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Chapter 1:

Captives and Narratives: The Early Muslim Presence and Its Significance

In the name of God The Compassionate... I am not able to write my life. I have forgotten much of the language of the Arabs. I read not the grammatical, but very little of the common dialect. I ask thee, O brother, to reproach me not, for my eyes are weak, and my body also....

—Omar ibn Said, Muslim slave in North Carolina
Letter to a friend in West Africa (1836)

A little known fact which continues to inspire incredulity is that America's first Muslims arrived chained in the hulls of slave ships. In 1977, when ABC television broadcast the miniseries *Roots* to an unprecedented 130 million viewers, this skepticism came into full view. The miniseries based on Alex Haley's eponymous novel would spark a great interest in African cultural retentions and ethnic and racial genealogy, but also disbelief— particularly over the scenes showing how Kunta would avoid eating pork and kneel in prayer facing east, unlike other slaves. A year after the novel's publication, critic James Michener took issue with one such scene, which described Africans praying to Allah in the interior of a ship making the trans-Atlantic crossing: "To have Kunta Kinte, or one of his fellows praying to Allah while chained in the bottom of a Christian ship is an unjustified sop to contemporary developments rather than a true reflection of the past."¹ Critics suspected that Haley had inserted the scenes of Kunta Kinte praying simply to lend some historical precedent and legitimacy to the Black Muslim and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s.² This skepticism would obviously increase as

various genealogists contested Haley's claims that Kunta was his seventh-generation ancestor taken from the village of Juffure in the Gambia in 1767 and sold into slavery in Maryland. It was long considered improbable that the African slaves in America may have been Muslim, and even more unlikely that they continued to practice their faith and transmitted their culture to their children in the New World. As one popular textbook put it, "what Muslim faith they [the African slaves] brought with them was quickly absorbed into their new Christian milieu and disappeared."³

But scholarship over the last two decades, inspired in part by the debate over *Roots*, has revealed a "subtle Muslim presence" in America since the early 1500s. Historians have unearthed texts in English and Arabic written by Muslim slaves, shedding light on a far-flung population of Muslim Africans enslaved throughout the New World, many of whom were distinguished by their literacy, and who struggled to maintain their faith through rituals and naming practices, by reading the Koran and writing Arabic, sometimes even launching jihads against their overlords. While historians will continue to debate the number of Muslims enslaved in the New World,⁴ it has become increasingly clear that Muslim slaves in Anglo-America were treated comparatively better than their counterparts in Latin America, and their presence would shape not only racial categories and stratification in the United States, but also inform early American views of the "Orient." The impact of the early Muslim presence on American racial discourse and representations of the Islamic world is critical to understanding the different Islamic and quasi-Islamic movements that emerged in early twentieth century African America.

Texts and Retentions

The historical research on African Muslim slaves in the New World reveals a difference between the treatment of Muslim slaves in Spanish territories and those in French and English territories. Michael Gomez notes that whereas the experience of Muslim slaves in Latin America, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and Brazil was characterized by “severe political repression,” since these communities were often seen as threatening, the “Muslim communities in the United States were comparatively quiet and compliant.” In addition, throughout the French- and English-speaking Caribbean and North America, Muslim slaves—who were often Mande, Fulbe and from Senegambia—would be elevated above other slaves and given less arduous work. “Patterns of privileging Muslim individuals would develop all over Anglophone America,” writes Gomez, “and they stand out in sharp relief against the anti-Muslim mania of the Spanish and Portuguese domains.” Why this difference? A central reason is that these “new” encounters were an extension of centuries-old interactions in the Old World, and the differing treatments of Muslim slaves reflect the European states’ disparate relationships to North Africa and the wider Muslim world. The Spanish and Portuguese states, who were battling Islam within their borders, were obsessed with the Moorish threat, and would take great measures to prevent the importation of Muslim Africans to the New World, even persecuting those slaves suspected of being Muslim. If the relationship between Africans and Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America was a continuation of a history of violence that had existed on the Iberian Peninsula for centuries, “England had no such tradition and therefore had no reason to anticipate religious hostility in any a priori fashion.”⁵ One indicator of this comparative tolerance—even preference—for Muslim

slaves that existed in the United States was the considerable writing (journalistic, scholarly, and even fiction) that emerged about Muslim slaves and their narratives.

