

**Early Muslim Slaves
in America (1527-1903)**

Dr. Zeghoudi Yahia
-Université de Tlemcen

ملخص:

يتناول هذا المقال نبذا من تاريخ شبه مجهول وسير لأوائل المسلمين من الأفارقة خاصة المستعبدين في القارة الأمريكية ممن سيقوا إليها من غرب وشمال إفريقيا فيما عرف بتجارة العبيد عبر المحيط الأطلسي بداية من القرن الثامن عشر. وقد بلغ العدد الإجمالي للعبيد المجلوبين أكثر من عشرة ملايين يعتقد المؤرخون أن 7 إلى 8 بالمائة منهم كانوا مسلمين ويرى آخرون أن النسبة تزيد عن هذه. ولعل أول عبد أسود مسلم معروف في القارة الأمريكية هو إسطفان الذي انحدر من أزموور بجنوب المغرب الأقصى وقد استقدمه المستكشفون الإسبان من إسبانيا إلى فلوريدا سنة 1527 لتسند إليه مهمة الدلالة والترجمة من أجل استكشاف وتعمير أريزونا ونيو ميكسيكو بالولايات المتحدة حاليا. فبدايات هاتين الولايتين مدينة للمجهودات التي قام بها، ولقد كان أن لقي حتفه في هذا السعي على أيدي قبيلة الزونبي الهندية سنة 1539. وبداية من 1717 وصلت أولى شحنات العبيد المسلمين إلى أمريكا الشمالية قادمة من كوت ديفوار وغانا والنيجر والجزائر. وقد عانى هؤلاء معاناة شديدة في البيئة النصرانية الجديدة العدائية. كثير منهم تنصر، إلا أنه توفرت لنا بعض النبذ عن أولئك الذين تمسكوا بدينهم وقاوموا حتى لقوا حتفهم. ولقد كانت سيرهم شجيرة مؤثرة تستحق الجلاء والذكر و من هؤلاء: أيوب سليمان ابن ديالو وبلاي محومت وسالم الجزائري.

Abstract:

Little is known of the tragic landing of *Muslims* from Africa to Central and North America beginning from 1717. Those pioneers suffered terribly from their servitude as well as from the hostile Christian community, which pressured them to apostatize and embrace Christianity. Some fell while others resisted by sticking to the *Islamic*

practices and traditions and stuck to the use of Arabic as an intellectual resistance to slavery and evangelizing. Here are a few brief biographies of the moving and dramatic lives of a small group of African *Muslim* slaves.

Keywords

Muslim slaves in early America – Istafan of Azemmour- Salem the Algerian-Hadji Ali-the Wahhab Brothers-

Introduction

In an earlier article we dealt with the supposed '*Muslim* presence' in the American continent, which we said existed in its earliest manifestation between AD 700 and AD 800. We mentioned that *Muslims* had arrived from West and North Africa and Spain and had settled in Nevada, Indiana, New Mexico, Arizona, etc. and had established a civilization there and elsewhere in the continent.¹ Presently, we are going to examine the *Muslim* presence after the arrival of Columbus up to the 19th century, highlighting the lives of the few *Muslim* slaves about whom we could get scarce information. However, compared with the pre-Columbian period this one is relatively better known than the previous.

As to Muslims, in general, they were present during the Spanish conquest of the West Indies, Central and South America as well as the southern parts of the USA. King Charles V of Spain issued a decree in 1539 that forbade the grandsons of *Muslims* who had lived in Spain during the *Muslim* rule to migrate to the Spanish colonies in the West Indies. Then, he followed it with an order in 1543 to expel all *Muslims* from Spanish overseas territories, but there are proofs that they were still there. They had even contributed to the Spanish expeditions into the American mainland². For example, Estevan or Istafan³, the Arab who had originated in Azemmour, Southern Morocco, was the first identifiable *Muslim* in North America. He came from Spain to Florida in 1527. He was a black slave both in Spain and America, who served as guide and interpreter to the Spanish explorers, who intended to settle the present day Arizona in the USA in 1539. The beginnings of Arizona and

New Mexico owe to his efforts. Istafan had also previously taken part in the expedition of Panfilo de Narvaez to Florida, which ended in total failure in 1527 with the death of all but four people who numbered originally 400. The expedition had started from the Gulf Coast. Noteworthingly, in an article in *Islamic Horizons*, Brent Kennedy, considers him the first *Muslim* or Moor in America⁴. Moreover, Istafan also became the first non-Indian to enter the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola⁵ to visit the Pueblo Indians in what are now the states of New Mexico and Arizona. The Zuñi Indians killed him in an attack in 1539, while serving as a guide for the friar Marco de Niza. During his lifetime, the massive Atlantic slave trade was in full operation, leading to the enslavement of over ten million Africans. The first *Muslim* slaves arrived from Africa to North America in 1717.⁶ Most slaves were brought from West Africa's *Muslim* states such as present-day Ghana, Ivory Coast, Niger, and Algeria.⁷ Among these West African slaves, an estimated 7 to 8 percent were *Muslims*.⁸ Another source puts the estimation of 15% of slaves brought to North America to be from *Muslim* tribes.⁹ According to Richard Brent Turner, the latter were a minority distinguished by its resistance among the rest of slaves. This represented a particular fear to the Spanish authorities, which insisted that the slaves imported to the New World had to be *ladinos*, that is to say, captives who had spent some time in Spain and were forced to convert to Christianity. They feared that those Muslims would convert Indians and teach them how to use the horses, which would undermine the Spanish military advantages.¹⁰

