No Common Slave: Islam, Blackness and Literacy in Atlantic Slavery

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Timeline

Events specific to the lives of these men are in regular font, and events that are relevant more broadly have been bolded.

1730-Ayuba Suleiman Diallo captured from Mandingo territory, transported to Annapolis, Maryland

1733-Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo and Bluett set sail for England

1773-Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo dies in West Africa.

1765-Start of the American Revolution

1783-End of the American Revolution

1794-Abdul Rahman Ibrahima marries his wife, Isabella, after some years on the Foster plantation.

1803-Bilali Muhammad sold to Thomas Spalding, sometime before 1808.

1804-Omar ibn Said captured from Futa Toro.

1807-Congress bans importation of African slaves

1811-James Owen visits ibn Said in prison to see his Arabic writing, purchases him.

1812-Bilali Muhammad and fellow slaves are permitted to be armed, in the case of a British invasion of Sapelo Island

1824-Bilali Muhammad leads fellow slaves to safety to as a hurricane strikes Sapelo Island

1826-Abdul Rahman Ibrahima writes a letter to his family

1829-Abdul Rahman Ibrahima dies shortly after reaching Liberia.

1849-Nicholas Said is captured by Tuareg raiders

1853-After a few tumultuous years of enslavement and travel, Nicholas Said is sold to
Menshikov and taken to St. Petersburg

1854-Nicholas Said is baptized by Trubetzkoy in the Russian Orthodox Church

1857-Bilali Muhammad dies on Sapelo Island.

1861-**US Civil War starts**

1862-Nicholas Said arrives in Detroit

1863-**Lincoln issues Emancipation Proclamation**, Nicholas Said enlists in the 55th regiment of the Union Army

1864-Omar Ibn Said dies in the United States.

1865-Nicholas Said leaves the 55th Regiment in South Carolina in fall, **Civil War ends in May**

1882-Nicholas Said dies in the United States
Introduction

The Atlantic Slave Trade was a multinational, multimillion dollar enterprise that lasted from the 15th century through the 19th century. The major European empires built their empires in large part on the trafficking of humans from Western and Central Africa. In these years, hundreds of thousands of West African Muslims were shipped to the New World. Only a small fraction of enslaved people were transported to North America, and there are many well-preserved stories from every corner of the New World that are worthy of study. Although it is difficult to generate exact numbers, Muslims likely represented many of the millions of Africans transported all over South America, the Caribbean, and the United States. All of the men discussed here were upper class, literate, West African followers of Islam who served masters of European descent at some point in their journey, and found themselves in the United States for a significant period of time. Their stories touch three continents and span from the years before the Revolution through Reconstruction.

It is a challenge to draw meaningful historical conclusions from individual experiences, especially when we are forced to rely on narrators that wished to capture, master, or take pity on the subjects we find most interesting. In order to both honor the ways in which the lives in question were extraordinary and recognize their broader place in the history of slavery, I will use a microhistorical approach that focuses on individual lives, while acknowledging that all of these are situated in broader social and historical contexts. My analysis will start with an exploration of Islam and the young United States, then provide the details of where each man was born, how he was captured and where he labored as a slave, and then it will move on to broader questions. In

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1 Sylviane A Diouf, Sadaqa Among African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas (Journal of Islamic Studies 1999)
dominant American imaginings of slavery, Africans were rapidly converted from animism to Christianity. How did Muslim religious identity come to bear on slave experiences? While it is difficult and perhaps impossible to assess the inner intensity and spiritual meaning of a person’s faith, the historical record allows us some insights into how the outward markers of religious status were viewed by their superiors. With each man’s story, their level of education is a point of interest for the Europeans and American white people they encounter. How did these colonial overlords view Islam, and the related quality of Arabic literacy, in enslaved people of African descent?

Throughout my sources, we hear the voices of non-African people in the United States and Europe expressing how impressed they were with the slaves in question. They express their fascination with these men in various ways—one slave is permitted to correspond with Henry Clay, two are sent home, one is paraded around Britain and meets the Queen, another is baptized into the Eastern Church by a Russian aristocrat. My thesis explores why these men were granted a special status above their fellow Negroes. What were the makings of a “good” or “smart” or “interesting” African person? I argue that the enslaved people discussed here were legible to their superiors as exceptional because of their literate, Muslim status.

**Literature Review**

The world of work on the Atlantic Slave Trade is expansive in English, Spanish and many other languages. The conversation surrounding Islam and the “West” is similarly large, but neither of these categories quite captured the relevant experiences of the individuals explored in this thesis.
The authors that do discuss Muslim, first generation African slaves in the United States fit largely into two categories. First, there are the authors who see the presence of Muslim slaves in the U.S. as an interesting pit stop in a larger story. *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam* has a short chapter on these slaves, in which they address their origins in West Africa, give a few examples of interesting lives, and situate the content in the contemporary discourse of identity politics. Edward Curtis’ approach in his *Muslims in America* is not dissimilar. He begins his book with a lively description of many of the same men this paper focuses on, and ends with a few touching oral testimonies that cite religion as a site of resistance and strength under slavery’s conditions.

Michael Gomez’s *Black Crescent* employs a unique set of sources spanning South America, the Caribbean, Central America and the U.S. to tell a story that pays slavery due attention. He addresses the continued presence of Islam in the Iberian Peninsula, and gives an in depth analysis of the African sociopolitical contexts from which these slaves were swiped. Slavery is a rather large topic here, because the book focuses on African Muslims in the Americas. It made many gains by connecting Muslim experiences across different regions.

Allan D. Austin’s *African Muslims in Antebellum America* falls into the second category of texts. He focuses exclusively on the individual stories of a few Muslim slaves, almost all of whom appear here. His book served as a reference point for many other works, primarily because of its efforts to document and organize the sources, as opposed to offer a full analysis. Similarly, *Five Classic Muslim Slave Narratives* simply tells the stories of five slaves, and offers little in way of context or synthesis. Finally, Sylviane A. Diouf’s *Servants of Allah* is the most impressive book on the subject I have found, and it was also written the earliest, marking a
starting point for the study of Muslim slaves in a serious way. Diouf organizes her book’s chapters by themes such as Europeans and Africans, or simply “Literacy.” Her graceful writing and seamless synthesis of a broad range of sources creates a book that concentrates on the United States, but opens up possibilities for further work in Spanish, French and Portuguese archives. Broader economic trends are brought out, but Diouf always circles back to serious questions about Islamic religious practice. Individuals are permitted to shine, but never dominate the analysis.

Other useful books have been written about individuals. They read as biographies with the explicit goal of complicating popular American imaginings of slavery. Alford’s *Prince Among Slaves* is almost a novelization of the story of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima, and its position in the discourse remains unclear to me. The author writes of Ibrahima in a romantic way, and he makes little comment about the other implications of studying the slave trade, but his text is richly researched and useful nevertheless. Muhammad A al-Ahari, otherwise known as Ray Allen Rudder, translated the text written by Bilali, the Muslim religious leader on Sapelo Island. This book was clearly useful to me and others for its detail, and through its superb English translation of a difficult Arabic text. Finally, *a Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said* was a great piece of scholarly work that focused primarily on the life of one man, and serves as a collection of the work of Diouf, Gomez, Austin and others.

There were other smaller articles and chapters of larger books that were relevant to the story of Islam in U.S. slavery, but the above scholars and texts crop up consistently in this small but lively discourse, and inform my own work in a substantial way. My thesis will move the conversation beyond collecting, cataloging and organizing life histories viewed as exceptional by
cracking these texts open for rigorous analysis. I will do this by treating them as more than biographies. Instead, I employ a microhistorical approach to evaluate these vibrant stories and sources as windows into plantations, households, moments of capture in West Africa, and sets of white American or European attitudes about Muslims and Africans. This approach goes beyond an (arguably) empty celebration of the novelty of the experiences described. Instead, my goal is to determine what the allegedly exceptional Islamic presence in colonial North America actually tells us about the experience of enslavement in this time and place, in terms of the attitudes of white slave owners towards the people they enslaved.

