

Authorship in Muslim Slave Narratives: Job Ben Solomon, Omar Ibn Said, and Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua

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Abstract Literary canons reveal important insights regarding definitions of literature in specific periods and cultures. Canons considered in Anglophone literary criticism expanded significantly throughout the past five decades to include, for example, various non-fiction genres. One of these genres is the slave narrative. Despite the now widespread inclusion of slave narratives in literature anthologies, there is still little literary criticism dedicated to this genre. In particular, comparative studies focusing on more than one specific author or text omit the fact that among the many contributors to this unique type of autobiographical writing were many enslaved Muslims. This fact alters today's understanding of the polyglot nature of the New World's literary history, as it also adds a commonly concealed angle to the concept of Arab American identity. The present study discusses three slave narratives associated with Job Ben Solomon, Omar Ibn Said, and Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua and it highlights their importance for literary scholarship concerned with categories of autobiography, American literature, and historical fiction. The selection of the three authors in particular allows for considerations of amanuensis, translation, creolization and polyglot inclusion of African tribal language in the context of their narratives' literary values.

Keywords Autobiography; Enslaved Muslims; Job Ben Solomon; Mahommah Baquaqua; Omar Ibn Said

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Introduction

Sarah Meer argues in favor of literary values of slave narratives in “Slave Narratives as Literature,” her contribution to the recent *Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature* (70-85), but texts by enslaved Muslims are absent from her discourse. This omission reflects on literary criticism dedicated to the slave narrative genre in general (see also *The Oxford Handbook of the African American slave narrative*; 2014). Building on Meer’s argument, the present study seeks to identify literary values inherent in selected testimonies related to the enslaved African American Muslims Job Ben Solomon, Omar Ibn Said, and Mahommah Baquaqua. It highlights in particular how questions of authorship complicate such identification.

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, known as Job Ben Solomon and allegedly born in 1701 in Senegal, met the lawyer, Rev. Thomas Bluett while imprisoned at the Kent County Courthouse. After traveling to England with Ben Solomon, Bluett published *Some Memories of the Life of Job, the Son of the Solomon, High Priest of Boonda in Africa* in 1734. Omar Ibn Said created his own testimony *The Life of Omar Ibn Said: Written by Himself* in Arabic about a century later, in 1831. Although two translations of this text originate during Ibn Said’s lifetime, Alexander Cotheal’s in 1848 and Isaac Bird’s in 1862, the first publication of an English translation, F. M. Moussa’s revision of the Bird translation, did not appear until 1925. Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, born in the early nineteenth century in Djougou, relates details about his enslavement in Brazil in *An Interesting Narrative. Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua*, written down and edited in 1854 by Unitarian Minister Samuel Downing Moore. Of the three, only Ibn Said did not use the language acquired in the New World to convey his memories directly. Baquaqua relied

heavily on Moore's editorship, as emphasized in the preface, and Ben Solomon reaches his readers entirely via an amanuensis. Highlighting such discrepancies in origin and inherent language mediation, the present study compares authorship in the three respective texts and argues that the polyglot and transcultural elements of the selected narratives enhance their unique styles as literary documents.

Meer refers to the etymological relation between "literature" and "literacy" during her assessment of various definitions of the former. Yet, the field of oral tradition within literary studies does not consider the ability to read and write a condition for the production of literature. The ancient storytellers, instead, relied on their senses of hearing and speaking, to foster their talent. Folktales and songs have found their way into literature anthologies along with letters and travel accounts, types of texts not typically anthologized during the first half of the previous century, at least not in the Anglophone tradition. As Meer points out, the broadening of the definition of "literature" also results in the inclusion of slave narratives:

... expressions of doubt are now rare. Literary critics have pored over slave narratives and published reams of analysis. Many narratives are staples of undergraduate literature courses, and are available in beautifully produced editions that assert their literary quality either implicitly or directly. (71)

The narratives Meer refers to here, as the essays throughout the *Cambridge Companion* and the *Oxford Handbook* testify, are not narratives by and about enslaved Muslims. They are the more widely studied texts by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, Olaudah Equiano, and Solomon Northup, for example. The present essay, with its focus on Job Ben Solomon, Omar Ibn Said, and Mohammah Baquaqua aims to remedy this general oversight. The selection of the three authors in particular allows for considerations of amanuensis, translation, and polyglot inclusion of African tribal language in the context of their narratives' literary values. The resulting comparative study highlights those literary aspects of the selected narratives that are related to the slave narrative genre, such as the issue of authorship and the relevance of socio-historical and postcolonial perspectives.

