



Mawālī: How Freed Slaves and Non-Arabs Contributed to Islamic Scholarship

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The contributions of non-Arabs and slaves to early Islamic scholarship

Those unfamiliar with Islamic intellectual history might assume that most early Muslim scholars were Arabs. And some might be surprised to hear that among these early scholars were many who had been slaves. However, as I will demonstrate, Islamic scholarship is tremendously indebted to the efforts of emancipated slaves and non-Arab scholars. In this brief article, I shed light on the term *mawālī* and explain how it referred to both freed slaves as well as non-Arabs in early Islam. Next, I highlight the importance of the tribal system in the Arabian Peninsula and how it resulted in the creation of the *mawālī* category. Finally, I explain who the *mawālī* were and their role in developing and preserving Islamic scholarly tradition. The primary purpose of shedding light on this issue is to demonstrate that Islam's call for racial equality generated a meritocratic scholarly atmosphere that allowed scholars of all backgrounds to participate in the quest for and preservation of knowledge.

Many have argued that non-Arabs scholars have exceedingly outnumbered Arab scholars. This assumption is not necessarily accurate. Non-Arabs certainly played a key role in Islamic scholarship, but it is important not to misunderstand this as Arabs not contributing or even lacking intelligence. A random sample of over one thousand scholars who died in or before the year of 400 AH/1010 CE, covering the five main branches of Islamic learning (*ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, *qirā'a*, *naḥw*, and *fiqh*) found that 51% of scholars were Arabs and 49% were non-Arabs. In the first century of Islam Arabs outnumbered non-Arabs 90% to 10%, but by the fourth century non-Arabs outnumbered Arabs 65% to 35%.¹ Another study that used Abū Ishāq al-Shirāzī's (d. 476/1083) *Ṭabaqāt al-Fuqahā'* to look at the first two centuries of Islam found that the ratios of Arab to non-Arab scholars were: 8:2 in Medina, 2:8 in Mecca, 7:3 in Syria and northern Iraq, 4:4 in Egypt, and 7:3 in Kufa

¹ John Nawas, "The Contribution of Mawālī to the Six Sunnite Canonical Ḥadīth Collections," in *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Boston: Brill, 2005), 141–52.

and Basra.² As we see, Arabs played an absolutely essential role in Islamic scholarship, particularly in the early period, when the vast majority of Muslims were Arab. With time, non-Arabs became the majority. The initial predominance of Arabs in Islam did not suppress the Islamic teaching that it is piety and knowledge that determine a scholar's standing, not race or background. The early Muslim community allowed people from all societal backgrounds to contribute to Islamic knowledge.

What did slavery look like in 7th-century Arabia?

Today, many automatically view any historical phenomenon labeled as slavery through the lens of American chattel slavery. This complicates discussing slavery in the Islamic tradition, because the extreme oppressiveness, expansiveness, and racial basis of slavery in the Western European colonies of the New World is not representative of the many and varied forms slavery has taken throughout history. Looking at slavery only from the American prism conceals the tremendous diversity in the variety of relationships of dependent labor and exploitation that have appeared in human societies globally and throughout history. The concept of slavery and the difficulty in defining it has been discussed elsewhere in great detail.³ However, it is important to highlight a few differences between slavery in the Americas and the forms it took in Islamic history.

Slavery in 7th-century Arabia was not based on skin color or race. The primary way one became a slave was by being captured as a prisoner of war or on a raid. In modern times, when soldiers of an enemy army are captured, they are usually placed in a prison. However, premodern times did not have the institution of prisons housing hundreds or thousands of prisoners. Instead of being placed in jails, in the premodern world prisoners of war were either killed, ransomed, or taken as slaves into the homes of individuals. Because slavery was based on whom

² Harold Motzki, "The Role of Non-Arab Converts in the Development of Early Islamic Law," *Islamic Law and Society* 6, no. 3 (1999): 293–317.

