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BARREN SEEDS IN A BLEAK LAND: AFRICAN MUSLIMS IN COLONIAL AND ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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Muslims did not arrive to the New World by choice or by accident. Caught in local, and regional, political, religious and social confrontations, aggravated by the Atlantic slave trade\(^1\), racism and greed, they were thrown into a world where only their muscle power and agricultural skills were valued. They came from largely Islamized areas situated between present-day Chad, Senegal and Northern Nigeria\(^2\). According to Allan Austin\(^3\) at least ten percent of the total slave population in America may have been Muslim during the colonial period. During the post-Colonial period the percentage of Muslims was much higher because many slavers had began to specialize in ‘Gambians’ for the American market\(^4\). Austin conservatively estimates that «there may have been about forty thousand African Muslims in the colonial and pre-Civil War territory making up the United States before 1860.»\(^5\). Since planters had a predilection for Senegambians\(^6\) because of their prized agricultural skills, the percentage of slaves from Muslim areas in the rice and indigo producing areas of the American south often came close to 30

(4) Ibid., p. 35.
percent\(^{(7)}\). Furthermore, on a plantation, where there may have been as many as twelve ethnic groups, the Muslims sometimes represented the largest single group who shared a religion, a language, a writing system, and a set of values that transcended ethnic, regional or caste differences\(^{(8)}\).

The role of this sizable population and its legacy have been largely ignored by historians, and of the tens of thousands of African Muslims who lived in America during the colonial and antebellum periods, less than a hundred have been identified so far. In the majority of cases Muslim slaves were like barren seeds sown in a hostile environment, their «barrenness» should not prevent us from attempting to reconstruct the history of these pioneers. We have to operate in the murky waters of historical neglect and deliberate attempts to wipe out the African heritage, including its Muslim component, in America. Fortunately, we know enough about a handful of African Muslim slaves to piece together a composite portrait of this community.

This sizable population whose presence and achievements remain largely under-investigated had an influence greater than its number would suggest as it included many literate individuals who often worked in the households of wealthy and influential individuals such as Thomas Jefferson or held important positions on the plantations. Yet despite their importance Muslim slaves remained out of sight except for a handful who attracted the attention of abolitionists, colonizationists, clergymen, ethnographers, journalists, linguists, novelists, historians, painters, photographers, or statesmen including a Secretary of State and a President. By 1867, biographies of Ayyub, Abd-ar-Rahman and Omar, and autobiographies by Abd-ar-Rahman and Omar, Salih Bilali, Mahomah Baquaqua, and Mohammed Ali Ben Said had already been published in America. By that year manuscripts composed in America by Ayyub, Abd-ar-Rahman, Omar, Bilali, as well as portraits of Yarrow Mahmood, Ayyub, Abd-ar-Rahman, Omar and Baquaqua were known to a few ethnologists and African colonizationists.

We can therefore only wonder why, despite numerous references to African Muslims in the 1830s and 1840s\(^{(9)}\), information about Muslims almost disappeared from American writings between the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century. We wonder why even prominent

\(^{(8)}\) Ibid., p. 72.
antebellum African Americans such as abolitionists Henry Highland Garnet and Martin R. Delany, who prided themselves on having Mandingo grandparents, failed to acknowledge the Islamic faith of their ancestors. It is also surprising that authors such as Washington Irving, who was fascinated by the Islamic heritage in Andalusia, failed to write a single line on African Muslims in America. It is also surprising that Herman Melville failed to admit that even the rebels in «Benito Cereno» (1856) were Muslims, although he quoted his historical source which identified them as «believers in Allah.». In opposition to their northern counterparts, Southern authors such as Mark Twain, Joe Chandler Harris and George Washington cable acknowledged the presence of African Muslims, but misrepresented them as Arabs or cannibals. We can only wonder why scholars, and other students of American life, have ignored such an influential group that included literate and talented individuals and who left significant linguistic, social, religious and cultural markers in America, played an important role of social differentiation and the emergence of an African American identity, and used Islam and literacy to challenge their masters’ claims to superiority and to promote a form of cultural and social resistance to slavery.

