**Regional Meeting for the Middle East on the International Decade for People of African Descent**

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***Doing Justice to the Contributions of People of African descent to the Middle Eastern Societies***

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I wish to thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to invite me to share some thoughts in this second panel discussion devoted to the pillar of Justice.

The recognition of the historical contributions of Africans and people of African descent to the cultural, socio-economic and political development of the Middle East remains until today a great challenge in this region.

A number of taboos, prejudices and apprehensions continue to discourage serious research and frank debate on the influences of African cultures in the Middles East.

However, over the last decades some scholars from this region have undertaken bold studies on the African presence in their countries and the cultural interactions that resulted from.

Interesting research on Afro-Iranians, Afro-Palestinians, Afro-Iraqis, Afro-Saudi, Afro-Indians and Afro-Turks have been produced to address specific aspects of their contributions. This research has also underlined the conditions of poverty and marginality of these populations and the various forms of discrimination they still face today in their societies.

Some of these studies have pointed out a paradox that has always puzzled observers of this region: the Middle East is the region of the world where the presence of people of African descent is the oldest, the most diversified and the most productive. And yet it is the region where African influences are least recognised, studied and celebrated nowadays.

Very little is known about the century-long interactions across the Red Sea that have led to an early presence of Africans on the Arabian Peninsula. These people of various origin but mostly from Ethiopia, Somalia, Nubia and the East Coast of Africa came in their various capacities as traders, soldiers, rulers, artists, craftsmen and indeed as enslaved.

Arab literary sources have left scattered accounts about people of African descent living in the Peninsula before the advent of Islam.

We are therefore be tempted to ask why there is such a lack of interest and deficit of knowledge on the common heritage of these two regions that are geographically and historically so close.

The main reason, in my view, is indeed the organised silence about the slave trade and slavery in the Middle East, which is considered as one of the oldest and longest traffic of human beings, lasting until the 20th century.

More importantly, it is the legacies of racial prejudice, categorisation and discrimination and their denial that certainly explain the invisibility of people of African descent in the Middle East.

The specificity of slavery in the Islamic Middle East, which ,compared to that practised in the Christian Atlantic world, offered possibilities of way out of the enslavement through marriage, merit and genealogy has, paradoxically, reinforced this silence. Many of enslaved people have been able to integrate and assimilate into the general population through blood ties and manumission. But families and their society as a whole have tried to conceal the link with slavery and escape the prejudices in order to escape the stigma related to it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is important to recall that there is no natural statute of “slave”. It has always been the result of a process of subjugation, which used violence, terror and intimidation to impose enslavement. That is why its more appropriate to use the term of “enslaved people” instead of “slaves”. A term that perpetrates this misconception. This change of terminology helps also to better understand the constant and long lasting resistance engaged by the enslaved people to recover their dignity and freedom.

The Tunisian historian, Salah Trabelsi, professor at the University of Lyon, who has studied in their original version the writings of the great Arab thinkers since the 8th century highlighted that and I quote: “*The Arab sources provide significant information on the evolution of mentalities, the introduction of colour prejudice and the establishment of an imaginary hierarchy. They provide a fairly comprehensive basis for understanding the ways in which clichés and markers of biological and socio-cultural identities have been produced in the Middle East*”

Although Africans made up a large proportion of the enslaved population in the Middle East, Arab scholars did not develop a comprehensive and objective knowledge of Africa and its inhabitants.

Salah Trabelsi noted that “*During the first centuries of Islam, the image of the African continent reflected only an obscure and fragmented universe. In general, the intellectual baggage of Arab scholars remained for a long time marked by the old prejudices inherited from the latest Greek thinkers. Despite the importance of contacts with the Sudanese kingdoms and trade in gold and slaves, very few serious overviews of Africa, its peoples, their characters and their history were left. Arab speculative and descriptive geography was unable to come up with a specific concept for the African continent. As for the term “Ifrīḳiya”, it referred to the eastern Maghreb and had no analogy with the name that was later be attributed to the African continent*”

It is difficult to understand how territories which have been criss-crossed for so long by Arab traders experienced in long-distance trade who built fruitful partnerships with local actors, could have been kept under such a blanket of silence. This ignorance about Africa may in return explain the set of prejudices and stereotypes about Africans elaborated over the centuries by Arab scholars.