Job Ben Solomon and Thomas Bluett

Ayuba Ben Suleiman Diallo, better known as Job Ben Solomon was a son of a high Priest from Senegal (Austin, *Transatlantic* 53). An African enemy kidnapped and sold him in 1730 (Bluett 18). According to the preserved sources, he worked on a tobacco plantation in Maryland before his escape and subsequent imprisonment.

Job's literacy in Arabic attracted the attention of the philanthropist James Oglethorpe who helped to free him. Presumably, Job himself practiced slavery before his own enslavement, as well as after he gained his freedom and returned to Africa. In 1733, during his voyage from America to England, he asked Thomas Bluett to write *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job the Son of Solomon* (1734). Allen D. Austin, in *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*, calls Ben Solomon's narrative not only the "earliest known 'life and thoughts' of an African who had been a slave in the New World" (Austin, *Transatlantic* 5), but also "the oldest text in African American literature." In fact, Austin's subtitle for the chapter dedicated to Ben Solomon is "A Nobleman and a Father of African American Literature."

This latter claim is curious since the preserved rendering of Ben Solomon's narrative is ascribed to Thomas Bluett, the White lawyer and reverend, who identifies himself as the one "who was intimately acquainted with [Ben Solomon] in America, and came over to England with him" on the narrative's title page. While most readers, or at least Anglophone critics are familiar with Ibn Said's narrative in one of its English translations, and Moore pretends to have functioned merely as Baquaqua's editor, Ben Solomon's text complicates the question about author identity most visibly among the three. Would what Austin describes as the "father of African American literature," then really be Ben Solomon or rather Bluett, his amanuensis? This question recalls the more recent controversy over an African American classic, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). Scholars still argue, and their successors will likely continue to do so, whether to consider Alex Haley this testimony's author, ghostwriter, co-author, or rather collaborator. Meer mentions traditional suspicion towards functions of amanuenses in the context of yet another famous text in her study of slave narratives as literature. She specifically highlights the achievement of Solomon Northup's canonization:

Still more interesting is the inclusion of Solomon Northup's slave narrative in the African American classics series, since his book was mediated by a white [sic] amanuensis, David Wilson; such narratives were for a long time suspect, especially for critics whose definition of literature stressed individual and original achievement. (Meer 72)

Definitions of literature based on author identification are incompatible with the expansion of a canon willing to welcome sources whose authorship may be anonymous or also communal.

In *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (2011), Wail S. Hassan devotes an entire chapter to “The Emergence of Autobiography.” Relying on the scholarship of Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe (1992), Hassan suggests a certain irony in the simultaneous popularity of a poststructuralist “death of the Author” and genres revolving around an author’s “vital signs” (78-79). The respective developments throughout the past five decades appear less contradictory when one takes into account the potential proximity between fiction and non-fiction genres, rendering obsolete James Olney’s rigid distinction in “‘I was born’: Slave Narratives, their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” (1984). The author’s identity loses at least some significance when readers consider autobiographies not only always as one of the many kinds of literature, but when they further bear in mind the potential overlap with this umbrella category’s fiction genres. As Hassan cautions,

... the dialogical, interpersonal dimension to all kinds of narrative erases conventional distinctions between fiction and autobiography, on the one hand, and on the other, between autobiography and other kinds of nonfiction writing, including historiography, philosophy, literary and cultural criticism, and so on. If novels are always to some degree autobiographical (“Madame Bovary, c’est moi!”), autobiography is inevitably novelistic, always making use, whether consciously or not, of familiar conventions and techniques of storytelling. (79)

Granting that slave narratives are one specific form of autobiographical writing, these considerations of the genre’s similarities with other genres, including fiction, as well as other forms of documentation, detract from the urgency to hold one specific or even single individual responsible for their origin. Even if authorship is uncontested, as in the case of Douglass for example, different influences and intertexts, as Meer underlines (72), provide relevant presences of other author’s voices and intentions within the respective narrative.

