

REASSESSING AFRICAN MUSLIMS' ROLE IN THE COLONIAL CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT**REEVALUANDO EL PAPEL DE LOS MUSULMANES AFRICANOS EN EL PROYECTO CARTOGRÁFICO COLONIAL**Otha M. Nash¹

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Abstract: Conventional histories of colonial exploration in Africa often subtly or overtly discount the existence and value of indigenous African knowledge of African geographies. This study presents historical evidence for the existence of a long-standing Islamic African tradition of cultivating and disseminating cartographic knowledge within diasporic networks on the continent as well as in the wider Atlantic world. It argues for a reassessment of the impact of this tradition not only on the colonial cartographic enterprise but on the life trajectories of its practitioners.

Keywords: Islamic Africa, Colonial Cartography, Atlantic Africa, Mutual Aid Societies

Resumen: Las historias convencionales de la exploración colonial en África a menudo descuentan sutil o abiertamente la existencia y valor del conocimiento autóctono africano sobre las geografías africanas. Este estudio presenta evidencia histórica de la existencia de una larga tradición islámica africana de cultivar y difundir conocimientos cartográficos dentro de redes diaspóricas en el continente y en el mundo atlántico más amplio. Aboga por una reevaluación del impacto de esta tradición no solo en la empresa cartográfica colonial, sino también en las trayectorias de vida de sus practicantes.

Palabras clave: África islámica, Cartografía colonial, África atlántica, Sociedades de ayuda mutua

Reassessing African Muslims' Role in the Colonial Cartographic Project²

In a 1987 article on 19th-century European cartographic exploration in West Africa, Gerd Spittler describes the relations between European explorers and their African coadjutors as a relation between colonial masters and African servants whose primary function “consisted principally in relieving their masters of the routine tasks and the strain associated with them, so as to leave them free to do their exploring” (Spittler, 1987, p. 397). He argues that this could not but be the case because European explorers “usually brought along their servants from the coast or abroad; accordingly, these seldom were acquainted with local conditions. At best, they knew one native tongue and thus could serve as interpreters” (Spittler, 1987, p. 397).

Apart from the fact that Spittler's assertion that African guides lacked local knowledge is empirically dubious, as will be seen shortly, his description of indigenous Africans' role in the colonial cartographic enterprise constitutes a narrative of colonial exploration of Africa in which Africans have no narrative of their own. They are simply functional elements of the setting within which European explorers' exploits

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occur. However, against this narrative of Africans as passive adjuncts to European cartographic activity stands the reality of European explorers' practical reliance on the knowledge and mediation of African intermediaries. For instance, Spittler observes that when Mungo Park was deprived of the services of his African servants, "he wandered aimlessly for months without any means of assistance, fighting to survive: begging for food and shelter, on the watch for wild animals and robbers, and often barely able to move for days on account of illness" (Spittler, 1987, p. 397). This relationship of utter dependency on the skill and knowledge of indigenous Africans illustrates a point made by Clive Barnett (1998): "Without the use of local guides and interpreters, the exploits of men represented as untiringly persevering, independent and self-denying seekers of the truth would have been impossible. But this routine practical dependence on local knowledges and information is not accorded any independent epistemological value" (p. 245). However, indigenous African knowledge of what has been aptly called the "real" geography of "grazing patterns, tribal affiliations, ethnolinguistic affinities, Sufi networks, and local market areas" (Ross, 2010, p. 30), represents more than just a complicating element of the traditional colonial cartographic narrative. It represents a rich and complex story of knowledge generation in its own right, a story that deserves to be told within its own context and understood on its own terms.

The story of Abu-Bakr as-Saddiq, an African guide who accompanied the British explorer John Davidson on his 1836 expedition to Timbuktu, represents a fascinating case study of this process of knowledge generation. Abu-Bakr was a prominent Malian cleric who was pursuing Qur'anic studies in the city of Bouna when the Ashanti Empire invaded it, and he was taken captive and transported to the port of Lago on the Cape Coast. From there, he was sold to a slaver and transported to Jamaica around 1805. During his thirty-year sojourn in Jamaica, Abu-Bakr was transferred between three owners. The last of these, a Mr. Anderson, employed Abu-Bakr as a bookkeeper for his estate. Abu-Bakr reportedly kept the estate's records in Arabic, and read them off to Mr. Anderson every evening in English (Renouard, 1836, p. 108). His facility with Arabic brought him to the attention of Dr. R.R. Madden, a British orientalist who was serving in Jamaica as the Special Magistrate tasked with supervising the implementation of the Emancipation Act of 1833. After determining that Abu-Bakr's education and cultural background made him well-suited to serve as a guide in British cartographic expeditions to West Africa, Madden secured Abu Bakr's manumission and commended his services to John Davidson, a member of the newly formed Royal Geographical Society (RGS) (Curtin, 1967).

