

Racialization and the Politics of Lineage in the Zanj Rebellion

Africa

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Abstract: In the Ninth century, a group of enslaved Africans called the Zanj, from the Bantu speaking regions of East Africa, revolted against their slave masters. Under the leadership of Ali Ibn Muhammad, they staged several bloody guerilla wars until their inevitable fall. This paper looks at the role of politicization of lineage, racialization in Islamic societies, specifically the Abbasid Empire, and how racial contestation and class subjugation can manifest amongst a group of people. All these things led to the Zanj rebellion, which was one of the largest and longest-lasting slave rebellions in the history of the world.

Slavery has existed throughout history in various forms, including domestic servitude, military servitude, and chattel slavery. From the Americas to the Middle East, one thing these forms of slavery have in common is the existence and frequencies of slave rebellions. One of these rebellions was the Zanj rebellion as it was the longest, most significant slave rebellion in pre-modern history and lasted from 869 - 883.¹ The Zanj, under the leadership of Ali Ibn Muhammad, staged a 14-year bloody guerilla war against the Abbasid Caliphate that killed thousand of Zanj slaves and slave owners. A combination of their race and class birthed the Zanj rebellion and has similar ties to that of the revolt in Haiti, staking their place in the history of the African diaspora. Historically, this rebellion has been analyzed through the lens of class. Further analysis of the history of the Zanj people and the racialization of non-Arabs,

through literature, art, and proverbs, shows us that we cannot discuss the rebellion without including race as an important factor. The Zanj rebellion was a result of the racialization that took place in the Abbasid Caliphate and the hierarchical structures in place that dictated that Africans like the Zanj would be relegated to the lowest social class, lack autonomy over themselves and work as slaves for the upper class.

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade, majority of the time, is seen as the beginning of the end of Africa's autonomous existence in their land of origin. The arrival of Europeans and Christianity into several African countries is the first marker we discuss when we learn about slavery. What most people tend to neglect when discussing the autonomy of the African people is the Arab-Islamic slave trade, as it stands as a nearly unexplored area, as many seem to only focus on the causes and effects of the

¹ Jackson, D. E. P. *Iranian Studies* 28, no. 1/2 (1995): 100-03.

slave trade. While we must continue to study it, the lack of prioritization around the Arab-Islamic slave trade has led us to a narrow definition of what it means to belong to the diaspora. From the Haitian revolution to the slave rebellions in Bahia, Brazil, one thing people in the diaspora have in common, is revolting against their slave masters in ways that alter the history of the country. The Zanj slave rebellion that took place in modern day Iraq lets us know that it is not only part of the diaspora through a shared heritage of being African, but the presence of Africans in the Middle East is one mired with a history of rebellion that deserves to be studied.

To understand why the Zanj rebellion took place, we must look at the role of slavery in the society that they were in. In Islam, enslaving another Muslim is

against the Quran and Haram,² but the consensus about blackness was that they were pagans and nonbelievers, making the process of enslavement easier for the Arabs. "The rights of one possessed are that he should share in the owner's food and clothing and should not be assigned work above his capacity."³ When the region came under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad, he created a moral code for slave owners to abide by, instead of slaves being targeted and blamed.

Medieval Arab writers derived much of their initial understanding of Africa from translations of Greek works, most notably the geography of the second century Alexandrian Claudius Ptolemaeus.⁴ With this understanding, the world was divided into seven latitude zones, the first being closest to the Equator and the seventh being

² Tabarâi. *History of al-Tabari: The Caliphate of 'Ali I A.D. 656-657/A.H. 35-36*, trans. David Wines (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) 299.

³ John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Princeton, 2002) 9.

⁴ Hunwick and Powell, 35.

closest to the Arctic circle.⁵ The Zanj, who fell into the first latitude zone, which we know as Africa, were viewed as savages and beasts. Long before the enslavement of the Zanj, negative ideologies about their blackness and place in society were being spread. Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Abi Talib al-Dimashqi, a Syrian author, writes from popular perception of people who live in the first latitudes. “The equatorial region is inhabited by communities of blacks who are numbered among the savages and beasts. Their complexion and hair are burnt, and they are physically and morally deviant.”⁶

Bilad-as-Sudan, “the country of black people,” which we know as Sub-Saharan Africa, offered a vast hunting ground for Arab slave traders.⁷ Islam facilitated the growth of slavery and its development on a transcontinental scale due to slaves mainly being obtained through

Jihad, and military conquest, which produced an unending stream of male and female prisoners, many of whom were made into slaves.

