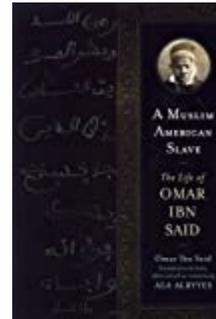




**Ala A. Alryyes.** *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. xii + 222 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-24954-0; ISBN 978-0-299-24953-3.



**Reviewed by** Hilary N. Green (Elizabeth City State University)

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**Commissioned by** Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

## Reevaluating Islam and Slavery in the Antebellum United States

Ala Alryyes has made a valuable contribution to the understanding of the religious and intellectual lives of enslaved persons in the antebellum United States with the new English translation and contextual essays of *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said*. This critical study explores the history of Islam in America through the narrative of Ibn Said and its various interpretations by missionaries, proslavery advocates, and scholars. The work's main contribution is the new English translation of the Ibn Said's narrative itself. By presenting Ibn Said's Arabic text alongside Alryyes's English translation on facing pages, the book adds a degree of authenticity to the slave narrative, many of which had been assumed by an earlier generation of scholars to be fictitious accounts written by former slaves in collusion with abolitionists. Moreover, this translation offers insights into the shifting historical interpretations of Ibn Said's narrative from its publication in 1831 to the Isaac Bird translation that appeared in the *American Historical Review* in 1925. This translation and the encompassing introductory essay offer further insights into how

early historians used Ibn Said's narrative to forward particular narratives of slavery, Islam in the United States, slave resistance, and the antebellum religious traditions of African Americans.

Like the American Colonization Society missionaries, slaveholders, and ethnographers who endorsed Ibn Said's narrative, Alryyes astutely shows how J. Franklin Jameson and early readers of the *American Historical Review* translation misread Ibn Said's narrative by ignoring his use of Arabic, the Quran, and literacy as tools of resistance and subterfuge. Rather, Jameson and other early scholars of slavery used Ibn Said's narrative, like other slave narratives, to promote a more sanguine image of slavery in which slaves happily toiled on plantations under the guidance of their benevolent Christian slaveowners, who only meted out light punishments when necessary. While the author fails to discuss this popular interpretation of the "peculiar institution" or its overturning beginning in the 1960s, Alryyes convincingly demonstrates the ways in which scholars have continued earlier interpretations, such as viewing Ibn Said and other Mus-

lim slaves in the United States as novelties or as exceptions to the predominant Christian religious culture of African Americans. This definitive study rectifies previous misinterpretations.

The contextual essays by Alryyes and other historians of slavery firmly place the narrative into historical context. These essays capture the truly global context in which Ibn Said lived. One gains deeper knowledge of how Ibn Said's narrative compares with other slave narratives written by Muslim Americans in the essays by Allan Austin and Michael Gomez. Ghada Osman and Camille Forbes's literary analysis reveals how Ibn Said continued to adhere to a sense of self and an African identity through his writings and critiques on the West, Christianity, and African American slaves. Robert Allison's and Sylviane Diouf's complementary essays provide the necessary American historical context of Ibn Said's world at the time he wrote his autobiography and the African historical context at the time of his capture and sale to the Atlantic slave trade that was missing from the opening introductory essay by Alryyes.

Interestingly, neither Alryyes's introduction nor the

other essays contextualize how U.S. historians viewed slave narratives as "fiction" at the time the *American Historical Review* translation appeared. By not acknowledging this major historiographical debate, one can easily overlook the significance of J. Franklin Jameson's recommendation that readers ignore the Quranic verses "remembered" by Ibn Said "as not autobiographical" (p. 83). Furthermore, its inclusion would further demonstrate the importance of the new translation and study among scholars of slavery, African American religion, and Islam in the United States. Just as Islam operated outside the purview of mainstream American religious culture until more favorable conditions emerged in the twentieth century, as Alryyes poignantly points out in the introduction, likewise, more favorable conditions toward the importance of slave narratives, Islam, and slave resistance were necessary in order to more fully understand Ibn Said's narrative, his religiosity, and his adherence to an African identity rather than an African American identity. Notwithstanding, this critical study will enrich any undergraduate and graduate seminar on slavery, religion, literary resistance, and the development of an African American Islamic tradition under slavery.

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