

Allah and the A'bda: Islam and Slavery in the Americas
الإسلام وعبودية في الأمريكي

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Ever present in colonial society, religion had a dynamic impact on the development of slave systems in the Americas. However, Western historians have tended to focus on the relationship between the indigenous beliefs of African slaves and Christianity, as opposed to the connection between slavery and Islam, an outside religion for many of them. A significant part of plantation life for many African slaves across the Americas, Islam represented an important aspect of the developing slave society. Yet the enslavement of Muslims played a role in Islam even before the religion spread to the New World with slavery. The spread of Islam and the relocation of Islamic slaves to the New World during colonialism was minimal, but significant. Once on plantations, Islamic slaves faced great difficulties attempting to stay true to their religious beliefs. They regularly confronted the pressures put on them by Christian society, such as conversion. Although some Islamic slaves benefited from the educational and academic skills gathered through their religion, the manifestation of Islam in plantation society eventually diminished. Even with the weakened presence, the implementation of Islam into plantation slavery society was remarkably impactful in the scheme of slavery in the Americas.

Before its diaspora to the Americas, Islam had already established itself throughout Africa, particularly in North Africa and the Middle East. Growing trade between the Muslim nations in the Persian Gulf and north of the Sahara Desert contributed to the spread of Islam to other areas of Africa, particularly the sub-Saharan region. Trade routes throughout much of Africa became dominated by Arab traders “long before the arrival of the Portuguese” and other Europeans (Klein 56). The prominence of Arabs and Muslims grew with the increase in trade and many Arab communities were considered equal to those in Europe (Dunn, Hamdum and King 272). As a result, when Europeans began to access more areas of the continent, slave traders largely avoided Muslim communities during any type of raiding as a courtesy to their

fellow traders. The exception to this practice was “when there was open rebellion against the authority of the [regional] king or the princes” (Becker and Martin 123). “Collaboration in slave-raids into non-Muslim territory thus became a virtual duty” for any Europeans hoping to gather a significant number of peoples to sell on the slave market (Leopold 656). Such trade routes expanded, eventually diffusing to the sub-Saharan region where “contacts with North Africa included growing awareness of Islam” (Dunn, Hamdum and King 271).

The sub-Saharan region, particularly in western Africa, was the main contact point for European traders taking part in the Atlantic slave trade. Unlike North Africa, “mass conversion to Islam did not occur in sub-Saharan Africa at this point, but there was important interaction” between the two groups (Dunn, Hamdum and King 271). Many cultural and religious based ideals and practices were transferred to the sub-Saharan region in this fashion. “Sub-Saharan Africa did not become a full part of Islamic civilization as North Africa did,” but Islam was increasingly accepted, and a mixed belief system was established in many areas (Dunn, Hamdum and King 271). In sub-Saharan Africa, some of the kingdoms had “several different religions, including Islamic and Christian beliefs” (Olwig 29). Even with the presence and prevalence of the mixed belief systems, Islamic practices “continued to characterize this civilization for many centuries” (Dunn, Hamdum and King 271).

Trading West – Muslim Slaves in the Atlantic Trade

The movement of Muslims slaves accompanied the spread of Islam to the New World. Historians agree, “there can be no doubt that...the slave trade received a great impetus from the rise and spread of Islam” (Oliver 117). The first recorded Muslims to reach the Americas were slaves brought by Spanish settlers to the island of Hispaniola in 1501 (Jenkins 2: 13). They were among the first African slaves to be imported to the New World (Jenkins 2: 13). Merely five

years later Moorish servants, a mixture of the North African Amazigh (Berber) Muslims and Arabs, were listed as a group not permitted to enter Hispaniola by a Spanish royal decree (Jenkins 2: 19). Such actions taken by Catholic-dominated Spain illustrated the European disdain for Muslims. The disparity between Muslims and Christians in the international slave market continued into the late 1500s when an importing license prohibited the import of Moorish slaves in 1595 (Jenkins 2: 125). Even with their contempt for Muslim society, the Spanish never officially prohibited the importation of Islamic slaves to their empire (Menard and Schwartz 100). This is contradictory to the actions previously committed by the Spanish government against native Filipinos who were prohibited from entering the empire after 1591 (Menard and Schwartz 100).