Slave narratives are a precious resource for understanding the experiences of Muslim slaves in America, how they were treated and represented. The Muslim slaves who captured the American imagination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were all distinguished by their leadership qualities and learning. Below I refer to three such individuals - Omar ibn Said (also known as “Prince Moreau”), Bilali, and Ibrahima Abd Rahman, all of whom would become local legends spawning a spate of literature trying to explain their literacy and supposed “Oriental” origins. The first-hand accounts of contemporaries who encountered Muslim slaves have turned out to be critical in shedding light on the lives and habits of Muslim slaves. Consider the reference in Georgia Conrad’s memoir, *Reminiscences of a Southern Woman*, to a Muslim family she met on Sapelo Island, off the coast of Georgia, in the mid-1850s: “On Sapelo Island near Darcen, I used to know a family of Negroes who worshipped Mahomet. They were tall and well-formed, with good features. They conversed with us in English, but in talking among themselves they used a foreign tongue that no one else understood. The head of the tribe was a very old man named Bi-la-li. He always wore a cap that resembled a Turkish fez. These negroes held themselves aloof from others as if they were conscious of their own superiority”⁶

Conrad was referring to Bilali, another Muslim slave who would gain notoriety for his literacy and valor. Wylly Spaulding, the grandson of Thomas Spaulding, who was Bilali’s master, also writes about his grandfather’s slaves of “Moorish or Arabian descent, devout Mussulmans, who prayed to Allah...morning, noon, and evening.”⁷

The said Bilali would make a lasting mark in the American cultural and literary imagination, becoming the subject of two children's books by Joel Chandler Harris -- *The Story of Aaron (So Named) the Son of Ben Ali* (1896) and *Aaron in the Wildwoods* (1897); he would be invoked as a Muslim ancestor in Tony Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), and mentioned to in Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*. Bilali gained notoriety after the War of 1812, during which he and eighty slaves successfully fought and prevented the British from invading Sapelo. He is also remembered for an Arabic text that he wrote and had placed in his coffin along with his Quran and his prayer rug. The text, a collection of pieces from the Maliki legal text, *ar-Risala*, attempted to reconcile the law of Islam with leading a principled life, and showed how the author was struggling to maintain his *imam* in the land of America.⁸ Because of his outstanding qualities, Bilali would be appointed the manager of his master's plantation, overseeing approximately five hundred slaves.

Ethnographic work done in the 1930s, by linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner and the Georgia Writers' Project, about the Muslim community of Sapelo and St. Simon's Island during the antebellum period, showed that the islands' relative isolation allowed for a preservation of Muslim traditions. This decades-old research on the Georgia Sea Islands has proven to be an invaluable source on Muslim slave life (and further adding to Bilali's reputation since a number of the individuals interviewed during the 1930s were Bilali's descendents).⁹ Particularly intriguing was Lorenzo Turner's hypothesis that the 'Ring Shout,' a Southern Baptist ritual in which worshippers move in a circle around an altar at the center of the church clapping, shuffling their feet and praying aloud, may derive from the Muslim ritual of circumambulating the Kaaba. Lorenzo Turner noted that, "Shout = a

religious ring dance in which the participants continue to perform until they are exhausted,” and proposed that the origin of the word ‘Shout’ is the Arabic *shaut*, which means, “to move around the Kaaba (the small stone building at Mecca which is the chief object of the pilgrimage of the Mohamedans) until exhausted.”¹⁰ Another possible Muslim retention that still absorbs scholars involves the fact that the Christian congregation on Sapelo Island prays towards the east and the church itself is built facing that direction. Worshippers are taught to pray facing east because “the devil is in the other corner”—and even the dead are buried facing east. While “the East” in this case might simply mean Africa and not necessarily Mecca, historians continue to ponder if this peculiarity—along with other Shouters’ prayer rituals—including being barefoot at church, kneeling on a piece of fabric, performing a ritual handshake followed by the touching of the left breast by the right hand—are “Islamic traits.”¹¹ Without more evidence to substantiate these claims of Muslim retentions in African American culture, these hypotheses remain speculative; but these claims of Muslim “survivals” and “continuities” would become critical to the twentieth century social movements discussed in this volume that would use these alleged retentions as raw material for their ideological and cultural repertoires.

Drivers and Overseers

While the cultural influence of the early Muslim presence remains a matter of speculation, the impact of the Muslim slave population on the hierarchy of the American South is less disputed. As Gomez has argued, “the most lasting [and]... most salient impact” of Islam, in colonial and antebellum America, “was its role in the process of social stratification within the larger African American society,” adding that “the early Muslim community contributed significantly to the development of African American

identity.”¹² Many of the Muslim slaves were of Fulbe, Mande and Senegambian background, whose features were thought to be closer to those of Europeans than of Africans, and American slave owners invariably saw Muslim slaves, “as more intelligent, more reasonable, more physically attractive, more dignified people.”¹³ The “European” features and intelligence were thought to be obviously linked. This bias reflected the influence of the notorious Hamitic thesis—the argument, popular in nineteenth century European colonial thought, that North Africans, and Central Africans with “thin” features, were actually Africans of Caucasian origin who had migrated from the West to Africa; thus Senegambians, the Fulbe, and Tutsis, for instance, were said to be not of African origin, but of European, Egyptian or Arab descent. The Hamitic thesis and the belief in the alleged superiority of the “Mohammedans” would make its way across the Atlantic and be invoked to explain the literacy of Muslim slaves in the New World. In his *America Negro Slavery*, Ulrich Phillips observes that plantation owners often thought the Senegalese were the most intelligent because they “had a strong Arabic strain in their ancestry.”¹⁴

