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Portrait of Yarrow Mamout (Muhammad Yaro) © Charles Willson Peale, Public Domain
Dive into the second issue of Bouctou which includes six articles with connecting threads to Islam, Muslims and Arabic. In Early West African Muslims in the U.S. and Mini-Bios of Enslaved Muslims, historian Sylviane Diouf notes the deep roots of Islam in Africa beginning in the 8th century and highlights literate West African Muslims who were kidnapped and enslaved in the U.S. Observers of the day wrote about these enslaved Muslims, noting their devotion to Islam and that some were literate in Arabic. Slaveholders, journalists, scholars, diplomats, writers, priests, and missionaries wrote about them. We also find their traces in runaway notices, newspaper articles, the Muslims' own manuscripts, and their descendants' memories. Diouf provides samples of Arabic writings by enslaved Muslims Ayuba Diallo, Omar ibn Said, Bilali Muhammad and others. We learned in the first issue of Bouctou that Timbuktu, Mali was the center of Islam and academic study in West Africa. In Timbuctoo, New Jersey: Rewriting Black History, Guy Weston introduces the New Jersey settlement founded in 1826 by formerly enslaved Africans. Weston, a descendent of one of the early settlers, describes how he discovered his Timbuctoo heritage and his transformation into an amateur genealogist. The article also highlights archaeological evidence of Timbuctoo and teach local young people about the past. Weston is particularly excited about the curriculum. It’s important for young people in the area to learn about Timbuctoo, to connect to a history they can touch and feel.

In Understanding Ajami: the Deep Roots of Islam and Arabic in Africa, Dr. Fallou Ngom of Boston University introduces us to Ajami, a writing system that modifies and enriches the Arabic script to write local languages, just as the Latin script has been modified to write French, Spanish, and German. Languages that currently utilize Ajami include Wolof, Hausa, Mandinka, Fula and more. Dr. Ngom’s research invites us to look closely at the writings of Muslims in West Africa and even Muslims enslaved in the U.S. for evidence of Ajami. Many scholars, he explains, have treated Ajami documents as undecipherable or poorly written Arabic because they simply don’t have the skills to decode the writing. At Boston University, Ngom and his team have amassed over 30,000 pages of Ajami documents in about ten languages. The documents cover a wide variety of topics, work...
songs, poems and prose text, theology, astrology, politics and more.

Bouctou’s Student Corner concludes the issue with my article, Ajami an Article for Students and a lesson plan for teachers by Dr. Elsa Wiehe, What is Ajami? Where is it Used? How can I write with it? Wiehe’s lesson provides a video that demonstrates how to write in Wolof Ajami.

We invite you to explore this issue and share it with your colleagues and students.

Brenda Randolph
Outreach Co-Director
Center for African Studies
Howard University

Hawoye Fassoukoye, a teacher from Mali and Cheikh Hammou, calligrapher and foremost Timbuktu manuscript expert, visited Westampton, NJ in 2017. Courtesy of Brenda Randolph.
Early West African Muslims in the United States

Over five hundred years ago African Muslims, deported through the transatlantic slave trade, landed in the Americas. By then, several West African populations had been practicing Islam for half a millennium. Familiar since the 8th century, the religion had taken roots in the first decades of 1000 with the founding of the Islamic state of Tekrur in northern Senegal. Islam then spread to Gambia, Mali, Guinea, and parts of Sierra Leone, Ghana, Benin, and Nigeria. Teachers, students, clerics, traders, pilgrims, musicians, soldiers, farmers, and herders from these areas were among the hundreds of thousands of Muslim men, women, and children who spent the rest of their lives enslaved in the Western Hemisphere. Though they were a minority among the enslaved population, Muslims were acknowledged like no other African community. Slaveholders, journalists, scholars, diplomats, writers, priests, and missionaries wrote about them. We also find their traces in runaway notices, newspaper articles, the Muslims' own manuscripts, and their descendants' memories.

Muslims were noticed because despite being enslaved and living in Christian lands, they continued, as best they could, to practice their religion, including its most visible aspects. All Muslims are required to observe the Five Pillars of Islam: the profession of faith or shahada (the belief that "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God"); prayer (five times a day); charity to people in need; fasting during Ramadan; and the pilgrimage to Mecca if they are able. In addition, they must abstain from alcohol and pork, and kill the animals they eat the halal way, by letting them bleed. Muslims should also be modestly clothed and wear headgear such as skullcaps, turbans, headwraps or veils.

Evidently, those were extremely difficult rules for enslaved people to follow since they had no say as to
their activities, schedules, food, and clothes. Still, numerous examples of Muslims' continued adherence to their religion were recorded throughout the Americas.

It is probable that most Muslims prayed in secret, but some did it in public. Charles Ball, enslaved in Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia, wrote in his 1837 autobiography about a man who prayed aloud five times a day in a language no one understood. He added, "I knew several, who must have been, from what I have since learned, Mohamadans; though at that time, I had never learned of the religion of Mohamed" (Ball, 165-167).

