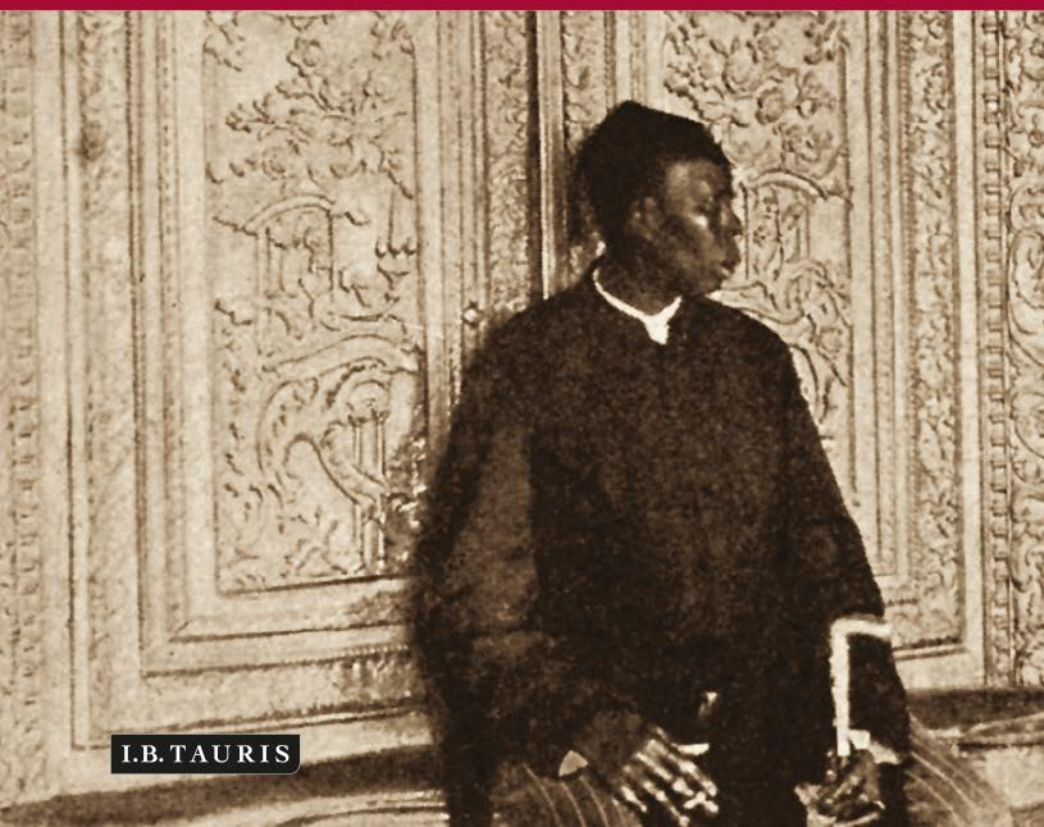


The BLACK
EUNUCHS *of*
the OTTOMAN
EMPIRE

NETWORKS OF POWER IN THE
COURT OF THE SULTAN

GEORGE JUNNE



I.B. TAURIS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to examine the histories of the Chief Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire. Variouslly referred to as the Dârrüsaâde Ağası, Āghā Dār al-Sa'āda and Kızlar Ağası, these African emasculated men were centres of power in the Ottoman Empire from 1574 almost until the Empire's end in the 1920s. The reader will become familiar with the lived-experiences of these men, including their histories, their accomplishments and their social and political failures and their successes. Because the accounts of eunuchs are not common knowledge to many, the work will also illuminate aspects of their histories in the Muslim world, in Europe and in Asia.

African American history is replete with references to the castration and emasculation of the Black male, both figuratively and literally. Researchers such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan and others, for instance, seemed to infer that the disintegration of Black families (even if that theory could be supported) was due to emasculating Black women. 'The emasculated Black man', whether true, partially true or false, is a subject that academic research in Africana Studies/Black Studies has had to confront.

It came as a complete surprise to me what I uncovered during the investigation of this research project. I had known that the Ottoman Empire used eunuchs in their harems, many of whom were African. I did not know that in the palace of the sultans, there was a system wherein African (and formerly White) eunuchs could gain remarkable power.

There might be some confusion as what the word 'harem' means and because it will be used many times in this work, it would be appropriate

to define the term early on. 'Harem' stems from the Arabic root of *h-r-m*, meaning forbidden or unlawful. It also means inviolable or sacred, a secure space.¹ For instance, a military base might have a sign that says 'harem', but it can also be a space within a home or palace that is off-limits except for a few. In the latter case, there is also a sense of sacredness or sanctity associated within the abode. If one violates the harem within a house, palace or other structure reserved for women, whether one does that intentionally or not, one can be justifiably killed, even today in some quarters.

The Chief Black Eunuchs (Kızlar Ağalar) of the Ottoman Empire (more accurately, the Ottoman Sultanate) truly were physically emasculated, but ironically, they were also among the most powerful of men. They controlled fortunes for religious foundations although, remarkably, they were also the personal slaves of the sultans.

Those discoveries led to many obvious questions about the history of eunuchs, the use of eunuchs by the Ottomans, views about Blacks, slavery and Islam, and a host of other queries. In addition, there had to be some comparative analyses on both the trans-Atlantic slavery and Ottoman slavery regarding Blacks. Were the Ottoman experiences anomalies or are they simply a reconfiguration of the same system?

There are also some other very important considerations when attempting such research. Most of the records are in Turkish or Ottoman Turkish, the researcher is from another culture and the context is, in some respects, alien. One has to constantly consider cultural biases and some non-Turkish sources are, frankly, bigoted. Particularly with a subject such as eunuchs, one must avoid the lure of focusing on the exotic and the bizarre. After all (to coin a trite phrase), those men were human.

