

African Muslims in Bondage: Realities, Memories, and Legacies

Sylviane A. Diouf

Between the early 1500s and the 1860s, West African Muslims from Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin, and Nigeria were shipped to the New World. They probably represented from 10 to 15 per cent of the 12 to 15 million Africans swept away by the transatlantic slave trade. In the United States, their proportion may have been higher since, in contrast to the rest of the Americas, people from the Senegambia area – heavily Muslim – were the second largest group deported to the North American shores. Thus, from one to two million practitioners of Islam were forced to make their life all over the Americas and the Caribbean.

They found themselves in a double bind: enslaved, and living in a Christian world historically hostile to their religion. Nevertheless, the testimonies of their contemporaries (enslaved and formerly enslaved men and women, slaveholders, chroniclers, journalists, scholars, travelers) as well as their own show that as a group, they managed to keep their faith alive and to practice it in difficult circumstances. Reports of Islamic activities appear in court and police records, in laws, plantation books, newspapers, books, and fugitive ads. In addition, they can be seen in paintings, drawings, daguerreotypes, and photographs; and they have left autobiographies, letters, talismans, and religious manuscripts written in Arabic and in their native languages written in the Arabic script that have been uncovered so far in the United States, Brazil, Jamaica, Trinidad, and the Bahamas.

Although some became crypto-Muslims when forced to convert to Christianity, others continued to live their religion openly, praying in public, insisting on fasting, refusing pork and alcohol, and wearing turbans, flowing robes, skullcaps, and veils (WPA 1942, 141, 161-166, 179-181; Curtin 41; Hodgson 69; Teas 388; Debien 388; Conrad 252; Callcott 62; Campbell 467; Freyre 319). In Rio de Janeiro and Bahia – and one may assume, elsewhere as well – they operated Qur'anic schools and makeshift mosques in free Muslims' houses (Rodrigues 53-56; Reis 96-100).

In the forests of eastern Trinidad, demobilized African soldiers of the Third West India Regiment built, in the early 1820s, what seems to be the first documented consecrated mosque in America (Burnley 1842, 25, 98). There, as well as in the United States, Brazil, and Jamaica, enslaved and freed Muslims succeeded in procuring Islamic prayer beads, Qur'ans, and other religious books in Arabic imported through their own networks from Africa and Europe (Raeders 75; Burnley 60; Plumer I; Gurley 203; Campbell 467, 471; Hodgson 69; WPA, 1986, 179).

By the end of slavery in the late 1880s, close to four hundred years of continuous Muslim presence had left its mark on the religions and cultures of the American continents. At the time, Islam had been present in West Africa for nine hundred years, but it is in the Americas that the religion touched the most diverse populations. Muslims and non-Muslims from a wide area of Western and Central Africa came into close contact in the slave quarters. Populations from the Congo/Angola area, for example, who had not had any acquaintance with Islam in Africa would become familiar in America – even if only in a superficial way – with at least some tenets of the religion and some Arabic vocabulary. This paper explores two of these traditions and their related terminology brought over the Atlantic by African Muslims that not only helped them nurture their faith and keep their communities together, but have influenced the cultural and religious lives of their non-Muslim companions. These traditions have been essential in psychological and physical resistance, and live on today as important components of the cultures of some communities of African descent.

Charity Among the Enslaved

One essential tradition in Islam is *sadaqa*, or freewill offerings. *Sadaqa* or *sadaqa al-Tatawwu* (alms of spontaneity) is a voluntary charity that can consist of anything the believer wishes to give: money, food, or clothes. To give *sadaqa* is considered an act of worship. Although the giving of charity in a situation of abject poverty such as was prevalent in American slavery may seem unlikely, it has nevertheless been documented in places as diverse as the United States, Brazil, Trinidad, Tobago, and Grenada.

On Sapelo Island – part of the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina – Katie Brown remembered in the 1930s that her grandmother Margaret, a daughter of Bilali, a Guinean Muslim who left a 13-page document in Arabic, (Greenberg 372-75; Martin 589-601) used to make rice cakes she called *saraka* (WPA, 1986, 62). On nearby St. Simons Island, Ben Sullivan related that his father Bilali – the son of Salih Bilali, a Muslim from Jenne, Mali – made the *saraka* (182). Shadwick Rudolph of St. Marys recalled that his grandmother Sally made the cakes (194). These rice cakes were not indigenous to the South; their recipe and their function were brought from Muslim West Africa. Rice cakes are the charity customarily offered by women on Fridays. After *jummah* or noon prayer, they hand them out to the neighborhood's children. The rice cake is not called *saraka*, but the act of giving is a *sadaqa*. In the Sea Islands, as in Africa, the *saraka* were given to the children. Shadrach Hall (great-grandson of Bilali) recalled: "Duh cake made, she call us all in an deah she hab great big fannuh full an she gib us each cake." (167). It is recommended that the gift be accompanied by a supplication to God so, in West Africa women handing out the cakes say that it is a *saraka* or *sadaqa*, made in the name of Allah and utter the word *ameen*, which has the same meaning as the Christian amen. The practice was similar in the Sea Islands: "Den we all stands roun table, and she says 'Ameen, Ameen, Ameen', an we all eats cake."