Berkeley University professor Joseph LeConte, who grew up on a Georgia plantation, recalled how Philip, who was "a Mohammedan … greatly interested us by going through all the prayers and prostrations of his native country" (LeConte, 29). Similarly, Charles Spalding Wylly mentioned that among his grandfather's enslaved workforce were "devout Mussulmans, who prayed to Allah morning, noon and evening" (Wylly, 52).

In the 1930s, Muslims' descendants in Georgia described how their relatives prayed and they even remembered some of the Arabic words they used. They also recalled with fondness the rice cakes their grandmothers gave to the children. There was a word for it: saraka. Rice cakes are the charity

women on Fridays and holidays. The cake is not called saraka, but the act of giving is a sadaq or saraka, a freewill offering.
The Muslims who could do so distinguished themselves by the way they dressed. In Georgia Bilali Muhammad from the Islamic state of Futa Jallon in Guinea always wore a cap that resembled a Turkish fez recounted a woman who met him around 1860 (Conrad, 252). Other men wore white turbans. One man kept a lot of white cloth and hung them to dry around the stable. Some women sported veils as did Katie Brown's grandmother; she wore a white cloth over her head, and it hung loose over her shoulders (Savannah Unit, 162-181).

Muslims also generated much curiosity because of their literacy, which distinguished them from the numerous non-literate Black as well as White people. Theodore Dwight, the secretary of the American Ethnological Society, observed in 1864, that several Muslims had been known at different periods and in different parts of the country to be highly literate "but, unfortunately, no full account of any of them has ever been published. The writer has made many efforts to remedy this defect, and has obtained some information from a few individuals. But there are insuperable difficulties in the way in slave countries, arising from the jealousy of masters, and other causes" (Dwight, 323).

Some enslaved Muslims owned Qur'ans, the Islamic holy book. Omar ibn Said had a Bible in Arabic, procured with the help of Francis Scott Key, author of the national anthem, but the secretary of the American Colonization Society reported in 1837 that Omar, then 74, had retained a devoted attachment to the faith of his fathers and deemed a copy of the Qur'an in Arabic (which language he reads and writes with facility) his richest treasure (Secretary's Report, 203).

In Georgia, Salih Bilali, had a Qur'an (Hodgson, 69) And Bilali Muhammad, who kept all the plantation Acts in Arabic, was buried with his Qur'an and praying sheepskin mentioned his owner's grandson (Willy, 52). We don't know for sure how these men acquired Qur'ans in remote islands, but it is possible they wrote them themselves, as did Ayuba Suleyman Diallo and other Muslims enslaved in the Americas. Those who could write Qur'ans could have given copies to their coreligionists who, like Salih Bilali, could read Arabic but not write it.

While they were highly noticed during slavery, Muslims were ignored thereafter. The assumption that they converted to Christianity and disappeared as Muslims was contradicted by the abundance of sources depicting them as profoundly attached to their faith. However, they were not able to pass on their religion to the next generations. Yet their legacy, often hidden, endures. In the Caribbean and South America,
numerous manifestations of Islamic practices and Arabic vocabulary survive in the cultures and religions of several countries. Musicologists and historians have shown that in the United States traditional African American music, including the holler—which gave birth to the blues—are directly linked to the Muslims (Diouf, Renovation). In Georgia and South Carolina, the Gullah/Geechee language contains many words in Arabic or of Islamic origin.

Today, the African Muslims’ presence in the Americas is being rediscovered, and their history and impact explored.

**SOURCES**


Savannah Unit, Georgia Writers’ Project, WPA. Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1940.


Wylly, Charles S. Pading, The Seed that was Sown in the Colony of Georgia. New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1910.

Mini-Bios of Enslaved Muslims

Sambo, a Muslim, was described as writing "the Arabic language" in this 1805 South Carolina runaway ad. Literacy in Arabic is important in Islam, because believers rely on the Qur'an to understand the religion, to guide them in their daily life, to provide them with the right prayers on legal matters and proper social behavior.

governor of Senegal, remarked in 1828 there can read and write the Arabic than we would
who spent thirty years enslaved in the United States, stated he had a few girls in his school

Ayuba Suleyman Diallo was born in 1700 in Bundu, an Islamic state in eastern Senegal. A teacher and a trader, he was kidnapped and sold in Gambia in 1731. He landed in Maryland where he wrote a letter to his father and gave it to a slave dealer with instructions to remit it to the captain of the ship that had brought him to Annapolis. The letter was given in London to James Oglethorpe, the future founder of Georgia, who posted a bond for Diallo's release. The young man sailed to London where he was freed and met the royal family. Before returning to Senegal in 1734, he wrote three copies of the Qur'an from memory. This copy was sold at auction in 2013 to an art foundation in Beirut, Lebanon.

