

# «Black Iraqis Are Not The Descendants of Slaves. On The Cushitic Origins of Iraq»

by Victoria Kabeya, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Minority Rights Group International, the Black Iraqis, whose most members are now living in Basra, would constitute an ethnic clan of a million and a half citizens. Though belonging to one of the most populated black groups in the Middle East, their existence has always been linked to the era of the Zanj slave trade which led to the most important black rebellion in the Near East at the time. As black populations in the region tend to be overlooked and automatically regrouped under the slave category, few authors have attempted to explore their unique diversity. Arab, Persian, Indian and European scholars have all supported the thesis regarding the Zanj slave trade-and the Arab slave trade in general- as the only common root of origins for the Afro-Arabs. Yet, such explanation is far from being correct and true. This paper aims to argue that the Black Iraqis are not the descendants of slaves but would rather embody an admixture between a pre-existing indigenous black population living in ancient Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula and through which, the area would be directly attached to the Horn of Africa and the Cushite culture, and the different enslaved Africans brought to Arabia during the slave trade. Slavery is not the point of beginning regarding the presence of black individuals in the country. Indeed, an original black Iraqi population, including the ancient Arabs, were already present before the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Black African Origins of Iraq

The Middle East has been greatly affected by the colonial invasions its local population had to face over the centuries. The region has always been known, as the gate of passage which joined the Western world to Asia. As the spaces had been conquered by different forces which connected the territories to their own political centers, few scholars have managed to point out how the colonial gaze has deeply impacted the Middle East as well as the idea one envisions when thinking about Arab populations. In most minds, the Arabs constitute a race when in reality they would rather represent an ethnic group with shared various customs and beliefs. It is true that, due to the massive invasions of white populations from Central Asia and the Mediterranean area in ancient times and during the Middle Ages, the modern Arab world has become multiracial. Yet, owing to the legacy of slavery and the expansion of the feelings of anti-Blackness promoted by Arabized thinkers such as Ibn Khaldun with the release of Al-Muqaddimah in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Black Arabs have either been reduced to silence or isolated from the mosaic of the modern Arab culture.

As the region designated as the Middle East was annexed to white spheres by the conquerors and the new populations as well, whether mixed or white, the indigenous black peoples have been excluded and made strangers in their own land. As the colonial politics of Arabization and Turkification progressed, most groups have forgotten about their roots in the region and the history of their ancestors. The conquests have not only silenced the voices and weakened the Black Iraqis, but they have also nurtured the brutal change favored by the colonization of the geographical space. Indeed, conditioned by many years of Eurocentrism<sup>1</sup>, the modern gaze would, by looking at a map, truly attach the Middle East to either Asia or Southern Europe but never to Africa, when such parts

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1 In the colonial context, Eurocentrism can not only be reduced to the to whitewashing regarding the history of a given nation but should be understood as a strong desire to place White Europeans as the founders of a civilization where they never had any presence or importance at all.

of the world should be perceived as the geographical extension of Northeast Africa, also known as the Horn of Africa.



Map from Google . The Arabian Peninsula is not the Middle East but the extension of the Horn of Africa.

Indeed, ancient books do not refer to a Middle East but highly suggest a proximity between Northeast Africa and the territories known today as white Arab lands. In the Torah, in the Book of Genesis 10:10, Babylon or Babilem was mentioned as the land where Babel, Erech, Accad and Calneh were located. Those cities were, according to the Scriptures, founded and dominated by Nimrod, a Cushite. Hence a Black African Hamite. Though Nimrod can be considered a fictitious character by some, such narrative represents a good indication regarding the African Cushitic origins of modern day Iraq. If Nimrod was known as being the father of the region, this means that blackness was not restricted to the limits of the African continent at all as we know it today but was rather present outside of its frontiers as well. Such events were natural and common at the time. Before the invasions of the Central Asians, it was not unusual to find black populations living in the Arabian Peninsula. The Torah thus refers to a direct Black Hamitic origin of the indigenous populations of Iraq.

