

On the Barbary States' Captives and the American South's Slavery in the Nineteenth Century

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Submission date: 21/01/2023 Acceptance date: 05 /11 / 2023 Published date: 31 /01 /2024

Abstract:

The present paper explores the history of the European and American enslaved captives in the Barbary state of Algiers with a background overview of slavery in Islam and how it gradually led to the disappearance of the practice of slavery. It also gives an account of slavery in the American South taking Frederick Douglass's bibliographic account as a reference. The purpose of this study is to show the humane treatment that the Western captives in Algiers received despite the bias produced by the west against Islam. It further shows the brutal treatment against African slaves in the South while nobody blamed Christianity for it. This paper offers a comparison between two unlikely practices that could not be any more dissimilar, that of slavery in the American South and the slave captives in the Barbary regency of Algiers. Examining both types of slavery, we can see whether each form of slavery can permit some doors to freedom, and allow less suffering to the individual slaves or the captives. The captives in Algiers are by far treated more humanely than the slaves in the American South.

Keywords: Barbary states; corsairs; captives; Muslim-Christian Slavery; Algerians

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1. Introduction:

For hundreds of years, enslavement of Muslims by Christians and Christians by Muslims was so common particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in two opposing poles, in the Mediterranean and beyond the Atlantic Ocean. The American slavery in the South and the so called enslavement or captures in the Barbary states (Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli) were types of slavery almost taking place simultaneously.

The Barbary states played a cradle for the enslavement of European Christians. One of the American consuls at Tunis, Mordecai Noah, described Algiers to be “the sink of iniquity and curse of humanity” holding a “great depot” of Christian slaves. According to Leiner (2006), the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Algiers housed roughly thirty thousand captives. By the 1620s, it was said that “more British subjects lived as slaves in Islamic North Africa than as freemen in the colonies of North America.” (p.13)

The hyperbole stories and narratives of American captives always depicted the Barbary regencies as despots who did not respect humans, let alone treat them well. North African countries were referred to as “Barbarians” who chose piracy over legitimate trade since they “operated outside the cultural norms of civilized society” (Lambert, 2005:106). Meanwhile, the Barbary states catered for the “pirates” a haven for the illegitimate practice of piracy (Tyler (1797), 2002, p.185). However, the so called civilized societies were out and out conquering the rest of the Western hemisphere along with the rest of the world. “Democratic” and “civilized” countries such as Britain, Spain, France, Portugal, and even America were building empires in America, Africa, Latin America, and even Asia.

The Barbary piracy did not emerge from vacuum, for it has its own causes. One reason was the Crusade Wars. When the Muslims were murdered and expelled out of Spain, most of them were driven to North Africa in the Barbary states, as James Lewis (1990), put it, “By the fifteenth century, assaults from the Barbary shore had declined to the status of small-scale piracy, and might never have re-emerged as a significant phenomenon had not Spain decreed the expulsion of the Moors from Granada in 1492”(p.76) Having been driven out of Spain, these North African states backfired in piracy and especially because Christians were practicing the exact same thing. On top of them was the regency of Algiers under the Barbarossa brothers. Since the Barbary states were Muslims, the western propagandists blamed it on religion while, “These same propagandists ignored the parallel piracy practiced by Christian states like Malta because they targeted Muslim rather than Christian powers; echoing the language of the Crusades, Maltese pirates were referred to as knight[s].”(qtd in Lewis, 1990: p.76). This indeed played an early misrepresentation on the part of the West against the Orient, and hence, the Muslims.

After the oscillation of captures between Europe and the Barbary states, the turn of the United States arrived on the scene by the end of the eighteenth century. Right after the American Independence from Britain, American merchant ships wanted to sail, trade, and load products near the Mediterranean, however, the price was not easy, the Algerine corsairs were there on alert, ready for captures particularly of countries with which they did not have relations of paying a tribute to the *Dey* in Algiers, and thus, the United States was sailing under the British flag before Independence.

After the capture, and particularly due to the United States infant army and emergence as a nation, the payment of the ransom to the *Dey* of Algiers was delayed several times. By July

1796, the United States paid the entire cost of the ransom eventually which reached a million dollars—including tributes, presents, and naval stores, around one sixth of the yearly budget of the United States(Lewis, 1990).