Some of the Turkish sources seem biased as well. In her book *Three Centuries, Family Chronicles of Turkey and Egypt*, Emine Foat Tugay's account makes slavery under Ottoman rule seem quite benign and even almost pleasant. Born in 1897 to an important family (her father was Commander-in Chief of the First Army), she reported that Ottoman slaves were all part of the family and humanely treated. She also mistakenly wrote that slaves were only employed in households. Indeed, if slaves had problems with the owners, they could easily leave for another household!

One of the prevailing phrases concerning the history of Ottoman, European or African slavery, is that 'those people sold their children'. Indeed, many people did. However, one has to be very cautious with such an off-the-cuff response. In most societies around the world, children are highly valued and the overwhelming majority of mothers do not simply sell their children! It seems that, with admittedly limited documentation, the families selling their children were in wretched situations and the only salvation for children and the families was to sell them, hoping that they would not only survive but also prosper. Many children were simply stolen from their families during wars. Further, for thousands of families over time to sell children there had to be an established market for them.

It is very evident that one can make comparisons between trans-Atlantic slavery and slavery of the Ottoman Empire. Some have estimated that trans-Atlantic slavery swept up approximately 12 million Africans. On the other hand, the trans-Saharan/Red Sea slave trade took an estimated 14 million Africans over the past 1,300 years. Both systems robbed Africa of its human resource, taking people from their families and communities and transporting them to alien spaces where someone owned them. Both systems were responsible for the decimation of hundreds of villages and towns and robbing the continent of its greatest natural resource – its people.

While the trans-Atlantic trade incorporated mostly Africans and some Native Americans (the latter also forced off their lands and even killed), the Ottoman slave system used non-Muslim boys and girls, men and women, primarily for personal service. Specifically, the politics of the sultans' seraglio closely resembled that on the Caribbean plantation of Thomas Thistlewood, where the women with whom he was having sex and to whom he gave small gifts were engaged in power struggles and jealousies. One also sees similar behaviours in prisons, incidentally. With the men caught up in the Atlantic slave trade and the women in the Ottoman slave trade, what are the legacies of those institutions?

Both systems used women as sexual slaves. The seraglio specifically dressed the women (and sometimes males) in fine clothes, gave them money and allowed a few to rise in the system. Most, however, stayed at the bottom as servants. Some spent their childhood on slave farms while at the same time slavers stole children from other families. They might have lived in 'gilded cages' but they were still captives. With the

outlawing of the harem system in 1909, eyewitness descriptions tell of the women happily going home with relatives who traveled to Istanbul to claim them. The African slaves, men and women, boys and girls, eunuchs and non-eunuchs, had no family members arriving to claim them. What were their fates?

There are also references to the ugliness of Africans, which obviously smacks of racism. The more 'ugly' they were the more someone paid for them, both men and women. I am sure that most people have known 'ugly' children who grew to be quite handsome adults, and vice versa. What is behind this notion? Did Turks want to buy Africans who would not sexually arouse men and women and in the specific case of the African women, not have children by the Turks? If one compares again trans-Atlantic slavery where the owner also held the life and death of a slave in his hands, the appearance of the slave mattered little to the men who were sexually abusing them. Certainly, beauty (and even ugliness, if there is such a condition) *is* in the eye of the beholder.

The switch from White eunuchs to African eunuchs as harem guards might also have ulterior motives. Many have written that the reason for the change stemmed from the White eunuchs amassing too much power and controlling too many religious foundations (waqf or vakıf). It appeared that the African eunuchs amassed as much or more power and controlled more funds. Perhaps a more logical explanation was that the White eunuchs were not necessarily completely 'shaved', while the Africans were. Therefore, it was not only probable but also actually possible for some of the White eunuchs to have had sex with the harem women and, perhaps, to sire a child. Because the White eunuchs were European, as were most of the harem women, if they fathered a child few would have known that he or she was not the sultan's offspring. The chance that one of the African men could sire a child was very remote. If he did, it would be highly probable (but not absolutely certain) that some of the child's physical characteristics would indicate that the sultan was not the father. For that reason, all harem eunuchs received a periodic checkup to insure that 'nothing had grown back'.

Combined with the belief that one might be able to discern a child of a Black person from a White person could have been the availability of eunuchs. Europeans may have been supplying fewer and fewer of their people to be castrated for a number of social and political reasons, but Africans may have still been obtainable in great numbers. As the

European supply began to fizzle out, the Ottomans turned to the next plentiful source – Africans. In addition, Europeans began to eliminate slavery in the early 1800s, but it continues in areas of Africa today. Since most eunuchs were slaves, abolition would eventually affect the numbers of European eunuchs.

When one reads about Turkey today, writers usually state that it is the crossroads of Europe and Asia. With the ratio of African slaves in the Muslim world exceeding the numbers of Africans caught up in slavery in the New World by 1.4:1, why do the writers not mention Africa as an element of those crossroads? Who and where are the descendants of those Africans? Are we supposed to believe that *none* of the thousands upon thousands of African women had children by their owners, or that *none* of the sultans fathered any of their children? What happened to the mothers and their offspring? What about the children of African men who were not eunuchs? Have their descendants become present day Turks? This work does not investigate those questions, and those are only a few obvious ones.

Turkey has a number of archives with astonishing records of Ottoman history. There are probably a few personal diaries and journals plus oral histories in basements and attics as well, but very few have emerged so far. What did the slaves, African or non-African, write or dictate about their experiences of capture and sale? What about those who were born and raised in slavery? Where are those records, if they exist at all? In the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the experiences of most of the slaves were horrible. For example, one freedman interviewed in the 1930s said that if he had to do it all over again, he would take a gun and end it. Was it as bad for the Ottoman slaves or not? Where are those voices?