Canadian scholar George Aaron Barton revealed that Hamitic-Semitic races originated in North Africa and the Sahara region as early as 10,000 to 8,000 BC. These nomads saw a part of their clan migrate to Southern Arabia through the gate of Bab-el-Mandeb where they settled over centuries. (Barton:1929: 306). According to Arab sources from the Middle Ages, the Arabs as a people had to be divided into three distinct groups. The Ads and the Thamuds belonged to the ancient tribes and vanished according to the Quran. On the contrary, the pure Arabs, in terms of blood, belonged to the southern part of the Peninsula and are known as the Qhatanites, who used to live in a region located in modern day Yemen.

The roots of the original Arabs were also Cushitic and would validate the Biblical account. Regarding the geographical point of view, the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa are only separated by a small stretch and the populations were racially similar and dark-skin. Such argument would also be validated by the weather. Indeed, the indigenous populations had no other choice but to be extremely dark and melanated to adapt to the sun rays. These Peninsulars were aware of their Cushitic roots and never ceased to communicate with the Eastern part of the continent. Writers and historians have mentioned frequent fluxes of exchange between Arabians and East Africans which were not rooted in slavery and dating back to as early as 1200. Indeed, millions of Arabians found refuge in East Africa due to issues related to climate, political destabilization or would be simply fleeing from natural disasters.

The Cushitic identity is the point of origins of the Arabian Peninsula and the different populations which took root in the Horn of Africa would later constitute their own clans. Therefore, the Cushitic heritage would predate the identity of the Arabs which would only emerge politically in the 7<sup>th</sup> century through the expansion of Islam and the beginning of the Zanj trade.

White Arab scholars such as Andalusian Arab Al-Bakri or Muhammad Al Idrisi expressed a great contempt in the Hamitic roots of the Arabs and Berbers, hence of their true connection to Africa and blackness. They would claim a Semitic Yemeni heritage instead but were limited by the Hamitic evidence. The Berber scholars already had a strong desire to assimilate to Arab literature and identity, as they replaced Black African history with Arab epic accounts. They felt attached to the Yemeni legacy of the pre-Islamic Tusba Kings. The scholars were thus the first to favor the ideology of Panarabism before the 19th century. Their views at the time marked the beginning of the distancing between Amazigh black identity and Africa.

In the process, Arab scholars established a distinction between them and the Sub-Saharanans regarding them as «foreigners». Therefore, the brutal treatment inflicted upon them could have been a violent manifestation of this detachment. It was necessary to crush them to deny their existence and common roots. The dehumanization of Blacks in the region was also fueled by the Jewish scholars and religious entities themselves, as they began to associate blackness with the color of the curse of God around 600 AD, with the Babylonian Talmud, hence a few years before the Arab Umayyad spread these thoughts. The anti-blackness promoted by the Arabs was never repressed by the Ottomans later on as it allowed the authorities to maintain their system of exploitation and economy during the Zanj trade.

Before they became Arabs, the black populations of the region knew they were the descendants of Horners and Black Semites. The Arab and Muslim identity was formed around 634 in the 7th century, especially in Basra – a time when the city was founded- under the Umayyad Caliphate. It was thus an internal colonial system which shaped the area. Arab identity was thus, from the beginning, the consequence of dominant parties, yes, but it was not opposed to Blackness in essence. Baldwin confirms the same Cushitic roots of the Arabs claiming that «[...] the Cushitic race belongs to the oldest and purest Arabian blood [...]» and concludes that «the South Arabs represent a residue of Hamitic populations which at one time occupied the whole Arabia» (Baldwin:1869:306).

## **The Modern Black Iraqi community and Jalal Diab**

The Black Iraqi community was never treated more differently than the other indigenous populations scattered throughout the Middle East. Just like their counterparts in Palestine, Syria or Israel, their existence was mostly unknown or knowingly covered for racist reasons<sup>2</sup>. Though present for many centuries and millennia, they were never acknowledged until a day of November 2008. That year, the United States chose their very first mixed-race president. The election of Barack Obama not only did spark a feeling of hope in the world at the time, but it resonated among the Afro-Iraqis, especially in the heart of Jalal Diab.

