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Muslims in America: A forgotten history

For more than 300 years, Muslims have influenced the story of the US — from the founding fathers to blues music today.

By Sylvianne Ji Shaud
Oct 12, 2021

In the summer of 1765, newspapers in North Carolina announced the death of "renegade African," referred to, in a paternalistic manner, as "Uncle Mamout".

Owner Ben Ford, a Mecklin, was born in 1701 to Bonaqui and by the time of his death, he had been enslaved for 36 years. In 1991, Omar, an opera about his life, will premiere at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina.

KEY POINTS

- The Muslim influence on the US is ancient and enduring
- Know your history: Understanding racism in the US
- Analysis: Tapping racial statues makes space for radical change

Muslims are usually thought of as a 20th century immigrants to the US, yet the well over 300 years, African Muslims like Uncle Mamout were a familiar presence. They had grown up in Bornagl, Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Benin and Nigeria where Islam was the main faith since the 8th century and spread to the 14th century.

Estimates vary, but they were at least one-quarter out of the 12.5 million African Africans, who were forcibly transported to the Americas. Muslims were enslaved in the Union of States of Hispaniola and Brazil.

Though they were a minority among the enslaved population, Muslims were advanced edge like no other community. Sharifuddin, Ismailites, journalists, scholars, diplomatic, and ambassadors, they were well-educated, literate, and fluent in Arabic. Prominent Muslims, Presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State Henry Clay, author of the US national anthem Francis Scott Key, and portraitist of the Founding Fathers Charles W Peale were acquainted with some of them.

Visible manifestations of faith

Part of the Muslims' conspicuousness was due to their continued observance, whenever it prevented, of the most noticeable tenets of their religion. Prayer, the pillar of Islam, was one of these visible manifestations of faith noted by enslaved and endeavors alike.

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In his 1837 autobiography, Charles Ball, who escaped slavery, related in great detail the story of a man who prayed about five times a day in a language others did not understand. Ball, who was born in 1781 in Maryland, was sold to a cotton plantation in Mobamkinsa, though at that time, I had never learned of the religion of Mohamet.

Charles Spalding, Will had this to say about Bilali from Guinea, ordered by his grandfather, William Spalding, to Georgia. "Three times each day he faced the East and called upon Allah." He witnessed other "Street Mussulmans, who prayed in Allah morning, noon and night."

Yarrow Mamout, another highly visible Muslim, was taken from Guinea in 1731 when he was about 16 years old. Age was a matter of dispute, he and Bonaqui lived in Wadsington, DC. Mamout was a kind of celebrity in his area who "often seen and heard in the streets, reciting Psalms to God — and conversing with him," stated noted artist Charles Willson Peale.

A portrait of Uncle Bonaqui's wife Phillis, William Peale, made in Wadsington, Washington, D.C. in 1788. (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

In the region, more and more Muslims originally enslaved in Georgia described their relatives and others prayed several times a day: they knelt on mats, bowed, said strange words, and had "strings of beads" or rosbaths. As Bilali profiled the beads, one observer had recalled, he said "Belawdy, Mahabama, Mahabama."

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It is hard to imagine how people in that complex society could give ideas, the third pillar of Islam, Zakat, which clearly proved to be the most widespread and efficient of all the Muslim religious practices.

In the box Islands, the women left their mark on this tradition. In the region, their descendants recalled with fondness the rice cakes their mothers gave to children. There was a street in Bamako, followed after the charity by beggars, lepers, women, Amen."

Rice cakes are the charity still offered by West African Muslim women on Fridays. The cake is not called a cake, but the act of giving is a sadaqa, a freewill offering, and that word is altered as the women give it.

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In South Carolina, a man only known as Nero was more fortunate. Its Jerry Ian where in had formal. By fasting and refusing certain food Muslims were not only remaining faithful to their religion, they were also asserting a degree of control over their lives.

Fasting and dietary requirements

There is no doubt that Islam's fourth pillar, fasting, was exceedingly hard for people enslaved and overworked. Nevertheless, Bilali and his kings family used to fast during Ramadan. And so did his friend Salih Bilali. Abdul Rahman Ibrahim, who was born in Timbuktu and was enslaved in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1828, said he "never missed a day during the entire fast, particularly that of the Ramadan" when he "ended", James Hamilton Cooper.