Although the correct Arabic term is *sadaqa*, *saraka* is not an American neologism or the product of the Muslims' descendants' faulty memory. The word *saraka* is indeed an African linguistic creation brought over by the Muslims. The Fulani of Guinea, Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, and Mali use the word *sadaqa*; but the Wolof of Senegal call the charity *sarakh*, the Mandinka of Senegal and the Bambara of Mali use the term *sarakha*, and the Yoruba *saraa*. The Malinke of Guinea, the Juula of Côte d'Ivoire and the Hausa of Nigeria call the giving of charity *saraka*.

The West African *sadaqa* or *saraka* has several functions: to attract divine grace; reinforce a prayer; expiate a sin; or conjure a potential danger. The reasons behind the giving of *saraka* in the Sea Islands could only have been relevant to the women's particular lives in servitude. They may have wanted to bring in divine grace to avoid the separation – through sale – of their families, or punishment, or the arrest of a fugitive. They may also have tried to get protection for their family left behind in West Africa – including against the slave trade – and asked God's grace for the well being of the enslaved community. This almsgiving was true to the authentic spirit of *sadaqa* since tradition states that the best *sadaqa* is the one given by a person who owns little. The hungry and deprived children who were the recipients of their charity evidently appreciated the women's gesture: they created a special song about the cakes that can still be heard in the Sea Islands:

Rice cake, rice cake
Sweet me so
Rice cake sweet me to my heart. (Crum 265).

For *sadaqa* to be maintained in conditions of dismal poverty evidences the importance it must have had in the life of the Muslim communities. The fact that at least one man, as noted earlier, made the rice cakes – an exclusively female activity – only reinforces this assertion. People were clearly disposed to cross rigid gender boundaries in order to keep up the custom. The giving of charity certainly played its traditional role of reinforcing cohesion and confraternity and contributed to the spiritual and social well being of the group. *Saraka* was a link to the past, but also an expression of control over the present, and insurance for the future. To give charity in order for something to happen or not to happen can be seen as an affirmation that their enslavers had no real power over the enslaved people's lives and that neither the present nor the future rested in these strangers' hands. It meant that the community could influence its own fate with the proper prayers and alms.

From Muslim Tradition to Ancestors' Offerings

Sadaqa can be traced to other areas of the Diaspora. In Tobago, Carriacou, and Grenada, people of African descent offer *sadaqa* during the Big Drum Dance or Nation Dance (African nations), also called *saraka* or *salaka* (Simpson 102-103; McDaniel).

There, however, the word is not associated with rice cakes, but rather with an offering of food and beverages to the ancestors to thank them for their past blessings and ask for their continuous support. After they have received their share, the rest of the food is distributed to the children and, lastly, to the adults. The African communities that perform the *saraka* are not of Muslim tradition. The nations whose descendants take part in the Big Drum Dance are the Temne (Sierra Leone), the Chamba and the Igbo (Nigeria), the Kongo, the Koromantin (Akan from Ghana), the Arada, (Benin), and the Moko (Nigeria and Cameroon). However, the Mandinka, who have been early Muslims in Africa, are also part of the *saraka*. Their presence may indicate that it is from them that the other groups learned of alms giving in the form of *sadaqa*.

The participation of Muslims in the Nation Dance may appear incongruous. However, contrary to popular views – influenced by the cultures of Islam in the Middle East – there is no contradiction in the association of Muslims, dance, and drums. Actually, a description of *sadaqa* in Sierra Leone in the 1830s, therefore during the period of American slavery, reveals that drumming could be an integral part of certain types of alms giving. In one instance, in the Muslim town of Medina, the giving of alms – in the presence of "many Muslim chiefs" – included the sacrifice of eighty bullocks and other animals, as well as drumming. And another "sataka [sic] was perform[ed] at Robumsar for a child accidentally shot in the bush; and the travelers were much annoyed with the noise of tom-toming" (Clarke 169, 170, 176).

In the Caribbean, Arabic vocabulary and Islamic practice can be detected in the songs specific to each nation performing the *saraka*. For example, in Carriacou, a Koromantin song concludes with *salamani-o*, which seems derived from *assalamu aleikum* (McDaniel 47-48). Another Koromantin song goes "Anancy-o, Sari Baba." *Sari*, in Mande, Yoruba, and Hausa is a gruel made of cereal and milk that people eat, in particular, early in the morning during Ramadan. The word comes from the Arabic *sahur*, the predawn sweet dish eaten during the annual fast. In Mande languages, *baba* is a term of respect for a father or an older man. Throughout the West Indies, *baba* has retained this meaning and is used to designate a father, grandfather, or senior member of a household. *Sari baba* would thus refer to the giving of a rice dish associated with the Muslims to an elder, which is precisely what the West Indian *saraka* is meant to be. There is at least one other retention of the word *sari* among people who

practiced *sadaqa* in the West: in Gullah terminology, it describes “boiled rice pounded” (Turner 200).