**Elite American Discourses of Islam**

Because this project spans between the year 1730 and the end of the American Civil War, it would be impossible to fully explore all of the relevant visions that Americans had of the many political entities that they associated with Islam or the “East.” This is further complicated by the fact that our earliest protagonist arrived in North America before the American Revolution, so any analysis would ideally include the British interactions with the Orient that undoubtedly informed early American elites. (I use the word elite here only to refer to the class of people with an education that included other parts of the world, and could afford slaves.) Because I want to argue that these five enslaved Muslims were “legible” as Muslims to white American people, it is necessary to grapple, if only briefly, with what the word “Islam” or “Mahometan” might have conjured up for at the time. It is less urgent to trace the associations with the categories of “Africa” because the opinions, curiosities and anxieties that white people held about that continent and its people appear ubiquitously throughout my sources.
One useful, early source on Islam in the West African context comes from Anthony Benezet. Benezet was born to a Huguenot Protestant family in 1713, but ultimately moved to the United States, where he converted to Quakerism, and devoted his life to teaching in a Quaker school, and educating black children at night. From the 1750s onwards, he was an avid abolitionist. In 1771, forty one years after Diallo’s time in the United States and just five years before the U.S. declared independence, Benezet’s book *Some historical account of Guinea, : its situation, produce, and the general disposition of its inhabitants, with an inquiry into the rise and progress of the slave trade, its nature and lamentable effects* was published. In it, he discusses the African Muslims of the Guinea region by referencing Thomas Astley, an explorer who came to that region many years before:

“Some of these Mandigoes who are settled at Galem, far up the River Gambia, can read and write Arabic tolerably, and are a good hospitable people, who carry on a trade with the inland nations. "?They are extremely populous in those parts, their women being fruitful, and they are not suffering any person amongst them, but such as are guilty of crimes are made to be slaves, We are told from Jobson that the Mahomtean Negroes say their prayers thrice a day. Each village has a priest who calls them to their duty. It is surprising (says the author) as well as commendable, to see the modesty, attention and reverence they observe during their worship. He asked some of the priest the purpot (sic?) of their prayers and ceremonies, their answer always was that they adored God by prostrating themselves before him, that by prostrating themselves, they acknowledged their own insignificance, and farther intreated (sic?) him to forgive their faults, and to grant them all good and necessary things as well as deliverance from evil. Jobson takes notes of several good qualities in these Negro priests, particularly their great sobriety. They gain their livelihood by keeping school for the education of the children. The boys are taught to read and write. They not only teach school, but rove about the country, teaching and instructing, for which the whole country is open to them, and they have a free course through all places, though the Kings might be at war with one another.”

Benezet persistently describes Muslims as superior to other kinds of Africans. His reading does not credit their success to their Mandingo ethnic or tribal associations, or any other aspect of

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their society or culture. Rather, he lists the characteristics that set Muslims apart.

According to Benezet, Muslims are “tolerably” literate, have schools, teach their boys to read and write, they are hospitable, and they have trade, which is to say that they have commerce. In the Enlightenment-era thought of Benezet’s time, commercial and intellectual life were prerequisites of a civilized society. They are also well-populated, which is to say that their women are “fruitful,” a compliment because a woman’s most important role was still that of mother. If someone commits a crime, they are enslaved, and although the kings fight, the overall area is safe for travel. Both of these anecdotes represent Benezet’s efforts to present Muslims as living under something comparable to the rule of law, or stable government. Likely because of the author’s strong Quaker affiliations, the most important thing that sets a Mahometan Negro apart from his dark brethren in this text is that he “prostrates himself before God,” a display of earnest religious devotion.

Benezet uses a two-pronged approach to justify why these particular West African Muslims are deserving of praise, and by extension, more humane treatment. He first fits his subjects into an Enlightenment framework of a “civilized” society, and then he praises their sobriety and devotion to God. Note that for Benezet, “Allah” and “God” were the same, indicating either a misunderstanding of basic Arabic, or a political maneuver. This latter is an important possibility, because we will see later masters attempt to coerce their slaves into conversion, sometimes on the basis of shared ground between Islam and Christianity.

Although Benezet’s perspective was limited to an anti-slavery, Quaker minority point of view, he represents one strand of thought on Islam in early American culture. Another early point of contact between Islam and Americans was the US-Morocco “Treaty of Peace and
Friendship. In 1777, Morocco became the first nation to recognize the United States as a nation, the Sultan Muhammad III granted US ships safe passage through Gibraltar and Moroccan ports even as the Revolution continued. In 1787, Congress ratified an official treaty that promised American ships safe passage in waters where they previously were often attacked by pirates.

This incident is also explored in Denise A. Spellberg’s *Thomas Jefferson’s Quran*. She explores the interactions between Jefferson, Adams and the Moroccan ambassador's fully, concluding that the Founding Fathers were certainly interested, but deeply misinformed about Islam. Her book goes on to use seemingly trivial anecdotes (that Thomas Jefferson owned a Quran, was interested in Islam and studied Arabic) to discuss the ways in which the Founding Fathers imagined Islam more broadly. She argues that Jefferson’s view on Muslims was progressive in that it imagined them as full citizens. Unfortunately, these views on “Muslim civil rights” as she calls them, were primarily ideological stances on the inclusion of Catholics, Jews and Muslims in Protestant America, not real political action.

Ironically, it is likely that Washington, who also supported rights for Muslims in the abstract, owned at least two, perhaps four, Muslim slaves on his own Mount Vernon plantation. Spellberg suggests that although many of the Founding Father’s viewpoints on Islam might surprise us in their positivity, they still carried over stereotypes and polemical views from Europe. As far as they could tell from their own perspective, there were no Muslims in the United States, only theoretical goals of absolute religious tolerance.

As in any other cultural exchange that unfolded over one hundred and fifty years, the

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relationship between white American elites and the Islamic world evolved significantly over time. Just a few years before our stories start, in 1721, Montesquieu released his *The Persian Letters*, a book that uses his own deformed understanding of the infamous Ottoman imperial social unit, the harem, to argue for a more tolerant, democratic approach to government, as opposed to Eastern despotism. We know that many of our Founding Fathers were well-versed in Enlightenment thought, and Montesquieu would have fit firmly into that discourse. His Muslim subject is depicted as spiritually bankrupt, politically backwards, materialistic to the point of unproductive excess, sexually perverse and misogynistic, a perfect negative image of everything the Enlightenment project hoped Europe would become, and everything the Founding Fathers hoped America would become.

By the mid 19th century, increased contact with the Islamic world, imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa, and a sense of British and French military confidence over the Ottomans had changed the tone of these Oriental scenes. This refined Orientalist fantasy is perhaps best articulated in the visual arts, where we see an explosion of paintings focused on Muslims in their own lands. In the United States context, for example, Frederick Arthur Bridgman was born in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1847. His painting *An Dans une ville de campagne Alger* was finished in 1888, 23 years after the Civil War ended, and a few years after the death of our last protagonist, Nicholas Said. Although the American painting scene took a few years to catch up to its European counterpart, this image is a rich example of the ways in which American views of Islam changed over time, evolved in conversation with Europe, and were more dynamic than previously believed.
This image, in conjunction with other Orientalist work, clearly demonstrates that American visions of Islam were still intimately connected to the European cultural milieu, even by the end of the 19th century. The scene here is a typical imagining of the harem space. It is all female, luxurious, taking place outside, in a warm climate. The presence of the orange tree, the flowers, the incense burning, and the fountain all create a highly sensual atmosphere. However, the Sotheby’s critics rightly point out that the presence of a child, and the business-like manner of the three women, make for a less charged scene than most harem paintings.

This painting represents a rising awareness of the complexity of the Islamic world. Especially interesting to us is what we might call the “diversity” of the women involved. There is at least an acceptance here that Muslims may have different phenotypes, as the dark-skinned woman in the corner makes clear. The viewer still gets the sense, however, that Bridgman imagines Muslims as exotic inhabitants of a far-off land, with whom he has little in common, much like the Founding Fathers a century earlier, and that is why they are so interesting in the first place. There is nothing to suggest that the image of the American Negro had become more compatible with images of the Orient, the Islamic cultural world, or Mahometans.

5 “Frederick Arthur Bridgman.” Sotheby’s, 19th Century European Art, a.n.d.
I put forth these examples not to argue that the way our enslaved protagonists are discussed by their white superiors is directly connected to any one French play or Romantic-era painting. Rather, I hope to show the instability of the category “Mahometan” in 18th and 19th century America, the distance between views of these Muslims and notions of blackness, the ways in which Islam was seen as connected to larger questions of the global stage, and the continuity of anxieties about this other monotheistic religion.

**Stories from Sources Written by the Enslaved**

**Omar ibn Said’s Story**

Omar ibn Said was born around 1765 in Futa Toro, present day Senegal, to a relatively powerful family. Because his father was killed when he was only five years old, he was raised by his uncle and educated by an older brother and other teachers. His autobiography makes mention of this spiritual education, but he did not appear to have a traditional family life in Africa or America. ibn Said was likely captured in a war against the anti-Muslim Bambaras in the country of Burr in 1807. His first master was kind, but he died soon after the African’s
arrival. His second master was demanding and not religious, a situation that was unacceptable to Said, so he ran away for thirty days, until he was captured while praying in a church. He was then taken to a prison in Fayetteville, North Carolina. 6

While there, ibn Said wrote on the walls of his cell in Arabic, a visual that drew much local attention. Said received no effusive honors that show us how truly exceptional the white people in his life believed he was. He made no transatlantic return, received no honors aside from his master’s approval of his literacy. We cannot say for certain that Said lived better than most other slaves. However, we can say that Said’s own situation improved dramatically after he revealed his ability to write a language that was directly associated with the religion of Islam.