³ See Jonathan Brown, *Slavery and Islam* (London: Oneworld, 2019). Also see Jonathan Brown and Abdullah Hamid Ali, "Slavery and Islam: What is Slavery?," *Yaqeen*, February 7, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/abdullah-hamid/slavery-and-islam-what-is-slavery>.

one captured in war and not race, slaves from all backgrounds existed, with the largest group of slaves in Pre-Islamic Arabia being other Arabs.⁴ Slaves in Arabia were not housed away from their owners, working apart in the fields. They were individuals who were part of their owners' households. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized the importance and necessity of clothing, feeding, housing, and treating slaves humanely and treating them as brothers and sisters. He prohibited beating them, and the Qur'an and Sunnah strongly encouraged freeing them. In a hadith, the Companion Al-Ma'rūr ibn Suwayd (d. 82/701) رضي الله عنه narrates:

I saw Abū Dharr Al-Ghifārī wearing a cloak, and his slave, too, was wearing a cloak. We asked him about that (i.e., how both were wearing similar cloaks). He replied, "Once I abused a man and he complained of me to the Prophet. The Prophet asked me, 'Did you abuse him by slighting his mother?' He added, 'Your slaves are your brethren upon whom Allah has given you authority. So, if one has one's brethren under one's control, one should feed them with the like of what one eats and clothe them with the like of what one wears. You should not overburden them with what they cannot bear, and if you do so, help them (in their difficult work).'"⁵

Until the age of abolition in the 1800s, slavery had been a mundane reality in every civilization. Although Islam did not prohibit slavery, it did come very close to it. This was due to the fact that the Qur'an strongly encouraged the emancipation of slaves and even mandated it as a requirement for forgiveness for certain categories of sins. Beyond requiring the freeing of slaves for sins, the Qur'an and Sunnah are full of examples strongly encouraging the freeing of slaves as a good deed. In fact, one of the earliest chapters revealed refers to freeing slaves as a sign of piety.⁶ Slaves were often emancipated by their owners as an act of righteousness. Slaves were also able to gain freedom by a contract of manumission (*mukātaba*) whereby the owner granted the slave freedom after a period of employment or an agreed set of money was paid. This meant that the owner had to allow the slave to earn money. A female slave who gave birth to her owner's child, known as *umm walad*, immediately became free when the owner died. The Prophet ﷺ also noted that a

⁴ Jonathan Brown, *Slavery and Islam*, 114.

⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2545.

⁶ See Qur'an 90:12–13.

slave automatically became free if the owner declared him or her as such, even if the statement was an accident or a joke. Finally, if a Muslim committed certain sins, such as involuntary manslaughter, they were required to free a slave.

In Islamic civilization, slaves were rarely slaves for life and most were eventually freed. What this meant was that there was never a consistent class of slaves in society, since so many were freed. Early Muslims took the Qur’anic exhortation to free slaves to a level of obsession, sometimes with disregard to their own wealth.⁷ For example, during his lifetime, the Prophet ﷺ was gifted dozens of slaves, and he freed all of them.⁸ This was done at a time when slavery was not considered immoral and almost every middle-class family had a slave. The fact that the Prophet ﷺ emancipated every slave that was gifted to him is a clear indication that he did not like the idea of owning a slave. The Qur’an’s requirement to emancipate a slave as a penalty for certain sins as well as the Prophet’s actions demonstrate that although Islam did not prohibit slavery, it certainly did not encourage it. This is not an apologetic point or a watering down of Islam, but a historical fact.

Who were the *mawālī*?

North of Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century did not have any states or formal government. Individuals had only their families and tribes to rely on for protection. Society at the time did not have police or courts. Rather, there was the tribal social structure. In order to enjoy security one had to be affiliated with a tribe. Although they are not identical, one can compare the function of tribes in Arabia to that of gangs in the modern world. People had absolute and blind loyalty to their tribe because they depended on it for their survival. That is why we find the famous statement of the Arabs “Support your brother whether he is oppressed or the oppressor.”⁹ Islam challenged the tribal system by insisting that all humans are

⁷ Jonathan Brown, *Slavery and Islam*, 263–64.

