

**RETHINKING THE BEN ALI DIARY: MULTIPLE CONTEXTS AND  
MUSLIM SLAVES**

by

**Amir Syed**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the reasons why Bilali Mohammed, a Muslim slave who lived on Sapelo Island produced his Arabic document, known as the Ben Ali diary. Although several scholars have studied the document, they have remained silent on why Bilali was literate and why he produced this work. Since the Ben Ali diary deals with Islamic ritual, this paper argues that in order to understand the text it must be intimately connected to Bilali's life in West Africa, and, more specifically, to the spread of religious school during a period of Islamic revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One of the central concerns of this paper is to raise questions about Muslim slave identity, resistance and literacy. It seeks to situate the discussion about the Ben Ali diary in the larger context of African American and American history. While the paper explores the literature on Muslim slaves, it also explores why the historical narratives that scholars produce about America's past silence Islam. Finally, it investigates issues around power and narrativity, and suggests that Islam has been present in the New World since the onset of European colonialism. Consequently, it argues that present-day discourse about the foreignness and "dangers" of Islam in the West, make little sense, and are only legitimized by a complete disregard of this Muslim past.

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## **DEDICATION**

*To Bilali Mohammed, and others like him,  
who the power of narrativity has silenced*

## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1790s Thomas Spalding, an influential Georgian statesman and planter, purchased thousands of acres of land on Sapelo Island, off the coast of Georgia.<sup>1</sup> True to his southern gentlemen pedigree, Spalding operated a lucrative slave plantation, and like others in his social class engaged in a brutal, dehumanizing and exploitative system. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, Spalding had enslaved nearly four hundred human beings of African decent, and coerced them to work his numerous cotton, rice and tobacco fields.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, Spalding's plantation was typical in comparison to other large plantations in both the hierarchical nature of command and in the intensive labor that he required of his slaves. In addition to these similarities, however, the Spalding plantation is also perhaps one of the most important locations for the early history of Islam in the United States. This is because Spalding's head driver was Bilali Mohammed, a Muslim, who before his captivity was a student at one or more religious schools in Timbo, the capital of Futa Jallon (present-day Guinea).<sup>3</sup> Importantly, even after Spalding had enslaved him, Bilali continued to practice his faith, and produced an Arabic document—the Ben Ali diary. Consequently, not only was Bilali in an extremely powerful position on the plantation as a driver, but also by practicing Islam and producing an Arabic work, he connects Islam with early American history. Indeed, while Spalding was an advocate of slavery, by the very fact that he owned and operated a

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<sup>1</sup> Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland, 1984), 268.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> William S. McFeely, *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk into Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1994), 35.

plantation—and there is nothing romantic about white supremacy or slavery—his plantation or more specifically, his driver raises several important questions about the Islamic history of America. Part of this history is underpinned by the fact that Islam was amongst the very first religious traditions practiced in the newly formed United States, and it makes little sense to suggest that Islam is “Eastern” or “Other.” Put differently, Islam has been present in the United States since its very inception as a nation-state, and Bilali’s example highlights that Islam *is* American.

Significantly, Bilali’s position as a Muslim is not unique in the history of the New World since perhaps tens of thousands of other Muslims arrived in the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, an expanding number of scholarly works and monographs highlight that many countries in Latin and North America had substantial Muslim slave populations as early as the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, over the past twenty-five years Allan D. Austin, Paul E. Lovejoy, Sylviane Diouf, Michael A. Gomez, and João José Reis, to name a few, have demonstrated from court records, police documents, newspapers, the dairies of slave-holders, and Muslim religious artifacts—prayer beads and prayer mats—that some slaves engaged in overt Islamic practices in many parts of Latin and North America, such as, Brazil, Jamaica, and America.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, it is possible that out of the approximately 229,000 slaves that entered the

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<sup>4</sup> See, Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*; Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Michael Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Ronald A.T. Judy, *Disforming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in slavery: a history of slavery in Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion In Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 Bahia*, trans. Arthur Brakel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Gomez, *Black Crescent*, x.

United States, 50,786 or 22% were from the Senegambia region of West Africa—a region that had a high concentration of Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Added to this is that many Muslim slaves, like Bilali, were literate, and wrote—in Arabic—letters, biographical works, and religious treatises, leaving an undeniable mark on the corpus of African American literature.<sup>7</sup> In short, there is enough evidence, both material and documentary, to support the fact that Islam and its practitioners have been present in the New World since the beginnings of European colonialism.

Yet, despite this evidence, many scholars have not investigated the Islamic or otherwise non-Christian history of the Americas, and therefore what remains is a conventional narrative of the United States that silences, not only Islam, but other non-Christian religious traditions from the historical registry. This is surprising because over the last several decades, scholars have produced extremely nuanced and thoughtful works in which they have attempted to investigate slave agency, and the way that slaves created a world for themselves. Specifically, many of these works have focused explicitly on the way the institution of slavery functioned and the diverse ways slaves resisted, accommodated and attempted to live within this institution. In this regard, perhaps two publications, Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, and Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* underscore the sensitivity that scholars now have in exploring the intricacies of slave life, and highlight the dynamic relationship slaves had with their masters. However, while both scholars

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<sup>6</sup> Sylviane A. Diouf, "From West Africa to the Americas: Muslims and the Transatlantic Slave Trade," *Seasons*, Spring-Summer (2005), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*, 85-88.

provide synthetic narratives about slave life and how the institutions of slavery functioned in the United States, they privilege Christianity, and define the religious practices of slaves as fundamentally Christian.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, like the overwhelming majority of works that investigate the history of slavery in the United States, these works do not take into account the experiences of Muslim slaves and therefore they remain silent on Islam's relationship to slave religion.<sup>9</sup> What remains then is a canon of works on slavery in which the idea that Muslim slaves ever existed in the Americas simply appears to be "unthinkable."

It may very well be that historians, such as, Berlin and Genovese have unconsciously silenced Islam from the larger narrative of African-American and indeed American history. This then raises questions about the narrative practices of historians, and the way that the categories of analysis and analytic frameworks they employ blind them from reclaiming crucial elements of the past. Part of the problem is that in a narrative reality is "distorted" and only certain aspects of an event are ever represented, and therefore a narrative always contains a "particular bundle of silences."<sup>10</sup> These silences are always implicated with power in terms of what becomes source material, how accessible these sources are, what "facts" take precedence, and who the narrator is.