In 1811, James Owen, a former militia officer, came to see ibn Said in prison precisely because he wanted to see the African man write in Arabic. 7 He brought the slave and took him home to his family. The brothers James and John Owen gave Said both an English Quran and an Arabic Bible, 8 and Said’s autobiography delicately details a conversion process. During this transition, Said was already forty years old and appeared frail, but he lived for fifty three more years. He had a seat at the county church, his own little home in the yard, meals prepared by the family cook. 9 His fond account of this life was only available in Arabic until the text’s translation and publication in 1925.

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


Analysis of Omar ibn Said’s Story

Omar ibn Said originally wrote his story in Arabic, and it was published in English in 1975 by John Franklin Jameson for the American Historical Review. The translation used here came from the National Humanities Center. This text is exciting because it describes ibn Said’s inner life. He discusses his homeland, his religious experiences with Islam and Christianity, the images that his master held of him, and the way that relationship developed over time.

It should be noted that the source has its weaknesses. Arabic translations are notoriously difficult, and although I have spent time with the original, my own limited knowledge of the language did not lead me to new conclusions. Ibn Said was asked to write these biographies after a few years of fame, and the usual human experiences of trauma, ego, and the fading memory of old age all make for a text that is often thin on details or vague about how events transpired. Although it is unlikely that ibn Said’s masters spoke Arabic, we must consider that he was in no position to speak badly of their relationship, even less so if they were abusive in some way. His traumatized memory of Africa and the Middle Passage cannot be relied upon as an entirely accurate account of what transpired, and like any source, an autobiography only tells one version of the story.

Although ibn Said is not the perfect narrator, his account consistently demonstrates that he received special treatment, compared to his fellow black people, as a Muslim, and as a literate person. When he runs away from his first master, he reports that a young man informed his father that a “black man” was in the church. In 1811, the proper place for runaway blacks who entered into spaces that were not theirs, like a church, was jail. Ibn Said found himself in jail, but arguably surpassed this status when Owen brought him.
The enslaved man’s Muslim identity and his literacy are intertwined at first. As we saw in the case of Thomas Jefferson and other early American interactions with Islam, it is likely that an educated, landholding man like Owen would have at the very least associated the visual of the Arabic alphabet with Islam. Our narrator admits that he did not understand English at the moment of his jailing, so there was little he could have said to win the favor of his jailors, Mumford or Owen, so very little beyond this visual clue might have pointed to his Islamic ties or his literacy.

It is likely that Owen\(^\text{10}\) heard of ibn Said’s Arabic writing through the local newspapers that turned him into something of a local celebrity. There is still work to be done surrounding the specifics of media coverage in the area, but in an act of kindness that seemed random to our protagonist, Bob Mumford released the African on bail, brought him from his old master, and then gave him to Jim Owen, his son-in-law, who went on to provide ibn Said with a life in which he was treated as a “friend and pensioner” and “befriended by all” until his death. Something in the story of an Arabic-writing, jailed African spoke to this family. It is unclear whether or not they were already in the market for a slave, or how useful they believed ibn Said, a self-reported small man, would be to them, but it is clear that the writing of Arabic, a dual signal of literacy and Mahometan status, drew them to specifically seek him out and give him a life that was more peaceful and dignified than those of many of his black peers in the Antebellum era.

This initial inspiration carried forward into gentle treatment, intellectual stimulation and allowances for the enslaved man’s physical weakness throughout his life. In an era when most American slaves were illiterate, and often punished for learning how to read, ibn Said was given

an Arabic bible and an English Quran to help him improve his language skills and develop his new, Presbyterian way of thinking and lifestyle. Owen fondly remembers various occasions on which the Owens spent time with him personally to discuss the gospel, Jesus Christ, and God. These incidences allow us to rule out the possibility that the Owen family was simply particularly sweet tempered or pious; rather, they sought to engage with ibn Said’s own level of learning and his Islamic religiosity, bringing him into the fold of Christianity through text and conversation, rather than violence. Although the Owens’ position of power necessarily renders any conversion effort coercive, they did not rely on the abuse, manipulation or force that we often see in Atlantic world religious conversion. Particularly interesting is their allowance of a Quran, which might have easily been deemed an inappropriate gift for a number of reasons. Clearly, ibn Said’s good fortune, and Islamic, literate status earned him a special place with the Owen family.

It would not be productive to search Said’s text for his personal religiosity, but it is helpful to consider that most dominant strands of Islam allow Jesus Christ a certain special role. For most Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad is the last in a line of prophets that starts with Abraham, and includes both Old Testament and New Testament figures, ranging from Moses to Mary and Jesus. In the mainstream Islamic schools of thought, and in keeping with most ritual practice, Mary is honored as the only female prophet but does not enjoy the same central theological roles as Fatima or Aisha. The Quran tells the story of Jesus’ birth in Sura Maryam (Mary’s Chapter), in a scene that scarcely resembles the Christmas manger of Western narratives. Christ is often referenced but seldom focused on outside of this chapter, and the

Quran clearly refutes Trinitarian logic, and by extension, Christ’s divine status. Whether or not ibn Said’s praise of Christ falls within Islam proper is a judgement call, but I would note that even his use of the word of “messiah,” which might be read as the Protestant tenant of accepting Christ as Lord and Savior, is actually in keeping with Quranic passages, such as 3:45 which names Jesus son of Mary as the mesiah (messiah). (This point will be relevant again with the story of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima.) Of course, the Quran does not dictate every action of every Muslim, and ibn Said’s consistent emphasis on Christ, and his characterization of “when he was a Mahometan” as a past moment in his life points to a serious shift in experience, if not necessarily belief.

Overall, ibn Said has left us with an interesting autobiography that details his circumstances both before and after capture. For him, literacy and a Muslim religious identity were expressed in the same act of writing on the walls of his jail, and it was this declaration that was led the Owen family to find him, free him from jail, purchase him, and give him a life in which they ostensibly made an earnest attempt to nurture his intellect and spiritual life.

**Nicholas Said’s Story**

My longest primary source is an autobiography written by an enslaved man born Muhammad Ali ben Said, baptized and better known as Nicholas Said. Said was born in 1833 in Bornu, west of Lake Chad, into a military-merchant family of some prestige.  

He claimed he was the son of Barca Gana, a man who was enslaved once himself but also served as the

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premiere calvary office for Muhammad el Amin el Kanermy, the great liberator of Bornu who would have been known to Europeans at this time, due to British expeditions from Sudan to North Africa. Unclear as Said’s family tree is, we know he was captured by Tuareg raiders in 1849, and marched as a slave to these North Africans across the Sahara, a three month journey. Said was sold at Tripoli, taken to Mecca on the hajj, then sold to a wealthy man in Turkey. He was sold again to Menshikov, a Russian, in 1853, and together they went to St. Petersburg, where Said lived among very wealthy Russians. When Menshikov was called to the war in Crimea, Said managed through ambiguous means to find a new master, named Trubetzkoy. It is unclear whether Said was an employee or a slave, but his role was certain that of Trubetzkoy’s servant, and in 1854, he was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church as Nicholas.¹³

Between the years of 1853 and 1859, Said travelled much of Europe with his master. Austin tells one of many stories from these years. At one point, Said’s responsibilities included working as a servant at an international soiree of European leaders, and in his reflections on the event, he writes questions about Africa’s global status.

Finally, Said was hired as a manservant for a traveler to the Americas. However, once our protagonist and his new employer arrived in Ontario, the traveler ran out of money, so in 1862, Said made his way to Detroit, and convinced some locals that his was qualified to teach at the local schools. After two years of this, he enlisted in the 55th Regiment. He fought well and rose to the position of sergeant, until 1865, when he got mustered out in South Carolina. Finally, Said appears to have rested. Our records of him end here, but we know he married and ultimately

¹³ Allan D. Austin, African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles. (New York: Routledge, 1997.)
died in 1882.

Once again, I found this text through UNC’s *Documenting the South* series. This story is exceptional, even compared to the other narratives analyzed here, and therein lies the excitement and the challenge. Said provides us with information about the United States in the years directly after the Civil War, as well as information on Europe, Russia, and the hajj. However, he is also limited by the same things as his peers—an idiosyncratic perspective, a royal background, the literacy to express himself, the mental blocks that come from any sort of self-aware writing. One strength of this source is that in the moment that Said wrote this, he likely had no master, and was able to speak freely on matters such as religion, and his political opinions. This text substantiates my claim that literacy and Islamic religion gave Said a special status because of his relationship with his Russian master, and the complimentary note from the police included at the end.

