

The Signifying Slave: Literate African Muslim Slaves in Antebellum America between Orientalism and Racism.

Mahmoud Abdel-Hamid Khalifa

Taibah University

Abstract: Literate African Muslim slaves were differentiated from the rest of the slaves and given a special status and some of them could leave back to Africa having shown their unworthiness of slavery. African Muslim slaves in British North America have left important biographical and autobiographical evidence of their presence. Literacy was the key factor in a context where a literate African slave was an oxymoron in antebellum America whose vision of the world was governed by the dominant white racial frame. The racial discourse of Enlightenment admitted the presence of exceptions to the general rule of Africa as devoid of any attainments of civilization: this was prompted by the presence of literate Africans; literacy was a sign of reason that gave enlightened Europeans and Americans a pause for thought regarding Africa that soon dissolved into the sea of a dominant white racial frame. Muslims were not exempted from racism even though they were placed above illiterate Africans. Orientalism preached a different type of racism based on culture not on biology. In the midst of it all, African Muslim slaves worked hard to maintain their identity through writing, ritual practice, using their Arabic names. Literacy put them on equal cultural footing with intellectuals of the time but that did not change the asymmetrical relationship of power in favour of the white slave owner.

Key words: Slavery- African Muslim slaves- white racial frame- Orientalism- autobiography- Antebellum America- Literacy- de-Africanization- Enlightenment

According to Michael A. Gomez: “Given that between 400,000 and 523,000 Africans came to British North America during the slave trade, at least 200,000 came from areas influenced by Islam to varying degrees. Muslims may have come to America by the thousands, if not tens of thousands” (682). African Muslim slaves in British North America have left important biographical and autobiographical evidence of their presence. Literacy was the key factor in a context where a literate African slave was an oxymoron in antebellum America whose vision of the world was governed by the dominant white racial frame. Literate African Muslim slaves were differentiated from the rest of the slaves and given a special status and some of them could leave back to Africa having shown their unworthiness of slavery as the cases of Abdulrahman Ibrahima, Job Ben Solomon and Sali-bul-Ali show. Autobiographical and biographical literature left by

those slaves reflect the acts of resistance and manipulation they used to survive the traumatic experience of slavery. Their literacy did not match with their skin colour within the white racial frame which provided white settlers with “big picture narratives” to quote Joe R. Feagin. In that picture, Africans were savages. Feagin argues that: “Over its centuries of operation this strong racial framing has encompassed both a positive orientation to whites and whiteness and a negative orientation to those racial “others” who are exploited and oppressed. The dominant racial frame is negative and ethnocentric toward the racial others ...” (11). A literate African slave disturbs that picture by showing knowledge of writing in another language which is Arabic. This paper will argue that the white racial frame de-Africanized and Orientalized African Muslim slaves so that it can avoid the confounding presence of literate African slaves which threatened the coherence of its racist tenets that represented Africa as a dark, brutal and cannibal place.

Yet the white racial frame is amorphous, for while it de-Africanized and privileged African Muslims because of literacy, it Orientalized them through framing them as Orientals. Resistance to this volatility on the part of the slave required a form of a multifaceted approach that would make African Muslim slaves take advantage of the discourse of racism which privileged and subjugated them at the same time. Literacy was a critical difference between African Muslim slaves and other enslaved Africans. Literacy and education of African Muslim slaves attracted ethnologists and Orientalists of antebellum America: It was a time during which knowledge deployed by European settlers’ discourse about Africa was stereotypical and racist. It was a time also where a sizable number of Muslim slaves were among the slave population transported to the Americas.