Hassan questions several categorizations within the context of Arab American identity. He writes that the “first Arab autobiographies were written neither by Arabs nor by immigrants, but by educated Muslim slaves captured in West Africa [...] and, like other slave narratives, *they were written at the urging of abolitionists*” (Hassan 79; emphasis added). This statement reminds readers of the complicated circumstances out of which slave narratives emerged, on the one hand. On the other, it emphasizes that literacy in Arabic among Muslim slaves was a result of their religion, rather than ethnicity, an important distinction the authors return to in the

following section. The extent of an abolitionist's influence on or interference with a particular narrative's creation may be more relevant for the historical rather than the literary analysis. Those literary scholars aiming for an author-centered approach would have to place considerable weight on other preserved sources, such as letters or notebooks, by the author in question.

Bluett evokes the two most prominent purposes of literature, education and entertainment, in his introduction, where he pledges faithfulness to Ben Solomon's account and underlines that this debt would make his text "most useful and entertaining" (Bluett 10). Various referring to his writing as "account," "memoirs," and "pamphlet," Bluett ends his preface with a clear subject position that reveals his intentions as the messenger between the victim of an abusive institution and anticipated readership intending to gain knowledge but avoid boredom in the process:

Pursuant to this Resolution, I shall not trouble my Reader with any very long and particular Detail of the Geography, History, or Rarities of that Country of Africa which JOB belongs to; nor shall I meddle any farther with these Matters, in the present Account, than to relate such Observations concerning them, as JOB himself made to me in Conversation; being either not generally known, or so curious as to bear a Repetition here, consistently with the Design of these Memoirs. However, I shall endeavor to make the whole as agreeable as the Nature of the Subject, and the Limits of this Pamphlet will allow; and therefore, without any farther Preface, shall proceed to the Thing propos'd. (11)

This closing of an introduction clearly presents the self-confident voice of someone not merely convinced of his cause, but also well aware of his powers to advocate it. These powers rest in language skills. While he will not trouble his readers with tedious formalities, he will indeed trouble them with the injustice inherent in "the Nature of the Subject," and he will do so in as eloquent as possible a manner in order to maintain their attention, as well as recruit them for his cause.

While literary praise regarding form and style of Ben Solomon's narrative are accordingly due to his amanuensis, Bluett, it is crucial to remember the latter's close cooperation with the former. It is after all not merely Ben Solomon's story but also the ways in which he related it that inspired Bluett's writing. Judging by Bluett's vow to a faithful rendering, it is further likely that some of the phrasing may actually be Ben Solomon's. An anonymous report for a 1750 volume of *Gentleman's Magazine* describes Ben Solomon as "a perfect master of the Arabic tongue" (Davis and Gates, Jr. 4). According to the same report, his linguistic talent, presumably responsible at least partly for his journey to England and subsequent

return to Africa, was not limited to Arabic, since he was employed to translate “several manuscripts and inscriptions upon medals into *English*, of which he had acquired a competent knowledge during his servitude and passage to *England*.” Such judgement allows for the conclusion that the life story of Job Ben Solomon accessible today is the result of the combined talents of two sophisticated artists, as well as of the friendship between these two storytellers in question.

Omar Ibn Said’s Efforts with Recovery

The narrative preserved of Omar Ibn Said, in contrast to the one of Ben Solomon, appears in Arabic, presumably in Ibn Said’s own handwriting. Allegedly, no ghostwriter, editor, or publisher has altered this manuscript, which has been on display at Harvard’s Houghton Library and at the International Museum of Muslim Cultures in Jackson, Mississippi during the past years. Yet, controversies over its various journeys make its reception more problematic than the one described in the preceding section of this study. As Patrick Horn summarizes in his entry for *Documenting the American South*, not only do “the numerous sketches of Said’s life contradict each [sic] other on various issues,” but the short autobiography itself “raises more questions than it answers” (2004). Moreover, the reception at least among Anglophone critics is plagued by discrepancies between different translations. Safet Dabovic provides an extensive survey of a number of articles adding to the legends surrounding the figure of Ibn Said in his dissertation titled *Displacement and the Negotiation of an American Identity in African Muslim Slave Narratives* (2009). He refers, in particular, to studies by Ghada Osman and Camille F. Forbes with regard to comparisons of existing translations (Dabovic 109).