The end of this conspiracy of silence and misrepresentation began when Philip Curtain and others began to document the existence of Muslims among African slaves in America. But it was Allan D. Austin who first provided an exhaustive account of those Muslim slaves who came to the attention of their contemporaries between 1730 and 1860 and who left manuscripts in Arabic or in English, and whose life stories inspired writers such as Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain, who «used» Ben Ali and Abd ar-Rahman in their fiction, or served as basis for published autobiographies.

Of the tens of thousands of African Muslim slaves who lived in colonial and antebellum America, less than a hundred have been rescued from oblivion so far. They stand today as eloquent witnesses of a fairly rich and diversified Muslim history in North America and their narratives and traditions bear witness of the importance of their community. Thanks to them even the anonymity, which shrouded the lives of African Muslim slaves, is beginning to

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speak of their heritage. Like the baobabs which survived the relentless
desertification of the African Sahel and still point to the Sahara’s green and lush
past, these Muslim pioneers are beginning to speak of the role they played in
the shaping of African American identity. They testify for themselves and for
an undetermined number of African Muslims whose memory is lost to us just
like the «exceptional» baobabs of today that speak of the distant past of a green
and lush African Sahel. The few Muslim slaves who caught the attention of the
establishment were often considered as exceptional individuals when, in fact,
they were neither odd exceptions nor isolated individuals, but representatives
of a wider community of Africans enslaved in America.

These slaves came as Muslims, lived as Muslims and used Islam as a
tool for social mobility within the structure of slavery. They arrived with an
Islamic culture and a tradition of Arabic literacy, which they struggled to
preserve, and which became the basis of their disproportionate influence in
slave communities, and in some cases, their key to freedom. Contrary to
commonly held beliefs, the condition of chattel slavery did not stamp out
their Islamic faith, a faith for which they had fought and for which they had
been enslaved in Africa after their defeat in wars opposing them to their
animist foes. Slavery on the other hand prevented the adequate transmission
of Islamic beliefs to succeeding generations.

Islamic presence in colonial and antebellum America perdured mainly
because it was sustained and renewed by fresh supplies of Muslim slaves
from West Africa. Upholding their Islamic faith in a hostile environment was
not easy, but many took advantage of the reluctance of many slave owners to
force conversion on their slaves—an attitude that lasted until the Great
Awakening at the end of the eighteenth century. This attitude gave way to a
policy of containment of African religions, including Islam, and of
conversion, as «most slaveholders had to suppress manifestations of non-
Christian religious practices that might be used to unite or direct their
slaves» (15). Security considerations were very important in the slave holding
South because of the very high percentages of slaves in the majority of
Southern states, ranging between 57 and 25 percent in 10 slave states (16).

(14) Gomez argues that «Islam’s most lasting and ... most salient impact was its role in the
process of social stratification within the larger African American society.» see his
Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial
(15) Ibid., p. 5.
(16) Observe the percentage of slaves in 1860: South Carolina, 57 percent; Mississippi, 55
percent; Louisiana, 47 percent; Alabama and Florida, 45 percent; Georgia 44 percent,
North Carolina, 33 percent; Virginia, 31 percent; Arkansas, 26 percent and Tennessee, 25
percent. See Gomez, Exchanging our Country Marks, op. cit., p. 27.
Although most African Muslim slaves did not live in communities with large concentrations of Muslims, the majority of African-born Muslim slaves managed to uphold their faith throughout most of their lives\(^{(17)}\), but was seldom able to transmit it to all their children, who usually raised non-Muslim children. Although they were not able to ensure the transmission of their faith, African Muslims continued to lead Muslim lives, practicing most of its rituals, transmitting Muslim names to their children, and trying, as best they could, to preserve their Arabic literacy\(^{(18)}\).

