



What Black America
Must Know About the Role of Islam
in Slave Revolts!



**Black
Dawah
Network**

What Black America Must Know About Islam

The Black Dawah Network is an Islamic outreach organization that promotes Islamic values in inner-city Black America. The Black Dawah Network's goal is to not only educate African Americans about the principles of Islam, but to also make them aware of the Islamic heritage of their African forefathers. The time has come for Black America to learn about how their ancestors used the virtues of Islam to fight for their freedom from white supremacy.

Historically for Black Americans, Islam has represented a profound symbol of resistance against the destructive injustices of anti-Black bigotry. Islam has empowered some of the most oppressed Black Americans with the tools to counter and combat white supremacy. The story of Malcolm X is perhaps the most famous example of this blueprint to conscious upliftment. However, there is a long history of black slave rebellions and black independence movements inspired by Islam centuries before Malcolm X.

Violent oppression and exploitation of black people are deeply entrenched in Western history. In times of despair, it is imperative to infuse a new sense of faith and way of thinking in the people. In hindsight, there is nothing “new” about the Islamic way of thinking in black culture. About 15 to 30 percent of the African slaves brought to the United States were Muslim and some historians believe the number to be much higher because the region they came from had become predominantly Muslim centuries prior (Nadir, 2018). Black Americans have been stripped of their heritage from the moment their ancestors arrived in the United States due to the slave-master’s whitewashing. Black Americans should learn about how Islam has historically aided their fight against systemic racism in the Americas.

What Black America Must Know About the Role of Islam in the Bahia Rebellion

Black America must know about the Bahia slave rebellion. The Bahia slave rebellion began in January of 1835 when enslaved African Muslims launched an attack on a coastal city of Brazil. The uprising took place in a prominent sugarcane plantation located in the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia (Reis, 1995).

As a means of symbolism, the revolt took place on the day they believed to be *Laylat al-Qadr*, which means the “Night of Power.” *Laylat al-Qadr* commemorates the anniversary of when the Quran was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) in the year 610 AD. Muslims believe good deeds done on that special day is better than 83 years and four months of worship [Quran 83:4]. These courageous African Muslim slaves were fasting as it was the month of Ramadan. The revolt was an extension of their worship. It was also a testament to their commitment to liberty as going to battle while refraining from food and water is no easy task. However, the leaders of the

slave revolt persevered because their Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) once said there are three men whose prayer is never rejected. Those three are “when a fasting person breaks their fast, the just ruler, and the one who is oppressed” (Al-Tirmidhi, 9th Century CE).

The slave rebels fell under two of these categories perfectly as they were fasting and indeed brutally oppressed. After all, the slave revolt was led by Muslim scholars who were versed in the shariah (Islamic way) and understood the necessity of removing themselves from the tutelage of white slave masters. Islam made them steadfast and confident in their efforts.

Historian, Joao José Reis called the Bahia slave revolt “the most effective urban slave rebellion ever to occur on the American continent.” (Reis, 1995). The slave rebellion was preceded by many conversions to Islam and proselytizing. Reis notes that “Among Africans many political and cultural alternatives were available at the time, but Islam took the lead. It was the right moment...It made them not want to be slaves or inferiors; it gave them dignity, and it created new personalities for its members” (Reis, 1988).

Though the rebellion would be stopped, the Muslims continued to resist. One of the suspected masterminds in the revolt, Pacifico Licutan, kept referring to himself as Bilal during his interrogation (Bastide, 1978). Bilal ibn Rabah, may Allah be pleased with him, had been a black slave in Arabia during pre-Islamic times but was liberated by the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). He would become an exemplary warrior, close companion of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and the first *muezzin*.

A muezzin is someone who specializes in reciting the Muslim call to prayer. The relevancy in Licutan’s self-declared nickname of Bilal is evident to those who see this uprising as the beginning of a New World Muslim tradition in the Americas. Bilal went from slave to freeman of high nobility in Arabia due to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). That prophetic tradition of liberating the marginalized inspired this slave revolt in Brazil over a millennium later. Reis writes that “The revolution was still alive in Licutan’s (or Bilal’s) heart, despite its failure on the battlefield” (Diouf, 1998).

The revolutionaries in the West Indies sought to replicate an Islamic society. In 1807 there were 8,307 Hausa, Nago (Yoruba), and Ewe people from Africa that were kidnapped into Bahia. Bahia was a central importer of Africans from these regions at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The network that the Bahia slave revolt had built with Africa was so interconnected that historian Enrico Dal Lago indicates that they “followed a similar pattern to the jihad that characterized Sokoto expansion, almost to the point of being a transatlantic extension of the latter in the Americas” (Dal Lago, 2012).

When the uprising in Brazil was thwarted, it revealed just how ingenious and resourceful the revolutionaries were. They created African Islamic networks that connected the plantation with the motherland. Muslim merchants and sailors likely smuggled them books into the country, making

their way into the hands of the enslaved. These Muslim slaves established Quranic schools that instilled them with Islamic morals and an appetite for liberation. This accomplishment required cooperation between individuals and groups that would not have flourished under normal circumstances. Getting in touch with the motherland was the first step needed to reclaim dignity. The African Islamic networks did exactly that.