The Abbasid Empire was the third major Islamic caliphate to succeed the Islamic Prophet Muhammad and expanded through Southern France, across Africa, through the Arabian Peninsula and into the Persian empire of the East.⁸ Due to its size, Baghdad became the new capital of the Empire, drawing many from the Persians to the Turks and Africans for trade. The influx of non-Arab speakers and non-Muslims led to a clear racialization in this empire long before the Zanj rebellion.⁹ For a society to become racialized, the idealization of others and self must be created. Around this time, when Baghdad had a high influx of non-Arabs, the Arab minority felt threatened, and a clear distinction was needed.

⁵ Hunwick and Powell, 35.

⁶ Ibid, 35.

⁷ Ibid, 9.

⁸ Popovic, 9.

⁹ Nicholas C McLeod, *Race, Rebellion, and Arab Muslim slavery: the Zanj Rebellion in Iraq, 869 - 883 C.E.*. (Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2016) 107.

Racialization did not only affect Africans but also Persians, Turks, Greeks, and Slavs. The difference between them and Africans was that they were viewed as easily assimilable.¹⁰ In this society, blackness had always been equated with paganism, unbelief, and slavery.¹¹ It did not help that many Africans who had converted to Islam, included elements of their pre-Islamic beliefs. An example would be the Gnawa people in Morocco who, while they are Muslim, incorporate aspects of trance into their rituals, which many Muslims view as syncretic and thus haram.¹² Ideologies of blackness, are in part, what led to smaller rebellions and, finally, the Zanj rebellion in 869.

While the topic of the Zanj rebellion is one that is lacking in scholarly research, some scholars have come together in an

attempt to understand what the motivations behind the rebellions were. Some authors such as Ghada Hashem Talhamis view it as motivated by class and minimize the role of Africans, "The slaves were merely one among several oppressed classes who participated in the rebellion, which was not an attack on the institution of slavery but social inequality."¹³

Class does play an essential role in the Zanj rebellion, but to ignore the intersect of class and race during the Abbasid Caliphate ignores the racialization that went on in this society and removes the Zanj population from Islamic history.

Understanding race not through a modern lens, but looking at it from the way society incorporated the ideology of Paganism and blackness into their daily lives will help us

¹⁰ McLeod, 107.

¹¹ Hunwick and Powell, 9.

¹² Hamel, Chouki El Hamel, *Constructing A Diasporic Identity: Tracing the Origins of the Gnawa Spiritual Group in Morocco* (The Journal of African History 2008), 241.

¹³ Ghada Hashem Talhamim, *The Zanj Rebellion Reconsidered* (The International Journal of African Historical Studies 1977), 443.

understand why race is an essential factor in the Zanj rebellion.

Race is an important distinction when discussing the rebellion, but for us to be sure that the Zanj were black, and from Africa, an examination of the word 'Zanj' is needed. Using Tabarîs' text *The Revolt of the Zanj*, we know that the Zanj were taken from the Bantu region of East Africa and brought to southern Iraq as slaves to remove nitrous topsoil to make the land more cultivable. "They were recruited from among important Negro slaves and local peasants, and grouped in camps of 500 - 5,000 workers, packed without family or hope, given a handful of flour, semolina, and dates as their only food."¹⁴

Because the Abbasid Caliphate was responsible for creating much of early Islamic theology, the racial ideologies dispensed through the Islamic doctrine heavily reinforced the racialized social

structure as blacks were cast as intellectually inferior and against everything Islam stood for due to them being linked to paganism. Another ideology that was popular around the time was the story of their skin color. It was believed that their skin color was the way it was due to a deformity and a curse from the time of Noah¹⁵. This is known as the Hamitic Myth; Ham, son of Noah, was of lighter skin, but due to a curse from Noah, God changed the skin color of Ham and his descendants and left them to live in what we know today as East Africa. The curse was simply that Ham and his descendants would be slaves to his brothers and their descendants who retained their lighter skin.¹⁶ While this myth is unfounded, it is one that has currency and has furthered the belief and justification for the enslavement of Africans. With this justification came loathing; Taous al-Yemani, lieutenant of Abdallah, son of

¹⁴ Tabarâi, 299.

¹⁵ Hunwick and Powell, 37.

¹⁶ Ibid, 38.

