Black Morocco

*Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* chronicles the experiences, identity, and agency of enslaved black people in Morocco from the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. Chouki El Hamel argues that we cannot rely solely on Islamic ideology as the key to explain social relations, particularly the history of black slavery in the Muslim world, for this viewpoint yields an inaccurate historical record of the people, institutions, and social practices of slavery in northwest Africa. El Hamel focuses on black Moroccans’ collective experience beginning with their enslavement as members of the loyal army of Sultan Isma‘il. By the time the sultan died in 1727, the army had become a political force, making and unmaking rulers well into the nineteenth century. The emphasis on the political history of the black army is augmented by a close examination of gender and concubinage as well as the continuity of black Moroccan identity through the musical and cultural practices of the Gnawa.

Chouki El Hamel is an Associate Professor of history at Arizona State University.
African Studies

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Black Morocco

A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam

CHOUKI EL HAMEL

Arizona State University

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-02577-6 - Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam
Chouki El Hamel
Frontmatter
More information
To my mother and all the mothers of Morocco, for paradise lies under their feet!

To Malaika and Kanza

In memory of the silenced members of the Soudani and the Gania families
The executioner kills twice, the second time [by silence].

Elie Wiesel¹

We cannot sustain an open and free society if we do not remain mindful of the lessons of the past. Because with ignorance comes indifference. With indifference comes incomprehension. And with incomprehension comes the foundation upon which systems of injustice, exploitation and racism can flourish freely.

Michaëlle Jean²

² Michaëlle Jean’s speech on the occasion of inaugurating the Harriet Tubman Institute at York University, Toronto, Sunday, March 25, 2007.
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I express my vast gratitude to all my friends and colleagues for their support throughout the course of my writing this book. I am, in particular, indebted to Tim Cleaveland, Robert Conrad, and Patrick Manning for their contributions, corrections, and suggestions. Tim Cleaveland, an expert on race, ethnicity, and gender in the western Sahel, has read many drafts of my book and offered invaluable insights toward improving it. I am also grateful to the anonymous readers and the adviser of the African Studies series for their constructive criticism. Paul Lovejoy, Deborah Kapchan, Michael Gomez, Yacine Daddi Addoun, Sarah Shields, Eve Trout Powell, Kim Butler, Gregory Castle, Mohamed Salem Soudani, and Jean Boulègue are friends whose intellectual support and friendship were crucial in enhancing my work. I recall my mentor, Jean Boulègue, with deep sadness, as he passed away in March 2011. Many thanks also go to my colleagues at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York (Class 2001): Colin Palmer, Kim Butler, Rhonda Frederick, Samuel Roberts, Jeffrey Sammons, Barbara Savage, Jeffrey Ogbar, Thomas Reinhardt, Barbara Katz, Geoffrey Porter, and Aisha al-Adawiyya. A special thanks to Doann Houghton-Alico for helping me build the index of my book and Mary Margaret Fonow, director of the School of Social Transformation at ASU.

Many people have contributed directly or indirectly with comments or encouragement to improve the quality of my research: Alice Bullard, Constant Hamès, Myriam Cottias, Barry Gaspar, Karla Holloway, Charles Payne, Louise Meintjes, Paul Berliner, Janet Ewald, Miriam Cooke, Barry Gaspar, Rick Powell, Nichole Green, Martin Klein, John
Acknowledgments


I acknowledge my deep gratitude to the wonderful librarians who assisted me in the United States, France, Mali, Mauritania, and Morocco, especially Liliane Daronian, Henry Stevens, Edward Oetting, Ahmed Chouqui Binebinte, Khalid Zahri, Mohammed Said Hinch, Nouzha Bensaadoun, Aziz Laghaoudi, Rahma Nagi, Mohamed Abbouti, Chafik Khafajah, Bouazza El Khalfouni, Meriam Stoni, Mohamed Malchouch, and the late ‘Abd al-Wahhab b. Mansur, director of the Royal Archives. I am also grateful to the Soudani and Gania families for allowing me to interview them and to enjoy their warm hospitality.

My initial research was supported by the Scholar-in-Residence fellowship at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York (2001–2002), which helped me broaden my understanding of the similarities and the particularities of the experiences of enslaved black Africans in the global diaspora. The 2005 summer grant from the American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS) allowed me to make another research trip to Morocco to gather more information that was crucial in giving me more insight into the experience of the Gnawa. My institution, Arizona State University, allowed me two sabbatical research leaves. These two semester leaves from full-load teaching, advising, and administrative duties were crucial in allowing me the time to write a great part of my book.

I thank the various universities that invited me as a guest speaker to share my work in progress and to get feedback from my colleagues in different disciplines. Finally, I ask forgiveness from those my memory has failed to remember.
This study chronicles the experiences, identities, and achievements of enslaved black people in Morocco. I examine the history of slavery in Morocco from the beginning of the Islamic era through the reign of Mawlay Isma'il, with a special emphasis on the “black army” or ‘Abid al-Bukhari. I have written the story of the black army to inform readers beyond those with narrow specialist knowledge. I have explored how the concept of integration in the name of Islam functioned as a source of privilege as well as discrimination by focusing on the agency of black Moroccans. The second part of the book, especially Chapters 4, 5, and 6, oscillates between narrative and analysis in order to give readers a deeper sense of the historical and sociological implications of the story being told across a long period of time, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Though the strongest element of these chapters concerns the black army, an important component of my discussion is the role of female slaves. The shortcomings of this analysis rest on a limited “evidentiary base.” My goal was to broaden this base and make clear the importance of female slaves in relation to the army and to Moroccan society at large.