There is a notable parallel here between the demand for Abu-Bakr's services, first as a bookkeeper and then as a guide, and the long-standing role that learned African Muslims played in West African politics and trade. This role is exemplified in the activities of the Wangara clerical caste of the Soninke people, who had long acted as long-distance traders and missionaries throughout the entirety of upper Guinea, almost from the beginning of the introduction of Islam to West Africa (Lovejoy, 1978). In this role, the Wangara provided eagerly sought-after services to illiterate non-Muslim kings who frequently:

Surrounded themselves with Muslim clerics on whose expertise they relied for various services, including recording trade agreements, chronicling history, and providing protective talismans and charms. It was common for non-Muslim kings to solicit the services of Muslim clerics as secretaries, including the King of medieval Ghana, the King of Asante in present-day Ghana, and the King of Oyo in western Nigeria in the fourteenth century. (Kane, 2016, p. 45)

In the present instance, Davidson ultimately agreed to employ Abu-Bakr as a guide for his 1836 expedition to Timbuktu. However, even before departing for Davidson's expedition, Abu-Bakr made significant contributions to British cartographic knowledge of West Africa in an 1836 article titled "Routes in North Africa," which appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society (JRGS)*. The article's content was initially dictated in Arabic by Abu-Bakr and translated into English first by R.R. Madden, and then by Rev. G.C. Renouard. It is Renouard's translation that appears in the *JRGS*. In his article, Abu-Bakr provides significant geographic data in the form of place names, geographic descriptions, and lexicons of terms in their native languages. In addition to providing these geographic and ethnographic details, much of which was previously unknown to Western audiences, Abu-Bakr helped his interlocutor to confirm and corroborate the placenames and relative locations of localities already

identified on British maps (as-Saddiq, 1836).

Notably, however, despite Abu-Bakr's evident learning and skill, his remarks were framed by what Clive Barnett describes as a habitual Western "rhetoric of doubt and suspicion" that refashions local knowledge, "as a hindrance, as a barrier to the arrival at the truth" (Barnett, 1998, p. 245). In his preface to Abu-Bakr's remarks, Renouard states:

It is with this view of the latitude which, as geographers, we may without impropriety allow to our inquiries, that the following narrative is offered to the Society. It may not, indeed, be, strictly speaking, a geographical document, but it is illustrative of human nature under no ordinary trials and vicissitudes, and it incidentally throws some light on the geography of a remote region of the earth hitherto concealed from the eye of the European by an almost impenetrable veil. (Renouard, 1836, p. 100)

Barnett observes that this attitude permeated the entire 19th-century colonial cartographic enterprise. It was undoubtedly on vivid display during Abu-Bakr's own service as a guide. Despite Abu-Bakr's high standing in his home country, his literacy, and the experience and learning evidenced in his published remarks in the JGRS, Davidson seemed to regard Abu-Bakr essentially as an errand boy. In his expedition journal, Davidson perpetually remarks that he has sent Abu-Bakr off to purchase food, deliver a parcel, or attend to some other menial task. Moreover, he repeatedly complains of Abu-Bakr's incompetence as a scribe and interpreter, stating, for instance, that, "Abú [Abu-Bakr] makes so bad an interpreter, and is so fearful of speaking out, that I am in a sad position" (Davidson, 1839, p. 105). It is worth noting that Abu-Bakr's reluctance to "speak out" may have been connected with Davidson's general umbrageousness, particularly his tendency to threaten total strangers, whether high or low, with violence whenever he felt that he needed to prove his manhood, as was frequently the case. In any event, Davidson's generally negative attitude toward Abu-Bakr's prominence and competence was perhaps somewhat presumptuous and ill-advised, given that he himself did not speak Arabic or any other language indigenous to the region, and that his expedition's safety and success were entirely dependent on whatever goodwill Abu-Bakr could obtain from local officials.