Because of this thinking, Muslims slaves in the United States were often placed in positions of power over other non-Muslim slaves. In his book *Prince Among Slaves*, about the life of another prominent Muslim slave, Ibrahima Abdal Rahman, Terry Alford notes that Muslim slaves were used as “drivers, overseers and confidential servants with a frequency their numbers did not justify.”¹⁵ Muslim overseers informed on disobedient slaves and crushed slave uprisings, earning the distrust of other Africans. In a treatise he wrote calling for the “benign” treatment of slaves, Zephaniah Kingsley noted how Muslim drivers on Sapelo Island jointly crushed a slave revolt. Referring to events along

the Georgia Coast during the Anglo-American War of 1812, Kingsley alludes to “two instances, to the southward, where gangs of negroes were prevented from deserting to the enemy [England] by drivers, or influential negroes, whose integrity to their masters and influence over the slaves prevented it; and what is still more remarkable, in both instances the influential negroes were Africans; and professors of the Mahomedan religion.”¹⁶ (Kingsley might very well have been referring to Bilali who, during the War of 1812, is reported to have assured his owner that he would not defect to the British, who had promised to liberate the slaves who joined their side, adding that he could “answer for every Negro of the true faith, but not for the Christian dogs you own”—on whom he said he could not rely.¹⁷) Muslim slaves often took the side of the slave-owner, and this—along with the preferential treatment they received—created a rift between Muslim and non-Muslim.

Literacy and Genealogy

The impact of the Muslim presence on American racial discourse is also evident in how scholars and journalists of the day sought to explain the origins of Muslim slaves. A great deal of energy was expended by antebellum writers and owners trying to ascertain the genealogy of the Muslim slaves, and to find a way to classify them so that their Arabic literacy would not threaten the ideological underpinnings of racial slavery. The case of Omar Ibn Said is illustrative: because of his Arabic literacy, Omar Ibn Said was identified as a Moor. “He is an Arab by birth of royal blood,” who had been enslaved by Africans “whom he had always hated.” explained *The Providence Journal* in 1846.¹⁸ But it is the tales spun around Omar’s origins that are most dubious—and revealing. On January 22 1847, *The Wilmington Chronicle* accurately described Omar as a “Pulo”

(Fulbe), but the writer notes, “the Foulahs, or Falatas, are known as descendents of the Arabian Mohamedans who migrated to Western Africa in the seventh century. They carried with them the literature of Arabia, as well as the religion of their great Prophet, and have ever retained both. The Foulahs stand in the scale of civilizations at the head of all African tribes.”¹⁹ This tendency to depict African Muslim slaves as Moorish, Arab, or of Oriental origin was widespread. The aforementioned Bilali of Sapelo Island would be similarly “Orientalized,” portrayed as “an Arab–man of the desert–slave hunter” in Joel Chandler Harris’s novel *The Story of Aaron (So Named) the Son of Ben Ali*.

The literacy and education of the Muslim slaves was rarely seen as a result of their exposure to Islam or Arabic education in West Africa, but was attributed to their Arab, Berber or Moorish origin. Muslim slaves were thus separated from other Africans physically—in the work and positions they were given—but also ideologically and epistemologically. And these Muslim slaves—many of whom had little but contempt for their non-Muslim counterparts—would accept these labels, and often eagerly claim Moorish, Arab or Berber origin themselves. (For instance, Ibrahima Abd ar-Rahman, a Fulbe, is reported to have insisted that he had no “Negro” blood, and “placed the negro in a scale of being infinitely below the Moor.”) This air of superiority would fuel the resentment of other slaves, with Muslim, Moorish and Arab identity being suspected of being pro-slavery and anti-black, while also luring other slaves claim to Moorish or Muslim identity.

But why the need for these utterly fictitious genealogies? Why the effort to “de-Negroize” the Muslim slave? As Henry Louis Gates has observed, the Enlightenment discourse of this era viewed writing as “the *visible* sign of reason,”²⁰ and as such the

literacy of Muslim slaves posed a challenge. Diouf argues that accepting these Muslim slaves as Africans would have posed an ideological threat to the American racial order: “It was more acceptable to deny any Africanness to the distinguished Muslims than to recognize that a “true” African could be intelligent and cultured but enslaved nonetheless. So, gradually, the African Muslims were seen as owing their perceived superiority not to their own “genes,” not even to their culture or proximity to the Arab world, but to foreign ‘blood’.”²¹ This reasoning grew out of peculiarly American context, which, unlike its counterparts in Latin America, did not recognize the intermediate strata of mulattos, creoles, or *mestizo*, with different meanings of intelligence and privilege attached to these categories. In the more rigid American racial order with its Manichean categories, an “intelligent black” was categorized not as black, but as close to white—a Moor or Arab; blacks were thus still seen as inferior, but those of alleged Moorish or Arab origins were seen as suited for higher positions where they could monitor the majority of blacks and enforce the rules of the slave society.

