

Appendix B: Ibn al-Akfānī, *The Book of Observation and Inspection in the Examination of Slaves*

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The book of observation and inspection in the examination of slaves by Ibn al-Akfānī, may God cover him with His grace.

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In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. The humble servant, Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Sā'id al-Anṣārī, may God have mercy upon him, says to God Almighty, the One, the Creator: praise be to God whose praise is true, and His blessings upon our lord Muḥammad, whose character is excellent, and upon his family and his companions. This is a brief treatise about the examination of the slave and the consideration of his conditions. I produced it, obeying the order from its compliance enjoined on me because of the past of his beneficence towards me.

[Ibn al-Akfānī] said that it is necessary for the [slave] inspected to be of a kind of slave which [the buyer] does not need, since the hungry person finds all food delicious and the naked person finds all clothing excellent. Do not decide at first glance, since there is confusion [in that]. Do not be preoccupied by consideration of clothing or adornment, since it may perplex [you]. Do not consider the first report that you hear from his first master, or any criticism of his. Ask about the reason for his sale. Beware of buying one who rebels against beating and argument. Know that if the slave is tempted, he becomes covetous at once, and if he is restrained, he becomes subdued, and when he associates with a corrupt [person], he becomes corrupt.

Beware

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of the pregnancy of slave women, since they may hide it and bring forth blood which deceives.⁵⁷ Also beware of their cunning concerning pregnancy after taking possession [of them], since some of them may make themselves stubborn with hatred of pregnancy despite the desire for it. Do not be misled by the seller of his slave woman to take her away except during blood because of whatever pregnancies might befall her later on.⁵⁸

⁵⁷A pregnant slave woman might present the menstrual blood of another woman as her own in order to conceal her pregnancy.

⁵⁸The buyer should not take possession of a slave woman except during her menstrual period. This strategy ensured that she was not pregnant at the time of transfer and that any subsequent



Build, stature, and proportionality of the limbs are what the gaze proceeds to first in the slave. Then look at the color, since wanness inclining towards yellow shows weakness of the liver, if roughness or fullness or hardness on the left side under the ribs or a prevalence of yellow bile accompanies it. If paleness and the inclination towards dullness accompany [the wanness], it shows damage in the spleen, if roughness or fullness or hardness on the left side under the ribs or a prevalence of black bile accompany it, if lupus on the face accompanies it.⁵⁹ [The color] ivory shows lack of blood and of spirit, and the prevalence of phlegm, or weakness of the stomach,

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if leanness of the body accompanies it. Hardness or roughness of what is between the navel and the penis is black.⁶⁰ The best and most balanced of the colors is pure white tinged with red. That is concerning white. As for brown, [the best] is pure [brown] and lustrous pitch black. Then look at the freedom of the skin from vitiligo, leprosy, freckles,⁶¹ brands, scabies, warts, burns from fire, and traces of sores on the face and the body in general. Know that vitiligo and leprosy are made to vanish with *shītaraj* and vinegar;⁶² washing it with vinegar and Meccan potash reveals it.

Then look at the head and its roots, the chest and neck, since its size in relation to the thinness of the neck and the narrowness of the chest may be distorted. Look at its form, lest it be deformed, and [that] the hair be straight, not dyed, not broken, and not falling out; without alopecia and ophiasis, or scalp ringworm, or some of it white, or many gaps among its roots, or traces of sores or scabs like bran.

pregnancies would be the responsibility of the buyer and not the seller. Accurately determining the paternity of a slave woman's child was important because if the father was her master, the slave mother gained *umm walad* status and could not be sold. Thus if it were discovered that a slave woman had been sold while pregnant with the seller's child, the sale would become invalid. Another strategy recommended by jurists was for the buyer to observe a period of *istibrāʿ*, refraining from sexual intercourse with his newly purchased slave woman for one to three months in order to confirm that she was menstruating and not pregnant. Robert Brunschvig, "Abd," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 1:24–40.

⁵⁹ *Quṭrub* can be translated in a number of ways, but a facial rash is one of the distinctive symptoms of lupus.

⁶⁰ Black, i.e., bad.

⁶¹ Lentil-shaped spots of various colors on the skin.

⁶² *Shītaraj* is an herb.



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Then look at what waste an eye expels,⁶³ or [whether they are] protruding, or sunken, or their movement is agitated;

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and [whether] there is blueness in the pupil of one of them; or their white is cloudy, dry, inclined towards yellowness, or showing veins; or [whether] their eyelids are covering [them]. Rather they should be even of pupil, pure of white, almond-shaped, equal. Check their eyelids, lest they be rough, coarse, or drooping; or with dispersion in one of them; or turned inward; or with whiteness in one of them; or with a covering on them which extends over the larger corners of the eyes.⁶⁴ If moisture arises from it, there is a fistula. Examine their vision on small and distant things, and [examine] their condition in the sun.

Then look at the ear in strong light, lest they have an obstruction, a wart, excessive flesh, or an obstruction [sic]. Examine their hearing in a lowered voice and [in] the quickness of the answer.

Then look at the nose, thus, lest it have sores, polyps, excessive flesh, or an obstruction.⁶⁵ Examine its condition in perceiving weak scents, and [examine] the freedom of the voice from a nasal buzz.

Then look at the tongue, lest it be big or very small; or [lest there be] a piece which had gone from it with a bite in cracking.⁶⁶ Choose rather the proportionate measure, slim, pure red,

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quick in movement. Leprousness, yellowness, blackness, and coarseness are repugnant because their indications are of a distorted mixture in the stomach.

Then look at the teeth, concerning their completeness and their health; the whiteness of their color; and their freedom from cavities, wear, and pus.⁶⁷ Examine the color and the decay and what [teeth] were lost before, lest it change, since it reverts without what is after it.⁶⁸ Then check the gums, lest they be hot or decayed or wrinkled.

⁶³The paragraphs about the eyes and ears begin with singular forms (the eye, the ear) but quickly switch to dual forms (the two eyes, the two ears) in Arabic.

⁶⁴The inner corner of the eye next to the nose.

⁶⁵*Bawāsīr*, translated here as polyps, is more usually translated as hemorrhoids.

⁶⁶If slaves habitually used their teeth to crack nuts, for example, they might accidentally bite and injure their tongues in the process.

⁶⁷*Al-ḥafr* can be translated as cavities or as scurvy.

⁶⁸The buyer should check for color, decay, and missing teeth. If any of these qualities changed after sale, the seller might have used fraudulent means to conceal faults in the teeth. Once the fraud began to wear off, the teeth would revert to their actual state.



Look at the uvula, lest it be swollen or drooping. Then listen to its sound, lest it be hoarse or nasal. Then order him to exhale through his mouth in order to smell it, lest he be rotten or sharp of breath. [If] the reason for whatever change of odor there was is from the mouth, his recovery is expected. [If] whatever [change] there was is from the stomach, there is no recovery for him. Sniff the odor of the nose. Then consider the tonsils and the throat, lest there be scrofula or traces of it there. Then look at the chest, lest it be narrow or curved; or protruding from a heavy part; and nothing but meager of flesh. Then look at the shoulders, lest they be sloped or different in position.

Then look at the two hands, lest they have shortness or be different in measure. The elbows should not be curved, [they should] bend without twisting, and [with-out] swelling or spasms. If they have

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a thin, elongated swelling as if it were a worm, then it shows Medinan veins. Examine their strength with a firm grasp. Then check under the armpits.