In Trinidad, *saraka* refers to a ceremony held in honor of ancestors. Melville and Frances Herskovits who studied the practice in the 1940s called it *sakara* and mentioned that “sakara [is] an African designation for the offerings given the ancestors.” (Herskovits 88). There may be confusion between *saraka* and *sakara*, but both terminologies have an Islamic background. *Sakara* is the name of a specific Yoruba drum and of the type of religious music played to this day by the Yoruba Muslims of Nigeria. In the Trinidadian context, the word probably refers to the music that accompanied the giving of *saraka*. Part of the Trinidadian *saraka* is ground corn mixed with sugar. It is called *sansam* on the island, *chanmchanm* or *sanmsanm* in Haiti, *shum-shum* in Jamaica, and *shamsham* in the rest of the Caribbean (Anglade 78; Nunez 426, 427, 429).¹ The etymology of the words is probably *simsim*, sesame, in Arabic. But it may also be *zamzam*, the sacred well located near the Kaaba in Mecca whose water is said to be curative. In Hausa, for example, *zamzam* has come to refer to anything good.

Since Muslims do not make offerings to their ancestors, the Caribbean communities that give *saraka* evidently borrowed the word from them, but not the ceremony. It is possible that the enslaved Muslims of Tobago, Trinidad, Grenada, and Carriacou gave charity to their non-Muslim companions, following the Qur’anic injunction that states that *sadaqa* may be given to non-Muslims. Freewill offerings may thus have been associated with the Muslims, and the gesture may have made a lasting impression on the non-Muslims who borrowed the terminology and its meaning, as they developed and adapted their own rites. It is also possible that the non-Muslims attributed a particular power to the Muslims’ offerings and thus adopted this word. This is a common occurrence in Africa, where Islam and other religions have been living side by side for as long as a thousand years. People who follow “traditional” religions have often incorporated Arabic words and other Islamic elements that they see as reinforcing their own beliefs and liturgy. The hypothesis of a Muslim community, in America, holding a ceremony for the ancestors also has to be considered. However, evidence shows that the West African Muslims undertook considerable efforts for the maintenance of Islamic orthodoxy in the New World. In point of fact, as exemplified in the Sea Islands and Brazil, when enslaved Muslims and non-Muslims participated in the same celebrations, each group seems to have strictly stuck to its particular rituals, as has habitually been the case in Africa (Diouf 1998, 192-193). This reality is observable in Trinidad, where *saraka* are usually given by Yoruba and Hausa descendants, and by other groups who emulate their practice. It is significant that the Hausa, at least up to a certain time, had a different way of offering *saraka*, and the documentation does not show that they gave it to their ancestors. According to informants interviewed in the 1970s, a Hausa man who was a practicing Muslim, gave *saraka* by killing an animal in the *halal* manner (by letting it bleed), and insisted on his deathbed that the ritual be performed, after his death, by a Muslim cleric (Lewis 69). Another said *bismillah* (in the name of God), the formula that Muslims are supposed to utter before engaging in any activity, as he gave away the food. His *saraka*, like in Muslim West Africa and the Sea Islands, consisted of soaked rice (116). In contrast, when *saraka* is described among others, it is associated with the pouring of rum; no mention is made of *halal* butchering, and the sacrificed animal is sometimes a pig (Lewis 32; Herskovits 87-91). These three elements are anathema in Islam.

Evidence suggests that non-Muslims, in the Caribbean, borrowed the Islamic tradition of freewill offerings and its Arabic name, and incorporated them into their own rites, while the Muslims continued their particular rituals. In the Sea Islands, on the other hand, there is no indication that the tradition expanded to non-Muslims. Mentions of *saraka* by the Work Progress Administration interviewees occurred only in families that can be linked with certainty to Islam. The people who remembered *saraka* also remembered their ascendants

using words like *ameen*, and praying several times a day (WPA, 1986, 141, 161-166, 179; Parrish 27). But for the non-Muslims as for their Muslim companions, *saraka* was an expression of agency. It was a link to the past since it celebrated the ancestors, but the past was linked to the present and the future because the ancestors were asked for their benediction and approval of future actions. Power and influence, in other words, were not with the dominant society, but with the ancestors.

Islamic Protections

Another tradition the Muslims brought to the Americas was the making of amulets. Most African societies use amulets for protection, but Islamic talismans – from the start – use the written word and are thus easily recognizable. Most Islamic amulets or *gris-gris* consist of a piece of paper on which the *marabout* (holy man, teacher, scholar) has written kabbalistic signs, numbers arranged in a grid, or excerpts of a *surah* or chapter of the Qur’an. The paper is then folded and sewn in cotton fabric or leather for preservation. In Spanish America and Brazil, amulets are called *bolsas de mandinga* (or Mandinka purses because there, as in Africa, they were carried in a leather pouch), or simply *mandingas*. The men who make the *mandingas* are called *mandingueiros*. The Mandinka, early Muslims, have had a long reputation in Africa for the efficiency of their amulets, and their occult skills were evidently held in high regard in the Americas, as linguistics clearly indicates (Diouf 2003).