Davidson's apparent obliviousness to the value of Abu-Bakr's presence in his retinue is illustrated by one of the more remarkable observations contained in his journal. On July 5, 1836, Davidson notes in passing that a colleague informed Abu-Bakr that his cousin and former classmate had been made King of the Wangara state of Gwiriko (formerly Kong) (Davidson, 1839). This would seem to be the strongest indication yet of Abu-Bakr's high standing and level of accomplishment. Yet a little over a month later, on August 8, Davidson complains that Abu-Bakr seems to be unable to comprehend Davidson's attempts to teach him geography: "he is a very dull scholar: he has no idea of position, nor can I make him understand the drawing of the ka'bah" (Davidson, 1839, p. 135).

Arguably, this deeply rooted suspicion (if not contempt) toward the value and validity of indigenous African geographic knowledge constitutes a kind of "Afro-Orientalism," that confirms Edward Said's observation that, "Orientalism, at a fundamental level and from the beginning, has combined interest in Asian [and Islamic African] societies with a contempt for them and the conviction that 'Orientals' were unfit to analyse and arrange their own cultures" (Bernal, 2020, p. 254).

Nevertheless, European cartographers and explorers eagerly sought the knowledge and services of educated and experienced African intermediaries, as seen not just in the case of Abu-Bakr, but in the cases of dozens of his African Muslim compatriots and contemporaries in the 19th-century Caribbean. An illustrative instance of this pattern is that of Muhammedu Sisei, a Muslim educator from Niani-Marú,

Gambia, who was seeking repatriation to his homeland after 28 years of captivity in the Caribbean. In 1838, Sisei gave an autobiographical interview to the JRGS, which was conducted, translated, and summarized by Capt. John Washington, the secretary of the RGS. Sisei states that after marrying at around the age of 17 in 1805 and establishing a school in his home village, he was captured during a conflict between his home country and a neighboring kingdom, and sold to French slavers in 1810. Washington then relates that, “five days after the vessel sailed from the Gambia, she was captured by a British frigate, commanded by Sir Thomas Cochrane, and carried into Antigua” (Washington, 1838, pp. 449-450). Washington further relates that upon Sisei’s arrival in Antigua in 1811, he was conscripted into the 3rd West India Regiment (WIR) as a grenadier under the name Felix Ditt. He served in this capacity for 14 years, until 1825, when his regiment was disbanded and he was discharged at Trinidad.

Washington states that the veterans were given grants of land in Manzanilla, Trinidad, but Sisei chose to settle in the capital, Port of Spain. His choice of residence was likely influenced by the existence of the Free Mandingo Society, a mutual aid society headquartered in Port of Spain and comprised of West African Muslims whose aim was to buy fellow Muslims out of slavery and maintain them within a self-sustaining and autonomous community (Campbell, 1974). Sisei related to Washington that he personally witnessed the redemption of over 20 Muslims, and he avowed that there were no enslaved Muslims living in Trinidad as a result of the society’s activities (Washington, 1838).

Among the more significant events to occur during Sisei’s sojourn in Trinidad, was the Free Mandingo Society’s decision to employ Trinidadian notary public Edward Schack to translate and transmit a petition to the Crown requesting repatriation of 12 of the society’s members to Sierra Leone. Schack was an acquaintance of the editor mentioned above of the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, Capt. John Washington. To a great extent, as the comments of Edward Schack, Capt. John Washington, and a host of other scholars and officials affirmed, the petitions of the Mandingos received favorable attention precisely because their learning, piety, and abstemious lifestyle marked them out as capable, intelligent and dependable potential informants and guides.

This is made explicitly clear throughout the correspondence between Schack and Washington. For instance, Schack observed:

The Mandingos are a very intelligent and well-behaved set of men and are superior in every respect to the other Africans we have on this island; they are, so far as I have been able to ascertain, the only Nation who can read or write, or who enjoy the benefits of education. One of them . . . is really a clever intelligent fellow . . . from him I expect a great deal of information, and I think he would be the man to travel with in Africa. (Schack to Washington, September 6, 1838)

Moreover, in his journal article, Washington’s appeal on Sisei’s behalf was framed explicitly in terms of an opportunity to acquire an acculturated and intelligent aide to potential British explorers:

. . . as an interpreter with his nation, he would be invaluable, as he is intelligent and speaks English very fairly, and should any traveler be disposed to attempt to penetrate Africa by following the route of Mungo Park, he would find a useful companion in Mohammed, who, before he left London, assured the writer that he was ready and willing to travel to any part of the interior. (Washington, 1838, p. 453)

Here, Sisei’s relationship with Washington not only recapitulates the traditional role of the Wangara diaspora in West African trade and governance, but it also illustrates the manner in which displaced West African Muslims relied on their knowledge and literacy as a means of securing greater autonomy, and in a number of instances, as a means of gaining emancipation and repatriation. One of the most striking

features of the Free Mandingo mutual-aid society is the extent to which it was institutionalized and apparently regionalized. In addition to Sisei's own testimony regarding the activities of the Free Mandingo Society of Trinidad, Samba Makumba, one of Sisei's Trinidadian compatriots and co-religionists, related that:

. . . When a slave ship arrived at the colony, Samba and his friends were the first on board to inquire for Mandingoes, and if there were any among the captives, they ransomed them immediately. Up to the time of the declaration of freedom, they had released from bondage upwards of five hundred in Trinidad alone. Their operations were also extended to other islands. (Truman et al., 1844, p. 110)

Apart from this evidence of a trans-Caribbean African Muslim mutual aid network, there is also ample evidence that African Muslims maintained a trans-Caribbean and trans-Atlantic epistolary network. One of the most famous examples of the operation of this network is seen in the correspondence of Muhammad Kaba Saghanughu. Saghanughu was a Muslim from Futa Jallon who was enslaved in Jamaica from 1777 to 1838. While enslaved in Jamaica, Saghanughu undertook a notable effort around 1821 to preserve the religious knowledge of the local Muslim community through the authorship and dissemination of a manual on Islamic laws and observances, which has been given the name *Kitab as-Salat* (The Book of Prayer) by its translators (Addoun and Lovejoy, 2007). Moreover, this is not the only form of group correspondence that Saghanughu participated in. Around 1830, Saghanughu was apparently the recipient of a circular letter that purportedly originated in West Africa and was distributed to Muslims throughout the Caribbean, exhorting them to remain faithful to the tenets of Islam, and to be diligent in observing its laws (Addoun and Lovejoy, 2007). After the Baptist Rebellion of 1831/2, Saghanughu's wife apparently believed that the letter potentially incriminated him as a leader of the uprising, and destroyed his copy (Addoun and Lovejoy, 2007).

Along with his participation in collective correspondence with Muslims in Jamaica and around the Caribbean, Saghanughu carried on individual correspondence with the aforementioned Abu-Bakr as-Saddiq, who was enslaved in Jamaica during the same time period. The two existing fragments of this correspondence appear in translation in Vol. 2 of R.R. Madden's *A Twelve Months Residence in the West Indies* (Madden, 1835b). The originals have not been located. In their exchange, Saghanughu congratulates Abu-Bakr on his recent emancipation, and asks Abu-Bakr to send him a reply in Arabic. It is notable in this connection that Saghanughu was a member of the Wangara clerical caste. Indeed, the epistolary network which Saghanughu, Abu-Bakr, and other widely dispersed West African Muslims participated in is recapitulated in the communal organization of the Wangara Muslim merchant-cleric diaspora (Lovejoy, 1978). When and where Wangara communities existed as religious and vocational minorities (as was often the case), they tended to settle in isolated self-governing enclaves (Lovejoy, 1978). Nevertheless, despite their local isolation, they maintained durable political, economic, and familial ties with other enclaves in their diaspora, and thus collectively constituted an internetworked and confederated "republic" of considerable wealth and influence (Levtzion, 1975).

There is a clear and striking parallel between the Wangara tradition of establishing self-supporting communal enclaves in foreign lands and the establishment of the Free Mandingo Society in Trinidad. Moreover, the willingness of British authorities to cultivate productive relations with the Mandingos in Trinidad may have been at least partly the result of their familiarity with the influence possessed by Muslim merchant-clerics in the upper Guinea region.

Here, then, we have a self-organized diasporic network of African Muslims not only engaged in self-

directed initiatives to obtain manumission for their fellow-believers, but providing a cadre of educated, disciplined and multi-lingual informants and guides for British cartographic projects in West Africa. Moreover, their activities were embedded in and emerged from a West African Muslim clerical tradition that was more than six centuries old.