Omar Ibn Said was said to have fasted daily. Others whose lives were not recorded may have fasted, but without an Muhammad Kaba to inspire them, they may have felt it was too hard to be persisted in by only.

Several testimonies mention Islam's dietary restrictions. Throughout his long life, Yarrow Mamout held people, "it is a good rule not Dog Land Swine whether is very bad."

In Mississippi, the use of a pioneer acknowledged the difficulty of adhering to these rules since slaveholders provided the food. He said "in terms of bitter regret, that his master would give him the food he could not eat because it was not halal, and that he was ill-fed under the necessity of eating pork but drains ever tasting any kind of pork."

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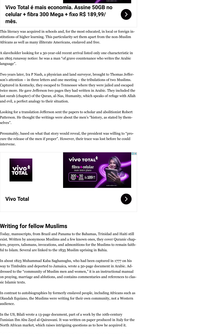

A portrait of Nathaniel Bowditch Shaler, William Peale, made in Wadsington, Washington, D.C. in 1788. (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

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Distinguished by their dress

In addition to respecting the tenets of Islam, Muslims distinguished themselves, when possible, by the way they dressed. In Georgia, some women were with white men spoke of Turkish fez or white turbans.

An 18pa article described two, each morning, Omar Ibn Said spotted the end of a long, white, Turkish turban, which was wrapped around the head of a man who was walking a hallowing a turban. Daguerreotypes show him with pointed turbans around his head in a very bad. In his portrait, painted in 1819 by Charles W Peale, Mamout wore the same turban.

In 1731, the Senegalese Ayuba Suleiman Diallo insisted on being interpretated in his "country dress" with a white turban and a robe. Liberian, same Muslims in Trinidad, Brazil, and Cuba were described as wearing "flowing robes", dialbaga and white pants.

By identifying the course, demonating dress clothes, the Muslims who could do so were reclaiming a bit of ownership of their own bodies, while stating their fidelity to their religion.

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A portrait of Nadia Sulaiman Diallo by English artist William Hoare, circa 1733 (Jamestown Foundation Collection, on display at the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown)

Curiosity and literacy

Besides being visible, Muslims generated much notoriety because of their literacy, an Islamic requirement because believers read and write.

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This literacy was acquired in Muslim schools, but the most diligent were kept or foreign to be educated in Muslim lands. Bilali's son Lamine was sent to Scotland to study the new Muslim arrivals and to study Illinois Americans, endorsed and Ian.

A slaveholder looking for a pious Muslim slave arrived from Ireland only one characteristic is an deep concern nerdoc. he was a man "of grave continenance who writes the Arabic language".

Two years later, Ian P Shah, a physician and land surveyor, brought to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, Ian Sidi Mahomet Ibn Said, a Muslim from Senegal. Because of his Muslim and literate status, they escaped to Tennessee where they were jailed and escaped twice more. He gave Jefferson two pages they had written in Arabic. They included the Muslim's Lord's Prayer of the Quran, of Ibn Hamuda, which a page of refuge with Allah and with a perfect analogy to their situation.

Long for a translation Jefferson sent the papers to scholar and abolitionist Robert Patterson. He thought the writings were about the men's "history, as stated by themselves".

Presumably, based on what that story would reveal, the president was willing to "pay a ransom of the men if proper". However, their ruse was lost before he could intervene.

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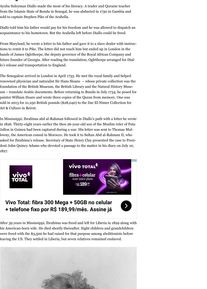

A portrait of Ibrahim Abdul Rahman Ibn Said, by Scottish artist James Eckford Lauder, circa 1830 (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

Writing for fellow Muslims

Today, manuscripts, from Brazil and Panama to the Bahamas, Trinidad and Haiti still exist. Written by anonymous Muslims and a few known ones, they cover Quranic chapters, prayers, talismans, invocations, and admonitions for the Muslims to remain faithful. Some were found or linked to the ship Meshia carrying to Bahia.

