



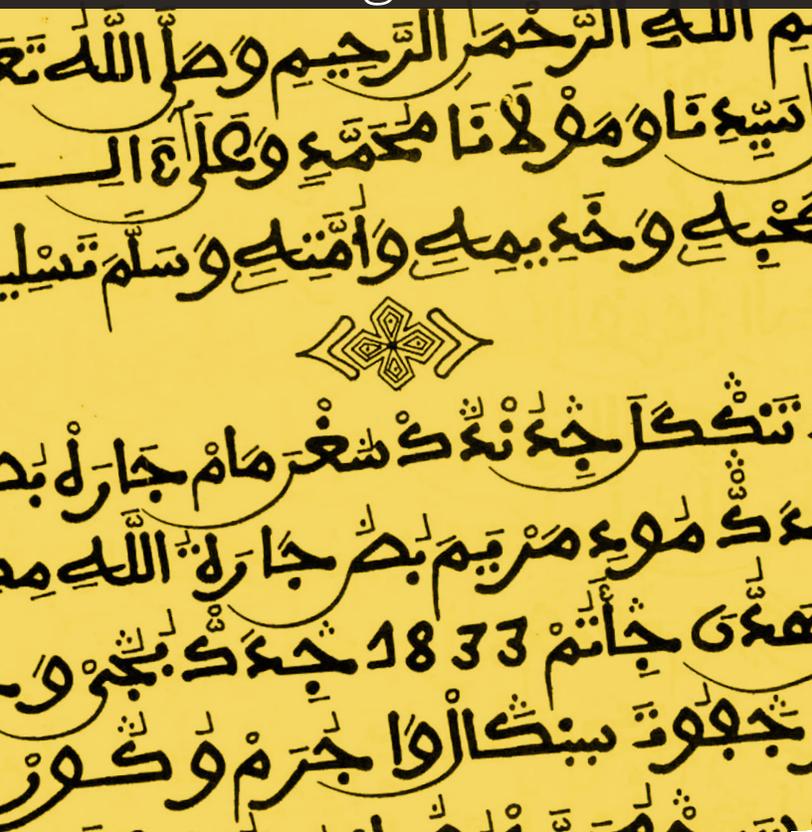
Issue 2, Fall 2023

BOUCTOU



AN AFRICANA MAGAZINE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Connecting Threads: Islam, Arabic and Ajami



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Introduction

by Brenda Randolph, M.A., M.L.S.

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 Dr. 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, 5)." Dr. 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 *Timbuktoo, 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 Timbuktoo heritage and

his transformation into an amateur genealogist. The article also highlights community efforts to unearth archaeological evidence of Timbuktoo and teach local young people about the past. Guy Weston is particularly excited about the curriculum. "It's important for young people in the area to learn about Timbuktoo, 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
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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

by Sylviane Diouf, Ph.D.

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.

PRAYERS AND CHARITY

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, Mohamedans; 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

still offered by West African Muslim women on Fridays and holidays. The cake is not called saraka, but the act of giving is a sadaqa or saraka, a freewill offering, and that word is uttered as the women hand out the small cakes. In South Carolina, the children even had a song about the cakes: "rice-cake, rice-cake, sweet me so, rice cake sweet me to my heart" (Diouf, 92-93).

FAST, FOOD AND CLOTHES

Some Muslims fasted during Ramadan. Salih Bilali, abducted in Mali when he was about 12, was still sixty years later "a strict Mahometan; [he] abstains from spirituous liquors, and keeps the various fasts, particularly that of the Rhamadan", wrote the man who enslaved him (Couper, 69). Omar ibn Said, a Senegalese enslaved in North Carolina, was described as a "staunch Mohammedan, and the first year at least kept the fast of Rhamadan with all great strictness" ("Uncle Moreau", 175). Another Senegalese, Ayuba Suleyman Diallo, used to eat "no Flesh, unless he has killed the Animal with his own Hands, or knows that it has been killed by some Mussulman [the halal way]. He "won't touch a bit of Pork" (Bluett, 26). In 1822 Mississippi, a man who had been taken to Timbuktu to be sold away, acknowledged "in terms of bitter regret, that his situation as a slave in America, prevents him from obeying the dictates of his religion. He is under the necessity of eating pork but denies ever tasting any kind of spirits" (Teas, 387).