Slavery in the South started because of an economic need for labor on the Southern plantations in America. It was unfortunate that even though people there realized that slavery was an evil practice, yet at the same time, they learned that they can make too much profit out of it, and therefore, it lingered from the foundation of the country till it was forcibly abolished during the Civil War.

The objectives of this paper is to show how, in the course of time, the West with its control of the Media orientalisised Islam and Muslims claiming biased stories in literature and history records seizing every opportunity to blame the religion of Islam as is the case in the Western captives in the Barbary states. On the other hand, it is universally acknowledged that the practice of slavery in the South was not just wrong but was brutal and un-humane and yet nobody blamed Christianity for it. The paper tries to reveal the double standards the West uses against Muslims to inferiorize them.

The significance of this paper stems from the fact that news and information from the West tend to misrepresent us ‘Muslims’, and we are keen on taking it for granted. Therefore, this paper calls Muslim readers not to take information about them first-hand from the West and that they can always check them so as to brighten or cleanse the image of Islam of its indictment of violence.

The paper compares the two types of slavery taking place in the nineteenth century in two faraway places that could not be more different; that of the Muslim Regency of Algiers and that of the Christian South of the United States.

The researcher sheds light on the differences between western slavery, particularly in the American South, and the so-called slaves or captives in the Barbary states, mainly in Algiers, and the different treatment practiced on each side as well as the possibilities of un-enslavement. The study revealed that the Western captives in the Barbary state of Algiers were more likely to be free from the cuffs of slavery and particularly when they convert to Islam while the African slaves in the South were deemed to remain slaves for the rest of their lives till the end of the American Civil War.

2. The Barbary states capture of European shipping:

In the late eighteenth century, Algiers was at peace with Great Britain, France, Spain, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Venice, and the little Republic of Ragusa. However, it was hostile with Portugal, Prussia, Naples, the Italian States, the Hanstowns and any country that did not pay tribute to the regency of Algiers. Exceptions were made to Empires like Russia and Germany where the dey was undecided and waited for the Sublime Porte to give him information, and hence, their shipping remained unmolested (Baeper, 1999).

The power of Algiers at the time was quite impressive. After the United States got independence from Britain, the British Consul in Algiers, Charles Logie, informed the dey in Algiers of the consequences of the war and that the United States was no longer protected by Britain, and hence, the Algerine corsairs were free to captivate American ships. Cruisers of Algiers went all the way to the coast of Portugal and captured ships from Portugal, Genoese and two from the United States. On July, 25th, 1785, the *Maria* from Boston was captured,

and arrived to Algiers the next day. The *Dauphin* of Philadelphia was captured five days later during the same month and arrived to Algiers on August 12th (Baeper, 1999).

As the United States achieved its independence from Britain in 1783, the new American Republic was faced with the challenge of protecting its ships from the Mediterranean corsairs of North Africa. Being a new country, America was looking for trading opportunities near the Mediterranean, where the Barbary States posed an eminent threat leading America to its very early missions of foreign policy with a far non-Christian country. In 1793, an American brig known as *Polly* sailed from Newburyport in Massachusetts to Cadiz Spain. John Foss was one of its crew who was captured by the Algerine corsairs. Foss gave a salient account of his experience of the capture of the *Polly* and his enslavement in Algiers. The brig approached flying a British flag as the *Polly* waited for her. But the American seamen soon learned that it was not British:

Their dress and long beards that they were Moors, or Algerines...She then hove too under our lee, when we heard a most terrible shouting, clapping of hands, huzzaing, & c. – And saw a great number of men rise up with their heads above the [gunwale], dressed in the Turkish habit like them we saw on the poop. (Leiner, 2006, p.3)

Not having a powerful navy, the United States was compelled to pay the Barbary states in order to ransom its captive citizens. In 1796, it paid 642,000 \$, this was a humungous number for the federal reserve of the young country to ransom 107 American captives in Algiers, some of whom have been captives for nearly a decade. Furthermore, The United States signed a treaty of paying a tribute –similar to those of Europe— paying 21, 600 \$ annually with additional presents as the new 36-gun frigate for the Algerine navy named, the *Crescent* (Leiner, p.20). Paying off the tribute to the Barbary states was the obvious solution and the wisest one in order to avoid any provocation from the corsairs, simply because the new American Republic was too young, disorganized and had a poor navy.