William Costel Tamplin adds new fuel to the debate with his attack on existing scholarship in “Who was ‘Umar ibn Sayyid? A Critical Reevaluation of the Translations and Interpretations of the *Life*” (2016). A student of Arabic as a foreign language, Tamplin presents detailed examples of what he considers mistranslations of Ibn Said’s handwritten manuscript. The authors of the present essay see no reason to doubt the identification of the “formal Arabic in a West African (Maghribi) script” (Alryyes 3) and wonder to which extent it lends itself to applications of classical Arabic grammar and spelling rules. Moreover, while Tamplin concedes that “well-informed speculation” proves “how little is known about [Ibn Said’s] origins” (Tamplin 128), he contradicts this concession in the following segment of his essay. To state that, “as little as we know about ‘Umar, we certainly know a lot about the society he came from,” (Tamplin 129) means to assume sufficient information about the enslaved writer’s origin. It appears that similar contradictions lead to occasional

premature misjudgments throughout Tamplin's argument.

Ibn Said was born in 1770, several decades younger than Ben Solomon, and forced to Carolina in 1807 (Alryyes xi), when the latter had already returned to Africa. In the opening of *The Life of Omar Ibn Said: Written by Himself* (1831), the author apologizes to a certain "Sheikh Hunter" for the mediocre command of his written language. Ala Alryyes, who first edited Ibn Said's narrative for inclusion in *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* edited by Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, reveals this apology as false modesty with a reference to the "fair quality" (Alryyes 59) of Ibn Said's original text. Tamplin, on the other hand, takes the apology seriously when stating that Ibn Said's "Arabic is rudimentary in terms of grammar, diction and orthography" (129), or even that "his Arabic is so bad to be almost incomprehensible" (127). Tamplin never mentions the fact that the text appears in Maghrebi script, nor that it is of an ostensibly poetic nature. He does explain that Ibn Said's first language was the African tribal language Fulfulde. This fact allows Tamplin to caution that, "it is not unreasonable to suggest that many of his mistakes may be Fulfulde or English calques" (Tamplin 131).

Dabovic, whose study remains unexamined by Tamplin, offers an intriguing Glissantian reading of Ibn Said's *Life*. Édouard Glissant provides the seminal point of departure for the Caribbean concept of creolization in his *Le discours antillais* [*Caribbean Discourse*] (1997). While this concept and resulting theories about continuous processes of transculturation emerged from recent postcolonial studies, their subject matter is at least as old as the arrival of the first non-indigenous communities in the New World. Arguably, it is much older since the authors discussed in the present essay arrived in the New World with already creolized identities, as is evident in their knowledge of tribal languages as well as Arabic. Although the amount of speculation revolving around Ibn Said's work prevents straightforward interpretations, scholars of his manuscript should remain alert to the possibility of "a creolized form of Arabic," as Dabovic puts it (Dabovic 105). It is further worth underlining that Ibn Said's spelling is not consistent, and that he holds his old age and weak eyes (Shell and Sollors 74–75) at least partly responsible. This apology makes his recollection of an entire chapter from the Koran, the *Surat Al-Mulk*, all the more remarkable (Shell and Sollors 64–72).