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).

LITERACY

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 Koran 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 Koran and praying sheep skin” 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 and finally recognized.

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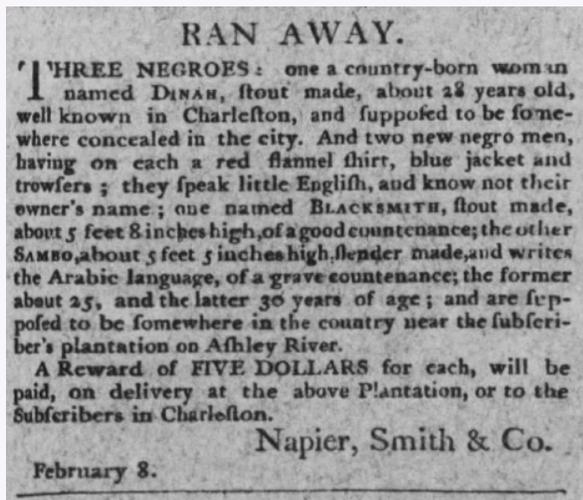
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Société de géographie. Séance du 16 juin 1882. Itinéraire au Fouta-Djallon et au Bambouk par le dr J. M. Bayol. 1881. Bibliothèque nationale de France, <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb40687927c>. Public Domain.

Mini-Bios of Enslaved Muslims

by Sylviane Diouf, Ph.D.



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 for different circumstances, and to instruct them on legal matters and proper social behavior. Schools flourished wherever Islam went. A governor of Senegal, remarked in 1828 “there are villages in which we find more Negroes who can read and write the Arabic... than we would find peasants in our French countryside who can read and write French.” Lamine Kebe, a teacher who spent thirty years enslaved in the United States, stated he had a few girls in his school

in Futa Jallon and that his own aunt “was much more learned than himself, and eminent for her superior acquirements and for her skills in teaching.”

Sambo Ad. *The Charleston Daily Courier*, Newspapers, 16 Mar. 1805, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/604406498/?terms=sambo&match=1> Accessed 3 Nov. 2023. Public Domain.



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.

Diallo, Ayuba Suleiman. “*The Slave Qu’ran (XVIII)*.” 1734. Dar El-Nimer Collection, Beirut, www.darelnimer.org/. Accessed 3 Nov. 2024. Permission granted.



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.

Hoare, William. *Ayuba Suleiman Diallo*. 1733. National Portrait Gallery (United Kingdom) On loan from Qatar Museum Authority, www.npg.org.uk Public Domain.



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.

“The DIG: 365 Days of Artifacts Muslim Charm and Chain (Fort Shirley).” *Archaeology in the Community*, YouTube, 17 Apr. 2014, https://youtu.be/Ti6GG_ZpOnU. Accessed 23 Nov. 2023. Public Domain.



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.

Mohammed, Bilali. *Ben Ali (Bilali) Manuscript*. circa 1850. *Francis Goulding Papers*, Hargrett Rare Book Manuscript Library, U of Georgia Libraries. Public Domain.

