

2014

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Recommended Citation

Kahera, Akel, "God's Dominion: Omar Ibn Said use of Arabic literacy as opposition to Slavery" (2014). *Publications*. 1.
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**“GOD’S DOMINION”:
OMAR IBN SAID’S USE OF ARABIC LITERACY
AS OPPOSITION TO SLAVERY**

by Akel Ismail Kahera

It is He who has made the earth subservient to you. Walk about its regions and eat of His provisions. To Him all shall return at the Resurrection.

Are you confident that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to cave in beneath you, so that it will shake to pieces and overwhelm you?

—from *Surat al-Mulk, Qu’ran*, as quoted in *The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (1831)



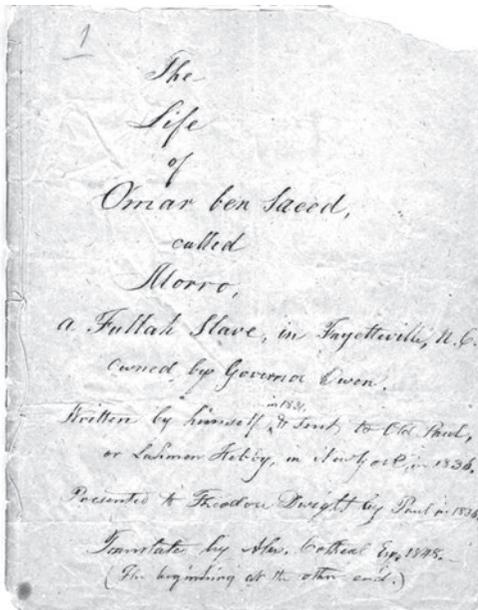
Omar ibn Said, Courtesy of Davidson College Archives.

Omar ibn Said’s *The Life of Omar Ibn Said, Written by Himself* (1831) occupies a unique position within the slave narrative tradition. As the only surviving Arabic autobiography written by a slave from the United States, the *Life* juxtaposes a religious exegesis based on the textual authority of the Qur’an with a first-person account of Omar’s life. Only recently rediscovered, having been found in a trunk in a Virginia attic in 1995 and sold to a private collector after being lost since 1920, the manuscript has sparked renewed interest in writings by enslaved Muslims in America, and in particular Omar’s literacy in Arabic and his religious training. Omar’s *Life* is a hybrid narrative: it is a slave narrative, a spiritual narrative, and a quasi-conversion narrative. This essay examines two critical moments in Omar’s life—his Arabic writings on the walls of a Fayetteville, North Carolina, jail during his imprisonment and his ambiguous relationship

to Christianity later in life. Omar's meditation on the Qur'anic chapter *Al-Mulk*, which means "Dominion" or "Sovereignty," encapsulates the contradictions between these narrative modes, challenges the religious sanction of slavery, and undermines the practice of granting slaveholders dominion over other human beings.

While the paucity of primary sources has made scholarly research of antebellum Muslims rather difficult, scholars have pieced together the story of enslaved African Muslims in America from a variety of sources. In the 1940s, the oral history narratives published by the Works Progress Administration generated a cycle of renewed inquiry, which led to the discovery of Muslim forenames and surnames among many Muslim descendants. Allan Austin's *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Source Book* (1984) is perhaps the earliest attempt to record and study the lives of enslaved Muslims. Austin's subsequent publication, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (1997), revealed that the Hausa, the Mandingo or "bookmen," and the educated Fulani from West Africa were part of the slave population. Similarly, Sylviane Diouf's *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (1998) posits an impressive catalog of descriptions of cultural and political life, which depicts African Muslims throughout the Western hemisphere as well-read, well-traveled, cosmopolitan, multilingual, courageous, and resourceful, seizing opportunities even in unfamiliar surroundings (1998).¹ Those who wrote a variety of texts all used Arabic as their vehicle of communication and Islam as their vehicle of liberation (Diouf 1998, 39). Ronald Judy's *Dis-forming the*