Amulets are not an object of worship; they are a medium – like a Catholic saint medal – through which one seeks divine help and protection. In Africa, non-Muslims routinely use Islamic *gris-gris* because they are reputed to be particularly effective, and evidence indicates that during slavery, this tradition was maintained in the Americas by African and native born people who followed other religions. Amulets are meant to protect the bearer; to bring well-being, health, and success to one person or one’s family; or to defeat or neutralize an opponent. In times of conflict, people wear them to increase their strength, and to escape injury and death. Slave dealers were well aware of the relationship between *marabouts*, amulets, and slave revolts. As explained by an employee of the French slave dealing *Compagnie du Sénégal* in the eighteenth century: “Marabouts who give and bless *Grisgris* are very dangerous for the slave traders, and if some are among the slaves, it is almost certain that there will be some seditions or revolts. They always promise them that they will overcome the Whites, this is why one always take the precaution of taking away their *Grisgris*” (Lamiral 254-55).

Examples of the “seditious” power of amulets can be found in Saint Domingue. There, the most prominent maroon leader, François Macandal, a Muslim who, according to contemporary informants “knew the Arabic very well”, was so well known for his talismanic skills that amulets were called *macandals* (Madiou 35; Fouchard 497-97). He may have been a Manding and been nicknamed Macandal from the Mande *mo kandan*, a spiritual protection. Since only *marabouts* may make Islamic amulets, there is strong indication that Macandal had been a cleric before his deportation, and that he continued to be one during his life in the West. He had built a large following, and he launched a movement for the takeover of the island by the enslaved population. Caught in 1758, as he was preparing his assault on Cap-Français, he was burnt at the stake. *Gris-gris* continued to be used, however, and a French Colonel revealed several decades later: “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. The patriots used to yell, when the soldiers brought those papers: *see, this is the Aristocrats’ correspondence*. Nobody understood those writings. It was Arabic” (Malenfant 211).

These papers could have been correspondence pertaining to the then unfolding revolution, but they may also have been mixed with occult protections consisting of pages of prayers and

excerpts from the Qur'an, as the study of documents recovered during several Muslim uprisings in Brazil has illustrated. Like their Haitian coreligionists, the Brazilian Muslims relied heavily on the protection of amulets in times of strife. In May 1807, they planned the first of a series of revolts in Bahia and had, according to the police, "certain magical compounds they make use of, which they call *mandingas* and which they believe, make them invulnerable and immune to all pain and injury."² (Bastide 103).

In 1835, they staged the largest uprising in Brazilian history with all the protection they could muster. The use of Islamic amulets was so pervasive that the Chief of Police informed the President of the province that "the leaders persuaded the unfortunate wretches that pieces of paper would protect them from dying, and this is why a lot of those papers were found on the dead bodies and in the rich and exquisite clothes probably belonging to the chiefs seized during our house searches" (41).

About seventy documents seized in Qur'anic schools and other places have been translated, and published in 1970 (Reichert). Some are lessons in Arabic, others are prayers, excerpts of the Qur'an, and several are occult protections. A one hundred-page manuscript in Arabic found in a pouch hanging around the neck of a dead insurgent and kept in the vault of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico in Rio de Janeiro has recently resurfaced. A preliminary study I conducted reveals that it is a combination of Qur'anic verses and prayers, written in two types of calligraphy. Most of the pages are in Arabic, but one is written in an African language, and a few have kabbalistic signs.³ As a whole, the papers constitute an occult protection.

The French Representative in Rio recovered other manuscripts of this type, just after the uprising. According to the translation he commissioned, one stated: "In the name of God the merciful, the compassionate! May God have compassion on our lord Mohammed! Praised be the name of the giver of salvation = blood must be shed: we must all have a hand in it = Oh God! Oh Mohammed! Servant of the Almighty! We hope for success if it be God in the highest's will. Glory be to God! Amen" (Bastide 120). The diplomat mentioned that the sentence "blood must be shed" was repeated 210 times on 42 lines of each piece of paper carried by each combatant. He was not versed in Islamic numerology, but there is little doubt that he indeed was in possession of an appeal to revolt that doubled as a protection. In Islamic numerology, twenty-one and its multiples correspond to *al-fatihah*, the opening *surah* of the Qur'an, which must be repeated at each prayer. It is said to have protective virtues.