Absented herself



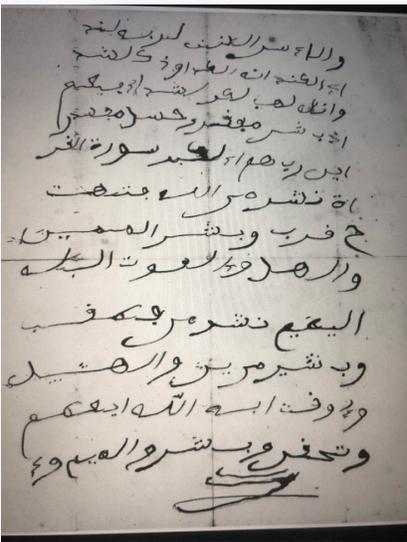
FROM the service of the Subscriber, on Thursday the 14th instant, an African wench named **FATIMA**. She is about 20 years old; speaks very little English; is stout made and inclined to fat. She is branded on the right arm above the elbow **E. M.** Had on when she went away, a blue callimancoe petticoat and yellow furniture cotton wrapper. As she went off without the smallest provocation, it is suspected that she has been enticed away and is harboured by some worthless person or persons; on proof of this **THIRTY DOLLARS REWARD** will be paid; or five dollars reward for delivering her at No. 2, Middle-street, Gadsden's Green, or to the master of the Work-House.

R. Heriot.

June 19 8 eod

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.

Fatima Ad. The Charleston Daily Courier, Newspapers, 19 July. 1808, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/604363864/?terms=fatima&match=1> Public Domain.



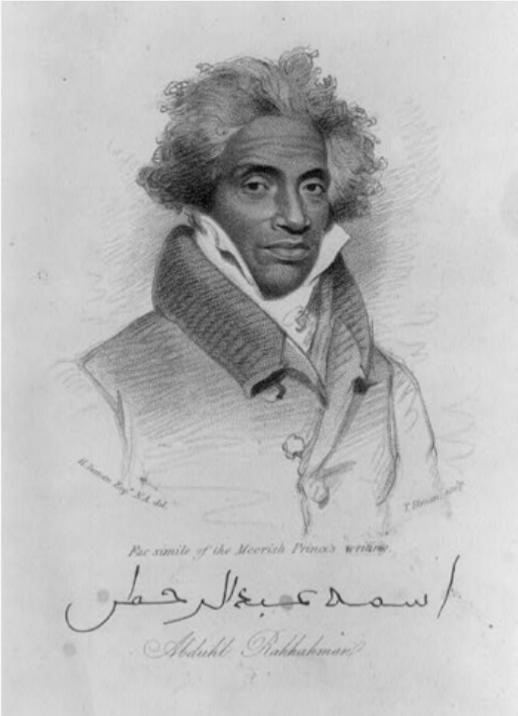
In 1807, two Muslims recently arrived—most likely in Charleston—ran away and were captured in Kentucky. They escaped to Tennessee where they were jailed and escaped twice more. While in custody they wrote at least two texts in Arabic. They were sent to President Jefferson. He made inquiries as to the 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.

"Last surah of the Quran, an-Nas." 1807. Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, 1805, Accessed 4 Nov. 2023.



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 DC. 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.

Peale, Charles Wilson. Yarrow Mamout (Mamadou Yarrow). 1819, Philadelphia Museum of Art, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/319114>. Public Domain.



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 \$195,000 today to free some of them. Ibrahima raised the equivalent of \$100,000 among Northern abolitionists and wrote at least two copies 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 \$7,000 in gold (over \$210,000 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.

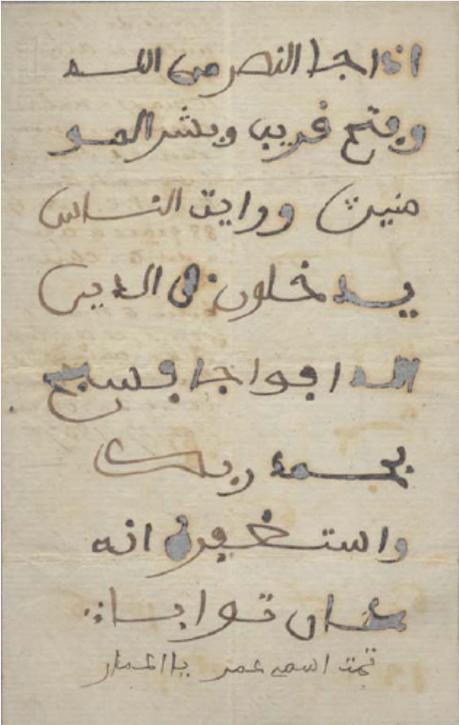
Inman, Henry. *Abduh Rahhahman*. 1833-1834, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a39953/>. Public Domain.