American Cannon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular (1993) shifts scholarly attention to the richness of vernacular texts in order to highlight the knowledge and acumen of educated enslaved Muslims.² This body of scholarship has made it possible to evaluate Omar's narrative in a renewed way, as demonstrated in Ala Alryyes' *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (2011), a critical edition of Omar's writings that includes multiple translations of Omar's *Life* alongside a facsimile of the original Arabic manuscript and a number of critical essays and commentary on Omar by a range of scholars. In particular, Alryyes provides critical annotations with his translation of the *Life* that highlight the significance of the Qur'an to the *Life* and that call upon scholars to examine more closely the centrality of Omar's Muslim faith to any study of his life and work.



This additional English-language title page of Omar ibn Said's autobiography offers details about how his story was disseminated. Courtesy of the Omar ibn Said Institute.

Omar's Life and the Power of the Qur'an

Omar was a Fulani Muslim tribesman of Futa Toro, modern day Senegal. Born around 1770 and part of a community where the diffusion of knowledge was fully imbedded in the social milieu and geographic landscape, Omar received twenty-five years of religious schooling and made the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Makkah, kept the fast, prayed regularly, and had on occasion engaged in jihad, or “striving.” While the details of Omar’s jihad are unclear, it is worth noting here that classical jurists had distinguished four ways by which the believer could fulfill his jihad obligation—by the heart, the tongue, the hands, and the sword (Willis 1967). After teaching for six years in the Futa Toro, Omar began a new venture as a trader, a known practice among the educated Muslim clerics of West Africa (Alryyes 2011, 3). Fulfilling the obligation to teach and trade earned West African clerics the title of *marabout*.³ The *marabout* would normally travel from one locale to another, teaching religious studies and engaging in business transactions at the same time. Omar was captured in 1807 by slave traders and shipped to Charleston, South Carolina. He recalls, there

came to our country a big army. It killed many people. It took me, and walked me to the big Sea, and sold me into the hand of a Christian man (*Nasrani*) who bought me and walked me to the big Ship in the big Sea.

[W]e sailed in the big Sea for a month and a half until we came to a place called Charleston. (2011, 61–63)

After his first owner died in 1808, Omar was sold to an especially harsh man known only by his last name, Johnson. Johnson exacted extreme physical labor from Omar, who describes himself as “a small man who cannot do hard work” (2011, 63). In 1810, Omar found the means to escape but was later caught and jailed in Fayetteville, North Carolina after he is discovered having “entered [one of] the houses to pray” (63). As Omar recounts, “I saw a young man.... He spoke to his father that he saw a Sudanese man in the house... another man riding a horse with many dogs took me walking with them for twelve miles to a place called Faydel. They took me to a big house [building]” (63).

While imprisoned, Omar wrote his first Arabic petition on the walls of his jail cell. Unable to speak English, he could not say who he was, or where he had come from: but, finding coals in the ashes of his cell Omar filled the walls of the jail with pious petitions from the Qur’an. Omar effectively put the power of the Qur’an to use in order to condemn his treatment while drawing on the mass appeal for his release generated by the local fascination with his Arabic writing on the cell walls. Using the jail as a literary space of protest, Omar turns to the power of writing in order to continue to protest his multiple forms of captivity and petition for his own freedom. Omar’s literacy should be understood as inextricable from his religious knowledge: he not only became fluent in Arabic through his religious education but also would have understood the power of authorship and literacy as vital to human existence, as stated in the Qur’an: “Proclaim! And the Lord is Most Bountiful—He Who taught (the use of) the Pen” (96:3–4). The petitions may have been unreadable to the local population, but, even as a strategy for attracting attention to his plight, the petitions worked: the strange Arabic handwriting on the prison walls drew

the notice of the citizens of Fayetteville, and he was released after spending sixteen days in confinement. This liberation from jail depended, however, on his re-enslavement: he was purchased by John Owen of Bladen County, a general of the southern militia, and the influential Owen family took Omar to their estate, where he lived for the rest of his life.⁴

Omar's early Qur'anic petitions on his jail cell walls led the Owen family to take a special interest in this learned slave's religious education, which led to increased public interest in his religious practices. In 1822, when Omar was more than fifty years old, the family purchased two key texts for him—a translated copy of the Qur'an as well as an Arabic Bible. His encounter with Christianity may be gleaned from his narrative:

I am Omar, I love to read the book, the Great Qur'an.