The life stories of these *Muslims* were fascinating, for they told of princes, teachers, scholars and soldiers who were captured in their homelands and sold in slavery in a strange Christian land. These were transmitters of the *Islamic* religion to the American continent where they struggled to maintain the *Islamic* tradition in a hostile environment. They were the first identified and recognized transmitters of this religion into America, which is a significant event in the history of *Islam* in this continent. They preserved their *Muslim* names and traditions and their literacy in Arabic to constitute the intellectual front to resist slavery. Sometimes, *Muslim* slaves used Arabic to plan revolts.¹¹

At about the same period of Spanish conquests of the American mainland, another *Muslim* by the name of Nasruddin was one of the earliest Arab settlers in America. He is well known for having killed an Indian Mohawk princess, who refused to marry him.¹²

As to the black African *Muslims* who were shipped to America during the famous slave trade, their arrival started in 1530. Over ten million were brought from their homelands and made to serve in farming. A great number among them were from Futa Jallon, Futa Toro and Massina and other regions of West Africa. Timbuktu was the capital of those lands from which the slaves had been taken. They were shipped to Cuba, Mexico, and South America. In the estimation given by Ahari, over 30% of all those slaves were *Muslims*¹³. This proves that blacks in the USA have a *Muslim* historical background to which a number of black scholars made reference, like Edward Wilmot Blyden and non-black scholars like Richard Brent Turner.

Biographies of some *Muslim* slaves

1. Ayub Suleiman ibn Diallo

Later in the 18th century, in colonial America (1607 – 1783), some African *Muslim* slaves' experiences were recorded for history. Among them was that of Ayub Sulaiman ibn Diallo,¹⁴ or Ayuba Suleiman Ibrahima Diallo (c. 1700-1773) according to Richard Brent Turner¹⁵. He is also known by his partly anglicized name Job Ben Solomon. He was a slave who continued to practice *Islam* in Maryland during his two years life of slavery. He was from a Fulbe family, who gave a number of *Muslim* religious leaders to West Africa. His grandfather established his birth town in Senegal, Bondou. He studied the *Qur'an* and Arabic with prince Sambo, the heir to the throne of Futa in his early youth.

In 1730 while he was travelling to the coast to buy supplies of paper and to sell two of his father's slaves to English traders, he was attacked by his enemies, the *Mandinkas*, and sold to the English. The ship that he intended to sell his father's slaves to carried him to Annapolis, Maryland. Ayub Sulaiman worked on plantations in Maryland, and as once he prayed in the woods white children mocked him and threw dirt in his face. He tried to run away from his plantation, but he was later

captured and put in prison. An English priest, Thomas Bluett, heard about Ayuba Sulaiman while in prison and went to see him. Bluett discovered that Sulaiman was fluent in Arabic and had a strong devotion to *Islam*. He could also tell from his affable carriage and easy composure of his countenance that Sulaiman was not a common slave.

His maintaining of the *Islamic* identity helped him gain sympathy and his freedom. His good command of oral and written Arabic and his inner struggle to preserve his *Islam* in the difficult situation in bondage in America brought notice to his plight, leading to his freedom by the founder of the colony of Georgia, James Oglethorpe in 1733. The latter also made arrangements for his transportation to England the same year. Once in England, he became acquainted with the royal family as well as with Sir Hans Sloane, the founder of the British Museum. Having learnt the *Qur'an* by heart, he used to write copies of it from memory. The British Museum staff asked him to translate Arabic inscriptions on coins into English along with other Arabic materials for the Royal Society¹⁶. In addition, he drew a map of West Africa with the names of places in Arabic. Furthermore, Sulaiman obtained the freedom of his friend Lamine Ray, who had been brought with him from Africa. In 1734, Thomas Bluett published his biography in England, and the Royal African Company carried him back to Africa. There, the company used him in the slave, gold, and rum trade. Eventually, he regained his homeland in Boonda¹⁷, Galumbo in 1735. While in his birth town, he assisted the Arabic-speaking Armenian Melchour De Jaspas, who worked for the Royal Company, in exploring Africa from 1738 to 1740. Faithfully, he maintained his contact with his English friends until his death.

2. Salem, the Algerian

The next *Muslim* in line in the present day United States was Salem the Algerian, who was from a royal family in Algiers, Algeria. He studied in Constantinople and was captured by a Spanish man of war on his way back from a visit to Constantinople. Later, he was sold to the French in New Orleans, USA, where he served as a slave. Eventually, he ran away from slavery, reached some Indian tribes and lived free among them until he settled in Virginia¹⁸. At some point, he was found in a

depressed condition in tattered rags. He was taught English and when discovering that he knew Greek, he was given a copy of the New Testament in that language. Several politicians, who eventually became Congress members, became his friends and got him to convert to Christianity. After this event, he decided to return to Algeria to spread the Christian faith. He made a disastrous trip to his homeland where his people refused to embrace the Christian faith and shunned him for his apostasy from *Islam*. Consequently, he returned to the USA and met with Thomas Jefferson and even attended the First Continental Congress held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on September 5th, 1774. The agenda was mainly to find a response to the Coercive Acts¹⁹ passed by the British Parliament in April 1774, as well as to adopt and issue a series of resolutions and protests against British abuse in the colonies. During his presence in Congress, a painter, Mr. Peale, drew his portrait. Salem was said to have died an insane at the estate of Mr. Page, a member of Congress. He had been an insane since his conversion to Christianity and his return from his journey to Algiers. Some said that he regained his sanity some time before his death and renounced Christianity, while others said he died a Christian²⁰. Anyway, neither Salem the Algerian nor Ayub Sulaiman ibn Diallo tried to transmit *Islam* in America. Only the latter tried to keep his belief.