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.

Uncle Moreau [Omar ibn Said]. 1850. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2002060> Yale U, Randolph

Simpson Collection, New Haven, JWJ MSS 54. Public Domain.



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 that God has the power over all; in effect refuting his 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.

Said, Omar Ibn. Surat an-Nasr. Circa 1800?. Documenting the American South. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/omarsaid/support3.html> Accessed 4 Nov. 2023. Public Domain.



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.

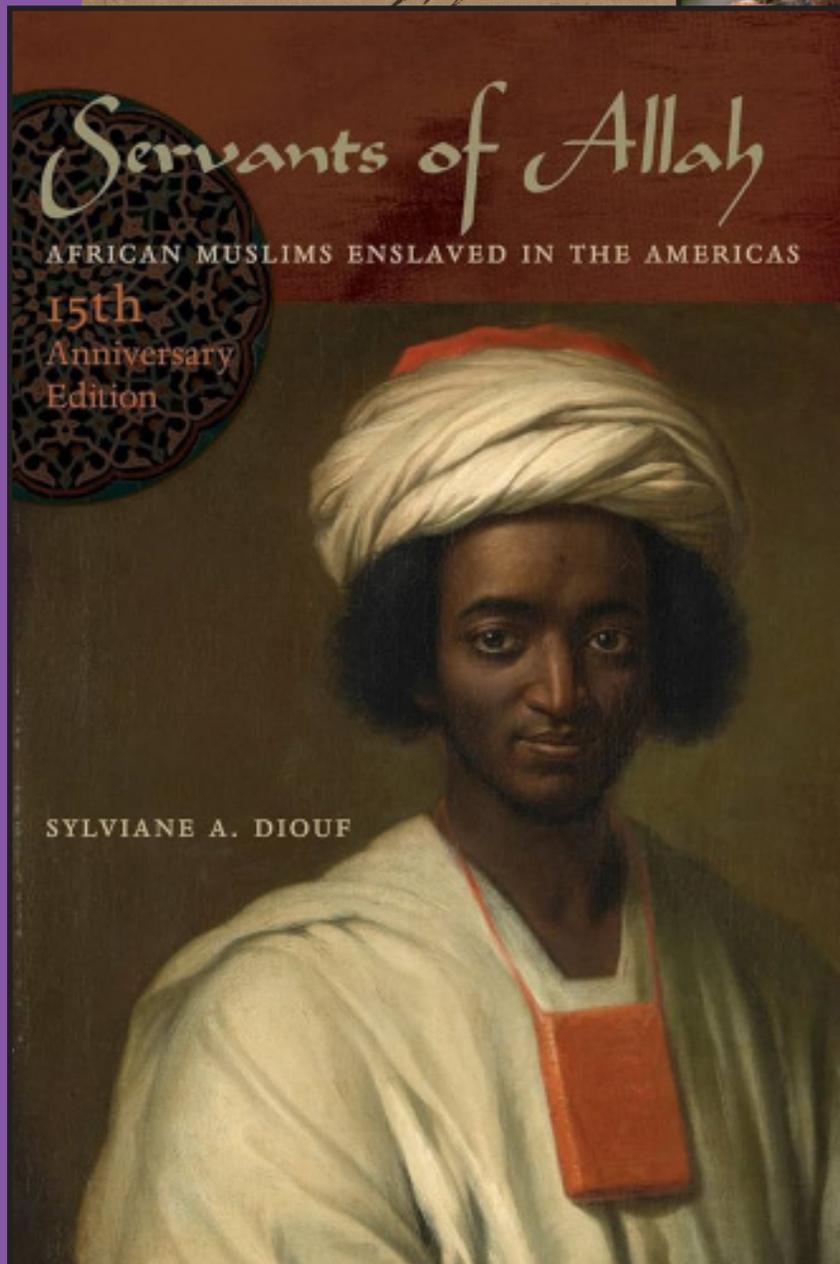
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To learn more about this topic, see the book by this article's author, Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*, published by New York University Press, 2013, which was named **Choice Outstanding Academic Book** 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.