General Jim Owen and his wife used to read the Bible, they used to read the Bible to me a lot. Allah is our Lord, our Creator, and our Owner and the restorer of our condition, health and wealth by grace and not duty. (Ibn Said 2011, 73)

As public interest in Omar's story grew, many influential individuals, groups, and institutions—including Frances Scott Key, the American Ethnological Society, the American Numismatic Society, and the American College in Beirut, Lebanon—speculated about his religious identity and largely presumed his conversion. An entry in the *African Repository* in June 1869 confirms this presumption; of Omar, it concludes, "His false belief has been supplanted by a true and living faith in Jesus Christ."⁵ Twentieth-century critics and historians alike have assumed or heavily suspected Omar's conversion to Christianity before his death, citing as evidence his possession of this Bible, his writing of the Lord's Prayer and the twenty-third psalm, and conflicting interpretations of Omar by southern whites (who were apparently convinced that he was a Freemason and equally convinced of his conversion to Christianity). In writing about Omar and other educated slaves, critic Patrick Horn notes, "These often-neglected narratives offer insights into the truly multiethnic, transnational nature of American literature; the lives they describe are those of educated travelers and active agents in their own destinies who rely on various tactics to overcome adversity" (2012, 46). Although Horn describes enslaved Muslims as "educated travelers and active agents," he unquestioningly affirms nineteenth-century assumptions about Omar's conversion to Christianity: "Omar's subsequent conversion to Christianity rendered him a celebrity of sorts, and his story was recounted in several religious magazines and pamphlets" (49). Horn argues for Omar's conversion using secondary sources, such as religious magazines and pamphlets, but also notes that "Omar's account stops short of explicitly professing faith in a Christian God or explaining the reasons for his conversion" (50).

Ghada Osman and Camille Forbes provide a new platform for rethinking Omar's complex spiritual identity when they assert, "Omar strategically both identifies and dis-identifies with the Christians/Westerners by whom he was surrounded and influenced... through his specific uses of Qur'anic references, he maintains a distinction between himself as Muslim and the Westerners/Christians with whom he interacts" (2004, 332).⁶ The claims that Omar converted to Christianity disavow the many declarations he made in his own writings, which suggest that he remained a Muslim; more importantly, however, even critical accounts attentive to the complexity of Omar's relationship to Christianity

fail to account for an important Arabic rhetorical strategy of concealing one's true faith—a strategy known as *idtirar* (and *taqiyyah*) in Arabic—which is an important feature of all of Omar's writings as he sought to defy a web of power relations and social pressures. One instance of this strategy of concealment may be detected in Omar's use of the *basmallah*—the phrase beginning nearly every chapter of the Quran and translated fully as “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”—before writing the Lord's Prayer and the twenty-third psalm. Thus, while Omar's precise spiritual identity later in his life is left to speculation, it is most likely more complicated than a simple conversion narrative would presume. He may have yielded to missionary pressure more in appearance than in fact; he may have appreciated the beauty of these scriptures but not their substance; he may have accepted either or both religious doctrines, as a syncretic form of worship not unlike the forms in many parts of the antebellum South, where slaves combined African indigenous belief with Christianity. Perhaps Omar had momentarily hoped that if he served his master who rescued him from prison, caused no trouble, and honored his master's religion, then he might be treated better. If such possibilities cannot be proven true or false, then it is equally important to recognize that neither do Omar's manuscripts show proof of his conversion.