Abbâs, refused to eat the meat of any animal killed by a Zanj, calling them “a hideous slave.”¹⁷

The racial stratification that took place during the Abbasid empire, and the medieval Islamic world, resulted in the confinement of black people to the lowest position in the social structure. They were positioned and considered inferior to their lighter-skinned counterparts and were relegated to a role of permanent servitude whether they were free or enslaved.¹⁸

The meaning of the word Zanj is one that has been debated amongst scholars for decades. The earliest mentions of the Zanj were found in an excerpt from Al Fazarai, an Arab astronomer, around 780C.E.¹⁹ Initially, the term meant those who originated from Eastern Africa and practiced a pagan religion, but as the slave trade continued to grow it became a general term

for all blacks regardless of region of origin.²⁰

Since the word Zanj is not of Arab origins, there are many hypotheses as to where the word originated from as it would help us solidify the idea that the Zanj were indeed black people who were forcibly removed from Africa and brought to Southern Iraq. Some historians think the word is borrowed from Ethiopia, seeing as Amharic, the Ethiopian language, is a sister language to Arabic. In Amharic, the verb Zanega, meaning to prattle, or to stammer is what some historians believe is where the word originated from.²¹ Others think the word is of Persian origin zang, zangî (Pahlawi Zoroastrian Zangîk "Negro"), but the most popular one is the belief that it is a mixture of Persian and Indian Zanz-bar, which means "country of the black man."²²

¹⁷ Popovic, 21.

¹⁸ McLeod, 126.

¹⁹ Popovic, 15.

²⁰ Ibid, 15.

²¹ Ibid, 15.

²² Ibid, 16.

By the ninth century, around the time of the Zanj rebellion, the word Zanj was used by Caliphates to describe Africans who belonged to a specific socio-economic category. Kazouini, the Arab cosmographer and geographer from the thirteenth century, states that there are ten unique characteristics to the Zanj: black complexion, kinky hair, flat nose, thick lips, slender hands and feet, fetid odor, limited intelligence, extreme exuberance, and cannibalistic customs.²³ Phenotypically, this description lets us know that the Zanj were indeed black, and the last three characteristics describe the racial ideologies that Arab societies had of Africans.

The slaves were brought over to work camps located in southern Iraq, at Furât al-Basra, and while we cannot verify the number of slaves brought over, fifteen thousand, which is the figure given to us by Tabari, has been cited by other historians.

²³ Popovic, 16.

²⁴ Hunwick and Powell, 24.

We also know that due to the size of slaves brought over, these camps were operated by the wealthy, simply because during that period, only they could afford to own vast amounts of land to accommodate the slaves brought over.

The type of slavery imposed on the Zanj is even more striking when one looks at the conditions of slavery in the Middle East. In *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* by John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, slavery in other Middle Eastern countries was mainly domestic servitude, which makes the conditions of the Zanj unusual even for Medieval Muslim society.²⁴ Unlike the Atlantic slave trade that forcibly relocated slaves for the purpose of labor, slavery in the Middle East, for the most part, was mainly for black people to work in harems, as eunuchs and serve in the military.²⁵ Unlike the Zanj who were taken to southern

²⁵ Ibid, 24.

Iraq for manual labor in the salt marshes, slaves who were brought over for the purpose of military or harem work had the opportunity to move up in society and were protected by the laws of the land, regardless of how horrifying slavery was for them.²⁶ The Zanj however, had little to no protection and were relegated to the bottom of society. Stereotyped as thieves, rapists, and devoid of reasons, the Zanj were forcibly packed into camps by hundreds and thousands, without family, and given meager rations of food.²⁷

Little is known about the life of Ali Ibn Muhammad, the man who instigated the Zanj rebellion. What we do know is insufficient to allow us to make any definite statements, but the little we are given from Tabaris texts are only fragments or disparate details presented to us about the man responsible for the Zanj Rebellion.²⁸

Ali Ibn Muhammad was believed to have been born in a village in the vicinity of Al Rayy called Warzanin.²⁹ Little is mentioned about his life growing up, but according to Tabaris' text, Ali was taken from his mother by his father after an argument about the nature of slaves in their house.³⁰ He later returned to his mother after the death of his father but subsequently left and moved to Samarra, where he became a poet and earned a living by teaching children the art of writing, grammar, and astronomy.³¹

Compared to other rebellions that have taken place in the diaspora, little is known about what radicalized him to start the Zanj rebellion, but class, the politics of lineage, and claiming religious revelations play a part in peoples' belief in the rebellion. Ali Ibn Muhammads claim to have received supernatural revelations in the form of

²⁶ Ibid, 24.

²⁷ Popovic, xi.

²⁸ Ibid, 33.

²⁹ Ibid, 35.

³⁰ Ibid, 35.

³¹ Ibid, 36.

verses of the Qur'an helped legitimize him in the eyes of his followers.

