



WHAT BLACK AMERICA MUST KNOW ABOUT THEIR ENSLAVED AFRICAN
MUSLIM ANCESTORS BY BLACK DAWAH NETWORK

Black Dawah Network Institute For Islamic Research

What must Black America know about their enslaved African Muslim ancestors? Surprisingly, many are still not aware that a large number of Africans kidnapped to American shores on slave ships were Muslim. The lessons that their arduous lives can teach us often get erased. Many of our Black Muslim ancestors who came here against their will were superb as documenting their savage oppression in the the Americas and we certainly learn from their determination. Enslaved Muslims offer insight on liberative ideals that beautifully portray black identity, resistance, and ancestral appreciation.

Umar Ibn Said

Umar ibn Said, of the Fulbe tribe, was described as a prince by white visitors. There was no evidence about him being a literal prince, but his biographies never failed to mention his royal demeanor. Umar ibn Said's dignity did not diminish one bit after enslavement. The Fulbe like the other tribes were a proud people and their circumstances could not purge them of their sense of self-pride. The stately manner with which they comported themselves with is a consistent tribulation to many other Muslims who brutally smuggled across the Atlantic Ocean during this time.

Umar carried to America the quality education he had received in Futa Jallon. Author Allan D. Austin wrote about Umar's autobiography that "His most important activities in Africa--judging by the space he gave them in his autobiography--were his training in and practicing of the Five Pillars of Islam: the Quranic obligations on praying five times a day, fasting, giving alms to the poor, fighting for the faith, and going on pilgrimages."¹ The handwritten autobiography was transcribed in Arabic. Arabic was the language of liturgy and faith as it would become a medium of cultural retention for Muslims of all ethnicities. White people made stereotypes about Africans being mentally inferior and incapable of anything that resembled civilization. The image of jungle-dwelling heathens formed the standard perception in the European mind. Africans like Umar threatened the very root basis of slavery, which was white supremacy and anti-blackness.

The earliest known manuscripts of the autobiography begins with surah *Al Fatihah*:

All praises to Allah, Who created all of us to worship Him. See what works they do; what they say; those who do good will have good; those who do evil will have evil.²

¹ Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 133.

² The Holy Quran (Surah 1)

He then introduces lines of poetry based on the Hadith (narrations about the Prophet Muhammad (saws) and his companions). Then he denounces what he considered idolatry of the white world by referencing surah 53:21-23, followed by affirming the unity of all of the prophets that Allah has sent to guide humanity by referencing surah 2:285. In the former verse mentioned the Quran states “These are nothing but names that you and your forefathers have invented, for which Allah has sent down no authority,” which means Umar bin Said openly rejected the white names masters gave their slaves to strip them of their African heritage. Umar asks that Allah forgive the believer in the land of the unbelievers. Umar then references Africa writing “I am wanting you to know I want to be seen in a place called Africa in a place called Kaba in Bewir [Bure].” He ends by saying that Allah knows what is in his heart even if he can not openly proclaim it. His final manuscript was surah *an Nasr* “The Help.” He died uttering the *shahadah* “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger.”³

Umar ibn Said identified as a Muslim African in America, but not so much as a slave. It is hard to see yourself as a slave when you had been free and was of high status in your own land. ‘Slave’ referred to his circumstance but not his true identity. The oppressor could enslave him physically, but never mentally. He exuded intelligence and radiated elegance in defiance of their slave-masters intimidation. The analogy is being submerged in water, but holding your breath so that the water does not fill your lungs and forces you to drown. This was the goal of virtually all of the enslaved, but the Muslims have bequeathed personal narratives indicating how they were able to keep much of the perniciousness rhetoric away from their souls. In the Holy Quran, Allah asks, “so which of the favors of your Lord would you deny?” and surely the Muslim slaves in the Americas always remained grateful to have once been part of a loving Muslim community with great knowledge.⁴

Every white slave-master’s mission was to install a deep inferiority complex into the hearts of every black slave. Once a man is conquered from within he begins to succumb to prejudice stereotypes and propaganda. Hope is lost, especially when you have been separated from your family and loved ones in strange foreign land. Muslim slaves were well-versed in their holy scriptures, therefore it is quite easy to see how they embodied countless Quranic teachings in their daily lives. In the Quran it says, “do not let their words sadden you” and Muslim slaves like Umar ibn Said never let bigots colonize their minds.⁵ As mentioned before, some white visitors even likened their disposition to royalty. A testament to how connection with their religion kept them brave-hearts. The Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) once said there are four qualities Allah gives the best of his believers they are “a grateful heart (that is thankful to Allah), a remembering tongue (that mentions Allah often), an enduring body (to persevere through the trials), and a faithful wife.”⁶

To no surprise these Muslim slaves held tight to the rope of their religion as best as they could. They remained grateful for even the littlest things like God making them Muslim and for God giving them life. What is even more remarkable is how they never questioned God’s plan despite being subject to some

³ Austin, 137.