The power of the Islamic amulet appears to have been recognized in the Americas by peoples who followed other religions. In Cuba, for example, the followers of the African-derived or neo-African religions, which were for a long time associated with sorcery by the elite, wear leather or fabric pouches containing protections. Brazilian Catholics carry *patuas*, which are Christian prayers and kabbalistic signs written on a piece of paper. The paper, like the Islamic *mandingas*, is then inserted into a leather or cloth pouch, and is supposed to protect the bearer from sudden death (Ignace 903). Black and white Catholics, in Cuba and Brazil, have a tradition – borrowed from the Muslims – that consists of gluing prayers written on pieces of paper to their windows and doors as a means of protecting their house (Freyre 316). It is also possible that the Brazilian *figa* is linked to Islam. It is a small hand worn around the neck to protect against evil spells. This amulet has usually been explained as being a Kongo symbol. But it may apply to only one type of *figa*: the most widespread, a clenched fist with the thumb protruding between the forefinger and the third finger. There exists, however, a second kind: an open hand with extended fingers. The open hand is a widespread Islamic symbol, linked to the number five. In Islamic numerology, five is of great pertinence. Islam has five holy persons: the Prophet Muhammad, Ali his cousin and son-in-law, Fatima his daughter, Hassan and Useyn, who were Fatima's and Ali's sons. It has Five Pillars (profession of faith, prayer, giving of alms, fast, and pilgrimage) and five daily prayers. On

numerous amulets, a hand is drawn and inside each finger is written the name of one holy person; in addition, some people wear a silver hand around their neck. Like the *figa*, these amulets are used to protect the bearer from evil spells and the evil eye.

Islamic *gris-gris* and occult sciences typical of Sufism played a significant part in the social and religious life of peoples of African descent, Muslim or not, in the Americas. Their importance lies in the fact that people believed in them, not in their real or supposed efficiency. They gave self-confidence, a sense of power over one's body and life, and over one's family and community. Amulets were important in everyday life for psychological survival, but they were critical in times of conflict. The men who wore them and went into battle, during slave uprisings or maroon wars, believed they could not be killed, that their enemies would be crushed and that victory was certain. *Gris-gris* were consequently more than a protection, they were a weapon of war that enabled the insurgents to be fearless, to defy danger, and challenge death. Thus, besides their personal significance to individuals who needed hope and a sense of security, the *gris-gris* served a communal purpose that was highly subversive in a situation of servitude. Amulets, like *saraka*, embodied the search for control over one's life and the life of one's community. They were a negation, in other words, of the essence of slavery.

Memories and Legacies

The study of the Muslim community and of some of its traditions contributes to show that religions and cultural habits did not just "survive", but were deliberately developed, maintained, nurtured, reinforced, and shared sometimes at great personal and communal cost. It also shows that Islam could survive outside the transculturation process for several centuries, although it ultimately disappeared in its orthodox form as brought by the Africans. The retention of a specific tradition while others eventually disappeared indicates a concerted effort on the part of a community to preserve the aspects of its native culture, beliefs, and social organization that mattered most and helped survival and adaptation. People saw *saraka* and *gris-gris* as effectively solving their secular and supernatural problems, and therefore continued to adhere to them. Their adoption and reinterpretation by various groups show that these specific elements had a universal appeal that transcended religion and ethnicity, and were an essential part of people's strategies for adaptation to new conditions, as well as psychological, social, and political resistance to them.

Islam and the Muslims have vanished from the consciousness of the people who today continue to practice rites or use words and expressions that were brought over the Atlantic by practicing Muslims. It is perplexing that a few decades have been sufficient, notably in the United States, to erase their memory. Given the fact that West African Muslims (and non-Muslims) were introduced illegally throughout the nineteenth century and possibly continued to practice Islam into the early twentieth century, their disappearance from African American collective memory has to be addressed (Diouf 1998, 179-84).

One contributing factor may have been the hegemony of the Christian churches that spread considerably among African Americans right before and after the Civil War. Christianity was an affirmation of belonging to humanity, as defined by whites, and to the nation. African religions, on the other hand, were ruled paganism and witchcraft – still a widespread notion – a throwback to an "uncivilized" state.⁴ Indeed, echoing the prevalent sentiment of the time, the three main black nationalists of the nineteenth century, Martin R. Delany, Alexander Crummel, and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner presented Africans in terms of "heathen savages" who had to be redeemed by Christianity. The Constitution they drafted for the African Civilization Society (1858) stated that its goal was to "civilize" and Christianize Africa. Turner, who had a positive view of the Muslims of West Africa, also saw them as "the

forerunners of evangelical Christianity; in short the Mohammedan religion is the morning star to the sun of pure Christianity" (Turner 60). It is likely that the amalgam of their traditional religions and Islam with witchcraft and paganism pushed Africans to stop talking and reminiscing about them. Zora Neale Hurston, who interviewed Cudjo Lewis (not a Muslim), who arrived from Benin in 1860 on the *Clotilda* – the last documented slave ship to the United States – noted with perspicacity that he "is now an ardent Christian and is, I believe, hiding or suppressing what he knows about African religion for fear of being thought a heathen" (Hurston 653). Yet, first-hand information that would have corrected these stereotypes was available to Americans. In 1873, Mohammed Ali ben Said, originally from Bornu (Nigeria), had published his autobiography in Memphis, Tennessee and lectured throughout the country (Said). His book provided information on Africa, Islam, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition, at the same period Edward W. Blyden, the Virgin Islands native and Christian missionary, wrote and lectured at length about Islam and the Muslims he had met in West Africa (Blyden, 1871; 1877, 100-27; 1967).