Allow me to take an example of how these prejudices were deeply rooted, defying sometimes reason and intelligence. The well-known Arab geographer and chronicler Muḥammad Abū-l-Ḳāsim ibn. Ḥawḳal who wrote about Africans in the tenth century has designated the lands inhabited by Blacks as the model of the most radical otherness. This part of the world was, in his eyes, the prototype of savage societies living in a state of nature. He wrote that dark-skinned populations were devoid of beliefs, intelligence and creativity and thus deserve to be relegated to the bottom of humanity. But when Ibn Hawkal realised the contradiction of his hasty judgment with the reality of the diversity of African peoples, he changed his mind in the same book and presented the Blacks who built civilisations such the Ethiopians and Nubians as different from others. As exceptions that somehow confirm his rule and judgement.

In his book *kitāb Ṣūrat al-’arḍ* he wrote “*I have not mentioned the country of the Blacks in the Maghreb, nor the Bedjdja or the Zendjs, nor the other groups living in their vicinity, for the good organisation of empires depends on religious convictions, good morals and wise institutions; and the preservation of wealth depends on a just method of government. These people, however, neglect and do not participate in these qualities, and therefore deserve a place apart from the point of view developed for the other empires.* *However, some of the blacks who settled in the vicinity of famous empires came to the religious idea, to a regulated life and to sensible institutions, and became close to the inhabitants of these empires: such are the Nubians and the Abyssinians, Christians who conformed to the ways of life of the Byzantines. Before Islam, they bordered on Byzantine territory, since the Nubian region bordered on Egypt, while Abyssinia lies on the Red Sea coast”*.

It is surprising that the same kind of arguments as those developed in the Western enslavers and colonialists have been used to bestialise Africans and deny them any creativity and agency by attributing every sign of civilisation found in Africa to external actors. It is precisely to deconstruct in a scientific and rigorous way this denial of African history that UNESCO has launched the prestigious collection of the General History of Africa in 1964’s.

In his defence, let us assume that Ibn Hawkal did probably ignore in his time certain some historical facts such as:

* The fact that ancient Egypt civilisation itself was the product of African people as it is today largely demonstrated;
* The fact that the Nubians kingdoms have confronted, ruled and even safeguarded the unity of the Ancient Egypt;
* The fact that the Abyssinians of Axum had built a powerful independent empire that conquered and dominated southern Arabia for a long time;
* The fact that other great empires such as the Songhai, Ghana, Mali, Kongo and Zimbabwe empires, with their own commercial network, urban centres of knowledge have emerged in Africa in the West, central and Southern Africa.

It is important to know at what precise moment in the history of the Middle Eastern societies the essentialization of Blacks could be traced. How did the transition from a simple cliché to a systematic stigmatisation take place? Did this precede or coincide with the extension of slavery?

For many scholars, the turning point in the perception and description of Africans occurred in the 9th century of the Christian era. Between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 11th centuries, a series of bloody revolts undertaken by enslaved Africans provoked a shock wave in the Middle East societies. The most important uprising known as the Zandj Rebellions occurred between 869 and 883 in the lower Mesopotamian Valley and Southern Persia. Joined by other disadvantaged groups, the insurgents extended their movement further and directed their attacks towards Baghdad. The news of their progress spread great panic and fear throughout the Abassid Caliphate.

According to the chronicle of al-Tabarī, a Muslim scholar who was contemporary to these events, this was the longest and most deadly revolt against the Caliphate power. During more than 14 years, the insurgents who created their own capital, Al Mukhtara, occupied and sacked the port of Abbadan in the Eastern bank of Shatt el Arab, the city of Basra and the capital Ahwaaz. Although their movement was crushed in blood, it shook the Middle eastern societies based on the slave system.

It was in this particular context of riots and claims for socio-political change that the most violent outpouring of negative images against Blacks has emerged. The writings of al-Tabarī constitutes a significant example of the clear change in the tone of historical narratives from that period. This historian, who usually sticks to a relatively objective account of the facts, did not hesitate to denigrate and demonise the authors of these revolts which have threaten the Caliphate. In his furious discourse, he described them as "*bands of savages, impious monsters, cursed and perverse traitors, enemies of God and Islam".*

This opened the door for a new rhetoric in the writings of Arab scholars that led to the crystallisation of a series of prejudices and stereotyping about Africans and Blacks in general. For instance, it was for that purpose that the myth of prophet Noah's curse on his son Ham was used to designate Black people as his cursed descendants condemned for ever to slavery and misfortune on earth by God.

Thus, the term '*Abd*,' (slave) became synonymous with *Aswad* (black) and *Zandjī* (Bantou population of East Africa). These interchangeable terms provide the natural substance to define the biological, social and cultural identity and destiny of Africans in the Middle East. These discursive amalgams have had long lasting effects on the collective memory in this region.