Evidence of this struggle to preserve their identity and to lead Muslim lives can be seen in their efforts to retain their traditional dress and to keep and transmit Muslim names. Ben Ali wore a Turkish fez in the late eighteen fifties; Omar ibn Said is shown wearing a skullcap while Job Ben Solomon's portrait shows him wearing a white turban and a booboo dress. They treasured Muslim names by using them among themselves, and giving them to their children\(^{(19)}\).

However, if African-born slaves managed to preserve their faith, their children had barely enough Islamic vigor to last for one generation. These barren seeds produced only weak seedlings, which could not grow to «Islamic» maturity in the bleak and desolate wasteland America proved to be for Islam.

**Yarrow Mahmood (1686?-1824?)**

Yarrow managed to keep his African name, his Muslim dress, and lived to the old age of 136, and after his manumission by his Maryland masters lived alone in a small house, he owned, where after almost a century in slavery he still practiced Islam. Two of his portraits are still on public display today. The first portrait, which was painted by Charles W. Peal in December 1819, when Yarrow was 100 years old is still on view at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, while a second portrait completed by James Simpson in 1828 is on display in the Peabody Room, at the Georgetown Public Library, Washington DC.


\(^{(18)}\) See Gomez, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-79.

AYYUB IBN SULAYMAN (1702-1773)

Also known as Job ben Solomon, Ayyub escaped from slavery while relatively young, and gained international fame. His life story was first published in 1734. Written by Thomas Bluett, his biography was designed to introduce him to his benefactor, the Duke of Montague, and to provide information about Africa. His life was also the subject of Grant’s *The Fortunate Slave*. Defeated in battle, Ayyub was enslaved and sold in Gambia in 1730. Once in America he ran away from his master only to be caught and jailed in Maryland. His literacy skills attracted the attention of James Oglethorpe, who upon reading his letter, redeemed him and had him shipped to England with his biographer Thomas Bluett in April 1733. In England, he was introduced to the Royal Family, and as a farewell gift, was given presents valued at £500 and sent back to Gambia to promote British trade in the area.

BEN ALI MUHAMMAD (1760-1859)

Ben Ali Muhammad did not take advantage of his literacy in Arabic to write his autobiography, instead he copied sections from a religious treatise in Arabic, and used an unidentified African dialect, written in Arabic characters, to shroud half of his text in a mystery from which it has yet to

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(21) The manuscript of his letter to James Oglethorpe is available in the British Library.
emerge. In 1859 he gave his manuscript to a popular writer of stories for children, reverend Francis R. Goulding, whose heirs gave it to the Georgia State Library in 1930.

He was born in Timbo, Futa Jallon, in present-day Guinea and was enslaved and sent to the Bahamas around 1800 when Thomas Spalding brought him to Sapelo Island, Georgia where he quickly became the manager of a plantation of close to 500 slaves, whose records he kept in Arabic. He ruled over a large family of twelve sons, about whom nothing is known, and seven daughters to whom he "passed on African names, terms and tradition that were clearly Muslims" and led a community of Muslim slaves, which depended on him for protection, Islamic instruction and leadership. He and one of his wives, Phoebe, brought with him from the Bahamas prayed regularly and observed the fast and feast day celebrations. Upon his death was buried with his Qur’an and prayer rug.

Ben Ali Muhammad certainly meant to perpetuate Islam and Islamic scholarship when he wrote from memory in the 1840s a religious manual in Arabic for this community, a manuscript long believed to be a diary, which

(23) Austin, African Muslims, op. cit.
(24) Sylviane Diouf suggests that the possession of copies of the Qur’an by a number of Muslim slaves indicates that they regularly communicated with West African Muslims through secret networks.
proved to be a religious text on Islamic doctrine, based partly on Matn al-
Rissalah by Ibn Abi-Zayd al Qayrawani (d.1018).25:

IBRAHIM ABD AR-RAHMAN (1762-1829)