⁸ See *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2379.

⁹ This was a saying among the Arabs before Islam that meant to blindly support your brother or tribe, regardless of whether they were oppressed or oppressing. The Prophet ﷺ later used this same statement but explained that one supports his oppressive brother by preventing his oppression. On its usage before Islam, see Muḥammad Muṣṭafā

equal before God and that one should stand for justice even if it is against one's nearest kin. For example, the Qur'an 4:135 states, "O you who believe, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your close relatives. Whether the person is rich or poor, God can best take care of both. Refrain from following your own desire, so that you can act justly. If you distort or neglect justice, God is fully aware of what you do." Women, orphans, and slaves were the most vulnerable in 7th-century Arabia. The Prophet Muhammad's call to equality and justice was unprecedented. Justice and equality were central themes of his message.¹⁰ When he heard of an elderly woman who was treated violently in a neighboring land, he stated, "How would God sanctify a nation that does not protect its underprivileged from its powerful?"¹¹

The Qur'an and Sunnah instituted an order in which justice and basic rights belonged to all, even non-Muslims, and were guaranteed by the government,¹² which the Prophet ﷺ called "the guardian of those who have no guardian."¹³ The shift from a tribal system that favored certain tribes over others to a universal Muslim community did not happen overnight, however. Instead, it was a gradual process that took place over several years.

In Arabia of the 7th century, there was a way for outsiders to be integrated into the tribal system, and this would prove crucial for transitioning from the tribal system of *jāhiliyya* to the rule of law in Islam. Foreigners, Arabs who had moved from other areas, and other unattached individuals could become affiliates (*mawlā*, plural *mawālī*) of a tribe. This was also the status given to free slaves. When a member of an Arab tribe freed their slave, the slave would become an affiliate of the tribe. Freed slaves did not originally belong to the tribe but they still maintained an affiliation to it. In the early decades of Islam, the term *mawālī* could

Shiblī, *al-Madkhal fil ta'rīf bil-fiqh al-islāmī wa qawā'id al-milkiyya wa al-'uqūd fīhi* (Cairo: Dār al-Ta'līf, 1962), 35–36.

¹⁰ See Nazir Khan, "Divine Duty: Islam and Social Justice," *Yaqeen*, February 4, 2020, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/divine-duty-islam-and-social-justice#fnt_ref10.

¹¹ *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, no. 4010.

¹² See Ovamir Anjum, "The 'Constitution' of Medina: Translation, Commentary, and Meaning Today," *Yaqeen*, February 4, 2021, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/ovamiranjum/the-constitution-of-medina-translation-commentary-and-meaning-today>.

¹³ *Musnad al-Imam Ahmad*, no. 2260.

mean people outside the tribal system who had been integrated into it *or* freed slaves.

As the Muslims expanded outside of Arabia, both meanings of the term *mawālī* found much greater use. When more people from outside the Arabian Peninsula began accepting Islam, the Ḥijāzī Arabs integrated them into the fabric of Arab Muslim society using the *mawālī* system. A patronage system was developed to manage the many new converts spread over a vast area. A non-Arab convert would become the *mawlā* of an Arab patron. As Muslims entered the civilized lands of the Mediterranean and Persian worlds, where slavery had long been an important part of the economy and the slave trade was robust, the Arab Muslim conquerors also found themselves with many captives, and they were also given slaves by allies as tribute. This was a much larger number of slaves than they had seen in Arabia. Following the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the early Muslims freed many of their slaves, especially those who had become Muslim, and so a large portion of the new *mawālī* class of Muslims were former slaves or their children. For example, Sulaymān ibn Yasār (d. 107/725), was of Persian origin and the freed slave of the Prophet's last wife Maymūna bint al-Ḥārith رضي الله عنها. He eventually became one of the seven famous jurists of Medina, alongside the grandchildren of Arabs like Abū Bakr and Ibn Mas'ūd رضي الله عنهما.