⁴ Quran 55:38

⁵ Quran 10:65

⁶ Abdullah Ibn Abbas

of the worst treatment humans have received in history. Historians have even 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.”⁷

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, anglicized as Job Ben Solomon, was another Muslim captive in Maryland. He too was Fulani from a major clan of Futa Jallon and had come from a family of religious leaders and scholars. Job’s impressive demeanor drew much attention. He was said to have disputed with Christians over the oneness of the Creator. But his most impressive endeavor was when he wrote three Qurans from memory and translated them. He was so sagaciously intelligent that he had a 30 book long series memorized word for word, back to back. According to his biographer Thomas Bluett he wrote in Arabic often. These letters and religious scripts made Job the talk of his town and beyond. He ended up meeting dignitaries in England and spoke with influential people in America with the expressed intention of returning to Africa, his home.⁸

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo reproducing the Quran from memory shows how central Islam was to him and in Africa. Memorizing Quran was part of the education of his tribe just as learning the tribal history. It was customary in Futa Jallon to study the Quran from a young age. As one grew older they would learn about the book as part of a larger education that included Islam, history, and other disciplines. When in America enslaved he relied on its words to reinforce his worth in a society that was built on dehumanizing his people. This was Job’s soft resistance and it expresses the diverse ways African’s struggled to preserve their identity and worth in slavery. They were always resisting even when they were not physically engaged in war. They revolted by rejecting the slave owner’s religion, culture, and narrative which were meant to enslave their minds.

It was customary for many plantations to allow their slaves to work on Sunday and pay them for their labor. It was a pittance, but many of the slaves took this opportunity and used the money to gamble and purchase alcohol. This is how many sought to alleviate the pain and suffering. Unfortunately, alcoholism and domestic abuse became a factor. Slave owners stepped in and ended this practice for those slaves who displayed recklessness since such behavior threatened their investment. Job ben Solomon gained his freedom. Part of what enabled him and other slaves to save the money towards manumission is that he did not spend it on frivolities. They saw it as an opportunity to get free.

Alcohol is forbidden in Islam. The Arabic word for alcohol means "that which veils the mind or impairs judgement." Drugs and alcohol are often sought in order to cope with their condition. But experiencing every anguish of oppression with sound mind and body impels one to change their condition. Intoxicants do not free the mind they bind it to the oppression. Job ben Solomon, who “refused wine, so they concluded that Job was a Muslim,” gained his freedom through diligence and

⁷ Tabarani, 2011

⁸ Ibid, 56.

abstinence. He was not the norm and manumission was certainly an uphill battle. Escaping was more practical, but these Muslim slaves practiced what the Quran taught them, which is that Allah will not change the condition of a people until the people first change what is in themselves.⁹

Ibrahim Abdur-Rahman

Ibrahim Abdur-Rahman was also from Futa Jallon, versed in the Quran, literate in Arabic and carried himself like a prince. But there was one difference from Umar and Job: He was a prince. Ibrahim was the son of the king of Ibrahim Sori. The crown of what is now Guinea from 1751 to 1784 and was part of the Islamic Confederation of Futa Jallon. Ibrahim was taken to Natchez, Mississippi where he would end up the slave of Thomas Foster. It was when a white man, a doctor named John Cox, spotted Ibrahim and remembered him from the time he visited Ibrahim's kingdom.

Ibrahim served as both prince and a military leader. In fact, he was captured in battle and then sold to the Europeans. When he arrived in America he explained to the auctioneers who he was and that his family was rich and will pay any price for his return. Of course, he was not believed until the doctor discovered him and pleaded for his release. When Ibrahim's owner, Foster, learned that Ibrahim was not telling a tale he exploited his uniqueness to his own benefit. He mockingly called him prince and tried to bring himself notoriety by being known as the owner of African royalty who could write a strange language.

While in America Ibrahim constantly strengthened his African Muslim identity. He would often be seen writing Arabic in the sand using a stick. Like other enslaved Muslims he used his fanfare to gain his freedom. His literacy attracted the abolitionists. When asked to reproduce the Lord's Prayer in Arabic he wrote the surah *al Fatihah* instead, the opening chapter of the Quran.

Ibrahim raised enough for the freedom of himself and his wife, but sadly could not take their children. They departed for West Africa where they settled and started a new family. Their descendants are currently residing in Mississippi.¹⁰

Abu Bakr

Abu Bakr comes to us from Africa. Abu Bakr was a learned Muslim who interrupted his studies to visit his father's grave. He was ensnared in conflict between local rivals where he was captured and sold to the Europeans. He recounted his harrowing experience:

⁹ Ibid, 54.

