

*A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa*. M'Hamed Oualdi. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. ISBN 9780231191869.

After reading M'hamed Oualdi's examination of the life and death of General Husayn Ibn 'Abdallah, I was reminded in many ways of Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*. Both authors examine a far larger historical context, both geographically and ideologically, through the lens of the life of a single individual. Published in 1987, Maalouf's monograph provided an important departure from the traditional histories of the Crusades by shifting the narrative away from European accounts, focusing instead on myriad sources from the point of view of the Arab world. The result was a re-examination of the history of the events and the places in which they occurred, and led Maalouf to raise questions about how the events of the thirteenth century may have affected the present day. In *A Slave Between Empires*, Oualdi builds on much of what Maalouf began thirty-three years earlier by applying a transimperial approach to his analysis of the history of General Husayn. The result is a vibrant and thought-provoking examination of the people and events in the region of North Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when shifting empires imprinted their desires on multiple aspects of the lives of individuals and their descendants.

In order to situate his monograph in the context of the histories of colonized societies, Oualdi chronicles changes over time in their theoretical frameworks, beginning with histories that presented colonized regions as a continuation of the history of Europe. These, he notes, privileged colonial sources over those in non-European languages, all but ignoring the presence of the wealth of sources in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Berber as well as Judeo-Arabic sources. Scholars in the 1960s began to write from the point of view of the colonized and took what Oualdi calls a "bottom up" approach, in an attempt to flip the narrative to focus on the colonized instead of the colonizer. Thirty years later, as scholars began to scrutinize their

methodologies, colonial histories began to reflect the rejection of periodization, which has, according to Oualdi, led historians and other scholars to examine a wider, more inclusive set of sources that go beyond the colonizer/colonized bifurcation of colonial regions. Oualdi's investigation of a variety of source material rejected both artificially enforced timelines and the idea that the colonial world divided neatly into only two social strata. This, he posits, provides new spaces in which to examine heretofore ignored or marginalized populations, providing new insight into how the events of the late nineteenth century can provide insight into twenty-first-century events in North Africa.

Oualdi's focus on General Husayn, a slave turned dignitary, aptly illustrates the multi-layered complexity of the history of North Africa that can be achieved when applying a transimperial approach. One man's life, which spanned most of the nineteenth century, changed dramatically as a result of the changes around him. Husayn's origins in the Caucasus led to his eventual enslavement and migration to Tunis where he served as a member of staff to the Ottoman court. Oualdi posits that Husayn directly benefitted from the Ottoman reforms that began in the late eighteenth century, thereby allowing his transformation to student then general, and later, to mayor of Tunis. He traveled extensively and read widely, and is described by Oualdi as having a lifelong devotion to reform whether close to home in Tunis or in his letters to the U.S. in the 1860s in support of a global ban on enslavement. When in 1880 Husayn found himself exiled from Tunis and living in Tuscany after his patron lost power to a new regime in Tunisia, Oualdi notes that Husayn's reforming spirit did not abate, but took new form as he began to reimagine a different and better relationship between religious factions in North Africa. Oualdi writes that, when he died in 1887, even the distribution of his sizeable estate informs us

about the cross-cultural and cross-political issues that dominated North Africa at the end of the nineteenth century.

Oualdi employs myriad sources of disparate origins in order to craft this history. Instead of eschewing European sources, Oualdi incorporates them as one weft in the overall tapestry of this intricate story. Both French and Italian archives are mined, as are archives in Turkey, Tunis, and Washington, D.C. In addition to these rich primary sources, Oualdi combed hundreds of secondary texts about North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, each of the major religions represented in the region, and all of various places Husayn traveled throughout his life.

By challenging periodization and focusing on an individual whose life included several migrations as well as involvement with two imperial powers who influenced the course of his life, Oualdi has produced a narrative that sets precedent for others who would re-examine the history of North Africa as well as other colonial regions of the world. With *A Slave Between Empires*, Oualdi lays a path for history to become both more vivid and inclusive.

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