When Diallo had his portrait made in London in 1733, it was of extreme importance to him to be immortalized as his true self. He insisted on being represented in his "country dress," which he had to describe to the painter. His turban, his "boubou" or robe, and the leather pouch he is wearing are the typical dress of West African Muslim men. The following year, Diallo returned to Bundu where he died in 1774. The letter to his father, another one he wrote while a captive in Gambia, and several letters he sent from Senegal to various people in London are held at the British Library. This portrait was sold to Qatar Museum Authority for over $1 million in 2009.


Between 1753 and 1756 a Muslim lost this medal inscribed in Arabic La ilaha illa Allah, "there is no God but God", the shahada. It was discovered in 2009 during the archaeological excavation of Fort Shirley in Huntington County, in central Pennsylvania. An analysis of the copper suggests that it came from Cornwall. Copper was one of the main articles of the British transatlantic slave trade. If this is indeed the origin of the medal, then copper that had been used to buy captives was transformed into an Islamic talisman worn by a man who in turn became a victim of the slave trade.


Bilali Muhammad was born in Timbo, in Futa Jallon. He was first enslaved in the Bahamas. In 1801, along with his wife and several children he was bought by Thomas Spalding and sent to Sapelo Island, Georgia, where the family continued to openly practice Islam. Bilali wrote a 13-page text taken from a legal work written by Ibn Abu Zayd al Qairawani in the tenth century. This work is part of the curriculum of higher studies in West African Qur'anic schools. The excerpts Bilali wrote include the title page, parts of the introduction and of chapters dealing with ablutions and the call to prayer.

Muslims were among the numerous men and women who ran away. Like many Africans did within days or weeks of their arrival, Ayuba Suleyman Diallo, Ibrahima Abd al-Rahman, and Omar ibn Said, all tried to recover their freedom. Because most Africans were given European names, we don't know how many runaways were Muslims, but some, like Fatima, had retained their original names. The name Fatima appears in several runaway ads as well as in lists of enslaved people. It is a common name among Muslims; Fatima was a daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.


In 1807, two Muslims recently arrived—most likely in Charleston—ran away and were captured in Kentucky. They escaped to Tennessee where they were jailed and escaped twice more. While in custody they wrote at least two texts in Arabic. They were sent to President Jefferson. He made inquiries as to the men's whereabouts, but they disappeared before he could intervene. This is the last surah of the Quran, an-Nas, “Mankind,” which speaks of refuge with Allah from evil, a perfect analogy to their situation.


Mamadou Yarrow, known in the United States as Yarrow Mamout, born around 1736 in Futa Jallon was enslaved in 1752 as a teenager in Maryland. After 44 years he was freed in 1796, and four years later bought a house in Washington D.C. Throughout his long life, he abstained from pork and alcohol. Charles Willson Peale, who made his portrait in 1819, stated he professes to be a Mahometan, and is often seen & heard in the streets singing praises to God and conversing with him. As a Muslim, he covered his head and, in this portrait, wore the same kind of hat as Omar ibn Said did in one photograph. Mamout died in 1823.

Ibrahima abd al-Rahman, born around 1762 in Timbo, was a son of the ruler of Futa Jallon. As a teenager, he studied in Jenne and Timbuktu. Upon his return to Timbo, Ibrahima became a military commander. In 1788, he was captured in war and taken to Natchez, Mississippi. A letter he wrote in Arabic in 1826 was sent to an American diplomat in Morocco who brought it to the court of sultan Abd al-Rahman II. The sultan asked for Ibrahima’s release. President John Quincy Adams wrote about the matter in his diary on July 10, 1827.

Ibrahima was freed and so was his wife, but not their children and grandchildren. Their owner demanded the equivalent of over $95,000 today to free some of them. Ibrahima raised the equivalent of $0,000 among Northern abolitionists and wrote at least two copies of al-Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Qur’an. In 1829, he migrated with his wife to Liberia and sent a letter to relatives in Guinea asking for help in freeing the rest of his family. They sent a caravan with $0,000 in gold (over $10,000 in today's currency) but Ibrahima died before the men arrived and they turned back. Eight relatives were freed with the money he had raised in the North and they too left for Monrovia. Another six descendants remained enslaved.

Omar ibn Said was born around 1770 in a learned and wealthy family in the Islamic state of Futa Toro in northern Senegal. He studied for many years and became a teacher and later a trader. In 1807, the thirty-seven-year-old erudite landed in Charleston after a six-week ordeal on a slave ship. After he ran away from his second owner, he was captured in North Carolina and thrown in jail. With pieces of charcoal, he wrote in Arabic on the walls of his cell, which attracted much attention. He was sold to politician and planter Major General James Owen, brother of one of North Carolina's governors. In his three known portraits, like this c. 1850 ambrotype, Omar's head is covered by cloth or a hat. In an 1859 article he is also described as wearing a white turban.
Omar ibn Said wrote several manuscripts and fourteen have been found. Some writings are excerpts from the Qur'an and he also quoted from a 12th-century Andalusian erudite and a 16th-century Egyptian poem. In his 1831 autobiography in Arabic he subtly denounced his enslavement with the help of surah al-mulk which states owner's supremacy.