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<sup>8</sup> See, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 3, 7, 162, 282; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003), 15-16, 161.

<sup>9</sup> See, Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). While both of these authors suggest that Muslim slaves were present in the United States, they nevertheless treat the subject matter as an aside to the larger narrative of slavery they wish to highlight.

<sup>10</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.

Put differently, by creating narratives, historians always engage in a process of silencing, and this process is always implicated with power.<sup>11</sup> The consequence of power in relation to the production of narratives entails that certain narratives become more influential than others and can fundamentally shape the discourse about an event. As a result, narratives can become powerful instruments that influence the way scholars view the past or an event, and more importantly in how they produce new narratives about the past or an event. For this reason, the narratives that historians produce about America's past are simply a reproduction of a more powerful meta-narrative in which Islam is silenced.

While it is difficult to explore the multiple facets that constitute this powerful meta-narrative, what partially underpins it are certain historic and imbedded prejudices in the West about Muslims and Islam. Indeed since the Middle Ages, Europeans have had a contentious, polemical and often violent relationship with Muslims and Islam, underscored by ideas of Christian superiority, and the belief in the heretical nature of Islam.<sup>12</sup> With the rise of the New Imperialism in the nineteenth century, the Middle East became an object of European colonialism, power, and imagination. In this regard, Edward Said in *Orientalism* explores how Europeans constructed the "Orient" and associated with it "the deepest and most reoccurring images of the Other," which "helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Europeans not only constructed the "Orient," but also linked this

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion about how medieval Europeans viewed Muslims and Islam see, John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)

<sup>13</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 2.

construction with everything that was “un-European.” Furthermore, the discourse and ideas that the European imagination of the Orient produced have also played, and continue to play a role in the United States. In this regard, Timothy Marr argues “Islam has figured in the fashioning of North American cultural definitions since as far back as the first years of European settlement,” in what he dubs “American Islamicism.”<sup>14</sup> Like the European notion of the “Orient,” Marr argues “the Islamic orient was conceived by many Americans as a vicious realm of inhumane bondage, unstable tyranny, illicit sensuality, and selfish luxury that symbolized the dangerous forces that threatened their fledgling political rights and freedoms.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the American imagination, Islam and Muslims have always been associated and perceived as the Other and signify everything that is “un-American.” Consequently, it is not difficult to see how this historical othering of Muslims in American culture has translated into the silencing of Muslims from narratives about America’s past.

This power of narrativity also plays a central role in present-day discourse about the incompatibility and foreignness of Islam and Muslims in the West, and the silencing of Islam from the past helps to anchor and legitimize such discourse. Since September 11<sup>th</sup> and the subsequent launch of the United State’s War on Terror, a host of self appointed “experts” on Islam have begun to increasingly clamor vociferously about the “dangers” of Islam to Western values and democracy, and in the process incite hate using extreme anti-Muslim language. For example, the far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders,

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

speaking recently in California, highlights this point lucidly. He argues that there is an imminent Islamic “threat” and pleads with his audience to take action saying

we have to stop the Islamization of the West. Because if we don't, we will roll back centuries, it will mean the end of our civilization. If we don't act now, we will betray our Western values, we will lose our culture, we will lose our democracy and we will lose the dearest of our many liberties: the right to speak our mind.<sup>16</sup>

Wilders resorts to fearmongering to argue that Islam is encroaching on “Western values” and this requires some preventative measures, because for him the presence of Islam spells the end of “Western” civilization. But what precisely constitutes this civilization for Wilders? He spells this out, using a simplistic and nonsensical “us” versus “them” dichotomy saying “our Western culture based on christianity, judaism and humanism is far better than the barbaric islamic culture,” and consequently he argues that fundamentally there is a “clash between the West and Islam that it is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between rationality and barbarity.”<sup>17</sup> In Wilders imagination the West is a homogenized category that represents progress, rationality, democracy and freedom, unlike Islam, which is quite the opposite. However, as Said reminds us “we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment, and democracy are by no means simple and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find, like Easter eggs in the living room.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the West is a heterogeneous and contested category, and it is worth mentioning to Islamophobic politicians, scholars and polemicist, such as, Daniel Pipes, David Horowitz,

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=A1026AE7-EED9-43E1-838F-56A487C689F5>. Accessed April 11, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, xix.

and Geert Wilders, the category West itself is constitutive of Islam.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps for this reason, it becomes important to challenge this meta-narrative, and force scholars to become more self-aware so that the narratives they produce about America's past are inclusive of Islam.

In focusing specifically on Bilali, it is against this meta-narrative that makes him a significant person of historical inquiry since he forcibly challenges misleading notions about America's past, and highlights that as a Muslim he is part of that past. In this regard, while the nascent literature on Muslim slaves is certainly important in highlighting an early Islamic presence in the New World, it does not investigate what significance this presence holds for African-American and American history, and indeed present-day discourse about the foreignness and "dangers" of Islam in the West. Consequently, in relation to Bilali, much of his life remains obscure. Nothing speaks more poignantly to this than the fact that no one has raised the fundamental question of why Bilali was literate in the first place, and explores why he wrote his Arabic manuscript, the Ben Ali diary. I am convinced that in order to reintegrate Islam into the master narrative of American history, there requires a nuanced and careful reexamination of the lives of Muslim slaves. In the case of Bilali, understanding why he was literate and exploring his text may have important implications for recovering this Muslim past, and moreover for understanding Muslim slave identity and resistance. Without such an exploration it is difficult to appreciate how (literate) Muslim slaves understood the

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<sup>19</sup> For more on Daniel Pipes see, <http://www.danielpipes.org/>, <http://www.campus-watch.org/>, and <http://www.meforum.org/>. For David Horowitz see, <http://www.frontpagemag.com>.

institution of slavery and answer whether they were able to create a world for themselves that was distinct from other slaves.