Born in Futa Jallon, in present-day Guinea, Abd ar-Rahman was taken
to Santo Domingo, in the West Indies, from which he was shipped to Spanish
New Orleans and then to Natchez, some 300 miles up the Mississippi river
where he became a plantation manager. After forty years in slavery, he was
still a dignified man who was proud of his literacy, and who cut an honorable
picture during his meetings with President John Quincy Adams, Secretary of
State Henry Clay, US Congressman Edward Everett, and many
philanthropists. Abd ar-Rahman was the subject of a series of articles in
antebellum southern newspapers, and he himself left at least thirty
manuscripts, of which thirteen have been rediscovered so far.26 His
popularity made Henry Inman draw a portrait of him, which is currently
displayed in the Library of Congress.

In 1794 he was ‘married’ to an American born Baptist with whom he
had five sons and three daughters. Abd ar-Rahman came to public attention
when he wrote a letter in Arabic to a local newspaper editor who sent it to
Captain John Mullowny, the American Consul General in Tangier,
Morocco.27 The idea was to secure the manumission of this «Moroccan»
prince and return him to the Emperor of Morocco, with whom a treaty of
Peace and Friendship, signed in 1786, was coming up for renegotiation. On
February 22, 1826, Prince, as Abd ar-Rahman was known in Natchez, was
freed by his master, and the Natchez community where he was highly
esteemed, subscribed funds for the purchase of his wife. After forty years in
slavery spent on the Mississippi frontier, dressed in an «Arabian costume,»
he sailed to Cincinnati at government expense. He reached Cincinnati on
April 19, 1828 from where he embarked on a tour of the Northeast and visited

(25) This manuscript raises a number of questions, the least of which concerns the way Ben
Ali got hold of sheets of paper produced in Italy for sale in the North African market. One
can only conjecture that he got them through a sophisticated underground
communications network probably involving African seamen, which Africans on both
sides of the Atlantic; a network, which probably depended on Sufi brotherhood solidarity.
The second question concerns the second half of the manuscript where the Arabic script
is used to write a text in an unidentified African dialect. Interestingly, Ben Ali gave his
manuscript to his master for safekeeping, making him the unwitting witness of the
resilience of a religious tradition slavery could not eradicate. He might have relished the
irony of preserving his defiant Islamic memory for posterity in the very heart of the slave
institution.
(27) Ibid., p. 149.

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Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Haven, Hartford, Springfield, Worcester, Boston, West Bedford, Providence and other small towns where he was hosted by the different chapters of the American Colonization Society which organized meetings to drum up support for the repatriation of free blacks to Africa. In the Northeast Abd ar-Rahman collected $3,400, which was to help redeem his children left behind in Natchez. He sailed for Liberia on February 7, 1829. After he reached Liberia, he managed to free eight of his descendants, but he died within five months of his arrival in Africa. Terry Alford wrote a well researched biography of Abd ar-Rahman which sheds enough light on African Muslim slaves and their ability to withstand the pressures of slavery thanks to their commitment to a religion which, they felt, put them on higher grounds than their masters. In 1826 he was provided with an Arabic Bible in an attempt to convert him to Christianity, but he showed no signs of giving up his religion, as is clear from his manuscripts. Islam made it possible for them to resist bondage and to acknowledge only the mastery of Allah over their destinies.

SALIH BILALI (1765-1848?)

Owned by John Couper who thought highly of him, Salih Bilali single-handedly directed his master’s plantation, from 1816 to 1846 during the long absences of his master. Speaking of him, Couper wrote one of his friends that

(28) The American Colonization Society was founded in 1816 to repatriate free African Americans to West Africa.
His industry, intelligence, and honesty so011 brought him into notice, and he was successively advanced, until he was made head driver of this plantation, in 1816. He has continued in that station ever since, having under him a gang of about four hundred and fifty Negroes, which number, he has shown himself fully competent to manage wit advantage. I have several times left him for months, in charge of the plantation, without an overseer; and on each occasion, he has conducted the place to my entire satisfaction. ... he possesses great veracity and honesty. He is a strict Mahometan; abstains from spirituous liquors, and keeps the various fasts, particularly that of the Rhamadan. ... He reads Arabic, and has a Koran (which however, I have not seen) in that language, but does not write it(29).