Besides the experience of Salem the Algerian in the middle of and late 18th century, another group of *Muslims* made a forced visit to America. The Wahhab brothers had their ship wrecked in the coast of North Carolina in the 1770's. Consequently, they settled there, married and started farming land they had acquired. They had grandsons, who are still living in the USA and they own now one of the largest hotel chains in North Carolina. Around the same time, a shipload of 70 Moorish slaves landed in Maryland, but nothing is known about what happened to them.

There was documentation of *Islamic* presence among African slaves throughout the 19th century. In the following, there will mainly be a review of the lives of four individuals: Lamén Kebe, Salih Bilali, Bilali Mahomet and Hadji Ali and others.

3. Lamén Kebe

Lamen Kebe was also known as Lamine Kaba and Paul. He, too, struggled to keep his *Islamic* faith and identity in North America. He was a schoolteacher back in Africa. It was Theodore Dwight, Jr., who wrote his biography; however, he failed to do it successfully since he did not focus on the life of Kebe, but rather on West African *Muslim* educational methods. His purpose was to learn about this education in order to send Arabic Bibles to Liberia for missionary work.

Kebe was born around 1780 in Futa Jallon in a wealthy *Sereculeh* family, whose members were noted *Jakhanké* teachers of *Islamic* sciences. The latter were devoted wandering teacher-*imams*, whose mission was to teach *Islam*, historical accuracy and the education of young people. Kebe studied to an advanced level theology, law, philology, Arabic language sciences, *hadith* and scriptural exegesis. After his education, he started to teach at the age of twenty-one and continued teaching for five years. When he was twenty-seven, he was kidnapped while in search for paper near the coast. From there he was sold as a slave in America. He may have arrived at this destination around 1807, where he served about thirty years as a slave in Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama. Finally, he returned to Africa in 1835 with the help of the American Colonization Society.²¹

To return to Africa, Lamine Kebe devised an intelligent plan to deceive his Christian, American white philanthropists in the aim of raising funds for his passage. He pretended that he had undergone a sudden conversion to Christianity when his master manumitted him. In 1835, he voiced to a group of white philanthropists his wish to return to Africa to reunite with his wife and children as well as to convert his *Muslim* people to Christianity. He ended his plea by blessing America. Kebe also meant to back up the colonization movement, because months after this speech he moved to New York, where he solicited funds for colonization in Liberia. This bid was sanctioned with the collection of two thousand dollars, which he allotted to aid blacks to immigrate to Liberia. Some of the information about Kebe could be found in the magazine of the American Colonization Society, the *African Repository*, which reported on the occasion:

A coloured man was now presented to the audience, who expected shortly to go out as an

emigrant to Liberia. The gentlemen who presented him said that he was an educated man, that he spoke, read, and wrote the Arabic language very perfectly; and was a professed believer in Christ. He intended to act as a missionary to his race. He had been liberated by his master for this end; and had been waiting now for 90 days for an opportunity of going.²²

The society transported him to Liberia, which he reached in August 19, 1835, where he went by the name of Paul A. Mandingo. Finally, he moved to Sierra Leone where he settled.

A year before his passage back to Africa, Theodore Dwight, Jr., asked him to tell him his story to publish as a biography. The biographer was a Yale graduate, editor, linguist and a member of the American Ethnological Society. Although he did not believe that Kebe had converted successfully to Christianity, he wrote his biography with the intention of learning about the *Islamic* educational system practised in Western Africa. The goal was to use it in a missionary campaign to send Bibles in Arabic to facilitate the conversion of *Muslims* there into Christianity.

In the story of Kebe, we learn that certain Muslim slaves in America maintained correspondence with slaves who had returned to Africa in the 19th century. The following excerpt is from an introduction of a letter written in Arabic by Muslim slave Omar ibn Said in America in 1836 to his friend Lamine Kebe in West Africa. We learn that they maintained correspondence in Arabic, not in English the language of the place where they lived the most part of their life. Arabic was another tool of intellectual resistance to slavery, alienation and attempts to convert them to Christianity:

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, and 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.²³

4. Omar Ibn Said (1770-1864)

The intimate friend of Lamine Kebe, Omar Ibn Said, was born in 1770 in Futa Toro, probably between Senegal and the Gambia, or Senegal and Niger Rivers in their upper parts. In his Arabic letter to his friend in Africa, he tells of his birth, education and how his land was invaded and his being imprisoned and sold as a slave to Christians:

...The teachers of Bundu-foota were a sheik, named Mohammed-Sayeed, my brother,
and the sheik Soleyman Kimba, and sheik Jebraeel-Abdel. I was teacher
twenty-five
years. There came a great army to my country. They killed many
people. They took me
to the sea, and sold me in the hands of Christians, who bound me, and
sent me on board
of a great ship and we sailed a month and half a month, when we came
to a place called
Charleston in the Christian language.²⁴

American historians' biography of Omar Ibn Said told that he was sold to a kind planter in South Carolina and was well treated. According to it, it was the treatment of a cruel overseer that drove him to run away from the farm of his master. This is not true. The narrative might have been concocted on purpose to soothe American consciences about slavery and to defend it in the South.

Omar Ibn Said said about it:

Here they sold me to a small, weak, and wicked man named Johnson,
a complete
infidel, who had no fear of God at all. Now I am a small man, and not
able to do hard work.
So I fled from the hand of Johnson, and, after a month, came to a place
where I saw some
houses. On the new moon I went into a large house to pray; a lad saw
me, and rode off
to the place of his father, and informed him that he had seen a black
man in the great
house. A man named Handah (Hunter) and another man with him...