If Muslim slaves in the United States had to be categorized and represented in a way that would not unsettle the country’s racial order, their narratives—the slave narrative—would emerge as a literary genre in the US in a way unseen in Latin America—also threatened to disrupt reigning assumptions about human races, modernity and the Enlightenment. As one literary critic has asked, “What happened when a significant number of literate enslaved Muslims gave the incontestable lie to the notion that blacks were incapable of reason—possessing neither books nor history nor scriptural/revealed religion—were, in short, a cultural tabula rasa?”²² One way to deal with this challenge was by presenting the Muslim slave’s life story as a tale of uplift from heathenism and an

espousal of Christianity and American values. The popular narrative that emerged around Omar ibn Said, for example, tells of an Arab Muslim's difficult journey to freedom and enlightenment: after enduring slavery in South Carolina, he ran away before he was taken in by John Owen, the former governor of North Carolina, who was impressed by his literacy and helped him convert to Christianity.

The Muslim slave's conversion to Christianity was also often accompanied by an express desire to return to Africa to spread the gospel and American civilization. The first Muslim slave known to have gained freedom because of his literacy was Ayyub bin Suleiman (also known as Job the Son of Solomon), a Fulbe from a prominent family, who was enslaved in Maryland, where white children "would mock him and throw dirt in his face" as he attempted to recite his prayers in the woods. His literacy and piety would draw the attention of an English minister who would begin to press for his manumission. Henry Louis Gates identifies the 1731 letter of Ayyub ibn Suleiman Diallo to his father—asking that he ransom him out of slavery—as the first instance in modernity when an African literally wrote his way out of slavery.²³ The London-based Royal African Company would eventually arrange for Ayyub's return to Bondou, where he would assist the Royal African Company, in their trade of rum, gold and slaves. Literacy would in fact help a number of African Muslim slaves earn their liberty, as they offered their services to American and English colonial projects in West Africa.

The widespread interest in the stories of the Muslim slaves must be viewed in historical context. Of the hundreds of narratives written in North America, very few were written by African-born slaves, and even fewer—the most notable exception being Olaudah Equiano's bestseller published in 1789—would gain a wide readership.

Abolitionists, who promoted slave narratives generally did not seek the texts of African-born slaves, since they thought these would be seen as too alien to gain a wide readership and aid the abolitionists cause.²⁴ Moreover, unlike most slave narratives which detailed the horrors of life under slavery and crackled with tales of escape and adventure, the Muslim slaves' narratives were not so suspenseful, often simply giving descriptions of Islamic teachings and portrayals of daily life in Africa. Yet despite their few numbers, the Muslim slave narratives would draw considerable attention because of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1803), and because of the Barbary wars (1801-1805), which made the figure of a disobedient slave or educated Muslim slave rather unsettling. As African American slave narratives were gaining a readership, the captivity narratives of white Americans held in North Africa, were also becoming popular and jointly these texts would engage the American popular imagination and disturb the racial status quo.

White Slaves, African Masters

The attacks on American vessels off the Barbary Coast, and the enslavement of scores of white Americans by Africans in a distant Muslim land since the mid-eighteenth century, produced a range of reactions from American observers, and touched on myriad cultural and political issues. Since the 1700s, American observers would view their country's racial predicament through the prism of Barbary and the wider Orient.²⁵

Critics would point to North African slavery and despotism to tell America that it had to live up to its principles and abolish bondage—that it could not descend to such barbarous behavior. As early as 1700, the renowned jurist Samuel Sewall wrote *The Selling of Joseph*, the first anti-slavery pamphlet condemning bondage in America, and highlighting the hypocrisy of those who decried slavery in North Africa: “Methinks,

when we are bemoaning the barbarous Usage of our Friends and Kinsfolk in *Africa*: it might not be unreasonable to enquire whether we are not culpable in forcing the Africans to become *Slaves* amongst our selves.”²⁶ In 1776, Samuel Hopkins, a Congregationalist minister and early abolitionist, excoriated his fellow Northerners, who seemed appalled by North African slavery but silent about bondage at home: “If many thousands of our children were slaves in Algiers or any part of the Turkish dominions...how would the attention of the country be turned to it! Would it not become the chief topic of conversation? Would any cost or labor be spared...in order to obtain their freedom?...And why are we not as much affected with the slavery of the thousands of blacks among ourselves whose miserable state is before our eyes.” He continued: “The reason is obvious...It is because they are Negroes and fit for nothing but slaves. Tis because they are negroes, and we have been used to look on them in a mean, contemptible light.”²⁷ Hopkins would go on to ban slave-owners from his congregation and found the American Colonization Society to return blacks to Africa.