CHAPTER 1

ENSLAVED AFRICANS AS EUNUCHS IN AFRICA AND EUROPE

Africa began to use slaves several thousand years ago and slavery peaked between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, affecting almost all territories. One of the consequences was the shifting of populations; some areas were almost uninhabited through slavery while in other areas, the population increased.¹ Opportunities for trade expanded, beginning with local networks trading for food. Those networks developed into larger ones, evolving into chiefdoms and kingdoms. Slavery became one way to obtain workers, for they 'could be captured, traded for, or obtained as payment from families needing to pay off debts or seeking courtly favours'. Women were important to that system for reproduction as well as production.² Eunuchs had their own niche in the slave trade.

There were also luxury slaves, such as dwarfs; and the very large numbers of concubines possessed by some notables must be regarded as supernumerary. Slave women were not judged exclusively as concubines: those of Musgo, southeast of Mandara, for instance, were especially disagreeable in appearance, but valued for their trustworthiness and their great capacity for labour. But concubines were one of the major single categories of slaves, both for domestic use and for trans-Saharan export; it has been estimated that a majority of the slaves crossing the Sahara were

women and children, in contrast to the Atlantic pattern, and this may in turn partly explain the different subsequent assimilation of the slave population, in North America and North Africa.³

There are accounts that refer to West African slavery dating back to the seventh century. Al-Yakubi noted that the kings of Sudan sold slaves when there were no wars and 'for no reason'. Another chronicler, Hudud al-Alam, noted in 982–983 that most eunuchs came from the Sudan. He reported that merchants came from Egypt and stole children, castrated them and sent them to Europe for sale. He also reported that some Sudanese stole other people's children and sold them to the merchants. Those reports confirm the fact that military systems and organized merchant networks preyed on Black Africans to cater to foreign markets and demands.⁴

Records from the Sudan dating back to AD 1421 show the trade in eunuchs. One leader, the legendary Hausa Queen Amina, received 40 eunuchs and 10,000 kola nuts in tribute from Sudanese rulers. The Sarki (king) of the Kano Kingdom, Abdulahi Burja (r. 1437–1452) received 1,000 slaves a month. He went to what was then the southern area of the empire and, according to the chronicles, built a town about every two or three miles along the route he traveled. At each stop, he left 1,000 slaves – 500 men and 500 women to populate the communities. Yakubu (r. 1452–1462), the son of the previous ruler, traded horses for eunuchs, receiving 12 eunuchs for ten horses. Abubakar Kado (r. 1565–1572) was a very religious man who spent a lot of time in prayer. A manuscript from that time noted that eunuchs were 'very numerous'. The next ruler, Mohamma Shashere (r. 1572–1582), became known for his generosity and was the first to give a eunuch, Damu, the prestigious title of Wombai. He gave two other eunuchs high titles as well. Kutumbi (r. 1622–1648), was a warrior ruler who, when he went to war, had a hundred spare horses of his own plus musicians. Following him were also 'a hundred eunuchs who were handsomely dressed and had gold and silver ornaments'. It is clear that Kano rulers were not only participants in slave trading, but were also familiar with acquiring and making use of eunuchs before the establishment of the Ottoman Empire.⁵

It appeared to be customary in the Sudan to 'geld the most robust of the boys and youths captured in slave raids'. The Mossi punished criminals by castration and thereby supported a profitable trade in them.

They were very skilled in the operation and kept their techniques a secret. A largely Sunni Muslim people of the Volta River Basin the Mossi, now living in the Burkina Faso region, plus the Sunni Muslim Bornuese (Kanuri) people currently living in Niger and Nigeria, were very famous for the trade in eunuchs, chiefly selling them to Egypt, the Barbary States and Turkey. Bornu was one of West Africa's oldest empires, stretching east and west of Lake Chad. There was strong competition because of local demand in the Sudan and Bornu as well. While Turkish merchants might pay \$250 to \$300 for a eunuch, the Sultan of Bornu had 200 in his own harem.⁶

Long before the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the rise and spread of Islam helped to expand slavery throughout northern Africa. Beginning approximately AD 900, people as far away as West Africa were enslaved and transported to Europe and Asia, including Muslim lands. The Prophet Muhammad (the Praised One) lived in a slave-owning society that saw conquerors kill defeated men and enslave the women and children.

The Arab armies, as they spread out across the Middle East and North Africa, quickly learned to reward themselves with the wives and children of the conquered, and as the Caliphate developed its palace cities at Damascus and Baghdad, and its great garrison towns from which the provinces were governed, so a huge international market grew up for slaves of all races and colours.⁷

Ironically, the Muslim world practised formal manumission as well. The Qur'an applauded it and slave soldiers north of the Sahara, at the completion of their training, were sometimes freed. Muslim communities south of the Sahara did not seem to practise formal manumission to the degree of their northern counterparts. However, those slaves could expect to share in the spoils of war and could aspire to own slaves.⁸ By the seventeenth century, the slave trade dominated western Africa. Although steady demand in the Arab world kept the trans-Saharan routes active, the rapidly growing demand for slaves in the Americas eventually exerted even greater demands.⁹

The trans-Saharan slave trade, on the other hand, favoured young women in a 2:1 ratio over men. Males served as labourers and soldiers to such an extent that by the nineteenth century, slaves became important in

the maintenance and reproduction of social and political order.¹⁰ In several regions, eunuchs held that responsibility. The trade in eunuchs continued throughout the nineteenth century in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of the slaves from that area did not end up in the Americas but were taken across the Sahara. Those costly slaves were favoured in civil service and in harems throughout the Muslim world.¹¹ Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut, Mecca, Medina, Jeddah and Smyrna were the centres of demand from eunuchs supplied from the western Sudan from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries.¹²

Meanwhile, some European countries were capitalizing on the production of eunuchs. During the Middle Ages in Europe, the French town of Verdun took pride in its production of them, selling eunuchs to Moors in Spain.¹³ Moors were principally Sunni Muslims.