He continued his narrative by indicating that he had been made to walk twelve miles to Fayetteville, where they put him in jail for sixteen

days. Thereafter, Bob Mumford took him to his home where he stayed four nights, after which his son-in-law, Jim Owen asked Omar Ibn Said to accompany him to a place called Bladen. In fact, James Owen the brother of a former governor of North Carolina had bought the African to use as a slave.

Omar Ibn Said presented himself to his master as being of an intellectual background with a frail health, expecting him to spare him all hard labour, which the latter did to a certain extent. He was a black *Tukolor Fula*, who received education and training in Africa to become a scholar, teacher and trader. He arrived in America in 1807. Although many articles on his life had been published since 1825, they contained many false facts on his subject. They indicated that he abandoned *Islam* and Africa and converted to Christianity and spent the rest of his life in the love of America and white Christians. As scholars and writers created an orientalist culture during antebellum America,²⁵ Omar Ibn Said's time, they were inclined to distort historical facts to suit their wishes. In their dealing with this African *Muslim*, they formulated his story according to their preconceived views of *Islam* as an exotic, mysterious, and inferior Arab religion.²⁶ To counter the idea that he truly converted to Christianity, believed in it and attended church services regularly, the fact that he wrote on his Arabic Bible references to Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), and that all his manuscripts contained indication to the Prophet of *Islam* demonstrate his assimilation might have been a deceptive means.

In 1819 when colonist Francis Scott Key in North Carolina offered an Arabic Bible to Omar Ibn Said, he was still practising *Islam*. In spite of the fact that he attended the church regularly and was said to have written Christian prayers for whites, the fact is that he rather wrote *Muslim* inscriptions indicating that he was still a *Muslim* struggling to maintain his faith in this Christian environment. "The Lord's Prayer," Omar's last extant Arabic manuscript that Christians there believed was related to their religion, was a paraphrase of *Surat An-Nasr* from the *Qur'an*. This *Surat* tells of Allah's ultimate victory. It reads in this translation:

When comes the Help of Allah, and Victory (1), and then dost see the people enter Allah's

Religion in crowds (2), celebrate the Praises of thy Lord, and pray for His Forgiveness: for

he is Oft-Returning (in grace and Mercy) (3).

The other speculation regarding those Arabic manuscripts by Omar Ibn Said is that he might have used *Quranic* verses as magic protection against his enemies and against domination by white masters. Besides, his manuscripts contained Arabic drawings and pentacles similar to the amulets discovered with the *Muslim* slaves in the Muslim insurrection of 1835 in Bahia, Brazil.²⁷ The latter amulets consisted of leather pouches that contained pieces of paper with passages from the *Qur'an* and prayers that had a seductive power over Africans in Brazil and West Africa. Their usage included magical protection from the various threats that a *Muslim* slave may face in his life. The *Muslim* Africans in America might have used them in their continuous struggle to resist domination of white Christians and to protect themselves from the wrath of their masters. All this could be inscribed in their *jihad* to maintain their *Islamic* faith and identity. It is also to be noted that the Arabic literary tradition and the *Qur'an* helped resist slavery and gave the slaves moral strength.²⁸

One final note regarding Omar Ibn Said as to his connection with international *Islam* is that in 1858 he received a letter in Arabic from Yang, a Chinese *Muslim* in Canton, China. Reverend D. Ball played the role of intermediary between them. Finally, one of Omar's Arabic letters came to the knowledge of Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), the noted Pan-African scholar causing him to start his field work among *Muslim* communities in Western Africa. As Daniel Bliss, head of the Syrian Protestant College, knew about Omar's letters, he believed that there were many *Muslims* in West Africa who had knowledge of Arabic. Therefore, he arranged to send Arabic Bibles to Liberia. Each Bible contained a leaflet requesting information about people who were literate in Arabic further inland in Africa. Finally, a letter in Arabic came to the Liberia College in 1867. The sender was a *Mandinka Muslim* in Liberia by the name of Karfae. It read:

We are of one religion and that is the religion of Mohammed: Whosoever believes in our prophet shall enter heaven, but whosoever does not believe in our prophet shall dwell in hellfire. [But] come to us with the books which are among you, and your paper and we will write to you.²⁹

This letter came as a help to Blyden's efforts to establish contact with the *Muslims* in West Africa when at the same time he was planning to start a department of Arabic studies at the College of Liberia.

The black Presbyterian minister, Blyden, visited the region and the fruit of his visit to *Muslim* communities in West Africa had an important impact on his vision of the plight of the Negro in America. He used the example of *Islam* in this region of Africa as a paradigm to racial separatism in his Pan-Africanist ideology. He noticed in *Muslim* communities that blacks and Arabs lived separated in a climate of mutual understanding and respect. Ultimately, he became of the conviction that for blacks, *Islam* was preferable to Christianity. Blyden said in this context:

Mohammedanism in Africa has left the native master of himself and of his home; but wherever Christianity has been able to establish itself...foreigners have taken possession of the country, and, in some places, rule the natives with oppressive rigour.³⁰

As the father of Pan-Africanism, his ideas about *Islam* affected the adherents of his ideology. These ideas served as an ideological link between the old *Islam* of the original African *Muslim* slaves and the new American Islam of the early twentieth century.

Bilali Mahomet and Salih Bilali

The other African *Muslim* was Salih Bilali, a *Fulani*, whose story was written by James Cooper. However, he wrote about the vocabulary of the *Fula* but nothing about his *Islamic* practice. The third one was Bilali Mahomet who was mentioned by William Brown Hodgson.

Others mentioned by Hodgson were Omar Ibn Said, who was a butler of the brother of a former Governor of North Carolina who lived at Fayette Ville, North Carolina. Omar wrote a 13 -page autobiography in Arabic.

