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Raiber (Salah) Muhiddin

University at Albany, State University of New York, rmuhiddin@albany.edu

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Islam as a Liberating Force for Muslim Slaves on the Georgia Sea Islands

by

Raiber (Salah) Muhiddin

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Introduction

Islam has been a part of America since colonial times. “Hundreds of thousands” of Muslim slaves were brought to the shores of the New World as part of the transatlantic slave trade.¹ While many of these slaves were prevented from outwardly practicing their religion, some of them managed to assert their religious identity and practice their religion despite the control of their masters. In this paper, I examine the story of two such slaves, Bilali Muhammad and Salih Bilali, and the role Islam played in their personal lives. Islam, at once, gave these slaves their own sense of identity, allowed them to reject the identity set for them by white society, and comforted them against the hardships of forced servitude. Ironically, in the case of these two slaves, it also brought them the respect of their masters.

For a long time, Islam has been left out of the conversation regarding slave religion. For much of the twentieth century, the scholarly debate centered on the extent to which the Christianity of slaves resembled that of whites. On one side of the debate, John Boles argued that “in no other aspect of black cultural life than religion had the values and practices of whites so deeply penetrated.”² On the other side, Sterling Stuckey argued that slaves adopted “a Christianity shot through with African values.”³ Bilali and Salih challenge Boles’s argument that slaves were engulfed in white religious values, but they also contradict Stuckey’s argument that slaves brought their own values into Christianity. Bilali and Salih did neither. Notwithstanding decades under servitude, they remained firm adherents to Islam, uncompromising in their practice, unwavering in their belief, and unshaken in their faith.

¹ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*, (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 70.

² Quoted in Peter J. Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1989), 84.

³ Ibid.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, several historians began to challenge the sidelining of Islam in American slave history. The first major work illuminating the stories of Muslim slaves in America was published in 1984.⁴ A handful of historians have since developed the field, starting a discussion on the meaning that Islam had in the lives of these slaves. Some scholars have shown that Islam provided a sense of identity to Muslim slaves as being, first and foremost, slaves of God rather than of man. Sylviane Diouf, for instance, titled her pivotal work on these slaves *Servants of Allah*. Scholars commenting on Muslim slaves have also made reference to the fact that converting slaves to Christianity was important to slave masters, but they have said less about how certain Muslim slaves blatantly rejected the religion of their masters and openly practiced Islam. This being said, the meaning of Islam which scholars have given least attention to is the comforting role that Islam had to these slaves.

For all the good work recently done on Muslim slaves in America, no scholar has yet explained how three distinct components of Islam meant three distinct ways Islam served as a liberating force for Muslim slaves in America. The physical component of ritual practice in Islam gave Muslims their own sense of identity. The mental component of adopting Islamic creed, specifically in regards to the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran, allowed Muslims to reject the identity set for them by the slave society. Finally, the spiritual component in Islam of perfecting one's faith provided a sense of comfort and purpose to slaves whose lives on Earth were dictated by society to mean little more than pleasing their masters.

⁴ See, Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, (New York: Garland Pub, 1984). Several historians before him have made significant contributions to the narratives of particular Muslim slaves, but Austin's is the first comprehensive study of these slaves in general.

This argument about the impact Bilali and Salih's religion had on their lives should not be misconstrued as being an argument about motivation. While Islam did provide these slaves a sense of identity, a method to reject their master's identity, and a source of comfort, these need not have been Bilali and Salih's objectives behind practicing their religion. Rather, Bilali and Salih practiced their faith because they sincerely believed it. James Maxwell Couper, son of Salih's master, described Salih as the "the most religious man that he had ever known."⁵ Written during the Old South, when religion played a significant role in society, these words are even more forceful. Bilali and Salih both took their faith seriously. They practiced because they were genuine in their convictions. Those practices, in turn, had an immediate impact as a liberating force in their lives.

The story of Bilali and Salih is singularly suited to analyze the meaning Islam played in the lives of slaves because of the openness with which these slaves practiced their religion and the documentation of their practice. Several other observant Muslim slaves in America whose practices were documented eventually gained their freedom, but these two remained enslaved from the time they were captured in Africa until they died. Despite their bondage, they were open about their religion and were surprisingly still respected to some level by white society. Various southerners spoke of these slaves. Salih's master, James Hamilton Couper, even penned a lengthy letter about his conversations with Salih. Bilali and Salih were also revered by their fellow slaves, and descendants of these slaves would recall being told their story. This being said, the most unique source from them is a 13-page handwritten Arabic manuscript by Bilali on matters of Islamic jurisprudence which provides us with a window into his beliefs.

⁵ Austin, *Sourcebook*, 316.

Background

Salih Bilali was born, around 1765,⁶ in Kianah, a town in the Kingdom of Massina.⁷ The Kingdom of Massina was a West African Kingdom which contained large segments of both Muslims and non-Muslim polytheists.⁸ His hometown was populated with Muslim Fulbe.⁹ Salih received a basic education there, explaining that “all the children are taught to read and write Arabic by the priests (Maalims).”¹⁰ As a child, Salih would frequently visit two large neighboring towns, Kuna and Jenne, each of which served as economic and religious hubs.¹¹ At the age of 12, on one of his journeys from Jenne back to his hometown, Salih was captured while on horseback and enslaved.¹² He would be transferred from owner to owner in Africa over the next two years until he was finally shipped to the Bahamas. Salih remained enslaved in the Bahamas until 1800, when Hamilton Couper’s father purchased him and brought him to a large plantation on St. Simon’s Island.¹³ Here he would be given the slave name “Tom.” In 1816, Salih was made head driver on the plantation, where he remained enslaved until his death.¹⁴

⁶ Austin, *Sourcebook*, 325.

⁷ James Hamilton Couper, "Letter of James Hamilton Couper," 1844, in *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 321-25, (New York: Garland Pub, 1984). Originally in *Notes on Northern Africa, the Sahara and Soudan, in Relation to the Ethnographic, Languages, History, Political and Social Condition, of the Nations of Those Countries*.

⁸ Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 146.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Couper, "Letter," 324.

¹¹ Curtin, *Africa Remembered*, 148.

¹² Couper, "Letter," 325.

