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The Politics of Commemorating the Abolition of Slavery in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

M'hamed Oualdi *In: 299 (Summer 2021)*

In 2019, eight years after the Arab Spring uprisings, President Béji Caïd Essebsi declared that Tunisians would commemorate the abolition of slavery on January 23 each year. It was on this date in 1846 that the then-governor of Ottoman Tunisia, Ahmad Bey, signed a decree authorizing enslaved Black people to request manumission certificates. Dating back to the medieval period, this region—like other parts of the Mediterranean and the Muslim world—had relied on the work of African as well as European enslaved men and women. These enslaved people were employed mostly within households for domestic tasks and sometimes as urban and rural workforces. Why has the end of the enslavement of West and East Africans become so central to state and civic memory in post-revolutionary Tunisia, while other forms of slavery, including that of Latin Christians and Caucasian peoples, have been relegated to the background?

The new policy of commemoration is indeed a political achievement for Tunisian Black activists who, since the 2011 revolution, have fought

against anti-Black racism and advocated for the state to acknowledge a long history of oppression. But this political achievement was also a political calculation, made by an old nationalist, secular and light-skinned elite. This elite, which includes Caïd Essebsi and former nationalist activists, has controlled the Tunisian state since independence in 1956. By promoting this new policy of commemoration centered around the traumatic experiences of formerly enslaved Black people, the postcolonial elite has invested in diversity and tolerance in order to present itself to the Western world as an inclusive reformist government (as it also does with feminist issues).

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But there is more to this story. Many within the Tunisian elite, including Caïd Essebsi, have family connections with enslaved Caucasians and Europeans who converted to Islam—called mamluks—and were promoted to the highest levels of state power throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries when Tunisia was an Ottoman province. In light of the fact that Tunisia's elites trace their personal histories to enslaved Europeans, Caïd Essebsi's decision to commemorate the abolition of the enslavement of Africans underlines the sharply different social situation for descendants of enslaved Africans and Europeans in contemporary Tunisia. While some Tunisian elites descended from enslaved Europeans, their identification with slavery faded over time in a way that was not the case for their darker-skinned compatriots. Black Tunisian activists point to this discriminatory treatment as confirmation of their central convictions: There is an ongoing distinction made between Black and non-Black citizens and this differentiation reveals the underlying structural racism that contributes to the unequal distribution of resources in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Black Tunisians Claim Their Rights in the Nation

In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, Black Tunisian activists have initiated a new conversation about racial categories within society. They are working to ensure that they are seen as an integral part of the nation and that their histories are included in the national narrative. By organizing protests and using social media, these activists have denounced the many common racist slurs and daily acts of violence, including by state representatives. They are carrying out this work in solidarity with the efforts of African nationals (migrants, refugees and students) to denounce the racism that they experience regularly.^[1] For the first time, they have organized demonstrations to press for racist acts to be made a punishable offense, initially by campaigning for the adoption of an article in the new constitution explicitly addressing the issue of racism. They also supported the establishment of a formal commemoration of the 1846 abolition of slavery, noting that although slavery remains an “essential historical factor for understanding the current situation of Tunisian Blacks,” it should not be understood as the most significant “element of their presence in Tunisia.”^[2] Tunisian activists firmly reject all categorizations that define them solely in relation to slavery, such as *‘abid*, *wusfan* (Black slave) or the allegedly affectionate diminutives such as *shushan*, *kahlusha* or *kahlush* (“little Black” in feminine and masculine forms). Citizens across the country, though mainly in southern Tunisia, have also taken concrete legal actions to change their last names and erase signs that recall the servile past of their ancestors.^[3]

Tunisian Black activist claims emerged within the new post-2011 revolutionary democratic context when new forms of representation within the constituent and legislative assemblies were being widely debated. In this new institutional system, Black citizens—who make up between 10 and 15 percent of the

In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, Black Tunisian activists have initiated a new conversation

population, not including so-called *métis*, or mixed-race people—denounced their disproportionately low representation in the new institutions and in the media.

about racial categories within society.