This *mawlā* policy was established by the Umayyad dynasty, and its initial form was controversial. It retained some of the prejudice of the old tribal system. Non-Arab converts to Islam were all referred to as *mawālī* and, though they were Muslims, they had a lower status than Arab Muslims.¹⁴ The Umayyad government's preference for Arab Muslims caused contention because it went against the Qur'an's affirmation that all Muslims are equal. Non-Muslims who lived in the Umayyad dynasty paid a tax called a *jizya*, which absolved them from any military obligations. If a non-Muslim converted to Islam this tax was no longer applicable to them. However, giving fiscal equality to new Muslims was not in the interest of the Umayyad state, and they required them to continue paying the *jizya*.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Urban, "The Early Islamic Mawālī: A Window onto Processes of Identity Construction and Social Change" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012), 114–17.

The *‘ulamā’* and pious Muslims objected to this policy and argued that Arabs and non-Arabs were equal. The pious Umayyad caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101/720) ended laws discriminating against the *mawālī*. The early Umayyads had used tribalism as a tool of politics, and the *mawālī* posed a threat to the tribal system.¹⁵ But, by the middle of the Umayyad period, the tribal system had imploded as a tool for organizing the vast Muslim Umayyad empire. The later Umayyad caliphs turned to the *mawālī* as a new pillar of support.

Some modern scholars have questioned whether the *jizya* was levied on the *mawālī*. Jamal Juda has argued that the idea that non-Arab converts to Islam still had to pay the *jizya* comes from that term being used at times for both the tax levied on non-Muslims and the land taxes imposed on everyone. This situation was simplified when the caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz issued a decree that taxes on land would remain the same regardless of the owner, Muslim or non-Muslim.¹⁶

Whatever the anxieties of the early Umayyad state, by the 720s CE the *mawālī* had mostly started speaking Arabic, intermarrying with Arabs, and becoming major figures in business, scholarship, and society. When the Abbasid family took over the caliphate, they soon eliminated all remaining policies that distinguished between Arabs and *mawālī*, and they were no longer considered an inferior class of society.

They achieved social, educational, and economic equality with Arabs in several ways. First, the scholarly class spoke against the idea that Arabs are superior to non-Arabs. Additionally, children of enslaved mothers resolved their liminal positions by re-defining themselves as completely Arab in a similar way that children of immigrants will eventually identify as American rather than as from their country of origin.¹⁷ The *mawālī* needed to demonstrate that they were true Muslims who were loyal to the empire and Islamic scholarship. They used their

¹⁵ Urban, “The Early Islamic Mawālī,” 103.

¹⁶ Jamal Juda, “The Economic Status of the Mawālī in Early Islam,” in *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam*, ed. Monique Bernards and John Nawas (Boston: Brill, 2005), 271–73.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Urban, *Conquered Populations in Early Islam: Non-Arabs, Slaves and the Sons of Slave Mothers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 2.

mastery of Arabic language and scholarship to obtain political and religious positions. As the Abbasid period went on, Arab and non-Arab stopped mattering as ethnic or tribal distinctions. Islamic culture became the shared identity of all, with Arabic becoming the mother tongue of millions and the language of royal courts and scholarship alike.