Yet the question remains, for whom had Omar written these documents? Certainly the Owen family could not read Arabic, and his texts were not readily accessible among the plantation slaves who had the capacity to read them. In fact, they were not addressed to anyone in particular. It would appear that Omar was engaged in purposeful deception and self-preservation, using Arabic as a language of dissimulation to guard or preserve his life in a time of danger. It is possible that Omar also realized that he might make something reasonably comfortable out of an apparently helpless situation. He was not free, and he obviously did not want to be resold. The Owen family did not require him to perform hard labor in his remaining years in the involuntary servitude.

Omar's Exegesis of Al-Mulk

Omar's *Life* takes into account various complex relations of the elements of faith and practice. He begins the narrative with the sixty-seventh chapter of the Qur'an, *al-Mulk*. It begins with the *basmallah*, which, as noted above, precedes nearly every chapter in the Qur'an and is a common invocation in Muslim communal doctrine. *Al-Mulk* takes into account complex human relations of power, including dominion, authority, sovereignty, and control. Omar employs these verses—and indeed the whole chapter of *al-Mulk*—as a mechanism for transferring power from the supporters of slavery to God, who holds dominion over all humankind. And it is this acknowledgment of God's absolute power that enables Omar to undermine Christian justifications for slavery and empower himself to rise above the sufferings caused by enslavement.

The use of *al-Mulk* as a prologue to the narrative is a strategic part of the text's exhorting message against the institution of slavery. Within the first lines, *al-Mulk* points to the problem of human ownership: “Blessed is He (God) in whose hands is the dominion; and He is able to do all things” (67:1). Omar wisely raises the problem of his servitude within the prologue, citing *al-Mulk* to lay bare the linkages between his servile condition and the knowledge of his faith and the power of his creator. It is here that Omar reveals

his secret thoughts about his captivity, about the tensions between master and slave as well as his plan to overthrow the system of oppression *spiritually*. Indeed the repetition of custody, control, ownership, and absolute power turns up throughout the thirty verses of the Qur'anic chapter in very pointed terms. *Al-Mulk's* exegesis highlights these terms in order to challenge the power of the servile estate and practice of servitude.

Influential Muslim theologian and philosopher Fark al-Din al-Razi said that *al-Mulk* stands for the power, might, and authority of God both in the visible and invisible world (Asad 1993, 879). It would seem that Omar's reading of *al-Mulk* could counsel revolt by laying bare the sharp disparity between God's authority over humankind and the institution of slavery, in which some humans claim absolute authority over others. According to Muhammad Asad in his *Message of the Qur'an*, "The fundamental idea running through the whole of *al-Mulk* is man's inability to ever encompass the mysteries of the universe with his earthbound knowledge and hence his utter dependence on guidance through divine revelation" (1993, 879). The etymological and lexicographical meanings of the term *al-Mulk* (which include derivations meaning "property" and "a deed of ownership") contribute to the hermeneutic complexities of its inclusion in the narrative. Prominent Qur'an scholar Al-Zamakshari (1075–1144 CE) states that *al-Mulk* means "God's dominion," which occurs in the first verse of the chapter. But *al-Mulk* has also been designated as "the Saving One," *al-Munjiyah*, and as "the Preserving One," *al-Waqiyah* (Asad 1993, 879). These terms point to the dichotomy of servitude and to Omar's juxtaposition through subversive means, and stress the unfathomable quality of God's existence and power.

"The Saving One," *al-Munjiyah*, and "the Preserving One," *al-Waqiyah*, have direct reference to Omar's oppressed condition, providing an opening through which his redemptive voice emerges. With regards to Omar's oppressed condition, nodal Qur'anic verses one and two explicitly mention death and life: "Blessed be He in whose hands is Dominion; And He over all things Hath Power: He who has created death and life that he may try which of you is best in deeds" (1781–90). Yusuf Ali's exegesis notes that "*mulk*" means "dominion," "lordship," and "sovereignty," and that "*mulk*" and "*malakut*" are from the same root. "*Malakut*" refers to "lordship" in the invisible world, but "*mulk*" refers to the visible world (Qur'an, 1781 n. 5555). Ali notes that death before life makes reference to another Qur'anic chapter, 2:28: "Seeing that you were without life [literally dead], and He gave you life; then He will cause you to die, and will bring you back to life again" (1781 n. 5556).⁷ Particularly evident are references to man's punishment in verses six and seven of *al-Mulk*: "When they are cast into that [hell], they will hear its breath indrawing [sobbing] as it boils up....[I]ts keepers will ask them, has no warner ever come to you?" When we consider Omar's case against slavery and the servile estate, the interpretation of *al-Mulk* is influential in his condemnation.