**Analysis of Nicholas Said’s Story**

Before analyzing Said’s story, it is crucial to note that he ended his life as a free man in the United States, and was only enslaved or in indentured servitude abroad, or for a few brief weeks with the traveler, who was likely a fur trader, in Canada and upstate New York. Said knew no American master who would have conformed to the paternalistic fantasies of the Southern planter class, so it was not those familiar stereotypes that his competence, intelligence, and monotheistic faith would have shattered in his interactions with those who controlled his body and labor. Still, Said’s adult life was greatly impacted by a number of white superiors in the U.S. context, and it was his literacy and Islamic identity that set him apart abroad and in this country.
Said’s story finds a home in this analysis because his exceptional experiences and accomplishments were only made possible by his Islamic identity and high level of literacy.

It is important to understand exactly how Said came to North America, because his life experiences would have contrasted greatly with those of the Americans he encountered. After a European tour with the Russian prince Troubetzkoy, Said found himself in a moment of relative peace and quiet in the spring of 1867 on the Isle of Wight. He writes,

I had an irresistible desire to visit my native country. I at first tried to overcome that feeling but all in vain. When I communicated my wishes to the Prince he tried to ridicule me, stating that I was no longer an African but a citizen of Europe. He said I could not reconcile myself to the manners and customs of my countrymen. He moreover told me if I would stay with him twenty years he would give me a pension the rest of my days. All this, however, did not deter me from returning to Soudan. All the Prince could do was to draw a promise from me to return to him after spending a year in Central Africa.  

We can take the language of this passage at face value because Said describes his efforts to learn English, among many other languages, and he served as both a soldier and a teacher in North America before he wrote this document. Predictably, Said’s relationship with the Prince defied North American expectations of how a white master and a black slave were meant to interact, but I argue that their dynamic represents more than a shift in cultural context. Only a few pages before this scene, Said describes the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of the Prince, and his unhappy conversion to “the Greek faith, the State religion of Russia.” Said’s understanding of Christian sects is muddled, but we can deduce that he was converted to Russian Orthodoxy, a religion whose rituals he grudgingly participated in as “pantomimic performances” and rolled his eyes at its infractions of the Quran in “holy horror.” When Said was finally forced to convert, he described kneeling on the marble as “perfect agony.” For Said, Islam was a source of pride, an

inner resistance that allowed him to imagine his Christian surroundings as inferior. Said went on to enjoy at least six months of European travel with the man who was responsible for his unhappiness. Eventually, their relationship evolved to a point where Said could request what was amounted to a self-guided vacation, and the Prince gave him three hundred pounds sterling.

Said then left for the “Stranger’s Home, for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders,” on the West India dock, where he was sent for to see a gentleman who offered him a job in the West Indies and the British North American provinces for twelve months. He gave Said twenty fours hours to consider, during which time the African’s “fondness for travel asserted its supremacy” and he decided to take the offer.\(^\text{15}\) We can only conclude that Said came to the United States as a man who had wanted to return home but then decided against it, as a man who spoke his own language, Arabic, some Russian, English and French, that he clung to his Islamic identity despite a forced conversion, and that he essentially talked himself out of a position of enslavement.

Said’s new employer married in the West Indies, went to New England, back to the Caribbean, where Said shares his thoughts on late 19th century Haiti, and then went back to Canada and upstate New York. At this point, Said’s employer asked him to borrow money, and left the African at the British Hotel, his wife departing shortly after. For three months, Said waited there. As it turned out, his employer had left a large debt with the hotel, so the owner seized all of Said’s remaining money and possessions.

We now see a black man who was essentially free, literate, Muslim, exceptionally well-educated, but without connections. A reverend helped the African get a job as a deckhand

\(^{15}\) Nicholas Said, “Biography of Nicholas Said.”( Stowell & Co, 1873. Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina.), 186.
on a ship to Detroit, but he was unaccustomed to physical labor and made only one trip. Another
reverend recommended Said to teach French to the colored children of Detroit for six months.
Said spent time teaching, travelling, and landed eventually in Henry county, Alabama, where a
gentlemanly Mr. M Smith sent Said forth to Abbeville with the following letter of
recommendation, dated July 21, 1871, just a few years after the Civil War.

Colonel Oates,
The bearer, Nicholas Said, who is without a shadow of a doubt, a native African, and
whose ostensible object in travelling through this country, is to obtain subscribers to his
Autobiography, lectured here today.
And I am glad to say, gave entire satisfaction to his audience, which was composed of a
goodly number of white and black people. He is, by far, the most intelligent, and the best
educated man of the African race, with whom I have ever conversed, etc.
Any attention paid to Mr. Said will be thankfully received.
I am, Colonel,
Yours most truly, 16

M. Smith

On one level, this letter simply represents one man’s opinion of another. If we consider the social
milieu of Alabama in the years following the Civil War, any person as well-cultured as Nicholas
Said would have been novel and interesting. But why do we consistently see white people,
whether they be the Prince, the man who recommended Said to his first employer on the West
Indies Dock in Britain, this M. Smith, or Thomas Bailey, who wrote Said’s teacher
recommendation, vouch for this African man? Charisma, a self-professed talent for language and
communication, and sheer luck certainly all played a role. However, we must consider that Said
was warned by “his people” that Alabama was “very dangerous” and “filled with the Ku Klux
Klan.”

In this note, Smith makes an argument for Said, and his argument is based entirely on
Said’s intelligence and literacy. He is definitely African, says Smith, but he is writing an

16Nicholas Said, “Biography of Nicholas Said.”( Stowell & Co, 1873. Documenting the American South, University
of North Carolina.), 209.
autobiography. The contrast here is sharp, and is further delineated by the fact that he lectured an audience, and was listened to by both blacks and whites alike! He is, by far, the most intelligent man that this likely wealthy Alabama gentleman ever spoke with, and this is what makes him worthy of the attention. It should be noted that Islam was likely not salient for Said in Alabama, and although his worldly travels are fascinating to us, the text does not suggest that bragging about his time in Paris is what earned Said a stable living in America. Nowhere does he mention telling a story to black or white Americans about Russia, the hajj, his home, or any of the other fascinating places he saw. By his own account, language and writing carried the day. He wore his education on his sleeve, by teaching, writing, and lecturing everywhere he went, although his ability to lecture for profit was likely increased by the attention paid to him by local media sources. It was this ability to communicate effectively, in a way that was legible as intelligent and educated, that allowed Said to transcend his status as a black man in Reconstruction-era America.

**Bilali Muhammad’s Story**

The details of Bilali’s life remain elusive, but we are sure that he was captured in tribal warfare at roughly the age of fourteen. Because he received an Islamic education, we can deduce that he was likely born to a merchant-warrior class in West Africa. Bilali was taken to the plantation of Dr. John Bell in Middle Caicos in Turks and Caicos, where he married and had children.

He was then sold to Thomas Spalding and arrived on Sapelo Island, off of Georgia, between 1803 and 1808, and became the overseer there by 1810. Bilali was known as a hard
worker, and was in charge of possibly four hundred to five hundred slaves in his position as overseer. He is known to have defended the island on two occasions. During the war of 1812, the British ultimately did not land on Sapelo, but if they had, they would have met Bilali and 80 other slaves, armed with muskets entrusted to them by the master. This was particularly surprising given that Georgia did not even allow blacks to fight in the Revolutionary War. During the hurricane of September 1824, Bilali is known to have directed the slaves to safety, although the details of the situation are lost to us.17

Little else is known about Bilali’s time on the plantation, but we know he prayed publicly and was known as something of a leader to other Muslims on the plantation. Mohammed Abdullah al Ahari entitles the text Bilali left us “Meditations.” It likely consists of chapters of the risala, of abu Muhammad Abdullah bin Zaid al Qairawani, a popular Maliki legal commentator, the predominant school of Islamic legal thought of West Africa. Risala is Arabic for a communication, in this case it refers to a piece of jurisprudence. The text deals directly with questions of ritual practice, one of which is ablution. Around 1859, Bilali left this text to the Reverend Francis Golding. There was much confusion in later years about whether the text was a diary, record, or one of the many popular “adventure” stories of slaves’ escape from bondage. Bilali may have converted to Christianity, but family lore says he was buried with a copy of the Quran on his chest. 18

I found Bilali’s text reproduced in a number of places, such as al-Ahari’s booklet and Austin’s compilation of slave narratives. Some of the text’s limitations are only an issue for this interpreter- its translation, its rooting in a West African Islamic legal tradition with which I am


only vaguely familiar. Other problems are simply inherent to the text, like its vague stance on the
demands of daily life, its uncertain provenance, and the water damage. However, the text is still
worthy of serious attention because Bilali wrote it himself, and it was either deemed important
enough to smuggle from West Africa to the Carolinas, or to write under the conditions of
slavery. The content is best described as a religious treatise, likely committed to memory by
Bilali in Arabic. The text and the story of its owner will further substantiate the claims, already
made by several authors, that Bilali was a trusted religious figure among his fellow slaves, and
enjoyed a peaceful relationship with his masters.