Since Ibn Said left his manuscript without page numbers, and the preserved copy passed through the hands of several acquaintances before its disappearance and rediscovery about a century later, it is impossible to comment on its composition. The repetition prominent in the remaining document may easily function as "refrain" not only in the sense that Dabovic assigns to it, but also in the sense in which it

might adhere to a musical, folkloric tradition. None of the scholars mentioned here have wondered why Hunter did not, as Bluett did for Ben Solomon, write Ibn Said’s life story in English. Alternatively, nobody has inferred that there might have been such an English version that could have disappeared unnoticed or been destroyed deliberately. Then again, the choice of language of this particular slave narrative could have been the enslaved author’s as much as the involved abolitionist’s. Muna Al Badaai suggests in “Positioning the Testimony of Job Ben Solomon, An Enslaved African American Muslim” (2015) that Ben Solomon himself had an interest in his narrative’s wider circulation. A close look at the manuscript pages preserved from Ibn Said’s account suggest, rather, that he intended them as personal notebook or as a poetic rendering for friends, including Hunter. The following excerpt illustrates this assumed purpose:

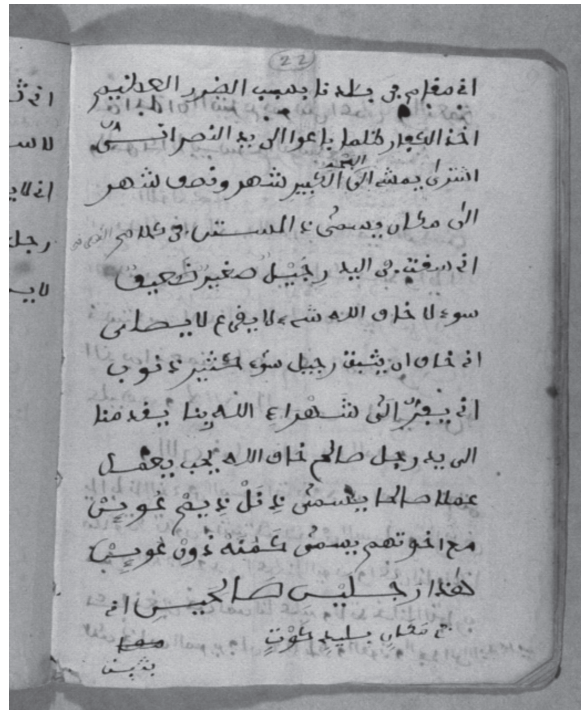


Figure 1: excerpt from the manuscript by Omar Ibn Said (1831)

The following paragraph reflects the exact reproduction of this excerpt, inasmuch as this is possible, given the age of the manuscript and its uncommon script. Parentheses indicate ambiguities and possible alternative reproductions.

دي ىلا اوعاب املظ رافكل ذخا ميظعل ررضلا ببسب اندلب يف ماقم ين
 ىمسي ناكم ىلا رهش فصنو رهش ريكل رحبلا ىلا يشمي يرتشا ينارصنلا
 ءفي عض ريغص لىجر ديلا يف (تقس) تفس ينارصنلا مالكل يف ننتسلا
 ءوس لىجر تبثي نا فاخ ينال صي ال (عرقى) عرفي ال يش لىلا فاخ ال ءوس
 فاخ حل اص لجر دي ىلا انمدقي انبر لىلا (ءارش) ءارش ىلا رفي ينابونذ ريكل
 نوج ءنمك ىمسي مهتاوخا عم نىوع ميج لنج ىمسي احلاص الامع لمعي بحى لىلا
 نىوك دىلب ناكم يف ينال احلاص نىلجر اذه نىوع

Alryes translates this passage thus:

I reside in our country here because of the great harm. The infidels took me unjustly and sold me into the hands of the Christian man (*Nasrani*) who bought me. We sailed on the big sea for a month and a half to a place called Charleston in the Christian language. I fell into the hands of a small, weak, and wicked man who did not fear Allah at all, nor did he read or pray. I was afraid to stay with such a wicked man who committed many evil deeds so I escaped. After a month, Allah our Lord presented us into the hands of a righteous man who fears Allah, and who loves to do good deeds and whose name is General Jim Owen and whose brother is called Colonel John Owen. These are two righteous men. I am in a place called Bladen County. (Shell and Sollors 91)

The authors of the present essay offer the following Modern Standard Arabic rendering, as close as possible to the original wording:

ىلا ينوعابو املظ رافكل ينذخا ميظعل ررضلا ببسب اذه اندلب يف ماقم ين
 ىلا فصنو رهش قدل انرحبأو ريكل رحبلا ىلا انيشم ينارصن يرتشم يدي
 ءوس لىجر دي يف تطقس كانه. نوتسلراشت ينارصنلا مالكل يف- ىمسي ناكم
 ءاقبل تفخف. يلىل ال ارقى ال ءيش يف لىلا فاخى ال فى عضو ريغص -
 لىلا لىفبو رهش دعبو. هنم ترفف؛ بونذلا ريكلو ىيس هنال لىجرلا اذه عم
 اذه مسا احلاص الامع لمعي نا بحى و لىلا فاخى حل اص لجر ىلع تفرعت انبر
 نالجرلا اذه نىوع نوج (ديقعل) لىنولوكلا ىمسي هيخا نىوع ميج لارنجل لجرلا
 نىدال بعظاقم يف نال ين. نالاص

The comparisons justify the Alryes translation as apt reflection for a contemporary Anglophone reader of this text created by Ibn Said more than two centuries ago. It would gain from indications of possible influence by the author's African language, though such research would fall more into the area of linguistics and anthropology.

It is worth noting that “reading” and the implied gaining of knowledge appear explicitly as virtue in the given excerpt. The characteristics describing the unethical “small, weak, and wicked” first owner emphasize his lack of faith, and his failure to read and pray, in that order. Not to read means to disregard the first directive in the Koran, and both “small” and “weak” as descriptions for the abusive slaveholder function metaphorically, referring to personality rather than physical appearance.

Granted, Tamplin makes several valid points regarding sentence structure, but he is not correct in stating that Ibn Said’s manuscript “has no punctuation” (Tamplin 134), as there are passages in which two parallel hyphens obviously signal the end of a sentence. The authors of the present essay further disagree strongly with his assessment of Ibn Said’s medium as signaling “language decay” or “language retrieval slowdown and failure” (Tamplin 132). They caution instead to consider what Ronald T. Judy refers to as “graphemic displacements” (238) and “graphic enigmas” (227) in his predominantly philosophical *Dis-forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*. This study includes a close analysis of a different Arabic manuscript referred to as *Ben Ali’s Diary*. Judy provides a translation in three columns, with Ben Ali’s text “with its heterography intact” (Judy 239) on the right, the edited Modern Standard Arabic in the middle and an English translation complete with notes on spellings and irregular usages on the left. Judy’s analysis recognizes a variant of Kufic script including “passages where standardized Arabic spelling conventions collapse” (238). He offers several possible explanations for such “graphemic displacements,” none of them with negative implications. A phrase such as “language decay,” in contrast, signals the same linguistic xenophobia creolists are alarmed by in the oldest documented reference to creolized language. George Lang traces creolization back to the eleventh century in *Entwisted Tongues: Comparative Creole Literatures* (2000), with a reference to the Andalusian geographer Al Bakri who, when working in Mauritania, lamented long before the births of Ibn Said and Ben Solomon that “the blacks have mutilated our beautiful language and spoiled its eloquence with their twisted tongues” (Lang 1). Rather than “decay” and “mutilation,” creolists tend to see new potential in multilingualism, and the authors of the present essay argue that numerous other texts included in the Shell/Sollors collection testify to such potential.

A sarcastic scholar studying Tamplin’s article may question whether the latter is himself a victim of what he calls “language decay” when he evokes “the *hipshot* reader” (Tamplin 134; emphasis added) of *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*. Alternatively, might he, with this adjective, claim for himself the kind of poetic license he so vehemently denies the nineteenth century enslaved African

as well as Ibn Said's translators? Tamplin does well to represent Arabic script in his essay. He would do better to situate Ibn Said's original script in its proper socio-historical context, as Judy carefully does for *Ben Ali's Diary* (Judy 209-244), another important source unexamined by Tamplin. This kind of careful consideration of graphic ambiguities complement respect for the fact that a translation, in particular of a poetic text, is always an interpretative creation of new poetry or (poetic) prose. When a handwritten very old manuscript so obviously makes no claim to the rules of classical Arabic, it seems a futile task to insist with such rigor on an application of such rules.