John Couper indicates that Bilali was an able manager who was literate in Arabic, owned a Qur’an and fasted regularly. Salih Bilali must have received some additional Islamic and Arabic instruction from Ben Ali Muhammad, who lived in a neighboring Sapelo Islands plantation, who certainly taught other Muslim slaves along with him(30). Salih Bilali was born in a wealthy family around 1765 in Kinah, along the river Niger, southwest of Timbuktu. He was attending a Qur’anic school when he was kidnapped at the age of twelve and shipped to the Bahamas, where he spent almost ten years in slavery before he was purchased by John Couper in 1800. He became head driver in 1816, a position he held until his death in the late 1840s, and died a Muslim, pronouncing the Shahadah on his deathbed, as attested by his first master’s son(31). Salih’s life story points to the existence of Islamic solidarity networks which provided support, Arabic and religious instruction, and in general nurtured Islamic ideals among the community of Muslim slaves. Salih was wrenched from his African home at a young age when his proficiency in Arabic, a foreign language for him, must not have been high enough to allow him to read the Qur’an. This leads us to believe, in agreement with Austin, that he must have benefited from the services of discreet Islamic tutors, in the Bahamas and in Georgia, who certainly


provided similar instruction to other slaves who will probably remain anonymous forever.

Couper's slaves in Sapelo were used as «serfs,» working for their master, and for themselves on their own plots of land. They lived in mud-plastered huts grouped in villages headed by headmen, which gave them an opportunity to preserve and to transmit their faith and traditions to their descendants.\(^{32}\)

**OMAR IBN SAID (1770-1864)**

Omar is undoubtedly the most famous and the most ambiguous Muslim slave in American history. His life story was often in print between 1819 and the late 1960s.\(^{33}\) Fourteen of his manuscripts in Arabic, a daguerreotype portrait of him showing a middle-aged man wearing a skullcap, have been preserved. Recently, both of his «biographies» thought to have been lost in 1925, as well as his grave have been rediscovered. Newspaper articles about him started in 1825 and lasted well into the twentieth century, and Joel Chandler Harris, portrayed him as an Arabian with straight hair and delicate features, and romanticized his life in *The Story of Aaron*.

Born in Futa Toro, on the south bank of the Senegal River, in a wealthy family, he was a scholar, trader and teacher. He was probably 37 years old when he was captured in Kebe, south of his homeland, and taken to Charleston in 1807. He ran away from his brutal second master but was caught and jailed in Fayetteville, North Carolina. His Arabic writing on the prison walls attracted the attention of James Owen, who decided to buy him from his master. He probably thought that men of value must know and respect Arabic, and that his literacy would make them recognize him and appreciate him as a man of value, and come to his aid. He impressed his new master and his distinguished visitors by his mastery of the Arabic language, and reassured them by writing what he called the Lord’s Prayer and the 23rd psalm. Omar, who had been offered a Qur’an in English, a language he didn’t master, and a version of the Bible in Arabic was under severe missionary

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\(^{34}\) Two decades ago, African American Muslims built a mosque in Fayetteville, North Carolina, which they named the Omar ibn Sayyid Masjid, in memory of this famous Muslim slave.
pressure, but he clung to his Islamic faith, as can be ascertained from his extant Arabic manuscripts. Like Yarrow Mahmood before him, he neither married nor started a family in America.

Omar’s manuscripts are written in a very fluid hand, which points to high linguistic competence, and advanced training in the Islamic sciences well beyond those attained by Ben Ali. He corresponded with Lamine Kebe, the third scholar of the group, in 1835.