The contributions of *mawālī* to Islamic scholarship

Even during the time of the first four caliphs, *mawālī* had begun playing important roles in government and Islamic education. The caliph ‘Umar once met the person in charge of Mecca during the Hajj. ‘Umar asked him, “Who did you leave in charge of the people of the valley (i.e., Mecca)?” The man responded, “Ibn Abzā.” ‘Umar asked: “Who is Ibn Abzā?” The man said, “He is one of the *mawālī*.” ‘Umar said: “So you put a *mawlā* in charge?” The man responded, “He recites God’s book and is knowledgeable about the obligations.” ‘Umar responded, “Indeed, I heard your Prophet ﷺ say, ‘God elevates [some] people with this religion and lowers others.’”¹⁸

The role of the *mawālī* increased even under the Umayyads. When Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742), a scholar of Arab stock who was close to the caliphs, returned from a journey, caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (d. 86/705) asked him about who the religious leaders were in different regions. Al-Zuhrī kept naming *mawālī*. The questioning continued until the caliph asked who was leading Kufa, to which al-Zuhrī finally mentioned an Arab, Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī (d. 96/717). The caliph seemed anxious about the fate of his Arab dynasty, and he remarked with worry, “By God, the *mawālī* will lead the Arabs until they give sermons from the pulpits while the Arabs sit under them.” Al-Zuhrī responded: “O leader of the believers, this is the affair of God and His religion; whoever preserves it prevails, and whoever loses it is degraded.”¹⁹ In just a short period of time, almost all major learning centers were led by *mawālī*. An examination of the biographical literature (*ṭabaqāt*) clearly illustrates that it was not a rare occurrence to see a *mawlā* in a

¹⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 3088.

¹⁹ Al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *Ma‘rifat ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijārī lil-Tibā‘a, 1935), 199.

position of religious leadership. The anecdote of al-Zuhrī is not a rarity, but rather representative evidence of systematic change that occurred all over the Muslim empire.

The role of non-Arabs in all areas of life, however, truly blossomed under the Abbasids. Many of the scribes of the Abbasid government were Persian. Scribes, known as *kuttāb*, played an important role in society and had a substantial amount of political and social influence. The *mawālī* quickly became a significant majority of the Muslim scholarly and political class. In the later part of his life, al-Zuhrī admitted that, “Knowledge has been taken over by the *mawālī*.”²⁰ Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) made a similar observation: “An amazing fact is that those who carried knowledge in the Islamic tradition were mostly non-Arabs.”²¹ Similarly, the Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher stated “a statistical assessment of these matters (the role of *mawālī*) would certainly be to the disadvantage of the Arabs.”²² The idea that *mawālī* outnumbered Arab scholars has not gone unchallenged as previously noted.²³ Whether or not they outnumbered Arab scholars, *mawālī* scholars were numerous and, more importantly, their impact was substantial.

This is evident when we look at the great Sunnī hadith collections. All of the compilers of the six famous hadith books were non-Arab and almost half of the narrators in these canonical hadith compilations were *mawālī*. This demonstrates that being a former slave or a non-Arab did not prevent one from playing important

²⁰ Brown, *Slavery and Islam*, 211.

²¹ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn* (Damascus: Dār Ya‘rib, 2004), 2:361.

²² Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1:109. Goldziher’s statement here seems in line with Zuhri’s; however, it likely stems from his belief that the cultural capacities of Arabs were limited and his refusal to attribute the flowering of Islamic culture to Arabs. This idea that Arabs, and Muslims at large, borrowed everything from other cultures is a consistent theme found in the works of Orientalists. Adolf Grohmann even accused Muslims of borrowing the concept of a dot to separate the chapters of the Qur’an from other cultures. He states, “I have suggested, as far as sura separators are concerned, they were taken from Greek or Syriac manuscripts.” See Adolf Grohmann, “The Problem of Dating Early Qur’āns,” *Der Islam*, 1958, 228–29. Orientalists primarily rely on parallels between Islam and other religions/cultures to support the idea that Muslims borrowed ideas from other cultures. However, the presence of a parallel is not sufficient proof of borrowing because parallels can exist for a variety of reasons. For example, it could simply be that a legal matter, such as divorce or inheritance, presented itself similarly in two civilizations, and they both provided similar solutions.