Strong differentiation in the slave market made the carrying of Islamic beliefs to the New World challenging. As the European powers gained more control over the Western hemisphere, Islamic countries struggled to keep up. With the upsurge in technological advances, European states vigorously pursued political, territorial, and economic expansion. “The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would, ultimately, witness dynamic developments in the West – developments to which the relatively stagnant Islamic countries would not be able to respond” (Jenkins 2: 128). Even with an imbalance, a number of Muslims did make their way to the Americas, many as slaves. In the European empires, due to the lack of documentation, “was often difficult to determine the precise religious beliefs of people in the seventeenth-century” (Gragg 271). But “a conservative estimate is that there were close to thirty-thousand Muslim slaves who came from Islamic-dominated ethnic groups” in West Africa (Nanji 148). These slaves made up approximately fifteen to twenty percent of the total number of Muslims who came to North America before the last third of the nineteenth century (Nanji 141).

Origin of Muslim Slaves

Muslim slaves came from a variety of places in Africa. Most were taken from “Islamic-dominated ethnic groups [in West Africa] such as Mandigos, Fulas, Gambians, Senegambians, Senegalese, Cape Verdeans, and Sierra Leoneans” (Nanji 148). The tribal lands of these kingdoms are situated in close proximity to Arab North Africa. This resulted in additional contact with Arab and Muslim traders, and consequentially a larger number of Muslim converts within the population. European traders acquired these converts as slaves primarily because of the series of Islamic wars that occurred from the late 1500s through the late 1700s (Klein 59-60). Because of these wars, Europeans could obtain slaves from the interior parts of Africa, particularly from the states of the Upper Niger region (Klein 59-60). The conflicts undoubtedly “produced slaves for the American markets [and] there is no question that some wars were directly to control international trade and thus to impact of Atlantic slave trade” (Klein 117).

In addition to the Muslim slaves exported from West Africa, the Portuguese successfully exported Muslim slaves from the Mozambique region for a limited period. In 1508 the Portuguese set up a post of central residence on the Mozambique coast and “for the next few decades they raided all the Islamic towns on the coast,” obtaining a multitude of Muslims to be sold into the slave trade (Klein 67-68). They did “finally settle into peaceful dealings with the local Islamic trading networks by the 1520s,” resulting in a decline in Muslim slaves from outside of West Africa (Klein 68).

Slavery within Islam

Exportation of slaves from sub-Saharan Africa was not the first interaction between Islam and slavery. Slavery had long been practiced in Islamic societies. Allah (God) and a’bda, or ‘slave’ in Arabic, are intricately intertwined in the history of the Muslim faith. Prevalent during

the time of Mohammad, slavery is addressed in the Qur'an, the central Muslim holy book. The Qur'an was written and intended for practical, daily use by followers of the prophet Mohammed. Slavery was fairly common practice during the time of the Prophet (approximately the 600s) and the Qur'an advises believers on how to approach the institution.

Enslavement in Islamic society was regarded as a more complex moral matter than in most Christian societies. Decisions made regarding slavery surpassed feelings of racism or ideas of economic necessity. They depended upon whether the person subject to enslavement was a believer or a non-believer. "To enslave a Muslim against his will is an offense against God" (Kake 164) and any offense against Allah was illegal in areas ruled by Sharia law, the common law in the teachings of the Qur'an. An exception to this holy rule is in relation to war captives who were seen to have been righteously enslaved. One of the primary reasons for permitting the enslavement of a fellow Muslim, particularly during conflict, was if he was viewed as a nonbeliever who, belonging to an outside group, did not make a pact of peace with the Muslims looking to do the enslaving (Willis 19). "In the Koran an "unbeliever" (*kafir bi na'mat al-Lah*) is not an atheist... but one who is ungrateful to [God], who can see quite clearly what is owing to God but refuses to honor him in a spirit of perverse ingratitude" (Armstrong 142). Even though the Qur'an does not completely condemn the institution of slavery, it does encourage the slave holders to treat their slaves with civility and warns against any punishment harsh enough to end in the death of a fellow Muslim; slave or not. Sûrah 4. An-Nisa' Part 5 number 93 addresses the punishment of death for any who dare to defy Allah's instructions. It reads,

