Slavery and Enslavement in Funj and Darfur Sultantes

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Slavery and Enslavement in the Funj Society

The single document that deals with slavery and enslavement in the Funj society dates back to 1754; it is part of the Sheikh Khojali documents. According to Spaulding and Abu Salim, that means it was written about 280 years after the establishment of the Black Sultanate, and three decades after the very first document issued by the sultans of Funj, dated 1724. Following this document in importance are the books of the traveler Krump from 1701, James Bruce from 1771 and J. L. Burckhardt from 1819. Their observations and impressions cover a good deal of the eighteenth century and two decades of the nineteenth-century. All of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remain in the dark, with no coverage by travelers to illuminate that period. The documented history of slavery and enslavement started after al-Tunisi and Burckhardt, in the documents of al-Turkiyya, al-Mahdiyya, and the Condominium era through 1936, which include the memorandum by the Civil Secretary, dated May 8, 1936.

The scholar (faqih) Abdelrahman ibn al-Sheikh Khojali issued a charter (hujja shar’iyya), a fatwa, and judgment on a case presented by his brother Taha. Taha impregnated a slave woman he co-owned with others. His co-owners were not happy with what he did, and they refused his offer to pay her price in settlement of the dispute. He consulted Abdelrahman ibn al-Sheikh, who advised that the co-owners accept the settlement, but they refused. Al-Sheikh sent to other knowledgeable sheikhs who, in the tradition of scholars at the time, followed Imam Malik’s madhab, quoted in the abridged version of that madhab and aqīd al-Sheikh Salim. He then advised that Taha should pay the price of the slave before pregnancy, not...
counting the value of the fetus. They all agreed and signed a *hujja* to that effect.\(^7\)

*Tabaqat Wad Dayf Allah*,\(^8\) which included biographies of the prominent Sufi sheikhs at the time, included 30 remarks on slavery scattered throughout the biographies on pages 59–361. The following is a compilation summarizing those remarks, without elaboration on the original.

Al-Sheik Idris wad al-Arab used to receive his disciple al-Sheikh Mohamed wad Fayid from the Red Sea area. Wad Fayid would be accompanied by tribesmen; some of them brought honey, some cloth, and others slaves. Al-Sheikh Idris would distribute all the gifts among the needy. A story was conveyed about a man from the Hawara tribe who came from Egypt, sold some goods to a man from Arbji, and deferred payment. The Hawari went to Western Sudan and bought slaves, but his slaves died, and he died afterward. His son came to the Arbji merchant and asked for payment of the deferred amount. The Arbji merchant asked al-Sheikh Idris to intervene on his behalf and ask the son to accept ten slaves in payment. The son agreed, but gave the slaves as a gift to al-Sheikh Idris who returned them to the merchant.

It was narrated about al-Sheikh Hassan wad Hisouna that he acquired slaves whom he taught horseback riding in order to guard his livestock. He was known to own five hundred slaves armed with swords with silver handles and silver decorated sheathes; they had a *sid qum* (a leader and soldier), and they carried big sticks. Al-Sheikh Hassan owned so many slaves that they had villages around the residence of al-Sheikh. A magnificent description is given in *al-Tabaqat* of processions by a huge number of the slaves he owned and who served his guests. It was conveyed that in such a procession, one could see 120 female slaves (*farkhat*) carrying big plates of *kisra*; each one was followed by another *farkha* carrying a plate, and in turn, followed by one carrying a calabash. Al-Sheikh Hassan was aware of his vast property of slaves; he used to say that people came to him just to see his male and female slaves.

Wad Dayf Allah continued to narrate stories such as the one about giving away slaves. When wad Hisouna’s sister Fatima got married to a man from the Shukriyya tribe and moved to her husband’s home, he gave her four female slaves to serve her. On his deathbed, he bequeathed that one-third of his property be given to five poor men. Each man then got 36 slaves, some of whom were domestic servants and others who were administrative staff, known as slaves of dignitaries (*raqueq al’aayan*).