Author: Sylviane A. Diouf, Ph.D.

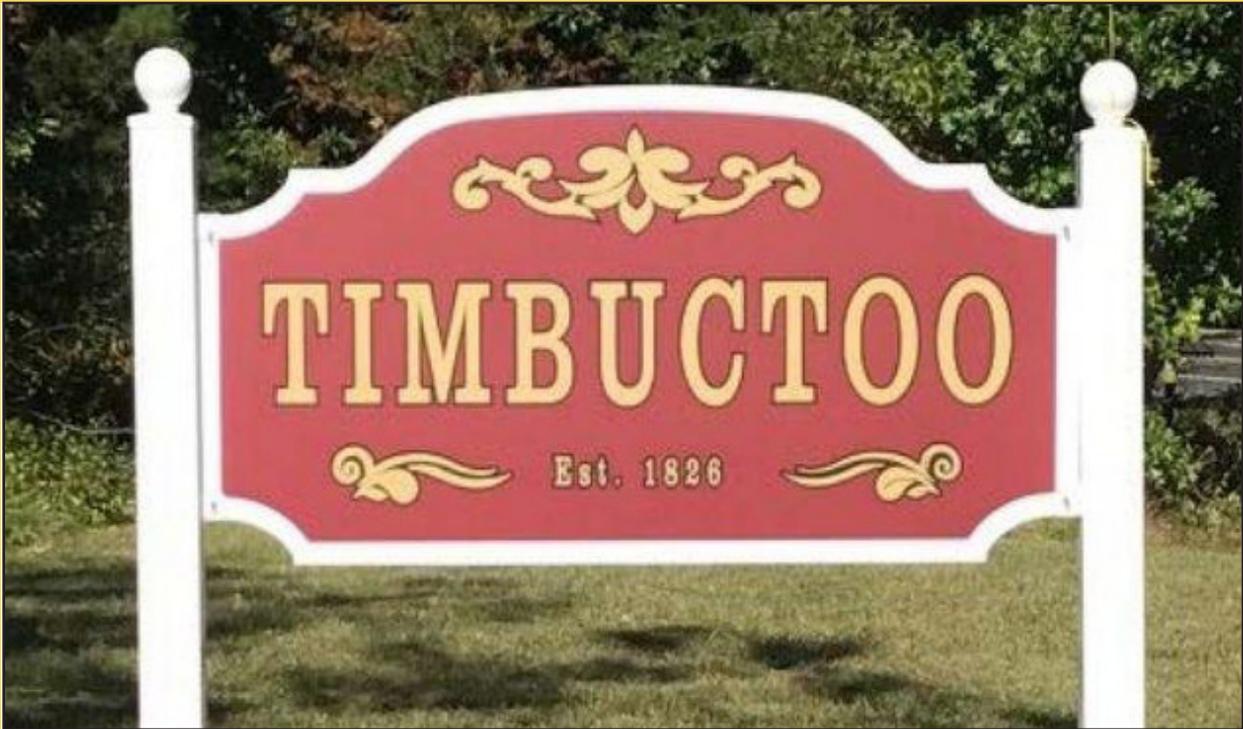


Sylviane A. Diouf is an award-winning historian of the African Diaspora. Her other books received the 2007 Wesley-Logan Prize of the American Historical Association, the 2009 Sulzby Award of the Alabama Historical Association and she was a finalist for the 2008 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. A recipient of the Rosa Parks Award, the Dr. Betty Shabazz 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.

Timbuctoo, New Jersey:

Rewriting Black History

by Brenda Randolph, M.A., M.L.S., with Guy Weston, M.A.