In the early twentieth century, Christian churches were no longer alone in trying to cater to the soul of the black community. Two movements that claimed to be Islamic recruited principally among Southerners who had migrated North during the Great Migration. But the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) and the Nation of Islam of the 1920s did not mention any link between African Muslims – in Africa or formerly enslaved in America – and their own unorthodox brands of Islam. On the contrary, the MSTA related African Americans to the Moroccans and the "Asiatic" people; and the Nation of Islam under Fard Muhammad also claimed an Asiatic origin for the "so-called Negroes."⁵ (Fauset; Clegg; Shouk, Hunwick and O'Fahey 137-191).

Therefore, even among African Americans who presented themselves as Muslims no acknowledgment was made of the African Muslims' presence and potential contributions to later homegrown constructions of Islam. There again, and most incongruously, the memory seems to have disappeared. Or if it did not, it was certainly glossed over, probably because an association with Africans and Africa was regarded as far less validating, much less conducive to self-esteem and pride, than an association with the Moorish empire and the great civilizations of Asia. Nevertheless, even if the leaders did not recognize any link with African Muslims, it is not a coincidence that the country that received the largest proportion of Muslims was also the one to develop an early form of proto-Islam. Just as the men and women interviewed by the WPA in the Sea Islands had seen great-grandparents and grandparents praying and following other Pillars of Islam, it is likely that some early followers of the MSTA and the Nation of Islam had also noted Islamic behavior among some family members. Like the Sea Islands descendants, they probably did not relate any of it to Islam. But later in the North, some of the gestures, words, expressions, and dress of the followers of the MSTA and the Nation of Islam would have seemed familiar to them and evidence that Islam was the black man's early religion – as claimed by both movements – since it was what their own ancestors had been practicing.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the situation has been quite different. There, some African-derived religions – such as Candomble, Macumba, Umbanda, and Vodou – readily acknowledge Islam and the Muslims, just as they acknowledge the presence and contributions of several other groups and religions (Carneiro 37; Ramos 88-91; Menesson 1952, 1959; Molina). Today, Cubans of various faiths keep on greeting one another by saying *alafia* or "may all go well" (from the Arabic *al-afia*: happiness, health, peace, absence of problem).⁶ The greetings and the last sentence of the prayer of the followers of Palo Mayombe or Palo Monte – a Kongo religion – is the customary Islamic salutation, *assalamu aleikum*, but there is no indication that people know where that expression comes from.⁷ Descendants of some Maroon populations in Jamaica use the same greeting (Afroz). Arabic words are also

numerous in the vocabulary of Umbanda, a Brazilian spiritualist religion that uses "la lingua Angola" as its ritual language, but intersperses it with Arabic words and expressions. Among them are: *alcali* or judge (from the Arabic *al-qadi* or judge), *alijenu* or diabolical spirits (from *jinn*, bad spirits), *assumi* or fast (from *sawm*, the month-long fast of Ramadan), *abaricada suba* or God bids you a good day (from *allah barakati la*, may God bless your day), *ali ramadu li lai* or Praise to the Lord of the universe (from *al-hamdu lillahi*, praise be to God). In Cuba, Jamaica, and Brazil, as well as in other Latin American countries people generally do not know the Arabic origin of these words and expressions even though they use them daily.

Although the memory seems lost, the legacy nevertheless lives on, and one can find several other contemporary manifestations of the Islamic substrata in the cultures of the African Diaspora. A saying of the American South: "wash your feet, say your prayers, and go to bed," seems a likely reference to the Muslim prayer, done after one has accomplished his/her ablutions, which include the washing of the feet. This interpretation is all the more compelling because some people today recall having seen grandparents wash their feet in a peculiar manner before praying; a way they now recognize as being similar to Muslim ablutions.

Other indications that Islamic behavior inherited from earlier times was still rampant in the twentieth century can be found among some people who regard themselves as Hebrews. The oldest member of New York's Black Hebrew community, who was born on the island of Montserrat in 1904, mentions that in her area, people did not eat pork or carrion, but only animals that they had killed themselves by cutting their throats and letting the blood drip; and that men were circumcised (McLeod). Seeing some convergence with Jewish practices she and other people of African descent "reverted" to the Hebrew faith as early as the 1920s. According to their creed, their ancestors are the true Hebrews who were scattered from Palestine to West Africa and sold by native Africans to the European slave dealers because of their foreign religion and customs. Given the lack of historical foundation of this interpretation, it is much more likely that their ancestors were Muslims who indeed are circumcised; follow the Qur'anic injunction "Forbidden to you are: dead meat (carrion), blood, the flesh of swine" (5:3); and bleed their animals to death.

In the cultural area, the Blues may be counted as a legacy of the African Muslims. According to musicologist John Storm Roberts, the Blues' "long, blending and swooping notes are similar to the Islam-influenced styles of much of West Africa." In addition the "bending of notes" and other techniques used in the Blues are found "in Islamic African music and hardly at all in other styles" (Roberts 213; Charters 125; Oliver 88; Lomax 233). Parallelisms are equally strong between early Blues, the *adhan* or call to prayer, and the recitation of the Qur'an. *Levee Camp Holler*, a piece recorded in a Southern penitentiary by Alan Lomax, is an almost perfect replica of the *adhan* as done in West Africa: it has the same ornamented notes, tortuously elongated sounds, pauses, nasal humming, and simple unaccompanied melody.⁶ This suggests that during slavery, *muezzins* must have called to prayer – their chanting would probably have been perceived as just another African work song by overseers – even though laborers, in the fields, may have only been able to pray "in their head." The wider community then would have appropriated and secularized this specific type of "music."