While a careful investigation of Muslim slaves has ramifications for the very identity of American “culture,” my intentions in this paper are far more humble. In revisiting Bilali, I wish to simply stimulate discussion that hopefully will produce more nuanced works on the presence of Islam in the New World, and ultimately “unsilence” Muslim slaves from narratives about America’s past. Indeed, in a time where Muslims have increasingly become the Other in the West, perhaps such works are now paramount. Certainly, if we want to envision a different future that is absent of hate, fearmongering and polemics, then we must critically engage and reorient our assumptions about the past. Specifically in relation to Islam, without engaging carefully with this Muslim past in the New World, we cannot truly understand our present, and ultimately we will not be able to envision a different future.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I take this idea from David Scott, who argues that the way we view the present is intimately tied into the narratives we construct about the past, and this has consequences for how we envision our future. See, David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND THE BEN ALI DIARY

Bilali's work is thirteen pages long in Arabic, and although it is over a hundred and fifty year old, it continues to remain elusive, which highlights that scholars have not done enough to flush out its significance. Since the first decade of the nineteenth century it has been housed in the Georgia State Library's Rare Books and Manuscript section, where a number of scholars have had an opportunity to study it. Indeed, a quick glance at some of these studies reveals that scholars are yet to ask fundamental questions relating to why Bilali wrote the text.

Perhaps one of the first encounters with the Ben Ali diary was in the 1890s by the author Joel Chandler Harris, who considered Bilali an Arab prince who wrote about his experiences in a diary.<sup>21</sup> Needless to say that Harris certainly did not know Arabic, and instead of acknowledging that Bilali was a black African slave, he cast him as an Arab prince. Certainly this is reflective of Marr's notion of "American Islamicism" because for Harris, Bilali's writing was so exotic that it could only come from an Arab, who was a prince and not from an enslaved African in America. It was only four decades later, in 1940, when Joseph Greenberg, a student of the Africanist Melville Herskovits, studied the text that scholars learned that it dealt with Islamic ritual and was not a diary at all. After visiting Nigeria, Greenberg argued that Bilali's text resembled an Islamic ritual manual from 945 AD—the *Risala* of Ibn Abi Zayd—which was commonly studied in North and West Africa.<sup>22</sup> He also highlighted that Bilali's usage of Arabic did not

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<sup>21</sup> Yusef Progler 'Ben Ali and his Arabic diary: Encountering an African Muslim in Antebellum America,' *Muslim & Arab Perspectives: International Islamic Journal*, Vol. 5-11 (1998-2004), 36.

conform to the Arabic used in the *Risala*, and that Bilali did not always follow Arabic syntactic, grammatical and spelling conventions. Subsequently, other scholars continued to support the view that the text was indeed the *Risala*, and added further that Bilali, having studied this text, was also in the process of becoming, or already had become an Imam (religious leader) in West Africa.<sup>23</sup> More recently, however, Ronald A.T. Judy and Yusef Progler have argued that the Ben Ali diary varies too much from the *Risala*—both linguistically and in content—and instead they argue Bilali produced an original composition.<sup>24</sup> Thus, after over a hundred years, scholars have so far only classified the text within a specific genre—ritual/legal—translated what Bilali wrote and investigated the linguistic complexity of the document. What strikes me is that this is an Arabic document from the early history of America, and no scholar has yet to ask why Bilali knew Arabic. More importantly, why haven't scholars attempted to connect this document with larger questions about Muslim slave identity, resistance and literacy? Needless to say, this pernicious indifference on the part of scholars to the works of Muslim slaves, like the Ben Ali diary, has helped to trivialize Islam's history in the New World.

I have noted that the Ben Ali diary is an Arabic work that is over a hundred years old, and perhaps this is a sufficient enough reason to explore the text, but I want to also highlight what Bilali wrote in case it is not clear why it is a text that deals with Islamic ritual. On pages seven and eight of the document, Bilali gives a detailed and lucid

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph H. Greenberg "The Decipherment of the "Ben-Ali Diary," a Preliminary Statement," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July, 1940), 373.

<sup>23</sup> See, Ausin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*, 86-87.

<sup>24</sup> For the linguistic and textual differences between the *Risala* and the "Ben Ali Diary" see, Judy, *Disforming the American Canon*, 228-250.

description about how one would go about making ablution or *wudu'* before prayer. He writes:

one begins ablution [*wudu'*] with the *basmala* [saying in the name of God the Most Merciful, the Most Beneficent]. Then one washes the right hand with water, three times, then washes the left hand three times. With both the right and left hand one washes the mouth with water three times, and cleans the nose with water three times. Then one washes the face three times, and washes the right arm until the elbow, and then the left arm until the elbow. After that, one puts a hand on each ear, and then wipes the head, starting from the forehead until the collarbone. Finally one washes the right foot until the ankle and then the left foot until the ankle, three times, and ends with a supplication: Oh Allah, I bear witness that there is no god but Allah in His unity and I do not associate partners with Him...<sup>25</sup>

Bilali's description of *wudu'* suggests that he clearly knew how to perform this ritual, and was able to take this knowledge and articulate it through writing. Consequently, even though the text is over a century old, it is still possible to read the text and know exactly how to make *wudu'*.

Besides this description of *wudu'* Bilali gives another detailed description on how one should make the call for prayer or *adhan*. He writes:

the call to prayer is: God is Great, God is Great. I bear witness that there is no god but God, I bear witness that there is no god but God. I bear witness that Muhammed is the messenger of God, I bear witness that Muhammed is the messenger of God. Come to prayer, come to prayer. Come to success, come to success. Prayer is better than sleep, prayer is better than sleep. God is great. There is no god but God.<sup>26</sup>

It is noteworthy, again, that Bilali clearly knew this ritual and was able to express it in a way that is easy to understand and follow.

While Bilali's description of *wudu'* and *adhan* are perhaps the clearest and most detailed instructions on Islamic ritual in his text, he does go into some detail in explaining Muslim prayer or *salat*. However, his explanation of *salat* is not complete, and it is not

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<sup>25</sup> I have translated this based on my reading of photographs of the Ben Ali diary, and Judy's transcription of Bilali's handwriting into typed Arabic text found in Judy, *Disforming the American Canon*, 228-236.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

apparent from reading this explanation how one would perform Islamic ritual prayer. I must mention that there are six pages of the document that are illegible and difficult to decipher, and there may be a page or two missing from the text.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, in these pages Bilali may have further elaborated on *salat* and may have also given detailed instructions on how to perform it.