Born in 1965, in Basra where he was raised, Jalal Diab, a teacher in Az Zubayn, was a black indigenous Iraqi man who acted as the leader of the first pro-Black party in the country known as the Free Iraqis and founded in 2007, a year before the election of Barack Obama. Jalal was a politician and social worker for the Black Basrawi community and denounced the lack of presence of Afro-Iraqis in politics and daily representation. He would often expose the subhuman treatment imposed upon them as well. At the time in 2009, when speaking about the political structure of the

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<sup>2</sup> Like the other Blacks of the region, their presence is wrongly explained through East African slavery. If some of them descend from the Zanj slaves, a huge majority had ancestors who had always been there and even contributed to the construction of the greatest ancient civilizations.

organization, Diab recalled how their mere participation was a success in itself and the symbol of a real fight against segregation. Racism in Iraq has been denied and is said to be non-existent. Indeed, to most White Iraqis, there has never been any form of segregation or division, as all Iraqis are the same. However, it was not the case for Diab. With the association, the teacher denounced the lack of presence of Blacks in politics and their absence in daily life<sup>4</sup>.

Conscious of his blackness and pride, he even fought for the banishment of the word “abd”<sup>5</sup>. By 2009, 35 members of the Free Iraqis movement had enough courage to become candidates in the region of Basra where fifteen per cent of the population is black. This political organization was, to the eyes of the white Iraqi officials, a nightmare which would bring back memories from the Zanj rebellion. Until this day, his death was never investigated at all and his murderers have not been apprehended. The Jalal Diab murder also reflects the politics of Iraq as a whole. Iraqi leaders are still using tactics of intimidation and censorship against any minority or dissident voice. The Free Iraqis movement did have a tremendous legacy in Basra. Though still active, it also allowed the Black Iraqi community to come out of darkness and even be recognised beyond the frontiers

The group has various heritages and cultures they managed to preserve. This fact is true for the Zanjs and recent immigrants from the Horn and Egypt, but many are still unaware of their roots. The Iraqi Nubians from South Egypt, the Iraqi Ethiopians and the East African Zanjs have managed to keep their rituals- and African identity since the 7th century and 8th century, yet, what remains of the pre-Islamic Cushitic heritage today? The Arabization of their customs have truly contributed to the demise of their ancient beliefs. However, it is more than accurate to recognize that they constitute a diverse entity made of different black African groups whose members mixed with the indigenous black Iraqi race of Cushitic origin.

## CONCLUSION

The Afro-Iraqi community is one of the most important in terms of numbers in the Middle East with over one million, one third living in Basra. Contrary to popular belief and to the scholar narrative, their presence is not new as the roots of Arabia were always from Cush. By the 7th century, the Arabs emerged as a political dominant entity and sealed their position with slavery. This second wave, defined by the exploitation of African slaves, was deemed to be the point of origin of the Black presence in Iraq, when it only represented one side of the African heritage which had already been preceded by the existence of Cushitic and Black Semitic groups in the area. The Zanj rebellion positioned Iraq as one of the most important lands in the Middle Eastern history when it comes to the political consciousness of an Afro-Arab population. The Turkic invasions which led to a great replacement of the indigenous black populations isolated them even more as the various White or Central Asian clans nurtured a false narrative giving space to Caucasian peoples as the founders of the civilization and the region. From a historical point of view, the Zanjs would only constitute the third great wave of Black people migrating in the region. Yet, due to the colonial rule led by the Caliphates in the 7<sup>th</sup> century which would be followed by the politics of Turkification, the memory of the original Black Iraqis has been erased as they wrongly identified as Arabs and converted to Islam by force. Due to the deep anti-Black policies nurtured by the Arabized North African and Andalucian thinkers, a distance was put between Arabia and Black Africa and the stigma of slavery would therefore only be attached to the community until this day. In this matter, facts point out that the black populations in Iraq can not all be the descendants of slaves as they would rather constitute an indigenous group to the region with some having been mixed with Zanjs who had been taken away from their original countries.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the members of the association, most Afro-Iraqis are treated like less than humans, especially when the black population in Basra is close to 300,000.

<sup>5</sup> (Slave in Arabic)

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