“LIKE A STONE THROWN IN STILL WATER”:
A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AFRICAN MUSLIMS IN EARLY AMERICA

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In the past several decades, a handful of scholars across the social sciences have explored the history of Islam and the experience of Muslims in the United States. Aiming to make the Muslim-American experience an American one, these scholars have woven Muslims into the fabric of this nation’s past by unearthing the stories of its original Muslim population—African slaves. Historians have paid special attention to the presence and experiences of African Muslims in colonial and antebellum America. Historians from diverse fields including Africa, Islam, the Old South, slavery, religion, colonial and antebellum America, and the Atlantic slave trade have slowly brought this rich, complex, and little-known history out from the shadows. For over forty years, historians have added to the understanding of Islam’s history in the United States; however, this subject is still in its nascent stages. All of the works analyzed in this study function as foundations—as calls to historians to continue reconstructing this beautifully intricate and relevant aspect of America’s past, present, and future.

Spencer Trimingham’s 1959, *Islam in West Africa*, was the first of its kind. Focusing on the region where more than half of all North American slaves came from, this embryonic stage of scholarship eventually birthed a movement to explore Islam’s journey from Africa to the Americas by way of the Atlantic slave trade.1 Beginning in the late 1970s, a number of biographical works examined African Muslim slaves in the Americas, detailing the fascinating lives of a few well-documented individuals. Beginning in the mid-1980s, a handful of historians broadened their view to include the larger African Muslim community, instigating a desire to grapple more deeply with the significance and legacy of this racial and religious minority. By the 1990s, this historical problem gave rise to a number of works published on African Muslims in early America. It was not until the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, that the first comprehensive histories on the subject of Islam in America were published. Spanning the breadth of America’s history, these studies embed Islam and its African-American adherents into their colonial and antebellum contexts.

This study examines six of the most important works written between 1977 and 2010 on African Muslims in early America.2 From Terry Alford’s foundational biography on Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima to the most recent comprehensive history on Islam in America by Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, these works vary in focus, breadth, and depth, but share a common purpose to ignite scholarly curiosity about this fascinating yet little-explored part of America’s past. Placing these works under a microscope reveals a passionate dialogue and handful of important themes that are central to all of the narratives. First, all of these histories are concerned with the preservation and survivability of orthodox African Islam as practiced by slaves in America. Scholars have probed such questions as: Did orthodox African Islam survive, and what efforts did African-Americans Muslims make to preserve their religion? What were their obstacles? Were they able to live as Muslims? Did they convert other slaves? Were aspects of their Islamic traditions infused into other cultural practices? Additionally, all of these works explore the peculiar circumstances of African Muslims in relation to contemporary ideas of race and ethnicity. Often coming from a higher social status in Africa and having the ability to read and write in the language of Islam—Arabic—Muslim slaves were viewed as more civilized, less black, less savage, and ultimately, less African than their non-Muslim counterparts. To this end, scholars have attempted to re-Africanize Muslim slaves, while also illuminating their unique position, character, and legacy. Crucially, these scholars have all acknowledged the agency of Muslim slaves, and have written histories of resistance, pride, self-confidence, and determination. Despite an impoverished historical record on this topic, an indispensable aspect of early American history has been unearthed in these five scholarly works, as has the long-standing presence of Islam in America.


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Prince among Slaves traced and vividly detailed the life of Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima, an African Muslim prince from Timbo, Futa Jalon (the land of the Fulbe) who was captured in war and sold into slavery. Ibrahima, as Alford referred to him, ended up in Natchez, Mississippi and was purchased by a cotton plantation owner named Thomas Foster in August of 1788. According to Alford, Foster quickly took note of Ibrahima’s knowledge, confidence, loyalty, and discipline and eventually made him the overseer of the plantation. “The Prince,” as he came to be called by Foster and others, slowly gained widespread attention and many began to press for his freedom—including an English doctor whom he had met back in Africa. Finally, in 1829, after pressure from President John Quincy Adams and Secretary of State Henry Clay, Foster agreed to free Ibrahima as long as he returned to Africa. Despite efforts to raise enough money to free his children, Ibrahima and his wife Isabella returned to Africa alone. Four months later, in Monrovia, Liberia, he died from a sickness, never setting eyes on his native Timbo again.