The content of his booklet shows that he might have been a *Qadiryyah Sufi*³¹, trader, and schoolteacher who had nearly converted to Christianity under difficult circumstances.³²

5. Bilali Mahomet

Bilali Mahomet and Salih Bilali were two black *Muslim* slaves who lived among at least twenty others and could practise their faith in Sapelo Island and St. Simon's Island in the Georgia Sea Islands during the antebellum period. In these islands, these *Muslims* enjoyed a relative isolation from Euro-American influences, enabling them, thus, to maintain their *Islamic* practices to a better extent than their fellows in mainland America. Both men were steadfast in maintaining their identities, performing their religious obligations, and keeping the traditional ways of *Muslim* dress and names, and one of them in speaking and writing Arabic with ease. This one passed Arabic on to his children. Both of them might have been leaders of a small black *Muslim* community on those islands.

Georgia Conrad, a white Christian resident of one of the Sea Islands, was impressed by the Bilali family whom she met in the 1850s. This family maintained traditional *Muslim* dress, spoke Arabic, and stuck to *Islam*. She wrote:

On Sapelo Island near Darcen, I used to know a family of Negroes who worshipped Mahomet...

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-lali. He always wore

A cap that resembled a Turkish fez.³³

Bilali Mahomet also known as Bu Allah and Ben Ali was a slave to Thomas Spaulding from the early to the mid-1800s, who spent his life working on his plantation of Sapelo Island, Georgia. When the Works Progress Administration was underway in the 1930's, Bilali's great-

grandchildren were able to remember his story and tell it to the project's writers. His nineteen children received *Muslim* names and were brought up in the *Islamic* faith. After his death, he left an Arabic manuscript which he had written and asked for his prayer rug and the *Qur'an* to be buried with him.

Not much is known about his life in Africa, except that he was born in Timbo, Futa Jallon. He was probably raised in a scholarly *Muslim* family as the manuscript, which he had composed in America testified to an advanced mastery of Arabic. The manuscript was a treatment of pieces from the *Malikite* legal text, *Ar-Rissala*, the book that had been authored by Abu Muhammed Abdullah ibn Abi Zaid Al-Qairawani. Bilali entitled his book First Fruits of Happiness, and tried in it to apply *Islamic* law, *sharia*, to a wholesome life in its daily details. He was the author of this only extant book of *Islamic* law written in America and provided a number of *Islamic* terms to the Gullah dialect of English.³⁴ Bilali was the manager of his master's plantation that included over five hundred slaves. He was an able military leader as well, for in the British War of 1812, he led eighty armed slaves against the British and stopped their advance, thus saving the island. He was authoritative, for in this war, he forewarned his master, Thomas Spaulding, that he was responsible only for *Muslim* slaves in his regiment. He said that if in a battle, "I will answer for every Negro of the true facts, but not for the Christian dogs you own".³⁵

In the 1930's, when the writers of the Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writer's Project interviewed his great-grand children, the latter still could remember him. According to Shadrack Hall, one of Bilali's great-grandsons, he was brought from the Bahamas with his wife Phoebe to Georgia and was able to maintain *Islamic* traditions and names for at least three generations. He said in the interview:

Muh gran Hestah, Bilali's daughter. She tell me Belali wuz coal black, wid duh small feechuhs

we hab, and he wuz very tall... Beleli had plenty daughtahs, Medina, Yaruba, Fatima, Bentoo,

Hestah, Margret, and Chaluut.³⁶

Another interviewee, Katie Brown, one of Bilali's great-grandchildren talked about her grandmother, Margret, who was a *Muslim*. She used to wear a headdress and make rice cakes for the children to celebrate the end of the fasting month, *ramadhan*. She said to the interviewers:

Yes'm, I membuh gran too. Belali he from Africa but muh gran she came by Bahamas...

She make funny flat cake she call "saraka." She make um same day ebry yeah, an it big day.

Wen dey finish, she call us in, all duh chillum, an put in hans fill flat cake an we eats it.³⁷

6. Salih Bilali

Salih Bilali, the intimate friend of Bilali Mahomet on the Georgia Sea Islands was born in Massina in 1765, and was likely to be a *Mandinko* from a family with solid religious background. At the age of twelve, he was kidnapped and sold into slavery on his way back from Jenne in West Africa, where he studied. While a slave in America, he still remembered well Arab *Muslims* who sold them goods in Jenne, Timbuktu, Gouna, and Sego as well as the racial and cultural differences between them. He was brought from West Africa to the Bahamas, where the Cooper family bought him around 1800. He served this family and around 1816 became an overseer of their plantation in St. Simon's, where he managed over four hundred slaves. He was steadfast in maintaining his Islamic practices, which might have resulted from the training he had received from his friend, Bilali Mahomet, in the Bahamas and Georgia. Salih Bilali and Mahomet Bilali formed together the nucleus of a small *Muslim* community on the Georgia Islands. The testimony of his master, James Hamilton Cooper, who owned a plantation on St. Simon's Island wrote a paper for the American Ethnological Society on his slave Salih Bilali, also known on the Island as Tom. He wrote:

He is a strict Mahometan; abstains from spirituous liquor, 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...in that language but does not write it...Mr. Spaulding of Sapelo,

has, among his Negroes, one named Bul-Ali who writes Arabic and speaks the Folah language.