In about 1835 Mohammed Kaba Saghanughu, who had been captured in 1771 on his way to Timbuktu and deported to Jamaica, wrote a 20-page manuscript in Arabic. Ali dressed in the "commonly of Muslim men and women," it is an instructional manual for prayers, fasting and ablutions, and contains numerous Quranic and references to the Islamic texts.

In contrast to autobiographies by formerly enslaved people, including African such as Olaudah Equiano, the Muslim were writing for their own community, not a Western audience.

In the US, Bilali wrote a 15-page document, part of a work by the 19th century Tuskegee Ibn Abu Said of Quissoussi. It was written on paper produced in Italy for the North African market, which raises intriguing questions as to how he acquired it.

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A page from a manuscript by Sidi, a Muslim from Senegal (Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The Donald Wyatt Collection)

The Muslim who became famous were only a handful but many others, as accomplished, creative, and

Born Bonaqui Sulaiman, a former diplomat posted in North Africa and a slaveholder, stated in 1831 "There have been several educated Mohammedans slaves imported into the United States."

In 1831, he informed the French Scottish Colonization Society's Ian S Pasdah prince, named Omar, is presently a slave in the United States and will be able to generate precious documents for a detailed notice on his nation."

Bonaqui had tried to get information — probably for the same purpose — from Mamoudou but had to stop due to slaveholders' hostility.

Similarly, Theodore Dwight, the secretary of the American Ethnological Society, obtained a letter from a Mandingo man who had been in this country seven Bonaqui and he had "obtained more information from some of them".

Unfortunately, he has encountered "insuperable difficulties in the way to show countries, arising from the jealousy of masters, and other causes."

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Writing for freedom

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo made the most of his literacy. A trader and Quranic teacher from the Islamic State of Bundu in Senegal, he was abducted in 1731 in Gambia and sold to captain Stephen Pike of the Arabella.

Pike was known to Britons for his kindness and he was allowed to dispatch an acquaintance to his hometown. But the Arabella left before Diallo could be freed.

Frank Marchand, he wrote a letter to his father and gave it to a slave dealer with instructions to deliver it to a friend in Gambia. Marchand was intercepted by Thomas Bell, a friend of James Oglethorpe, the deputy governor of the Royal African Company and future founder of Georgia. After reading the translation, Oglethorpe arranged for Diallo to release and transportation to England.

The Senegalese arrived in London in April 1733. He met the royal family and helped obtained a personal and naturalist Sir Hans Sloane — whose private collection was the foundation of the British Museum, the British Library and the Natural History Museum — and was introduced to the Royal Society and Royal African Company. In 1734, he met the painter William Hoare and wrote three copies of the Quran from memory. One was sent to Jersy for 20 pounds British (£6,8,0,0) to the Bar EI Hoare Collection for Collection to Revive.

In Mississippi, Ibrahima abd al-Rahman followed in Diallo's path with a letter he wrote to a Mate. Thirty years earlier the Mate ate slave-owner Ian of Natchez, the father of Philip Ian Ibrahim's Ian had been captured during a war. His father was sent to Thomas Hutchins, a Mississippi consul in Morocco. He took to Abdur Abd al-Rahman II, who asked for Ibrahima's release. Secretary of State Henry Clay presented the case to President John Quincy Adams who directed a passage to the matter in his diary on July 10, 1827.

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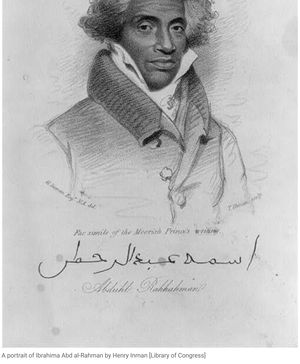
Abu ga-ness in Mississippi. Ibrahima was freed and left for Liberia in 1829 along with his American born wife. She died shortly thereafter. Eight children and grandchildren were freed with the Ali,gate he had raised for that purpose among abolitionists before leaving the US. They settled in Liberia, but seem relative remained endured.