The Zanj rebellion did not happen immediately, but instead, it took two defeats for it to take place officially. The first one is known as *The First Sojourn in Basra*; to garner support for his movement, he sent four men who had been long supporters of his to preach in front of the Abbad mosque in Basra.³² Their mission was unsuccessful, and they were driven out by the governor of the city, Muhammad b. Raja al-Hidari.

Fleeing to Baghdad, some of the supporters he did manage to garner in Basra were jailed, including wives, eldest sons, daughters, and servants.³³ The second instance that fueled the rebellion was *The Sojourn in Baghdad*. On their way to Baghdad, Ali and his men were captured while crossing into Al-Batiha, he managed to extract himself and his men from their

precarious situation and headed to Baghdad. There, he claimed to be a descendant of Ahmad ibn Isa b. Zayd, who had led a revolt against the Umayyad Caliphate but was unsuccessful.³⁴ He was able to elevate his status amongst his followers by invoking the supernatural and claiming to know what his men were doing and thinking.³⁵ This led to his supporters growing in size during his time spent in Baghdad.

It is important to note, that while lineage and religion played a role in recruiting people into Ali's camp, Rayhan ibn Salih and Rafiq, black slaves who had been loyal to Ali, were instrumental in garnering the support of other black slaves in this revolt.³⁶ It was Rayhan ibn Salih's camp that the slave revolts first took place. Without Rayhan and Rafiq, Ali would not have been able to garner the amount of slaves he had to support him. Taking

³² Ibid, 38.

³³ Ibid, 38.

³⁴ The Contested Life of Isa b. Zayd: Notes on the Construction of Zaydi Historical Narratives

³⁵ Popovic, 39.

³⁶ Ibid, 39.

advantage of the fact that Rayhan and Rafiq were both former slaves and staunch supporters of Ali, enslaved Africans were more likely to believe in Alis' vision as it aligned perfectly with their idea of freedom, which was reaching the status of their slave owners.³⁷

After garnering support in Baghdad, he and his supporters moved closer to the Zanj where he posed as a wealthy businessman from a princely family.³⁸ The revolt was declared on Wednesday, 26 ramadân 255/ September 7th, 869. Ali's followers/rebels intercepted a group of 50 slaves on their way to work and bound their hands and feet. They did this until they reportedly amassed a following of reportedly 500 slaves. Ali Ibns proclamation is what officially started the Zanj rebellion. Promising the slaves wealth and improvement in their condition, he turned towards the slave owners and reminded

them that they deserved death for the way they had behaved towards their slaves and for doing things forbidden by God. Ordering the slaves to beat their slave masters and after receiving 500 blows, he made them take a solemn oath promising not to disclose his location or identity. Ali Ibn proclamation and the blows delivered to the slave masters are what officially started the Zanj rebellion.³⁹

The Zanj rebellion has two distinct periods. The first (255-66/869-879) was a period of success and expansion. Through incorporating elements of religion, invoking the supernatural, and claiming different lineages, his support grew, leading them to become a real threat to the Abbasid Caliphate. The second period (266-270 / 879-883) saw the slow, agonizing decline before their final defeat.⁴⁰

Rebel headquarters were set up on Maymûn Canal, Ali Ibn Muhammad

³⁷ Ibid, 40.

³⁸ Popovic, 40.

³⁹ Tabarâi, 37.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 206.

gathered his followers, whose number continued to grow during the first period of the revolts. In an address to them, under the flag for prayer, he spoke of their "miserable conditions and assured them that God had chosen him to be an instrument of their deliverance."⁴¹ He also told them that he wanted to improve their condition so that one day, they could also own beautiful homes and slaves. Before leaving, he asked those who understood Arabic to translate what he said to those who did.

An important distinction between the Zanj revolt and a similar one like the Haitian rebellion was the Haitian rebellions primary goal was to drive out their colonial masters and liberate themselves from slavery. Due to slavery being so prevalent in this society and more of a norm, the Zanj rebellions primary motive was to flip the hierarchy by placing themselves at the top, and their slave masters at the bottom.

⁴¹ Popovic, 46.

⁴² Ibid, 46.

The Zanj's first significant victory was against Al Himyarî and his men. Their second victory is where we see how unprepared the Zanj were. Against troops of 4000 heavily armed men, the Zanj were ill-equipped with only three sabers in their arsenal.⁴² One rebel was seen dashing into battle, carrying only his plate as a weapon showing how poorly equipped they were, but against a troop of four thousand armed men, the Zanj were able to win their second victory.