Analysis of Bilali Muhammad’s Story

Bilali Muhammad’s story is known to us mostly through extrapolation. There is a rich
oral tradition among his descendants on Sapelo Island, and it is difficult to know what is real and
what is mythology.

It should be noted that Bilali’s status was likely improved only by the fact of his literacy,
not the content of the text itself. Although we may be interested retroactively in Bilali’s African
life, his white contemporaries did not appear to understand that his text was simply a guide to
religious ritual. As mentioned above, the text passed hands many times, before it reached Joseph
Greenberg at Northwestern University, who showed it to the Hausa Muslims in Kano, Nigeria, in
1939, and they finally concluded that it was a risala, with chapters that dealt with ablutions and
the call to prayer, a crucial part of a West African Islamic curriculum.

If it is finally clear what Bilali’s text was, it is still unclear why he wrote it, how he used
it or where it came from. Diouf speculates that for Bilali, this text was used to educate the other
Muslims around him on the plantation. Bilali’s literate status may have been linked to the trust his masters placed in him, like the position of overseer. He likely never learned to read or write in English, and was limited to his own memory of Arabic. The extent of his literacy is perhaps less important than the fact that he could write at all. As we saw with the case of Omar ibn Said writing in Arabic on the walls of his jail cell, the very act of a Negro forming letters was in and of itself discordant with the paternalistic, Southern, elite white American view of the dark-skinned person as ignorant savage.

According to Diouf, Bilali’s plantation was an interesting place in terms of religion. There was a substantial mix of both Christian and Muslim Africans, and the difference between the groups was pronounced. When Bilali was offered his freedom in exchange for fighting in the War of 1812 for the British, he is quoted as saying that he could “answer for every Negro of the true faith, but not for the Christian dogs you own.” It is unclear if the white masters of Sapelo Island viewed Bilali as highly as he viewed himself, but something about that context, in which his Muslim status allowed him to preach, work above his fellow Africans and enjoy special privileges, emboldened him and engendered a self confidence that is not typically associated with American slaves. I argue that despite the fact that the details of how Bilali’s masters viewed his religion and ability to write are not as clear as in the case of Nicholas Said, for example, the surviving oral record of his personal charisma, the later scholarly efforts to decode his text, and the privileges he enjoyed in his own context all point to a status that was elevated in both the eyes of his fellow Africans and the masters. If nothing else, we can easily see that the continued

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fascination with Bilali and his mysterious text was sustained only because he disrupted the usual
expectations for an enslaved person.

Stories from Sources Written About the Enslaved

The Story of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima

Engraving of crayon drawing by Henry Inman, published in Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom, 1834

Rahman was born in the Fula Jalon highlands in present-day Guinea to a prominent Fula leader. He was raised as an educated Muslim and trained as a military leader. When he was sixteen, an American surgeon named Dr. Cox arrived at Sierra Leone. He went hunting in the interior, and returned only to find that his ship had sailed. He wandered back into the country, became sick, and eventually arrived within the territory of Footah Jalloh. The locals were surprised by his white skin, according to some sources, and brought him to their king, Rahman’s father. The royal family cared for Dr. Cox and sent him back to his ship with gold and ivory.

21 Cyprus Griffin, “The African Homeland of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima,” July 1828. (National Humanities Center.)
Seven years later, when Rahman was in his mid-twenties, he was sent with his father’s army on a campaign against the Heboh people. He was captured by the Heboh, sold to the Mandingoes, then sold to a slave ship at the mouth of the Gambia River. He was transported to Dominique, then to Natchez, Mississippi, where he was sold to his master of many years, Col. Foster.

Between sixteen and eighteen years later, Rahman was selling sweet potatoes in Washington, a neighboring town. While there, he met Dr. Cox by chance. Dr. Cox was willing to help Rahman gain his freedom, offering his master a thousand dollars, a generous estimate, but the owner would not budge. In 1826, he wrote a letter to his family, and a local journalist sent the letter to Thomas Reed, the Mississippi senator at the time. Assuming the Arabic signified that the writer was a Moor, Reed sent the letter to the US consulate in Morocco, at which point the Sultan demanded that Henry Clay release Rahman. Eventually, with the support of abolitionists and the African Colonization Society, Rahman was able to emigrate to Liberia with his wife. Unfortunately, he died several months after his arrival and never again saw Footah Jalloh or his children’s arrival in Liberia. 22

The first source for Rahman’s life is a series of newspaper articles compiled by the scholars at UNC. These articles illuminate a white, Southern, U.S. perspectives on Africa, but only one of them really addresses Rahman’s situation head on. We are, however, better able to see why he was considered special when his image is contextualized in US imaginings of his homeland.

The second source comes from UNC once more, and it is a pamphlet entitled “A

22Allan D. Austin, African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles. (New York: Routledge, 1997.)
Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince, Abduhl Rahhahman,” written by Thomas H. Gaulladet, best known as the founder of the American School for the Deaf. Aside from its brevity and the racial issues characteristic of its time period, this text is a great find. The author’s pitying yet excited tone fits in neatly with the pattern of special treatment for enslaved Muslims that I have found so far. The use of the category “Moor” should be addressed, as should questions about translation.

Analysis of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima’s Story

In addition to fitting our well-used categories of literacy and Islamic identity, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima is also royal. Most of the enslaved men discussed were born into higher classes, because primarily only wealthy men received a classical Islamic education in West Africa. However, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima’s royal status deserves special attention, because his story of liberation would not have been possible had his father not been a king. Cyrus Griffin’s *Southern Galaxy* newspaper articles, and the Reverend Gallaudet’s Statement, all refer to Rahman as a prince. On the one hand, this use of the honorific is a way of selling papers to a country that saw black people as slaves, not humans, and certainly not as high class people with power and connections. Because Americans did not have a monarchy during a century when most of the world still maintained at least the veneer of its royalty, any word like prince or king would have been novel in this time period, even more exciting when combined with the exotic “Moorish” title. The earnest reverence felt by the white writers for Rahman stemmed clearly from their desire to see him free, the strange circumstances of his royal birth and subsequent bad luck, and the fact that his father was kind enough to help the “first white man ever seen” by his
own people.\textsuperscript{23} This is discussed as an act of hospitality, generosity, and by extension, civility and humanity.

When we read past the sensationalist tone of this article, we see that Rahman and Foster, his master in the United States, had a relatively contentious relationship, one in which Foster appears to be ignorant of Rahman’s royal status until Dr. Cox enters the picture. (I focus on this master because little is known about Rahman’s time in Dominique or Natchez, and the relevant drama of his life plays out in this Southern, Antebellum United States context.) Foster would not sell Rahman to Dr. Cox precisely because Rahman was so useful as an overseer. According to the Reverend, “his master, of whom Prince always speaks with great affection and respect, doubted whether his freedom would increase his happiness.” We cannot know whether Foster was charmed by Rahman’s intelligence and interesting life experiences, or if he simply saw him as a useful overseer. What we do know is that Rahman is another literate Muslim that was put into a high status and viewed as valuable.

To what extent was Rahman’s literacy legible to Foster, Dr. Cox, and the writers who sought to tell his story? The Reverend, at least, was aware of Rahman’s past, and gave weight to the situation in his introduction of the enslaved man. He writes, “At twelve years of age Prince was sent to Tombuctoo, to obtain an education…”\textsuperscript{24} Cyrus Griffin, the abolitionist writer who wrote articles in an effort to help the Prince win his freedom, writes that “We know him to be a man of intelligence, and what is more a man of integrity.” He goes on to mention that, “at the

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age of seven, he was placed at school at Tombuctoo. Here, and at Jennah he completed his education, and at the age of seventeen..he received an appointment in the army.” Griffin gives a long account of Rahman’s battlefield achievements. Flowery as his language might be, it paints the Prince in an intelligent, capable and strong light. He also devotes a few paragraphs to explain that Footah Jallo is “an elective, limited monarchy,” and gives some sense of the laws and juridical systems of the area. The two sources do not speak of Rahman’s ability to read and write in Arabic, although the script on his portrait reads “His name is Abdul Rahman,” and was presumably written in the slaves’ own hand. The sources do not comment on the quality of his English, but Rahman was permitted to advocate for his own freedom to abolitionists. Griffin’s rhetorical approach is typical of the Enlightenment era. He attempts to paint Rahman as part of the civilized world by emphasizing the strength of education, military prowess, law and government in his homeland.