A portrait of Ibrahima Abd al-Rahman by Henry Inman [Library of Congress]

Challenging stereotypes

If his literacy didn't free Omar ibn Said, it largely improved his situation. After he ran away in 1810 from an "evil man ... an infidel who did not fear Allah", Omar was captured as he prayed in a church and thrown in jail as a runaway. With pieces of coal, he covered the walls with pleas, in Arabic, to be released. The brother of a North Carolina governor bought him, gave him light tasks and furnished him with paper and Christian proselytisation.

Omar's 1831 autobiography, written in Arabic, subtly denounced his enslavement with the help of Surat al-Mulk, which states that God has the power over all; in effect refuting his "owner's" supremacy.

Professors Mbaye Bashir Lo at Duke and Carl Ernst at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have closely analysed his 17 known manuscripts. They found that he quoted from memory from a variety of works, including one by a 12th-century Andalusian Sufi master and a 16th-century Egyptian theological poem.

Much was made of Omar's alleged conversion to Christianity and Francis Scott Key helped procure him a Bible in Arabic. Omar also had a Quran, which was said to be his most precious possession. Tellingly, his last known manuscript, in 1857, was Surat al-Nasr (the Victory) as in the victory of Islam against the "unbelievers" and other enemies. This was the last surah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

To be sure, the stereotype of Africans as uncivilised idolaters used as justification for their enslavement did not align with literate, monotheist people. Therefore, Muslims were often misrepresented as Arabs, Moors, and "descendants of the Arabian Mahomedans who migrated to Western Africa".

The American Colonization Society, whose objective was to deport free Black people to Liberia, envisioned freed Muslims, like Ibrahima, as a conduit to the "civilising" of the continent and, strangely enough, its Christianisation.

The blues

The imprint of enslaved African Muslims can still be seen today. Arabic terminology survives in the Gullah language of South Carolina, in Trinidadian and Peruvian songs, in the Caribbean saraka, and in a variety of religions such as Candomble, Umbanda and Macumba in Brazil, Vodun in Haiti, and Regla Lucumi and Palo Mayombe in Cuba.

Moreover, a significant Muslim contribution, the blues, has been acknowledged by major musicologists since the 1970s. The roots of the blues can be found in the field holler – a solo, non-instrumental, slow tune with elongated words, pauses, and melisma, all constitutive elements of the Islamic style of singing and reciting.

What musicologists did not recognise, however, is that the holler was a direct product not of the Muslims' memories, but of Islamic practices that endured in the US such as prayers, the recitation of the Quran, Sufi chants, and the adhan, the call to prayer.

In particular, the closeness to the adhan of WO "Bama" Stewart's "Levee Camp Holler", recorded in 1947 at Parchman prison in Mississippi, is quite extraordinary. When both are juxtaposed, it is hard to tell when one ends and the other starts.

The blues is one of the most lasting and overlooked contributions of African Muslims to American culture.

Another might be the ring shout of the American South, Jamaica, and Trinidad. A religious rite during which people turn in a circle, it was thought to be an African dance with a perplexing name since there is no shouting. Another explanation was proposed in the 1940s. One tour around the Ka'ba is called a shawt, which sounds close to the word "shout" in English. Like the pilgrims do in Mecca, the American shouters turn counterclockwise around a sacred structure, such as the church, the altar, or a dedicated second altar. Could Muslims have "reinvented" the major episode of the Hajj?

A forgotten history

Over time, the story and even the presence of African Muslims in the Americas faded from memory. But since the tragedy of 9/11, there has been a growing interest in this forgotten history, a stunning discovery to most.

African American Muslims used it to claim an ancient lineage and immigrant communities to show that Islam, far from being foreign, was as American as Christianity.

Today, people in the wider Islamic world are increasingly interested in this international history of Islam.

As Africans and as Muslims, the people who lived their faith in the dreadful oppression of American slavery contributed to the social, religious and cultural fabric of this country. The Muslims' legacy, acknowledged or not, lives on. Their story is an African story, a Muslim story, and an American story.

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