Moors (from the Latin *maurus*, which is derived from the Greek *mauros*, 'dark-complexioned'), the classical name in Europe of the people of North Africa, who, since the Arab invasion, have been made up of a mixture of Arabs (approx. 40 percent) and Berbers (approx. 60 percent). Morocco and Algeria, and, to a lesser degree, Tunisia and Mauritania, correspond to the lands of the Moors.¹⁴

According to historian Hugh Thomas, the Muslims in Spain bought many slaves. One major source of supply was the territory of the Slavs, whose name 'later became a synonym in Arabic for "eunuch"'.¹⁵

Merchants in the eastern marches of Germany would drive captives to markets in the Mediterranean – sometimes via Walenstad in Austria – or Venice – sometimes via Koblenz, on the Rhine, or Verdun. These prisoners might also travel south, down the Saône and the Rhône, and be embarked at Arles. Thence, crossing the Mediterranean in a middle passage as disagreeable as, if shorter than, that of the Atlantic in later days, they would be landed at Almeria, the main port of Muslim Spain. They might be shipped thence to any Muslim port, even to Baghdad or Trebizond, Cairo or Algiers.¹⁵

The slave markets of North Africa, in the late Middle Ages, held Christian captives from Spanish and Italian ports and villages. However,

for hundreds of years, Arab merchants traded in African slaves, particularly girls and young men 'for use in Muslim courts, from Córdoba to Baghdad, as servants, concubines, or warriors'. Egypt in the tenth century desired eunuchs, as did Baghdad, which bragged that they had 7,000. There was fervent desire for African slaves as far east as Java and China and Muslim slavers satisfied that need, sometimes with women from East Africa. Several trade routes supported the trade in eunuchs.

Many Ethiopians (Ethiopia was the best-known early source in Africa) and Nubians came up the Nile or via ports such as Massawa [now in Eritrea] and Suakin [Sawakin] on the Red Sea; other east coast Africans (some from as far away as the modern southern Kenya and eastern Tanzania) traveled through Somalia and the southeastern end of the Red Sea at or near Aden, Yemen, and the Island of Socotra [Suqutrá]; others came across the Sahara eastward from Bagirmi, Dongola, Darfur, Kordofan, and Sennar in present-day Chad and Sudan and then up the Nile; yet others made the northward journey across the Sahara especially to Tunis and Tripoli (and also Morocco) from source areas such as Mossi territory (present Mali), a wide band of Tuareg country (present southern Algeria and northern Niger Republic and Mali), Damagaram (present Niger Republic), the Ningi region (Nigeria) and other source areas in the central and western Sudan. A Mediterranean sea voyage ended the journey for many of these exports from Africa.¹⁶

One of the most famous eunuchs ruled in tenth century Ikhshid Egypt. The Nubian Abu al-Misq Kafur (Musky Camphor) became the regent from AD 965–968 and from all reports, he was very competent in that position in spite of the opposition he received from certain quarters. The status of most African slaves did not approach that level.¹⁷ Yet, African slaves were essential to an important economic system.

The slave girls of Awdaghost, on the Upper Niger, were prized as cooks, particularly skilled, reported the traveler al-Bakri, at making exquisite pastries out of a mixture of nuts and honey. In the fourteenth century, another traveler, al-Umari, described the empire of Mali, the largest West African monarchy of the time,

also on the Upper Niger, as deriving great profit from 'its merchandise and its seizures by razzias in the land of the infidel.' The successors of the Mali, the emperors of the Songhai, would customarily give the presents of slaves to their guests. In Fez, in the early sixteenth century, the emperor gave Leo the African, a Moor born in Granada who later lived at the brilliant court of Pope Leo X in Rome, 'fifty male slaves and fifty female slaves brought out of the land of the blacks, ten eunuchs, twelve camels, one giraffe, twenty civet-cats [...] Twenty of the slaves,' he added, 'cost twenty ducats apiece, and so did fifteen of the female slaves.' The eunuchs were worth forty ducats, the camels fifty, and the civet-cats two hundred – the high cost of the last item being due to their use in making scent.¹⁸

There were two areas in Africa known as primary sources of eunuchs for the Muslim world – the Ethiopian Empire and the Nupe Kingdom (now Nigeria). Some from the latter locale may have reached the Mediterranean. During the fourteenth century, the making of eunuchs took place primarily in the town of Washlu. The Arab world was familiar with Ethiopian eunuchs because some were guards and servants at the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina and the mosque of the Ka'ba in Mecca.

The Sultan who first placed the eunuchs in the haram [sacred zone surrounding the city, not to be confused with 'harem'] of Medina was imposing the structure of a royal household on the tomb of the Messenger of god. On a political level, the introduction of the eunuchs into the harem was a kind of Sultanization of the Prophet. Just as a corps of eunuchs, themselves symbols of royal authority, controlled access to the private chambers of the Sultan, these eunuchs would guard the hujra [chambers or dwelling that enclosed the graves of the Prophet and Abu Bakr and Umar] which was both the tomb and, in his lifetime, the most intimate area of the Prophet's own household – the chamber of his favourite wife.¹⁹

The overseers of the Harams, or, the sacred zones that extended for miles around Mecca and Medina and in which non-Muslims were forbidden, sought eunuch slaves. Many of those eunuchs were removed

from Istanbul because of age or for political reasons, the latter essentially serving in exile. During the 1850s, there were 80 eunuchs at the Mosque of the Ka'ba in Mecca and 120 at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Some were purchased from Africa as late as 1895 to serve at Medina.²⁰ In a curious 1883 incident, a eunuch working at the Haram at Mecca and who had formerly served Sultan Murad V went to the British Consul to receive manumission. The Consul sent him back to the Haram because he was unsure whether eunuchs who worked there were free men or slaves.²¹

Songhay conquered the Malian Empire in 1468 and dominated West Africa for 300 years, establishing a famous university system. It stretched from Burkina Faso to the south and north to the Moroccan border, west to the Atlantic Ocean and east to the middle of Niger. When the empire of Songhai ruled, the king had 700 eunuchs about him. One of their duties as objects of prestige was to hold out a sleeve so that the askia (king) could spit into it.²² In Zanzibar, one served in the customs bureaucracy as the administrator. Even in Ethiopia they served as servants of the king and sometimes supervised the women.