If arguing that Rahman held an honored spot in a civilized society is one way to advocate for the enslaved man’s freedom, Gallaudet takes the other 19th century approach and argues instead for his status as a good Christian. The sources mention very little about Rahman’s Muslim faith, presumably because he converted. Gallaudet writes of Foota Jallo, “They were Mahometans, and the cities and territories over which they ruled, had advanced to a very considerable degree of civilization. Since his residence in this country, Prince has embraced the Christian religion. Himself, wife and eldest son have been baptized, and are in connexion with the Baptist church.” Again, much like with Benezet, we see Islam as a way of mitigating the


26 Revered T.H. Gallaudet, “A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince: Abdul Rahhahman.” Daniel Fanshaw, 1828. (Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina.), 4
usual, devastating colonial images of sub-Saharan Africa. Islam allows these otherwise black, pagan, savage people to achieve a “degree of civilization.” The Islamic faith, however, is quickly discarded in favor of his new faith, and the argument for the Prince’s freedom, and the subsequent argument for whatever degree of humanity Gallaudet hoped to offer the African. He writes the following:

> For his case makes its last and highest appeal to our feelings as Christians. So singular are the events of his life, that it seems as if Providence had taken him under His peculiar care, and destined him, and his interesting family, to be the means of opening, into the very interior of Africa, ‘a wide and effectual door’ for the diffusion of the Gospel to which we are indebted for so many invaluable blessings; and to shed the benign beams of which upon poor, benighted, oppressed Africa, is the richest recompense that our own and other nations, called Christian, can make for the accumulated wrongs that she has so long endured.  

Much as Rahman’s admirers showed some, but not much, interest in the extent, quality or nature of his education or literacy level, they were only somewhat impressed with his Islamic status. Islam here is a starting point, a relatively civilized basis upon which to transform Rahman into the sort of Christian Gallaudet describes. The enslaved inevitably becomes here an allegory for the conversion of his whole continent, and much like modern readers, Gallaudet struggles to move past the particulars of Rahman’s case.

Griffin takes the erasure of Rahman’s Islamic past in favor of his Christian status a step further. After he describes the somewhat civilized laws, military and customs of Footah Jallo, he writes on the religion.

> The religion of the country is professedly Mahomedanism [Islam]. We are not sufficiently read in the religion of the Prophet to decide with any precision whether it be strictly such. So far as we are able to judge we are inclined to the contrary opinion. The Footah Jallos believe that Christ was the son, not of God but of Mary. They give full credence to his miraculous birth and divine mission—that he wrought miracles and finally offered himself up a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Above, we see the return to the issue of Omar ibn Said. Does a reverence for Christ necessarily

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27 Reverend T.H. Gallaudet, “A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince: Abdul Rahhahman.” Daniel Fanshaw, 1828. (Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina.), 4
connote Christian identity? The status of Mary, as described by Griffin, is not incorrect, according to a purely Quranic analysis. Below, he praises Islam for its rejection of the Trinity, on the grounds of its rationality, and we are reminded again of the Protestant context of the South, and the post Enlightenment context.

They believe that he will appear again at the consummation of time to sit in Judgement upon the world. They are fully convinced, however, that due deference that will be paid to the Prophet—that Christ will appear first at Medina—that Muhammad will be called forth, mounted upon a white horse, and given in charge to Gabriel who will conduct him to the highest seat in the highest heaven. They believe that the Father and Spirit are one and the same, not only in essence but in person, the hypothesis being founded on the simple basis that divisibility would be superfluous, as Deity is omnipresent—a doctrine, which, to say the least, is far from irrationality. Prince speaks of the Christian religion with strong evidence of mature reflection. He points out very forcibly the incongruities in the conduct of those who profess to be the disciples of the immaculate Son of God. “I tell you,” said Prince (an expression with which he usually prefaces any important relation) “The Testament very good law. You no follow it; you no pray often enough; you greedy after money. You good man, you join the religion? See, you ant more land, more neegurs, you make neegur work hard, make more cotton. Where you find dat in your law?”

This passage is rich in information about our narrator, our protagonist, and the dearth of reliable information about Islam, even in educated American circles. First, we see that Griffin has continued Gallaudet’s tradition of laying down the groundwork for an Islamic society as slightly more civilized than its pagan African neighbors, before going on to insert Christianity into the story. He admits his ignorance on the topic of Islam, but then goes on to proclaim that an entire population of West African Muslims are actually, according to their own doctrine, better described as Christians. Misunderstandings aside, this is a clear rhetorical effort to garner sympathy for Rahman and his countrymen by deciding that their Islamic beliefs are actually a secret, subconscious or nebulously spiritual expression of Christianity, in keeping with Gallaudet’s work, and the writings of Omar ibn Said that declared his love of Gospel and Christ.

28 Griffin Cyprus, “The African Homeland of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima,” July 1828. (National Humanities Center.)
Much like in the case of Omar ibn Said, however, the Islamic veneration of Christ is lost in translation. Griffin’s theology is garbled at best, and a lie at worse. It is unclear if he received this information from a book, a person who knew more about Islam than himself, or Rahman. Of course, Islamic religious belief evolves over time, differs from the state-sponsored Hanafi school of the Ottoman Empire to the dominant Maliki school of West Africa, and differs between believers. However, the status of Muhammad, the nature of Christ, and the significance of all the Prophets are fundamental theological tenants that we can responsibly trace back to the Quran. As discussed in Omar ibn Said’s section on page 15, Muhammad is seen not as a Christ figure, but as the last Messenger in a long line of prophets ranging back to Abraham and including Jesus Christ. Our author’s reading of how Muslims view the Father and the Spirit reveals a basic misunderstanding of the role of Jesus in Islam. Christ is not the son of God, and the Trinitarian debate to which our author alludes is irrelevant because the Quran is quite clear, on multiple occasions, that Christ is human, not the son of God, and that Muslims should not accept a Trinity. There is a basis for his return on Judgement Day, the white horse to which the author refers is also part of dominant Islamic narratives, and the supreme place of Muhammad in heaven is vague, in keeping with most beliefs.

Why are these finer theological points related to how the writers in question viewed Rahman? I argue that Griffin’s confusion has adverse effects on his mission to humanize Rahman. It points to the condescending treatment of many abolitionists towards the objects of their help, and it reveals the blatantly political nature of these articles. The goal here is not to better understand Rahman, his desires, or the home he likely yearned for. Rather, he is one exceptional example of a slave who deserves to go home, because his capture was a
misunderstanding in the first place, because his father was a noble prince who once helped a white man, but the logic of the story leads to abolition. These religious points are also important because the author uses them to contextualize Rahman’s commentary on Christianity and goodness. Rahman’s poorly articulated admonishing of slaveholders would have been rhetorically powerful in the Antebellum South. Where does the Bible say you can buy more niggers, and demand that they work hard for cotton, asks Rahman? We have moved beyond the question of whether or not literacy or Islamic identity set Rahman apart, and into the writer’s efforts to legitimize the enslaved as a Christian, and by extension, a being that more closely resembled a human or a citizen, deserving of his equal rights.
Our next story takes us backwards in American history, to before the Revolution. Our clearest account of Ayuba Suleyman Diallo’s life comes from Thomas Bluett, a British judge from Annapolis who knew Diallo personally. I use this spelling of his name because it is Diouf’s best attempt at reflecting the original African roots. Bluett writes that Diallo was born in 1701 in Boonda, in the kingdom of Futa, modern Gambia, to a respected family that traditionally filled religious offices. He often assisted his father in his duties as imam and worked closely with the king, a sign of the family’s influence. Diallo ran a traditional household, marrying first at the age of fifteen, then again a few years later. In February of 1730, Diallo was sent on a trip to sell two slaves and buy some paper from European merchants.

29 “Job, son of Solliman Dgiallo, high priest of Bonda in the country of Foota, Africa,” Gentleman’s Magazine, London, June 1750 Thomas Bluett, A Slave About Two Years in Maryland, (National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, 2009.)
Diallo’s father had warned him against crossing the Gambia river into Mandingo territory, but his son did not like the price offered to him for the slaves by Captain Pike, a Royal African Company employee. Diallo sent servants home to tell his father that he intended to continue, took on a translator, and crossed the Gambia. As he rested at an acquaintance's house, a company of Mandingos kidnapped Diallo and his translator and sold them to Captain Pike himself. Upon recognizing Diallo, Pike gave him the opportunity to send to his father for help, but the slave ship set sail before Diallo’s father received word.