Omar’s autobiography was first translated by Alexander I. Cotheal, treasurer of the American Ethnological Society in 1848, and published under the title of «The autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina, 1831» in the American Historical Review in 1925. Over one third of Omar’s autobiography consists in an introductory section devoted to the glorification of Allah written in a conventional style used by Muslim scholars. The rest reads like a traditional sirah, dealing mainly with his religious training, and providing a brief account of how he came into the hands of his present master.

Omar left fourteen manuscripts written between 1819 and 1857, but his complete works have yet to be collected. Unlike Abd ar-Rahman who wrote the opening surah of the Qur’an, the Fatiha, claiming it was the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic, Omar often wrote the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic to convince his benefactors that he was on his way to conversion to Christianity, but all his extant Arabic manuscripts consistently use Qur’anic verses and du’a, and even his copies the Lord’s Prayer are preceded with Islamic formulae and Qur’anic verses. Written in 1857, a few years before his death in 1864, his latest manuscript, authored at the age of 87, represents surah al-Nasr (Victory), the last surah to be revealed to Prophet Muhammad a few months before he passed away, which speaks volumes of his commitment to his faith:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. (1) When there comes the help of Allah and the victory, (2) And you see men entering the religion of Allah in companies, (3) Then celebrate the praise of your Lord, and ask His forgiveness; surely He is oft-returning (to mercy).

LAMINE KEBE (1780-left 1835)

Lamine Kebe told his life story made to Theodore Dwight, Jr., a magazine editor and the first secretary of the American Ethnological Society,

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who like other biographers of Muslim slaves before him, showed little
interest in his subject's life in America, and concentrated on his potential
usefulness as a Christian missionary in West Africa.

Born in a clerical family, member of the powerful Qadiriyya
brotherhood, in Futa Jallon around 1780, and captured in his early twenties,
Lamine Kebe reached the United States in 1807. When he was captured he
was a mature scholar who had studied tafsir, hadith, theology, philology, law,
and was a well-established teacher and father of three children. His
autobiography is full of information about Qur'anic school pedagogy, which
he compared to what he knew of American pedagogy. His comments on this
subject indicate that despite his lowly status as a slave, he considered Islamic
school pedagogy and curriculum in use in Africa superior to what he knew of
American pedagogy and curricula. After nearly thirty years in slavery in three
southern states, and after his manumission in 1834 based on his conditional
return to Africa, he spent a year in New York with the American Colonization
Society waiting for a ship to Liberia, and finally sailed to Liberia and Sierra
Leone in 1835.(38)

MAHOMMAH G. BAQUAQUA (1830- LEFT 1857)

Born in the trading center of Djougou in the interior of the Bight of
Benin, he was taken to Brazil c.1845 and Haiti before he ended up in New
York harbor where he was rescued and freed. He collaborated with Samuel
Moore on a sixty-seven page autobiography that was published in Detroit
in 1854 where he recalls his days in Central College in McGrawville in
upstate New York and his confused attempts to preserve his Muslim
identity.(39)

MOHAMMED ALI BEN SAID (1833-1882)

Kidnapped in Northern Nigeria, Ben Said eventually ended up in the
United States by way of Russia and Europe where he became a schoolteacher
in Detroit around 1860 and joined the Union Army in 1862. He was
discharged in the fall of 1865 in South Carolina where he married, and
disappeared from view. He died in Brownsville, TN on August 6, 1882. He
wrote the only known autobiography of an African born soldier in the US
army in English, which was published in the Atlantic Monthly in October

(39) Paul E. Lovejoy, «Mirage of Ethnicity: Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua of Djougou and the
Experience of the African Diaspora in the Americas» Paper presented at the conference
«Liberté, identité, intégration et servitude dans le monde musulman» held at Al-
Akhawayn University, Morocco, June 28-31, 2000.
1867, and was «uncovered» only in the 1980s. while his portrait was uncovered in 1994. He did not claim total adherence to Islam.