Tom and himself are intimate friends.He is now old and feeble. Tom informs me he is from Timboo.³⁸

During the Georgia Write's Project in the 1930's, Ben Sullivan , Salih Bilali's grandson told that his father received his Arabic name from his own father, who worked on one of Cooper's plantation's. His father chose the surname Sullivan after the Civil War and became Bilali Sullivan. He practised his *Islamic* faith and made *saraka* cakes on certain occasions. Ben Sullivan himself was a *Muslim* slave of Cooper. The group included other *Muslims* such as Alex Boyd, his maternal grandfather, Daphne and Israel. Ben Sullivan tells that:

Ole Israel he pray a lot wid a book he hab wit he hide, and he take a lill mat and he

Pray wen duh sun go up an wen du sun go down...He alluz tie he head up in a white clawt.³⁹

These biographical sketches of Bilali Mahomet and Salih Bilali are evidence that African *Muslim* slaves in America attempted to establish a small *Muslim* community in the hostile Christian environment in the 19th century. They struggled to preserve their faith, identity, and traditions. Women, too, played a significant role in struggling to keep their *Islamic* practices and by transmitting their traditions to their descendants. The women maintained the *Islamic* way of dress, made cakes on big occasions such as *Id El-Fitr*, the celebration of the end of the fasting month *Ramadhan*. The impressions those *Muslim* slaves left on their children continued to exist. The latter were able to recall them when the writing project of the 1930's took place.⁴⁰ These memories were preserved in the African American folklore in the 20th century. It can be said that the Islamic content of the African American folklore prepared them psychologically for *Islam*, even in the false version of the Nation of Islam in the 1930's. These memories provided the link between the Negroes of the first half of the 20th century and their ancestors by sitting

deep in their souls, making them familiar with *Islam* and ready to accept it.

7. Abd Al-Rahmane Ibrahima (1762-1825)

The other African *Muslim* was Abd Al-Rahmane Ibrahima⁴¹, also known as Abdurrahmane Ibrahim Sori⁴², a West African prince captured by his enemies and sold to white slavers. He stayed in America forty years without forgetting his Arabic, which he continued to use until his return to die in Africa. Documentation of his story could be found in *A Prince Among Slaves*, a book by Terry Alford⁴³. His life story sheds light on the intellectual resistance, signification and struggle with the self to maintain *Islam* in America. Abd Al-Rahmane Ibrahima was born in Timbo, the Present-day Guinea in 1762. His father was King Sori of Timbo, a *Muslim* leader of the *Fulbe people*, who established a prosperous *Muslim* community among hostile unbelievers. As was the habit among his people, Ibrahima went to the *Quranic* school to learn Arabic and the *Qur'an* in which he became adept. At twelve, his father sent him to Jenne and Timbuktu for further studies. When he was seventeen, he returned to Futa Jallon to aid his father in his *jihad* against the polytheists. In 1781 he became a military hero when he led his army against a *Bambara* king and defeated him, ending his battle by personally beheading him with his sword. That year marked his victory and glory, but six years later he was defeated and sold into slavery. This happened as his people, the *Fulbe*, traded with an English slave-trader from Liverpool by the name of John Ormond who gave the *Fulbe Muslims* guns and other European goods in return for gold, ivory, and slaves. However, the *Hebohs*, who were non-Muslims resented Ormond and the *Fulbe* for trading in slaves. Eventually, they raided all slavers' ships to prevent them from buying Africans and carrying them to the New World. This caused a war between the *Fulbe* and their neighbouring communities.

To discourage the *Hebohs* from further attacking the slavers, Prince Ibrahima raided their land with an army of two thousand soldiers, but he was ambushed and captured. He escaped death when a *heboh* soldier noticed from his clothes that he was a prince. His enemies forced him to

walk barefoot for two hundred miles to the Gambia River, where they sold him to the *Mandinkos*, who in turn, sold him to Europeans. His price was “two flasks of powder, a few trade muskets, eight hands of tobacco, and two bottles of rum.”⁴⁴ Ibrahima was transported in a ship called *Africa* and stopped in Dominica, the Winward Islands, New Orleans and Natchez, Mississippi, where the tobacco and cotton farmer, Thomas Foster, bought him on April 21, 1788. He worked on the plantations for fifteen years, during which period he attempted to run away, but he was caught and returned to serve his owner. Nevertheless, he ended by resigning himself to slavery and married a black woman called Isabella, who bore him nine children. His owner made him overseer of his lands.

He stuck to his religion, traditions and identity while showing outwardly that he converted to Christianity in order to get help from American influential personalities to win his freedom and pay his passage back to his home in Africa. He exploited the European stereotypes of *Muslims* as well as his *Muslim* identity for regaining Africa. This happened in 1826 when Colonel Marshalk, an editor of a newspaper in Natchez, asked him to write a letter in Arabic containing verses from the *Qur'an*. Then the editor enclosed a short note and sent it to the United States consul in Morocco, Thomas Mullowny. In his short note, Marshalk told the consul that an old slave named Prince wrote the letter in Arabic in his presence.⁴⁵ Excerpts from the note read:

Dear Sir,

...He claims to belong to the royal family of Morocco, and the object of his letter...is to make inquiry after his relations...with the hope of joining them.