From the content that is decipherable of the text, however, it is apparent that Bilali elaborates on two Islamic rituals fully, and partially gives an account of another ritual. There is no indication that Bilali deals with other Muslim rituals such as the *hajj*—the pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims must perform at least once, provided they are physically and financially able to—and *zakat*—obligatory almsgiving. Regardless, the text is clearly instructive in nature, and at no point in the document does Bilali write about himself, or any of his experiences, but instead he restricts himself to describe Islamic ritual. Bilali clearly knew these practices and was able to use the Arabic language as a vehicle to write and express these practices coherently and methodically. So while he did not write about himself, by using Arabic and writing about Muslim rituals, he was clearly asserting his Muslim identity in perhaps a largely non-Muslim context. But to reiterate my earlier point, it is baffling that scholars have not raised the question about why a slave was even writing about Muslim ritual.

Given the above scholarly lacunae, to rethink about the Ben Ali diary, and perhaps understand why Bilali wrote it necessarily involves an exercise in reinterpreting the past, and it is at this juncture where my task becomes difficult. Part of the challenge is that in order to apprehend Bilali as a subject of the past, I have to employ categories and

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<sup>27</sup> Progler, 'Ben Ali and his Arabic diary,' 34.

analytic frameworks, such as, “West Africa” that are imbedded with assumptions that may lead me to obscure aspects of the past. Yet, at the same time it is not possible to study the past without making assumptions and using categories and analytic frameworks. Thus, by the very fact that we understand the world through categories means that we always engage in a process of silencing, and this creates epistemological problems in how we come to understand the past. Admittedly, I do not have an answer that could resolve this tension between the necessities of using categories to study the past, which, by their very nature also help to silence the past. Added to this problem is that the theoretical work on Muslim slave literature is non-existent, so there is no work that could help me engage with Bilali’s text more carefully. Fortunately, there exists enough theoretical literature about interpreting texts, more generally, which at the very least can make me more self-aware and critical of the categories I choose to use, and perhaps make this enterprise of reinterpreting the Ben Ali diary not completely futile.

One approach that seems particularly useful in deciphering texts is the interpretive strategy employed by Dominick Lacapra. In essence, Lacapra argues that texts do not have a single context but instead they must be interpreted through their “multiple contexts.”<sup>28</sup> The idea that texts have multiple contexts and that they need to be interpreted within these contexts can be effectively applied to study the Ben Ali diary. To arrive at a text’s multiple contexts Lacapra argues that a reader must use a dialogical approach. In other words he argues that texts should not be read merely as documents, but instead a

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<sup>28</sup> Lacapra argues that since people and the world can become “textualized” because meaning is assigned to the world through language, this provides multiple possibilities in how a text can be understood, which means that a text can have multiple contexts, or sites of interpretation. Therefore, Lacapra proposes that texts need to be interpreted through their multiple contexts in order to grasp the tensions, contradictions and submerged aspects within them. See, Dominick Lacapra “*Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts*,” *History & Theory* 19 (Oct. 1980), 254.

reader must have a dialogue with the text.<sup>29</sup> The implication of this is that the reader “speaks” to the text and the past through the texts “speaks” back to the reader. In this dialogue between the text and the reader, the text may contest and contradict the frames of references and categories that the reader deploys to understand the text, and in fundamental ways, may force the reader to reformulate his or her questions and open new possibilities for interpretation.<sup>30</sup> Thus in a dialogue, the Ben Ali diary forcefully challenges the assumption that all slaves were by definition Christian, and more specifically “tells” us that its production does not begin in the United States exclusively, but instead it is intimately connected to West Africa. Even though this may seem obvious, no one has explained this connection either.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>31</sup> Progler makes a connection between West Africa and Bilali’s text, but he doesn’t explain why this is the case, nor does he explain why Bilali was literate. See, Progler, ‘Ben Ali and his Arabic diary,’ 35-36.

## BILALI IN WEST AFRICA

To connect the Ben Ali diary to West Africa, it goes without saying that I need to explore Bilali's life in West Africa during the late eighteenth century, but I also think it might be useful to begin this discussion many centuries earlier, in order to understand the significant impact Islam had in this part of the world. Needless to say that by the eighteenth century Islam was not a new religion, but had permeated West African society for almost a millennium, and therefore was simply another religion in the region. Indeed, from the ninth century, Muslim traders from North Africa had permeated the interior of West Africa and in the process spread their faith.<sup>32</sup> Facilitating this spread of Islam was that "some fundamental features of traditional [African] religions and customs, such as the ritual immolation of animals, circumcision, polygamy, communal prayers, divination, and amulet making, also were present in Islam."<sup>33</sup> Consequently, between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, during the reign of the Ghana, Mali and Songhay empires, Muslims became increasingly important figures, and through trading, and shifting political circumstances, "little by little Islam gained ruling classes and urban peoples north of the Senegal and along the vast sweep of the Niger buckle."<sup>34</sup> Thus, at the dawn of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade "Islam and Islamic populations quickly became an

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<sup>32</sup> Mervyn Hiskett, *The Course of Islam in Africa* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 92.

<sup>33</sup> Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> John Spencer Trimingham, *A history of Islam in West Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 29.

integral part of the West African landscape,” and it comes as no surprise that Europeans also transported Muslims to the New World.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the greatest expansion of Islam in West Africa began by the Fulani—Bilali’s ethnic and linguistic group—who had adopted Islam and spread out of the Senegal valley in the tenth century.<sup>36</sup> With the collapse of the Songhay Empire sometime in the late fifteenth century, the Fulani quickly began to acquire new land and aggressively campaigned to spread Islam.<sup>37</sup> In the Senegambia region alone, the Fulani had consolidated power in Futa Jallon, Futa Toro and Bondu, before starting their expansion eastward into the former Songhay lands.<sup>38</sup> As a consequence, the Fulani appointed an *almamy* or *imam* (religious leader) to rule, effectively creating three imamates or theocracies on the western coast of Africa.<sup>39</sup> Thus, by the seventeenth century Islam became vibrant in those regions of West Africa, which had not been previously conquered by the Ghana, Mali or Songhay empires. In short, Bilali lived in a time when Islamic revival in West Africa was at its greatest, and vast tracts of land fell under the reign of Muslim rulers. This Islamic revival certainly coincided with the height of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and again, it comes as no surprise that self-conscious Muslims, like Bilali, also arrived in the New World as slaves.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> For more information about Fulani expansion in West Africa, Islamic Schools, and West African history see; John S. Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa*; John S. Trimingham, *The Influence of Islam Upon West Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1968); Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (New York: Longman, 1984); Basil Davidson, *West Africa Before the Colonial Era: A History to 1850* (New York: Longman, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Davidson, *West Africa Before the Colonial Era*, 86-88.

