

Book Review

Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn Hain, eds., *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), xi+354 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-062218-3, Price: \$99 (Cloth)/Price Varies (E-Book).

Kecia Ali
Boston University

(ka@bu.edu)

In this exciting new volume, co-editors Matthew Gordon and Kathryn Hain provide scholars and students an important resource for the study of slavery and enslaved women. The book comprises fifteen substantive articles plus a useful introductory overview by Gordon and an interpretive epilogue by Hain. It ranges from the seventh century through the eighteenth, across Andalusia and the Maghreb, through Arabia and the Levant, to Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia. “The shared aim,” Gordon writes, “is a reconstruction of the lives, careers, and representations of women across this same expanse of time, social organization, and political drama” (“Introduction: Producing Songs and Sons,” 1).

The contributors, who range from doctoral candidate to full professor, are mostly historians and literary scholars, but there is also a musicologist and a librarian. Roughly sixty percent of the contributions are by women and most of the essays cite secondary scholarship by women in due

proportion. There are overlapping clusters of chapters on the Abbasid era; on *qiyān*—enslaved singers; on Andalusia; and on enslaved (or, surprisingly, not) concubines in royal households.

A few contributions will be of particular interest for those in religious studies, including Nerina Rustomji’s “Are Houris Heavenly Concubines?” and Elizabeth Urban’s exploration of how mid-eighth-century contests over legitimate authority came to invoke Abraham and Muhammad’s enslaved concubines to “justif[y] the political aspirations of the children of slave mothers” (“Hagar and Mariya: Early Islamic Models of Slave Motherhood,” 230). In a similar vein, Michael Dann’s “Between History and Hagiography: The Mothers of the Imams in Imami Historical Memory” looks at hagiographical accounts of the mother of the twelfth imam as part of the construction of a theologically and politically robust messianic legitimacy. Younus Mirza’s “Remembering the *Umm al-Walad*: Ibn Kathir’s Treatise on the Sale



of the Concubine” is the closest the volume comes to sustained focus on jurisprudence, although the text on which it focuses is not a work of law; it does, however, address how authoritative precedent is constructed and contested.

One of the questions that inevitably arises in discussions of Islamic history is precisely what is “Islamic” about it. What are the commonalities as well as the distinctions among norms and implementation of slavery in majority-Muslim contexts and other contexts? This collection highlights certain recurring patterns—the legal protections governing the *umm walad*, for instance—but also reveals substantial divergences among forms of concubinage and enslaved courtesanship. It also reveals how dependent such practices were on local contexts and norms as well as the specifics of given historical moments. In “The Ethnic Origins of Female Slaves in al-Andalus,” Christina de la Puente tackles the complex ways that race, ethnic origin, skin color, and more play into norms about insiders, outsiders, and status. One intriguing suggestion offered by Gordon (34) is that later scholars may have read whiteness or European origins into descriptions of beauty where none are there in original texts. Issues of ethnicity crop up in other places from time to time; as Marina Tolmacheva notes, the fourteenth-century “Moroccan globetrotter” Ibn Battuta rarely names his wives or concubines, typically referring in the latter’s case to their ethnic/geographic origins (“Concubines on the Road—Ibn Battuta’s Slave Women,” 163).

One of the merits of this volume is the number of enslaved women about whom it presents biographical information—

though of varying levels of detail and facticity. We know very little about the numerous enslaved women whom Ibn Battuta, who “never traveled without a concubine if he could help it” (168), bought, gave away, used sexually, impregnated, and occasionally mourned. More often than not, what is true for Ibn Battuta’s enslaved companions is true more broadly: we catch a few telling glimpses of their life experiences, but these are nearly always subordinated to, and told in terms of their relevance to, their owners. There are some exceptions, however. The sources permit Betül İpşirli Argit to give a rich account of early-eighteenth-century Ottoman concubine turned queen mother Gülnuş Sultan (“A Queen Mother and the Ottoman Imperial Harem: Rabia Gülnuş Emetullah Valide Sultan [1640-1715]”). Captured and enslaved as a child in Crete, she became a favorite consort of Sultan Mehmed IV. Two of her sons ruled successively, from 1695–1715. Her skill at networking and making alliances enabled her participation in internal Ottoman politics as well as foreign affairs. Another set of exceptional women are certain *qiyān*, who are the subject of multiple chapters, including Matthew S. Gordon’s “Abbasid Courtesans and the Question of Social Mobility,” Lisa Nielson’s “Visibility and Performance: Courtesans in the Early Islamicate Courts (661-950 CE),” and Dwight F. Reynolds’ “The *Qiyān* of al-Andalus.”

