

### **3 Captive Scholars**

#### **“3 African scholars who were abducted and enslaved in the U.S.”**

“Salih Bilali was one of the many Muslim scholars who were enslaved in the United States of America during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Known in some sale records as Tom, Salih Bilali was born in Massina, along the Niger River in present-day Mali. His birth date is quite contentious; the Wisconsin Muslim journal says he was born in the 1770s while another account relates that he was born in 1790. He was only 12 years old while returning from Jenne to Kiana on a horse when he was captured and sold into slavery.

He is a slave who has known quite a number of masters because he was transferred from one slaveholder to another. When he was captured, he was taken to Segou where he was also transferred to another master in the Bahamas and then finally to James Hamilton Couper, an American plantation owner who took Salih to Cannon’s Point Plantation on St. Simons Island in Georgia.

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### Omar Ibn Said

Omar Ibn Said was born around 1765 in Futa Toro present-day Senegal and belonged to a wealthy family of the Tukolor Fula ethnic group. His family's wealth afforded him an opportunity to study subjects such as Mathematics and Theology under revered Muslim scholars. Said who was also a tradesman and teacher was documented to have performed his hajj pilgrimage from 1790-1805. He was captured in his and sold into slavery in his early 30s to an American slave trader for a crime that remains obscure. It has been estimated by scholars that the ship that took him to Charleston in South Carolina landed in 1807, the last year before slavery was abolished in the United States even though the act continued.

Said, also known as Prince Omeroh, Omeroh, Moro, Morro, Meroh, Monroe and Uncle Moreau, authored his biography while he was enslaved. The autobiography was part of the fourteen Arabic manuscript written by him and it is the only known Arabic-language autobiography written by an enslaved African in the US.

His literacy in Arabic became famous when he escaped from a harsh master who had purchased him in South Carolina whom Said

describes as a 'small, weak, and wicked man called Johnson, a complete infidel, who had no fear of God at all' in his autobiography. His autobiography, 'Life' recounts the details of his life which include his capture and enslavement, his devotion to Islam and his relationship with Christianity.

When Said escaped from South Carolina, he landed in Fayetteville in North Carolina where he sought he found a church and prayed after seeking a place of worship. Local authorities found him and put him in custody as a runaway. While in custody, he wrote on the walls of the cell in Arabic; a practice that challenged the erroneous assumptions by white people that enslaved Africans were illiterate.

He was eventually purchased by General James Owen, a man of high repute in the area. Owen was praised in Said's autobiography. He described Owen's family as an excellent one in which he has known no wants. He also credited the Owens for his conversion to Christianity. His conversion to Christianity has been debated for a while as evidence of Quranic verses have been found in his bible. For example, he wrote the opening chapter, Surah Fatiha, in his bible allowing white observers to believe it was the Lord's prayer. Another Islamic invocation was found written as part of Psalm.

His Islamic education allowed him to use Arabic to hide his Muslim religious writings. While some people believed his conversion in its entirety, others like a minister in his church were doubtful about Said's complete conversion. He said Said's outward signs presented him as a Christian.

By this, the minister had cast a shadow of doubt on Said's dealings on the inside which would contradict what was seen on the outside. Revelations from his autobiography continuous to leave a confusion as to whether he actually converted to Christianity. He is believed to have died in 94 with the circumstances of his death still being unclear.

Known to his European acquaintances as Job Ben Solomon, Ayyuba Suleiman Diallo was born into a noble family of the Fula tribe in the Senegambia region. He was tutored by his father who was teacher to the king's sons.

From the tutelage of his father and other prominent Islamic scholars, Suleiman became a 'Hafiz', a person who has memorized the entire Quran and assisted his father with imam duties. Before his capture, his father had helped establish the city of Bondu which was previously under the authority of a Mande King. The city of Bondu is home to Suleiman and also significant to the Fulani as it marks the first Fulani Jihad.

Suleiman was captured in 1731 while he was selling goods. He was sent to Annapolis in Maryland, an established port of entry during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. While he was there, he still remained a devout Muslim. He secluded himself in the woods to pray but he was mocked and harassed by white children.

When he could be the treatment and labour on the plantation, he escaped. He was captured and jailed. During his time in jail, he met with the English minister and lawyer, Thomas Bluett who helped him

secure his freedom. Thomas Bluett, took an interest in Diallo's faith during his imprisonment. The former secured a translator, an enslaved person who spoke Wolof, the language of Suleiman's hometown. The minister was told Suleiman's story and agreed to assist him secure his freedom.

Diallo wrote a letter to his father asking him for help to return home. The letter which was given to Bluett went through several hands before reaching James Oglethorpe, who founded the colony of Georgia in 1732. Oglethorpe's familiarity with West Africa enabled him to get the letter to Diallo's father. He also took a special interest in Diallo due to his faith and so he paid for his passage to London and found him employment with the Royal African Company.

Suleiman remained a staunch Muslim, unwavering his faith. During and after his passage to London, the ship's crew observed that he refused wine and also meat that was not slaughtered according to Islamic law. Noticing this, he was allowed to carry the task of slaughtering the animal so he could consume some. He maintained his five daily prayers while aboard the ship. Bluett related his Diallo's 1734 biography that he wrote three copies of the Quran from memory.

After spending time in London and his unsuccessful trade venture with the Royal African company, he eventually returned to Bondu to find that his father had died and his wife had remarried. Due to the sad turn of events, he wrote to his British contacts to enquire about visiting London. His request was denied and the reason for it remains

unclear. His correspondence with his British contacts continued until he died in 1773."

Source: Face 2 Face Africa

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