The life of Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima was nothing short of extraordinary, and Terry Alford did a remarkable job of piecing together and telling his story. Prince Among Slaves, however, contributed much more to academia than just an untold story of a unique individual; it ignited a scholarly pursuit to further explore the presence and legacy of African Muslim slaves in the Americas, and it identified a number of complex issues to address and investigate further. Alford posited that Ibrahima was “[n]o common slave.” Thomas Foster, other slaves, and even the president of the United States saw him as exceptional. For many whites, his literacy, integrity, values, and knowledge about cotton farming set him above the rest. Alford claimed that these virtues—sobriety, self-discipline, loyalty, and pride (to name a few)—were a product of his faith in Islam. Furthermore, this Islamic civility, Alford argued, impacted whites’ perceptions of race; thus, Ibrahima was not viewed as an African, or as black, he was seen as a Moor or an Arab by other whites—

he was exotic. While narrative trumps analysis in this work, Alford recognized the complex racial, social, and cultural landscape in which Ibrahima lived, therefore, paving the way for other historians to expand on his findings.

Initially, Prince Among Slaves did not receive a warm or enthusiastic welcome from the academic community. It was not reviewed by any major academic journals, and Alford himself stated, “it was as if the academy had met privately and decided to shun the book.” Perhaps this was the result of poor timing and a subject matter too uncommon to take immediate hold. Despite taking some time to be welcomed, the story of the African Muslim prince from Futa Jalon eventually received widespread acclaim, and continues to inspire. It has not gone on without criticism, however. Many, including some of the historians whose work was looked at in this study, have accused Alford of over-romanticizing the life of Ibrahima, and incorrectly placing him and Muslim slaves above others. These are valid criticisms, yet “The Prince’s” fascinating life and seemingly unusual belief in Islam opened the doors for future generations of historians who continue to work to expand our understanding of the presence, legacy, and significance of African Muslim slaves in early America.

By the mid-1990s, the subject of African Muslim slaves gained ground as a serious area of academic inquiry. In 1994, Michael Gomez’s important state-of-the-field article, “Muslims in Early America,” was published in The Journal of Southern History. In this piece, he touched on many of the same issues as Alford—race, ethnicity, literacy, survivability, and legacy—however, he broke away from the biographical style that had dominated the field, and instead, broadened his focus to make larger and more sweeping assessments of the field and subject matter. Unlike Prince Among Slaves, Gomez contextualized the lives of Black Muslim slaves, painting a portrait of the larger community and giving an important analysis of the state of the field.

Simply stated, the purpose of Gomez’s article was to assess and shed light on the history of Islam in early African-American history. As many histo

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4 Ibid., 183.
5 Ibid., 191.
6 Alford, Prince among Slaves, 192.
7 Ibid., 194.
rians, including Gomez, note in their writings, the source material used to piece together this history is scarce. Gomez, however, employed runaway slave records for the first time, and set an important model for other researchers. From these scant resources, he argued four main points in his article. The first is that there were significant numbers of Muslims in the United States. While an exact number cannot be known, Gomez cautiously estimated that “thousands, if not tens of thousands of African Muslims were brought to North America.”

Second, he contended that Muslims made genuine and persistent efforts to observe their faith, primarily among their families. Additionally, he asserted that Islam and ethnicity were important factors in the process of social stratification within the larger African American society. By contextualizing the African and Islamic roots of slaves, he showed how Muslim slaves set themselves apart from non-Muslims. Muslim slaves deemed themselves superior to their non-Muslim counterparts, and slave owners concurred on this point. And finally, he claimed that certain cultural phenomena found in the African-American community—Christian worship practices and certain artistic expressions—probably reflect the influence of early Muslims. While historians agree that Islam disappeared in slave communities within a few generations, traces of early Islam survived in more contemporary African-American religious practices and cultural forms.