It is almost a truism among specialists that the term “slavery” obscures vital differences among the array of legal, social, and personal relationships that fall under its umbrella. Islamicists who write about Mamluks or palace concubines often toss around the phrase “elite slavery” without conscious awareness of its oxymoronic

nature. Certain institutions combined legal servitude with social prestige, informal—and occasionally formal—power, and control over wealth. In her 2003 essay on the Abbasid post of *qahramāna*, steward/keeper of the harem, Nadia Maria El Cheikh mentions the remarkable Thumal, a *jāriya* of the caliph’s al-Muqtadir’s mother. That venerable woman placed Thumal in charge of the *mazālim* courts, causing considerable consternation.¹ But the blurry boundaries among status, influence, and power can be even trickier to analyze when sexuality and self-determination enter into the equation. Several contributors focus on questions of social mobility for enslaved women, which require negotiating what Marion Katz has called “the avenues of opportunity and forms of constriction that were navigated by individual women.”² In her epilogue (“Avenues to Social Mobility Available to Concubines and Courtesans”), Hain points out that “While slave women in Islamic society could use their wits, charm, talent, and beauty to achieve social mobility, they remained vulnerable” (336).

The book’s title highlights the inescapable sexual dimension to “feminine slavery” (2). While authors acknowledge the legal right of (male) masters to have sex with any unmarried women they own (e.g., 78), expectations of seclusion for enslaved girls and women kept as concubines were far more stringent than those attending enslaved servants assigned household work. At the same time, owing to historians’ available sources, concubines, particularly those in courtly and elite households, are

those whose presence is most visible to us now. (Contributors rely mostly on literary and documentary sources, occasionally including formularies and fatwas, both for historical reconstruction and for evidence of mentalités, dynastic propaganda, and hagiography.)

While not all *qiyān* were sexual partners for their owners, many were—at least when those owners were male—and their sexual allure was part of the point. Attachments—and possibilities for manipulation—could be enhanced by *qiyān* and others who had resources, including education, networks, and social cachet, beyond those of the uprooted women and girls who seem to have comprised the majority of enslaved concubines. Singer-composers and other educated enslaved women (see Jocelyn Sharlet’s “Educated Slave Women and Gift Exchange in Abbasid Culture” as well as Pernilla Myrne’s “A *jariya*’s prospects in Abbasid Baghdad,” which follows the poet Inan al-Natifi) wielded resources beyond those of many other concubines. Although the two educated women whom Ibn Battuta bought and ultimately returned to their owners themselves had no say in the matter, the men who sold them, and then had changes of heart and sought their return, seem to have been more attached to them than Ibn Battuta was to most of the women he bought or was given.

The variety of terms used throughout the book to name and discuss enslaved women reflects both the diversity of terms used in sources from various languages, eras, and genres and the different

1. Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, “The Qahramāna in the Abbasid Court: Position and Functions,” *Studia Islamica* 97 (2003), pp. 41–55.

2. Marion Katz, “Textual Study of Gender,” in Léon Buskens and Annemarie van Sandwijk, eds., *Islamic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Transformations and Continuities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 87–108 at 97–98.

sensibilities of the volume's contributors. Some, as I have tended to do in the past, use "slaves" and others, as I try to do now, make a point of using "enslaved person."³ The latter phrase highlights that enslavement is not a natural state but something that is actively done to one human being by another, who is not simply a "master" or "mistress" but a "slaveowner." English terms such as concubine and courtesan (or borrowed terms such as geisha) connote varying levels of status and agency; Nielson argues that "the ambiguity" attending prestigious, highly trained *qiyān* carved out "a liminal social and legal space between free and unfree" which makes courtesan a more accurate term than ones conveying "concubinage or servitude alone" (81). Reynolds, while noting "myriad" divergences, suggests that "the geisha of Japan are perhaps the most comparable form of socially institutionalized female companionship and entertainment for male patrons" (100).

Various contributors ponder how scholars can address consent, affection, and power within relationships between owners and the people they kept enslaved. How does one conceptualize human relationships across such vital power divides?⁴ Is meaningful consent to a sexual relationship possible when one

party is legally unfree? Many modern Muslims struggle with the institution of concubinage—including although not only in prophetic precedent—in part because consent has come to take center stage in discussions of sex (if not always in its practice).⁵ Yet as Myrne observes, "the system of sexual slavery seems to have been taken for granted on the part of society at large; it is hard to find evidence of any sort of opposition" (89). While I suspect numerous captured and enslaved women remained unconvinced of the justice of others' claims to own them and have sexual rights over them, it is true that there was not widespread protest against the entire institution of captivity, enslavement, or concubinage; no religious scholars railed against the practice.

Any sustained consideration of slavery, sex, and consent must address the overlap, conceptual and otherwise, between free and enslaved women and between concubinage and marriage. If the legal relationship of ownership encompassed a wide variety of de facto relationships, so did the contractual relationship of marriage. Marriage was sometimes a partnership of (nearly) equals; (some) women could negotiate de jure protections or carve out de facto ones, sometimes by forgoing de jure rights. At other times, marriage was a matter of domination and servility. Gordon

3. Katy Waldman presents an overview of the debate among historians: http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_history_of_american_slavery/2015/05/historians_debate_whether_to_use_the_term_slave_or_enslaved_person.html.