Diallo and his translator arrived in Annapolis Maryland in 1730, and Dialo was sold from Mr. Denton, another company representative, to Mr. Tolsey in Kent Island, Maryland. Unaccustomed to physical labor and unhappy, the slave ran away and was put in prison in Kent County, where Bluett visited him in 1731. Upon hearing Diallo pronounce words like Muhammad, watching him write Arabic, and seeing him reject wine, Bluett concluded that Diallo was a Muslim. He saw an older slave translate the Jaloff language, so that the jailer was able to advocate for Diallo’s better treatment, including prayer time.

Unsatisfied, Diallo wrote his father a letter through Mr. Denton, the man who sold him, in the hopes that Captain Pike might deliver it from England to Boonda. However Pike had already set sail by the time that Denton arrived with the letter, so it found its way to Mr. Hunt. The letter was seen by James Oglethorpe. Oglethorpe was also the head governor of the Royal African Company, a former member of Parliament and philanthropist. When he saw the Arabic note, he sent it to Oxford to be translated to satisfy his own curiosity. Oglethorpe was struck by Diallo’s story, and sent a bond to Mr. Hunt so that Denton might buy Diallo back. The slave stayed for a while with Denton in Annapolis, where he began to learn English. The two set sail
for England in March of 1733.

Once in England, Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo was kept busy with invitations, honors, and the portrait included above. Diallo was also asked to prove his literacy and faith to the English by producing three separate, identical copies of the Quran. At home Diallo enjoyed hafiz status, meaning he had memorized the whole Quran. After being the object of curiosity, Diallo returned to Boonda in June of 1738, where he remained somewhat connected to English trade until his death in 1773.

This story was largely pieced together through two texts. The first was Francis Moore’s *Travels into the Inland of Africa*, located on the World Digital Library, and a strong source for a few reasons. Firstly, it serves as a useful description of the situation on the ground in West Africa between different ethnic groups and the British. Secondly, it describes Diallo as a freeman in his own home environment. Its title also explicitly uses Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo’s Anglicized name as way of advertisement, suggesting that the book had been marketed to a wide range of people who were interested in Diallo’s life and time in the United States. The source is weak in the obvious historical ways; racism, imperial power, Moore’s position as a clerk for the Royal African Company. Diallo is also not Moore’s main focus, and his moments of focus are quality but few and far between. Even still, this text will help me prove that Diallo received special attention due to his Muslim status because every description is filled with a strange mixing of “Mahometan” stereotypes, which were slightly more positive, and African stereotypes which were overwhelmingly negative. His very status on the cover of the book substantiates my claim

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that dark skinned Muslims were seen by Europeans as novel.

The second source is Thomas Bluett’s account of Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo’s life. He composes a fine summary, although we have to wonder what was done about Diallo’s English learning process or translation. This source has many virtues, including its thoroughness, its desire to reveal Diallo’s suffering, and its attention to the details of how Diallo returned home. This source’s fallbacks can once more be traced back to the author’s positionality. Bluett pities Diallo and controls his fate, and a breakdown in communication between the two men would have been nearly inevitable. Nevertheless, Bluett’s entire approach towards Diallo’s situation gives me a basis to explain how Islam and literacy raised Diallo up above his fellow slaves in the eyes of Bluett and his peers, not to mention the London philanthropists who saw his liberation as a way to express their abolitionist values.

Analysis of Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo’s Story

Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo’s literacy is first made obvious to his white superiors in the same way Omar ibn Said made his own knowledge of language known. He did not write on the walls of his cell in Arabic, but he pronounced Arabic words, and then wrote a few lines of Arabic upon being asked. As noted, this display of knowledge would have been noteworthy on two accounts. He was able to form letters, which was in and of itself out of the ordinary for an enslaved African, and he was also able to speak a language whose script none of his white superiors even understood. Bluett is obviously so taken with Diallo’s abilities that he offers him freedom, passage back to England, and an ultimate return to his homeland, a journey which stems from this moment of linguistic understanding.
Francis Moore does not show abolitionist tendencies in his work, but he considers Diallo no less noteworthy. As noted, the African’s name is a subtitle for his book, presumably as a way to sell the story to English readers who were likely familiar with his story. In Moore’s account of his journey in Guinea, he writes the following description:

The next day about Noon came up the Dolphin show, which saluted the Fort with nine Guns, and had the same number returned; after which came on Shore the Captain, four Writers, one Apprentice to the company, and one Black man, by Name Job Ben Solomon, a Pholey of Bundo in Foota, who in the Year 1731, as he was travelling in Jagra, and driving his Herds of Cattle across the Countries, was robbed and carried to the Joar, where he was sold to Captain Pyke, Commander of the Ship Arabella, who was then trading there. By him he was carried to Maryland, and sold to a Planter, with whom Job lived about a Twelvemonth without being once beat by his Master; at the End of which time he had the good Fortune to have a Letter of his own writing in the Arabic tongue conveyed to England. This Letter coming to the Hand of Mr. Oglethorpe, he sent the same to Oxford to be translated; which, when done, gave him so much satisfaction, and so good an Opinion of the man, that he directly ordered him to be brought from his master, he soon after setting out for Georgia.

After this effective summary of the context for Diallo’s story, the reader is treated to an explanation of how he was viewed as special by Europeans and Americas:

Before he returned from thence, Job came to England; where being brought to the Acquaintance of the Learned Sir Hans Sloane, he was by him found a perfect master of the Arabic tongue, by translating several Manuscripts and inscriptions upon medals: he was by him recommended to his grace the duke of Montague, who being pleased with the Sweetness of humor, and mildness of temper, as well as Genuis and Capability of the Man, introduced him to Court, where he was gracioulsy received by the Royal family, and most of the Nobility from whom he received distinguishing Marks of Favor. After he had continued in England about fourteen Months, he wanted much to return to his Native Country, which is Bundo (a place about a week’s travel over land from the Royal African Company’s Factory at Joar, on the River Gambia) of which place his father was high-priest, and to whom he sent letters from England. Upon his setting out from England he received a good many noble presents...”

At the time of Moore’s writing, Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo’s story is already well known. Job’s “perfect” literacy must be confirmed by a white, British scholar of Arabic at Oxford. They no doubt conversed, read in Arabic, wrote and translated. This academically rigorous examination was crucial before Diallo could be declared the special man that the British believed him to be.

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32 Francis Moore, *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa: Containing a Description of the Several Nations for the Space of Six Hundred Miles up the River Gambia*, n.d. 249
On one level, his subsequent meeting with royalty was an honor, and a special privilege in the life of an American slave. On another level, it is an act of exhibitionism that fit cleanly into a long, colonial tradition of studying and surveying black bodies. It would not be overstatement to compare Diallo to a trained monkey, because Negroes were believed to be literally physically inferior. The use of the word “genius” in conjunction with Diallo’s intellectual capacity is particularly interesting, given the connotations of this term in Enlightenment-era discourse. A genius was not an affectionate term for a very smart person, but reflected a serious belief that the person in question had a natural, intellectual ability or talent that was well above the average or norm. Again, we see Diallo’s literacy as an indication of his specialness to American whites and Europeans, a point of special distinction among his peers.

A similar attitude was given to Diallo’s religious status. When he wrote Arabic for Bluett and his friends, he instantaneously revealed his literacy and his religious status. In the same conversation, he refused wine, and showed himself to be a Muslim, an identity marker that was deeply confounding for our narrator. He writes, “we perceived he was a Mahometan [Muslim], but could not imagine of what Country he was or how he got thither; for by his affable Carriage and the easy Composure of his Countenance, we could perceive he was no common Slave.”

The Mahometan marker is obviously part and parcel of what makes Diallo special to his abolitionist observers, and they express sympathy for him largely because his master did not allow him to pray. Islam, although firmly subordinate to Christianity, was used as proof of some level of religiosity, and by extension, morality, civility, humanity, traits that were attributed to

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33Bluett, Thomas. Some Memories of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon the High Priest of Boonda in Africa; Who Was a Slave about Two Years in Maryland; and and Afterwards Being Brought to England, Was Set Free, and Sent to His Native Land in the Year 1734. London: printed for Richard Ford, at the Angel in the Poultry, over against the Compter, M.DCC.XXIV., n.d. P. 46
Diallo in Bluett’s discussion of the enslaved man’s time in England. This same discursive logic could never have been applied to polytheistic beliefs.