Gomez began his story of Islam in the African context, tracing its journey to the Americas via the transatlantic slave trade. Importantly, Gomez pointed out that the areas of Western Africa where Islam gained a solid footing eventually became zones procured for the Atlantic slave trade. The regions of Senegambia and Sierra Leone commanded much of Gomez’s attention, as a significant proportion of slaves brought to America came from these areas. Crucially, Gomez argued that the reason for this was twofold. First, Africans coming from these regions had valuable knowledge about rice and indigo cultivation, a skill that planters actively sought. Additionally, many planters privileged the character and temperament of slaves from these regions, and, therefore, paid special attention to ethnicity. Like Alford, Gomez addressed slave owners’ views of African Muslims vis-à-vis non-Muslim slaves and came to similar conclusions: “Muslims were generally viewed by slave owners as a ‘more intelligent, more reasonable, more physically attractive, more dignified people.’”

Interestingly, though, and differing from Alford, he argued that Muslims’ agricultural knowledge was actually a more important factor in slave owners’ preference for Muslim slaves.

It was not just the slave owners who placed them in superior positions. Muslim slaves also considered themselves superior. Gomez identified a few factors that may have contributed to Muslim slaves’ feelings of superiority: their social status in Africa (a number of Muslim slaves were from prominent backgrounds), their ability to read and write, and the racist climate in America that encouraged them to distance themselves from the “average African.” This tremendously affected relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim slaves, and as Gomez pointed out, hindered their ability to convert and ultimately preserve their Islamic heritage among fellow slaves.

“Muslims in Early America” primarily addressed the significance of Islam in African American history. Gomez contended that the orthodox African Islam as practiced by slaves in early America did not survive; yet, “some of its constituent elements may continue to guide and sustain.” He concluded his article, nevertheless, with a thought-provoking connection between the Islam of the colonial and antebellum eras and the Islam that gained ascendance among the black community in the early twentieth century. Purposefully stirring the pot, he wondered if Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, converted to Islam because “in some way [it] was familiar, reminiscent of concepts and ideas he’d been exposed to as a child.” If this is true, he continued, “it would mean that Islam in America never really disappeared but rather underwent a brief hiatus…” This statement perhaps served as a call to action for historians to examine the apparent continuity of Islam in African-American history.

In 1997, the call was answered when Allan Austin published his remarkable book, African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and
Spiritual Struggles. Developed from a sourcebook published over a decade before, African Muslim Slaves detailed in great length the lives of eight African Muslim slaves, and provided glimpses into the lives of seventy-five others. Given the tendency of scholars in previous decades, including Alford, to romanticize these historical actors, Austin strongly stated that nothing written here “should be construed as saying that African Muslims were innately superior to fellow Africans who were not Muslims.”13 Embedded in rich analysis, these stories of African Muslims in antebellum America unveiled the complex tapestry of racial, cultural, and social relations between Muslims, non-Muslims, and slave owners. Moreover, they functioned as a blueprint for other historians as each account was analyzed using a variety of heretofore little-known primary sources, and each chapter ended with an in-depth bibliography for curious students and researchers. In Austin’s words, these individual stories “provide valuable contributions to a truly comprehensive story of Americans and tell more about first-generations of African Americans than any other single source.”14

Austin made a number of original contributions and arguments in this book, but he also explored similar topics and came to comparable conclusions as the aforementioned scholars. Unlike Gomez, Austin returned to the biographical style initiated by Prince Among Slaves, however, because of his numerous case studies, he was able to draw broader and more sophisticated conclusions about the larger African Muslim community in America. Austin also examined the significance of Muslim slaves’ social status in Africa, along with literacy, as factors in Muslim ethnocentrism and their preferential treatment by slave owners. Like Gomez, Austin found that many planters also preferred slaves from the Senegambia and Sierra Leone regions for their knowledge about rice cultivation. Austin was the only scholar up to this point to address Muslim slave women, noting that all of his cases are male and that a near absence of sources hinders efforts to include women in these stories. Austin was also (to my knowledge) the first to put a firm number on the African Muslim population in early America. He estimated that between five and ten percent of all Africans sent to North America were from Islamic regions of Africa. If eleven million slaves were bought over during the colonial and pre-Civil War eras, Austin’s claims indicate that approximately forty thousand were Muslims. Austin’s findings and collection of data proved instrumental to the study of African Muslim slaves in early America. He drew a detailed map for scholars to explore the deep waters of this little-known, but significant, part of America’s past. His subjects are resistant, intelligent, proud, and devout, but he was careful to place them within their proper contexts—African, Islamic, and American—to avoid inflated representations that appear superior to non-Muslim slaves. This is a significant contribution to the historiography that continues in to inspire scholars of early American religion.

