

The Arabs Were Black

The Case in Their Own Words

MASTERBUILDER91

Copyright © 2026 MasterBuilder91. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form without written permission from the author, except for brief quotations with attribution in reviews, articles and scholarly work. The classical Arabic texts quoted in this book are in the public domain; the translations, arrangement and commentary are the work of MasterBuilder91.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate.

Contents

Foreword

How to read this book

Part One: In Their Own Words

Chapter 1. What the Arabs called themselves

Chapter 2. The lexicographers testify

Chapter 3. The complexion ladder

Part Two: The Witnesses Speak

Chapter 4. Al-Jāhīz: the Arabs among the Black peoples of the earth

Chapter 5. Al-Nu'mān before Kisrā: who the Arabs insulted, and who they never did

Chapter 6. Features, not just color

Chapter 7. Living witnesses

Part Three: The Shift

Chapter 8. Lineage, not looks

Chapter 9. How the Arabs got lighter

Chapter 10. The weak reports, and why they exist

Part Four: The Case Closed

Chapter 11. Checkmate: answering every objection

Chapter 12. Refutation: "Black meant deep sumra" (IslamQA, answer 219388)

Chapter 13. The last word: al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah

Appendices

The witnesses: who they are and why their books count

Open questions

Bibliography

About the author

Foreword

This book is about integrity. Not mine. The integrity owed to the scholars of Islam, and to what they actually wrote.

For years, people have asked me to put this in one place: the texts, the definitions, the names, all of it, so they can stop arguing from memory and start arguing from the books. This is that book.

I have spent years reading the classical Arabic sources, and I keep running into the same thing in the modern world: people who do not say what the scholars said. They soften it, twist it, or quote half of a definition and leave the other half in the book. And when someone brings the full text forward, they answer an argument nobody made.

Who I am. I have studied the Arabic language for most of my life, in the classroom and on my own, and I hold an undergraduate degree in it. I read and translate classical texts every day, and I teach the language. That gives me the tools to read what the scholars of the past wrote, in their own words, without a middleman. And when a modern authority tells the public something those scholars never said, anyone who can read them has the right to ask why. That is all this book does: it sets the old words beside the new claims and asks the question out loud. Judge it by its evidence.

What this book does not claim. The favorite answer is: "The Arabs were not African." Agreed. This book never says they were. Appearance does not tell you where a people came from, and the whole world already knows it. The people of Fiji have tightly curled hair and dark skin. So do the Jarawa of the Andaman Islands. Nobody calls them African, their languages are not African, and no record brings them from Africa. Whatever theories exist about the deep past of such peoples, I am not proposing anything of the kind about the Arabs. My

claim is simpler: this is what the Arabs looked like, in their own peninsula, by their own description.

What the books say. The descriptions are in the pre-Islamic poetry and the early Islamic reports alike, because the people were the same people. How they described each other, which complexions they boasted of, which looks they mocked, which colors they gave to foreigners: it is all written down. This is not a theory. It is a matter of reading the books and reporting them honestly.

The great historian's answer. Even Jawād 'Alī, whose *al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tārīkh al-'Arab qabl al-Islām* is the standard modern history of the pre-Islamic Arabs, saw the darkness in the record. His explanation was African admixture: in *al-Mufaṣṣal* he attributes the blackness that appeared among the people of Yemen to the Abyssinian conquest. But follow that thought to its end. The Abyssinians ruled Yemen for a few decades. The dark Arabs of the sources are Quraysh in Mecca, the house of Hāshim, Banū Sulaym of the Hijāz, the poets of Najd: people the Abyssinians never ruled. And those Arabs did not apologize for their color. They boasted of it as the proof of pure Arab blood: a Hāshimī poet calling himself "green-skinned in the house of the Arabs," a lexicographer explaining that the Arabs described their own colors as black and the foreigners' as red. For the admixture theory to work, foreigners would have had to settle in Arabia, become Arabs, and then convince the Arabs that the foreigners' look was the very badge of Arabness. History offers no such moment. So I looked further, and the further I looked, the less the theory held.