Thus, there are numerous historical examples that demonstrate that the local knowledge possessed by African guides was far more than merely a non-analytic precursor to the “real knowledge” generated by European ethnologic and cartographic projects (Spittler, 1987). Rather, it was the fruit of a durable diasporic tradition that effectively preserved and disseminated knowledge, even under conditions of adversity and displacement, and endowed its practitioners with the internal and communal cohesion required to effectively leverage that knowledge as a means of obtaining their own emancipation.

There is a great deal that remains to be learned about the volume, velocity, and value of the flows that were generated by the Free Mandingo mutual-aid society, in terms of collective assets acquired, expenditures for slave redemptions and subsistence, and operating costs. Uncovering these details will require sustained attention to the structure and activities of communities that tend to receive relatively little attention within the framework of their own self-identification as Muslim communities. Likewise, gaining a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between the Atlantic abolition movement, the colonial cartographic project, and African Muslims’ own organized manumission initiatives, will require reading “against the grain” of the archive, and re-interpreting Western archival sources in light of African Muslim belief and practice.

Given the centrality of spiritual identity to the lives and actions of the members of the African Muslim community in Trinidad, a fully contextualized approach to their history will also require the use of analytic methods that take interpretive questions of personhood, purpose, and moral value as seriously as they take structural questions of volume, velocity, and economic value of material flows. Further, it is to avoid reproducing existing lacunae. In that case, any such approach must achieve this without simply collapsing questions of meaning into questions of instrumentalist ends, as is so often seen in prevalent representations of religion as primarily an instrument for gaining economic and political advantage. Indeed, the current relative lack of historiographic attention to the operations of African Muslim diasporic networks as networks, as opposed to a disparate set of notable individual activities, is perhaps due to several related historiographic tendencies that stem from inattention to questions of indigenous meaning. Among them: the tendency to reduce Islam to an Arabo-Persian ethno-religion and to consequently divorce Islam from Africa and Africans from Islam; the arbitrary separation of sub-Saharan Africa from North Africa; and the tendency to anachronistically racialize Africans’ own historical self-concepts.

These tendencies are particularly apparent in historical analyses of Islamic Africa’s role in the Atlantic world. At present, the field of Atlantic history is rife with analyses of the impact of Europe’s westward expansion on the social, economic, and political evolution of Atlantic African societies. By contrast, however, there is comparatively little analysis of Islamic Africa’s impact on the structure of the Atlantic world, beyond consideration of its functional role as an abstract source of labor and raw materials, if and when it is treated as a distinct category of analysis at all.

Indeed, it is relatively rare to encounter Islamic Africa itself as a primary subject of inquiry within Atlantic historiography, despite its prominent role in the intellectual, cultural, and economic development of the Atlantic world. Often, this lack of attention is attributed to the difficulties involved with a paucity of

textual sources (Green, 2016). However, in the case of African Muslims, the abundance of sources written not only in Arabic, but in indigenous African languages transcribed in Arabic script, indicates that the difficulty lies elsewhere.

More likely, the persistent disregard for Islamic Africa within the field of Atlantic history stems from an over-eagerness to subsume African identities and histories within totalizing meta-analytic categories, such as race and class, that implicitly and explicitly consign Africa to the familiar role of perpetual adjunct to Europe's expansionary project (Zezeza, 2006). This circumstance points to a crying need to examine African Muslim sources within their own historical and cultural framework, free from the deracinating taxonomies of discursive meta-analysis.

The brief history recounted in the foregoing illustrates that there is a rich body of sources from both sides of the Atlantic that is available to historians who will undertake the task of "remapping," as it were, the story of the African Muslim presence in the Atlantic world. In the course of conducting the research for the history recounted in this article, I uncovered the identities of more than thirty African-born Muslims in the early-modern Atlantic from published and unpublished primary sources. Of these, 11 contain some level of autobiographical detail. Several of their stories are well-known, but few of them have received sustained analytic attention from historians.

The promise that these sources hold for revitalizing historiographic fields bleached clean of the richness and complexity of lived historical reality by totalizing theories of social annihilation, under-development, inherited trauma, and the like, make the project of empirically analyzing the history of Islam in the Atlantic world not just exciting, but urgently necessary. It is well past time to pull back the obscuring blank curtain onto which we project our personal conjurings of an imagined African past of inertia and absence, and to examine the vibrant and dynamic history that has always been present for examination, had we but thought to look.

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