Singing Slave Women in the Medieval Islamic Court: Research and Teaching Resources

Discussion published by Lisa Nielson on Monday, August 31, 2015

Lisa Nielson, Anisfield-Wolf SAGES Fellow at Case Western Reserve University, offers H-Slavery the second of a series of topical guides concerning the study of slavery. The goal of this post is to provide a concise introduction to the major themes and works within this field with the hope of fostering more dialogue on the topic. Full references to works mentioned in the text appear in the bibliography below. H-Slavery invites and encourages its subscribers to use the “Post a Reply” feature to propose revisions to the author. A revised version of this post will soon appear as a webpage on H-Slavery’s menu bar.

This guide offers a brief overview of the importance of slave women in the early Islamicate courts (661-1,000 CE). To date, there have been few studies of slavery in the medieval Middle East, let alone one examining the intersections of slavery, music, and gender in the various Islamicate courts. Due to the fluidity of how slavery was defined and understood in the Islamicate world, it is easier to refer to Islamicate slavery as united by some similarities as a system but with practices varying greatly across time and region. For example, while Islamicate slavery most often revolved around domestic, civil service, and artistic roles, some Islamicate regimes utilized gang labor (the early Abbasids) and slave armies (Mamluks). (See especially Marmon, ed., Slavery in the Islamic Middle East [1999], Clarence-Smith, Islam and the Abolition of Slavery [2006], and Toledano, As If Silent and Absent [2007].) One commonality shared by Islamicate slave systems was the use of slave women as musicians, concubines, and courtesans. Although scholarship has too often relegated slave women to the status of oppressed, often silent members of the women’s quarters, free and un-free women were essential to the development of literature and music in the Islamicate world.

According to the extant documentary record, slavery was a fact of life in the urban and nomadic cultures of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean beginning around 3,000 BCE. To be a slave was a legal and economic status and anyone could become enslaved. Slaves were acknowledged as human and not entirely bereft of rights. The advent of Islam in Arabia in the 7th century did not bring about the abolition of slavery, just as the advent of other Abrahamic religions did not, but it did establish rules for good treatment and manumission of slaves. To free a slave was a means of gaining favor with God, and slaves could earn money, buy their freedom, and had certain rights under the law. (See Hodgson, The Venture of Islam [1974].)

The Islamicate courts primarily utilized slaves for domestic work. The courts adopted the practice of using eunuchs as civil servants from Persia, and used captives of war, slave raids, and diplomatic exchanges of prisoners to staff their corps of artists, entertainers, and concubines. One exception was the use of black African slaves, referred to as the Zanj, for hard labor. During the 9th century under Abbasid rule, gangs of black Africans were put to work draining the salt marshes and reclaiming flooded farmlands in what is now southern Iraq. The Zanj were nomadic and rural people from East Africa in the region called the Dar al-Aswad, or Land of the Blacks (forming part of today’s Sudan,
which derives from the Arabic word for black). They were enslaved not just because of the color of their skin, but due to their being perceived as not being civilized. In 869 CE, the Zanj staged a fearsome rebellion and established a stronghold which they held for ten years. (On these points, see Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* [1990], Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* [1984], and Hodgson [1974] for an overview of the Zanj rebellion. For a contemporary account, see al-Tabari, *The Histories* [multiple editions].)

According to Islamic law, one was not supposed to enslave co-religionists, so medieval slavers from the Middle East ranged east and west. As Islamic states expanded, slaves were brought or purchased from as far away as what are now France and China. Documentary sources show slaves being ranked according to the level of their civilization and “national character” based on their geographic region. People from Europe and equatorial Africa were considered uncivilized and best used for labor, while people from Persia, India, Byzantium, Abyssinia (Ethiopia), and other highly cultured regions were desired. Women from such civilized places, along with those from North Africa, were prized for their beauty and cultural background.