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,



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

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." ¹ 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." ²

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." ³

ORIGINS OF TIMBUCTOO, NJ

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 Africa to find the fabled gold wealth of 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

months and stories about "The Prince of Timbuctoo" circulated widely. ⁴

Within a few years of its founding Timbuctoo, NJ residents had established the African Union school, a graveyard and by 1856 incorporated the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church. Religion was important in Timbuctoo, as a reporter noted in the *New Jersey Mirror* on June 1, 1855.

Reader, if you have never been at a camp meeting in Timbuctoo or any other colored settlement, you have no conception of the proceedings. Do not ask us for a description. We shall not attempt it. The preaching, shouting, singing and praying, are surpassingly rich and beyond all powers of pen or tongue to convey a true idea of their soul starrng influences. All participants seem to be in the forty-third heaven with the full expectation of going up a little higher... ⁵

ENSLAVEMENT IN NEW JERSEY

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.

...the inhabitants turned out en masse,

*and armed with every conceivable weapon, were soon on a "quick march" for the field of strife, yelling and screaming at the top of their voices. The kidnapers hearing the unearthly noise, turned their eyes in the direction from whence it proceeded, and saw the negroes rapidly approaching, -- "terrible as army with banners" -- 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...*⁶

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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." ¹⁰

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 completely different picture. Blacks are always seen as having been in shackles then." ¹¹ 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." ¹²

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

¹⁰ Salisbury, n.p.

¹¹ Personal Interview

¹² Riordan, n.p.

Photographs courtesy of Guy Weston.

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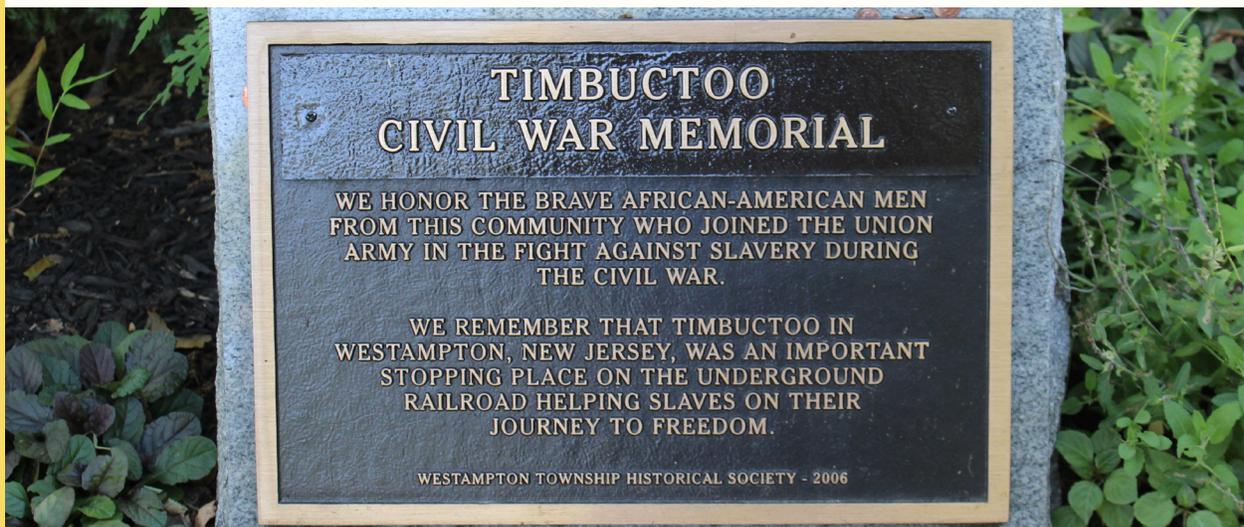
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Timbuctoo Civil War Memorial plaque. Courtesy of Guy Weston.



Participants in Global Timbuktu Symposium at site of Timbuktu, NJ in 2017
Courtesy of Carolyn Brown

SIDEBAR

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 Fassoukoye 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.

Understanding Ajami: The Deep Roots of Islam and Arabic in Africa

An Interview with Dr. Fallou Ngom

Interviewed by Brenda Randolph, M.A., M.L.S.,
Vanessa Oyugi, Ph.D., and edited by Karen Leggett

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 diaspora. His book, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of Ajamī and the Murīdiyya* (Oxford University Press, 2016), won the 2017 Melville J. Herskovits Prize for the best book in African Studies.

