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Nader Kadhem, *Africanism: Blacks in the Medieval Arab Imaginary*. Translated by Amir Al-Azraki. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023, 193 pages. ISBN: 9780228018728.

Reviewed by: Mbaye Lo, Duke University.

The study of Blacks and Blackness within Arabic culture has been significantly underrepresented in modern Arabic studies, with only a handful of scholarly works addressing this important topic. Among the pioneers in the field are the Iraqi Fayṣal al-Sāmīr, the Egypto-Sudanese ʿAbduh Badawī, and the Egyptian Ḥilmī Shaʿrāwī. However, apart from the late Shaʿrāwī, these scholars have largely perpetuated either Orientalist or Arab nationalist perspectives, often reinforcing negative stereotypes of Blacks in Arab-Muslim culture. Shaʿrāwī stood out as a revolutionary sociologist who boldly criticized his fellow Arabs for backward thinking and ignorance toward Black Arabs and Africans.

Shaʿrāwī was the first Arab scholar to draw parallels between Africanism and Orientalism, highlighting in Africanism how Arabic discourse has historically marginalized and degraded both Africans and Blacks in theory and practice. Professor Nādir Kāzīm (Nader Kadhem) continues Shaʿrāwī's legacy in style and vision but surpasses him in depth and ambition. It is gratifying to see Kāzīm's discipleship to Shaʿrāwī reflected in his citations and spirit, as embodied in this translated monograph from Arabic to English.

Yet, it is difficult to fully agree with the translator's (Professor Amir Al-Azraki) claim that this book is a direct translation of Kāzīm's popular Arabic text *Tamthīlāt Al-Ākhar: Tamthīlāt al-Sūd Fī al-Mutakhayyal al-'Arabī al-Wasīt* (*Representations of the Other: Representations of Blacks in the Medieval Arab Imagination*). This book seems, however, to also be a translation of new material that the author may have developed specifically for this publication. While some content is new, other parts appear to have been extracted from his work as well as from existing scholarship in English. The format, moreover, draws on his earlier Arabic book published in 2004. As a Shi'a minority in Bahrain, where he has faced persecution, lost his university job based on political rumors about his affiliations, and has been sidelined by junior colleagues, Professor Kāzīm has undoubtedly

experienced the weight of racialized oppression and the early contours of fabricated lies and constructed truths that have perpetuated it. This personal background has empowered him with the courage and vision to write such a daring book, which challenges cultural norms and exposes what is often denied in public discourse. In the four chapters of the book, the author argues that medieval Arab imagery represents Blacks as "an external Other that lurks in the remote jungles of Africa, and as an internal Other distinguished by black colour, despite the fact of being born and raised in the vicinity of the Arab culture" (p. 13). Through analyzing various cultural artifacts such as language, literature, religion, philosophy, geography, and history, the author demonstrates that, in both instances of otherness, Blackness is "perceived as an ugly colour and is always associated with negative meanings and derogatory values. So, whoever is black, it becomes their destiny and status, and whoever changes color to black, it is because of their sins and evil deeds" (p. 60).

Although some of these points were raised by earlier scholars, Professor Kāzīm stands out by providing more substantial evidence that this negative perception of Blacks has persisted in Arabo-Islamic culture and continues into modern times. The author argues that even the pioneers of the *Arab Renaissance* in the 20th century, who were influenced by Western ideals of universal human values and rights, failed to challenge this portrayal. Instead, they embraced it and attempted to employ Western ideals and sciences to justify these lingering anti-Black cultural beliefs (p. 4).

Since this book is one of the most original Arab studies of the subject available in English, it is important to address the inherited mistakes that have permeated its content. Throughout Arabic literary history, authors have frequently highlighted stories of self-hatred, which embellish the rich collection of Black poetry in Arabia. However, it is worth recognizing that these narratives were primarily the product of biased elites. Unfortunately, Professor Kāzīm falls into the same trap by perpetuating these claims. He is echoing mostly falsified poems and stories of Black self-hate without critically reflecting on the psychology of Arab nationalist scripts and storytellers who curated these collections during the high days of imperial Islam. Examples of this can be found in Professor Kāzīm's commentaries on Al-Jāhīz (p. 88+), Luqmān (p. 91), and 'Antrah (p. 109).