¹³ Ibid, 321.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Bilali Muhammad, also a Fula, was from the nearby West African Kingdom of Futa Jallon.¹⁵ Around 1779,¹⁶ he was born in Timbo, “an intellectual center” at the time, where he also received an education in the Islamic disciplines.¹⁷ Bilali was “captured when not fully grown,”¹⁸ and was also enslaved in the Bahamas¹⁹ before being purchased by Thomas Spalding and brought to Sapelo Island, only fifteen miles away from St. Simon’s.²⁰ He was made head driver on the plantation prior to 1813.²¹ Hamilton Couper, Salih’s master, writes that the two slaves were “intimate friends.”²² As two slave drivers on neighboring plantations, they must have had frequent contact. As similar as they were, it is no surprise that they developed a strong bond. Bilali remained enslaved on Sapelo Island until he died in the late 1850s due to old age.²³

Bilali and Salih’s stories thus share remarkable parallels. Both shared similar backgrounds as Fulbe Muslims born around the same time in West Africa, educated as Muslims, captured at a young age, and brought to the Georgia Sea Islands through the Bahamas. And both shared similar experiences as head drivers on neighboring plantations. The most remarkable parallel between these slaves was their religious life as slaves. Both of them openly practiced their faith as slaves, and both of them were recognized for it. Georgia Conrad, a Southern woman

¹⁵ Couper, “Letter,” 324.

¹⁶ B. G. Martin, “Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The Bilali Diary in Context,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 78, no. No 3 (1994): 590.

¹⁷ Austin, *Sourcebook*, 268.

¹⁸ Lydia Parish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*, (Hatboro: Folklore Associates, INC, 1965), 26.

¹⁹ Austin, *Sourcebook*, 272.

²⁰ Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 85.

²¹ Austin, *Sourcebook*, 268.

²² Couper, “Letter,” 324.

²³ William Brown Hodgson, *The Gospels, Written in the Negro Patois of English, with Arabic Characters*, (New York: Emory University, 1857), 8.

who met Bilali prior to his death recalled that Bilali “always wore a cap that resembled a Turkish fez.”²⁴ Hamilton Couper, Salih’s master, called Salih “a strict Mahometan.”²⁵ Zephaniah Kingsley, a pro-slavery writer, called the two “professors of the Mahomedan religion.”²⁶ Their religious education and practice were recognized early on by white southerners. Their Muslim identity distinguished them. What that identity meant to them will soon be explored, but first, an analysis of the historical value of Bilali’s manuscript is due.

Bilali’s Manuscript

Any comprehensive account of Islamic practices on the Georgia Sea Islands must make use of Bilali’s Manuscript, but the document’s significance was not always clear to historians. While historians now argue that it is an original work of Islamic jurisprudence written by Bilali, this was not always believed to be the case. Before an attempt was made to translate it, it was thought by historians to be some sort of “diary or plantation record.”²⁷ Benjamin Goulding, son of the Presbyterian minister to whom Bilali entrusted the manuscript, thought that this was the case, which is why the manuscript was officially dubbed the “Ben Ali²⁸ Diary” when Goulding donated it to the Georgia State Library in 1930.²⁹ Joel Chandler Harris, author of children stories

²⁴ Georgia Bryan Conrad, "Reminiscences of a Southern Woman," In *The Southern Workman*, (Hampton: Hampton Institute, 1901), 252.

²⁵ Couper, "Letter," 321.

²⁶ Z. Kingsley, "A Treatise on the Patriarchal, or Co-Operative System of Society as it Exists in Some Governments, and Colonies in America, and in the United States, under the Name of Slavery, with its Necessity and Advantages," in Daniel W. Stowell, ed., *Balancing Evils Judiciously: The Proslavery Writings of Zephaniah Kingsley*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), 69.

²⁷ Joseph H. Greenberg, "The Decipherment of the 'Ben-Ali Diary,' a Preliminary Statement." *The Journal of Negro History* 25, no. 3 (1940): 372.

²⁸ Ben Ali was a variant pronunciation of Bilali’s name.

²⁹ Yusef Progler, "Ben Ali and his Arabic diary: Encountering an African Muslim in Antebellum America," *Muslim & Arab Perspectives* 11 (2004): 20.

in the Old South, featured this interpretation in a sensationalized story he wrote about a fictitious son of Bilali. In the book, titled *The Story of Aaron*, he wrote about a boy named Aaron who had a book “wrapped up in soft leather,” which he read “in a strange tongue.”³⁰ Aaron explained that the book belonged to “Ben Ali, my daddy.”³¹

The first several attempts at translating the manuscript failed.³² Aside from common impairments to the decipherability of manuscripts (such as ink blots, illegible writing, and the use of old script), Bilali’s manuscript was hard to interpret for another reason. Many words in the manuscript are spelled differently because the author consistently interchanged certain letters. This was because he wrote the manuscript based on the way he sounded out the Arabic words in his non-standard accent.³³ This explains why prestigious institutions of higher learning failed to translate the document in the early 20th century and why a group of “learned men” in Nigeria “declared the writing to be the work of *jinn* (spirits)” when asked to translate it.³⁴

After the several failed attempts at translating Bilali’s manuscript, Dr. Joseph Greenberg took the manuscript with him on a trip to Nigeria to try to decipher it. Based on a few clues, he decided that “the major portion of the document could be identified as a series of excerpts from the *Risala*,” a treatise of *Maliki* jurisprudence which is part of the Islamic clerical curriculum in large sections of North and West Africa.³⁵ Under this theory, Bilali would have memorized sections of the *Risalah* in Africa “by rote” and “imperfectly” reproduced what he remembered of

³⁰ Joel Chandler Harris, *The Story of Aaron (So Named): The Son of Ben Ali*, (Boston: Houghton, 1896), 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Greenberg, “Decipherment,” 372.

³³ *Ibid.*, 373.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 372-373.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

it in America.³⁶ Greenberg based his conclusion largely on the fact that Bilali writes a prayer in the beginning of his manuscript for a man whose full name is similar to the name of the author of the *Risalah*, Abu Zaid al-Qairawani. He also supports this conclusion with several rudimentary similarities between Bilali's manuscript and the *Risalah*, including the fact that both are divided into several chapters on basic aspects of Muslim ritual practice and that the chapters begin with the word *bab*, (which roughly translates to "chapter").³⁷ This is hardly conclusive evidence, as books of Islamic jurisprudence have traditionally been written using the same format. Indeed, as Amir Syed correctly states, recent scholars who have studied the manuscript point out that "the Ben Ali diary varies too much from the *Risalah*—both linguistically and in content;" instead, "they argue [that] Bilali produced an original composition."³⁸

The assumption that Bilali's manuscript is a copy of the *Risalah* has led several historians to undervalue the manuscript. Greenberg himself used this misinterpretation to suggest that "it is also probable... that the writer was unaware of the meaning of much of what he had written."³⁹ Harold Glidden, who was Chief of the Near East Section, Oriental Division at the Library of Congress, went as far as to argue that "there is absolutely nothing of a personal nature in the text and no information about 'Ben Ali' himself can be derived from it except that he had studied the aforementioned work, was a Muslim, and was capable of writing extremely corrupt Arabic."⁴⁰ These views are mistaken. Even if the manuscript did comprise certain excerpts of the *Risalah*, Greenberg and Glidden's conclusions do not necessarily follow. More importantly, there are

³⁶ Ella May Thornton, "Bilali -- His Book" *Law Library Journal* 47 (1955): 229.