Interestingly, many activists and leading figures of these movements are women.^[4] And many of them come from southern Tunisian communities. Like other Tunisian citizens, they have often thought of their belonging and origin in relation to villages, neighborhoods or tribes. Often these narratives of origin explain and continue to justify the presence of Black communities in certain localities by invoking the protection of the founder of a tribe or patron saint. These narratives were also intended to legitimize communities' access to certain local resources or to rationalize their subordinate positions.

With the profound changes that occurred during the colonial and postcolonial period, such as urbanization and the education of some descendants of Black communities in public schools, these local narratives of origin have, however slowly, lost their power to legitimize or to assign narrowly local roles. As a result, the wider categories of belonging to a nation, to a Tunisian national community and consequently also being part of debates on collective memory and national historical representations, are now more important than local narratives of origin for Black Tunisians. In this way, activists working for the rights of Black citizens have contributed to a nationalization of the Black Tunisian condition.

The So-Called Tunisian Exception

By promoting their own national narratives, Black activists found common ground with state elites that ruled the country when Caïd Essebsi was president from 2014 to 2019. From the perspective of local authorities and state elites, designating a particular date to

commemorate the abolition of slavery would conveniently address several national and international political issues. For example, it has the potential to express the Tunisian state's commitment to fighting racism, recognizing inequality and democratizing civic memory. In addition to these aims, the official commemoration policy served to reinforce a key feature of Tunisian nationalism: The presentation of the country—once again—as a beacon of modernity and a so-called “exception” in the Arab-Muslim world.^[5]

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The narrative of the “Tunisian exception” is based on several pivotal moments in the country's history. Tunisia was the first Muslim state to abolish slavery in 1846, two years before France outlawed slavery. It was also the first country to implement a constitution in the Muslim world in 1861 and the first democracy to emerge in the Maghreb after the Arab uprisings of 2011. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the Tunisian presidency orients state and civic memory around the abolition decree promulgated by Ahmad Bey. The reign of Ahmad Bey (1837–1855) is often described by historians as a period of intense military, legal and social reform inspired by the Ottoman Empire and Europe. The abolition of slavery can rightfully be seen in line with this penchant for reform. Rulers such as Caïd Essebsi and other Tunisian elites have brandished this motif of enlightened reformism to explain or justify their actions, from the time of the Ottoman reforms to the post-2011 revolutionary period.

By announcing the commemoration of the decree of 1846, Caïd Essebsi sought to demonstrate to Tunisians and the international community alike that elites were still able to reform the country. In this way, the national narrative of enlightened reformism also conveys the contentious idea that Tunisia is only modernized insofar as it is open to the West and in the hands of an educated elite.

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Yet the commemoration—and the conversation between Black activists and Tunisian elites around it—ignores other forms of slavery that occurred from early-modern Tunisia until the late nineteenth century, notably the enslavement and then promotion of Caucasian and southern European men and women, a history that still shapes Tunisian

their actions, from the time of the Ottoman reforms to the post-2011 revolutionary period.

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social hierarchies. By a certain irony of history, Caïd Essebsi is himself linked to the history of slavery in Tunisia, namely the enslavement of Europeans. His family name refers in Arabic to a specific service—that of the “pipe keeper” (*al-sabsi*) or master of the ceremony of tobacco smoking. One of his ancestors, an enslaved man of Sardinian origin who converted to Islam, Isma’il Qa’id al-Sabsi, occupied this domestic function in the nineteenth century in the service of the dynasty of beys, or governors, of the Ottoman province of Tunis.

The Divergent Paths of Black Enslaved People and White Mamluks

Until the late nineteenth century, when Tunisia was still part of the Ottoman Empire, local households relied on Christian male and female captives from southern Europe and the Caucasus, in addition to African slaves. Enslaved people from the Caucasus sometimes converted to Islam, thus becoming mamluks (male servants) or odalisques (female harem members). Christian captives from Western Europe were the first enslaved people to be collectively freed, in the 1810s, long before the liberation and manumissions of enslaved Caucasians and Africans. Thus, the experiences of Caucasian mamluks and odalisques are most significant for deconstructing the current official discourse surrounding the commemoration of slavery that is mainly centered around the

enslavement and the liberation of West and East Africans.