African Muslim slaves made Africa relatively accessible to American intellectuals of the time: They were “signifying monkeys” to borrow the words of Henry Louis Gates, a major literary critic of African-American Literary criticism. Through writing and telling, African Muslim slaves could win their freedom and return home by signifying through their literate knowledge of Africa. While signifying for Gates is related to African’s oral tradition; for Muslims, it is closely connected to writing. Gates argues: “For, without the presence of writing as the visible sign of reason, the Africans could not demonstrate their ‘innate’ mental equality with the European and hence were doomed to a perpetual sort of slavery until such mastery was demonstrated” (13). My argument is based on the contention that writing was African Muslim slaves’ way of signification that contrasted so much with the orality of the signifying monkey of Gates. The Orientalist and racist

discourse in Antebellum America as a British colony distinguished between literate and illiterate slaves. Literacy was a mark of reason and was explained away by marking African Muslim slaves as non-Africans. Looking at the autobiographies and biographical records of African Muslim slaves of the time gives an insight into the workings of the white racial frame. The racist discourse of power regarding Africa as populated by a dark and beastly race was the dominant discursive formation which limited what can be said about Africa even though it flew in the face of empiricism, one of the highlights of the Enlightenment. The life narratives of African Muslim slaves presented a totally different vision of Africa through a constant portrayal of Africa as having all the attainment of civilization. Africa had educational institutions which meant a higher rate of literacy than even that found among slave owners and an agricultural system that offered a stable diet. That gap between empirical and stereotypical visions of Africa needed to be explained somehow for the white racial discourse to function and preserve internal coherence which othered Africans based on colour and a racist assumption that they are barbaric. The white racial frame was important to keep the flow of slaves and protect the material interests of the slave owners who depended mainly on slaves as cheap labour.

Orientalizing African Muslim Slaves

In its early modern encounter with the Muslim Barbary states, America drew on a long Western Orientalist tradition that characterized Islam as barbaric (Allison 153). Although the white racist discourse made exceptions and de-Africanized some Arab Muslim slaves, it was a discourse that was locked in a deadly embrace with orientalism. Burton and Loomba argued that during the early modern period - which coincides with the slave trade, a “wide range of writings makes visible the way in which older ideas such as Oriental despotism, African lechery, Southern feebleness, or the Egyptian reversal of gender roles were invoked and transformed to demarcate white European Christians from others (and at other times the English from their neighbors or from Southern Europeans) ...” (9). Orientalist discourse revived stereotypes of Muslims and Africans which placed African Muslim slaves under two disadvantages one discursive and one material: Orientalism and dehumanizing slavery. The double bind brought black and oriental in the category of the Saracen which has come to signify a wide range of stereotypes of Muslims. An early modern text *Cursor Mundi* shows the conflation of Muslim, Arab and black in a typically dehumanizing manner:

On returning home, David met four *Saracens*, *black and blue* as lead. They were misshapen creatures, their mouth was in their breast, and their long brows hung about their ears. Unlovely were their features, "in their forehead stood their sight," but they were unable to look upright. Their hairy arms, with wrinkled skin," were set to the elbows in their side." They had crumpled knees and humped backs. None could forbear laughing who saw them. They asked David to show them "the saving tree "; and when these *Ethiopians* saw it, they did reverence to it, and then they became quite *white* and *handsome*. (Morris xi; my emphasis)

Fast-forward and the message is the same. It comes from an early American anti-slavery novelist. Harriet Beecher Stowe placed blacks, Arabs and Muslims under the 'oriental category' which is a negative marker of otherness and racial inferiority. Speaking of the African slave's temperament, she explains:

The vision attributed to Uncle Tom introduces quite a curious chapter of psychology with regard to the negro race, and indicates a peculiarity which goes far to show how very different they are from the white race. They are possessed of a nervous organisation peculiarly susceptible and impressible. Their sensations and impressions are very vivid, and their fancy and imagination lively. In this respect the race has an Oriental character, and betrays its tropical origin. Like the Hebrews of old and the Oriental nations of the present, they give vent to their emotions with the utmost vivacity of expression, and their whole bodily system sympathises with the movements of their minds. (45)

She goes on:

The fact is, that the Anglo-Saxon race—cool, logical, and practical—have yet to learn the doctrine of toleration for the peculiarities of other races; and perhaps it was with a foresight of their peculiar character and dominant position in the earth, that God gave the Bible to them in the fervent language and with the glowing imagery of the more susceptible and passionate Oriental races. (Stowe 46)

In her perspective, the West is a master race which should learn to deal with irrational Oriental races. Islam is used as a "subterranean self" to use Edward Said's words. Said argued in his much-acclaimed book *Orientalism* that:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on. (3-4)