¹⁰ Austin, 65.

“On that day I was made a slave. They tore off my clothes, bound me with ropes, laid on me a heavy burden, and carried me to the town of Buntukkú, and from thence to the town of Kumási, the king of Ashanti's town.”

‘There they sold me to the Christians, and I was bought by a certain captain of a ship of that town. He sent me to a boat, and delivered me to the people of the ship. We continued on board ship, at sea, for three months, and then came on shore in the land of Jamaica. This was the beginning of my slavery until this day. I tasted the bitterness of slavery from them, and its oppressiveness; but praise be to God under whose power are all things, He doth whatever he willeth! No one can turn aside that which he hath ordained, nor can say one withhold that which He hath given! As God Almighty himself hath said:--Nothing can befall us unless it be written for us (in his book)! He is our master: in God, therefore, let all the faithful put their trust!’¹¹

Abu Bakr explains the source of his resolve:

“The faith of our families is the faith of Islam. They circumcise the foreskin; say the five prayers; fast every year in the month of Ramadan; give alms as ordained in the law... they fight for the faith of God; perform the pilgrimage [to Mecca]-i.e. Such as are able so to do; eat the flesh of no beast but what they have slain for themselves; drink no wine-for whatever intoxicates is forbidden unto them.....they teach their children to read, and [instruct them in] the different parts of knowledge..”¹²

As can be seen from this account Islam was an integral part of his life and to his understanding of the misfortune that had befallen him. Faith is about a sense of possibility. The possibility to overcome present circumstances. It is part of the supra-will that enables the believer to face adversity. Instead of succumbing to pessimism or despair Abu Bakr availed the misfortune to affirm his indomitable spirit and trust in the will of the Creator. At the end of the day “Allah does not burden a soul more than it can bear,” that powerful verse served as the fuel to their self-determination and their drive to fight their oppressor.¹³

What Black America Must Know

What black America should know about their enslaved African Muslim ancestors is that their belief and trust in God was not faith by convenience, but it does indeed become even more useful during times of loss. The productivity of Islam was quite evident in the biographies of these former slaves. Putting unconditional trust in God's plan is major tenet to the Muslim faith. In the Quran it reads, “He that is righteous and patient, never will Allah suffer the reward to be lost, of those who do right,” these African Muslims knew there would be an ultimate reward for their perseverance.¹⁴ After all the Prophet

¹¹ John Davidson, *Notes Taken During Travels in Africa* (Morocco: J.L. Cox and Sons, 1839), 211.

¹² *Ibid.* 212.

¹³ Quran 2:286

Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) once said, “Nothing befalls a believer, not a prick of a thorn nor more than that, but Allah will raise him one degree in status thereby, or erase a bad deed.”¹⁵ Indicating that there will be ease for every righteous Muslim by the hereafter at the very least. That type of divine silver-lining is priceless. African Muslim slaves strove against all odds to continue practicing their obligatory prayers, fasting, and writing Quran. Stories like that Abu Bakr illustrate just how ingrained Islam was in the cultural DNA of the sub-Saharan West African villages. Stories like Ibrahim’s also exhibit how cherished education in all forms was in the Muslim regions these people came from. In Islamic theology “the superiority of the learned man over the devout is like that of the moon, on the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars,” revealing how educational attainment is an indispensable element of Muslim faith.¹⁶

These enslaved African Muslims were devout practitioners of Islam. They knew their worth in a world that deemed them worthless and by rejecting the value assigned to them by white society carved out an alternative existence wherein they could preserve their culture and faith.

They used piety as a weapon in their struggle for liberation. The religion of Islam was not an opiate that dulled their ambition for change, but was the motivating principle on which they strove for freedom. They were able to raise money for their emancipation because they did not spend the meager money they earned from their Sunday labor to purchase alcohol. Many slaves coped with their crushing condition of oppression through intoxication. These Muslim slaves tackled their condition with sober free minds. They crafted ways of preserving their African-Islamic education and used it to strive towards freedom.

African-Americans have inherited the oppression they face, but they have also inherited the tradition and methods of resistance to that oppression. It is imperative that African-Americans continue the fight by channeling the countless Islam doctrines about social justice.

¹⁴ Quran 12:90

¹⁵ Sahih Bhukari 5641

¹⁶ Sunan Abi Dawud 3641

Selected Readings

Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997)

Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998)

John Davidson, *Notes Taken During Travels in Africa* (Morocco: J.L. Cox and Sons, 1839)