The “Barbary problem” emerged as a contentious issue at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, with the Federalists calling for the establishment of a navy to meet the corsair threat, and the anti-Federalists resisting the expansion of the federal state’s power. “What is there to prevent an Algerine pirate from landing on your coast, and carrying your citizens into slavery?” asked representative Hugh Williamson of North Carolina at the convention in Philadelphia. “You have not a single sloop of war?”²⁸ After the Barbary wars, the regencies of North Africa would cease to pose a threat to American commercial interests, but the narratives written by Americans enslaved in North Africa would gain a new significance in the antebellum years, as these texts, like the Muslim

slave narratives, became part of the debate over slavery. Abolitionists and white supremacists alike would use the narratives of released captives to protest or defend slavery on American soil.

The Barbary captivity narratives had existed since the 1600s, but would only become popular in the first half of the nineteenth century as the number of slaves in the United States increased rapidly—from one million in 1807 to two million by 1837²⁹—at the same time as African American slave narratives rose in popularity. As the dispute over slavery intensified so did the interest in the writings of ex-slaves—whites held captive in Barbary, but also the accounts of free blacks—from Omar ibn Said’s autobiography (1831) to Frederick Douglas’ best-selling narrative (1845) to Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1861)—which were used to bolster the abolitionist case. The abolitionist Charles Sumner would observe in his *White Slavery in the Barbary States*, that the interest in Barbary captives fed interest in slavery at home: “The interest awakened for the slave in Algiers embraced also the slave at home. Sometimes they were said to be alike in condition; sometimes, indeed it was openly declared that the horrors of our American slavery surpassed that of Algiers.”³⁰

The Barbary captivity narrative depicted a trajectory of religious redemption that was the reverse of the Muslim slave’s account, which portrayed morally redeemed figures crossing the Atlantic to return to their African homelands intent on helping America live up to its ideals. In the African American Muslim narrative, the slave would suffer in bondage, before a kind master would discover his Muslim (“Oriental”) origins and manumit him; the grateful African would then embrace Christianity and pledge to serve America upon returning to his homeland, enlightened and intent on spreading

American ideals. In the Barbary narrative, by contrast, the white slave would endure brutality, resist conversion to Islam, before defeating his Moorish master, who would then embrace Christianity and American anti-slavery liberalism, and the captive would then return to America vowing to abolish slavery. Despite their predictable “plotline,” both these types of narratives resonated deeply, challenging American racial hierarchies, and the young republic’s moral authority and self-image.

The Barbary narratives helped shape and were shaped by the debate over slavery that was dividing the country. Tales of white bodies possessed and violated by African masters presented a distorted mirror image of the situation in America, causing considerable anxiety, and challenging racial slavery’s black-white divide and its foundational assumptions about white supremacy and African primitivism. North African slavery posed a similarity and a parallel between America and the Orient that was profoundly disturbing: not only were *they* capable of enslaving white Americans, but how could *we* denounce their slavery while maintaining slavery at home. This contradiction produced varied reactions, from those who would compare the two systems of slavery and denounce the South for stooping to Oriental levels of cruelty, to those who were sickened by North African “barbarousness” and concluded that the blacks in America could never be ready for emancipation.

The most popular, and possibly the most influential, Barbary narrative to be sold in the United States was Captain James Riley’s 1817 account of his capture by “wandering Arabs” in northwest Africa. His book, *Suffering in Africa*, which drew attention to the country’s moral blind spot of slavery while speaking of America’s providential role, sold nearly a million copies and was adapted into an illustrated

children's story book. The narrative told the story of how Captain Riley and his crew endured slavery in the desert after their ship *Commerce* was shipwrecked off the coast of modern day Mauritania. When finally liberated by a compassionate Muslim traveler, Riley vows to devote the rest of his life to ending slavery in America. Recalling black slaves he had seen on the auction block in New Orleans, Riley's narrative ends with a plea to Americans to chop down the "cursed tree of slavery" and obliterate "the rod of oppression."³¹ When he returns to Washington, Riley meets President Monroe, who encourages him to publish his story. Riley's *Suffering in Africa* came out in at least twenty-eight editions, and is still in print today, and is perhaps the most influential Barbary captivity narrative, since it is said to have been one of Abraham Lincoln's all time favorite books – along with *The Bible* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*—and is believed to have shaped the future president's views on slavery.³² These narratives would shape early American representations of Africa and the Orient, unsettling American racial formations and showing how such racial constructs were often projected onto the Muslim world. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, in part because of these narratives, many Americans would view the Islamic world through the prism of race and slavery.