In 1801, a similar incident took place with Tripoli requiring a tribute annually like that of Algiers, but the United States wanted to fight in order to avoid payment. Under the command of president Thomas Jefferson, a number of squadrons were ordered to attack Tripoli. Victories and losses, ended up in the capture of the frigate *Philadelphia* in October 1803 with the seizure of its 307 crew. William Eaton led a force of American marines and some Barber mercenaries from Egypt to the Tripolitan port of Derna, where a deal was signed without having to pay a tribute to Tripoli. However, the United States had to pay a sum of \$ 60, 000 for the release of the *Philadelphia* captives. Yet, as Leiner remarked, “Tripoli, however, was not the major Barbary power. Algiers was.” (2006: 22)

3. Barbary Slavery versus Slavery in the South:

Exploiting humans is embedded in human nature, and the idea of using humans in slavery has always existed universally. As far back as the medieval times, slaves in ancient Rome were caught from various regions and ethnicities. They were under the control of an owner who could decide whether to let them live or put them to death. The Roman law endorses the power given to the owner by providing the possibility of buying and selling slaves like chattel. As put by the Emperor Justinian in a Roman code, “Slaves are in the power of their

masters; for we find that among all nations slaveowners have the power of life and death over their slaves, and whatever a slave earns belongs to his master.” (qtd in Blackburn, 1997: p.67).

In the Arab world, and before the coming of Islam in the seventh century, slavery existed in the Arab Peninsula. The Arabs before the coming of Islam were living in ignorance and what came to be known as *The Time of Ignorance* as a result of the lack of knowledge of Allah, his messenger, his *shari'a*, besides paganism. While others saw that the name was called so because of arrogance, prejudice of race, and so on, Ali Djawed commented on 'Ignorance', "to have come from foolishness, idiocy, asabiyyah¹, lightness, anger, being lawless to any creed or Godly will, and all that was crushed down on by Islam."¹

The Mohamedan religion came out in a time of deep slavery in The Time of Ignorance in Arabia as it was also common in other places. It was not an easy job for the Prophet to change what was long entrenched in the Arab tradition and mindset in that era, and hence, the Prophet Mohamed ﷺ (Peace be upon him) found at the beginning of his message and during his entire mission obstacles and difficulties in the spread of Islam and the word of Allah. One of the most difficult jobs of the Prophet ﷺ were to change the rigid and proud Arabs' bad habits and institutions and also get them out of ignorance and paganism into the light of worshipping Allah. Taking into consideration the system of slavery, how deep it was rooted in the society, and how long it was practiced, it was not simple to abolish it all at once. Therefore, for Ahmed Shafiq (1891), the divine wisdom saw fit that the abolition came gradually for the best interest of everyone. Slavery was not denied immediately but neither was it approved, instead, its sources were weakened, its effects were reduce, and it was confined as opposed to what it was before.²

A notable incident in the history of Islam took place during the time of the Second Caliph of Islam, the prophet's companion, Umar Ibn El Khatab. When Amr Ibn al-As abused justice as his son lost a horse-race to a man from Egypt, Umar summoned both the son, his father (*Wali* or a ruler of Muslims in Egypt) and the oppressed, and he commanded the oppressed Egyptian "to settle the score" and told the father his everlasting and famous words, "when did you enslave people when they were born free" (See Es Sallabi, p.91). People were born free and cannot be enslaved or oppressed let alone by those who were held responsible for them. With the indoctrination of Islam in many Muslim regions, the practice of slavery almost diminished by time.

A famous approach to the differences of slavery in the West and in the Barbary states can be articulated in the model written by Moses I, Finley in 1980 where he differentiates between "societies with slaves and slave societies" (Fay, 2018: p.3). In the slave society, slavery was a major economic tool of production whilst in society with slaves, slavery was a minor means of production amongst many others (Fay).