In large cities, households of Tunisian notables continued to utilize mamluks and concubines, as well as enslaved African people, even after slavery officially ended. The practice of slavery, slow to disappear, continued into the second half of the nineteenth century and even into the beginning of the twentieth century. Enslaved Black people and white mamluks and odalisques had distinct and different social positions and roles in late Ottoman and colonial Tunisia. During the Ottoman period and until the beginning of the twentieth century (including during the first decades of French colonization), while enslaved Black men and women were assigned to marginal positions, mamluks and odalisques were allowed to contribute to the building of a Tunisian state. Mamluks were promoted to the highest administrative and military positions, and certain odalisques were the wives of dignitaries and princes, giving birth to their children and thus ensuring the survival of dynasties and households of notables.

Consequently, while the country's Black subjects remained in separate communities mainly in southern Tunisia, the descendants of mamluks and concubines were integrated into Tunisian society and came to occupy similar social positions to other non-Black citizens. Some mamluks and odalisques who had modest social positions either as servants or cooks left no trace in the archives after their liberation. Now, three to four generations after liberation, it would be difficult to reconstruct their lineages. In the nineteenth century, free Muslim subjects could still mock the servile origins of notable mamluks. But the mamluks, the odalisques and their descendants gradually rid themselves of this stain of servitude. They instead emphasized their former high status and service to the state.

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From the 1920s onward, in the context of French colonial domination, the descendants of these Caucasian slaves merged into a Tunisian national community defined by anti-colonial Arab nationalism built around the pillars of Arabism and Islam. Some descendants of mamluks applied for positions in the colonial administration while others were involved in the Tunisian nationalist movement, such as Caïd Essebsi and Mongi Slim, the descendant of a mamluk of Greek origin who helped negotiate Tunisian independence and was later appointed as a minister and diplomat in postcolonial Tunisia.



Given the successful integration of the descendants of mamluks, it is hardly surprising that they tend to be less interested in the commemoration of the abolition of slavery. Their contribution to the founding of the Tunisian nation can also be marshalled to support—and indeed perform—the narrative of Tunisian exceptionalism: the notion that an enlightened elite, open to the Western world, would always have succeeded in reforming the country. For instance, historians still view prominent mamluks such as Khayr al-Din Pasha—the Tunisian prime minister from 1873 to 1877—as representing mamluk involvement in the major transformations of the Ottoman administration under European influence by the second half of the nineteenth century. The uneven integration of the descendants of former enslaved people into the different layers of Tunisian society, and even more so the different relationships of these groups to the memory of slavery, bolster the claims by Black activists of the existence of structural racism and the resulting unequal distribution of resources.

Even though Black activists have been successful in denouncing everyday acts of racism, they have found it much harder to convince Tunisians that structural racism also exists within society. Raising awareness of racism was already a tough battle: The issue still provokes mixed reactions in Tunisia—from claims that one must “nuance” the debate (by maintaining that one of the main forms of

racism in Tunisia today is directed against rural people) to outright denial, claiming that this racism is “blown out of proportion” and that Tunisians should remain a “united” nation to move forward. Fighting structural racism by demanding better economic and social rights for Black citizens appears to be unwelcome in the current economic context, in which many Tunisians feel they are treated as second-class citizens. In this fight against racism, Black activists, like other subordinate groups—such as the inhabitants of the marginalized regions of central, western and southern Tunisia—come up against the fundamental problem of the unequal distribution of resources in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Ongoing demands for more economic equality are embedded in this deeper history of slavery and post-slavery that has resulted in the unequal integration of the descendants of enslaved Europeans and Africans in modern Tunisia.

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Endnotes

[1] Marta Scaglioni, “‘I Wish I Did Not Understand Arabic!’ Living as a Black Migrant in Contemporary Tunisia,” *Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology—Working Papers Series* (2017).

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[3] Afifa Ltifi, “Black Tunisians and the Pitfalls of Bourguiba’s

Homogenization Project," *POMEPS* (2020).

[4] Maha Abdelhamid, "Les noirs tunisiens après la révolution de 2011. Retour sur les prémices d'un mouvement contre le racisme," *EuroMesco* 84/6 (2018).

[5] Jocelyne Dakhli, *Tunisie, le pays sans bruit* (Arles, Actes sud, 2011).



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