Research throughout the African Diaspora will uncover more Islamic contributions, particularly in the French and British Caribbean, Guyana, and French Guiana that were re-Africanized and to a certain extent, re-Islamized with the arrival of tens of thousands of African recaptives and indentured servants from the 1840s to the 1870s. The study of Islamic communities in the Americas will also tell us more about Islam and the Muslims in West Africa between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. By showing what they brought to the Americas, what they shed, and what they kept and developed, we will have a better idea of

who they were, how they lived their faith, and when some Islamic cultural elements were developed in Africa. For example, the offering of rice cakes as a charity exists throughout West Africa, but not in other parts of the Muslim world, and it does not appear in the Qu'ran. It is a West African tradition that was evidently well established by the eighteenth century when it was transported west.

Research in its Islamic component is shedding new light on the African Diaspora. It shows that Islam and the Muslims have had a much wider and deeper influence on the Americas than suspected so far. Islam and the African Muslims, hidden in plain view and ignored for so long, represent a missing link that helps us understand some of the "unexplained" features of the cultures transported, recreated, and adapted by the Africans and their descendants, and enable us to form a more detailed and comprehensive picture of the cultures and religions of the African Diaspora.

Endnotes

¹ Sam-Sam was the name of one of the eighteenth-century leaders of the maroon communities of Dutch Guiana. Arabi, whose name, like his predecessor's suggests a Muslim background, succeeded him in 1757.

² I wish to thank Tufy Cairus for bringing this document to my attention, and Imam Souleimane Konaté for working on its interpretation.

³ Ironically, in most African cultures the practice of witchcraft – or being accused of doing so – led to enslavement and, during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, to deportation to the Americas.

⁴ In Cuba, during slavery (and today), Yoruba practitioners of divination used the expression to indicate that they foresaw a positive outcome. Among the Gullah of Georgia and South Carolina, Alafiya is a female name. Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949: 49.

⁵ The Palo prayer is:

Jura Dio, mambé! Dio!
Tres personas y un solo Dios. Verdadero
Santo Tomas. Ver para creer
Guakunda Congo! Gua!
Endundo Kuna, ndundo. Ndundo!
Endundo Kuna, ntoto. Ntoto!
Somos o no somos. Somos!
Sala Malekun! Malekun Sala!

⁶ Alan Lomax. *Prison Blues of the South*. Recorded live at the Mississippi and Louisiana State Penitentiaries. Delta Music Inc., 1994.

Works Cited

- Afroz, Sultana. "From Moors to Marronage: The Islamic Heritage of the Maroons of Jamaica." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 19: 2 (1999): 161-80.
- Anglade, Pierre. *Inventaire éthymologique des termes créoles des Caraïbes d'origine africaine*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998.
- Austin, Allan D. *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Bastide, Roger. *The African Religions of Brazil: Towards a Sociology of the Interpenetration*

of Civilizations. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

- Blyden, Edward W. "Mohammedanism in Western Africa." *The People of Africa: A Series of Papers on Their Character, Condition, and Future Prospects*. Ed. Henry Schieffelin. New York: A. D. F. Randolph, 1871: 62-79.
- . "Mohammedanism and the Negro Race." *Methodist Quarterly Review* 29: 7, (January 1877): 100-27.
- . *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*. 1887. Reprint, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1967.
- Burnley, William Hardin. *Observations on the Present conditions of the Island of Trinidad, and the Actual State of the Experiment of Negro Emancipation*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1842.
- Callcott, George. "Omar ibn Seid, a Slave who Wrote an Autobiography in Arabic." *The Journal of Negro History* 39: 1 (January 1954): 58-63.
- Campbell, Carl. "John Mohammed Bath and the Free Mandingos in Trinidad: The Question of their Repatriation to Africa 1831-38." *Journal of African Studies* 2: 4 (1975/76): 467-95.
- Carneiro, Edison. *Negros bantus*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilizacao Brasileira, 1939.
- Charters, Samuel. *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1981.
- Clarke, Robert. *Sierra Leone: A Description of the Manners and Customs of the Liberated Africans*. London: James Ridgway, 1846.
- Conrad, Georgia Bryan. "Reminiscences of a Southern Woman." *The Southern Workman* 30: 5 (May 1901): 252-57.
- Curtin, Philip D. "Ayuba Suleiman Diallo of Bundu." Ed. Philip D. Curtin, *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967 : 17-59.
- Debien, Gabriel. *Les esclaves aux Antilles françaises*. Pointe-à-Pitre: Société d'histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1974.
- Diouf, Sylviane. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. New York: New York UP, 1998.
- . "Sadaqa Among African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 10: 1 (January 1999): 22-32.
- . "Devils or Sorcerers, Muslims or Studs: Manding in the Americas". *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora*. Eds. Paul E. Lovejoy and David Trotman. London: Continuum, 2003. Forth coming 2004.
- Fauset, Arthur Huff. *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults in the Urban North*. 1944. Reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.
- Fouchard, Jean. *Les Marrons de la liberté*. Paris: Editions de l'Ecole, 1972.
- Freyre, Gilberto. *The Masters and the Slaves*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Greenberg, Joseph. "The Decipherment of the 'Ben-Ali Diary': A Preliminary Statement." *Journal of Negro History* 25: 3 (July 1940): 372-75.
- Gurley, Ralph. "Secretary's Report." *African Repository*. July 1837.