The organizers of this revolt were African born Muslims from present-day Nigeria, then Yorubaland. Their learning exhibited their rich and intellectual culture. The rebellion itself emphasized the necessity of eliminating injustice, which has become a hallmark of Black Muslim Tradition. Knowledge, worship, and action are three indispensable elements of Islam.

What Black America Must Know About the Role of Islam in the Haitian Rebellion

The Bahia revolt was inspired by the Haitian revolutionary efforts that occurred many years before. Mackandal was among the most prominent slave rebels in Haiti. Born in Guinea and most likely a Mandingo, he was of noble pedigree. His family was prominent *marabouts*. *Marabouts* in Africa are Muslim mystics who are said to have a close relationship with the unseen world.

Mackandal was a field hand on Haiti's sugar plantation. He lost his hand while working on the sugar mill and was transferred to a job working with cattle. His longing for freedom led him to become a runaway, and he remained a fugitive for eighteen years. During his escape, he launched attacks killing French. He taught other slaves how to make poison. Mackandal is said to have believed that the slave revolt in Haiti would lead to the creation of a West African Islamic colony in the Americas. Other enslaved Africans, whether Muslim or not, had confidence in him and Boukman, another Haitian Muslim mystic leader. These men had military experience combined with knowledge about West African Islamic mysticism. These brave men were spreading awareness about how "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock, Plymouth Rock landed on us" two centuries before Malcolm X.

Francois Mackandal would carry out raids on the French Corps. He would often use symbolism to speak about fate. One day, he stood in front of a gathering with three glasses of water and three handkerchiefs: one yellow, one white, and one black. He pulled the yellow handkerchief out of the glass and said that this represents the first inhabitants of the island. He then pulled out the white and said this one represents the present inhabitants of the island. Lastly, he pulled out the black handkerchief and said this represents the future masters of the island (Diouf, 1998).

Mackandal developed a guild of guerrillas who fought French slaveowners and slaves deemed useless for cooperating with slaveholders.

Macandal's coup damaged the property of the colony and French colonial intelligence in hopes of striking fear into their oppressors. He was so effective at executing that in the eighteenth-century that Saint Domingue coined the term "Macandal" as a moniker for poison.

Perhaps Mackandal's insurgency's biggest strength was their command of the written word. The French Colonel charged with fighting the Haitian slave rebels, made some suggestions about the impact of his adversaries' African Islamic education:

"During the wars, I was obliged to do against the blacks; we often found written papers in the bags or macoutes of the few Negroes we killed...Nobody understood those writings. It was Arabic" (Malenfant, 1814).

These codified secret letters were a reflection of the strategic campaign Black Muslim slave rebels like Macandal led. The brilliance of these African Muslim slaves was no coincidence, in fact it was just part of being a Muslim. The word "ilm" (knowledge) is mentioned in the Quran hundreds of times and the holy book emphasizes how it is every believer's responsibility to acquire as much wisdom as they can in their lifetime. In a verse it reads, "Allah raises of those who believe and those who have been given knowledge many levels," explaining the need for education to be liked in Allah's eyes (Quran 58:11).

When the early Muslims fought in defensive wars, the Prophet Muhammad used to grant prisoners of war freedom if he or she taught ten Muslims how to read and write because literacy is something cherished in Islam (Shirazi, 2013). The intellectual aspect of Islamic doctrine is why Muslims experienced their Enlightenment centuries before the Christians and without the religious resistance the Catholic Church's gave scientific discovery in the Middle Ages. When Islam first reached Africa through peaceful means in the 7th century it brought the continent a universal moral code, its richest civilizations, increased learning, and unity. Historians have brought light to these positive attributes as some have said, "[t]hese enslaved Muslims stood out from their compatriots because of their resistance, determination and education" (Tabarani, 2011).

What Black America Must Know About the Role of Islam in Slave Rebellions in Jamaica

A letter from a white magistrate visiting a sugar plantation in Jamaica, reads, "One of them showed me a Koran written, from memory by himself but written, he assured me, before he became a Christian. I had my doubts on this point." Even under the bondage of slavery, enslaved Africans reproduced the text of the Qur'an. However, in order to survive in a world hostile to their faith, many Muslims would openly profess Christianity while believing in Islam in their hearts.

The Qur'an, which many African Muslim slaves had memorized front to back, is replete with verses urging Muslims to flee from persecution, pointing

to the spacious nature of God's earth. One such verse in Surah An-Nisa 4:97 reads, "...Was, then, God's earth not spacious enough for you to forsake the domain of evil?" Hijrah, or 'flight from persecution,' is an Islamic practice that began when the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) early followers forsake the domain of evil in Mecca and established their own Muslim community, beginning in Ethiopia and then Medina. Prophetic precedents would influence the ways in which African Muslims would fight slavery.

"Whoever migrates in the Cause of Allah will find on earth numerous places of refuge and plentifulness (in provisions). And whosoever leaves his home as an emigrant unto Allah and His Messenger, afterwards death overtakes him (on the way), then certainly his reward became due on Allah. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, continuously Merciful" (Quran 4:100). In light of the positive impact such verses from the Qur'an had on slaves, historian Dr. Afroz Sulanta writes that "hijra from the plantations led many of them to form their own community, known as Maroon communities."