Muslim Slaves and the Colonization of Liberia

A number of the abolitionists who pointed to North Africa to highlight America's bane of slavery came to believe that returning blacks to West Africa was the best solution to the country's racial discord. Thus the ardent abolitionist Samuel Hopkins, thought that equality was not possible for blacks in America, because of widespread racism and white fears of uprisings by freed blacks, and came to believe in "colonization" or the repatriation of freed blacks to Africa. The Reverend underlined the economic gains of

planting a colony of African Americans in Africa. "Such a settlement, promoted by the Americans," he enthusiastically wrote a fellow minister in 1793, "would not only tend to the good of the Africans, but would, in time, be a source of profitable trade to America, instead of the West India trade, which will probably fail more and more."³³

The American Colonization Society's attitude towards Muslim slaves is particularly interesting. For the repatriation movement, Muslim slaves with their Arabic literacy were seen as a valuable tool for opening up West Africa to American economic and political interests. The Muslim slaves were seen as natural intermediaries with the Muslims and pagans of the West African Coast; they had after all had embraced Christianity, were indebted to America for their newfound freedom and faith, and would help spread the gospel and American civilization in Africa. As the repatriation movement grew in influence, Muslim slaves and their narratives gained greater political significance and individuals like Ibrahima Abdul Rahman, would – along with other Muslim slaves - become central to the debate about Liberia, and often feigning conversion to Christianity, would volunteer to return to Africa to spread the Gospel's good news. Muslim slaves would also work with the American Colonization Society to gain passage to Africa. According to *The African Repository*, the mouthpiece of the American Colonization Society, in 1835, Lamine Kaba ("Paul"), who had served for almost thirty years as a slave in Georgia and South Carolina, addressed a group of white philanthropists about his sudden conversion to Christianity following his manumission, and his desire to pursue missionary work in Africa, where he would join his family. Traveling under the name of Paul A. Mandingo, Kaba would reach Liberia in August 1835 and would settle in Sierra Leone, but he would remain in contact with Muslim slaves that he had befriended in

America. The letter quoted in the beginning of this chapter was written by Omar Ibn Said to Kaba in 1836, showing that literate Muslim slaves maintained ties across the Atlantic.³⁴ The Muslim slaves' eagerness to get involved in the repatriation effort—as a way to gain passage home—undoubtedly incensed black abolitionists opposed to the Liberia project, which they saw as a ruse to rid America of its black population.

African American Muslim slave narratives continue to be discovered: Omar bin Said's Arabic text turned up in an old trunk in Virginia in 1995, the narrative of Shaykh Sana See of Panama was discovered in 1999, and the 1873 autobiography of Nicolas Said of Alabama was stumbled upon in a library annex in 2000.³⁵ As more of these texts come to light, we will undoubtedly learn more about the lives of Muslim slaves and ex-slaves. The foregoing discussion of the early Muslim presence on the American plantation, the literacy of Muslim slaves, the reactions to Muslim Arabic writing, and the simultaneous appeal of narratives by and about Muslim slaves and the Barbary captivity narratives – are all critical to understanding early (black and white) American attitudes to Islam, the rise of modern Islamic movements, and contemporary representations of Islam and the Orient. Since the American Revolution, Islam has been contentiously associated with race and slavery, as revealed by the politics surrounding the Barbary and Muslim slave narratives, and with American interests in Africa and the Orient.

By the early twentieth century, there would be a clear association in the African American community between Arabic and erudition, between Islam, liberation and black empowerment. The experiences and narratives of Muslim slaves—combined with the writings of Edward Blyden, who while in Liberia was deeply impressed by the civilization and political autonomy of Islamic states in West Africa—laid the intellectual

groundwork for the Black Muslim movements of the early and mid twentieth century. Yet at the same time there was a growing resentment of Muslims as arrogant “house negroes,” who deny their blackness and prefer to pass for “Arab or “Oriental,” even as race traitors all too willing to defend the institution of slavery and partake in pernicious colonization projects. The preferential treatment afforded Muslim slaves by the American racial order encouraged other blacks to claim Moorish or Arab descent, and even ‘incentivized’ conversion to Islam.³⁶ The association of Islam with preferential treatment and “passing” would grate the nerves of prominent black leaders. Reflecting this view, Booker T. Washington, in his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, scoffs at how a “dark-skinned man...a citizen of Morocco” is allowed into a “local hotel” from which he, “an American Negro,” is banned.³⁷ The belief that Muslim identity and conversion to Islam constituted a form of “passing” would echo deep into the twentieth century and would only be reinforced by the fact that many African-Americans who embraced Islam were not “Jim Crowed.” As Dizzy Gillespie famously pointed out, many jazz musicians who took on Muslim names could enter “whites only” restaurants and even had “white” stamped on their union cards. As Gillespie put it, “‘Man, if you join the Muslim faith, you ain’t colored no more, you’ll be white,’ they’d say. You get a new name and you don’t have to be a nigger no more.”³⁸