(An) و من يقتل مؤمناً متعمداً فجزاؤه جهنم خالداً فيها و غضب الله عليه ولعنه وأعد له عذاباً عظيماً

Interpretation of the Qur'an, Fakhry 95).¹

¹ English translation of Sûrah 4. An-Nisa' Part 5 number 93: "And he who kills a believer intentionally will, as punishment, be thrown into Hell, dwelling in it forever; and Allah will be angry with him, curse him and prepare for him a dreadful punishment" (Fakhry 95).

The English translation of this passage informs believers that if they are to go against the word of Allah, they will be thrown into hell and Allah will be so angry with them that a punishment to dreadful to specify will be thrust upon their persons (Fakhry 95).

Supplementary specifications related to the institution of slavery are discussed throughout the Qur'an and became common practice across the Muslim world. For example, slavery in Islamic societies often ended after the third generation (El Hamel 98). It was felt that the appropriate punishment for a slaves' unjust acts was served in this time period. Additionally, "a non-Muslim [who] converted to Islam only after capture...remains a slave until formally liberated through one of the many channels that Islamic law provides" (Willis 19). Such "formal manumission seems to have been confined to the world of Islam, where it was praised by the Koran" (Oliver 119). Freeing of a slave was considered to be a great act of faith. "To free a slave...is one of the most laudable acts a Believer can perform, worthy enough to merit redemption of one's sins" (Kake 164). This idea is captured in Sûrah 4. Au-Nisa' Part 5 (Fakhry 95). The English translation states:

It is not given to a believer to kill another believer except by mistake; and he who kills a believer by mistake should free a slave who is a believer and pay blood-money to his relatives, unless they remit it as alms. If he happens to belong to a people who are your enemies, but he is a believer, then you should free a believing slave. If he belongs to a people bound with you by a compact, then blood-money should be paid to his relatives and a believing slave should be freed. As for him who has not the means, he should fast for two consecutive months, as a penance from Allah. Allah is All-knowing, Wise! (*An Interpretation of the Qur'an*, Fakhry 95).

As this particular passage indicates, the conceivably simple task of freeing a slave, particularly a Muslim slave, can serve as redemption for the killing of another believer if the death was a mistake.

In the acknowledgement of slavery as an institution, the Qur'an encourages Muslim owners to treat their slaves with civility. This created a path for the future abolition of the practice. "The Koran...sought to alleviate [slavery's] conditions and possibly to prepare the way for its disappearance" (Kake 164). The sacred messages are given considerable emphasis in the practices of daily life and the Qur'an's encouragement to free those held in bondage as a form of repentance created a different concept of slavery that was not present in the Americas among Christian planters.

Colonial Religion – Muslims in the Americas

A sizable Muslim population made up mostly by slaves resided in the Americas, but they were a clear minority among Christian plantation owners, bourgeoisie, and other lower levels of European society. These settlers from all levels of colonial society began to push for the conversion of non-Christian slaves. This included the movement away from Islam and indigenous religions towards the dominant Christian belief system of that particular region. Initially, many planters were hesitant to comply with these pressures for fear of increased demand of manumission from their slaves. Although the initial desire to keep Islamic culture and traditions was strong among individual slaves, the practice of Islam on the plantation greatly declined due to a variety of factors, including a lack of connection with believers and the conversion efforts of the Europeans.