³⁷ Greenberg, "Decipherment," 373.

³⁸ Amir Syed, "Rethinking the Ben Ali Diaries: Multiple Context and Muslim Slaves." *University of British Columbia*, April 2009, 11.

³⁹ Greenberg, "Decipherment," 374.

⁴⁰ Proglar, "Ben Ali," 56.

serious reasons to doubt that it was ever meant to be a replica of the *Risalah*. Ronald Judy explains that the name in the beginning of the manuscript could have been referring to one of Bilali's personal teachers.⁴¹ Even if the name were that of al-Qairawani, it could simply mean that Bilali learned these rituals from the education he received on the *Risalah* without compromising the originality of his work. In the words of Judy, "the Ben Ali manuscript cannot be reduced to a poor, fractured redaction from memory of al-Qairawani's ar-*Risala*."⁴²

While there is still no complete translation of Bilali's manuscript (because of the difficulty in reading several pages), Ronald Judy, Muhammad al-Ahari, and Yusuf Progler have each made recent advances in deciphering it. What remains to be done is a historical analysis of what the document tells us about the Islamic practices of its author, and in turn what those practices meant to the author. Amir Syed, the most recent scholar to analyze the manuscript, asks two basic questions surrounding the document. He first asks how the document could have been produced by Bilali. He answers by situating Bilali in the context of a West African Islamic revival which was "buttressed by thousands of educational institutions."⁴³ Being from an intellectual center at the heart of Futa Jallon, Bilali had gone through clerical training, where he learned to read and write Arabic and where he studied the Islamic sciences.

Regarding Bilali's motivation behind writing the document, Syed concludes that the document was meant to be instructional. He says that "by writing the Ben Ali diary, it is possible that Bilali was attempting to recreate a . . . learning environment in order to foster a distinct Islamic identity and perpetuate Islamic religious practices within the confines of slavery in a new

⁴¹ Ronald A. T. Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*, (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), 247.

⁴² Judy, *Slave Narratives*, 248.

⁴³ Syed, "Rethinking the Ben Ali Diaries," 17-18.

land.”⁴⁴ This interpretation is supported by Bilali’s choice of a Quranic verse to begin his manuscript with. According to al-Ahari’s translation, Bilali quotes the following verse in the introduction of his manuscript: “And remind [believers to obey Allah], for verily reminders are beneficial to the believers.”⁴⁵ In sum, Bilali was not writing an informational work on what Muslims do. He was writing an instructive work on what Muslims, perhaps those with him on the plantation, ought to do.

Bilali thus originally intended for his manuscript to be a basic guide to Islamic practices for Muslim slaves on the plantation. Given that this is the case, one conclusion is clear: Bilali firmly believed in and practiced the contents of his manuscript. The manuscript provides invaluable information regarding Bilali’s own religious practice, something which historians have failed to point out and analyze. This conclusion is supported by the language of the manuscript and by a range of other sources about how Bilali and other Muslim slaves on the Sea Islands practiced their faith. This being the case, no in depth study of Islam’s role in Bilali’s life would be complete without copious use of Bilali’s only remaining work, the manuscript which he cherished and sought to preserve. Perhaps ironically, this conclusion means there was an element of truth in the old notion of the manuscript being a “diary.” While it is not a diary in the technical sense, the manuscript does have a lot to tell us about Bilali’s personal religious practice.

⁴⁴ Syed, “Rethinking the Ben Ali Diaries,” page 30.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Abdullah al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad: Muslim Jurisprudist in Antebellum Georgia*, (Chicago: Magribine Press, 2012), 4. The translation of the verse is my own.

Islam as a Liberating Force

Three Components of Islam

The notion that Islam has three distinct components stems from a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. As the story goes, the Angel Gabriel once took the form of a human and entered the Prophet's mosque while the Prophet was sitting with his companions. The Angel came to the front of the mosque and sat right in front of the Prophet, so much so that the Angel's knees were touching the Prophet's knees and the Angel's hands were holding the Prophet's thighs, when the Angel asked the Prophet several questions. The first three of those questions are particularly relevant to this discussion. The Angel began by simply asking, "What is Islam?" The Prophet responded by listing five physical acts of worship: professing one's belief in God and the Prophet, praying five times daily, fasting during the month of Ramadan, paying alms to the poor, and making pilgrimage to Makkah. The Angel then asked, "What is *Iman* (faith)" The Prophet listed six components of Islamic belief: belief in God, in Angels, in scripture, in prophets, in Judgement Day, and in divine decree. The Angel then asked, "What is *Ihsan* (perfection)"? The Prophet described the highest possible spiritual states: "Perfection is to worship God as though you see him, but if not to that level, then at least with the knowledge that he is always seeing you."⁴⁶

The tradition of Gabriel, as this particular narration has come to be called by Muslim clerics, is authoritative in Sunni Islam, as it is contained in one of most authoritative books of *hadith* (the prophet's sayings), *Sahih Muslim*.⁴⁷ It serves as a broad introduction to three different

⁴⁶ "The Book of Faith," *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 1, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1>.

⁴⁷ Malise Ruthven, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49.

components of the Muslim religion. The first component, simply named “Islam,” represents the physical component of the most important ritual acts which Muslims perform. The second component, named *Iman* (faith), represents the mental component of what Muslims believe in. The third component, named *Ihsan* (perfection), represents the spiritual state of mind Muslims strive toward. Each of these components played a crucial role in Bilali and Salih’s lives, and each of them correspond to a unique way that these slaves expressed their freedom and resisted their masters.