I have undertaken to endeavor to forward his letter for him and therefore beg leave to commit it to your care, with a request that you will aid to the old man's wishes.⁴⁶

On March 28, 1827, Mullowny received the letter and contacted King Abd al-Rahman II of Morocco to discuss Ibrahima's case with him. In the Arabic letter by the slave, he did not mention his nationality but wrote *Quranic* verses to get assistance for freeing him. As the Moroccan ruler made sure that a *Muslim* in need of relief solicited him, he requested his liberation in return for the release of American prisoners in

Morocco.⁴⁷ In February 1828, Secretary of State Henry Clay interceded on his behalf to convince his master to sign his manumission papers, which he finally did. It was his identity as a *Muslim* that led Clay and his president to cast Ibrahima's manumission as a diplomatic gesture towards North African *sultanates*, particularly Morocco.⁴⁸ Upon the emancipation of his wife, too, he set on a lecture tour in the Northeast of the USA to collect funds for the emancipation of his children. This was done successfully, and on his tour he met a number of influential blacks such as Samuel Cornish, the founder of *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in America. He also met David Walker, the politician who would later publish his *appeal* in Boston as well as other abolitionists.⁴⁹ During his lecturing tour he also met with people who asked him to write in Arabic. He maintained his intellectual resistance to preserve his *Islamic* faith to the extent that he, sometimes, recited *Quranic* verses while performing Christian prayers.

Ibrahima deceived some important white leaders of the American Colonization Society in order to facilitate his passage back to Africa. He promised them that he would practise trade and preach the Gospel there if they aided him to regain his homeland. Among the group who helped him in his return voyage, there were Thomas H. Gallaudet, the establisher of the deaf-mute education in the USA, John F. Schroeder the minister at Trinity Church in Boston and Arabist. The latter tested his Arabic mastery and certified that he recited the *Qur'an* with correctness and wrote it with neatness and rapidity.⁵⁰ The members of this group tried to instill in him their Christian beliefs; however, Gallaudet doubted his conversion to Christianity and expressed it by writing, "I hope that he is a Christian, but his means of religious instruction have been very limited."⁵¹ Yet, in other instances during his tour of lecturing in New England, he stirred religious controversy in black Masonic lodges and with Christian religious leaders that *Islam* was the only true religion.⁵²

The approval of his repatriation occurred in Boston on October 15, 1828, when Thomas Gallaudet solicited this in a public meeting by demanding from his fellow members of the American Colonization Society, which was a Methodist-dominated organization that was planning to send missionaries to Africa:

I would ask, then if humanity and patriotism do not urge us to render assistance to
Prince for this hospitality afforded one of our countrymen... We may be able to extend
our commercial relations to the very heart of Africa, and the influence of our institutions
also. As Christians, we must especially rejoice that an opportunity will be afforded
for the diffusion of the blessings of Christianity to that dark benighted region.⁵³

Finally, the society endorsed his repatriation and he departed the USA on February 7, 1829 and arrived in Monrovia in March. However, an extended sickness caused his death on July 6, 1829, at age sixty-seven before he could reach his homeland, Futa Jallon. His *Islamic* faith was preserved, and as soon as he arrived to Africa he reverted to *Islamic* practice.

8. Hadji Ali

The other *Muslim* person belonging to the 19th century was Hadji Ali, a Greek whose original name was Philip Tedro. He came to the USA in 1856 to help raise the *camel* cavalry corps in the desert of Arizona. He was one of six cameleers, who initially came to experiment with this corps. With him there were three Arabs and two Turks. This was the result of the bill introduced in Congress by Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, in 1855 to import *camels* for military purposes. Seventy-seven camels had been brought for the experiment, but as the Civil war broke out between the South and the North in 1861, the experiment was abandoned. The other five cameleers returned home and some of the *camels* were either acquired by the circuses and zoos or turned loose in the desert. Those that remained in the desert terrorised livestock and wild animals for a long time. Hadji Ali remained in the USA and became a prospector in the Colorado area. He later became a legendary person under the corrupted name the soldiers gave him 'Hi Jolly'. The legacy of his experience in America could be found in a highway gravemarker by his name and in some U.S. army manuals. He lived in Quartzside, Arizona, and died in 1903. His three daughters were raised in *Islamic* faith.

9. Yarrow Mamout

The other *Muslim* of the same period but poorly documented was Yarrow Mamout, who was perhaps the longest-lived person in the USA. He died at over 130 years. He was one of the first people to have bought shares in the Washington, D. C. Columbia Bank, the second chartered US Bank.⁵⁴ The American artist, Charles Wilson Peale (1741 – 1827), who painted his portrait in 1819 in Georgetown, collected the only scarce information about him. In a two-day sitting for the portrait, Peale wrote his impressions of Mamout, which remained the only document on this *Muslim* figure. The short notes suggest that he struggled to maintain his *Islamic* faith, identity, *Muslim* name and to practise his religion while he was over a century of age. Thus, he was the longest-lived known *Muslim* slave to have maintained his *Islam* in difficult circumstances for more than a century. As to his life in Africa, nothing is known; but in America he was a slave to the Bell family in Georgetown, for whom he worked industriously to merit his freedom eventually. In 1819, he had a private house in Georgetown and enough money to buy stocks in the Columbia Bank, founded by Alexander Hamilton in 1771.⁵⁵ He resisted attempts to convert him to Christianity and stuck to Islam. Peale wrote about him that he “professes to be *Mahometan*, and is often seen and heard in the streets singing praises to God- and conversing with him.”⁵⁶ Mamout dressed in a style common to *Muslims* and observed the dietary laws of *Islam*. Although his acquaintances invited him to eat pork and drink wine he abstained, saying, “It is no good to eat hog- and drink whiskey is very bad.” Mamout was a slave who struggled to keep his faith in North America against all odds for a long period, giving the example that it was possible to do so.

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¹ Youssef MROUEH, “Pre-Columbian Muslims in the Americas,”

URL <http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Park/6443/America/columbian.htm>

See also <http://www.sunnah.org/history/>

² MROUEH, op. cit.