<sup>39</sup> Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 24.

Both the Fulani Islamic revival, and indeed the spread of Islam since the eleventh century in West Africa were buttressed by thousands of educational institutions, which provided religious instruction that helped to inculcate a strong Muslim identity amongst various ethnic and linguistic groups. Already in the fifteenth century the Algerian scholar Muhammad Al-Maghili, noted that a town like Kano (in present day Nigeria) boasted three thousand teachers, and Timbuktu in Mali had over one hundred and fifty functioning religious schools, highlighting the importance of teaching and learning for Muslims.<sup>40</sup> Writing in 1775 about Bondou—situated in between Futa Jallon and Futa Toro, on the Senegal River—Mungo Park, the Scottish traveler observed many Fulani religious schools and his observations are worth quoting at length:

A large majority of the inhabitants of Bondou, are Mussulmen [Muslims] and the authority and laws of the Prophet, are every where looked upon as sacred and decisive...Religious persecution is not known among them, nor is it necessary; for the system of Mahomet [Muhammed] is made to extend itself by means abundantly more efficacious. By establishing small schools in the different towns, where many of the Pagan as well as Mohamedan children are taught to read the Koran, and instructed in the tenets of the Prophet, the Mahomedan priests fix a bias on the minds, and form the character of their young disciples, which no accidents of life can ever afterwards remove or alter. Many of these little schools I visited in my progress through the country, and observed with pleasure the great docility and submissive deportment of the children.<sup>41</sup>

Park's observations underscore the deep religious sentiments that the Fulani had during this period of revival, the role of schools in giving this sentiment expression and spreading Islamic knowledge, and shaping a Muslim identity from an early age. His observation about the inculcation of a Muslim identity to Fulani children, "which no accidents of life can ever afterwards remove or alter" is quite telling and so it is clear that the spread of schools and Islamic scholarship certainly helped to create a strong Muslim

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa 1775*, Kate Ferguson Marsters ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 106.

identity. Furthermore, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Futa Jallon had three thousand religious schools, indicating that Bilali was part of a society that valued education and the instructive nature of his text is clearly reflective of this.<sup>42</sup>

While religious schools were fundamental in the spread of Islam and Islamic scholarship in West Africa, they were also responsible for spreading literacy. Consequently, religious schools not only helped fashion Muslim identities through instruction, they also provided students with the necessary tools to become literate. In the early 1800s, the journalist Theodore Dwight, Jr., conducted an interview with Lamin Kebe—a Muslim slave in the United States, who was, like Bilali, also a product of West African religious schools. Providing important insight into Islam and Fulani religious schools, he writes:

unlike Popery, it [Islam] favors, nay, requires, as a fundamental principle, the free and universal reading and study of their sacred book; and instead of withholding it from the people under penalties of death and perdition, it establishes schools for all classes, primarily to teach its languages and doctrines. Extracts from the Koran form the earliest reading lessons of children, and the commentaries and other works founded upon it furnish the principal subjects of the advanced studies.”<sup>43</sup>

From Dwight’s conclusions it is possible to see the importance of religious schools in spreading Islam, and also the fundamental role schools played in fostering literacy among Muslims through the “free and universal reading and study of their sacred book,” regardless of their “class.” By suggesting that the Koran formed “the earliest reading lessons of children,” Dwight highlights that since the Koran is in Arabic, from the onset of education, children began to, at the very least, read Arabic. Fundamental to religious

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Theodore Dwight Jr., “Address to the American Lyceum,” in Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 422.

education and the spread of Islam then, was also instruction in how to read Arabic, and therefore students that attended religious schools all at least had a basic proficiency in Arabic.

Bilali certainly would have experienced the spread of religious schools and literacy during the Fulani Islamic revival because Timbo was a major economic and political center of Futa Jallon, specifically known for its trade markets, manufacturing of goods, and scholarly activity.<sup>44</sup> In 1828, a missionary named Thomas Gallaudet observed many of the distinct qualities of this capital, and more importantly commented on the impact schools had in spreading literacy. He notes:

at [sic] Teembo, which is about 160 miles distant from Sierra Leone, they manufacture narrow cloths, of which their dress is composed, and work in iron, silver, wood, and leather...The markets and channels of trade are under the regulation of the King. As there are schools in every town, the majority of the people are able to read, and many possess books of law and divinity.—They profess the Mohametan Religion [Islam], have numerous mosques, and are not bigots though they pray fives times in the day. <sup>45</sup>

Gallaudet highlights that Timbo was a vibrant city of trade and manufacturing, and because of its many schools “the majority of the people were able to read.” In addition, many people in Timbo possessed “books of law and divinity,” and the presence of “numerous mosques” meant that Timbo was a scholarly town with an active religious population. Thus, Bilali spent his formative years in a major religious center, where he was around people who read, and also acquired the ability to read himself in one of the town’s many religious schools.