4. For instance, Ehud Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

5. In addition to Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (London: Oneworld, 2nd. ed., 2016), chapter 3, see my "Consent and Concubinage" in "Roundtable: Locating Slavery in Middle Eastern and Islamic History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 49, 2017, pp. 148–52; see also my "Redeeming Slavery: The 'Islamic State' and the Quest for Islamic Morality," *Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations*, 1:1, September 2016. Online)

deems it “impossible to quantify when sexual union was coerced and thus violent, and when it was consensual and thus expressive of emotional ties”—and this observation holds for marriages as well, involving both free and enslaved women. As he points out, “medieval Arabic literary sources,” to which I would add scriptural and legal texts, “speak to a spectrum of conduct from sexual assault to close, extended personal relationships” (4).

The book’s subtitle reads “Women and Slavery in Islamic History.” The subtitle is accurate insofar as the volume’s focus is notably on women rather than gender. Its contributions say little about enslaved men, sexual use of boys, norms of masculinity, or the relevance of eunuchs for regulating and controlling women’s sexual comportment, including enslaved women. Free slave-owning women make brief, important appearances; not only are there royal women such as the Abbasid queen Zubayda but also women who “owned, trained, and traded in *jawari*” (64), such as the wife of Cordoba’s chief judge, who supported him in part by training *qiyān* (113).

Yet questions about enslaved, freed, and free women and their interrelationships beg for further exploration, both at the conceptual level and in their historical particularities. As Marion Katz notes, there are major limitations to the idea of “woman” as a unified legal and social category.⁶ The historiography of United States slavery has challenged the notion of white women in plantation households as mere downtrodden subjects of

patriarchal male authority; as Thavolia Glymph has shown, despite their legal debility compared to their husbands, mistresses exercised brutal power over enslaved women, rather than being somehow their natural allies on the basis of shared femaleness.⁷ In contexts where Islamic law granted women, including married women, full rights to property ownership, and where there was no marital property regime, questions about ownership and control of enslaved people in a specific household undoubtedly operated differently. (Polygyny, too, would affect these relationships.) There remains much to explore about women’s interrelationships within and across households, including but not limited to royal harems; contributors to this volume provide helpful, though not systematic, evidence for interactions among free and enslaved women.

One thread weaving through the volume is the way that reproductive strategies, especially but not only when rulership is in play, might lead to shifting preferences for marriage to free women, who could offer family alliances, or concubinage with enslaved women, whose lack of such ties would avoid potential divided loyalties. Majied Robinson’s statistical analysis of Umayyad-era Qurashi genealogies (“Statistical Approaches to the Rise of Concubinage in Islam”) shows two seemingly contradictory trends among Umayyad caliphs during the eighth century: increased cousin marriage (endogamy) and increased concubinage with “foreign slave women, who are the most exogamous

6. Katz, “Textual Study of Gender,” 93–102.

7. Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

marriage partners possible” (19). Usman Hamid’s account of the freeborn Muslim women incorporated into Timurid royal households as concubines—contrary to standard interpretations of Islamic law—was a way of circumventing the restriction on the number of legal wives a man could take while accruing the benefits of marriage alliances (“Slaves Only in Name: Free Women as Royal Concubines in Late Timurid Iran and Central Asia”). As Hain concludes, “Reproductive politics favored slave concubines” (336).

Issues of rulers’ reproduction also come to the fore in Heather Empey’s chapter, “The Mothers of the Caliph’s Sons: Women as Spoils of War in the Early Almohad Period,” but the most valuable contribution this chapter makes is to provide a case study of the intersections of war, capture, enslavement, and politico-religious legitimacy. The Almohad practice of enslaving and selling non-Almohad freeborn Muslim women—and the caliph ‘Abd al-Mu’min’s practice of keeping them as concubines, contrary to Islamic law—makes clear that “the Almohads dealt with the Muslim populace of the Maghrib as though they were non-Muslim enemy combatants or apostates” (155). What Empey shows explicitly, and other contributors implicitly, is that the study of enslaved women provides valuable,

otherwise unavailable, perspectives on important historical phenomena.

No volume can cover everything but one obvious lacuna in this volume is non-Maghrebi Africa. A chapter on the Sokoto caliphate, for instance, could have followed up on the apologetic mentions of the integration of captured women into Sokoto caliph households in Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack’s account of Nana Asma’u’s career.⁸ Another important comparative context would be the Indian Ocean human trade as well as case studies on the subcontinent. The fact that the book omits these topics is not an indictment but a call for more work that builds on Hain and Gordon’s substantial accomplishments in this volume.

Concubines and Courtesans is essential for scholars who study women or slavery in Muslim contexts and valuable for those who work on other topics in the Abbasid era, Andalusian history, or courtly cultures, and for scholars of slavery in other contexts. It will be useful for courses in history and Islamic studies. Each chapter is followed by endnotes and bibliography, a feature which makes it easier to select chapters for use in the classroom—and many of these would be good to teach with. The essays in *Concubines and Courtesans* will help set our scholarly agenda; there is much work to do.

8. Beverly B. Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman’s Jihad: Nana Asma’u, Scholar and Scribe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 35–6 and passim.