²³ See Harold Motzki, “The Role of Non-Arab Converts in the Development of Early Islamic Law” in *The Formation of Islamic Law*, ed. Wael B. Hallaq (Florence: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 153–78. Also see John Nawas, “The Contribution of Mawālī,” 141–52.

roles in preserving the Sunnah, Islam's second primary source. According to Ibn Khaldūn, one reason for this is because many of the converts to Islam came from places where the general population was trained to read and write. The early Arabs primarily learned Islam directly from the Prophet ﷺ and passed his teachings on to others. This is demonstrated by the fact that the early Arabs used to call those who read *qurrā'*. In other words, they had a title to describe those who could read as opposed to the unlettered. Furthermore, many of the Companions went out to other parts of the Muslim world to lead armies or hold political positions.

Ultimately, it was the *mawālī* who stepped up and played a leading role in the formation of Islamic sciences.²⁴ After the period of the Companions, the Qur'an required *tafsīr*; hadith needed to be compiled, dictionaries needed to be written, and new circumstances presented themselves that needed new *fiqh* rulings. The *mawālī* had an indisputable impact on Islamic scholarly tradition. They contributed to *fiqh*, hadith, *tafsīr*, theology, and Arabic grammar. Islamic scholarship remains indebted to the contribution of non-Arabs and slaves. It was primarily Islam's call to equality that created an environment where everyone was able to contribute to knowledge, regardless of race or social status.

A brief list of famous scholars who were *mawālī* from the second century:

‘Ikrima Mawlā Ibn ‘Abbās (105/723): He was the former slave of the Prophet's Companion Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما and of Berber origin. He was also a hadith narrator, jurist, and leading *tafsīr* scholar.

Ṭāwūs ibn Kaysān (d. 106/723): He met over fifty of the Prophet's Companions. He was one of the most famous students of Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنهما and was a teacher of ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Azīz (d. 101/720).

²⁴ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn*, 2:361.

Sulaymān ibn Yasār (d. 107/725): was of Persian origin and the freed slave of the Prophet's last wife Maymūna bint al-Ḥārith رضي الله عنها. He was one of the seven great jurists of Medina.

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728): is one of the most celebrated *tābi'īn* known for his scholarship and piety. He particularly excelled in Qur'anic commentary and his name is often cited in *tafsīr* works. He was a passionate and eloquent preacher who became a towering figure in Sufi literature.

Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/729): his father Sīrīn was the freed slave of the Prophet's Companion Anas ibn Mālīk رضي الله عنه. Ibn Sīrīn was a leading scholar in *tafsīr*, hadith, *fiqh*, and the explanation of dreams.

‘Aṭā’ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. 115/733): His mother was a basket weaver and his father was an African black man. ‘Aṭā’ was a hadith scholar, jurist, and served as the mufti of Mecca and taught in the great mosque, Islam's holiest site.

Nāfi‘ Mawlā ibn ‘Umar (d. 117/726): A *mawlā* of ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Umar رضي الله عنهما who was Persian or Berber and a major narrator of hadith. He was the teacher of Imam Mālīk. He was the freed slave of ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Umar and had the shortest chain of transmission to the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم.

‘Amr ibn ‘Uthmān (d. 180/796): better known as Sībawayhi, was a Persian and a leading grammarian in Basra and wrote the first book on Arabic grammar. His unnamed five-volume book, simply called “The Book” (*Al-Kitāb*), is a foundational text in Arabic grammar and considered unrivaled among grammar books.

‘Abdallāh ibn Mubārak (d. 181/797): his father Mubārak was from Khorasan and became a *mawlā*. ‘Abdallāh ibn Mubārak was known as the leader of the believers in hadith (*amīr al mu'minīn fī al-ḥadīth*). He travelled widely and studied with both Abū Ḥanīfā and Imām Mālīk.

Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767): the founder of the Ḥanafī school which is followed by approximately one-third of the Muslim world today. He was of Persian descent and considered one of the greatest scholars in Islamic law.