What these descriptive terms share is Omar's interest in asserting God's dominion and His immanent punishment for those who are evil or wicked in their treatment of others. The message is explicitly stated in verses sixteen and seventeen of *al-Mulk*: "Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause you to be swallowed up.... Or do you feel secure that He who is in Heaven will not send against you a violent tornado; So that you shall know how terrible was my warning." *Al-Mulk* also speaks of one's dependence on the Creator, addresses the aspirations of the human soul, and tells of the need to arrive at charitable meaning to understand better the human condition and the idea of creation.

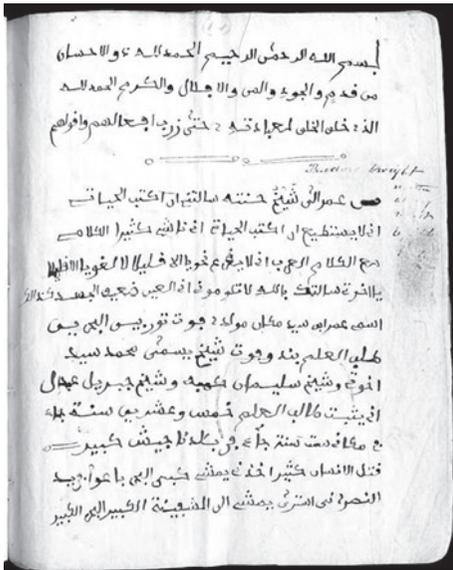
Among a host of eschatological themes, *al-Mulk* speaks of Allah (God) as the eternal, omnipotent creator of the universe, upon whom all life depends. After all, *al-Mulk* takes into account the relation between God and His servants and the emotional struggle to renounce the torment of the grave.

Omar's appropriation of *al-Mulk* introduces the reader to the teleological compression of space and time—the never-ending struggle of life and the ultimate condition of death—in a way that defies the human control over life and death under slavery. His use of *al-Mulk* counsels obedience to Allah and a rejection of the institution of slavery. Indeed, the emancipatory thrust of *al-Mulk* inherently points to Omar's knowledge and to his spiritual realism. The Qur'an also refers to God as *Maaliki yawm-id-deen* (Master of the day of Judgment). *Al-Malik*, with the definite article, is one of the divine names of Allah (*the asma-Allah al-Husana*). This rhetorical gesture of using the Qur'an in an autobiographical narrative is not an established convention in Arabic literature. Although it resonates with the mystical piety common to Sufi literary traditions, it also underscores the centrality of Omar's exegesis of *al-Mulk* to his narrative by a slave who nonetheless uses religious knowledge and literacy to contest the conceptual underpinnings of his enslavement.

By using *al-Mulk* to contrast his servile condition as a slave to all humanity's servile condition to Allah, Omar reveals and undermines the mendacity of slavery.⁸ It was precisely his recognition of this fact that gave him the opportunity to escape from the torture and subjugation of his mental and physical condition. According to one *hadith*—an authentic report transmitted from the prophet—*al-Mulk* endows the reader with an elevated rank, summoning people who care about him and warding off suffering, affliction, and distress. Understood in this way, Omar's description of the servile spaces he encountered, his captivity, and his attempt

to escape provoke several dichotomies comprising of freedom and bondage, self and identity, power and knowledge, center and periphery, and life and death. *Al-Mulk* need not be reserved solely for Qur'anic exegesis, for it transfers most immediately to the second part of the *Life*, which introduces Omar's personal history. Indeed, the prologue, narrative, and epilogue coexist and work together to extend the meaning of his servitude and explain the power of his intellectual prose.

