

## American Slaves Who Were Readers and Writers

*Slaves in America were forbidden by law to read or write. Yet hundreds of thousands of African slaves who were transported to the New World were literate in Arabic, a language they had learned in Koranic schools in West Africa.*

*by Sylviane A. Diouf*

**L**ITERACY FOR BLACKS in the Americas is widely thought to have developed after Emancipation. However, between the early sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, large numbers of slaves were literate. They were Muslims and could read and write Arabic and Ajami (their own languages using the Arabic alphabet), and probably hundreds of thousands among them had pursued higher studies.

When the first Africans were deported to the New World, starting in 1501 in the Spanish colonies, Islam had already been present in some parts of West Africa for 500 years. Literacy in Arabic is essential in Islam because the believers rely on the Koran 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 all legal matters and proper social and personal behavior. Therefore, wherever Islam goes, a widespread educational system of Koranic schools is always put in place.

In West Africa, on the eve of the launching of the Atlantic slave trade, the prevalence of education was such that when the Algerian scholar Al-Maghili left Kano (in present-day, Nigeria) in the fifteenth century, he noted that there were 3,000 teachers in the city. The number of schools dotting the West African landscape attracted the attention of several European travelers who compared it favorably to what was the reality in their own countries where the masses were kept illiterate.

Baron Roger, a French nobleman who was governor of Senegal, remarked in 1828 that “there are villages in which we find more Negroes who can read and write the Arabic, which for them is a dead and scholarly language, than we would find peasants in our French countryside who can read and write French!”



African students pursued higher education to become theologians, magistrates, scribes, and lawyers. They were trained in the renowned learning centers of Kokki and Pire in Senegal, Timbuktu and Jenne in Mali, Kong in the Ivory Coast, Kano in Nigeria, or Bouna in Ghana. Others studied as far away as Morocco and Egypt and still others in Arabia where they also made the *hajj* or annual pilgrimage. The curriculum of higher Koranic studies included grammar, philology, jurisprudence, law, theology, numerology, and astronomy.

With the advent of the Atlantic slave trade, large numbers of Muslims (they represented between 15 percent and 20 percent of the Africans deported to the New World) were torn away from their families and intellectual world and forced to spend a lifetime of manual labor on American plantations. There is a strong indication that a large proportion had been part of the intellectual elite.

The mobility of the teachers and clerics who traditionally traveled throughout the region and beyond to proselytize and recruit students made them particularly vulnerable to kidnappers and slave traders.

On the other side of the ocean, the literacy of enslaved Muslims set them apart from most of their contemporaries. Coming from oral cultures, the non-Muslim Africans were not literate; neither were the native-born slaves because their

education was illegal. Similarly illiterate was the bulk of the white population. During slavery, for the most part,

there were only two groups who were literate — wealthy white males and black Muslim slaves.

Among the latter, several left testimonies of their scholarship in the form of autobiographies, letters, Korans written by rote, plans for revolts, amulets, and religious manuscripts — all in Arabic — that have been preserved in the United

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States and other countries. In addition, planters, travelers, and former slaves acknowledged in plantation records, books, articles, interviews, and fugitive notices that they had seen slaves writing or reading Arabic.

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Ample documentation exists on some of these men. Job ben Solomon, a 32-year-old Senegalese who had been enslaved in Maryland and had sent a letter in Arabic to his father asking to be redeemed, wrote three copies of the Koran on the way back to his country. Ana Musa, a Mandingo deported to Jamaica, also wrote his own Koran. Bilali, a scholar originally from Guinea, who became the driver of a large plantation on Sapelo Island, Georgia, left a 13-page manuscript that reproduces a segment of a treaty of jurisprudence written by the learned Tunisian Abu Zayd al Qairawni in the tenth century. The treaty was and still is part of the curriculum of higher Koranic studies in West Africa. In 1831 Omar ibn Said, a Senegalese enslaved in Fayetteville, North Carolina, wrote his autobiography in Arabic. Abu bakr al Siddiq from Timbuktu, who was kidnapped as a teenager and spent 30 years as a slave in Jamaica before returning home in 1835, wrote three copies of his autobiography in 1834.

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*“Koranic curriculum included studies in grammar, philosophy, philology, law, and theology.”*

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Contrary to popular belief that portrays them as ignorant peasants, for almost 400 years, large numbers of enslaved Africans were actively engaged in reading and writing exercises that covered the production of religious texts, occult protections, correspondence, proselytism, uprising planning, and autobiographies. They preserved their literacy as best they could, with imagination, a strong will, and utmost dedication. A long tradition of literacy for all and higher education for some could not be erased even in the most damaging conditions. In a depressing, hostile world, the literate Africans used their knowledge to keep intellectually alert, to defend and protect themselves and their communities, and to affirm their value as human beings and cultured men and women.

Sylviane A. Diouf is the author of *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

**CAUTION!!**  
**COLORED PEOPLE**  
**OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,**  
You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the  
**Watchmen and Police Officers**  
**of Boston,**  
For since the recent **ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN**, they are empowered to act as  
**KIDNAPPERS**  
AND  
**Slave Catchers,**  
And they have already been actually employed in **KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES.** Therefore, if you value your **LIBERTY,** and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Show* them in every possible manner, as so many **HOUNDS** on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.  
**Keep a Sharp Look Out for**  
**KIDNAPPERS, and have**  
**TOP EYE open.**  
**APRIL 24, 1851.**  
THEODORE PARKER'S PLACARD

The Fugitive Slave Act enacted by Congress in 1850 legalized the apprehension of runaway slaves in free states and their return to slavery in southern states. As a result, those slaves who had been able to escape and cross the Mason-Dixon Line were no longer free or safe. Federal troops and marshals in free states were regularly called upon to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act. Also, bounty hunters routinely rounded up escaped slaves. In some cases, even freedmen were brought back to slave states for sale.

In the spring of 1851, Shadrach Minkins, a slave who had escaped from Virginia, worked as a waiter in a downtown Boston restaurant. He was apprehended by federal marshals under the Fugitive Slave Act. The marshals had been informed of Minkins' whereabouts by a bounty hunter employed by Virginia slaveowners. But when Minkins was arraigned in Boston's federal courthouse, a group of 20 blacks stormed the courtroom, overwhelmed the attending constables, and whisked Minkins off to safety.

After this incident, fliers similar to the one above were posted all over the city of Boston.