This distinction worked both in the cultural, religious and racial distinctions which were used selectively to support Western superiority over Islamic and African inferiority. In his book, *Notes on North Africa, The Sahara and Sudan*, William Hodgson, an American ethnologist and founder of *the American Oriental Society* registers his Orientalist bias against Africa and Islam: "On the Mediterranean coast of Africa, there are in progress, at this moment, great political and commercial revolutions. There exists in that region, a sanguinary and unceasing conflict of Christianity and Mohammedanism, of civilization and semi-barbarism" (2). Hodgson matches Islam with semi-barbarism. The book, published in 1844, reflects American Orientalist views of Islam as a cultural foe. Hodgson, however, admits Islam's superiority in comparison to African paganism. He allows a gradation of barbarism where Islam is superior to pagan Africa but still semi-barbaric in comparison to the West. Islam remained the perennial enemy of Christianity and the West. However, this Orientalist view of a dark Africa and a semi-barbaric Islam was challenged by testimonies given by Muslims to ethnologists who sought information about Africa. In a letter sent to Hodgson by a slave owner called James Hamilton Couper, the testimony of an African Muslim slave named Sali-bul-Ali is given about Africa. Hodgson included it in his book:

The exception I mention is a remarkable man for his opportunities; and as his history, country, and the information he possesses, are interesting, I will give you, in detail, the results of the conversations I have had with him.... Tom whose African name was Sali-bul-Ali, purchased about the year 1800, by my father, from the Bahama Islands, to which he had been brought from Anamaboo.... He has quickness of apprehension, strong powers of combination and calculation, a sound judgment, a singularly tenacious memory, and what is more rare in a slave, the faculty of forethought. (qtd in Hodgson 69)

Sali-bul-Ali is a practicing Muslim whose literacy and moral religious character is emphasized:

He is a strict Mahometan; abstains from spirituous liquors, and keeps the various fasts, particularly that of Rhamadan. He is singularly exempt from all feeling of superstition; and holds in great contempt, the African belief in fetishes and evil spirits. He reads Arabic, and has a Koran (which however, I have not seen) in that language, but does not write it. (Hodgson 69)

The rest of the biographical letter by Couper dwells in detail on the reminiscences of Sali-bul-Ali. Historical, geographical and linguistic information about Africa is obtained from Sali-bul-Ali and written down by Couper. Couper mines Sali-bul-Ali for all kinds of information such as the religious and social daily lives of people, the educational system, agriculture, eating habits, domesticated animals, trade and race. Racial differences are well marked and seem to direct some of his inquiries. Only an exception is made when the slave is possessed of some knowledge or literacy. Otherwise, Feagin's racial frame takes over:

Each outgroup that is central to capital accumulation in Europe's colonizing expansion was denigrated. Almost immediately, the English American colonists made great use of physical and biological markers in defining and oppressing "Indians" and "Negroes," both labels they borrowed from the Spanish language of earlier European invaders of the Americas. Those subordinated were colorized and biologized, with skin color and other physical features very negatively characterized and connected to their low position at the bottom levels of the great chain of being. (Feagin 41)

Although Hodgson makes allowances for the humanizing effect of Islam on Africa, he never forgets the superiority of western Christian civilization not only in Africa but even more in Muslim lands. The civilizing mission had just begun and with it more conquest and land grabbing and a flourishing racist Orientalist discourse. The relationship between Orientalist ethnologists and literate African Muslim slaves was asymmetrical in terms of power. The African slave had to demonstrate his worthiness of freedom by showing his readiness to assist trade or Christian evangelism. The ethnologists used that gap to turn them into native informants about their countries or missionaries. Under such circumstances, Muslim slaves provided ethnologists with information on Africa prior to their repatriation.

