BOOK REVIEW

Gernot Rotter: DIE STELLUNG DES NEGERS IN DER ARABISCH-ISLAMISCHEN GESELLSCHAFT BIS ZUM XVI. JAHRHUNDERT (The Position of the Negro in Muslim Arab Society till the XVIth Century), Bonn 1967.

The book starts with the rather misleading contention that Muslim Arab society was purely Arab in its infancy only. The fact that it was never purely Arab, not even in its infancy, is indirectly borne out by the author himself when he writes under the caption Slave Trade that black slaves were known to the Arab peninsula even before Islam. In the second section, entitled The Use of Black Slaves, Rotter attempts a sociological differentiation between three groups: domestic slaves, communal slaves, and warrior slaves. He arrives at the conclusion that “leaving aside Beduin life, we find the black slave on an equal footing with the white one in practically all types of the domestic slaves. Certainly, there are works for which Negroes are preferred, i.e., as door-keeper. However, there is not a single job exclusively performed by slaves of black skin.” As against this the slave communes always consisted of Africans and their social and economic position as laborers on large estates or factory-like workshops was far more unfavorable. This was due to the reason that the acquisition of Negro slaves was cheaper and their superior physical condition made them more suitable for performing such work as the cleaning of canals and removing the salt-layer from the soil. In the 7th century two minor and in the 9th (868 till 883) a major uprising of black slave communes took place in ‘Iraq. The motives for these rebellions were evidently not of a racial but of social nature. Their leader in the years 694 and 965, named Shirzanji, was in all likelihood a blackman himself, but dissatisfied white elements seem also to have participated in it. In the 9th century the revolt was led by a certain ‘Ali bin Muḥammad who was either a Persian mawālī or an Arab. He used the black Africans merely as a means to achieve his own ends. A shortlived uprising of the Negroes in Medina in 762 was again not directed against the Arabs but solely against the licentious soldiery who were foreigners and misbehaved with the black population.

In the third century of Islam the non-Arabs, who, by their conversion to Islam, had become mawālī, achieved factual equality with the Arabs. A large portion of them had in fact turned ‘Arabs’ themselves. Besides, there existed a large number of Negroes who were freedmen for several generations. Many of them seem to have belonged to the lowest social strata. But there is no evidence whatsoever, that their access to any profession was principally blocked or that they were denied full recognition as equal members of the society. One has to think of, e.g., the highly important mystic Dhū l-Nūn (died 861). Surely there were more high-ranking personalities descending from black slaves or slave-women than mentioned as such in the later sources. In other societies such persons would have been identified as Negroes or as half-castes. The fact that in the Muslim society of the later period it did not occur to anyone to point out such difference while referring to a person shows that it was taken to be altogether irrelevant.

A change can be noticed also in the political life of the third century. Former warrior slaves of foreign descent and freed eunuchs started to enter politics. They deter-
mined the history of the dissolving Arab empire to an ever increasing degree. At the
beginning of the ninth century black and white eunuchs and guards of equal strength
seem to have existed side by side at the court of the 'Abbāsids, especially under Amin.
Later on Mu'taṣīm gave preference to Turkish slaves and created the basis for their grow-
ing influence. Mu'taṣīd and Muqtadīr once again gave greater powers to the black
Africans, obviously trying to create a counterweight against the Turks. Here one has
to think of the black eunuch Muflīḥ under Muqtadīr. It is not known whether there
existed a link between him and the black foot-soldiers for the sake of preparing a black
take-over after the manner of the Turks. Even if this is taken for granted the Negroes,
however, lost the battle in the thirties of the ninth century when they were completely
pushed out of the army by the Daylamites of the Būyid wazirs. Two black eunuchs,
Sandal Abū Muzāhīm, the educator of the princes under the Būyid Abū Kahlīj, and
Jawhar al-Khādīm al-Nabāshī under the Seljuqs, attempted to usurp power themselves.
They failed because they lacked black troops to support them.