CONCLUSION

Anonymity was the lot of all the lower classes in antebellum America, and the majority of slaves remained anonymous and voiceless, except for the very few who left narratives, which were often the result of chance meetings between them and an interested auditor who published them and thus brought their story to public attention. These narratives were often drafted by interested persons, who acted as ghostwriters, with no interest in the narrator’s own preoccupations. These ghostwriters used their subject’s life story to raise money for African colonization, spread Christianity, and promote commerce or increase their knowledge of Africa and its languages(40).

The lives of these «lucky» few, who defied historical neglect, show that Muslim slaves were a dynamic segment of the slave population and that they were well-read, well-traveled, multilingual, resourceful and adaptable men. During their lifetime, they upheld their faith and were known to claim Islam as their faith, pray in private and in public, fast regularly and perform zakah among themselves. They displayed a sustained effort to retain as much as possible of their traditional dress, to keep their names, to observe Muslim dietary rules, to preserve their literacy in Arabic because of its sacred nature, either through the reproduction of religious texts or through the reading of bibles in Arabic, and to maintain contact with their African homeland through Black sailors who were routinely employed on ships(41).

Muslim slaves were remembered by their descendents in the early nineteen thirties. «Muslims married one another on Sapelo Island into a second generation at least»(42). Katie Brown, great-grand-daughter of Ben Ali, recalled that her great-grandfather had daughters named Bento, Medina and Margaret «who held themselves aloof from the others as if they were conscious of their own superiority» and that her grandmother, Ben Ali’s daughter, prayed and used prayer beads. Another resident of Sapelo remembered in the 1930s that his grandmother «Rachel Grant» used to pray the Muslim way(43). The Georgia Writers Project of the WPA(44) of the 1930s

(41) See Diouf, op. cit.
(42) Ibid., pp. 265-279.
(43) Ibid., p. 396.
(44) Part of the Federal Work Projects Administration, a United States government agency, created to provide work on public projects for unemployed people during the depression of the 1930s. It provided jobs for both unskilled persons as well as for students and professionals including writers, dramatists and artists.
lists eighteen Muslims, who lived or who had lived, near the coast of Georgia, many of whom were descendants of the Sapelo Muslims. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), the Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison cites a song and some names (Solomon, Balalay, Medina, Omar, Ryma, Muhammet) from Georgia memories of Muslim forebears. These Muslims kept their faith and transmitted various West African traditions, including tabby building techniques that were used to build houses and sheds on Sapelo Island, including the Big House itself, which was a "spacious tabby mansion."

The autobiographies and the Arabic texts they bequeathed us are not subjective narratives from which we can learn about their life in slavery; they provide mostly Qur’anic verses and notions about Islamic rituals. Their Arabic writings seem to have been meant to reaffirm their Islamic identities and confirm their religious affiliation. In hiding their individualities behind Qur’anic verses, these Muslim slaves, were simply acting as Muslims who believe their piety and faith are the real hallmarks of their identities, rather than the incidents of their tumultuous lives. Thus, they followed the injunction of the Qur’an, which warns people that the worthiest amongst men are the most pious: «Verily, the noblest among you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him» *inna akramakum ‘inda Alla/zi atkakum* (Qur’an 49:13). We could conjecture that, by stressing their steadfastness in Islam and their piety, these slaves were clearly claiming their African and Islamic identities, stating their moral superiority and claiming to be, in Sylviane Diouf’s words, the servants of *Allah* exclusively.

Although these autobiographies have been understandably silent about the incidents of these men’s tumultuous lives, and about their preoccupations, we know enough about them to piece together a portrait of a community of tens of thousands of Muslims whose presence in significant numbers was recorded as early as 1711, who used Islam to resist the effects of slavery. They upheld their faith, taught it and nurtured it as much as they could through vital solidarity networks, very much like the inmates of gulags and concentration camps.

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(47) Ibid., p. 293.


MCMANAN, Margaret. «Bladen Slave Was Also a Prince», May 7, 1967.