What I have caught. Here is the part that should trouble every Muslim. I have watched modern writers report the old texts in ways the texts do not allow. A man the sources call black becomes "merely dark." A well-known fatwa site tells its readers that when the early Arabs called one of their own black, they meant ^{شَهْرَةُ}السَّمْرَةُ ^{فَحْسَبُ}الْغَامِقَةِ ("only a deep sumra"), which in their understanding of sumra means a deep tan, not black. As this book will show, that is not how the scholars understood sumra. It brings no lexicographer who

says so. That is not a reading of the Arabic language; it is an addition to it. Meanwhile there *is* evidence that when the Arabs said "white" of a person, they did not mean the literal color, and you will rarely hear that. When it is mentioned at all, the full definition is not quoted. In this book it is, every time.

What you are about to read. None of what follows is my opinion. All of it is in print, in Arabic, in books Muslims have trusted for a thousand years. In these pages you will meet:

- A ninth-century Arab writer who records that the Indians were *lighter* than the Arabs.
- The Arabs' own word for the half-breed, and the color it was named for: white.
- A lexicographer who ranks *asmar*, the word everyone translates as "tan," as the first degree of *black*.
- An Arab king who stood before the Persian emperor, mocked the looks of four nations to his face, and said nothing against the Africans.
- 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, described as black: شَدِيدُ الْأَدَمَةِ ("intensely ādam").
- The purest-blooded Qurashī of his age, a descendant of the Prophet ﷺ with not one foreign mother in his line, whom the caliph himself called "charcoal."
- And one of the most widely read fatwas on this subject, taken apart line by line against the very scholars it quotes.

Read it with the sources open. That is the point.

When we stop reporting things as they reached us, something has gone wrong. The scholars handed these words down with care. The least we can do is read them out loud.

Acknowledgments. I did not walk this road alone. First, the website alajamwalarab.com, which gathered many of these proofs from the sources. Then the work of Tariq Berry: his book *The Unknown Arabs*, his thorough videos, and the Save the True Arabs forum, where a great deal of this knowledge was exchanged and tested. Where this book stands on their findings, it has gone back to the sources and checked them. Any errors that remain are mine.

— MasterBuilder91

How to read this book

The classical Arabs described themselves as a black people, in their own words: in their lexicons, their ḥadīth commentary, their poetry and their prose. This is not a modern idea pressed onto old texts. It is what the texts say when they are read in Arabic.

The proof comes from every direction at once. Their scholars named their color. Their essayists counted them among the Black peoples of the earth. Their own historians described the purest-blooded man of Quraysh as tar-black. And the quieter evidence points the same way: an Arab king mocked the looks of four nations and spared the Africans, and a Companion took a Zanj man for one of his own until he failed to answer. Laid side by side, the conclusion does not need to be argued. It only needs to be shown.

Ground rules

1. **Their words first.** Every claim rests on an Arabic primary text, quoted with full tashkīl and translated.
2. **Their scale, not ours.** Arab complexion words describe positions inside a dark people, the way Black Americans speak of light-skinned, brown-skinned and dark-skinned. On that internal scale, أبيض ("white") was a wheat complexion and آدم ("dark brown") was the dark end. Neither maps onto the modern global binary.
3. **Report it as transmitted.** A report is cited through the person who carried it: "al-Qurṭubī transmits from Ka'b," "al-Jāḥiẓ records the Sūdān saying." No source is made to say more than it says.

4. **No genetics.** This is a case about how the Arabs saw, named and described themselves. That record is enough.

Not a modern theory

This is not a 21st-century idea, and it owes nothing to modern Afrocentrism. Every witness in this treatise is a classical Muslim scholar writing in Arabic, most of them more than a thousand years ago: al-Jāhīz (d. 255 AH), al-Mubarrad (d. 285), al-Ṭabarī (d. 310), al-Nimrī (4th century), Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463), Ibn al-Athīr (d. 606), al-Nawawī (d. 676), Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711), al-Dhahabī (d. 748). Al-Jāhīz wrote *Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā al-Bīdān* in Basra eleven centuries before anyone used the word "Afrocentric." The claim is theirs. This book only gathers it.