By the early eighteenth century, eight slave ships were sent each year by Rhode Island merchants alone, each of which had chains, handcuffs, vinegar, and rum to get Africans and sell them to plantations owners in the American South and West Indies. By 1860, there were about twelve million people living in the South, a third of which were slaves with about 250, 000 free slaves. In some areas in the Deep South, the number of slaves outnumbered that of

¹ I borrowed the term from Ibn Khaldoun's *Muqaddimah* since I found it suitable to the translation especially because of the lack of the equivalent word in English

whites (Wish, 1972). The Southern economy depended mainly on slave labor since according to Starobin (1970) "The South's economy was predominantly agricultural, and heavily dependent upon the cultivation of several commercial crops." Huge produce was grown in the area; tobacco and hemp in Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri; a huge amounts of wheat in Maryland and Virginia; rice in South Carolina and Georgia; sugar in Louisiana; corn was almost everywhere while the South's most important produce, cotton, "extended all the way from Carolina to Texas." (p.3). In accordance with the stark contrast of numbers of slaves and slave owners in the American South as well as the economic produce of slaves, it is clear that the South belongs to Fay's category of 'slave societies'.

Slavery in the South was so devastating for the human soul, as men, women, and the elderly and even children were all components of such a Peculiar Institution. Douglass wrote in his majestic book, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglas: An American Slave* (first published in 1845) that the allowances given to the slaves were so cheap, little, and did not cover the need of few months, let alone a year. The slave children, since they could not work on the fields had no trousers, jackets, nor stockings. They were given only two coarse linen shirts per year. Thus, the children of both sexes were naked all year long (Douglass, 1968). In the same way, slaves in the South did not even know about their ages, as Fredrick Douglas (1968) pointed out, "I have no accurate knowledge of my age...the larger part of slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant" (p.21) Douglass in another chapter of his biography told of how he was made to endure the worst 'dregs of slavery' in the South:

We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely the order of the day than of the night...I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. (p.75)

Many slaves like Douglass were put to the extreme sufferings of their masters and supervisors. Not only did the supervisors not tolerate any misdemeanor by slaves, but masters too did not mind them being whipped, nor killed. Even in courts, for judges always ruled against slaves as they endorsed the power of the master over the slave, as a judge put it "The power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect" (Kenneth, 1956: p.141). Indeed, overseers were given advice and instructions not to treat the slaves well, nor trust them, one Southerner, recommended to an overseer, "The only way to keep a negro honest is not to trust him."(p.148)

Slavery perpetuated in the South for long since the 'Founding Fathers' did not do much to stop it, for they were even slave owners themselves. According to, Hammond, "slavery expanded because Jefferson, Madison, and their fellow partisans made no effort to stop it" (2007: p.5). in other words, the American Founding Fathers were able to know both the evils of slavery and its profits, but chose the latter which in itself turned into an institution which got out of hand had it not been for the Civil War, slavery might have lingered till the present day.

In the Barbary states, however, the captives were incarcerated in Algiers, and more or less treated as prisoners or slaves. Since the captures were not meant for trade or as an act to breed slavery—besides the rare number of slaves or captives in Algiers, it seems safe to conclude that slavery in the Barbary state of Algiers belongs to the category of "societies with slaves".

Probably, part of using the term slavery in Algiers was the interchangeable use of words by the captives themselves and the narrators. They used three words, “slave”, “captive”, and “prisoner” to portray their circumstances, and since they were read to the public, “their contemporaries also used [these terms] and that scholars have continued to employ” (Rojas, 168). However, the captives in Algiers were held for political and economic reasons as Prisoners of War. Slavery in Algiers meant, “a temporary status, subject to change when one’s family or government met the terms set by the dey or, since only infidels could be enslaved, if and when a captive converted to Islam”(See Rojas, p.168). A similar definition of slavery in the literature of Barbary states might also come from the imagined fiction in the West. In one of the earliest novels in English, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) described the tumultuous journey leading to the wreck of the protagonist’s ship, and Crusoe was taken a prisoner in the Barbary states.