The First Component: Islam

The five aspects of Islam which were listed in the last section are commonly referred to as the five “pillars of Islam.” In *Servants of Allah*, Diouf analyzes the various ways Muslims in the Americas practiced these pillars. A reading of the primary accounts of Bilali’s and Salih’s lives demonstrates the importance of these pillars to them. The first “pillar of Islam” is the *shahadah*, or the declaration of one’s belief that God alone is to be worshiped and that Muhammad is God’s messenger. This declaration is often seen as what makes someone a Muslim, as professing it is the way people convert to Islam. It is also commonly repeated by Muslims, and is pronounced both in the Muslim call to prayer and in the prayer itself. Bilali repeats this statement several times throughout his manuscript, listing it as one of the statements made during the two calls to prayer and recommending that Muslims say it upon completing ablution and upon completing the prayer.⁴⁸

James Maxwell Couper, son of James Hamilton Couper (Salih’s master), provides a powerful testimony to the significance of the *shahadah* in Salih’s life. In a personal letter, he

⁴⁸ Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad*.

writes that Salih declared “Allah is God and Mohammed his prophet” immediately before dying.⁴⁹ As someone who was unaware of the intricacies of Salih’s faith, Maxwell Couper did not know the history and significance of Salih’s action the Islamic tradition. Its significance goes back to a tradition from the Prophet Muhammad where he is reported to have said that “Whoever’s last words are ‘there is no God but Allah’ will enter paradise.”⁵⁰ Muslims since have always viewed this to be one of the most conclusive signs of the sincerity of one’s belief.

What makes Salih’s last words even more profound is the length of time he was separated from his Islamic roots in Africa. As previously mentioned, Salih was kidnapped and enslaved at the age of 12. He died at a really old age, as he was already 73 when Couper wrote the letter about him.⁵¹ It is astounding for Salih to be taken from his religious roots at such a young age and to be so unwavering in his beliefs decades later that the last thing he was thinking about on his death bed was the *shahadah*, even after living so long in a Christian environment. His background as a young student of the Islamic religion in Africa no doubt had a role to play in this, but other Muslim slaves must have also served as an influence. When Hamilton Couper says he and Bilali were “intimate friends,” Bilali no doubt had a special role in Salih’s life as a fellow educated Muslim who was in a similar condition. It comes to no surprise that Salih would name one of his sons Bilali.⁵²

Aside from the *shahadah*, the other pillar of Islam which is repeated on a daily basis is the Muslim prayer (*salah*). So important was this prayer to Bilali’s legacy that the bulk of his manuscript was about how the prayer should be performed. The manuscript goes through how

⁴⁹ Austin, *Sourcebook*, 316.

⁵⁰ “The book of Funerals,” *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Hadith 3116, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/21>.

⁵¹ Couper, “Letter,” 321.

⁵² Austin, *Sourcebook*, 316.

one should wash-up before the prayer (*wudu*), how one should make the two calls for prayer (the *adhan* and the *iqamah*), and how one should pray. He describes various postures in the prayer, from standing to bowing and prostrating, and he explains what one should say in each of these positions.⁵³ Rather than providing an in-depth commentary on the minutiae of the prayer, Bilali's manuscript serves as a broad outline of the basic elements of the prayer. This was his intention, as he begins the manuscript by calling his text "a very concise summary," repeating the Arabic word for an abridged text (*mukhtasar*) three times.⁵⁴

That Bilali wrote his manuscript about the Muslim prayer shows its importance in his life. Gathering the supplies to write the manuscript was no small endeavor for someone enslaved.⁵⁵ Ink blots and smudges on the manuscript also show the difficulty of writing with the utensils that Bilali had. As such, the manuscript should not be viewed as just any piece of writing by Bilali which happened to be preserved. Bilali likely had not written much else. It was, aside from his copy of the Quran (which may or may not have been written by him), his most cherished (and perhaps lengthiest) manuscript. He kept the manuscript with him throughout his life and chose to entrust it to a "white friend and confidant," Rev. Francis R. Goulding, when he was near his death.⁵⁶ If his document could not serve his original purpose of being used as an instructive manual for Muslim slaves on the plantation, Bilali at least wished that the document be preserved so that later generations would appreciate the plantation's Islamic history.

By concentrating on the Muslim prayer in his manuscript, Bilali etched its place in his legacy. Prayer was so much a routine part of his life, that it is one of the first things he was

⁵³ Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad*.

⁵⁴ Judy, *Slave Narratives*, 240

⁵⁵ Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 170.

⁵⁶ Martin, "The 'Bilali Diary' in Context," 593.

remembered for among his decedents on the island. Asked about Bilali, Katie Brown, a great granddaughter of his, recalled:

*Magret an uh daughtuh Cotto use tuh say dat Belali an he wife Phoebe pray on duh bead. Dey wuz bery puhticluh bout duh time dey pray an dey bery regluh bout duh hour. Wen duh sun come up, wen it straight obuh head and wen it set, das duh time dey pray. Dey bow tuh duh sun an hab lill mat tuh kneel on.*⁵⁷

{Margaret [Bilali's daughter] and her daughter Cotto [Bilali's granddaughter] used to say that Bilali and his wife Phoebe prayed on beads. They were very particular about the time they prayed, and they were very regular about the hour. They used to pray when the sun came up, when it was straight over one's head, and when it set. They bowed towards the sun and had a little mat to kneel on. }

Brown, speaking around 80 years after Bilali died, had no recollection herself of Bilali, but remembered what her mother and grandmother said about him. She recalled being told that he prayed at regular times during the day in a certain direction, and on a mat, all characteristic of the Muslim prayer which Bilali wrote about.

Other than the *shahadah* and the prayer, Muslims on the Sea Islands would also perform the ritual fasts during the month of Ramadan. Salih's master, Hamilton Couper, noted that Salih "keeps the various fasts, particularly that of Ramadan."⁵⁸ In the Islamic tradition, fasting involves abstaining from all food and drink from dawn (roughly an hour and a half before sunrise) until sunset. Salih was 73 at the time Couper wrote the letter,⁵⁹ and he still maintained the thirty-day fast of Ramadan along with other supererogatory fasts throughout the year. What

⁵⁷ *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, Savannah Unit Georgia Writers Project: Work Projects Administration, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 161.

⁵⁸ Couper, Letter, 321.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 325.

makes the feat even more impressive is that he was under servitude, and he did all of this even though he had strict duties he had to perform as head driver on the plantation.