His last known manuscript, in 1857, was the surah an-Nasr known as The Victory. This was the last surah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Omar died in 1863 at 93. He was so well known that his obituary was published in North Carolina newspapers. His autobiography is held at the Library of Congress.


Arzuma (from Al Jumaa, Friday in Arabic) was a Muslim from northern Benin or Northern Nigeria. We do not know how she became a captive, but in 1860 she was taken to the port city of Ouidah in Benin where she was bought by slave ship captain William Foster along with 109 men, women and children—the youngest was 2 years old. They were secretly taken to Mobile, Alabama on the Clotilda 52 years after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The organizer and financier of the expedition was the wealthy slaveholder, Timothy Meaher. After emancipation several Africans, including Arzuma founded their own town, African Town. Arzuma, probably the last enslaved African Muslim woman in the US, died in the late 1910s. African Town, now called Africatown still exists and some of the Africans’ descendants live there. In 2019, the wreck of the Clotilda was discovered.

To learn more about this topic, see the book by this article’s author, Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*, published by New York University Press, 2013, which was named with NYU Press. First published in 1998, *Servants of Allah* is a seminal work on the collective experience of African Muslims enslaved in the Americas.

Sylviane A. Diouf is an award-winning historian of the African Diaspora. Her other books received the 2007 Wesley-Logan Prize of the American Historical Association, the 2009 Sulby Award of the Alabama Historical Association for the 2008 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. A recipient of the Rosa Parks Award, the Dr. Betty Shabaz Achievement Award, and the Pen and Brush Achievement Award, Diouf is a Curator at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library.
Guy Weston is a descendant of early settlers of Timbuctoo, NJ, a 19th century African American community.

Guy first learned about Timbuctoo when he was thirteen from his cousin Lillian Giles Gardner, the guardian of the family homestead. Located in southern New Jersey, Timbuctoo is a part of Westampton Township in Burlington County about 20 miles from Philadelphia.

Guy’s great grandmother, Alsetta Giles was born in Timbuctoo in 1902. His mother, Mary Giles Weston,
visited there when she was a child, frequently on Decoration Day (now Memorial Day) to visit family’s graves. The Giles’ family home was gone long before Guy was born in 1959. Guy was not impressed when he first saw Timbuctoo in 1975. “The grass on our 1.25 acre lot was waist high. The adjacent lot had a dilapidated old house with an abandoned 1962 Ford Galaxy next to it.” Still over the years, the memory of Timbuctoo stayed with Guy. From time to time, he would visit the family lot, stare into the pasture and wonder what it must have been like to grow up there.

Around 1984, Cousin Lillian surprised Guy and his mother with a gift, the deeds and other papers for the family homestead. As Guy and his mother studied the papers, they discovered that John Bruer, Guy’s fourth and Mary’s third great grandfather had purchased the one acre plot in Timbuctoo in 1829, just three years after the founding of the community. Guy had no idea his family’s roots were so deep. The bits of papers intrigued him, luring him into the past, “I quickly became an amateur genealogist and learned all kinds of details about my ancestor’s lives, I was absolutely fascinated.”

Mary Weston looks over the family records in a 133-year-old Bible in Timbuctoo, Westampton, New Jersey, on Feb. 3, 2015. Photo: Chris Fascenelli
In 1992 Guy and his mother built a house on the homestead. "I liked to sit under a 130-year-old tree in our yard and contemplate what life must have been like during the latter years of the 19th century, when that very tree provided shade to my great great grandfather and his children on hot summer days. For this experience, I will be forever indebted to my cousin Lillian, who gave me a tangible parcel of history and an indelible impression of the meaning of family."

In 1826, David Parker, Ezekiel Parker, Wardell Parker and Hezekiah Hall, all formerly enslaved African American men from Maryland, purchased land in Burlington County from a Quaker businessman living nearby. Four years later, the area had a name. "Timbuctoo" first appeared on a local deed in 1830. Why was the name "Timbuctoo" chosen? Probably because of the reputation of Timbuktu, Mali as a medieval center of gold and scholarship. Nineteenth century U.S. newspapers frequently published stories about expeditions to West Timbuktu. In 1828, many newspapers featured stories about Abdul Rahman, the Prince of Timbuctoo. "Emancipated by the order of President John Quincy Adams after 40 years of servitude, Rahman spoke in several U.S. cities seeking funds to emancipate his children and grandchildren. His appearances generated excitement for

By 1860 the population of Timbuctoo was about 125. The village was a "station" on the Greenwich line of the Underground Railroad. Bounty hunters sometimes threatened Timbuctoo, trying to capture runaways. According to the New Jersey Mirror, on December 6, 1860 residents of Timbuctoo joined forces and successfully prevented kidnappers from re-enslaving Perry Simmons, a resident living free in Timbuctoo for 10 to 12 years.
and armed with every conceivable weapon, of strife, yelling and screaming at the top of their voices. The kidnappers hearing the unearthly noise, turned their eyes in the direction from whence it proceeded, and saw the negroes rapidly approaching, looking more infuriated and determined than a battalion of Zouaves, making a charge. They once concluded that discretion was the better part of valor" and hastily retreating to the carriages left the scene. This midnight attack upon the Pine Swamp Fortress will long be remembered. 

