-Blackness and towards the clear guidance of God and His Prophet ﷺ. Those wondering if Islam is anti-Black need look no further than how this scholar was rescued from the anti-Black racism endemic in his society by the revelation of Islam itself.