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas H. Gallaudet, “Abduhl Rahahman,” *New York Journal of Commerce* (October, 16 1828), reproduced in Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 174.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

Clearly Bilali was literate precisely because he attended one or more religious school(s) in Timbo, but this still does not explain why he was able to produce the Ben Ali diary, in a fundamentally different context from West Africa. In my view, Bilali's ability to produce the Ben Ali diary is a consequence of the unique pedagogy that underpinned, and continues to underpin, West African religious schools. In this regard, Dwight in writing again about Lamén Kebe's schooling experience, sketches some important aspects about how these schools functioned:

his scholars, according to the plan pursued in his education, were seated on the floor, each upon a sheepskin, and with a small boards held upon one knee, rubbed over with a whitish chalk or powder, on which they were made to write with pens made of reeds, and ink which they form with care, of various ingredients. The copy is set by the master by tracing the first words of the Koran with a dry reed, which removes chalk where it touches. The young pupil follows these marks with ink, which is afterwards rubbed over with more chalk. They are called up three at a time to recite to the master, who takes the boards from them, makes them turn their backs to him, and repeat what they were to do the previous day, which they have a decided interest in doing to the best of their recollections; because it is the custom to mark every mistake with the stroke of a stick upon the shoulders.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the Fulani lands (and other parts of West Africa) religious schools followed a similar pattern of teaching and learning, whether the students were studying the Koran or other religious texts. In my own experience, having visited several "traditional" religious schools in Senegambia in 2005, I noticed that students would copy certain parts of a text onto a wooden board (known as a *lawh*) and then begin to memorize what they had written down. Once they had fully memorized and mastered this portion of the text, they would recite it in front of their teacher(s), who would check for mistakes and provide a commentary of what the student had just learned. Through this method of writing and memorizing, eventually the Koran and other texts, in their entirety, would become etched in a student's memory, so that a student could subsequently move around and teach it to

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<sup>46</sup> Dwight, "Address to the American Lyceum," 417.

other people, repeating the process once again. The various religious clerics I spoke to, including Shaykh Subki Sylla, and Shaykh Ahmad Cherno—both well-recognized scholars in the region—intimated that this general pedagogy of instruction has been practiced for centuries throughout West Africa. They further explained that these practices were the same in Mali, Mauritania, Guinea, Senegal, the Gambia, and Nigeria. These scholars also explained that the essence of this pedagogy was that by memorizing texts, students were able to internalize grammatical forms and sentence structures that aided in the acquisition of the Arabic language, and also memorization gave them a repertoire of texts that they could continue to teach others.<sup>47</sup> The implication of this teaching methodology was that through memorization students became “walking” texts, and from their memory they could write out entire texts.<sup>48</sup> In essence it is not difficult to imagine that Bilali must have also gone through this process of memorizing texts and therefore his educational experience gave him several examples of how Islamic rituals were written, on which he could base his own text in America.

An afterthought about West African religious schools that is important for the study of literate Muslim slaves in general was that these schools were open to students from all social groups. In this regard, in explaining the wide appeal of these schools, Dwight writes:

all the children have the means of instruction in reading and writing at least, on low terms; while the poor are taught at the public expense, taxes being laid to pay the master or mistress. Private schools are also very numerous, particularly in the larger towns of some of the most learned nations. In some schools, boys and girls are under

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<sup>47</sup> For the pedagogy West Africa religious school see also, Lamin O. Sanneh, *The Jakhanké Muslim Clerics: A Religious and Historical Study of Islam in Senegambia* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> I take this from a conversation I had with Dr. Rudolph T. Ware from the History Department of the University of Michigan, on March 30, 2009.

the care of the same master; but they are placed in separate rooms. Our informant had from fifty-five to fifty-seven pupils in his native town, after he had completed his education, among whom were four or five girls.<sup>49</sup>

To reiterate, Dwight highlights that schools were open to all strata of society, and regardless of whether somebody was rich or poor, male or female, they could still attend schools, and at the very least learn how to read and write. Thus, if these schools were open to everybody, and most children received instruction in religious practices, and at the very least could also read and write, it follows then that other Fulani who arrived in the United States could also read and write. In other words literacy was not exclusive to Bilali, but there must have been other slaves with similar capabilities. It is likely then, if Bilali knew any of these other literate Fulani, they would be able to read his text and understand its content.

In summary, Bilali was able to write the Ben Ali diary because he lived in West Africa during a time of intense religious revival and the spread of religious schools. In Timbo, he was in one of the major centers of scholarly activity, and as a student he acquired literacy in Arabic and also the ability to produce his text, by perhaps memorizing several other similar texts that dealt with Muslim rituals. Needless to say, his educational experience must have had an enormous impact in fostering his Muslim identity. Thus, without interpreting the Ben Ali diary in connection to West African schools, it is not possible to understand why Bilali could produce the text. Even then, however, this does not explain why he would produce it.

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<sup>49</sup> Dwight address to the American Lyceum," 417.

## BILALI ON SAPELO ISLAND

Whereas in Timbo, Bilali lived in a town with a large Muslim population and engaged in scholarly activity, as a slave in the United States, he lived in far different circumstances among people, who were mostly non-Fulani and non-Muslim. Consequently, to attempt to make sense of the Ben Ali diary I need to be sensitive to Bilali's life in the United States, and explore those factors that perhaps shaped the production of his text in a fundamentally different context than West Africa. Unfortunately, I cannot trace what circumstances led to Bilali's enslavement, or even when exactly he arrived in the United States. It is possible that he was kidnapped in West Africa, or was a prisoner of war, who was eventually sold to slave traders.<sup>50</sup> It is also possible that Bilali first arrived in the Bahamas, where slave traders "seasoned" slaves, before sending them to America. However, in relation to Bilali's early life in America it is still possible to discern that he arrived on Sapelo Island in the first decade of the nineteenth century and that soon after Spalding appointed him as his plantation's head driver.<sup>51</sup> Again, I cannot explain why Spalding appointed Bilali as his driver, but this does not limit me from exploring what his role might have been as a driver in a southern plantation and what relationship he might have had with his master and other slaves. Thus, even though there may not be a large amount of evidence, in my view, there

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<sup>50</sup> Other Muslim slaves, such as Abu Bark and Abdul Rahman Ibrahim Sori, narrate that they were kidnapped in West Africa and sold to European slave traders. For Abu Bakr's account, see his autobiography reproduced in the primary source collection: Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 156-163; For Abdul Rahman see, Cyprus Griffin, "Abduhl Rahahman: The Unfortunate Moorish Prince," in Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 147.

<sup>51</sup> I explained earlier that after purchasing Sapelo Island in 1802, Thomas Spalding began to aggressively purchase slaves until they numbered four to five hundred. It seems reasonable to assume that Bilali was one of these slaves. See; Austin. *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 276.

remains enough evidence about Bilali's life on Sapelo Island to at least hypothesize about the production of the Ben Ali diary and in the process raise fundamental questions about Muslim slave literacy, resistance and identity. Certainly connecting the different aspects of Bilali's life in the United States, and subsequently interpreting them is a challenging task, and in no way do I assume that this exploration is by any means exhaustive.