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Raids like the one at Timbuctoo's Pine Swamp were perfectly legal in New Jersey. Unlike most northern states, New Jersey supported the Fugitive Slave Acts which allowed for the capture and return of runaway enslaved people. Indeed, enslavement itself was not abolished in New Jersey until 10 months after the Civil War ended on April 9, 1865. New Jersey was the only northern state that refused to pass the 13th Amendment which freed enslaved African Americans. In northern New Jersey where profits from slavery were significant, there was strong resistance to ending slavery. About 75% of enslaved people were found in six northern New Jersey counties. These counties were economically developed and used the labor of enslaved people to build wealth. Some northerners felt ending southern slavery would ruin their businesses. Other worried free African Americans would come North and compete with them for jobs.

7

In southern New Jersey, Quakers were leaders in efforts to end enslavement. In the early days of America, many Quakers bought and sold African Americans but over time opinions changed. In 1775. Quakers officially petitioned the New Jersey legislature to abolish enslavement. Ninety years would pass before the New Jersey legislature agreed to do so.

TIMBUCTOO DISCOVERY PROJECT

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the population of Timbuctoo began to decline as residents left to find steady employment in nearby cities. By the 1950s, tombstones were the only above ground evidence of Timbuctoo. Old houses had collapsed, and new homes were built over the old homesteads. Many incoming residents had no knowledge of Timbuctoo's historic past.
In 1999, Mary Giles Weston moved into the house she and her son Guy built. She quickly became engaged with efforts to preserve Timbuctoo. “I’ve always had an interest in how people came to be where they are,” she said. Determined to expand awareness of Timbuctoo, in 2006 she persuaded the Westampton Township Historical Society to put up a historical marker for Timbuctoo.

Mary Weston wasn’t the only one interested in making Timbuctoo a historic site. Archeologist David Orr and his colleagues had recognized the importance of Timbuctoo in the 1980s. However, excavations were not possible until 2009 when Westampton Township acquired four of the roughly fifty acres of Timbuctoo. The 2009 dig was planned in collaboration with The Timbuctoo Discovery Project, an advisory committee chaired by Mary Weston. This community archeology project brought together archeologists, historians, community members, descendants, local politicians and other stakeholders.

The Timbuctoo Discovery Project excavated over 15,400 artifacts, including jars for medicines and cosmetics, pieces of shoes, dinner plates and a tiny cast iron buffalo that may have been a child’s bank. Mary Weston and her young grandchildren were part of the excavation team, digging, washing, cleaning and bagging artifacts. “It brings a sense of connection that nothing else could bring…. These wonderful artifacts being unearthed prove we did exist here very, very early. We did live here. Just the connection with ancestors from the early 1800s brings a rush of joy…. a greater sense of connection with who I am.”

More work needs to be done at the Timbuctoo site. Archeologists believe at least eighteen Timbuctoo homes and a church are buried under mounds of dirt in the area around the excavation site. Ground penetrating radar has identified at least 100 additional unmarked graves in the cemetery of the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church. In 2019 the Timbuctoo Historical Society was founded to expand preservation work. Projects include excavations, a film documentary and getting Timbuctoo on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places (official lists of the nation’s historic places worthy of preservation).

TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT TIMBUCTOO

In 2016, Westampton Middle School social studies teacher Joanne Donnelly learned about Timbuctoo at a workshop for history teachers at Rutgers University. Anxious to bring this information to her students, she and co-teachers Jennifer Perry, Cristina Burrows, Neshea Thomas and Cheryl Alspach developed a curriculum on Timbuctoo. Guy Weston is excited about the curriculum. “It’s important for young people in the area to learn about Timbuctoo, to connect to a...”
history they can touch and feel… to learn diverse stories from the past. The history of Timbuctoo gives you a whole new sense of what Burlington County was like 150 years ago. It’s a

are always seen as having been in shackles then.” Janet Curran of the Westampton Historical Society agrees with Weston that Timbuctoo holds a special place in US history: “Timbuctoo was freedom to people. It’s where freedom began.”

1 Henderson, 140
2 Henderson, 141
3 Henderson, 141
4 Alford, 138-139
5 New Jersey Mirror, 1855
6 New Jersey Mirror, 1860
7 Wright, 28, 36
8 Riordan, n.p.
9 Barton, 83
11 Personal Interview
12 Riordan, n.p.