While his knowledge of Fulfulde may have influenced Ibn Said's use of Arabic, Baquaqua's text, discussed in the following final segment of this essay, actually represents an African tribal language in the opening chapter, as well as in occasional vocabulary references. Baquaqua did not rely, as Ben Solomon, on an amanuensis, but the editor Moore credits himself with a significant contribution to the final preserved document in its preface. Much more so than Ibn Said's, Baquaqua's is the most fragmented text of the three accounts selected for the present study. The first chapter of Dendi numbers with English translation and the Whitfield poem at the end frame several prose segments. The following paragraphs highlight effects of this provocative if not accidental combination of styles.

Mahommah G. Baquaqua: Numbers and Words

The long descriptive title on the cover of the text revolving around Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua's memories foreshadows the unique combination of chapters within this document. Samuel Downing Moore signs there as the writer and editor of what he calls, first, *An Interesting Narrative*. The following cover details include *A Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua, a Native of Zoogoo, in the Interior of Africa*, and (*A Convert to Christianity*), note the parenthesis, and finally *With a Description of That Part of the World* (1854). Reflecting this complicated ambition expressed on the cover, the sixty-six pages of text contain two pages of translated number words, a preface by Moore, seven chapters of "Biography," a poem allegedly composed by Baquaqua's teacher, "Miss K. King," titled "Lines Spoken by Mahommah," and finally James Monroe Whitfield's "Prayer of the Oppressed." In their revised and expanded second edition of *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America* (2009), Paul E. Lovejoy and Robin Law distinguish two main parts, the first describing Baquaqua's country of origin, the second telling his life story (2).

Law writes in an earlier essay, "Individualising the Atlantic Slave Trade: The

Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua of Djougou (1854),” that Moore’s compilation “is not the most substantial or interesting example of the genre. It is a brief work of only sixty-six pages; and its literary merit is slight. It is written in a simple, indeed naïve style” (Law 121). In the preface to the co-edited collection, including additional correspondence, historical evidence based on recently discovered documentation, as well as an extensive annotated bibliography, Lovejoy, in contrast, writes that Baquaqua’s account “is one of the most detailed and best authenticated accounts of the notorious ‘Middle Passage’” (Law and Lovejoy xviii). The co-editors emphasize Baquaqua’s unique significance as someone who experienced slavery in West Africa and Brazil. Baquaqua escaped from slavery in New York City in 1847, and spent two years in Haiti under the protection of the American Baptist Free Mission Society, before he studied at New York Central College and went on to write his autobiography in Canada, in the early 1850s (Law and Lovejoy 1). Many passages and the tone in general suggest that Moore had either much more control over the writing than admitted, or that Baquaqua supplied him with what the former required. “Mahommah,” according to the text, “did not progress very well in learning, having a natural dread of it” (Law and Lovejoy 126). The racism in this statement is blatant. The tone equals that of the missionary who also states that “Africa is rich in every respect (except in knowledge)” (Law and Lovejoy 128). The inclusion of African languages would in this case mainly function to add authenticity to an account declared someone else’s.

Tamplin assumes traces of Fulfulde in Ibn Said’s manuscript. Ben Solomon’s account briefly mentions that he spoke Wolof. Moore presents not only occasional vocabulary belonging to African languages Law and Lovejoy are not always certain to identify, but he opens Baquaqua’s narrative with two pages of number words with their English translation. Law and Lovejoy offer the most illuminating explanation so far in a footnote conceding that though not proven “presumably these numbers are in Baquaqua’s native language” (90). Relying on the scholarship of Petr Zima, they identify this language as Dendi, “the language of the Muslim community of Djougou,” but they also repeat Austin’s observation concerning the similarity with “the ‘Timbuktu’ language, i. e. Songhai, which is closely related to Dendi.” The uncertainty in these explanations once more invites further research by linguists, historians and anthropologists among others. In the context of literary criticism, the focus rests on the possible meaning, purpose, and potential effect of the respective number columns. The purpose could of course be very pragmatic, to give a simple example of Baquaqua’s native language. One may ask whether this purpose indeed required the given amount of number words, or if the effort