In an extensively researched biography entitled *Prince Among the Slaves*, Terry Alford, an American professor of history, tells the life story of Ibrahima, an African Muslim

slave. Ibrahima hailed from an elite ruling class in Africa. He was captured and brought into America. He gained the title prince because of his comportment which made him stand out among the slaves. He was assisted to get his freedom back after many years of slavery in the South. He, like Sali-bul-Ali, was literate and that made him stand out and sought after for his literacy and knowledge about Africa. On a tour across America to secure money to free his family having himself and his wife been already freed, Ibrahima was introduced to the audience by a certain Reverend Thomas H. Gallaudet: “Methinks I see [Ibrahima] like a Patriarch crossing the Atlantic, over which he was taken as a slave forty years since, with his flock around him, happy in the luxury of doing good. I think I see benighted Africa, taking her stand among the nations of the earth.... I think I see Africa, pointing to the golden rule of the gospel...” (qtd in Alford 163-164).

African Muslim slaves’ encounter with Orientalism was one of equals in terms of knowledge. Orientalists viewed them as a good source of information and quizzed them about Africa. Charting Africa was a priority: that is where the real value of African Muslims seems the greatest from the point of view of Orientalists and ethnologists. A contemporary of Hodgson wrote an article entitled “Conditions and Character of Negroes in Africa” in which he tried to gather information regarding the interior of Africa. Islam is looked at favorably for having spread literacy and converted pagans, however it is viewed only as a stepping stone for Christianity.

Muslims are closer to the native Americans in relation to the white racial frame. At one time they are described as a threat of barbarism to the White settlers and at other times as brave and noble in comparison to the laziness of Africans.

The Exceptional Slave: De-Africanizing African Muslim Slaves

Literacy was a real challenge to the white racial frame, yet an opportunity for literate African Muslims uprooted from their homelands and brought into slavery in a non-Muslim country; a world so far removed from their culture and religion. It was the white racial frame that placed African Muslim slaves above their African compatriots for practical reasons. According to Sylviane A. Diouf, a prominent historian of Muslim slaves in Antebellum America, African Muslim slaves were represented as Arabs, rather

than Africans. She explains that Muslims were set apart from other slaves because “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 privilege took several forms, one of which was the immense interest in the lives of some slaves whose biographies were supposedly narrated to American writers who wrote them down. One such biography is that of Job Ben Solomon whose biography was written by Thomas Bluett, a Christian minister. Bluett narrates his first encounter with Job Ben Solomon, an Africa Muslim slave:

When I, who was attending the courts there, and had heard of JOB, went with several Gentlemen to the Goaler’s House, being a Tavern, and desired to see him. He was brought into the tavern to us, but could not speak one Word of English. Upon our talking and making signs to him, he wrote a Line or two before us, and when he read it, pronounced the words Allah and Muhammad; by which, and his refusing a Glass of Wine we offered him, we perceived he was a Mahometan, but could not imagine of what country he was, or how he got thither; for by his affable Carriage, and easy Composure of his Countenance, we could perceive *he was no common slave*. (Bluett 2; my emphasis)

“He was no common slave” has a revelatory significance. Literacy seems to have confused the white racial frame which binds skin colour to civilization. A black African belongs to uncivilized and brute cultures; a slave who can read and write in his language is a challenge to the colonial racist discourse. Thomas Bluett, the biographer of Job Ben Solomon, finds it difficult to “imagine of what country he was” because the character of Job does not conform to his mental image of an African slave who is supposed to be removed from civilization and near to the state of nature. Instead of seeing slavery as the culprit behind Job’s captivity, he sees what happened as the ‘divine economy of things’ not the willful act of a brutal and dehumanizing slave trade:

One can't but take Notice of a very remarkable Series of Providence, from the Beginning of JOB's Captivity, till his Return to his own Country. When we reflect upon the Occasion and Manner of his being taken at first, and the Variety of Incidents during his Slavery, which, from slight and unlikely Beginnings,

gradually brought about his Redemption, together with the singular Kindness he met with in this Country after he was ransomed, and the valuable Presents which he carried over with him; I say, when all these Things are duly considered, if we believe that the wise Providence of the great Author of Nature governs the World, 'tis natural for us to conclude that this Process, in the divine economy of Things, is not for nought, but that there is some important End to be served by it. (Bluett 54; my emphasis)

According to Bluett, Job Ben Solomon seems to subscribe to the same idea of providence, “With some such Reflections as these Job used to comfort himself in his Captivity; and upon proper Occasions, in Conversation, would speak very justly and devoutly of the Care of God over his Creatures, and particularly of the remarkable Changes of his own Circumstances; all which he piously ascribed to an unseen Hand” (Bluett 58).