Excitement at Timbuctoo, The Battle


Riordan, Kevin. Resident determined to revive historic Timbuctoo neighborhood.” Courierpostonline.com Timbuctoo Historical Society Accessed 1/19/2022.


INTERVIEW

Timbuctoo Civil War Memorial plaque. Courtesy of Guy Weston.
In 2017 Westhampton Middle School participated in a virtual student exchange with students in Bamako, Mali coordinated by Westhampton’s Joann Donnelly and Malian teacher Hawoye Fassoukoeye who grew up in Timbuktu, Mali. The program was facilitated by professors Renee Larrier and Carolyn Brown of Rutgers University’s Center for African Studies as a part of Global Timbuktu: Meanings and Narratives of Resistance in Africa and the Americas. This initiative focused on the place of Timbuktu, Mali in the history, culture, and imagination of Africa and its global diaspora. A two-day symposium March 25-26, 2017 brought together a range of specialists, including international Islamic scholars working to preserve the scholarly heritage and rich libraries of Timbuktu; archeologists engaged in excavation projects in Mali, New York, and New Jersey; and historians of African and African American history.
Most Americans don't realize the deep roots of Islam and Arabic in Africa. Can you speak to this?

Dr. Fallou Ngom, Professor of Anthropology and former Director of the African Studies Center at Boston University, specializes in the intellectual written histories of Africa, adaptations of Islam in Africa, and Ajami literature in Africa and the best book in African studies.

BOUCTOU:   

DR. NGOM:  

When the early followers of Prophet Muhammad were persecuted during the first Hijra in 615 CE (the migration from Mecca to Medina), they sought refuge in Africa, specifically in Ethiopia. That was the first emigration of Muslims as refugees, and they were saved by a Christian king of Ethiopia. When Prophet Muhammad began preaching about monotheism (that there is only one God), he continued the message of the Abrahamic tradition, but he was rejected by his community. The first small group of people who followed Muhammad became the target of persecution. Muhammad looked around to find a refuge and chose Ethiopia because he knew there was a good Christian King Najash who would be fair and welcoming. They stayed there until the situation improved and he took care of them. In fact, some of them never left. The Prophet Muhammad did not go to Ethiopia; he stayed back while the persecution continued. That led him to embark on what is often called the second Hijra in 622, when
the Prophet Muhammad and his followers fled to Medina. That’s the year the Muslim calendar begins. One thing to emphasize is that not only did Africa help and support Islam in its early and difficult days, but it was a Christian king who saved Islam. So, it is important to remind people that it was in fact Christianity that saved Islam in its early days.

BOUCTOU:

We know that Arabic is the primary language of Islam, but what is Ajami and how is Ajami connected to Islam?

DR. NGOM:

Just as Latin served as the language of the church, Arabic also served as the language of Muslim Africa. Arabic is the glue that tied all the Muslims together. Scholars in Africa were educated in classical Arabic. They produced documents that they exchanged with their peers in other parts of the Islamic world. But Arabic is not the language of the masses. So if the same scholar wants to communicate with the Mandinka, the Wolof, and the Hausa, they are going to have to use the local language. That’s where Ajami comes in.

Ajami is nothing but the modification and enrichment of the Arabic script to write local languages, just as the Latin script has been modified to write French, Spanish, and German. Ajami has enriched the Arabic script in order to render vowels and consonants in the languages of West Africa. Now the challenge that many scholars face is that when you look at an Ajami text and an Arabic text, you might think they are all Arabic because they look alike. When you have two texts written in Latin script, one in German and one in French, if you don’t speak either language, you might think the two texts are in the same language. So many scholars have seen Ajami documents and can’t read them and they think it’s bad Arabic or gibberish that Africans have produced. No, it’s Swahili, it’s Wolof, it’s Hausa, it’s Mandinka written in an Arabic script. Many early scholars who have encountered Ajami texts in Africa have called them undecipherable Arabic. Well, it’s undecipherable because they were unaware they were not looking at an Arabic text, they were looking at an African language text, they were looking at a Wolof text, they were looking at a Hausa text. The other interesting thing about Ajami is that Arabic only has three vowels: e, oo and ah. Some African languages have five vowels, some have seven vowels. So naturally Africans had to enrich the Arabic script from three vowels to render five vowels or seven vowels. Really, it’s an innovation. It’s not only in Africa that this took place, it took place across the Muslim world. In Turkey, for example. Also in Spain during the time of Andalus. The Uighurs have done that in China. Today when you see the Iranian language in the news media, it’s Ajami: Arabic script modified to write their language. In America, many of the enslaved Africans from Muslim Africa were...
educated and exposed to Arabic and Ajami. They brought some of that knowledge into the Americas. An example is Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq who was enslaved in Jamaica. His master realized Abu Bakr was more educated than he was and asked him to keep records of the plantations. Abu Bakr at that time was speaking English. Well guess what he did, he wrote English Ajami. He wrote English using the Arabic script to write and record important events.

