

Consider the Lillies of the Field: Gender, the Enslaved Body, and Recovering Life Narratives in Nineteenth-Century Sudan

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Abstract :

This paper examines the lived experiences of enslaved individuals in nineteenth-century Sudan through life narratives and archival testimonies that place the body at the centre of histories of enslavement. Taking its title from the biblical injunction to ‘consider the lilies of the field’ (Matthew 6:28–29), the paper explores the tensions between ideas of beauty, bodily adornment, suffering, and the violent marking of enslaved bodies. Focusing particularly on Josephine Bakhita and other lesser-known enslaved individuals, the paper asks what can be recovered from descriptions of scars, bodily modifications, clothing, gender, and physical appearance. Bakhita’s testimony is especially revealing: her account describes the permanent marking of her body through scarification, transforming the body into both a record of enslavement and a site through which her suffering was later interpreted within a religious and hagiographical narrative. The paper considers how such narratives reshaped experiences of violence into stories of sanctity, redemption, and Christian conversion. Rather than treating bodily descriptions as incidental details, I argue that they provide an important means of recovering the gendered experiences of enslavement. Scarification and other bodily modifications could carry social, cultural, aesthetic, and political meanings, while in the context of enslavement the body could also become a site of ownership, discipline, violence, and memory. Scholarship on scarification in Sudan demonstrates the complex social and aesthetic meanings attached to bodily marking, making it necessary to distinguish between culturally meaningful bodily practices and their appropriation, reinterpretation, or imposition within systems of enslavement. By reading these narratives both with and against the grain, the paper argues that the enslaved body can function as an archive: one through which gender, violence, identity, agency, and the contested remembrance of slavery can be recovered.