³ Estevanico of Azamor according to Fareed H. NUMAN, “American Muslim History: A Chronological Observation” (December 1992)

http://www.islam101.com/history/muslim_us_hist.html

⁴Quoted in Muhammed Abullah Ahari, "The Islamic Community in the United States: Historical Development." [http:// www.sunnah.org/history/islamamr.htm](http://www.sunnah.org/history/islamamr.htm)

⁵The Seven Cities of Cibola were mythical cities told by Indians to Spanish explorers of the southwestern part of the present day USA. They believed they were filled with gold.

⁶ Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims*, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc, 2000, p. 17.

⁷Ibid.

⁸ Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 12.

⁹Robert Danning, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 17.

¹⁰Daniel Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America*, New York and London, Norton & Company, 2002, p. 215.

¹¹Ibid., p. 216.

¹²AHARI, op. cit.

¹³NUMAN, op. cit. Turner, however, puts the number at 6 to 7%.

¹⁴Ayyub ibn Sulaiman Jallon, according to NUMAN, op. cit.

¹⁵TURNER, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁶In full Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge, the oldest scientific society in Great Britain and one of the oldest in Europe, founded in 1660. It began earlier with small, informal groups, who met periodically to discuss scientific subjects. The "Invisible College" of London and Oxford, which first met in 1645, and a number of small academies in England became incorporated in 1662 when the newly restored Charles II granted a charter to the Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Deluxe Edition, 2000, CDROM.)

¹⁷TURNER, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁸AHARI, op. cit.

¹⁹The Coercive Acts were four harsh measures taken by the British Parliament in April 1774 to discipline the British colonies in North America, which had dumped British tea in the Boston Port. The Boston Port Act closed the Boston Harbour for commerce until tea was paid for; the Act for Impartial Administration of Justice for trying officials in Britain; a new Quartering Act requiring the local authorities to provide lodges for quartering the British soldiers and if necessary in private homes; and finally, the Massachusetts Government Act made the colony's council and law-enforcement

officers appointive. George B. TINDALL & David E. SHI, *America : A Narrative History*, 2nd Ed., New York, Norton & Company, Inc, ND, p. 110.

²⁰ *Graham's Magazine*, 1857, pp. 433-437 as quoted by AHARI, op. cit.

²¹ The American Colonization Society was founded in 1816 to encourage the "colonizing of the free people of color of the United States" in West Africa, taking as its model the British effort in Sierra Leone. The first American blacks arrived in West Africa in 1821. In 1847 the black settlers severed their links with the Society and established the independent nation of Liberia. See: "From Abolition to Equal Rights (John Bull and Uncle Tom), " <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/british/brit-4.htm>

²² Quoted by TURNER, op. cit., p. 36.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Antebellum : before the war. Here it indicates to the period that preceded the Civil War (1861-1865) in the U.S.A.

²⁶ TURNER, op. cit., pp. 38-39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁸ DANNIN, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁹ Quoted in TURNER, op. cit., p. 40.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³¹ *Sufi* means a follower of *Sufism* or *Tasawwuf* as it is called in Arabic, which is defined by Ibn Khaldoun, the *Muslim* historian and sociologist, as " ...the way of right and good guidance which is originally the devotion to worshipping and exclusively to serve Allah the Almighty, and disinterest in the good things of earthly life, and disinterest in what the general public cherishes like pleasure, wealth, and fame. It is also loneliness from the rest of people in worshipping. This was common among the Prophet's companions and the old pious people, but when people started to cherish life so much in the second century [of the *Hegira*] and afterwards, those who took to much worshipping were called *Sufis*." See in Arabic: عبد الرحمن بن محمد بن خلدون، المقدمة، دار الجيل، ص. 517.

³² Another definition is that the verb *tasawwafa* in Arabic was derived from wearing *souf* (wool) clothes, and in practice it was a scientific and practical lifestyle to which the *Islamic* spiritual life tended to at the onset of *Islam* ...It was a reflection of this spiritual life to which man subjected himself to high standards of worshipping and prepared himself to the knowledge of things by means of 'direct observation' (*el-keshf wa el-moshahada* ' ...such as disinterest, asceticism, and piety...At first it was purification of hearts and souls...See in Arabic:

الموسوعة العربية الميسرة، المجلد الثاني، الطبعة المحدثّة، دار الجيل، بيروت، ط2، 2001، ص720.

³³ TURNER, op. cit., p.32.

³⁴ AHARI, op. cit.

The Gullah dialect is a creole form of English, indigenous to the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia (the area extends from Georgetown, SC to the Golden Isles of Georgia above Florida). It began as a pidgin language, transforming into a language in its own right with the first generation born in America. Most of Gullah vocabulary is of English origin, but the grammar and major elements of pronunciation come from a number of West African languages, such as Ewe, Mandinka, Igbo, Twi and Yoruba. See "Gullah Dialect and Sea Island Culture (Beaufort County, SC," <http://www.co.beaufort.sc.us/bftlib/gullah.htm>

³⁵ TURNER, op. cit., p. 33.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 33-34.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁰ TURNER, op. cit., p. 28.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² AHARI, op. cit.

⁴³ Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

Quoted by AHARI, op. cit., p. 30.

⁴⁴ Quoted by TURNER, op. cit., p. 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ TURNER, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

⁴⁸ DANNIN, op. cit., p. 20.

⁴⁹ Abolitionists were adherents of the reform movement during the 18th century often called antislavery movement, which sought to end the enslavement of people of African descent in Europe, the Americas, and Africa itself. Abolitionism also aimed at ending the Atlantic slave trade carried out between Africa, Europe and the Americas. Its historical roots lay in black resistance to slavery.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ TURNER, op. cit.

⁵² DANNIN, op. cit. p. 20.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ TURNER, op. cit., p. 26.

⁵⁶ Ibid.