Religion was a dominant fixture in the American colonies and the beliefs of plantation owners and societal pressures eventually had a devastating impact on Islam in the New World. In the English colonies, "most were members of the Church of England" and "the property owning planters both understood and largely accepted the tenants" of this branch of Christianity (Gragg 272, 275). Catholicism and Protestantism were also commonly practiced by colonizers,

particularly in those under the control of Spain and Portugal. Even though religiously affiliated ideas were prominent across the New World, spirituality as a whole was of little concern to many (Gragg 266). For example, reports from the British island of Barbados “suggest that at best about half of the population attended church regularly” in 1723 (Gragg 277). “Planters utterly failed to maintain organized religious services regularly, and, other than the religious sectarians who invaded the islands, left scarcely a trace of any spiritual commitment” (Gragg 266). Construction of churches was slow overall, but other symbols of the Christian faith became visible throughout colonial society (Gragg 281). These symbols acted as a form of religious-subliminal messaging for the many non-Christian plantation slaves. In the beginning, any potential impact in regard to the stability of the colony was overlooked. “People with a variety of religious beliefs came...and authorities...generally permitted them to practice their faiths” (Gragg 267). However, over time, “Church and secular authorities became concerned about the potential threat nonconformist religious groups posed” and began to push for combative measures (Gragg 268). This resulted in a change to a system of law that was more consistent with many of the religious laws existing in Christian Europe at the time.

Before Islamic practices among slaves became largely compromised by Christian emersion, Muslim slaves made their mark on plantation society. Of the few Muslim slaves in the Americas, many had knowledge, such as reading and writing, which could be attributed to their religious orientation. Such skills were often learned as children as they were considered necessary too more deeply understand the meaning of the Qur’an and other Islamic teachings.

Religious scholar Karen Armstrong writes,

The Koran constantly stresses the need for intelligence in deciphering the “signs” or “messages” of God. Muslims are not to abdicate their reason but to look at the world attentively and with curiosity. It was this attitude that later enabled

Muslims to build a fine tradition of natural science, which has never been seen as such a danger to religion as in Christianity (143).

Islamic emphasis on the sciences helped to develop basic academic skills among a large portion of its followers, later producing a variety of Muslim philosophers and scientists (Armstrong 167). These skills were recognized in the Muslim slaves time and again by the Europeans who held power over the Africans, particularly in regards to those with basic mathematic abilities. This contributed to the amplification of multiple individual slaves' status on plantations. It is recorded that in many instances Islamic slaves held positions of authority on plantations. Some even kept statistical plantation records in Arabic for the owners. Additionally, several slave diaries written in Arabic have been recently discovered (Postma). These slaves' academic and intellectual abilities enabled them to create a unique relationship with their white owners and put them on a different social level among their fellow slaves. This was largely due to the supervisory authority given them over the other slaves. "Knowledge was also an important granter of status in the slave community. This could be an ability to read and write the local European language, or even Arabic and a reading knowledge of the Koran" (Klein 180). The knowledge they possessed combined with their status of bondage made educated Muslim slaves valuable assents for the few plantation owners who owned them.

In a few unique cases, a slave who possessed such academic skills was able to alter not only their social status on the plantation, but their status as a slave as well. One of the best known cases is that of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo from the country of Bondu near modern day Mali (Postma 88). "Ayuba Suleiman Diallo was a well-educated Muslim merchant whose father and grandfather held prominent political and religious positions in their country" (Postma 88). In 1730, he was returning home from trading slaves to a British ship captain when he was captured, along with two of his servants, and they were then "sold to the very captain with whom he had

earlier traded” (Postma 88). Ayuba was then shipped to the United States where he worked on a tobacco plantation in Annapolis, Maryland (Postma 88). He worked on this plantation for two years, until “his intelligence, education, and abilities were recognized by an Englishman who secured his freedom” (Postma 121). This man, Thomas Bluett, returned to England with Ayuba (Postma 88). While there, Bluett assisted Ayuba in the writing and publishing of the account of his time as a slave (Postma 121). This memoir was officially published in 1734 (Postma 121). Although the tale of Ayuba Sulieman Dillo was not typical of Muslim slaves in the Americas, it was also not the only instance in which the knowledge a slave gained through their Islamic faith resulted in the betterment of their condition in the Americas.