One such Jamaican, Muhammad Kaba even wrote a book titled "The Book of Prayer" instructing the community of believers in Jamaica on the importance of maintaining their daily prayers. The Maroon Wars that took place in Jamaica also demonstrate the Islamic motivation behind revolutions. Historian Afroz Sultana has speculated with sound basis that the Africans in the Maroon War were rightful *mujahideen*. Mujahideen is the plural word for those who engage in jihad, in other words those who fight a struggle for the sake of Allah. Unbearable oppression is something the Quran states must be ended. In Surah Al-Haj it states "Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they are wronged," and it was blatantly obvious who was being wronged in these Latin American plantations. The communities that these Muslims established in the hills and mountains were Islamic communities set up by Muslim scholars and laymen.

In 1728 the Maroons carried out military campaigns against their oppressors. These attacks proved costly for the colony of Jamaica as similar rebellions proved for other colonies. Colonies were investments. A tremendous amount of imperial resources went into making sure they were a success. Anything that threatened the prosperity of the empire had to be addressed. Muslims were challenging from the beginning, as they questioned the colonizer's oppressive system because Islam demands that Muslims be free to in-order to serve their Lord (Foy, 2008).

What Black America Must Know About the Role of Islam in Slave Rebellions

It is a well-known fact that White slaveowners forced Christianity onto many of their black slaves (The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2020). Why did Islam play such a pivotal role in slave rebellions? Since Islam postulated that sovereignty belongs to the creator alone; it was clear that its adherents should be sovereign from any dictators. In fact, in Islam the term "slave" can

only be used in relation to a human being and the Creator, where the Creator is the master and every human being is the slave. This quality of sovereignty also drives black liberation movements and is the reason why Islam has continued to influence black political thought. Questioning the actions of those in power and political reformation is ingrained in Islamic theology as the scriptures say, “Those who listen to their Lord... who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation... [are praised] (Quran 3:159).

Furthermore, African Muslim slaves knew they were subjugated against the will of Allah (God). The Quran is very precise in its grammar and placement of words. With that in mind, slavery is mentioned in the Quran in the past-tense and the past-tense only. Making it clear that the enslavement of free men and free women is forbidden in Islam. Innocent human beings were kidnapped and sold as chattel in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) strongly denounced this practice when he said, “There are three whose opponent I will be on the Day of Resurrection, and whomever I oppose, I will defeat ... A man who sold a free man and consumed his price” (Bhukari, 9th Century CE). The Quran and the Hadith (narrations of the Prophet Muhammad) also repeatedly indicate how the ultimate manumission of all slaves is a major goal of Islam. Freeing slaves is credited as being important to piety because the Qu’ran says, “Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth... for freeing slaves” (Quran 2:177).

The slave revolts of Bahia, Brazil, the Maroons of Jamaica and Haiti were revolutions ignited by divine guidance. They were overtly Islamic and sought to create trans-Atlantic Muslim communities where their African Islamic identity could be embraced. We can say these revolutionary struggles for freedom were the types of struggle that would go on to characterize Muslim resistance to racism in the Western hemisphere. Islam mandates a spiritual and physical struggle against injustice. These uprisings reveal that Muslims in the New World considered it their religious mandate to contest enslavement.

By announcing their refusal to be enslaved and oppressed, they evaporated the water needed for the system to maintain itself. The system of white supremacy was fueled by intimidation, miseducation (indoctrination of self-hatred), economic deprivation, political marginalization, and cultural sabotage. Islam is the most viable agent of change as it opposes such practices.

We see a recurring theme in these slave revolts in the Americas. Black people have always rejected subjugation once they reclaim their vibrant Islamic and African identity. Look no further than how Muhammad Ali became a world-famous humanitarian once he dropped his slave name Cassius Clay. Islam teaches us to stand against oppression and of-course things like slavery, segregation, redlining, and mass-incarceration are nothing short of oppression. Today, Black communities are foolishly embracing this system of

abuse because they think change is impossible or because they think loving their oppressor is the only solution.

They must remember the Verse of the Holy Quran that says, “Oppression is worse than slaughter” (Quran 2:191). This Verse highlights how tyranny is far worse than killing people. Freedom and Liberty are as essential to life as breathing. As a result, the Muslim slaves of Brazil, Haiti, and Jamaica were inspired to earn their freedom by any means necessary. In the European colonies of the Americas, the wisest slaves knew that the small luxuries and gifts given to them by their white slave-masters by no means justified their captivity. These little favors were mere pennies in a fountain of violent exploitation. Islam became that liberating force towards emancipation as it invigorated the oppressed to become social justice warriors. Freedom is acquired through a strong sense of obligation and duty to one’s Lord, the commitment to one’s people, and losing the fear of death. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) once said, “Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of faith” (al-Hajjaj, 9th Century CE). Revolutionaries like Pacífico Licutan, François Mackanda, and Muhammad Kaba embodied this Islamic value to the fullest. Their traits merit true liberation.

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