It is strange that throughout Arabic literary discourse, from pre-Islamic poets to medieval Black poets, there is not a single Black poet or intellectual who did not mock his or her own skin color and express regret about being Black. Even Black poets who celebrate Blackness in their writing, such as Suḥaym, are still affected by this stigma. There is much evidence that these are corrupted lines added to their

work. Since Black poetry was foundational for popular Arab entertainment, it became a free-for-all among writers. In the 9th century, Muḥammad ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī (d. 845) discussed how the popularization of poems contributed to their corruption and falsification: "In much of the poetry that is recited, there is a lot that is contrived and fabricated, offering no value, no evidence of authentic Arabic, no literary merit, and no meaningful insight." Lies and fabrication became inseparable from the work of Black poets. It does not take much to acknowledge the reasonable context for this anti-Black phenomenon, which was systematically promoted by a nationalist cultural elite.

Similar to this argument is the author's claim that most Black poets "did not possess the ultimate representational tool, which is writing, and those who knew how to write did not use it effectively." (p.133). This claim cannot be substantiated as it applies to all poets of the time. In Arab tradition, poets recited and rehearsed their works orally, a practice that spanned from the pre-Islamic era to the late 9th century. This includes Black poets at the foundation of Arabic literary tradition such as Al-Shanfarī (d. 525), Ta'abbata Sharran (d. 530), Antarah, Sulayk (d. 605), and others, as well as Suḥaym and Nuṣayb in the early days of Islam. The act of writing as a means of intellectual preservation in the Arab-Muslim tradition was invented in the 9th century, known as *'aṣr al-tadwīn* (the era of documentation), not before.

What is often missing from this discourse and similar discussions is the acknowledgment that the tradition of Arabic poetry—considered the highest form of human ingenuity among the Arabs—was championed by Black poets (half-breeds, Negro outcasts (*Aghribat al-'Arab*), and free Blacks) before and during the early days of Islam. The rise of imperial Islam and the growth of the Umayyad dynasty as an Arab nationalist movement led to the dethronement of Black intellectual leadership. Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868) criticized the racism of his contemporary Arabs and its negative impact on the social status of Blacks, noting that with Islam, Arabs refused even to intermarry with Blacks, whereas before Islam, they considered Abyssinian Blacks their role models. It is true that the era of Black excellence in poetry before Islam was never replicated in the new Islamic era. I tend to agree with Bernard Lewis that this decline in Black excellence was not due to a lack of talent but rather a lack of opportunity during the Arabo-Islamic nationalist era when most of the ruling elites were uncomfortable with *'Abīd* (literally 'slave,' but used as a synonym for Blacks) participating in the craft of poetry. For instance, when Nuṣayb's poem was favored over the praise poems of Al-Farazdaq at the court of Sultan Sulaymān ibn Abd al-Malik (d. 717), Al-Farazdaq protested: "The best poetry is that which is recited by the noblest men, and the worst poetry is that which is recited by *'Abīd*" (Al-Mubarrad: 97). Al-Farazdaq was reminding the court of the prevailing new social

order that excluded Blacks from the elite class. Nuṣayb was a Black Nubian. The last prominent Black figure in medieval memory was Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Nāfi‘ (d. 857), also known as Ziryāb. He was forced by the intellectual elites to leave Baghdad for Ifriqiya (Tunisia) and eventually settled in Córdoba, Spain. In most classical sources, the person behind his self-exile was his former teacher, the polymath Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī (d. 850). It was in Córdoba where Ziryāb revolutionized lute techniques and was last celebrated as the Blackbird of music in the Iberian Peninsula.

One can add to this criticism the author's simplistic interpretation of Black excellence in music and dance, which the intellectual elites in Arabic literary discourse cynically refer to as *ṭarab* or ecstasy. Instead of analyzing the genius talents that make up *ṭarab*, Professor Kāzim attempts to defend Blacks by endorsing a pro-enslaver argument, suggesting that the *ṭarab* among Blacks is motivated by a desire to please the master (p. 76). This discrediting argument is rooted in the elites' belief that *ṭarab* is inherently evil, a viewpoint that is purely ideological and lacks grounding in any science or facts.

Despite this criticism, translating Professor Kāzim's work in this lucid form is a welcome addition to the booming cottage industry that nowadays examines the legacy of Black enslavement and the lived experience of Blacks in Arabic and Islamic intellectual history. This orientation was prohibitive a few years ago due to the phobia of scholars being associated with Orientalism, Occidentalism, or Islamophobia. John Hunwick once lamented the scarcity of academic attention to this subject despite its relevance and richness. He attributed this to the lack of a constituency in North America for studies of slavery or anti-Blackness that go beyond the Transatlantic triangle, particularly those that attempt to locate these issues within the Arabic land of Islam.

I am delighted to witness the drastic change that has occurred since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd. It is even more exciting to see that Professor Kāzim's daring scholarship has reached an American audience through one of the nation's esteemed academic publications. Hats off to McGill-Queen's University Press.

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