The key to the color words

Everything in this book rests on four words, and they are translated the same way every time they appear:

Arabic	Translation	What it is
أَسْمَرٌ / السَّمَرَةُ	brown, dark	The first step into darkness; how deep is decided by context, from plain brown to dark
أَدْمٌ / الأُدْمَةُ	dark brown, very brown	Udma: a brown so deep it resembles black
أَدَمٌ شَدِيدُ الأُدْمَةِ	black	Udma at its most intense; the same as أَسْوَدٌ
أَسْوَدٌ / أَدْلَمٌ	black / tall and black	Black, and the deepest black

The third line is the key, and it is not this author's invention. Ibn Sīdah defines black by it: **وَالسَّوَادُ شِدَّةُ الأُدْمَةِ** ("blackness is intense udma"). The scholars say it again and again:

- **Ibn al-Sikkīt**, *Kitāb al-Alfāẓ*: وَمِنْ الرِّجَالِ الْأَسْوَدُ، وَهُوَ الشَّدِيدُ الْأُدْمَةُ ("among men is the black, and he is the one intensely ādam").
- **Ibn Sīdah**, *al-Mukhaṣṣas*: وَالسَّوَادُ شِدَّةُ الْأُدْمَةِ، رَجُلٌ أَسْوَدُ ("blackness is intense udma: a black man").
- **Al-Qurṭubī**, *al-Mufhim*, explaining the plural اَسْحَمٌ: they are the black, plural of اَشْحَمٌ، وَهُوَ شَدِيدُ الْأُدْمَةِ ("and he is the one intensely ādam").
- **Al-Dhahabī**, *Siyar* (2/168), stating the Arabs' usage: وَكَذَا كُلُّ مَنْ غَلَبَ عَلَيْهِ السَّوَادُ، قَالُوا: أَسْوَدُ، أَوْ شَدِيدُ الْأُدْمَةِ ("and so with anyone in whom blackness predominates: they said black, or intensely ādam"), the two given as one and the same.

And the historians use the two for the same man. Ibn Kathīr describes ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘adah al-Fazārī as اَدَمٌ شَدِيدُ الْأُدْمَةِ ("intensely ādam") in one place, as اَسْوَدُ ("black") in *al-Bidāyah wa-l-Nihāyah*, and in his *Tafsīr* joins them in a single phrase: اَسْوَدُ شَدِيدُ الْأُدْمَةِ ("black, intensely ādam"). So when a source calls ‘Alī, Bilāl, Ibn Mas‘ūd or al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah شَدِيدُ الْأُدْمَةِ, this book translates it as what the lexicographers say it is: black.

The scale is fixed. Above it sit other words with other names, اَبْيَضُ ("white"), اَحْمَرُ ("red"), اَزْهَرُ ("radiant"), and they are treated in their own chapter. No word on this ladder slides up or down depending on whose face it describes.

Part One: In Their Own Words

Chapter 1. What the Arabs called themselves

The Arabs divided the world into two peoples, the red and the black, and they put themselves on the black side.

The red and the black

The Prophet ﷺ said:

وَبُعِثْتُ إِلَى كُلِّ أَحْمَرَ وَأَسْوَدَ

"And I was sent to every red one and every black one." (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)

The scholars explained who the black were. Ibn al-Athîr, in *Jāmi' al-Uṣūl*:

وَالْأَسْوَدُ الْعَرَبُ، لِأَنَّ الْغَالِبَ عَلَى أَلْوَانِهِمُ الْأُدْمَةُ

"The black are the Arabs, because the dominant color among them is udma."

Al-Ḥarîrî says the same in *Durrat al-Ghawwāṣ*, and spells out both sides:

وَالْعَرَبُ تَقُولُ فِيهِمَا: الْأَسْوَدُ وَالْأَحْمَرُ، تَعْنِي الْعَرَبَ وَالْعَجَمَ؛
لِأَنَّ الْغَالِبَ عَلَى أَلْوَانِ الْعَرَبِ الْأُدْمَةُ وَالسُّمْرَةُ، وَالْغَالِبَ عَلَى
أَلْوَانِ الْعَجَمِ الْبَيَاضُ وَالْحُمْرَةُ

"The Arabs say 'the black and the red,' meaning the Arabs and the non-Arabs, because the dominant colors of the Arabs are udma and sumra, and the dominant colors of the non-Arabs are whiteness and redness."