One of the defining attributes of those slaves who were appointed as drivers was that their masters gave them certain "privileges," and this must have been the case with Bilali. Masters often employed a very strict criterion in choosing who would become a driver from amongst the slaves. For instance, one North Carolina planter in choosing a slave driver would confirm that the slave was "honest, industrious, not too talkative...[and] faithful in the discharge of whatever may have been committed to his care."<sup>52</sup> Similarly, another South Carolina planter thought that it was necessary for a slave driver to "conform to instructions notwithstanding the privations necessary," and he had to have "energy, ready intelligence and satisfactory accountability."<sup>53</sup> Consequently, for Bilali to have been appointed the head driver of the plantation meant that Spalding trusted him a great deal. In the hierarchy of the institution of slavery, drivers were usually on the top, and they were given certain privileges and "liberties" that other slaves did not have. This is significant because having earned Spalding's trust, Bilali in limited ways would have also gained certain "freedoms," which would have allowed him to

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted from William L. Van Deburg, *The Slave Drivers: Black Agricultural Labor Supervisors in the Antebellum South* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

move around the plantation and use his time as he desired. In this sense, it is possible that he could have found an opportunity to converse with other slaves, perhaps even about Islam and use some of these privileges to acquire paper and writing instruments in order to compose his text.

Without a doubt Bilali must have had a strong relationship with his master because he was a driver, but besides enforcing his master's will on the slaves, he must have also created his own meaningful relationships with other slaves on the plantation. Usually drivers enjoyed a certain degree of respect and possibly also incited fear from the other slaves and through these bonds engaged in the "family, religious, and social life of black America."<sup>54</sup> On the one hand, drivers were intimately connected with their fellow slaves and on the other hand they were also an extension of the master's will—they had to ensure the other slaves did what the master demanded. In Bilali's case, he must have made multiple connections with the other slaves on the plantation, while also carrying out Spalding's demands. It is possible he tailored his role as driver to protect the relationship he had with his fellow slaves, and this relationship may have inspired him to produce his text.

Both the complex relationship that Bilali must have had with the other slaves and his authority on the plantation are highlighted in 1813, when British loyalist attempted to launch an attack on Sapelo Island. The British received news that "Bilali and eighty other slaves were armed with muskets," and would defend the island at any cost, and as a consequence this prevented a British invasion.<sup>55</sup> Importantly, this is one of the few

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<sup>54</sup> Van Deburg, *The Slave Drivers*, 14.

examples where slaves were armed, but there are no reports that they used these arms to revolt or run away. Instead they stood along side Bilali, indicating that Sapelo Island was indeed their home, and they would defend it, even if it meant they would remain as slaves. Perhaps this also suggests that the slaves had created strong bonds with each other, and had identified as a community.

While it is clear that Bilali had authority on the Spalding plantation, he may not have been the only Muslim in a position of power in the vicinity of Sapelo Island. Indeed, a slaveholder named Zephaniah Kingsley, who observed the British Loyalist's attempt to invade Sapelo Island wrote:

gangs of negroes were prevented from deserting to the enemy [the British between 1812 and 1815] by drivers, or influential negroes, whose integrity to their masters and influence over the slaves prevented it; and what is still more remarkable, in both instances the influential negroes were Africans; and professors of the Mohomedan religion.<sup>56</sup>

Kingsley's comments are quite telling, since he highlights that there were two "influential negroes" that were drivers, and both of them were "professors of the Mohomedan religion." One of the drivers was certainly Bilali, while the other was a close friend of his named Salih, who was also a Fulani and lived nearby on the Couper plantation, on St. Simons Island.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the fact that there were two Muslims in positions of authority indicates that there may have been many other Muslims on these plantations.

In this regard, again during the events of 1813, while arming the slaves, Bilali proclaimed to his master "I will answer for every negro of the true faith, but not for the

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<sup>55</sup> Austin. *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 268.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*

Christian dogs you own.”<sup>58</sup> This example clearly highlights that there were other slaves on Sapelo Island who were Muslim, and who perhaps had a relationship with Bilali. Importantly, by proclaiming this to his master, not only was Bilali asserting his Muslim identity, he was speaking to Spalding as though Spalding would know what he considered the “true faith.” Consequently, Spalding must have been aware that there were Muslims, including Bilali’s family, on his plantation, and by appointing Bilali as his driver he may have “approved” of this Muslim presence.

There is no evidence indicating that Spalding rebuked Bilali for his faith, and for openly asserting his Muslim identity. Instead, Spalding is reported to have said concerning Bilali’s ablution, “no Mahometan with his seven daily ablution, is a greater enemy to dirt” than Bilali.<sup>59</sup> Certainly this may have been an exaggeration, but it shows that Spalding was aware of what Bilali was doing, and that he knew enough to be able to associate Bilali’s rituals with Islam and did not scold him for it.

While Spalding was aware of Bilali’s faith, and Bilali held a position of authority on the plantation, it is perhaps through exploring what is known about Bilali’s family on the plantation that it may finally be possible to explain why he wrote the Ben Ali diary. In this regard, during the 1850s a former resident of the Georgia Sea Islands, not far from Sapelo Island who had met Bilali and his family wrote, “they were tall and well formed, with good features. They conversed with us in English, but in talking among themselves they used a foreign tongue that no one else understood. The head of the tribe was a very

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Quoted from Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 276.

old man called Bi-la-li. He always wore a cap that resembled a Turkish Fez.”<sup>60</sup> This observer continues on to suggest that “the whole family ‘worshipped Mohamet,’” indicating that Bilali had been successful in passing his faith on to some of his children.<sup>61</sup> Bilali may have also been able to teach his children another language besides English that “no one else understood.” Certainly this language may have been Arabic or Fulfulde (a language the Fulani spoke), which Bilali was able to preserve from the Old World. It is also possible that Bilali spoke this “other” language with slaves that were not from his own family, because on nearby St. Simons Island, there were other Fulani, including Salih Bilali, who also spoke a language other than English.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, another account about Bilali’s family suggests Bilali’s wife was also a practicing Muslim. In the 1930s, Katie Brown, Bilali’s great granddaughter was interviewed about whether she knew anything about Bilali.<sup>63</sup> She said that he had many daughters “Margret, Bentoo, Chaalut, Medina, Yaruba, Fatima an Hestuh,” several sons, and that Bilali and his wife Phoebe used to pray regularly and were particular about the hour when they prayed. She also reported that after his prayer, Bilali had a long string of beads and he would pull on each bead and recite “Belambi, hkabara, mahamadu” and Phoebe would say “Ameen, Ameen.”<sup>64</sup> It is likely what Bilali was reciting after his prayer was a “compression of

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Quoted from Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 313.