Two other actions comprise the pillars of Islam, alms-giving and pilgrimage, but they are not as applicable in the case of Bilali and Salih because the two slaves did not have the means to perform them. For mandatory alms-giving (*zakah*) to be applicable under Islamic law, one needs to have a certain amount of money saved over the length of a year. For pilgrimage (*hajj*) to be applicable under Islamic law, one needs to have the means of travelling to Makkah. As slaves, Bilali and Salih met the prerequisites of neither. This being said, they regretted that circumstance prevented them from these actions, and the actions were constantly on their minds. If Muslims on the Sea Islands did not have the requirements for *zakah*, they did not leave charity all together.⁶⁰ If they did not have the ability to make it to Makkah, they still faced toward its direction when they performed their daily prayers.⁶¹

By adopting these physical acts of worship, Bilali and Salih dedicated their physical bodies to the servitude of God. In doing so, they asserted their identity as slaves of God. Bilali even uses this title in his manuscript, saying at one point that “only the true servants of Allah make prayer and give blessings upon the Prophet [Muhammad].”⁶² In this regard, historians are correct to use the titles “servants of Allah” or “slaves of Allah” when referencing these Muslims. This being said, historians commenting on these slaves have not yet explained the significance this identity has in the Islamic tradition. One may be tempted to think that being a slave of Allah sounds demeaning, but such a forlorn view of the title neglects the rich religious tradition from which this title emanates, and to which these slaves subscribed. The title ‘slave of Allah’ has

⁶⁰ Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 92.

⁶¹ Salih explained to Couper that Muslims pray toward Makkah. See, Couper, “Letter,” 323.

⁶² Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad*, 8.

traditionally been viewed by Muslim theologians one being one of the most honorary titles. In fact, in one common formulation of the *shahadah*, it is the title given to the most revered figure in Islam, the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet is also recorded to have said that “the most beloved names to Allah are Abdullah [the slave of Allah] and Abdur Rahman [the slave of the Merciful],” hence the prevalence of these names among Muslims.⁶³

To understand the word slave (*abd*) in the Islamic tradition, one should understand its opposite, the word for lord (*rabb*). The word lord in Arabic is one of the most common ways to refer to God, and it carries with it implications of the one who creates, nourishes, sustains, and provides. One becomes a slave of God because one recognizes that God deserves worship. By adopting the servitude of God, Bilali and Salih showed that real servitude is only the right of God. These slaves obeyed their masters out of necessity, and not because they felt that their masters deserved obedience. God, on the other contrary, was fully deserving. “He,” Bilali writes, “is all powerful and I depend on him.”⁶⁴ These slaves structured their lives around the worship and obedience of the deity they believed deserved it. They prayed to that God daily, they gave up food and drink for him when Ramadan came, and their faith in him was so strong that the last words to come from their mouths were in acknowledgment of him.

The Second Component: Iman

Alongside the implementation of certain rituals, another crucial aspect of the Islamic faith to Bilali and Salih was adopting Islamic creed. As a whole, the Islamic creed of Bilali and Salih shared many similarities with the Christian creed of their masters, but there were several key

⁶³ “The Book of Manners and Etiquette,” Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2132, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/38>.

⁶⁴ Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad*, 6.

differences. In the minds of white southerners, the greatest of these differences was that Bilali and Salih believed in the Prophet Muhammad and in the revelation sent to him, the Quran. By adopting Islamic beliefs in general, and these two beliefs in particular, Bilali and Salih both refused to conform to the identity chosen for them by slave society. They rejected the religion of their masters even though converting slaves to Christianity was so important to slave masters that it was often used as one of the justifications of slavery.

Salih's belief in the Prophet Muhammad is best demonstrated in the anecdote shared in the discussion of the *shahadah*. The last words from Salih's mouth, as Maxwell Couper relates, were "Allah is God Muhammad his Prophet." The first part of this testimony, "Allah is God," is the part easier to reconcile with Christianity. While the Christian masters may have had different understandings of God than their Muslim slaves, the name "Allah" is essentially the Arabic equivalent of "God." The declaration that "Muhammad [is] his Prophet" is the part of Salih's testimony which was most conflicting with his master's Christian beliefs.

Bilali's reverence for the Prophet Muhammad is clearly demonstrated throughout his manuscript. The very beginning of his manuscript reads "In the name of Allah, The Most Merciful The Most Beneficent. Allah's blessings upon our lord Muhammad, and upon his family and companions."⁶⁵ Bilali also describes sending prayers onto the Prophet Muhammad as one of the hallmarks of true faith. "Only the true servants of Allah," Bilali says, "make prayer and give blessings upon the Prophet."⁶⁶

The distaste against accepting the Prophet Muhammad is encapsulated in the antiquated term which was used to describe Muslims. Salih and Bilali would be dubbed as "Mahometans,"

⁶⁵ Judy, *Slave Narratives*, 240.

⁶⁶ Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad*, 8.

both by their masters and by others who wrote about them. While it is tempting to brush this off as simply the standard word for “Muslim” at the time, the term carried an underlying misconception. This misconception is made clear when Georgia Conrad said, referring to Bilali’s family, that “I used to know a family of negroes who worshipped Mahomet.”⁶⁷ This is false. Bilali and his family respected Muhammad as a messenger of God, but they only worshipped God. Bilali makes this clear when he warns against taking any partners with Allah (*shirk*).⁶⁸ Conrad’s statement shows that belief in the Prophet Muhammad was one aspect of Islamic creed that most differentiated these Muslim slaves from the Christians around them.

The other major Islamic belief that contradicted the beliefs of the slave masters was belief in the revelation to Muhammad, the Quran. Both Salih and Bilali had a personal connection with the Quran. Couper writes that Salih “reads Arabic and has a Quran (which however, I have not seen) in that language.”⁶⁹ Salih thus managed to get access to a Quran while being enslaved, and he would read it constantly throughout his life. It is not certain what happened to Salih’s Quran after his death, but it is possible that he entrusted it to another literate Muslim on the plantation. Salih’s grandson, Ben Sullivan, describes a slave named Israel who had a book he would surreptitiously pray with:

*Ole Israel he pray a lot wid a book he hab wut hi hide, an he take a lill mat an he say he prayuhs on it. He pray wen duh sun go up an wen duh sun go down. Dey ain none but ole Israel wut pray on a mat. He hab he own mat. Now ole man Israel he hab shahp feechuh an a long pointed beahd, an he wuz bery tall.*⁷⁰

[Old Israel prays a lot with a book he has which he hides. He takes a little mat, and he says his prayers on it. He prays when the sun goes up and when the sun goes down. There

⁶⁷ Conrad, "Reminiscences," 252.

⁶⁸ Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad*, 6.

⁶⁹ Couper, "Letter," 321.