Disintegration of Plantation Islam

At the expense of Islam, slaves eventually came to adopt the dominant European culture of their masters. Muslims in the Americas had increasingly less exposure to other Islamic believers as “only a few African American leaders who had traveled to Africa knew anything about Islam. Contacts between immigrant Arab groups and African Americans were almost nonexistent at this time” (Nanji 148-49). “In many of their habits of work, friendship, beliefs about the world order, and especially the language in which they came to express themselves to others, the slaves of America were forced to accommodate to the dominant culture of the master class” (Klein 175). Derived from the limited records available, a conservative estimate relays that few, if any, plantation owners in the New World were Islamic. As a result, the African slaves who “readily adopted the culture, language, and religion of their masters” quite rarely adopted the practice of Islam (Craton 152).

Even with the large amount of adaptation to Christian customs, not all Islamic cultural traits brought by slaves to plantation life were lost. African culture in the Americas largely

became a mixture of African cultural traits and traditions of the New World (Olwig 26). The combination of beliefs did not lead to the dismissal of Muslim culture all together. Many aspects of Islamic culture are still present in Western culture today with one of the most prominent being language. Arabic was often spoken among Muslim slaves and as a result became imbedded in parts of the plantation lingo. Although an origin in Islamic slavery cannot quite be proven, variations of Arabic words are still present in the English language today. The word genie and its mysterious connotation, for example, comes from the Arabic word 'jinn' referring to a type of spirit and discussed in the Qur'an.

Although the education and academic skills of Muslim slaves were often used at the disposal of their master, it was risky and dangerous for planters to allow such outside religions to gather followers. Originally many of the European settlers "expressed bewilderment at their slaves' religious practices and saw little reason to convert them" (Gragg 278). This mindset was particularly prominent across the colonies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The Virginian House of Burgesses, for example, claimed in 1699 that it was "unnecessary to expose slaves to Christianity, since 'the gross barbarity and rudeness of their manners, the variety and strangeness of their languages and the weakness and shallowness of their minds rendered it in a manner impossible to attain to any progress in their conversion'" (Breen 310). This early stance on the conversion of slaves was greatly favored by the planter class and a large number of the general white population. The reasoning behind their opposition to heavy conversion rested in the fear that "imparting Christianity to the slaves might cause insubordination among them" (qtd. in Olwig 34). They were apprehensive about the prospect that Christianity would make the slaves "more perverse and intractable than others," make them

less fit for sale, afraid they would expect better usage, and afraid conversion would encourage revolt requiring manumission (Gragg 279).

With time, ideas changed and converting slaves of all backgrounds became increasingly favored among colonists. Baptisms of black slaves began to occur independently in the midst of plantation populations. Advocates of slave conversion emerged in the Americas, particularly in the English island of Barbados, where sixty-three percent of the total blacks baptized were slaves (Gragg 280). Quakers were the strongest and most visible of these conversion advocates. They argued that “Christ died for all men, his blood was shed for blacks as well as whites” (Gragg 279). At the same time their argument included the point that “the very safety of the island [of Barbados] has been ‘hazarded’” and that conversion of slaves to Christianity was the only way to properly deal with this issue (Gragg 280). While their activism may have seemed to suggest abolitionist sentiments, they almost never raised the issue of manumission and “most island Quakers in the 1680 island census owned slaves” (Gragg 280-81).

Despite the planters’ fears, conversion to Christianity rarely equaled freedom for African slaves. In colonies under the control of the British government, these apprehensions were formally put to rest in 1729 (Gragg 279). In this year both the British Attorney General and the British Solicitor General “gave their formal opinions that baptism could not alter the temporal conditions of a slave within the British kingdoms” (Gragg 279). “In all, few planters freed their slaves – only 133 between 1650 and 1700 [in Barbados] – and rarely did they offer a religious reason for doing so” (Gragg 281). Governing bodies began to pass multiple acts designed to compel the population to conform and to intertwine Christianity and colonial law (Gragg 269).