In 1998, Sylviane Diouf recounted a story centered on themes of resistance and perseverance. Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas argued vigorously that African Muslims “with remarkable determination” struggled to practice and preserve their faith in Islam.15 Countering narratives that slaves were absorbed into the cultural-religious Christian world, she found a community of African Muslim believers who determinedly built a tradition of revolt and resistance. She stated, “[t]hrough examining their history, their stories, and their legacy…this book reveals that whatever they wrote in the sand of the plantation is a successful story of strength, resilience, courage, pride, and dignity.” 16 Diouf argued that Islam was “the engine” of social mobility within structures of slavery. Not varying greatly from assessments of other scholars, she argued that social status in Africa, coupled with the virtues of Islam and literacy, gave Muslim slaves an advantage in the oppressive confines of slavery. Like Austin and Gomez, she critiqued historians who focused solely on individuals and failed to place Muslim slaves within their larger contexts and communities. Furthermore, she accused some historians of perpetuating the same tendency slave owners had to de-Africanize Muslim slaves. Making an important and original contribution to the historiography, Diouf expanded our understanding of the racial and cultural temper of the time. She posited, “The reason Muslim slaves were not seen as authentic Africans is not racial but cultural: the West African Muslims may be seen as ‘true blacks’ instead of Moors or Arabs, but their culture and religion are viewed

14 Austin, African Muslims in Antebellum America, 10.
16 Ibid., 3.
as foreign, Arab.” The conflation of race and culture that Diouf crucially addressed continues to be an issue in the twenty-first century for American Muslims; bringing this issue under the spotlight within the academy is one of the most significant contributions of this work. She ended the book by reminding readers that Muslim slaves were not spared from the brutal realities brought about from the institution that made them second-class citizens:

Turbaned men and veiled women, their prayer beads around their necks, chopped cotton, cut cane, and rolled tobacco from sunup to sundown. Like other slaves they were beaten, whipped, cursed, raped, maimed, and humiliated. They saw their families torn apart and their loved ones killed.  

Servants of Allah called on scholars and the general public to be cautious of romanticizing a dire situation. In this work, Diouf successfully balanced slaves’ agency with the harsh realities African Muslim slaves were forced to endure.

Countering Gomez’s claim of continuity, Diouf found no documented evidence linking Islam brought over by African slaves in the colonial and antebellum periods to early twentieth century movements. She did, however, believe African Muslims made an indispensable contribution to the cultures of people of African descent. Servants of Allah urges other scholars to delve deeper into these seemingly opaque areas of cultural infusion, as well as to continue unveiling this rich and complex part of America’s history. Scholarship written in the first decade of the twentieth century began to explore more deeply some of these complex continuities.

Islam in The African-American Experience by Brent Turner was first published in 1997. Turner explicitly attempted to break the mold of histories written on African-American Muslims by including new interpretations and analysis of well-known sources and examining never-before-used sources, such as naming practices. The book spanned the entire history of Africans and Islam in the United States—from the colonial era to the present, and therefore, did not focus entirely on early American history. In the introduction, Turner likened scholarship on the African-American Muslim community in the United States to a treadmill. He argued, “[s]cholars [have] repeated the same information in articles and books, shedding little light on either the developments in the community or its transformation.” As we have seen in the previous books mentioned, only subtle nuances exist in the assessment of the presence, survivability, and legacy of African Muslim slaves and their religion. While Turner did not steer too far off course from his colleagues (at least not in his analysis of African Muslims slaves) he contributed a fresh perspective and methodologically different approach with Islam in the African-American Experience.