Job Ben Solomon was eventually framed as a Western emissary of civilization to Africa. He was endowed with a civilizing mission. He was served with all the equipment of Western modernity to take back home. His intelligence is commended as he shows exceptional ability to use the tools which were just introduced to him. Yet this realization did nothing to change the stereotypes of Africans as less human: “Instead of reading his life and his memoir as the history of a representative, intelligent clearly civilized man trained in Africa, many writers have retold his adventures as the history of an unusual, not quite African individual saved by English generosity” (Austin 52).

Literacy and class play an important role in the fortunes of Ibrahima. His literacy was displayed everywhere he went to gain financial support to free his family. He was projected as a religious scholar. This manipulation of his literacy which suffered from forty years of slavery was aimed at still constructing him as totally different from the other African slaves and consequently worthy of support to gain his and his family’s freedom and return home:

His time in travelling was passed in part by writing in a book he had purchased. Though it might not appear so to observers, Ibrahima was being embarrassed by some of the requests he received to write literary passages. The years of slavery had taken their toll in both calligraphy and grammar, had taken it so thoroughly that now only his early lessons in the Quran came to him without effort. The pressures to appear “a scholar of no ordinary acquirements” as one Boston editor phrased it, were

terrific, however, and he felt it so important to his fund raising that he practiced continuously at copying lines from a Qur'an and a second book in Arabic that had been given him in Washington. (135-136)

But he was not presented to the donors community as an African, which would have created problems in the slave owning community especially in the South which saw the African as capable only of manual labour: a stereotype that supported the status quo of African slaves. He was presented as an Arab and a Moor. He was dressed in Moorish dress and put on display: "We are requested to state that Prince Abdraman, of Timboo, will attend, in Moorish Costume, at the Panorama of the Falls of Niagra, today, from 10 o'clock A.M. 'til 6 P. M. – Where the public will have an opportunity of seeing this interesting Personage, who has been the subject of singular and extraordinary vicissitude" (qtd in Alford 127). Addressing him as a Moor removes him from the realm of black slavery to the realm of captivity and modern international relations: "The bearer hereof, Prince, is a Moor, reduced to captivity near half a century ago. The executive of othe united states, has obtained him from his master, with a view of restoring him to his friends and country" (qtd in Alford 129). Exotic in both appearance and literacy, Abdrahman Ibrahima attracts attention: "Many ladies who saw him here requested he put his autograph in their albums, for the curious and for those incredulous at the thought of a literate African, he wrote the opening sura of the Qur'an, called the Fatihāh" (Alford 128).

African Muslim slaves were characterized as an exception to the rule. The 'negroes' are deficient in literacy and thought. That privileged status given to Job, Ibrahima and Omar Ibn Said was discursively aimed at de-Africanizing Muslim slaves whose character and literacy would otherwise confuse the racial borderlines of white civilized men and black underdeveloped Africans. Literacy of African Muslim slaves was a real menace to the consistency of the Western racial frame of Africa:

In the eyes of the slaveholders, the Muslims' literacy was dangerous because it represented a threat to the whites' intellectual domination and a refutation of the widely held belief that Africans were inherently inferior and incapable of intellectual pursuits. The Africans' skills constituted a proof of humanity and civilization that did not owe anything to the Christians' supposed civilizing influence. (Diyouf 161)

Literacy was a material threat to the western racist discourse which underpinned slavery.