The planters’ uneasiness over the connection between Christian slaves and rebellion eventually quelled with the increase in active conversion of slaves in the Americas. “While such

organized disturbances were relatively infrequent, an occasional uprising reinforced the planter's fears and remained a source of uneasiness years after the violence," but these acts of resistance very rarely corresponded with the transition to Christianity by a slave (Breen 297).

Leading Active Resistance

Although active rebellion was not directly connected with the push for conversion, Muslim slaves were noted as participants and leaders in multiple conspiracies and uprisings. "Slave insurrections were often attempted in South America, especially among the Muslim slaves" (Jenkins 2: 216). This was particularly true in Bahia, Brazil where Muslim slaves led a series of resistance movements throughout 1695 (Jenkins 2: 216). One of the most memorable movements led by Muslim slaves lasted from 1630 to 1694 (Jenkins 2: 155). In 1630, an opportunity for many African slaves to escape to the surrounding forests was created due to the political and social upheaval taking place in the Pernambuco region of Brazil (Jenkins 2: 155). "In these forests, the slaves formed a number of maroon communities. During the period from 1630 to 1694, the various maroon communities of Pernambuco, Brazil attempted to organize their own state, the state of Alagoas or Palmares" (Jenkins 2: 155). What became known as the Republic of Palmares was a highly developed confederation of maroon communities that had an estimated population of eleven thousand (Jenkins 2: 155). It stayed intact until the Portuguese were able to eradicate it in 1694 (Jenkins 2: 155). Other minor revolts with recorded participation of Muslim slaves took place across the Americas. This includes one in 1835 where there was a "revolt of the Muslims, who attempted to enthrone their own queen. The Muslims fought with extreme bravery, but were finally defeated" (Jenkins 2: 216).

Like most slave rebellions in the Americas, Muslim-led resistance movements were all eventually defeated. Their temporary successes were made insignificant by European forces.

They also “aroused peasant resistance, which was mainly Muslim in origin,” much like they were able to do among the plantation populations (Becker and Martin 119).

‘Christianization’

Muslim involvement in resistance did not stop the dismissal of Islamic practices from the plantation system. “A slow ‘Christianization’ of the population that [included] accepting the Christian creed, building and maintain an institutional structure for its promotion, and exhibiting observable behavior demonstrating its impact” assisted in overall colonial development at the expense of Islam and indigenous religions (Gragg 267). As a result, the Christian practices dominant among colonizers transferred into slave plantation society. To outside observers, conversion was an incredibly successful feat. In reality, the actual number of converts is controversial. Europeans kept few records of religious beliefs of their slaves, presumably because it had little effect on their market value or working ability. Because of this, there is no way to know whether extreme conversion efforts were successful or if the transition to Christianity was simply a side effect of time and forced cultural immersion. It is speculated that most slaves who did go through a conversion process chose to combine their old faith and new Christian religious beliefs (Olwig 26). This was illustrated by “missionaries in Georgia and South Carolina [who] observed that some Muslim slaves attempted to blend Islam and Christianity by identifying God with Allah and Muhammad with Jesus” (Nanji 148). Under the harsh conditions, forced religious conversion in the Western plantation system was questionably successful, but did accompany the steady deterioration of the Muslim faith among plantation slaves.

Although the total population of Muslim slaves in the Americas was relatively small, their presence was significant to the overall development of the plantation system and European

colonies. As a group, they actively defied slavery in a wide spectrum of ways. The knowledge skills they held due to their chosen religion assisted in alleviating the harsh plantation conditions for some, while others chose to fight the institution with more drastic techniques. Unfortunately the presence of Islam among slavery in the Americas eventually diminished due to the conversion efforts and cultural immersion individuals were subjected to.

There are records showing that some had knowledge of Arabic and the Quran and attempted to maintain ritual, dietary, and other Islamic practices. The cultivation of authentic Islamic life – which, in addition to the free exercise of devotional practices, requires a support community, including a strong family structure – was not permitted. Thus, the Islamic beliefs and practices of virtually all African Muslim slaves in America gradually perished (Nanji 141).

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