Among the most visible – and notorious – slaves in the Umayyad (661-750CE) and Abbasid (750-1258CE) courts were “singing slave women” (Arabic *qayna*, pl. *qiyān*). *Qiyān* were a special class of slaves trained in music, poetry, and courtly etiquette who commanded astronomical prices on the open market. Ownership and patronage were primarily available only to the caliph, nobility, and wealthy status-seekers from the middle class. The term *qayna* could also be used to refer to musically talented free women. However, free women of high status were socially prohibited from performing in public out of propriety and those free women who were *qiyān* took care to be perceived as amateurs.

In early Arabic literature, *qiyān* are often, though not always, differentiated from other types of female slaves, such as the more generic *jariya* (pl. *jawārī*). This distinction suggests that terms for slave women were also used to indicate skill and status, differentiating elite courtesans (*qiyān*) from musical concubines (*jawārī*). Even though they were not technically free, *qiyān* had higher status than other slaves and could earn their freedom through skill, money, or bearing their owner’s children (*umm walad*). (On these points, see Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad* [2011], Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority in Abbasid Literature on Women* [2010], Nielson, “Gender and the Politics of Music in the Early Islamic Courts” [2012], all listed works by M. Gordon, and Sawa, *Music Performance Practice in the Early Abbasid Era* [1989]. For slaves in the social fabric of early Islam, see also Ahsan, *Social Life under the Abbasids* [1979] and Lindsay, *Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World* [2005].)

References to singing girls, along with professional mourners, are found in pre-Islamic poetry and remain ubiquitous in Arabic literature from the 7th well into the 14th century. Depending on the perspective the primary source, they were viewed as symbols of excess, musical excellence, or delightful wickedness. They are credited with writing books of poetry, establishing their own musical traditions, and wielding considerable political power. (See Myrne, [2010], Sharlet, *Patronage and Poetry in the Islamic World* [2011], Caswell [2011], and Gordon, all.) Regretfully, there are no books extant by singing slave women; surviving historical records are authored by men. Singing slave women performed and competed for favor along with men and a class of cross-gendered entertainers called *mukhannathūn*. By the late 8th and early 9th centuries, music became essential to court
functions, though this change in aesthetic neither fully legitimized music as an honorable profession nor displaced women musicians. Rather, men and women, free and unfree, performed in the same events, often together, and contributed equally to the development of art music in the Middle East. (For slave musicians and Islamicate musical culture, see Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music to the 13th Century* [1929], Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs* [2003], Meyers-Sawa, “The Role of Women in Musical Life” [1987] and “Historical Issues of Gender and Music” [2002], Neubaur, *Musiker Am Hof Der Fruehen Abbasiden* [1960], Nielson [2012], and Sawa [1989]).

The bibliography provides a brief selection of primary and secondary sources, several of which are good supplements for undergraduate courses. For example, the *Epistle on the Singing Girls* by al-Jahiz, the two articles by Suzanne Meyers-Sawa, and short essays on the singing girl ‘Arīb by Matthew Gordon provide helpful background into the status of slave women and their complex role in the culture. The bibliography is brief not only because there are relatively few studies on Islamicate slave women and medieval Islamicate slavery, but because many sources have not (yet) been translated. That being said, there is a growing body of information about manumission, the extent of the medieval Islamic slave trade, the roles and uses for elite slaves, and the contributions of slaves to Islamicate cultures. Five years ago, a small working group of scholars examining slavery and concubinage in the medieval Islamicate world formed in the hopes of expanding our knowledge through collaboration. Members of the group are associated with H-Mideast-Medieval (MEM) and share ideas via a list maintained by Kathryn Hain at the University of Utah. New members are always welcome. The group presents work and organizes panels in several disciplines, including medieval history, Iberian studies, Middle East-North Africa (MENA) studies, and musicology. In addition, the new *Library of Arabic Literature* series through NYU is providing valuable translations of medieval Arabic texts and pedagogical tools, though further scholarship is needed. For example, there is rich territory for interdisciplinary collaboration into: the intersection of the medieval Islamic slave trade and that of medieval Europe; how gender and culture played into the roles and perceptions of slaves; economics and material culture; and slave contributions to music, art, and literature.

**Select primary sources**


**Secondary sources**

**Medieval Islamicate Culture:**


**Islamic slave systems:**


**Slave women:**


**Slaves as musicians:**


**Literature:**