**An Emerging Racial and Religious Hierarchy**

In the previous pages, I have shown that Omar ibn Said, Nicholas Said, Bilali Muhammad, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima and Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo were read as literate and Muslim by their masters and the white people around them, traits that helped them improve their conditions to varying degrees. Many other factors, particular to the stories of each man, were considered, and a consistent microhistorical approach has been deployed throughout my exploration of the sources.

I did not attempt a comprehensive exploration of the American viewpoint on Africans and slaves of African descent. This is a well-documented aspect of the pre-Civil War era, and I chose to incorporate existing knowledge of U.S. racist ideology into my argument. However, I did add nuance to our understanding of how racial ideologies worked in the late 18th and 19th centuries by analyzing how at least some elite, white Americans living between the Revolution and the Civil War might have seen Islam, Muslims, and the Islamic empires of the time. How can we connect the global place of Islam in this time to the the bizarre “exoticizing” fascination that surrounded our Muslim, male protagonists? I offer up the notion of phenotype as an entrypoint. Enlightenment notions of race famously broke down phenotypes, with a specific emphasis on the presence or absence of Negroid, black features, ranging from skin color to hair texture to genitalia. Phenotype went deeper than that, however. It was seen as an identity marker, tied intimately to geography and climate, and indicative of essential racial characteristics, like
strength, intellect or sexuality. In the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras, notions of phenotype build upon and reorder older patterns of “othering” and ethnic differentiation emphasizing religious difference.34

These phenotypic categories were clearly unstable and arbitrary, and those inconsistencies play out in the sources. Often, we see a scrambling of identity, imposed on the enslaved Muslims by white writers, that seems inconsistent with what they actually looked like and where they were born. Diouf writes that Omar ibn Said was referred to as an Arab in various newspaper articles, and Joel Chandler Harris mistook Bilali for an Arab in an early study of his life.35 The term Moor is applied to our protagonists on a few occasions. Moors were understood as North Africans, perhaps dark skinned, and decidedly “Mahometan,” or Muslim. Today, we are more likely to say that a Moor was a Muslim Arab. Moor denotes a swarthy, Mediterranean phenotype, but also a religion and a geographical area. Abdul Rahman Ibrahima is discussed as the Moorish prince, despite the fact that he was born in Guinea, an area which has an Islamic history, but is far from large Arab communities. Griffin writes,

Prince is a Moor. Of this, however his present appearance suggests a doubt. The objection is that he is too dark for a Moor, and his hair is short and curly. It is true such is his present appearance, but it was materially different on his arrival in this country. His hair was at that time soft and very long, to a degree that precludes the possibility of his being a negro. His complexion, too, has undergone a change. Although modern physiology does not allow color to be a necessary effect of climate, still one fact is certain that a constant exposure to a vertical sun for many years, together with the privations incident to the lower order of the community, and an inattention to cleanliness, will produce a very material change in the complexion. It is true that his lips are thicker than are usually those of the Moor; but the animal frame is not that of the negro. His eyes, and, in fact, his entire physiognomy is unlike that of any negro we have ever seen. And if the facial angle be an infallible criterion, the point is established, his being equal and perhaps greater, than most of the whites.”36

36 “Griffin Cyprus, “The African Homeland of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima,” July 1828. (National Humanities Center.)
Diouf uses this source to great advantage, and it easy to see why it is such an exciting find. Embedded in this passage is a debate, internal to Griffin but undoubtedly of interest to his readers, about whether or not this Muslim man is black, Arab, or simply a special, good-looking person whose “facial angle” is “equal and perhaps greater” than that of most white people.

In his careful weighing of the evidence, color is the first trait to be considered, followed closely by a debate over the texture of the hair. “Soft” hair literally precludes the possibility of blackness, and our author argues that he is only so dark because he has tanned beneath the “vertical sun” since his arrival in the New World. Lips are next on the list, and the author concedes that they are rather thick. It is unclear what the average “animal frame” of a Negro was considered to be, or if Griffin was being creative with his language. Griffin, the author of the articles and the lawyer who fought on the prince’s behalf, attempted to argue that he was “lighter skinned” when he arrived in the United States.  

We might assume that the Prince was rather short, or weak, whereas most Negro men were assumed to be strong.

If the Prince were to walk out of the portrait that I have included above, and walk down the streets of an American city, it is safe to say that he would be read as a black man. However, the point is not to prove the Prince’s blackness, but to ask why Griffin wanted to believe, and wanted his readers to accept, that Prince was a Moor? As the highly positive tone at the end of this quote reveals, a non-black Muslim person was a far

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better thing to be than a black pagan person—more deserving of freedom, more expedient for this small abolitionist cause, and more interesting to the 1828 readers of *The Southern Galaxy*. A hierarchy was emerging in the American mind, based on race and class, and it was expanding to include elements beyond Christian status, whiteness and blackness, while still encompassing gender, race and the obvious condition of slavery.

In our descriptions of Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo, we also see an obsession with phenotype. It should be noted that the sources regarding Diallo represent an earlier colonial moment, and a much less stable national identity for the pre-Revolutionary colonial American subjects who observed him. However, there is continuity. Francis Moore describes his understanding of the history of how Muslims conquered West African tribes, and he writes that the “kings and lords were Libyans, with high noses, and thin lips, and Mahometans by Religion, and the conquer’d people were Negroes.”

Again, we see the Arab being placed high above the Negro by European writers, and the component of Islam being associated first and foremost with that intermediary Arab group, floating somewhere high above blackness but firmly below white Christianity. It is interesting that Libya is chosen specifically, because that requires an awareness of the areas controlled by the Ottoman Empire on the part of our author. Moore’s phrasing also serves to enforce the narrative that the Negroes were always the “conquered people,” and that Islam, although it was far from Christianity, represented a higher form of society for people with “high noses,” and “thin lips,” as opposed to the polytheism or paganism that European sources typically ascribe to Africans.

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38 Francis Moore, *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa: Containing a Description of the Several Nations for the Space of Six Hundred Miles up the River Gambia*, (E.Cave, London), iii.
Diallo himself receives similar treatment to Rahman. Bluett writes that his hair was “long, black, and curled, being very different from that of the Negroes commonly brought back from Africa.” Again, this emphasis on length and softness, as opposed to a thicker texture, is meant to place Diallo closer to white people. Although Bluett does not specifically call him a Moor, the hint at racial ambiguity is enough to question why he is a slave. Phenotype is important for this very reason. A common Negro from Africa looks a certain way, and this look contains crucial social information that makes their bondage logical and permissible. Instead of addressing the issue of slavery head on, authors like Griffin and Bluett use the enslaved men’s Islamic status to hint at Arab or Moorish roots that would preclude them from being held justly in a life of slavery, according to the ideology of the time. A hierarchy based on religion and race was certainly emerging, with white Christianity at the top, black polytheism at the bottom, and Islam and ethnic Arabness hovering somewhere in between, depending on the political context, phenotype, and the historical moment. These categories are, of course, unstable and ever-changing, but were they linked to the presence of Islamic societies on the larger global scene? As we know, later incarnations of American black Islam will come under threat, a phenomenon which was not unrelated to later imperial politics and the rise of Islamism. If we accept that large slaveholders were part of an elite class whose cultural discourse reached across the Atlantic, it makes sense that when someone like Jefferson thought about Islam, he thought of someone who looked like a Moroccan.

39 Thomas Bluett, Some Memories of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon the High Priest of Boonda in Africa; Who Was a Slave about Two Years in Maryland; and Afterwards Being Brought to England, Was Set Free, and Sent to His Native Land in the Year 1734. (London: printed for Richard Ford, at the Angel in the Poultry, over against the Compter, M.DCC.XXXIV.), 46.
These questions of religion, ethnicity and Antebellum American culture are not fully explored in this paper, but I would hope to see future work devoted to that set of questions.

Conclusion

Through the stories of Omar ibn Said, Nicholas Said, Bilali Muhammad, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima and Ayuba Sulemayn Diallo, I have shown that literacy and Muslim identity often set Africans, and African enslaved people, apart from their peers in the eyes of elite, white Americans and Europeans. Although the particulars of their stories depend on their respective historical moments, and their own personal turmoils and triumphs, they all share a West African, Muslim cultural background.

I have begun to explore the ways in which the presence of Islam on the global stage, mainly through the proliferation of Ottoman culture into British and American consciousness, might have contextualized white American expectations of Islam, and I have offered up phenotype as a way of exploring the racial and religious hierarchies that took shape in the late 18th and early 19th century U.S. context. By focusing on where Islam was located in American and European imaginings, and how blackness disrupted those expectations, I hope to bring something new to the discourse surrounding the presence of Muslims in the early Americas, taking a step beyond curiosity about Islam, and drawing out the ways in which the slave trade was a truly global, and ideologically complex, enterprise.
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