BOUCTOU: Most Americans don't realize the deep roots of Islam and Arabic in Africa. Can you speak to this?

DR. NGOM: That's an important question to begin with because many people are unaware that Islam in Africa predates Islam in many parts of the Muslim world, including Arabia. 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

اَيْنَالِيْبِ التَّيَّارِ اَيْنْتِ دَارِ كَيْلَا لَا
اَسْكُوْرَاتْلُوْلَا كَمَسْدَانِ نَقْمُوْلَا

اَنْحِي قَوْمِ كَسُوْلَا فَرَقَا بَقَا كَيْلَا لَا

اَكْرَتُوْ بِالسَّيْبِيَا لَا اَبْرِسِيْدِ كُوْبِيَا لَا

اَبْرِدِيْبِيَا لَا اَيَا بِالسَّيْدِيَا كَيْلَا لَا



Unnamed Ajami script. Courtesy of Fallou Ngom.

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, you will find traces of Ajami. If you look 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.

***BOUCTOU:* How does Ajami shed light on ignored history and underrepresented voices?**

DR. NGOM: 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 are you producing? 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 Malagazi, Sorobe and some Lupe and Dagbani. We have evocations, work songs, literature, poems and prose text, documents that deal with theology, official correspondence, documents 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 that reflects local voices and local preoccupations.

When the Europeans first arrived in 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.

BOUCTOU: One of the ways we've found to get Africa into the curriculum is to start with what exists already in the curriculum - such as World War II - and then bring Africa into that, with an Ajami poem like the one you just mentioned.

DR. NGOM: 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 Mustafa Kulfi from Hausaland that is probably the most downloaded one. It talks about recipes for bravery and how to win a court case and things that clearly reflect the preoccupations 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.

BOUCTOU: Talk a little about how Ajami was used by Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Mouride Brotherhood, a sect of Islam.

DR. NGOM: 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 colonial officers because they thought he was disturbing the peace. They didn’t know that the person was reciting a poem that emphasized a work ethic, that self-sufficiency is a form of worship, that if you have to choose between going to the mosque and going to your farm so you can feed yourself and be self-sufficient and

independent - go to your farm. That is what he was talking about. And I think that is what made the Mourides very resilient because they had their own system which was different from the colonial system, but also different from the traditional classical Islamic system that was in the field.

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.

The first to challenge Bamba were not 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.

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.



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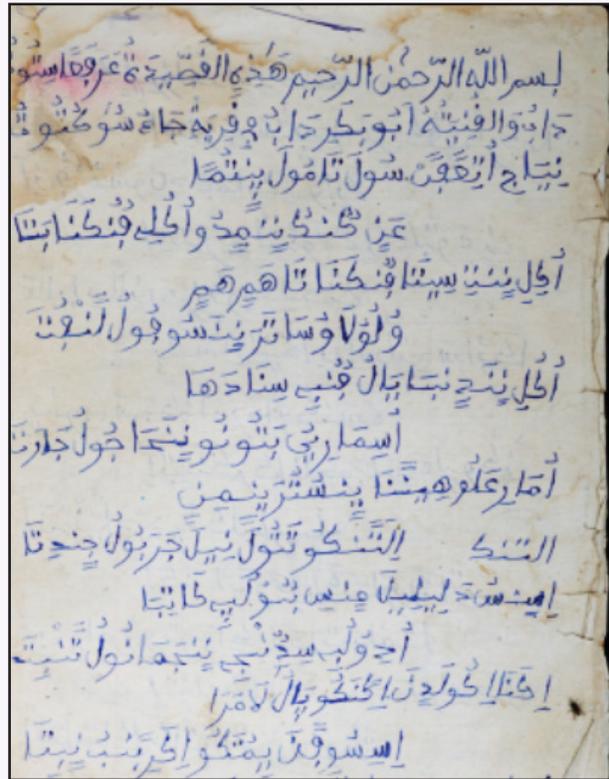
Introducing Ajami

An Article for Students by Brenda Randolph, M.A., M.L.S.