The language authorities give this as the meaning of the expression itself. Shamir, quoted in *Lisān al-'Arab*:

يَعْنِي الْعَرَبَ وَالْعَجَمَ، وَالْغَالِبُ عَلَى أَلْوَانِ الْعَرَبِ السُّمْرَةُ
وَالْأُدْمَةُ، وَعَلَى أَلْوَانِ الْعَجَمِ الْبَيَاضُ وَالْحُمْرَةُ

"He means the Arabs and the non-Arabs. The dominant colors of the Arabs are sumra and udma, and of the non-Arabs whiteness and redness."

Al-Nawawî, commenting on this ḥadīth in *Sharḥ Muslim*, lists this reading first:

قِيلَ: الْمُرَادُ بِالْأَحْمَرِ الْبَيْضُ مِنَ الْعَجَمِ وَغَيْرِهِمْ، وَبِالْأَسْوَدِ
الْعَرَبُ لِغَلْبَةِ السُّمْرَةِ فِيهِمْ، وَغَيْرُهُمْ مِنَ السُّودَانَ

"It was said: the red are the white people among the non-Arabs and others, and the black are the Arabs, because sumra dominates in them, and others of the Sūdān."

Read his wording closely: "the Arabs ... and *others* of the Sūdān." He counts the Arabs as one of the Black peoples. He also records two other readings (the Sūdān and everyone else; or humans and jinn) and accepts all three, since the Prophet ﷺ was sent to all of them. But the philologists explain the expression itself the first way.

What this means: "black" was the Arabs' own name for themselves as a people. "Red" was their name for the Persians, Romans and other light-skinned nations. Black meant black.

Udma: the color of the Arabs

Ibn 'Abd al-Barr states it in four words, in *al-Istidhḳār*:

الأُدْمَةُ لَوْنُ الْعَرَبِ

"Udma is the color of the Arabs."

Not a color some Arabs had. *The* color of the Arabs. The next section shows what the lexicographers say udma is.

Akhḍar: the dark skin of the true Arab

The Arabs also called black أَخْضَرُ ("green," i.e. dusky). Ibn Manẓūr records it plainly: وَيُقَالُ لِلْأَسْوَدِ أَخْضَرُ ("the black man is called akhḍar"). And an Arab of Quraysh, al-Faḍl ibn al-'Abbās al-Lahabī, boasted of it as proof of pure lineage:

وَأَنَا الْأَخْضَرُ مَنْ يَعْرِفُنِي ... أَخْضَرُ الْجِلْدَةِ فِي بَيْتِ الْعَرَبِ

"I am the dark one, for whoever knows me: dark of skin, from the house of the Arabs."

What "green" meant here. Some will try to play with this word, citing the definition of أَخْضَرُ ("green") as any color that is neither black nor white. The

scholars who explained this very verse close that door. Al-Azharī, in *Tahdhīb al-Lughā*, as quoted in *Lisān al-'Arab* (root ر ض خ):

فِي هَذَا الْبَيْتِ قَوْلَانِ: أَحَدُهُمَا أَنَّهُ أَرَادَ أَسْوَدَ الْجِلْدَةِ، قَالَ أَبُو
طَالِبٍ النَّحْوِيُّ. وَقِيلَ: أَرَادَ أَنَّهُ مِنْ خَالِصِ الْعَرَبِ وَصَمِيمِهِمْ،
لَأَنَّ الْغَالِبَ عَلَى أَلْوَانِ الْعَرَبِ الْأُذْمَةُ

"There are two views on this verse. One is that he meant black-skinned; Abū Tālib the grammarian said so. And it was said: he meant that he is of the pure Arabs and their core, because the dominant color of the Arabs is udma."

