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M'hamed Oualdi, *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. xiii, 230. Hardcover. ISBN 9 780231 191869.

Reviewed by: Martin A. Klein, Professor emeritus, Department of History, University of Toronto, Canada.

M'hamed Oualdi is one of the best younger historians working on North Africa. His work focuses on the Mamlukes, the privileged slaves who held high political and military offices in numerous Muslim societies. He is the author of *Esclaves et Maîtres: Les Mamelouks des Beys de Tunis du XVIIe siècles aux années 1880*.¹ In this book, he turns to a more limited theme, but one which is dense with insights and arguments. This is a micro-history, a study of a single man, Husayn ibn Abdullah, who was enslaved as a boy in Circassia in the Caucasus and ended up as a Mamluke in the service of the Bey of Tunis. It is not a full biography, though the biographical chapters are an important contribution to the literature on elite slaves and particularly on the Mamlukes. Husayn was a general, though he was never involved in combat and was most important as an administrator, and particularly as a reformer during the mid-19th century, when the government, both in Istanbul and in autonomous provinces like Tunisia, was trying to reform itself to better deal with threats from Europe.

In the process, Husayn managed to accumulate considerable wealth. More than half of the book deals with the struggle for control of that wealth after his death. Though Husayn spent the last 15 years of his life in exile in Tuscany, his wealth consisted mostly of property, which was mostly in La Goulette, the port for the city of Tunis. He lived rather modestly in Florence, but did not transfer any of that wealth to Tuscany. Before he died, he wrote a will, which left a third of his wealth to two girls he raised on the condition that they marry Muslims. Both girls were daughters of European women, one of them his concubine, the other a housekeeper. Another large share went to the family of Shaykh Bu Hajib, a cleric who had served for years as Husayn's secretary. This was all in spite of Muslim law. Though Husayn had long been manumitted, he remained a client of the Bey and his wealth should have gone to the Bey. In exile, Husayn continued to serve the Bey, taking on missions in Europe. In addition, the colonial regime had an interest in the inheritance, as did several creditors, of whom the most important was a litigious Algerian Jew named Leon Elmilik. French, Italian, and beylical courts were involved in settling the inheritance.

Oualdi makes this a gripping narrative, but he is not simply telling a tale to entertain his readers. He is making an argument that can be made for many colonized societies. He is critical of a tendency of many historians to view North Africa through the prism of colonial rule. He argues that it is necessary for historians to see the continuities in any colonized societies. Colonial rule does not wipe the slate clean, but must deal with continuities that existed before colonial rule and continued into and after it; continuities of culture, law and religion. Second, one of these continuities is that there are pre-existing relationships, such as financial relations with Europeans. The people he discusses move to and from Tuscany, Cairo and Istanbul and maintain relationships with Europeans and Jews. Third, he argues that political authorities in Tunis had more freedom of

¹ Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011.

action than they are usually credited with. Of course, this was in part due to the fact that Tunisia was a protectorate. While protectorates were often fictions, in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and many indirect rule societies, colonial regimes operated through traditional rulers. There were limits on those rulers, but they successfully maintained some autonomy. Oualdi sees the continuing importance of relations based on slavery. Husayn is legally free, but his wealth and power come from being the servant of the Bey. Most importantly, Oualdi is arguing about the importance of the household. He describes three very interesting households: that of Husayn, that of the Bu Hajibs and, to a lesser degree, that of the Beys. Husayn's household was perhaps most unusual in that he was not living with his wife, had no children until late in life, and in his final years raised two girls he considered his daughters. Interestingly, of the two, one loses in the struggle for part of his inheritance because her mother did not understand Muslim law and Tunisian social structure. The other mother links to, and eventually marries into, the Bu Hajib family. Her daughter marries an important early Tunisian nationalist. Oualdi also discusses, often briefly, a variety of other subjects such as the role of Jews and the differences between Tunisian and French land law

All of this Oualdi tells well. He writes with clarity and makes clear and challenging arguments. The book is very terse, perhaps in places too terse. The text is only 150 pages. I was curious, for example, about the fate of Emma/Amina, who disappears from the narrative after her mother loses the struggle for a piece of Husayn's inheritance. Nevertheless, this book is a good example of how a micro-history can be used to cast light on many aspects of historical advice. Because of its brevity and its raising of diverse questions, the book could be valuable in courses on North Africa, colonialism or the Middle East. Having written important works in French and in English, Oualdi has marked himself as an important historian.

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