- Herskovits, Melville and Frances. *Trinidad Village*. New York: A. Knopf, 1947.
- Hodgson, William Brown. *Notes on Northern Africa*. New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1844.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "Cudjo's Own Story of the Last African Slaver." *Journal of Negro History* XII : 4, (October 1927): 648-663.
- Ignace, Etienne. "Le fétichisme des nègres du Brésil." *Anthropos* (1908): 881-904.
- Lamiral, Dominique. *L'Afrique et le peuple africain, considérés sous tous leurs rapports avec notre commerce et nos colonies*. Paris: Dessene, 1789.
- Lewis, Maureen Warner. *Guinea's Other Suns*. Dover, MA: The Majority Press, 1991.
- . *Trinidad Yoruba: From Mothertongue to Memory*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 1996.
- Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York: Bantam/Doubleday, 1993.
- Lovejoy, Paul. "Background to Rebellion: The Origins of the Muslim Slaves in Bahia." *Slavery and Abolition* 15: 2 (August 1994): 151-81.
- McDaniel, Lorna. *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou: Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998.
- Madiou, Thomas. *Histoire d'Haïti*. 1847. Reprint. Port-au-Prince: Editions Fardin, 1981.
- Malenfant, Colonel. *Des colonies et particulièrement de celle de Saint Domingue*. Paris: Audibert, 1814.
- Martin, B. G. "Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The 'Bilali Diary' in Context." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 78: 3 (Fall 1994): 589-601.
- Mason Crum, *Gullah, Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968.
- Menesson Rigaud, Odette. "Vaudou haïtien: quelques notes sur ses réminiscences africaines." *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 27 (1952): 235-38.
- . "Le rôle du Vaudou dans l'indépendance d'Haïti." *Présence africaine*, 18-19 (February-May 1959): 43-67.
- Molina, M. A. *3777 Pontos cantados e riscados na Umbanda e na Quimbanda*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora espiritualista, ltda, 1975.
- Nunez, Benjamin. *Dictionary of Afro-Latin American Civilization*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1980.
- Oliver, Paul. *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*. New York: Stein and Day, 1970.
- Owusu-Ansah, David. "Prayer, Amulets, and Healing." *The History of Islam in Africa*. Eds. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, Athens: Ohio UP, 2000: 477-88.
- Parrish, Lydia. *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*. 1942. Reprint. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.
- Plumer, William. "Meroh, a Native African." *New York Observer*. January 8, 1863.
- Raeders, George. *Le Comte de Gobineau Brésil*. Paris: Les Nouvelles éditions latines, 1934.
- Ramos, Arthur. *O negro brasileiro*. Sao Paulo: Companhia Editorial Nacional, 1940.
- Reichert, Rolf. *Os documentos arabes do Arquivo do Estado da Bahia*. Bahia: Universidade Federal da Bahia, Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais, 1970.

- Reis, Joao Jose. *Slave Rebellion in Bahia: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.
- Roberts, John Storm. *Black Musics of Two Worlds*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972.
- Rodrigues, Nina Raymundo. *Os Africanos no Brasil*. Sao Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1976.
- Romero, Fernando. *Quimba, Fa, Malambo, Neque: Afronegrismos en el Peru*. Lima: IEP, 1988.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *The Jahanke Muslim Clerics*. Maryland: UP of America, 1989.
- Shouk, Ahmed I. Abu, John O. Hunwick and R.S. O'Fahey. "A Sudanese Missionary to the United States: Satti Majid, 'Shaykh al-Islam in North America', and his Encounter with Noble Drew Ali, Prophet of the Moorish Science Temple Movement." *Sudanic Africa* 8 (1997): 137-191.
- Simpson, George Eaton. *Black Religions in the New World*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978.
- Teas, Thomas. "A Trading Trip to Natchez and New Orleans in 1822." *The Journal of Southern History* 7 (August 1941): 378-99.
- Truman, George. *Narrative of a Visit to the West Indies*. Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1844.
- Turner, Lorenzo Dow. *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949.
- Turner, Richard Brent. *Islam in the African American Experience*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.
- Underhill, Edward Bean. *The West Indies*. London: Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1862.
- Works Progress Administration (WPA), Savannah Unit, Georgia's Writers Project. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*. 1942. Reprint. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986.