And Ibn Barī joins the two views into one:

وَأَرَادَ بِالْخَضَرَةِ سُمَرَةً لَوْنَهُ، وَإِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ بِذَلِكَ خُلُوصَ نَسَبِهِ وَأَنَّهُ
عَرَبِيٌّ مَحْضٌ، لَأَنَّ الْعَرَبَ تَصِفُ أَلْوَانَهَا بِالسَّوَادِ، وَتَصِفُ
أَلْوَانَ الْعَجَمِ بِالْحُمْرَةِ

"By greenness he meant the darkness of his color, and by that he meant the purity of his lineage, that he is a pure Arab, because the Arabs describe their own colors as black and the colors of the non-Arabs as red."

Notice that the two views are not really two. One says "black-skinned." The other says "pure Arab, because the Arab color is udma." Both land in the same place: the poet's dark skin was the visible proof that he was an Arab with nothing foreign mixed in. Whether that darkness was udma or full black, no

one looking at him would ask what he was mixed with. His color answered the question. That is what "green-skinned in the house of the Arabs" means.

And remember what "white" meant to these same people. Al-Dhahabī tells us that when the Arabs called a man white, they meant wheat-colored with a black appearance. If even the Arab "white" was wheat-brown, the Arab "green" sat on the dark side of it, and could reach all the way to black.

The Khudr of Quraysh. The same word names whole clans. A verse attributed to Ḥassān ibn Thābit sets the house of Hāshim beside a branch of Quraysh known by its color:

وَلَسْتَ مِنْ بَنِي هَاشِمٍ فِي بَيْتٍ مَكْرَمَةٍ ... وَلَا بَنِي جُمَحٍ الْخَضِرِ
الْجَلَّاعِدِ

"You are not of Banū Hāshim, in the house of honor, nor of Banū Jumah, the green, the hardy."

The Khudr of Banū Jumah are Qurashīs of Mecca, named "the green" for their dark skin, and the poet lists them as a mark of noble Arab stock beside the house of the Prophet ﷺ. Al-Jāhiz, who preserves the verse in *Fakhr al-Sūdān* ("Ḥassān or someone else said it"), gathers it with other Arab clans of the same name: the Khudr of Muḥārib, who boasted that they were black; the Khudr of Banū Makhzūm; and the kings of Ghassān. And he states the rule plainly:

وَقَدْ فَخَرْتُ خَضِرُ مُحَارِبٍ بِأَنَّهَا سُودٌ، وَالسُّودُ عِنْدَ الْعَرَبِ
الْخَضِرُ

"The Khudr of Muḥārib boasted that they were black; and to the Arabs, the black are the green."

What this means: "green" was not a vague in-between shade. It was the Arabs' own name for black skin, worn by whole noble clans of Quraysh and the tribes, and carried as a badge of pure Arab blood.

‘Umar’s house and the uncles of Jumah. The Khuḍr of Banū Jumah lead straight into the house of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. ‘Umar’s wife Zaynab bint Maẓ‘ūn, mother of ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Umar and of Ḥaḥṣah the Mother of the Believers, was of Banū Jumah, the sister of the Companion ‘Uthmān ibn Maẓ‘ūn. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, in *al-Istī‘āb*, records from al-Wāqidi that ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Umar said:

إِنَّمَا جَاءَنَا الْأُدْمَةُ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَخَوَالِي بَنِي مَظْعُونٍ، وَكَانَ أَيْضَ

"Our udma came to us only from my maternal uncles, Banū Maẓ‘ūn; and he was white."

Read the whole sentence. In this report Ibn ‘Umar describes his father as white and explains his own udma, and his siblings', by their mother's side. People who meet the line assume "maternal uncles" must mean Abyssinians. It does not. His maternal uncles were Banū Maẓ‘ūn of Jumah: Qurashis of Mecca, the very clan the poet called ^{الْخَضِرُ} *الخضر*, "the green." Even on this report, the dark color came into ‘Umar's house from one branch of Quraysh to another.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr himself does not accept this chain: وَعَاصِمُ بْنُ عُبَيْدٍ اللَّهِ لَا