⁷⁰ Drums and Shadows, 179.

isn't anyone but old Israel who prays on a mat. He has his own mat. Now, old man Israel has sharp features and a long, pointed beard, and he was very tall.]

The bearded man who prayed on a mat at specific times every day was undeniably a Muslim, so the book he used to read for worship was most likely a Quran. Given how complicated it was for slaves at the time to get access to a Quran, it is probable that Salih entrusted his own Quran upon his death to the slave on the plantation who he believed could make the most use of it.

Bilali also had an Arabic Quran that he would frequently read. While Bilali entrusted his second most revered document to someone for safekeeping, he kept the Quran by him at all times. So important was the Quran to him that his family decided to bury it with him when he died.⁷¹ Bilali's connection with Islam's sacred book was described by William Brown Hodgson shortly after Bilali died:

This Mohammedan, the trust-worthy servant of Mr. Spalding of Sapelo Island, Georgia, died recently, at an advanced age. He adhered to the creed and to the precepts of the Koran. He wrote Arabic, and read his sacred book with constancy and reverence. It is understood, that his numerous descendants, who are Christians, buried him with the Koran, resting on his breast.⁷²

Bilali's reverence for the Quran was thus recognized by Hodgson, who described Bilali as reading it "with constancy and reverence," and by his descendants, who decided to bury him with his copy of it.

Getting access to a Quran was not easy for slaves in the New World. Diouf quotes a French Ambassador who describes the lengths that Muslim slaves would go to in Rio to attain a copy of the Quran. "Slaves who are evidently very poor are willing to make the greatest sacrifices to acquire this volume. They go into debt to do so and sometimes take a year to pay off

⁷¹ William Brown Hodgson, *The Gospels, Written in the Negro Patois of English, with Arabic Characters*, (New York: Emory University, 1857), 8.

⁷² *Ibid.*

the bookseller.”⁷³ Unlike in Rio, the Muslim slaves on the Sea Islands did not have access to these booksellers. Given that slaves being transported were typically not allowed to carry any belongings, these slaves must have received their copies of the Quran after being brought to the Sea Islands. The only question is how.

One possible explanation of how Bilali and Salih each owned copies of the Quran is that the slaves personally wrote them from memory. It was not unheard of for educated Muslim slaves to write the entire Quran from memory.⁷⁴ Students in West Africa would be taught to memorize the Quran, so many memorized the entire text. Salih described the memorization process to his master. Couper writes, based on Salih’s account, that children in Salih’s hometown would “repeat from the Koran, and write on a board, which when filled, is washed off.”⁷⁵ They would right verses from the Quran on a board repeatedly to memorize them, washing the board off and starting over each time they filled the board.

While it is possible that Bilali and Salih wrote their own copies of the Quran, the more plausible explanation is that they managed to have copies of the Quran smuggled. Diouf theorizes that Africans were interconnected across “the Atlantic world.”⁷⁶ One method of this interconnectedness was through “black sailors” who worked on ships as either enslaved or free men. Given that Bilali and Salih were head drivers on their respective plantations, they would be in contact with any arriving ships. It is possible that an African on one of these ships smuggled copies of the Quran for them. Even if they wrote their own Qurans, the items needed to write them would have had to been smuggled. Nonetheless, it is less likely that they wrote their own

⁷³ Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 167.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 193.

⁷⁵ Couper, “Letter,” 324.

⁷⁶ Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 170.

Qurans given that their masters would not have allowed them to dedicate that much time into any such project.

By accepting the Quran, Salih and Bilali were refusing the Christianity of their masters. The view that the Muslim Quran is at odds with Christian Gospel is best shown through the words of William Brown Hodgson, the scholar to whom Hamilton Couper wrote his letter about Bilali. In the same chapter where Hodgson first published the letter that is now a vital source about Salih, Hodgson described the perceived tension between the two scriptures:

In Africa—in the land of the degraded negro—the Gospel now stands face to face with the Koran. There, the two confluent tides of religious instruction, from the West and the East, meet... Christianity has her stations; and she opposes by her Book, the further advance of the Moslem's Book.⁷⁷

Hodgson's was by no means a dissenting view among Christians at the time. Sources from the time are replete with the symbolism of the Quran being juxtaposed to the Bible. Sir Charles Lyell, a famous ecologist, used this symbolism when he visited St. Simon's Island and remarked that, while Salih ("Old Tom") was "a strict Mahometan," his children "have exchanged the Koran for the Bible."⁷⁸ The Quran was viewed as being in opposition with the Gospels, so accepting the Quran was a stern rejection of Christianity.

Salih and Bilali thus repudiated the religion of their masters by accepting the Islamic tenets of believing in the Prophet Muhammad and in the Quran. This expression of their freedom on the part of Bilali and Salih was no small endeavor, especially given how important converting slaves to Christianity was to slave masters at the time. While it is true that slave-owners were

⁷⁷ William B. Hodgson, *Notes on Northern Africa, the Sahara and Soudan, in Relation to the Ethnographic, Languages, History, Political and Social Condition, of the Nations of Those Countries*, (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1844), 59.

⁷⁸ Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, Vol. 1, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849), 266.

often wary of converting slaves to Christianity in the colonial period, this was not the case by the time Salih and Bilali were enslaved.⁷⁹ Diouf describes the importance of conversions in the Old South, saying that “it was essential that the new land become Christian as quickly as possible, because evangelization was a large part of the justification for the enslavement of the Africans.”⁸⁰

The desire to convert slaves to Christianity was just as strong on the Georgia Sea Islands as in the mainland. Slaves were being converted to Christianity on Sapelo Island and on St. Simon’s Island. Charles Lyell described this process as it took place on St. Simon’s Island. After lamenting that the “negroes” on the Island were “under a great disadvantage” in becoming civilized (because they had a greater ratio of Blacks to Whites than in mainland Georgia), Lyell expressed what he believes was the silver lining, saying that “every year many of them [are] becoming converts to Christianity.”⁸¹

Given this strong desire to convert slaves to Christianity on the Sea Islands, Salih and Bilali’s firmness in their convictions was all the more a rebuke of their masters’ way of life. The two slaves refused to adopt the Christian creed of their masters, and they held firm to the religion they were convinced of and were educated in while free men in Africa. Just as they asserted their own identity by adhering to the rituals of Islam, they rejected the identity of their masters by adopting the creed of Islam.

The Third Component: Ihsan

⁷⁹ Parish, *Slavery*, 84.

⁸⁰ Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 71.