Unfortunately, these discourses have not been yet seriously deconstructed and some of the literature that supported them are still thought in universities without the necessary historical contextualization and without a critical analysis of their presumptions. The late abolition of slavery in this region and the silence imposed on this history did not obviously help Middle Eastern societies to question their heritage and engage a frank debate to emancipate themselves from this accumulation of prejudices against people of African descent.

This lack of questioning and deconstruction is troubling because the Middle East holds concrete and rich heritage to develop more historically relevant narratives that would help challenge these prejudices and change mentalities: It is the rich, diverse and multidimensional contributions of people of African descent to Middle Easter societies, from the early time to the Golden Age of Islamic civilisation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to briefly mention some of these contributions that the classic Arab Muslim literature have documented:

* The influence of the famous Afro descent poets of pre-Islamic era such as ‘*Antar ibn Shaddad, Khufaf ibn Nadba, Sulayk ibn Al Sulaka* as well during of Islamic era such as ‘*Iraar ibn ‘Amar* and Abu Mihdjan
* The considerable role played by Africans in the life of the nascent Islamic politico-religious community during Prophet Mohamed's lifetime and after his death.
* The role of the military leaders of African descent such as Mikdad ibn “Amar al Aswad who fought on horseback during the battle of Badr and was given the name of “Faaris al Islam” (the Knight of Islam)
* The great musicians and musicologists who contributed to lay the foundations of Arab classical music such as Abu ‘Uthman Sa’id inb Misdjah who introduced Byzantine and Persian melodies in the singing of Arabic songs and was acclaimed as one of the four great singers of his time ( 8th century)
* And the last but not the least let me mention the number of researchers, thinkers and writers of African origin who greatly contributed to the development of Islamic sciences such as ‘Amr ibn Bahr al-Kinani, from Basra, widely known by his nickname Al-Djahiz due to an eye deformity, who a thousand year before Darwin elaborated the theory of the evolution of species in his pioneer book Kitab al-Hayawan or The Book of Animals, which covers various aspects of biology and zoology; such as animal classification, food chains and evolution

To conclude my presentation, I wish to highlight a particularity of the Middle Eastern societies, which is often ignored: it is le fact this region has been able in the past to overcome the dominant racial prejudices to welcome, appreciate and integrate the contributions of people of African descent. Comparatively, this was the case in the Western world where African and African diaspora’s contributions have been denied, erased or whitened. This legacy of openness and inclusiveness of Middle East societies constitutes therefore an asset to challenge the ignorance about this history and the current reluctance to debate about it.

This legacy can help transcend the usual arguments generally used to avoid addressing this complex heritage because of the fear of tarnishing the image of Islam or denigrating the golden age Arab Muslim civilisation.

The interactions between the Middle East and Africa are so ancient, so diverse and so intimate that they require a more holistic, objective, and rigorous approach to uncover the mutual influences that have given rise to an extraordinary common heritage. This scientific, cultural, artistic and spiritual heritage is part of the wealth of Middle Eastern societies. It could serve as a lever and catalyst to strengthen the so-called Afro-Arab solidarity, which has greatly suffered from the silence and misunderstanding about the slave trade and slavery in this region.

In this regard, decision makers, scholars and civil society activists in the Middle East should not let others write their history with slavery, with all the risks of bias that this may imply. They must encourage their own universities, research centres, museums, artists carry out the necessary historical introspections, cultural studies and popular dialogue in order to better understand the impact of this history on their societies.

To that end, the International Decade, which only two years left provides a golden opportunity to pay tribute to the victims of slavery and do justice to their significant contributions to the rich cultural heritage of Middle Eastern societies.

It is time to pass from the rhetoric of good will to concrete actions of good results, such as

* Launch affirmative action to raise the representation of people of African descent at the different levels of social and political life
* Adopt strong Laws and legislation to penalise acts of racism and discrimination
* Sensitise medias and producers of films, series and tv programmes about the prejudices the are reproducing about Africans and blacks
* Organise forums of discussion and exchanges to raise awareness about the presence and contribution of people of African descent to the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Middle East
* Encourage cultural programme and creative productions to promote the valuable inputs of citizens of African descent
* Change the content of education and curricula to educate young generations about the contribution of people of African descent

These are some of the actions to be taken to respond to the emergent situation in the Middle East regarding the conditions of Afro descendants.

Ali Moussa Iye