Omar's protest against the servile estate may have coincided with the ideological purge of many abolitionist sympathizers in the South. Even if the narrative was meant to bolster the antislavery complaint, it is clear that Omar's use of the pen highlights the overwhelming interest that he was able to solicit from the plantation aristocracy in North Carolina.



A page from Omar Ibn Said's autobiographical manuscript. Courtesy of the Omar ibn Said Institute.

Conclusion

The Life of Omar Ibn Said, Written by Himself provides an occasion for rethinking rhetorical strategies of spirituality in challenging the dichotomies of servitude and freedom. The narrative represents ibn Said as both a savant and as a slave who used Arabic and Qur'anic rhetorical strategies of protest and concealment to endure his captivity, which reemphasizes the power of writing in precarious, life-threatening circumstances. In his use of rhetorical strategies and tropes, ibn Said continuously negotiates between his faith and his enslavement. His persistent attention to *al-Mulk* as a source transforms the Qur'anic chapter into evidence against the institution of slavery, boldly exposing the unlawfulness of such practices at a spiritual level. By turning the narrative into an epistemological tool against the logic and legality of slavery, ibn Said provides a new framework for understanding the human experience. In light of the current flourishing research perspectives on his life and writings, future studies of the *Life* will contribute, in a wholly transdisciplinary way, to the reevaluation of questions that place the narrative squarely at home with some of the most important texts of its time.

Notes

1. Amongst the most memorable African Muslims in America are Ibrahim Abdur-Rahman, Yarrow Mamout, Lamine Kebe, Bilali Mohammed, and Salih Bilal. Muslim captives included devoted *marabouts* (teachers), *talibs* (student novices), *imams* (prayer leaders) the whole community of *ulama* (scholars); the *alfa* or *charno* (religious leaders), *qadis* (judges), and *huffaz* (memorizers of the Qur'an).
2. Salih Bilali's book was reconstructed from memory and cited excerpts from Abu Zayd al-Qayrawani's *ri-salah*, or Muslim creed of worship, according to the Maliki *madhhab* descendant, Bilali's descendants and Shad Hall of Sapelo (1930 WPA works progress administration interviews); Bilali may have been Frederick Douglass's ancestor (Diouf 1998, 199). Yarrow Mamout is featured in an oil painting by Charles Wilson Peale dated 1819.
3. The etymology of the word "*marabout*" is derived from the term "*al-Murabitun*," or the people of the *ribat*, a place of spiritual devotion and chivalry similar to a monastery; the *murabit* became *marabout* through French usage.
4. John Owen was the twenty-fourth governor of North Carolina (1828–30) and the second owner of Omar ibn Said; ibn Said's third owner was the governor's brother, James Owen.
5. In *The Christian Advocate*, for example, Omar's earlier story of being imprisoned ran as follows: "As no one claimed him, and he appeared of no value, the jail was thrown open, that he might run away; but he had no disposition to make his escape. The cause of the jail being thrown open was, he was found to be 'a bright mason'" (306–07). From what we can tell, ibn Said was certainly not a bright mason. He was educated, and he had mastered Qur'anic teachings adequately before his captivity; he was fully aware that the Qur'an lays stress upon the manumission of slaves. And it would appear that Omar is adapting the discourse of his captors but was ultimately not confined by the rules of that discourse.
6. Osman and Forbes further note, "Fourteen of Omar's manuscripts are extant, thirteen others are quoted by interested parties. His writings include three Lord's Prayers, two twenty-third Psalms, two lists of his masters' family's names, a commentary on Christian prayer, and several parts of the Qur'an. His last known manuscript is a copy of the Qur'anic sura 110, *al-Nasr* [Victory]" (331–43).
7. See Yusuf Ali's translation of *The Holy Qur'an*.
8. For a detailed account of Omar's "Afrika" petition, see John Hunwick, "I wish to be seen in our land called Afrika: Umar B. Sayyid's Appeal to be Released from Slavery (1819)," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 5 (2003–2004): 62–77.

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