BOUCTOU: Were Omar Ibn Said and Abdul Rahman, who were enslaved in the U.S., writing in scholarly Arabic as opposed to Ajami?

DR. NGOM: The writings of Omar Ibn Said, Suleiman Diallo, and other educated Africans who were enslaved in the Americas are in Arabic, but if you look inside some of their texts, at the work of Suleiman Diallo you might see that within the text there are words scholars say they don't understand. These are Ajami words, these are local words. We are talking about people who are multilingual and multiliterate. The people we are treating as illiterate have two forms of literacy. And I think that's why it's important for the new generation to be acquainted with Ajami because it opens up a whole new world with new sources of information we didn't know existed.

I hope I will have a graduate student one day who will focus on Ajami traditions of enslaved Africans in the Americas, so that actually we could show the intellectual continuities, centuries old continuities that we have missed completely. Many scholars have treated Ajami documents as undecipherable Arabic because they simply don't have the skills, they don't have the language.

The problem I have always faced is that when we talk about Africa the emphasis has always been on oral traditions of Africa. Orality is important but it is not the only source of knowledge in Africa. When we talk about a poem, for example, the poem is chanted and it is also written. And I think by ignoring Ajami we are actually ignoring an important source of knowledge. Sources of knowledge allow us to hear voices we've never heard before. For example, intimate serious issues are written in Ajami.

In my own case, I discovered my dad, who was a tailor, was actually an Ajami user. We've always treated him as illiterate because we were told that literacy meant to be literate in French. I found that he had a journal, and I was a character in the journal myself and I was not a very good character in that journal. I had even one interesting document when my mom was pregnant with one of my brothers. He
said my wife is pregnant and she will give birth on Friday and the child will be a boy; then he gave the name. So, these important forms of information that are private, they show how society works, healing plants and recipes and all are written in Ajami. So if you want to understand the working of society you look at Ajami documents.

This brings me to what I call the linguistic paradox in academia. You cannot be taken seriously if you said you are a scholar of America without speaking English. You would not be taken seriously if you were a specialist of France without speaking French. You cannot be taken seriously if you claim to be a scholar of any Western nation without speaking the language, and reading and writing in that language. How come you can be an expert of the Wolof, of the Hausa, of the Mandinka, of all these African people without speaking their languages? So, what kind of knowledge do you produce? It does not reflect the local voices and produces books that are detached from what I know. Some lectures I attend are about Senegal and maybe they are talking about a Senegal on Mars or Jupiter because it is based on perceptions and conceptualizations that have been created during colonization and continue to be repeated. These colonial frameworks haven't changed. Ajami sources allow us to come up with new frameworks.

Here at Boston University, we have a little over 30,000 pages of Ajami documents in about ten languages - Wolof, Hausa, Mandinka, Fula, and Foola Fuuta Jalon, some Yoruba, some Kanuri, some M alaga S or obe and some Lupe and Dogbani. We have evocations, work songs, literature, poems and prose texts, documents that deal with theology, dealing with labor and agriculture, gold, currency, astrology, politics, pharmacology, philosophy, ethics and morality. I mean it's just a wealth of information that we've ignored.

Africa, they found Ajami thriving. So, I have contracts where Europeans are writing in French or English and the local African king is writing in Ajami and it is a contract. But during the colonial period, suddenly everybody is illiterate. Ajami allows us to have a new framework that reflects local voices. If you let them speak, they shock the audience, at least Americans among the Western educated elite, because they never heard these voices before. For example, I have a poem that curses Adolph Hitler. There is a Mandinka Ajami poem, written in I think 1942 or '43. This was written in Sedhiou, in southern Senegal, where so many people were being drafted by the French to go to the war. Many were killed and some came back wounded and an elder heard that all of this was because of one guy, one
European guy they called Hitler. They called him Ickler because somebody mispronounced the name and it stuck. So, he decided that the best way to bring the downfall of Hitler is to curse him and that became a poem. And that poem - I am telling you that poem is so powerful, I am sure in his community many people might associate the downfall of Hitler with that poem.

The collection of Ajami documents we have at Boston University is a way to do that. They are all available freely online. If you search the African Ajami library you will see all these collections with summaries. Many of these documents are not yet translated but you have a summary of each document. And the one that I like the most is actually the one by probably the most downloaded one. It talks about recipes for bravery and how to win a court case and things of the people.

The second resource that might be available by the end of this year is our National Endowment for the Humanities Ajami project. We are translating 20 poems, 20 documents from Mandinka to English and French, 20 from Hausa, 20 from Wolof and 20 from Fula. For some of these texts we will actually have recorded chanting of the poems to highlight what I was talking about. The oral and written modalities in Africa are not mutually exclusive but complementary. So that is why we have a lot of songs because songs are educational. And so for example in this Ajami tradition almost every Ajami document has an oral version, a recited version or a chanted version, even prose Ajami texts are also read.