<sup>63</sup> She was interviewed as part of the Georgia Writer’s Project, which was an attempt to take the accounts of ex-slaves and their descendants. See; “Interviews with Katie Brown, Julia Governor, Katie Governor, Phoebe Gilbert, Nero Jones, Shadrach Hall,” excerpt from *Drums and Shadows*, 158-70, in Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 293-301.

‘God is one, great’ and ‘Mohammed is his prophet.’”<sup>65</sup> Significantly, the above examples, where observers noticed Bilali making *wudu*’ or performing *salat* show that not only was he writing instructions about these rituals in his text, but he was actively engaged in them, even though he was in servitude.

As a result, in interpreting the instructional nature of the Ben Ali diary, with Bilali’s life in Timbo during a time of Islamic revival and the spread of schools and literacy, his position as a driver on the Spalding plantation, his open religious practices, the fact that he passed his religion and language to at least some of his children, and the presence of several other Muslims on Sapelo Island and nearby on St. Simons Island suggests that Muslim slaves were engaged in learning and teaching their religion in early America.<sup>66</sup> Bilali was able to produce his text precisely because of the scholarly environment of West Africa, and the fact that as a student he had probably memorized similar texts. Consequently, by writing the Ben Ali diary it is possible that Bilali was attempting to recreate a similar type of learning environment in order to foster a distinct Islamic identity and perpetuate Islamic religious practices within the confines of slavery in a new land. The text may also have been Bilali’s way of practicing *tajdid* (renewal), as a Muslim minority, in order to protect his religious identity and faith from being assimilated and lost.<sup>67</sup> This is certainly something that all previous scholars that have

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<sup>64</sup> Drums and Shadow excerpt in Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, pp. 295.

<sup>65</sup> Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, 278.

<sup>66</sup> The idea that there was a quasi-Islamic institution on Sapelo Island is strengthened by what we know of other places in the in the New World that had large Muslim slave populations, like Brazil, in the Province of Bahia. While Muslim slaves were involved in coordinating and leading one of the largest rebellions in Bahia in 1835, for many decades they were also secretly meeting, praying and studying Islam. see; Reis, *Slave Rebellion In Brazil*, 105.

engaged with the Ben Ali diary have not suggested. More importantly, it asks those scholars who have erased the story of Islam from the larger narrative of slavery in America, to reassess their work. Given this explication of Bilali's text, and the possibilities that collectivities of Muslim practiced their religion in the New World, it makes little sense to only speak about Christianity, by definition, as the religion of slaves

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<sup>67</sup> Minority Muslim communities in West Africa often practiced *tajdid*, or renewal in order to protect their Muslim identity from being assimilated. Fundamental to *tajdid* was the role of education and schooling. See, Ivor Wilks, "The Transmission of Islamic Learning in the Western Sudan," in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 162.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, by interpreting the Ben Ali diary through its “multiple contexts,” and connecting the text to Bilali’s life in both West Africa and the United States reveals a complicated set of questions involving Muslim slave identity, literacy and Islam’s relationship to slave religion. Indeed, Bilali wrote his text in America based on what he had learned and memorized as a student in the religious schools of Timbo. Consequently, this raises questions about what role memory played in forming Muslim slave identities. More fundamentally, what did it mean for Bilali, and other Muslim slaves, to produce works in Arabic that perhaps few people in America could actually understand? How was this connected to their identities? Is it possible for us to discern that by producing Arabic works, Muslim slaves were engaged in a form of resistance? In my view, it is precisely these important questions that the overwhelming majority of historians of slavery have yet to explore. Part of the reason why they continue to remain unexplored is because many historians have not acknowledged the presence of Islam in the New World, and this certainly is a consequence of a meta-narrative, which has silenced Islam and Muslims from America’s past.

To give yet another example that will perhaps drive this point home is a recent work, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*, by E. Jennifer Monaghan. Spanning over three hundred pages the work is extremely nuanced and traces the history of literacy in Colonial America. Yet, while Monaghan deals with important questions about literacy in early American history, her work, following in the footsteps of the overwhelming majority of historical works about America’s past, is silent on the literacy of Muslims. Indeed, Bilali whose ability to read and write have been a central concern of

this paper, remains completely unacknowledged in Monaghan's account. In fact, to take it one step further, she simply asserts that "while some groups of West Africans lived on the 'margins of literacy,' thanks to their contact with Muslim traders who were literate in Arabic, most Africans who were kidnapped in their own country and exported by violence into an alien one had not encountered literacy before."<sup>68</sup> This example highlights the fundamental problem in not realizing that Islam played an important role in West African society, that it was practiced there for centuries, and ultimately thousands of Muslims arrived in the New world, many of whom were literate. At the very least Bilali forcefully contests Monaghan's claim that West Africans lived on the "margins of literacy." How could this be the case when we know that during the Islamic religious revival in West Africa, virtually thousands of schools helped to spread literacy amongst both Muslims, and non-Muslims?

Ultimately, while we may never know the exact nature of what Bilali's "institution" looked like, the fact that Islam was practiced and transferred to subsequent generations in the New World, calls for a reorientation of the analytic categories and frames of references that historians have used to study the past, which has thus far been exclusive of Islam. If any thing, in a time when the United States has a president, whose name, Barack Hussein Obama, has been demonized for its alleged relationship with Islam and Muslims, it may be worthy to note that Muslim slaves, with even "stranger" names have been in the United States from its very beginnings.<sup>69</sup> It may also be worthy to note

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<sup>68</sup> E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 242.

<sup>69</sup> I take this idea from a conversation I had with Dr. Paul L. Krause from the History Department of the University of British Columbia, in March 2008.

that for over forty years, a slave named Bilali Mohammed, stood silently in prayer, etching his Muslim identity on American soil forever.

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