In his book on the Islamic slavery in North Africa, *The Crescent Obscured* (2000), Robert Allison stated that the slavery in the Barbary states was not a difficult situation of hard labor but rather an attitude. For him, Islamic slavery in North Africa was “temporary status” for the Christian captives awaiting their far families or governments to ransom them and set them free otherwise, they accept the “choice of Islam”(quoted in Leiner, 2006, p.16). Hence, the Barbary slavery was not meant as an act of violence, and Europeans descriptions of it were more “hyperbolic”. In the Barbary regencies, slavery was not particularly “perpetual and unconditional” as is the case in the American South, “but rather subject to redemption for money or, sometimes, upon profession of the Muslim faith.” (Leiner, p.17)

G. N. Clark remarked that in spite of Europeans’ fear of Barbary captivity, which was for them worse than death, “the Christian slave was an asset to his Moorish² or Turkish master and so was worth preserving in good condition” in that his life was not always difficult, for he labored occasionally(1944, p.22). But the notorious reputation of the Algerine captivity in the west was what made it look bad. European authors wrote about it in the *bagnes* of North African towns. Such was the story of a character who escaped from prison in *Don Quixote* by Cervantes who himself was a captive prisoner in Algiers for five years.

Travelers in the Barbary states observed the relative kindness of the Islamic masters and their treatment of the slaves. Overall, women were not beaten or violently abused nor were slaves branded except that they wore ankle rings to indicate the slaves status however, many of them were able to earn and make money as they were free to move within Algiers. For Leiner, slavery in the Islamic Barbary regencies “was less severe than slavery in the American South” (p.16) Captives were even allowed to get promoted in jobs. For instance, the American sea navigator, James Leander Cathcart, who was captured by the Algerine corsairs in July 1785, recorded his experience as a captive in Algiers in a diary and dispatched letters to the U.S diplomats and politicians. By 1793, Cathcart reached the highest position given to a Christian slave; Christian secretary to the Algerian dey (Rojas, 2003: p.161-162). Likewise, in literature too, the depiction of Barbary slavery was more humane than in the American South. For instance, in the novel *The Algerine Captive*(1797), Tyler observed that in the Barbary regencies, conversions were not obligatory, and Christians who embraced Islam automatically became free. On the other hand, in the Christian world, “blacks were baptized into Christianity and then treated as brutes”(see Leiner, p.19). Indeed, slavery in the South was never undone unless a slave escapes to the North like Douglass did, but in so doing, the slave

² The inhabitants of the Maghreb were called Moors, it was a common term used by Europeans and Christians to describe any one from Mauritania, Morocco, Algiers, or Tunis.

risks his life otherwise, they get rotten in slavery.

4. Conclusion:

Americans and Westerners learned for a fact that what they called slavery in the Barbary states was nowhere near their practice of slavery, and especially the peculiar institution of slavery in the American South. They acknowledged the dire conditions they imposed on Africans in America.

It is hard to spot differences between an institution that was so embedded in a society, that of the Peculiar Institution, which had nearly four millions as slave chattel. Men, women-married and single, and children were all part of such institution, and worst of all, it was all based on race, or color of skin. Slavery in the Barbary states was a by-product of the Crusade Wars, and hence the capturing of prisoners was inevitable. The Barbary treatment of slaves was by far less severe than that of the South. Not only were they able to roam around the city of Algiers, but some of them even rose to one of the highest positions offered to a Christian captive.

Slavery in the West and particularly in the American South was extremely harsh. While slavery in the Barbary states was conditional to the act of paying the tribute or ransom for the head of the captured; converting to Islam— not by obligation, but by choice and the acceptance of the teachings of Islam. Thus, the captives had chances of getting freedom in return. In retrospect, slavery in the South could not be un-done. It was an entrenched practice that more and more slaves were bought and brought to join the institution from Africa and the act of slavery was based on hard labor only and no condition ever to see the light once Africans were put into the cuffs of slavery.

Notes:

¹ Trans. Mine. المفضل في تاريخ العرب قبل الإسلام (ص40)

² Trans. Mine. *L'esclavage au point de vue musulman*. Imprimerie nationale. (p.31-32)

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