⁸¹ Lyell, *Second Visit*, 269.

The third component of the Muslim religion, as explained in the famous tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, is the spiritual component. This component is defined by a state of mind, “that you worship God as though you see him, but if not to that level, then at least with the knowledge that he is seeing you.” This highest level, *ihsan*, which literally translates to “perfection,” is thus about internalizing one’s belief in God to the highest extent possible. This means being so firm in one’s conviction of God that one acts as though he sees God, or is at least always mindful that God sees him. By striving toward this perfection of their religion, Muslim slaves on the Georgia Sea Islands found a sense of consolation from the adversities of imposed servitude.

Striving toward the level of *ihsan* means a lot of contemplation on God’s perfection. One method which Muslims use to contemplate God is *dhikr*, or remembering God by repeating phrases in his praise. Muslims on the Sea Islands would perform *dhikr* the way they did in Africa, on a string of beads. Because each string had a specific number of beads, these Muslims could keep count of how many times they repeated a phrase while being able to contemplate on the phrases being said rather than on trying to count them. Katie Brown recalled being told that her great-grandfather Bilali would use this string of beads for his spiritual worship. She says that “Belali an he wife Phoebe pray on duh bead... Duh beads is on a long string.”⁸² Bilali’s wife, Phoebe, would thus join Bilali in worship, as would his daughters. Shad Hall, a great grandson of Bilali, recalled how his grandmother Esther (“Hestuh”), who was Bilali’s daughter, also prayed like Bilali:

Hestuh an all ub um sho pray on duh bead. Dey weah duh string uh beads on duh wais.
Sometime duh dtring on duh neck.⁸³

⁸² *Drums and Shadows*, 161.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 166.

[Esther and all of them would pray on beads. They wore the string of beads on the waist, and sometimes on the neck.]

Other Muslims on the plantation would also engage in these practices. Nero Jones recalled two people, “Uncle Calina an An Hannah,” who were “mighty puhticuluh bout prayin [mighty particular about praying]” and who would also “pray on duh bead.”⁸⁴ Spiritual remembrance of God through *dhikr* was thus a common practice among Muslims of the Georgia Sea Islands.

The exact formulations of *dhikr* used by the Muslims on the Islands is hard to determine from just the memories of the slaves’ descendants. *Dhikr* is typically practiced with common Arabic formulations which are prevalent among Muslims. When these Arabic phrases are preserved over time by non-native speakers of Arabic, corruptions will abound. Couper describes the difficulty he had in transcribing foreign phrases, even though he wrote his letter based on direct conversations with Salih. He writes that “I will put down all names as nearly in accordance with [Salih’s] pronunciation, as the difficulty seizing upon, and expressing the peculiarities of a foreign language, will admit of.”⁸⁵ Because the people who shared their memories of the Arabic formulations of *dhikr* were non-Arabic speakers who were sharing foreign phrases they heard long ago to interviewers who were also non-Arabic speakers, some of the formulations shared in these memories are hard to decipher.

Katie Brown recalled three Arabic phrases she was told Bilali would repeat over his beads. Her interviewers recorded them as “Belambi, Hakabara, Mahamadu.”⁸⁶ Phoebe, Bilali’s wife, would meanwhile say “Ameen, Ameen.”⁸⁷ The term “*Ameen*” has been perfectly preserved over this period of time. It is a common Arabic phrase which translates to “Amen.” While Billai

⁸⁴ *Drums and Shadows*, 165.

⁸⁵ Couper, “Letter,” 321.

⁸⁶ *Drums and Shadows*, 161.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 161.

would say prayers out loud, his wife would repeat “Amen, Amen.” Mahamadu is also clearly preserved, as it represents the name of the Prophet Muhammad. Bilali would constantly send blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad during his *dhikr*, which further confirms his reverence for the Prophet. The term *Hakabara* is harder to decipher, though it is most likely meant to be *Allahu Akbar*, one of the most common formulations of *dhikr*, which translates to “God is great.” Nero Jones recalled similar phrases used by two other Muslims on the plantation, Calina and Hannah. This time, Calina would say ‘Amen’ (recalled as “*Ameela*”) while his wife Hannah would say ‘God is Great’ (recalled as “*Hakabara*”).⁸⁸ *Belambi* is the hardest of these phrases to decipher, as it does not readily correspond with any common Arabic phrase.

While these memories show us what descendants of Bilali remembered about his spiritual practices, Bilali’s manuscript itself is the most accurate source about the phrases of *dhikr* Bilali used to repeat. This source, which Bilali himself wrote directly in the Arabic language, contains recommendations of how to perform *dhikr*. For instance, he recommends that one should say the following phrases thirty three times each when waiting for the Morning Prayer. One should say “Praise be to Allah” (*Subhan Allah*), “Glory be to Allah” (*Alhamdu Lillah*), and “Allah is Great” (*Allahu Akbar*).⁸⁹ This series of *dhikr* has been taught by the Prophet Muhammad himself, and is prevalent to this today. Other common formulations of *dhikr*, including the *shahadah*, are taught by Bilali to be repeated throughout the calls to prayer and the prayer itself.

To Bilali, the most dynamic time for *dhikr* was after the early Morning Prayer. This period right before sunrise was the time that Bilali could dedicate to remembrance of his Lord. It was a quiet time when Bilali’s mind was empty and when he did not have to worry about his

⁸⁸ *Drums and Shadows*, 165.

⁸⁹ Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad*, 7.

duties as a slave on the plantation. Bilali could focus his mind completely on contemplating and glorifying God during this time. He writes,

Only the true servants of Allah make prayer and give blessings upon the Prophet. Say your prayers, and make *tasbih* a long time. Make as much supplication as you can. It is disliked to sleep after the prayer of morning, and it is disliked to sit and talk after the prayer of morning except it be in the remembrance of Allah.⁹⁰

Bilali looked down upon wasting this time between the Morning Prayer and sunrise in sleeping and in talking. He recommended to use it all in the “remembrance of Allah,” and he lists three spiritual practices to occupy this time with. The first is sending prayers and blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad, the second is making *tasbih* (used here synonymously to *dhikr*), and the third is supplicating to God, or asking of Him.

Through these practices, Bilali had a daily spiritual routine to contemplate on God and on the temporality of life on Earth. By contemplating God, his sights was set on what he viewed to be the eternal life in the afterlife, the time when Muslim tradition states that believers can see the God they have been worshipping. In striving toward the perfection of his religion, Bilali was striving to be at the level where it would be as though he were seeing God, and his heart was focused on the time when he would actually see him. As such, Bilali could temporarily set his mind off of this world and off of the hardships of being a slave, and he could take comfort in his conviction that this will one day be over, and that, when the time comes, he would join his family at in an eternity of bliss.