In 966 the black eunuch Kāfur was recognized by the Caliph as viceroy of Egypt.
Before that he had already ruled for twenty years with practical independence. He too
was an educator of princes, an uṣtādīh (corresponding to the later atabeg). While edu-
cating the sons of the Ikhshīd Ibn Tughj he kept them under his thumb. Although a
large portion of the army consisted of black Africans, Kāfur did not really attempt to
install a rule of black mamluks. The Fātimids appointed black eunuchs as governors
and on other important administrative posts. With the black mother of Mustaṣīr and
the eunuch Mu'tamin al-Khilāfa (murdered in 1196) we find a marked tendency to re-
press the influence of the Turkish army contingents and to bring their own race to power.
The murder of Mu'tamin al-Khilāfa was followed by severe fighting that ended only
under Šalāh al-dīn when he destroyed the quarters of the black Africans and completely
removed them from the army. The Negro had then lost his struggle against the domi-
nantly Turkish warrior slaves. Only in the Zabīd in Southern Arabia an Ethiopian
dynasty of mamlūks, the Bazī Najāb, ruled from 1022 till 1158. In the West black warrior
slaves ruled temporarily over Morocco in the 18th century. In both the last mentioned
territories the black Africans were not confronted with the white mamlūks as was the case
in the centre of the Arab world. Moreover, in the Zabīd at least they possessed a racial
unity which in other areas they mostly lacked. In Egypt and the 'Irāq the black foot-
soldier was at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the mounted Turk from the very beginning.

Another section of the book under review is devoted to The Problem of Inter-
breeding. The union of an Arab with a black slave-girl, be it through marriage or through
concubinage, was comparatively frequent at all times. The appreciation of such a union
underwent a development in three overlapping phases: 1. Uptill the 10th century it was
generally regarded as unbecoming. Especially in poetry it was often made the butt of
biting derision. 2. The mother-parent was not given any importance as a genealogical
factor. This had its effect on the marriage with black girls for the half-caste enjoyed the
same social position as others, as proved by the frequent appearance of half-castes in
leading positions from the 11th century onward. Treatises in praise of the black woman
dating from the 15th and 16th century contain hardly any traces of polemics against a
prevailing dislike of such unions. However, the author says, there seems to be no histo-
rical evidence for the marriage of a pure Negro with an Arab girl. The marriage of
Bildī may be considered an exception, if at all it is historical.
BOOK REVIEW

Writing about The Possibilities of Social Rise, Rotter points out that the Prophet — peace be upon him — tried his best to improve the conditions of the slaves. His own personal experiences surely played a decisive role, for among his earliest disciples there was a number of slaves and freed men with un-shakable faith and endurance. Since there were also Negroes among them it is only natural that the Prophet became the champion of their emancipation; gratitude for Ethiopia's positive stand vis-a-vis his community might have been another factor to determine his Afrophil inclination. Being part of his sunna this attitude then became a guiding principle for later Muslims who took their religion seriously. The essential point is that Islamic law adopted the Prophet Muhammad's conceptions and perpetuated his indifference toward racial differences. In the Glorious Qur'an the difference of color is called a divine miracle. However, later traditions starting from this premise cannot hold their own against the legend of Ham which crept into Muslim lore from Jewish sources along with other Isrā'īliyāt. According to this legend the Negroes are descendants of Ham who was cursed by his father Noah with slavery and black skin. This widespread idea stood in stark contrast to the Islamic law which holds that slavery cannot be but the result of disbelief.

Popular Arab literature, finally, has mainly three functions for the black man. Most frequently he serves as the embodiment of all that is sinister, demonic, and cruel. At times the demons themselves assume Negroid traits. The black Africans propensity to lewdness is proverbial. In popular literature it is still more exaggerated and black slaves serve as a device of literary style to stress the sensuality of certain white women. But in numerous stories of the mystics the Negro appears as a pious ascetic, again probably as a device to emphasize the infinite love of God. The motive of the transformation of black into white skin during prayer or after death seems to be characteristic of this type of narrations. In this way, the author holds, the basically negative significance of black skin is underlined all the more.

The dissertation under review was accepted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Bonn. It certainly presents a challenge to Muslim historians and Arab ideologues alike and, therefore, calls for a translation into Arabic. It can only be hoped, that at least an English version be brought out soon. This would, moreover, provide the budding scholar with an opportunity to take into account fresh vistas that might have opened up after he published this research work in German. At a time when all over the United States Black Universities are founded and Black Studies are being introduced in numerous seats of learning all over the world the importance of a work like that by Gernot Rotter ought not to be underestimated. Besides, it provides a clue to the alarming racist tendencies in some extreme versions of 'Arabism' as preached today. The 1970 number of the leading magazine Al-Araby, published from Kuwayt, brought a feature on Mauritania, with an emphasis on the migration of black Africans from Senegal. To every conscientious Muslim it must have come as a shock to read that this immigration of Muslims into another Muslim country was called an encroachment upon the Arab homeland. In fact it was likened to the creation of the imperialist foothold on Muslim soil, the so-called State of Israel.

Detlev Khalid.

************