Nupe as well as Kano participated in the slave trade, including the trade in eunuchs. During the late fifteenth century, one Kano ruler, Muhammad Rumfa (r. 1462–1498), appointed a eunuch to an important state position. In the sixteenth century under Abubakr Kado (r. 1565–1572), eunuchs became common in Kano as that city adopted Islam. According to one record, some believed that Wombai Giwa, a seventeenth century eunuch, was plotting a revolt and he received a dismissal from his office. In the latter seventeenth century, over 100 eunuchs with clothing decorated with gold and silver ministered to Kano ruler Kutumbi (r. 1622–1648). Eunuchs also held important positions in the Songhai Empire under its famous leader, Askia Muhammad (r. 1493–1528), according to explorer Leo Africanus (Giovanni Leoni), a Spaniard educated in Morocco.

He also said that Askia Muhammad I attacked and killed the Hausa king of Gobir, and made eunuchs of his grandsons. A eunuch was in charge of the askia's extensive wardrobe. The chief of the palace eunuchs, Ali Folon, played almost the part of regent towards the end of Askia Muhammad I's reign. Askia Ishaq II [r. 1588–1591], defeated by the Moroccans [1591], attempted to slip away with gold and silver, royal emblems, thirty

of the best horses in the royal stables, and forty eunuchs. A little ironically, many of the early leaders of the Moroccan expeditionary and occupation forces were themselves Andalusian eunuchs.²³

The rulers of the Hausa, primarily a Muslim people residing in present day northern Nigeria and southern Niger, received support through the slave trade and trade raiding enterprises. They levied taxes and acquired other monetary benefits, including the profits from their agricultural slaves. From the fourteenth century, the Hausa also had eunuchs, some of whom were from their permanent slave class, the *cucanawa*. They made eunuchs of both boys and older men for markets in Egypt and Turkey. Although the survival rate of the boys was very low, some still volunteered for the operation in hopes of securing a lofty position. As in other areas of the world, eunuchs were the most expensive slaves.²⁴

By the mid-fifteenth century, the role of eunuchs in Kano civil service was considerable. During the reign of Kutumbi, he was attended by 'a hundred eunuchs who were handsomely dressed and had gold and silver ornaments'. Eunuchs served in both lower positions in the harems and in higher positions as government officials. One of their recommendations as government officials was that they could not establish a rival dynasty.²⁵

King Haji Muhammad al-Amin (r. 1749–1784) received credit for making eunuchs in Bagirmi, a kingdom located in Central Africa. Previously, Bornu (also Borno and Kanuri, one of the most Islamized African states, now in Nigeria) supplied them. When King Haji Muhammad (also known as Mbang al-Hajj Muhammad al-Amin) was in Mecca, he purchased a eunuch for 50 slaves from the Sultan of Mandara. Upon hearing that the sultan had cheated him, he learned how to castrate and performed the procedure himself. King Burkomanda (r. 1806–1846), the ruler who eventually succeeded King Haji Muhammad al-Amin, supposedly owned over a thousand eunuchs.

Eunuchs were rarely found in the possession of private citizens. They were significant in the trans-Saharan exchange, for service in the Ottoman court, or at the shrines in the Hejaz. Mbang al-Hajj Muhammad is reported every three years to have sent to Mecca via Wadai 100 garments, 100 slaves, and twelve eunuchs. The ruler of

Wadai himself would sometimes, on his accession, send some eunuchs to Istanbul.

From the 1840s to the 1880s, there seemed to be a large demand for African 'luxury slaves', the numbers varying from one region to another. Arabs in Central Africa did not own eunuchs according to one report, although the Omani Sultans of Zanzibar had small numbers of them. The kings of Buganda (Uganda region) introduced eunuchism in the nineteenth century under Arab influence. In Darfur (formerly a sultanate in western Sudan) and Ethiopia there were eunuchs placed in high positions.²⁶ Eunuchs were the most valuable of slaves, therefore only the wealthiest Turkish and Iranian-speaking families, 'particularly in Istanbul, Lower Egypt, Iran and parts of north India'. Although the British stemmed the trade in eunuchs in Egypt and India by the end of the nineteenth century, the trade persisted in Iran. In the twentieth century, the trade in exported eunuchs continued from the Gulf of Aden and the northern region of Mozambique.²⁷

Sokoto Caliphate (Fulani Empire of northern Nigeria, southern Niger and northern Cameroon) was a West African emirate during the nineteenth century that also used eunuchs. One quarter to half of the population were slaves since it was 'a political order based on systemic enslavement'. Fulani Muslim and sultan Muhammad Bello (r. 1817–1837) had a home with two entrances, one of which eunuchs guarded because his harem was located nearby. When the Sultan of Sokoto attacked the Hausa kingdom of Gobir, eunuchs comprised part of his army. Agadez, the Saharan tomb site of holy men in Niger, was an oasis north of Kano, and where nineteenth century German traveller and explorer Heinrich Barth recorded that the sultan of Agadez's chief eunuch met him when he first arrived.²⁸