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 is spoken primarily in western Asia and Africa. Ajami developed and spread in 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 Mandinka. In West Africa, Ajami is used in Muslim areas of West Africa including: Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Ajami is also used in parts of the Muslim Swahili-speaking world in East Africa especially in Kenya and Tanzania.

The English language is written and read from left to right. Ajami, like Arabic, is written and read from right to left. Several other languages are written from right to left including Hebrew and Farsi.



Daabo, Arfan Sitookoto. "Ni Yaa Je..." ["If You See"]. NEH Ajami Project, edited by Fallou Ngom et al., African Studies Center, Boston University, 2018, sites.bu.edu/nehajami/the-four-languages/mandinka/mandinka-manuscripts/ni-yaa-je/ Accessed 15 Nov. 2023. Courtesy of Fallou Ngom.

VIEW WHOLE LESSON
cfas.howard.edu/ajami-lesson-for-students

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.

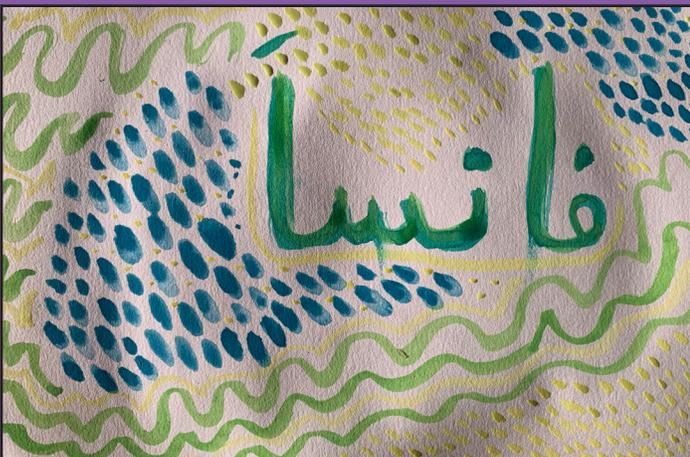
Include your name, age, and the following statement:
I give Africa Access and the Center for African Studies at Howard University rights to publish my artwork online.



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, Ed.D.

Grade Level: adaptable from grades 4-12

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.

VIEW WHOLE LESSON

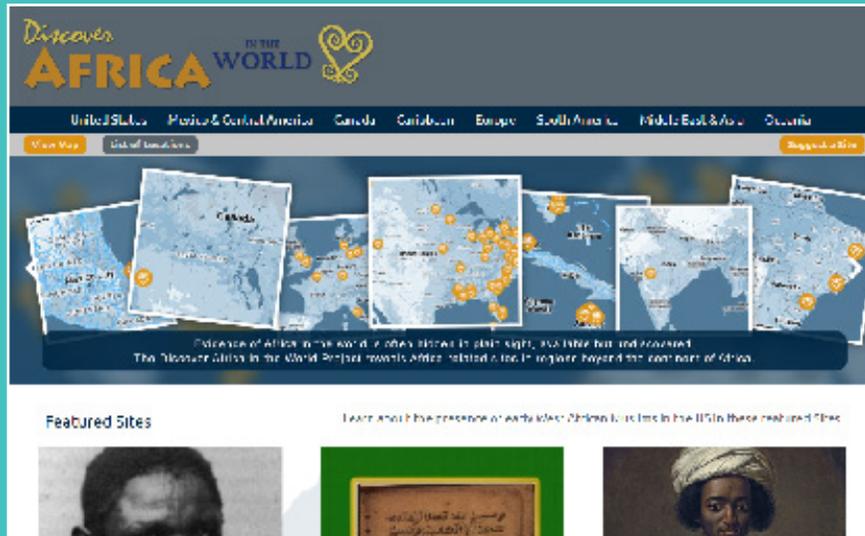
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