I remember initially when I began to talk about Ajami documents, I was dismissed. I remember arguing with colleagues in the early 2000s. So I went and competed and got funding and brought 5,000 pages of Ajami that show the evolution of the Mouride Brotherhood in Senegal and The Gambia, from its birth to how they survived the French, and I put it online. And I think that is what changed the debate. Now at Boston University, we have a hybrid language program. Students learn in both Roman and Ajami script so they can read these documents and include them in their research.

Bamba was very practical and wise. So as I said earlier,
many of these Ajami writers are bilingual and biliterate. So when Bamba was teaching his disciples, he would use Ajami but when he would write to his peers who are not Wolof speakers he would write in Arabic. In fact it is among the Mourides in Senegal and The Gambia that Ajami flourished to become a huge business. I mean you see all of these books in Ajami. They have their own printing presses because Bamba asked his senior disciples who were writing in Arabic to stop writing in Arabic - 'translate my ideas to my people in Ajami.' So that's how Ajami became the primary means of written communication among the Mourides. And I think that's the secret of why his movement succeeded despite the French depriving him of freedom for 32 years. The French were not aware that these songs that people were chanting and these documents that they were reading, which the French could not read, were a channel through which Bamba was teaching the masses.

In fact, there is a point when one guy was reciting an Ajami poem asking people to get out of their beds and come to work; he was arrested by the French, but local Muslim leaders. He challenged their way of doing business and that's why the masses saw in him somebody they had never seen. He came from a very important family but he said Islam is supposed to be about virtues - hard work, honesty, integrity - these are the same things that Islam is talking about. And he elevated these virtues into religious obligations and then he encouraged a way to disseminate that through their own tongues. My grandpa and many of his generation actually became Mouride when they began to hear these second language speakers of Wolof, when they heard these songs about Amadou Bamba and about his teaching.

And Bamba departed very early on from the classical Quranic and Islamic tradition that he found. He thought that the Islamic system was not doing its job, it was not producing the ethical, positive, important people who contributed to society. He thought just like now that education was something to enable the elite to stay in power and accumulate wealth. So he emphasized ethics and its positive impact on society.
Amadou Bamba believed that you can be a good Muslim and be a good Wolof and a good Hausa and a good Mandinka and they are not mutually exclusive. He also elevated generosity because generosity is very important in Wolof tradition. There are about four words for generosity, and this cannot be translated by the English word for generosity. For example, yatu is the special form of generosity, somebody who’s house is open to everybody, who’s heart is open to everybody. Yeven, is the form of generosity describing someone who gives away everything that they have. Whether a Mouride is in Brazil or New York or Boston or wherever, they will all pitch in because Amadou Bamba has elevated generosity and that is what made the community actually very strong. That is how I think they were able to survive the oppression from the colonial policies so now it is one of the most powerful movements in Senegal.
Ajami is a writing system that uses the Arabic alphabet to write languages other than Arabic. A Semitic language, Arabic is related to Hebrew and Aramaic. It spread in western Asia and Africa between the 10th - 16th centuries with the spread of Islam and Arabic. In a similar way, during the Middle Ages the Latin/Roman alphabet spread in Europe with Christianity. In Britain, Christian missionaries discouraged the use of local English writing systems and encouraged the use of the Roman alphabet.

There are at least 10 African languages that use Ajami today, including four languages in West Africa: Wolof, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Mkim. In West Africa, Ajami used inscriptions of West African languages, Gea-Bissau, Gea, Munka, MNGa, Gea, Ngir, and Geroon Ajami also used inscriptions of the Mwahwal script of East Africa especially ad Tanah.

The English language is written and read from left to right. Ajami Arabic is written and read from right to left. Some other languages are written from left to right. Hebrew, Arabic, and Farsi.
SHARE WITH US!

CREATE YOUR OWN AJAMI ARTWORK

See video sample.

Then have an adult guardian email a high-resolution image of your ajami artwork to brenda.randolph@howard.edu.

Include your name, age, and the following statement:
I give Africa Access and the Center for African Studies at Howard University rights to publish my artwork online.

Artwork by Elsa Wiehe

Artwork by Zoya Munif

Artwork by Yara Munif

Artwork by Elsa Wiehe
What is Ajami?
Where is it Used?
How can I write with it?

Ajami Lesson Plan by Elsa Wiehe

ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS

Ajami is written all across Africa, from Algeria to Madagascar, using people's lived languages that go beyond national borders. Ajami is used in countries where Muslims are present. Ajami is an enriched form of Arabic created by Africans to write in their mother languages. There are many Ajami scripts and all are written from right to left.

GOALS:
With this lesson students will be able to:
• Name African countries where Ajami is used
• Identify select language(s) and countries which use Ajami
• Discuss why languages go beyond modern national borders
• Gain familiarity with a script that are written from the right to the left side of the page
• Practice writing relevant Ajami letters in Wolof or Hausa
• Creatively render their own initials in Wolof Ajami.

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