Barth, an acclaimed observer of West African peoples and cultures, also knew Lamino, a lower ranking Bornu official who later rose to become a top political leader in the nineteenth century. He began to monopolize the eunuch trade and when Gustav Nachtigal, a Prussian military physician and an explorer of trade routes, wrote about him, he seemed to have fulfilled his desires. Lamino was 'devoid of conscience' and although the Qur'an forbade the practice of eunuchism, collected 'from time to time hundreds of boys' to castrate. Using the pretext of circumcising the boys, he assembled teams of barbers. They performed the operation and were

'accustomed with a quick grip to grasp the whole of their external genitals in the left hand, and with the right to amputate them with a sharp knife'. To staunch the bleeding, they used boiling butter.²⁹

Eunuchs were part of the Yoruba tradition as well as the Muslim tradition. Again, Barth wrote about their presence in Bornu. Traveller and explorer Dixon Denham, in the early 1820s, reported seeing the Sultan of Mandara (probably Bukar D'Gjiama, r. 1773–1828) with 30 sons and six favourite eunuchs. Others also noted the presence of important eunuchs.

Some eunuchs were employed exclusively in the management of the king's very large harem, but, as in both Bornu and Bagirmi, others held high and responsible positions, including military commands. The harem duties of one eunuch were combined with responsibility for the relations of the government with the Arab population; another, who [. . .] died as a result of a drunken quarrel between two eunuchs near the royal palace in which their retainers had joined, was a *kamkolak*, the title held by the highest ranking administrative officials of the country. In Darfur [Northern Africa], too, the head eunuch was one of the most important officials in the country, acting as tutor to Muhammad al-Fadl before his ascension to the throne, and as regent when Muhammad became king at the age of 11 or 12.³⁰

In Oyo, a Yoruba kingdom from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries now located in southern Nigeria, eunuchs maintained a significant amount of power. The grand eunuch not only controlled access to the king and controlled the palace, but also 'administered justice in the king's name'. At religious festivals, the second eunuch impersonated the king. The third eunuch also impersonated the king at public ceremonies and received notables at the palace when the king was indisposed. He accomplished those duties while dressed in the king's clothes. In addition, the eunuchs decided which of the king's progeny would succeed him in office.³¹

By the beginning of the nineteenth century in the Darfur Sultanate, now the Sudan, a eunuch had to hold the highest office of state. The eunuch's duties called for complete access to the entire palace complex, including the harem area. While some of the eunuchs were slaves, others

were not. Slaves generally were administrators, soldiers, concubines, guards and attendants.³² Slaves ended up in the markets of central Sudan through raids and kidnapping, tribute or through trade. How did Africans learn about the use of eunuchs?

There is no doubt that the custom of employing slave-eunuchs as civil servants reached the west and central Sudan from the surrounding Islamic states of Egypt and north Africa, as well as perhaps from Arabia, through the influence of Pilgrimage. It helped to make possible the development of highly centralised states, served by officials trained in the skills of organising taxation, conducting war and diplomacy, keeping records and many other activities of state-craft.³³

One of Darfur's most famous eunuchs was Muhammad Kurra, a spear-bearing page who rose to become a favourite of the king. A rival accused him of 'spending too much time with one of the royal concubines'. To demonstrate his loyalty to the jealous ruler, Kurra castrated himself, resulting in his appointment to the highest administrative position in the kingdom. Following the king's death, Muhammad Kurra became the regent. His rivals plus the supporters of the young king killed him in a fight.³⁴

Although Muslims were not supposed to enslave other Muslims, free Muslims would sometimes end up as slaves. Some Muslims would also raid other Muslims for their slaves. Missing from some descriptions of the slave trade are conditions pertaining to the capture of Africans. Raiders would routinely destroy villages as they rounded up captives, also setting fields on fire and killing those thought unfit. The march after the capture could be very cruel such as the killing of laggards to set an example to the others. Sometimes wells in the desert became clogged and by the time someone could clear them, slaves might die of thirst. Slave caravans might carry diseases such as smallpox.³⁵ Defenders of slavery, particularly those who argue that many of those enslaved attained higher prestige than they would have had without slavery, conveniently ignore this aspect. Following is a description of what the slavers did in East Africa.

Whenever a raid on a village took place there was death and destruction. Many more people died defending their homes and

families, or as a result of the starvation and disease which usually followed such violence, than were ever actually enslaved, let alone sold at the coast. As noted by Augustine Ambali, a Zaramo freed slave who eventually was ordained as a priest of the Church of England, 'in those days all over Africa there was terrible trouble for all black men; war everywhere and raiding, and no peace at all.'³⁶

Near the end of the eighteenth century, antislavery and abolitionist public pressure in England forced that country to legislate against it in 1807. In 1833, England made slavery illegal in all of the British Empire.³⁷ The end of European-controlled slavery also meant the beginning of colonialism, an institution that focused on 'legitimate' trade instead of the trafficking in humans. Still, many analysts theorize that economic factors were the major forces behind slavery's abolition. Scottish economist Adam Smith concluded, 'slave labour was both inefficient and counterproductive in a laissez-faire economic system'. Further, he declared that slavery was not crucial in the new economic system of capitalism that emphasized commerce and industry.³⁸ However, it appeared that the Sudanic and North African slave trade was vital to that area of the world.