⁹⁰ Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad*, 8.

Conclusion

For as much as Salih and Bilali's religion entailed a repudiation of the world set up for them by the slave society, their religion, ironically, also caused them to gain a modicum of respect by that very society. Rather than forcing their slaves to adopt Christianity, Bilali and Salih's masters allowed them to continue practicing Islam. This oddity could be explained by two main factors. Firstly, their masters realized that the two slaves could be valuable assets to their plantations. They noticed that their slaves were respected on the plantations and they saw natural leadership skills in their slaves, so they decided to make them slave drivers on the plantation. Secondly, and more significantly, Salih and Bilali contradicted their moral justifications of slavery. When society stereotyped Africans being dirty, irreligious, and ignorant people who needed to be civilized by Christianity, Salih and Bilali belied all those stereotypes and contradicted them through their own religion.

Because Bilali and Salih were seen by their masters as natural leaders, they were instilled as drivers on their respective plantations. Even though slave drivers were given a smidgeon of authority on the plantations, they were still slaves just like the other slaves on the plantation.

William Van Deburg, in his crucial study of slave drivers, describe them as such:

[Slave drivers] had one major quality in common—each was the “human property” of a white master. As such, the slave supervisors experienced most of the deprecation felt by their field hand brothers. Drivers did not escape exploitation. They could be demoted, sold, or whipped. Their families lived under a constant threat of separation or brutalization. The minor “perquisites of office” obtained by the drivers could in no way compensate for the day-to-day experience of living as chattel slaves in a professedly liberty-loving republic.⁹¹

⁹¹ William L. Van Deburg, *The Slave Drivers: Black Agricultural Labor Supervisors in the Antebellum South*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc, 1979), 115.

Slave drivers were, first and foremost, slaves. They lived through all of the hardships that other slaves lived through. They faced the same problems. They had to answer to the master just like any other slave. Even if Bilali and Salih were made drivers, they were, in the end of the day, still slaves.

As slaves, Bilali and Salih refused to conform to any of the stereotypes society used to justify the need of slavery as a way to spread Christianity. Charles Lyell, in discussing the plantation on St. Simon's Island (where Salih was a slave), shared his views regarding these stereotypes

A little reflection will satisfy the reader how much the education of a race which starts originally from so low a stage of intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual development, as the African negro, must depend not on learning to read and write, but on the amount of familiar intercourse which they enjoy with individuals of a more advanced race.⁹² These Africans were thus stereotyped as deficient in every way, and Lyell's answer was not to teach them "to read and write," but to allow them to mingle with civilized people "of a more advanced race." Neither Bilali nor Salih needed to mingle with "a more advanced race" to refute these stereotypes of Africans. They had all the respect they needed because of their religion, a religion they brought with them from Africa.

Slaves were stereotyped as being dirty by culture, and having to be taught cleanliness by civilized whites. Charles Lyell articulated this stereotype when he lauded that "each generation [of slaves] is acquiring habits of greater cleanliness."⁹³ These Muslims, whose religion taught them to wash up at least five times a day for prayers, so thoroughly contradicted this stereotype that their slave masters thought that they may be too meticulous in their washing habits. Thomas

⁹² Lyell, *Second Visit*, 268-269.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 269.

Spalding, Bilali's master, exclaimed that "no Mahometan with his seven daily ablutions, is a greater enemy to dirt" than Bilali."⁹⁴

Slaves were stereotyped as uneducated, but the religious education of these slaves made them be seen as the exact opposite to their masters. Hamilton Couper had to acknowledge that Salih "reads Arabic, and has a Koran... in that language."⁹⁵ In fact, Couper respected Salih's knowledge of Africa so much that he would have lengthy "conversations" with Salih and send the information he learned to William Brown Hodgson, the leading scholar of that region at the time. Hodgson was so impressed with Salih's knowledge of the region that he read its contents to "the Ethnographic Society of New-York" and subsequently published the letter.⁹⁶ Even though Salih was captured at 12 and was removed from Africa at 14, his memories of the continent were still respected, recorded, and studied. Much of these memories were a result of him traveling as a child to educational centers in an effort to learn his Islamic faith.

Slaves were stereotyped as superstitious. While Salih and Bilali were seen as infidels who were of the wrong faith, even their masters acknowledged certain parallels between the two religions and did not believe Muslims to be "superstitious." Couper writes that Salih "is singularly exempt from all feeling of superstition; and holds in great contempt, the African belief in fetishes and evil spirits."⁹⁷ Slaves were also stereotyped as morally corrupt, but Salih was praised for his "veracity and honesty."⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Quoted in Austin, *Sourcebook*, 277.

⁹⁵ Couper, "Letter," 321.

⁹⁶ Published in William B. Hodgson, *Notes on Northern Africa, the Sahara and Soudan, in Relation to the Ethnographic, Languages, History, Political and Social Condition, of the Nations of Those Countries*, (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1844), 68-75.

⁹⁷ Couper, "Letter," 321.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Then there were those stereotypes which these slaves defied not an account of their religion, but by their natural talent. Slaves were stereotyped as being intellectually deficient. Salih was seen by his master as anything but. Couper was rather flattering of his slave's mental capacities. Salih, Couper says, "has quickness of apprehension, strong powers of combination and calculation, a sound judgement, a singularly tenacious memory, and what is more rare in a slave, the faculty of forethought."⁹⁹ Even though Couper maintained his racist stereotype of slaves not having, for instance, "forethought," Couper thought Salih to be an exception.

Bilali and Salih's religious education and practice thus brought them a sense of dignity which was even acknowledged, in some minimal form, by the slave society which surrounded them. They called into question the very stereotypes which served as the justifications for forced servitude. They roundly repudiated the notion that they needed to be civilized by being forced to convert to Christianity. Their masters, in turn, responded by acquiescing to their religious practice and by instilling them as slave drivers. The position might have been less labor-intensive than other positions on the plantation, but, in the end of the day, they were still slaves on the plantation. They faced the same hardships that all slaves faced. This being said, they found liberation in the religious tradition they were educated in while in Africa. That tradition provided Bilali and Salih the ability to create their own identity, to reject the identity of masters, and to discover a source of hope.

⁹⁹ Couper, "Letter," 321.

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