The first chapter of this work explained the roots of Islam in the United States and its journey from Africa. As transmitters of a major world religion to the American continent, Turner argued that African Muslims were “far more significant than anyone could have imagined in their time.” Like other historians, Turner found extraordinary acts of resistance and perseverance amid oppression in the lives of Muslim slaves, but identified their resistance as intellectual. Black identity and naming—what Turner called signification—is the interpretive thread through which he analyzes the history of African Muslims in America. Turner explained the connection between signification and intellectual resistance to slavery: “some [African Muslim slaves] kept their African names, wrote in Arabic, and continued to practice their religion…All of this constituted intellectual resistance to slavery…” African Muslim slaves preserved their Islamic identities in their refusal to adopt Christian significations. These were conscious and brave acts of resistance against a powerful institution that sought to destroy their African and Islamic identities. Turner found that as African Muslims signified themselves—made conscious decisions about the people they wanted to be in America—they “transformed Islam to meet the demands of survival and resistance in [a] ‘strange Christian land.’” To this end, Turner pinpointed an ideological connection between the old Islam of the original African slaves and the Islam that developed in the early twentieth century. Turner, like other historians, also found that Islam as

17 Diouf, Servants of Allah. 204.
18 Ibid., 210.
20 Ibid., 12.
21 Ibid., 24.
22 Ibid., 25.
practiced by the first Muslims in America disappeared, but he also identified a place where Islamic values persisted. Turner’s use of naming and identity for mation integrated an original interpretive method into the study of the African Muslim slaves in America. It was his hope to explore new methodological pathways as a means to develop a more complex understanding of Islam in the African-America experience. By doing so, he continued the passionate pursuit by historians to encourage research and scholarship on this growing subfield.

In his 2010 path-breaking, comprehensive study, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri showed how Muslim communities and institutions have consistently adapted to changing social, cultural, and political climates in the United States from the colonial era to the present, challenging the longstanding dichotomy between Islam and West. Like Turner’s Islam in the Africa-American Experience, this book tackled a broad view of Islam in the United States. Instead of focusing solely on black Muslims, GhaneaBassiri’s study included all Muslim believers. Despite its expansive breadth, GhaneaBassiri also underscored the significance of placing the earliest stages of American Islam within its African Muslim contexts. GhaneaBassiri explained, “[t]he history of Islam in America must be located in the transcontinental context of early American history.”

GhaneaBassiri introduced three important terms for understanding the history of African Muslim slaves in America, which draw on similar themes identified by the other scholars. The first is de-Negrofication, which he notes is different from other scholar’s use of de-Africanization. He argues that de-Negrofication is a “more apt descriptive” because Muslim slave disassociation from “Negroid attributes and stereotypes” was more significant than their disassociation from Africa or African cultures. In addition to being de-Negrofied, he also claimed that African Muslim slaves were de-Islamicized either by disassociating them from negative stereotypes about Islam prevalent at the time or by presenting them as converts to Christianity. Both of these terms, he explained, underscore the “fluidity of racial and religious identities as sociopolitical constructs.”

Finally, and critically, GhaneaBassiri argued that African Muslim slaves were liminal figures who, for a moment, blurred the racial and religious boundaries of the time. He noted, however, that their relatively small number hindered any significant and lasting impact from taking root. In concurrence with other historians, GhaneaBassiri showed that African Muslim slaves occupied a unique and sometimes extraordinary position amid the horror and confines of slavery in early America. A History of Islam in America was published over three decades after Terry Alford’s influential narrative on the life of Abd al Rahman Ibrahima. Like Alford, GhaneaBassiri passionately hoped that his work would inspire future generations of scholars to continue exploring and expanding on the history of Islam and the experience of Muslims in the United States.

Together, the five foundational works discussed in this study have helped draw the history of African Muslims slaves in America out from the shadows. They vary in focus, breadth, and depth, but have uncovered a passionate discourse and a handful of important themes central to all of the narratives. Moreover, while illuminating the complex racial, cultural, and social relations between Muslim slaves, non-Muslims slaves, and slave owners, historians have unearthed a time during slavery when lines were blurred and resistance was possible. The presence, survivability, and legacy of the African slaves who brought the second-largest monotheistic religion to the Americas continues to inspire and ignite curious scholarly minds across disciplines, but I hope this study has shown that field remains in its early stages. Each scholar has used their work as a call to their colleagues and future generation of academics to recognize the relevance and long-standing presence of Islam in the United States, and to continue furthering our awareness of this rich, vibrant, and complex history. “Like a stone thrown in still water” these works made a splash and aim to “send out knowledge in ever-widening circle of understanding.”

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24 Ibid., 18.
26 Alford, *Prince Among Slaves*, XX.
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