Slavery and the slave trade were obviously institutions of immense importance in the area as a whole: probably the major stimulus to trans-Saharan trade; an important diplomatic lubricant in relations with North Africa and the Near East; essential for transport and communication within the interior, and for many other practical tasks; a main strength of government; a principal form of currency; an avenue of extending the faith; and a means for the incorporation of large numbers of people into initially small ruling or conquering societies. Central Sudanic statecraft was almost unimaginable without the slave.³⁹

After the Egyptians conquered Sinnar (1821) and Darfur (1874), the Turco–Egyptian regime (Turkiyya) that ruled from 1820 to 1881 expanded rights of the bourgeois class, including the right to own slaves. Along the Nile, slaves began replacing free people in the fields. The jallaba, those 'displaced by poverty and debt from their homes in the

irrigated north or drawn by the lure of easy fortune' began to erect 'predatory new Islamic slaving regimes' to serve the Turco–Egyptian market. Along the Blue Nile, the jallaba established slave labour for the mining and washing of gold and expanded the slave-exporting market. Capitalism became the driving force in the slave trade.⁴⁰

CHAPTER 2

EUNUCHS AND THE BYZANTINE WORLD

Emperor Constantine made the city of Byzantium into the capital of the eastern Roman Empire. Its location on the Bosphorus made it possible for the Byzantine Empire and later, the Ottoman Empire, to control trade between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Slavery was an important aspect of trade in the region for almost 1,600 years. Christians of Byzantium, replicating the slave trade of the Romans, continued to make slaves from prisoners of war. During the eighth and ninth centuries, the trade diminished, but then increased in the tenth century. Jews also traded in slaves, conveying them from Turkistan to Constantinople, and then to Spain and France.

Slavery declined again in the eleventh and twelfth centuries but rose when Russians began selling Caucasian and Turco–Tatar slaves to Venetian and Genoese merchants in Constantinople, who dispatched them to Chios (Khios), Crete, Sicily, Venice, Spain and Egypt. Black African slaves began to appear about the same time, although in limited numbers, and Muslims were noted among the slave merchants before the Ottoman Empire. Eunuchs were among the enslaved population.¹

To understand the role that eunuchs played in Byzantine society, one also has to understand how the Byzantines used that term. The definition changed between the third and twelfth centuries and included people we might not think of as eunuchs today. This becomes important for those studying the subject of eunuchs because the word also encompassed those who not only were incapable of bearing children, but also those who voluntarily refused to procreate.

Thus, until the ninth century the term encompassed anyone who did not as well as could not produce children, including men who were born sterile, men who became sterile through illness, accident or birth defect, men who were lacking in sexual desire and men and women who embraced the celibate life for religious reasons. It also encompassed men who had had themselves castrated voluntarily for personal reasons, including Christian priests who wanted to have easier contact with women parishioners, intellectuals who wanted to preserve their vital body fluids to increase their intellectual powers and men who wanted to have intercourse with women without fear of pregnancy. The term also encompassed men who had been castrated, or whose families had them castrated as children, so that they could qualify for positions at court traditionally reserved for eunuchs. Also included were castrated male slaves from the outer reaches of the empire (i.e., Cappadocia [ancient district located in Turkey], Armenia, the Caucasus Mountains) who were castrated as young children and then brought to the empire and sold, and, finally, illegitimate offspring of the imperial house – such as Romanos's illegitimate son, Basil – who were often castrated and reared as part of the household staff.²

The Byzantine Empire used eunuchs extensively in 'positions of public trust and authority'. Though used by the Romans, in that period they became administrators for the emperors.³ The Byzantine culture expected eunuchs to be 'graceful and well-made'. Young castrated slaves were raised in the women's quarters, supervised by an older eunuch. Their education prepared them for jobs specific to them. Some of the jobs were not considered masculine or, if done outside of the court, were jobs women did.

At court eunuchs acted as 'masters of ceremonies,' controlling access to the emperor; as doorkeepers; as servants in charge of traditionally female activities like cooking, serving and care of the wardrobe. Court eunuchs were also trained for tasks that aristocratic males traditionally avoided, such as bookkeeping, managing money and speculating in real estate. Certain positions at court were reserved specifically for eunuchs. They served as go-betweens in transactions between men and women of the court

and between the court and the outside world. They acted as trusted secretaries. They served as singers at court. They were very much involved in marital transactions and prepared the dead for burial. They regularly [appeared as] barbers, bloodletters and doctors.⁴

Palace eunuchs advanced from being tenth-century guardians of the harem to 'trusted political advisers and powerful administrators'. Even when women sat on the throne, they remained loyal. Some court eunuchs held important positions in the military receiving great fame. Unlike others in the royal palace, eunuchs were no threat to the emperor or empress because of their gendered status.

The most famous of these, of course, was Narses, Justinian's great general. Procopius believed that the removal of the testicles destroyed the seat of a man's natural powers, yet he was lavish in his praise of Narses. He marvelled that a eunuch raised in the women's quarters and accustomed to a soft life could overcome his inherent traits and command so successfully. Agathias chuckles at the naïveté of the Goths, who assumed that Narses was just a feeble caricature of a man who had set his masculinity aside and thus, were unprepared for his military prowess. Both of these authors stress the intelligence and skill of Narses, citing his planning and execution of a large operation.⁵

Eunuchs played an important role in the Byzantine world (AD 324–1453) that preceded the Ottomans. In AD 338, following the death of Constantine the Great, his three sons Constantius, Constantine and Constans arranged how to divide the empire. The resulting struggle saw Constantine and Constans killed and Constantius became the ruler of the Roman Empire with Constantinople as its capital. Constantius was paranoid about a coup d'état and wives and eunuchs, probably to curry favours from the emperor, may have exacerbated the situation by supporting his fantasies. Eunuchs not only encouraged the emperor but also received lofty positions because of their loyalty.