Under Ali b. Muhammads orders, prisoners were beheaded, and their heads carried on the mules of the Zanj. With a series of victories, Ali b. Muhammads troops were eager to attack Basra, where many of the slaves were stationed to liberate them, but Ali restrained them by establishing a new capital on the Sabkha (salt marsh) of Abu Qurra surrounded by date palm trees and prosperous villages.⁴³

⁴³ Ibid, 55.

September 871, the rebels were able to capture Basra successfully. The surrounding area, which had already been captured by the Zanj, led them to be able to block supplies from entering Basra, weakening the area. This led Mansûr b Ja'far al-Khayyât and his men to concentrate on finding supplies in other areas leaving Basra unprotected and vulnerable for Ali and his rebels to attack. On the 14th of that same month, a lunar eclipse took place, and Ali took advantage of this declaring, that when he had asked God to hasten the destruction of the city a voice had promised him victory: "Basra will be a loaf of bread that you will eat from all sides; when the loaf is half-eaten, Basra will be destroyed."⁴⁴

The capturing of Basra is said to be the official start of their slow decline of the revolt. The rebels, who controlled the area for 14 years, mercilessly slaughtered young and old, men and women. It is estimated that

about three hundred thousand men died under Zanj leadership.⁴⁵

Disparaging comments and ideologies is one thing many African societies in the diaspora are on the receiving end of, these beliefs and comments are used to justify their enslavement and humiliation. From the Zanj rebellion to the slave revolts in Bahia, Brazil, society has always labeled black people as criminals before anything.

According to a common proverb: "The hungry Zanj steals, the sated Zanj rapes."

⁴⁶While these ideologies were prevalent during this time period and led to the subjugation of Africans, their primary motive of the rebellion was not to destroy the institution that was slavery. Instead, they not only wanted autonomy over themselves but to also have the power that their former slave masters had.⁴⁷

During the Zanj revolts and its expansion, Ali Ibn Muhammad took

⁴⁴ Hunwick and Powell, 9.

⁴⁵ Popovic, 121.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 20.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 20.

advantage of the social capital that lineage gave one. While we do not know much of his background, him placing himself close to the Prophet Muhammad as a spiritual leader and having conversations with God, he was able to amass a large following that many slave owners were unprepared for. The politics of lineage is not one that is new to the Middle east. In Morocco, with the Gnawa peoples claim of Bilal, the first black person to convert to Islam, and the first Azan in the newly Islamized Medina and a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, they were able to legitimize themselves in Islamic society, as Ali Ibn Muhammad had done.

Comparing the Zanj rebellion to other rebellions in the west, it is easy to see why using a Western lense to analyze these revolts does a disservice to the people. Rebellions like the ones in the U.S., Brazil, and Haiti happened later on in the late 1700s and 1800s; their primary focus was to

liberate themselves from slavery and end slavery altogether. But in a society such as the Abbasid empire, slavery had become so woven into the community that envisioning one without it was something that many were not capable of, including the Zanj. Their idea of liberation was enslaving their slave masters and making conditions better for themselves. In many ways this is justified due to the hardship they went through and the harmful ideologies thrown at them.

Furthermore, the Zanj rebellion cannot be analyzed through class alone. The role of religion, in this case Islam, and race must also be included in any analysis of the Zanj rebellion. Without the process of racialization, which relegated black Africans to the lowest position in the social structure, the Zanj rebellion never would have taken place.

Ninth century Abbasid society knowingly promoted false racial ideologies

which stereotyped black Africans as racially inferior, morally impure, and unbelievers. Race became a vital aspect in the Abbasid Caliphate as it determined that blacks would remain in a permanent role of social inferiority. The Zanj were directly against this label of social and racial inferiority and sought to elevate themselves.

Bonilla Silva defines racial contestation as “the struggle of racial groups for systemic changes regarding their position at one or more levels.”⁴⁸ The Zanj expressing their own racial contestation revealed their objective interest in their desire for freedom. This contestation manifested through their retaliatory mass killings of slave owners and retreat from Arab society further south of Iraq to start their own community.⁴⁹

Anthropologist Runoko Rashidi, suggests that “wherever they met

oppression, African people have always defied subjugation, and the Zanj rebellion remains a glorious page in African history and black resistance movements.”⁵⁰ In conclusion, the Zanj rebellion has cemented itself in both African and Middle Eastern history and shows us how due to the racialization that African people face, they sought to fight against their oppressor, a fight that rings true in the diaspora.

⁴⁸ Bonilla Silva Eduardo Bonill, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 43.

⁴⁹ McLeod, 124.

⁵⁰ Rashidi, Runoko, *African Star Over Asia: The Black Presence In the East*. (London: Books of Africa Limited, 2012.), 174.

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