

THE MUSLIM ROOTS OF AMERICAN SLAVES (PART 2 OF 2): VESTIGES OF ISLAM

Rating: 2.5

Description: A discussion of how documents recently found and translated provide clues to the identity and background of American slaves.

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Growing collections of documents written in Arabic are being discovered across the United States of America. The light of research reveals that these documents long ago buried in basements and attics, and shut away in archives and libraries, provide evidence of the presence of



Muslims among the Africans shipped to the Americas as slaves.^[1] The collections, unearthed in the late 20th century CE, contain biographical statements, verses from the Quran, personal letters and eloquent letters to Muslim leaders in their home territories. Sadly many of the letters pleading for help and manumission from their owners never reached their recipients but collected dust, in boxes, chests and filing cabinets for many decades. As interest in the origin of slaves in the Americas increases these letters provide clues to the slaves' homeland and background.

These collections tell us that among those who endured the horrific crossing of the Atlantic Ocean known as the Middle Passage were Muslims, many of them well educated. They included Quran scholars, religious and tribal leaders, commercial and building experts and some with vast military experience. It is no surprise then to discover that Muslims were often chosen to be leaders because of their valuable skills. They rose to the top of the slave hierarchy more easily, were manumitted more often, and returned to Africa more frequently.^[2]

In at least one case a slave kept his master's plantation records in Arabic.^[3] The Arabic language itself holds clues suggesting the pivotal role played by Muslims in American slave history. From 1828 we find an interesting anecdote about a Christian teacher asking a Muslim slave to write the Lord's prayer in his native language, the Christian man then witnessed the document, inscribing underneath the few lines of Arabic 'foregoing copy of the Lord's Prayer'. Decades later when the document was examined by someone who read Arabic it was found that the slave had, instead of writing the Lord's Prayer, written the opening chapter of the Quran, Al-Fatihah.^[4]

Many Muslim slaves went to great efforts to retain an Islamic way of life. As was suggested by African American scholar Eric Lincoln, their memory of Islam and their previous lifestyle was never completely lost.^[5] Many resisted converting to Christianity or did so in a pseudo fashion clinging to the pillars of their faith, praying, fasting and giving charity while appearing to accept the new faith. Many slave owners and their ancestors recall practices and habits of the slaves that suggest they were Muslims. A plantation owner in Georgia noticed one of his slaves "bowing down" each morning at dawn.

On the island of Sapelo, off the coast of Georgia, certain Islamic practices remain even to this day. In the church, men and women sit on different sides of the aisle, separated as they usually are in a mosque. All shoes are removed and the women cover their hair for services. The churches are built facing Makkah and the bodies are buried also facing Makkah. The people living on Sapelo Island are descendants of Bilali Muhammad a Muslim who was enslaved on Sapelo in 1803. Bilal could read and write Arabic and was buried with a copy of the Quran. His wife, Phoebe, wore a veil, and her daughters had Islamic names, such as Medina and Fatima^[6]. In 1829, Bilali authored a small book on Islamic beliefs and the rules for ablution, morning prayer, and the calls to prayer. It is known as the Bilali Document, currently housed at the University of Georgia.^[7]

The descendants of Bilal Muhammad all have the surname Baily which is certainly a corruption of the name Bilal. Thus names also hold clues to slave identities and backgrounds. Slaves were routinely given new names, however many of the names were biblical contractions of their own Muslim names and on some occasions we find names that appear to be unchanged. Ayyub ibn Sulayman, whose story was told in Part 1 went by the name of Job Ben Solomon. Names also played a part in the well-known and documented Amistad case.

In August of 1839, the Amistad was seized off Long Island, New York. The captured slaves aboard the ship had risen up and killed the captain. They spared the lives of some of the crew on the condition they steered them towards the coast of Africa. The slaves were deceived and found themselves on trial in Connecticut. During the course of the trial it was revealed that the slaves were Africans, Muslim Africans from present day Sierra Leone. They had been given Spanish names and designated as black ladinos^[8] in order to circumvent laws and treaties against the international slave trade by Great Britain, Spain and the United States.

Ex-British government administrator Richard Robert Madden testified in the trial. He said, "...I have examined them and observed their language, appearance and manners; and I have no doubt of their having been, very recently, brought from Africa. To one of them I spoke, and repeated a Mohammedan^[9] form of prayer, in the Arabic language; the man immediately recognized the language, and repeated the words 'Allah Akbar', or 'God is great'. The man who was beside this Negro, I also addressed in Arabic, saying 'salaam alaikum', or peace be on you; he immediately, in the customary oriental salutations, replied, 'alaikum salaam', or peace be on you..."^[10]

From the amount of evidence that is being unearthed it is clear that not only were Muslims amongst those men and women enslaved in the Americas, but that they were influential in the making of the American nation.

Footnotes:

[1]

African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles. Allan D. Austin. 1997. New York and London: Routledge.

[2]

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

[3]

Ibid

[4]

African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles. Allan D. Austin. 1997. New York and London: Routledge.

[5]

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

[6]

(http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/cornelia_bailey.html)

[7]

Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The Bilali Diary in context. B. G. Martin. The Georgia Historical Quarterly

Vol. 78, No. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 589-601

[8]

A word indicating that the slaves had been in Cuba long enough to know the language and customs.

[9]

IslamReligion.com: The word Mohammedan was formerly common in usage, but the terms Muslims and Islamic are more common today.

[10]

(<https://bulk.resource.org/courts.gov/c/US/40/40.US.518.html>)

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