[M]any of them rose to leading positions in the civil, military and religious hierarchies, several becoming patriarch and one becoming *magister militum*, the commander-in-chief of the

army. One post that was almost invariably held by a eunuch was that of *praepositus sacri cubiculi*, or grand chamberlain. During the reign of Constantius this post was held by the eunuch Eusebius, who exerted great influence on the emperor, poisoning his mind against the young captive princes Gallus and Julian.⁶

Gallus and Julian were sons of Constantine's half-brother. Constantius imprisoned them for almost 14 years and then made Gallus the rank of Caesar and commander of an army. Eusebius convinced Constantius that Gallus was attempting to overthrow him and had his nephew arrested and beheaded under Eusebius' control. Constantius named Julian, Gallus' brother, as Caesar before his death in AD 361. His troops proclaimed Julian emperor and they traveled to Constantinople, arriving almost a month later in December. He was able to revenge his brother's death as one of his first acts as emperor was to try and then execute the eunuch Eusebius. Eusebius poisoned his uncle's mind against him. Julian also dismissed all of the other eunuchs in the imperial service as well as the needless servants who Constantius had hired. As Libanius wrote of those that Julian purged, 'There were a thousand cooks, as many barbers, and even more butlers. There were swarms of lackeys, the eunuchs were more in number than flies around the flocks in spring, and a multitude of drones of every sort.'⁷

A eunuch was responsible for breaking up the marriage plans of an emperor. After the death of Theodosius I, his two sons split the empire; Arcadius got the East and Honorius, the West. Theodosius wisely provided for his succession by appointing advisors because Arcadius was 18 and Honorius was ten. Honorius' advisor was Stilicho, commander-in-chief of the army in Italy. He arranged to have Honorius marry his daughter, Maria, in 398. At the same time, Rufinus, the advisor of Arcadius, wanted to increase his power and assure that a child of his family would become the wife of the emperor. However, it was the eunuch and grand chamberlain Eutropius who would have his way in the latter situation.

To maintain his control over the emperor, Eutropius wanted Arcadius to marry a woman he selected. He knew that if the emperor were pleased with the bride he chose, his power and prestige would rise. Rufinus visited Antioch and, while he was gone, Eutropius

showed Arcadius a portrait of a beautiful girl named Eudoxia from an aristocratic family of Constantinople. Arcadius fell in love with the woman in the portrait and by the time Rufinus returned to the city, the marriage preparations had already been made. They were married 'on 27 April 395, just three months after he became emperor of the East. During the remaining nine years of her short life Eudoxia bore him four daughters and a son, the future Theodosius II, who was born in Constantinople on 10 April 401'.⁸

As in many situations, the best plans do go awry. For all of his planning, Eutropius was executed in AD 399. Eudoxia so expanded her power that in AD 400, she had her husband crown her Augusta, an imperial title. She also had several lovers and many did not believe that her children were her husband's.

Eunuchs were very evident in the Byzantine Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople, for instance, was equivalent to the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. Patriarchs who were eunuchs included Germanus I (715–730), Nicetas I (766–780), Methodius I (843–847), Ignatios (847–858), Stephanos II (925–928), Theophylaktos (933–956), Polyuktos (956–970), Constantine III Leichudes (1059–1063) and Eustratios Gardias (1081–1084). Below the station of Patriarch were bishops, priests, monks and deacons. Many of them were also eunuchs, even though it was against church rules.⁹

The Byzantine Church made several decisions regarding castration, beginning with the First Ecumenical Council, called in AD 325. It ruled that the Church could not appoint eunuchs as clerics, 'unless they had been castrated for reasons such as an act of God or their health'. Excommunication was the punishment for physicians who unlawfully engaged in castration. Even so, 'the church never gave official permission, even on health grounds, because it had not wished to undertake the responsibility for such a dangerous operation which was frequently complicated by haemorrhage'. Still, nonprofessionals and physicians carried out castrations in spite of the laws, evidenced by the large number of eunuchs.¹⁰

Throughout the history of Byzantium eunuchs occupied places at all levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. They were monks, priests, bishops and church officials. Churchmen reflected secular society in their ambivalence about eunuchs, but they focused on different

issues. Rather than a preoccupation with the male ideal and procreation as points of reference, clerical discussion of eunuchs tended to focus on their relationship to the ideal of celibacy. Because of their physical castration, eunuchs in the Church were assumed to be celibate. Yet ecclesiastical sources frequently suggest that, in the struggle for ascetic virtue, eunuchs had 'cheated' and were not able to attain fully the celibate ideal. That is, celibacy was too easy for them because they did not have to struggle to attain it. Rather, they had achieved celibacy through the outside intervention of castration.¹¹

One of the sources on castration in the Byzantine era is the writings of physician Paul of Aegina. His seventh century work, contained in seven volumes, not only speaks to castration but also to the philosophies behind the practice. He was certain that castration was unnatural, but might be necessary for 'acts of God' or health reasons, where physicians were obligated to operate. He also described castration procedures in detail.

The castration [. . .] takes place in two ways: the first is crushing and the second is the excision of the testicles. In the case of crushing, the youngest infants are put in a sitting position on a container of hot water to relax their body. In the container the testicles are crushed with the fingers until they have dissolved and disappeared and are no longer tangible. In the case of excision, the candidate for castration is placed on a platform, with the fingers of the left hand the scrotum with its contents (the testicles) is pulled and when it is at its maximum tension, two vertical incisions, one at each testicle, are made with a lancet (smili in Greek). When the testicles pop out from the incisions, they are exposed from their sheaths and removed leaving only the vascular pedicle. The writer prefers the latter of these two techniques since castration by crushing sometimes leaves an appetite for intercourse because, as it appears, some areas of the testicles escape the crushing process.¹²

Paul of Aegina noted that castration and self-castration were manifest in Byzantine times. Eunuchs could hold a vast amount of power, in some cases even more than the emperor did. They could rise in the military to