Yet the white racial discourse was tainted with Orientalist ideas about Arabs and Muslims. When talking about Job Ben Solomon, Bluett shows his Orientalist attitude towards Islam which characterized Islam as a violent religion. The tolerance of Job Ben Solomon was never extended to the general religion. Bluett sets Job Ben Solomon apart from his culture and religion:

As to his Religion, 'tis known he was a Mahometan, but more moderate in his Sentiments than most of that Religion are. He did not believe a sensual Paradise, nor many other ridiculous and vain Traditions, which pass current among the Generality of the Turks. He was very constant in his Devotion to God; but said, he never pray'd to Mahommed, nor did he think it lawful to address any but God himself in Prayer. (Bluett 51)

The Autobiographical Urge: Decentering the Western Narrative

African Muslims interviewed by ethnologists and Orientalists of the time gave a very bright image of Africa that is different from the dark beastly Africa of slavery and racist theories. Sali-bul-Ali, interviewed by James Hamilton Couper, gives a wealth of information about Africa that should have served as a good argument for the humanity and civilization of Africans. They were not beasts of burden; they were human beings who cultivated lands and were fairly developed in agriculture as “They also grow beans, pumpkins, Okra, tomatoes, cumpers and cotton. They have coca-nuts, pineapples, and small yellow figs, which grow on very large trees” (Hodgson 73). Describing their diet, Sali-bul-Ali Christianized as Tom, gives the following details, “The usual food is rice, milk, butter, fish, beef and mutton” (Hodgson 73). He further describes their clothes: “The usual dress of the men, is a large pair of cotton trousers, and a shirt with a conical straw hat, without a rim. They manufacture their own cotton cloth; and dye it of a very fine blue better than anything he has seen here. They also wear blankets, made from the long wool of sheep” (Hodgson 73). The traditional educational system is described as well: “All the children are taught to read and write Arabic, by the priests, (Maalims). They repeat from the Koran, and write on a board, which when filled, is washed off. *There are no slaves.* Crimes are punished by fines” (Hodgson 73; my emphasis). The reference here to the absence of slavery is a covert argument against American slavery. Salih-bul-Ali portrays a romantic Africa that produces all that it needs and a functioning social system. In short, the description gives a view of an organized community with a justice system, an educational system and above all a humane non-slave owning society.

Theodore Dwight, a contemporary of Hodgson, wrote an article in the *Methodist Review* in 1864 entitled “Condition and Character of Negroes in Africa”. In that article, he shows an awareness that Africa is not the dark continent Americans and Europeans see. In his article, he gives a positive view of Africa. He explains that, “Readers who have neglected Africa may not be prepared to believe that schools of different grades have existed for centuries in various interior negro countries, and under the provisions of law, in which even the poor are educated at the public expense, and in which the deserving are carried on many years through the long courses of regular instruction” (79). He does not forget to use Islam in Africa to score a point against the Popery: “Unlike Popery, it favors, nay, requires as a fundamental principal, the free and universal reading and study of their sacred book; and instead of withholding it from the people under penalties of death and perdition, it establishes schools for all classes, primarily to teach its languages and doctrines” (78).

Far from being the supine, complacent informants, African Muslims did assert their Muslim identity even in the face of white racist depravity. Arabic autobiographies and writings left by African Muslim slaves posed a real challenge to the Western exceptionalism preached by the colonial racist discourse. Sali-bul-Ali, for example, left behind a manuscript of Jurisprudence that detailed religious practice and dogma of Muslims. African Muslim slaves, writing in Arabic, located authority of *ilm* (knowledge) somewhere else by naming their teachers before discussing their calamities under western slavery. The lineage of student-teacher bond rooted the slave in another tradition and human relationship which contrasted so deeply with the slave’s current situation of powerlessness and dehumanization:

Despite the unusual provenance of these works, several of them clearly deploy the classic conventions of the Arabic religious auto/biographical tradition. It is indeed a powerful moment of *deja vu* to read in the terse autobiographical writings of a person considered mere chattel in early-nineteenth-century America formulas and phraseology reminiscent of those used by medieval philosophers, religious thinkers, and princes centuries earlier. (Reynolds 9)

This is clear in Omar Ibn Said’s introductory paragraphs in his short Arabic autobiography. He concentrates on mentioning the names of religious scholars who taught him: “My name is Omar Ibn Seid. My birthplace was Fut Tur, between two rivers. I sought knowledge under the instruction of a sheikh Mohammed Seid, my own brother,

and sheikh Soleiman Kembah, and sheikh Gabriel Abdal. I continued my studies twenty five years (Alrayyes 61). Abu Bekr Saddiq, another slave, wrote about his religious education: “This was done in the city of Ghonah, where there are many learned ‘Ulema (scholars of Islam) who are not natives of one place, but each of them having quitted their own country, has come there and settled. The names these Sayyids were as follows: ‘Abd Allah Ibn al-Hajj, Muhammad al-Watarawi, Muhammad al-Mustafa...” (Al-Aharai 203).