In short, decades before the post-1945 era when the United States began to establish a presence in the Middle East, and before the advent of immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, the labels “Arab,” “Moorish” and “Muslim” already referred to loaded, polarizing categories. By the mid-nineteenth century, a discourse had evolved which separated the (“sophisticated”) Arab/Moor from the African, and split Northern

Africa (“The Orient”) from Black Africa (“Africa”). These efforts to separate Arab from African identity seen in the Orientalizing (“de-Negroizing”) of Muslim slaves is still evident in contemporary discourses on North Africa, specifically Sudan, where Arabic-speaking blacks are habitually described as “settlers” or “non-indigenous.” The emergence of various Islamic and quasi-Islamic movements in African America in the early twentieth century, which would overlap with the rise of the northern ghetto and American global power, would resourcefully adapt and contest these historic categories and representations. The post-war ascent of the United States and the country’s subsequent expansion into the Muslim world—particularly the Middle East—combined with the influx of immigrants from these regions into the United States, would all increase the appeal of Islam in the country’s urban core, producing myriad trends and movements—secular and religious—that would claim solidarity or a connection to some region or people in the Islamic world.

The essays in this volume address various aspects of this historic and evolving relationship between Islam and Black America: The authors included in this volume explore different dimensions of the more than century-long interaction between Black America and Islam; starting with the nineteenth century narratives of African American travelers to the Holy Land, the following chapters probe Islam’s role in urban social movements, music and popular culture, gender dynamics, relations between African Americans and Muslim immigrants, and the racial politics of American Islam with the ongoing war in Iraq and the US’s deepening involvement in the Orient.

Notes

¹ James A Michener, "Roots, Unique In Its Time" *New York Times Book Review* February 26, 1977, p.41.

² The novel contains various scenes highlighting Kunta's Islamic faith and practices. "As the sun began to set, Kunta turned his face toward the East, and by the time he had finished his silent evening prayer to Allah, dusk was gathering." (*Roots*, p.173) Elsewhere, Haley writes, "Through the night, he lay drifting into and out of sleep and wondering about these black ones who sounded like Africans but ate pig. It meant that they were all strangers—or traitors—to Allah. Silently he begged Allah's forgiveness in advance if his lips would even touch any swine without his realizing it, or even if he ever ate from any plate that any swine meat had ever been on." (*Roots*, p.178) Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976).

³ Caesar E. Farah, *Islam: Beliefs and Observances* Baron's Educational Services 2003 (Seventh edition) p.323

⁴ Allan Austin estimates that 7 to 8 percent of the Africans enslaved in America between the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries were Muslim. Based on a 10 percent estimate of all West Africans introduced between 1711 and 1808, Austin has also suggested that there was a total of 29,695 Muslim slaves in the Americas. Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1984); Michael Gomez thinks "thousands if not tens of thousands" of Muslim slaves were brought to the US. Michael Gomez, "Muslims in Early America," *Journal of Southern History* 60, 4 November 1994 p.682

⁵ Michael Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.58.

⁶ Georgia Bryan Conrad, “Reminiscences of a Southern Woman” from *Southern Workman*, 1901, cited in Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* University of Georgia Press p.28

⁷ Charles Spaulding Wylly, *The Seed That Was Sown in Georgia* (New York: Neale, 1910).

⁸ For more on Bilali’s Arabic manuscript, see Joseph H Greenberg, “The Decipherment of the ‘Ben Ali Diary,’ a Preliminary Statement,” *Journal of Negro History* 25 July 1940 p.372-375

⁹ Katie Brown, one of Bilali’s great-granddaughters – and at the time of the WPA interview described as “one of the oldest inhabitants” of Sapelo Island, told her interviewer that Bilali’s seven daughters were named “Margret, Bentoo, Chaalut, medina, Yaruba, Fatima, and Hestuh.” Katie went on to describe her grandmother Margret’s Islamic headdress, which differed from the scarf that she (Katie) wore, and explained how her grandmother would make rice cakes (*saraka*) for the children on religious holidays, and describes how Bilali and his wife Phoebe used to “pray on duh bead,” a reference to the Islamic rosary (*tasbih*): “Margaret an uh daughter Cotto use tuh say dat Bilali an he wife Phoebe pray on duh bead. Dey wuz bery puhticluh bout duh time dey pray and dey bery regluh bout duh hour. Wen duh sun come up, when it straight obuh head and wen it set, das duh time dey pray. Dey bow tuh duh sun an hab lill mat tuh kneel on. Duh beads is on a long string. Belali he pull bead an he say, “Belambi, Hakabara, Mahamadu.” Phoebe she say, “Ameen, Ameen.” See the *Georgia Writer’s Project*.

Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1940) p.158-161.

¹⁰ Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (New York: Arno Press 1969; orig. pub. 1949)

¹¹ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* New York: New York University Press 1998 p.190 Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: Washington Creel notes that the Gullah people buried their dead so that their body faced east. See Margaret Washington Creel, "A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs. The American Social Experiences Series, No. 7." *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (May, 1990), pp. 332-33*

¹² Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p.60

¹³ See Newbell N. Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1926), p.528-529

¹⁴ Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), p.42. The influence of the Hamitic thesis in the American South is evident in the writings of scholar-diplomat William Brown Hodgson. In his *Notes on Northern Africa, the Sahara and the Sudan*, he states emphatically that, "The Foulahs are *not* Negroes. They differ essentially from the Negro race, in all the characteristics that are marked by physical anthropology. They may be said to occupy the intermediate space between the Arab and the Negro. All travelers concur in representing them as a distinct race, in moral as in physical traits...They concur also in the report, that the Foulahs of

every region represent themselves to be white men, and proudly assert their superiority to the black tribes, among whom they live.” New York 1844

¹⁵ Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* Oxford University Press 1986

¹⁶ Zephaniah Kingsley, *A Treatise on the Patriarchal or Cooperative System of Society as it Exists in Some Governments and Colonies in America, and in the United States, Under the Name of Slavery, with its Necessity and Advantages*. 2nd ed. Reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971 p.13-14.

¹⁷ Ella May Thorton, “Bilali – His Book” *Law Library Journal* Vol 47 1955 p.228-229

¹⁸ Austin p.474

¹⁹ Austin *ibid* p.473

²⁰ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* p.13 Oxford University Press 1988 p.13

²¹ Diouf p.102

²² Keith Cartwright, *Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and Gothic Tales* University Press of Kentucky 2004 p.158

²³ Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black* 1987 p.12-13; *The Signifying Monkey* 148, 163

²⁴ Douf notes that of the ten Africans who published narratives five were born and raised Muslim: William Ansa Saskaru (1750), James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1785), Olaudah Equiano (1789), Venture Smith (1798), Ibrahima Abd al Rahman (1828), Omar bin Said (1831), Abu Bakr al Siddiq (1834), James Bradley (1835), Mohammed Gardo Baququa (1854), and Mohamed Ali Ben Said (1867). p.140

²⁵ Lotfi Ben Rajab, America's Captive Freeman In North Africa: The Comparative Method In Abolitionist Persuasion.” *Slavery & Abolition* 9, no. 1 (1988): 57-71

²⁶ Samuel Sewell, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* Ed., Sidney Kaplan. Amherst : University of Massachusetss 1969 p.11

²⁷ Stanley K. Schultz, “The Making of a Reformer: The Reverend Samuel Hopkins as an Eighteenth-Century Abolitionist” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 115, No. 5. (Oct. 15, 1971)

²⁸ Hugh Williamson, Speech at Edenton, N.C, N.Y. Daily Advertiser February 26 1788 in *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* 25 p.206

²⁹ Paul Baepler ed., *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives* University of Chicago Press p.25

³⁰ Charles Sumner, *White Slavery in the Barbary States* (1853) Ayer Co Pub 1947 p.83

³¹ James Riley, *Sufferings in Africa: An Authentic Narrative* New York: Potter 1965 p.445-447

³² Gerald R. McMurtry, “The Influence of Riley’s Narrative Upon Abraham Lincoln” *Indiana Magazine of History* 30 1934 p.133-138

³³ Hopkins, *Discourse*, pp. 611, 608-612; the *Dialogue*, p. 584

³⁴ George E. Post, “Arabic-Speaking Negro Mohammedans in Africa,” *The African Repository* May 1869 p.130-131

³⁵ Moustafa Bayoumi, “Moving Beliefs: The Panama Manuscript of Sheikh Sana See and African Diasporic Islam” *Interventions* Volume 5, Issue 1 April 2003 p. 58 – 81; Precious Rasheeda Muhammad, “The Autobiography of Nicholas Said: A Native of

Bornou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa” *Journal of Islam in America*, 2001 Cambridge, MA

³⁶ While Ibrahima’s case was in the headlines, just before his return to Africa, others began claiming Muslim descent and Oriental ancestry - including one “Abdullah Mohammed” who claimed to have been abducted from his native Syria by pirates, and another “Almourad Ali” who raised \$1500 for his passage back home to Turkey, before it was discovered that he was from Albany, New York. See Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* p.137

³⁷ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), p.103

³⁸ Dizzy Gillespie and Al Frazer, *To Be or Not to Bop* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), p. 293.