يُحْتَجُّ بِحَدِيثِهِ وَلَا بِحَدِيثِ الْوَاقِدِيِّ ("Aṣim ibn ‘Ubaydillāh is not taken as proof, nor is al-Wāqidi"). So it is set down here for what it shows, not as proof. Against it he sets the report of the Successor Zirr ibn Ḥubaysh, who saw ‘Umar with his own eyes: رَأَيْتُ عُمَرَ شَدِيدَ الْأُدْمَةِ ("I saw ‘Umar, and he was black"; literally, intensely ādam). And he states which description the historians follow:

هَكَذَا ذَكَرَهُ زُرُّ بْنُ حُبَيْشٍ وَغَيْرُهُ، بِأَنَّهُ كَانَ آدَمَ شَدِيدِ
الْأُدْمَةِ، وَهُوَ الْأَكْثَرُ عِنْدَ أَهْلِ الْعِلْمِ بِأَيَّامِ النَّاسِ وَسِيرِهِمْ
وَأَخْبَارِهِمْ

"This is how Zirr ibn Ḥubaysh and others described him: that he was intensely ādam. And that is what most of those who know the people's history, lives and reports hold." (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī'āb*)

The second caliph of Islam, by an eyewitness and by the majority of the historians, was black by the scale of this book.

In fairness: the other reports. 'Umar's color is described differently in the sources, and honesty requires saying so. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr himself records Abū Rajā' al-'Uṭāridī: كَانَ عُمَرُ بْنُ الْخَطَّابِ طَوِيلًا جَسِيمًا أَصْلَعَ شَدِيدَ الصَّلَعِ، ("Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was tall and large, bald, very bald, white, with very red eyes"), and Ibn Ḥajar, in *al-Iṣābah*, gives Abū Rajā's description with a sound chain as أَشْعَرَ شَدِيدَ الْحُمْرَةِ ("hairy, very red"). Of the Prophet ﷺ the sources say مَشْرَبٌ بِحُمْرَةِ، "infused with redness," the red inside the complexion. And the red the Arabs saw in a complexion was the red of the earth: the Prophet ﷺ himself was called الْأَمْعَرُ ("the red-ochre one"), from مَغْرَةٌ ("red ochre"), as Chapter 3 shows. A wheat-colored skin with an ochre-red cast over it is the opposite of what a modern reader pictures when he reads "white with redness." Neither describes أَمَقٌ ("gypsum-white"), the color the lexicons define as كَلَوْنِ الْجِصِّ ("like the color of gypsum"), and the two

must never be confused: the Arabs did not call gypsum-colored skin ^{أبيض} ("white") at all. That shade is not rare. Set a piece of gypsum beside many people across Europe and the Middle East today and it matches them, or is darker. They called it red. Their "white" was the wheat complexion this book has already defined.

Al-Wāqidī claimed that 'Umar's color changed to ādam in the Year of Ashes, from eating oil during the famine. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr rejected it in plain words: ^{وَزَعَمَ الْوَأَقْدِيُّ أَنَّ سُمْرَةَ عُمَرَ وَأُدْمَتَهُ إِثْمًا جَاءَتْ مِنْ أَكْلِهِ الزَّيْتَ عَامَ الرَّمَادَةِ} ... ("al-Wāqidī claimed that 'Umar's sumra and udma came only from his eating oil in the Year of Ashes ... and this is a rejected statement"). He held instead to Zirr's eyewitness account, ^{شَدِيدُ الْأُدْمَةِ} ("black"), as the description most of the historians follow. This book follows his judgment, and lets 'Umar stand as one witness among many. Nothing in its case depends on him.

One narration does call 'Umar ^{أَمْبَقُ} ("gypsum-white"), and some have built on that single word the claim that he was an albino. Test it against the poetry. 'Umar had enemies, and the Arabs' satirists spared no one: they mocked noses, legs, bellies, baldness and color, and they mocked them by name. A man as prominent as 'Umar with skin that strange would have been a gift to every poet who attacked him and the religion he championed. I have found no such verse. When one isolated word stands against an eyewitness and against the silence of the satirists, the word gives way.

What this means: a man of the Prophet's own clan held up dark skin as the badge of being a true Arab.

End of the free sample

Chapters 2 to 13, the appendices and the bibliography
continue in the full edition.

Get the ebook, audiobook and translations at
the MasterBuilder91 Books store.

TikTok: @masterbuilder91