While Non-Muslim slave narratives sought literacy as a white gift, African Muslim slaves were drawing on an age-old tradition of biographical /autobiographical writing and Islamic knowledge which owed nothing to the white man’s legacy. African Muslim slaves came to antebellum America carrying a different religion and cultural consciousness. The white man was for them *ahl kitab* from the “people of the book” which is a category found in the Muslim scripture. Muslims were aware of the religious beliefs of the European settlers in America. Job Ben Solomon could argue against the doctrine of the Trinity to the perplexity of his biographer and benefactor. According to Bluett:

He was so fixed in the Belief of one God, that it was not possible, at least during the Time he was here, to give him any Notion of the Trinity; so that having had a New Testament given him in his own Language, when he had read it, he told me he had perused it with a great deal of Care, but could not find one Word in it of three Gods, as some People talk: I did not care to puzzle him, and therefore answered in general, that the English believed only in one God. (Bluett 51-52)

Job Ben Solomon shows some relatively good knowledge of the Bible:

JOB was well acquainted with the historical Part of our Bible, and spoke very respectfully of the good Men mentioned in Scripture; particularly of JESUS CHRIST, who, he said, was a very great Prophet, and would have done much more Good in the World, if he had not been cut off so soon by the wicked Jews; which made it necessary for God to send Mahomet to confirm and improve his Doctrine. (Bluett 53)

The retention of Muslim names was one more strategy of resistance as it signified a Muslim identity that is different from the identity of slave owners. Muslims resisted assimilation into the categories of the white racial frame. One writer has argued that “In that discourse, only the master had the power to define who or what the African slave

could signify. For a slave, to retain Muslim names and traditions must have been perceived by some whites as an intolerable threat to the social order” (Turner 44). Arabic language was yet another form of resistance. It was used as a distancing technique that distinguished African Muslim slaves from Christian white culture. It offered the slaves a counter frame where they felt superiority and cultural pride. Ghada Osman and Camille Forbes argued that:

Through the use of Arabic and Qur’ānic references, Omar reveals an image of the ‘West’ and the ‘Christian’ not as that to which the African must aspire, but instead as an ‘Other’ in the realm of his enslaved Muslim African’s world. Rather than being on the ‘double quest for literacy and freedom’ typical of American slavery, Omar ibn Said is a new representation as the already literate learned slave. (343)

Unlike Muslims in Bahia in Spanish America who had a chance to form a community and start Jihad against the Spanish authorities, Muslims in America had limited resources. They kept to Jihad of the self and struggled to preserve their identity. The hostile atmosphere of Puritans like Cotton Maher would not have allowed the free expression of other religions. Writing in Arabic helped African Muslim slaves practice religion and create community. Muslims of Sapelo Island off the shores of Georgia were capable of creating a small community but that is all. No trace of Islam exists after that. They lacked the institutions that would perpetuate their language and religious practice. Islam like all traditions could not exist as a secret religion or a minority religion for long.

To sum up, the racial discourse of Enlightenment admitted the presence of exceptions to the general rule of Africa as devoid of any attainments of civilization: this was prompted by the presence of literate Africans; literacy was a sign of reason that gave enlightened Europeans and Americans a pause for thought regarding Africa that soon dissolved into the sea of a dominant white racial frame. Muslims were not exempted from racism even though they were placed above illiterate Africans. Orientalism preached a different type of racism based on culture not on biology. In the midst of it all, African Muslim slaves worked hard to maintain their identity through writing, ritual practice, using their Arabic names. Literacy put them on equal cultural footing with intellectuals of the time but that did not change the asymmetrical relationship of power in favour of the white slave owner.

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