to present two entire pages of them does not, rather, imply a different intention. Given his authorial control, Moore could have placed them at the opening of his publication to feign authenticity. An analysis of the words similar to that of an experimental poem, for example, supersedes the scope of the present essay. Instead, two points will suffice with regard to literary values of this particular narrative. The first, disregarding author intention, revolves around the symbolic value of numbers versus words. This juxtaposition could lead to interpretations of numbers standing for the amounts of money paid and the amounts of people shipped in the context of transatlantic slavery. Since the number words stand entirely unaccompanied by any words of explanation, all associated interpretations remain speculations. The only certainty about the inclusion of these numbers is, however, that they provide a kind of intertext, and intertextuality has become a crucial concept in literary criticism since Kristeva elaborated on the pioneering theses of Bakhtin. Meer is right in emphasizing that “quotation in slave narratives could function as a badge of cultural belonging and allegiance to ‘literature’ in its broadest sense” (Meer 78).

Baquaqua’s story is the richest to illustrate this fact because besides the mentioned number words and occasional shorter references, it includes two poems in their entirety. The first one, titled “Lines Spoken by Mahommah” is supposedly the work of a teacher, as mentioned in the first paragraph of this section. This poem, composed in more or less successful rhyming couplets, does admittedly not show promise of enduring value. However, it does summarize the narrative’s main perspective as that of proselytizing abolitionist Protestants whose alternation between third and first-person point-of-view provides a powerful stylistic device. Both Law and Austin consider it possible that Baquaqua complied in the publication in order to facilitate his return to Africa. The delivery of the poem probably had a similar reason. A first-person narrative precedes its reproduction. “I remained nearly three years in the college, and during that time made very great progress in learning,” the reader finds out at this point. The Whitfield poem selected to end the narrative is somewhat more refined than Ms. King’s, but it likewise enforces the missionary abolitionist agenda.

While some intertexts are clearly identifiable, others can only be assumed, much like the extent to which individual participants, including the enslaved and anti-slavery advocates, but also additional editors and translators contributed to any preserved slave narrative. Accordingly, different readers will disagree on their literary merits. It is wise, as Meer suggests, to consider any value judgment as one element in a continuously developing broader picture. “It ought to be possible,” Meer writes, “for instance, both to admire Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* and to

note its range in register, which veers between a declamatory rhetoric inflected by the pulpit, the antislavery platform, and the Bible, and statements of extraordinary, almost childlike, simplicity” (72). The more careful and interdisciplinary studies become available, the more complete this broader picture will become. It should definitely not lack analyses of stories by enslaved Muslims.

The recent *Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature* (2016) as well as *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (2014) provide proof that Anglophone scholars continue to ignore the contributions by enslaved Muslims to the slave narrative as specific type of autobiographical writing. Despite book-length studies by Allan D. Austin (1984, 1997 and 2011), Ala Alryyes (2011), Ronald A.T. Judy (1993), Robin Law and Paul E. Lovejoy (2009), as well as dissertations such as Safet Dabovic’s (2009), and online projects such as *Documenting the American South*, Job Ben Solomon, Omar Ibn Said, and Mohammah Gardo Baquaqua are generally absent from slave narrative scholarship, in particular in the context of literary criticism. Although two of the ten pages selected bibliography in Davis and Gates, Jr.’s *The Slave’s Narrative* (1985) refer to “Narratives of African Muslims in Antebellum America,” these sources are not the subject of the preceding essays in the collection. It is not surprising then that Melvin Dixon omits to mention Islam when referring to features of “Protestant Christianity and traditional African religions” in “Singing Swords: The Literary Legacy of Slavery” (Davis and Gates, Jr. 298), one among many similar omissions limiting the legacy in question.

Conclusion

The present essay’s focus on the accounts by Ben Solomon, Ibn Said, and Baquaqua suggests an expansion of the scope of slave narrative studies in general and with an emphasis on literary aspects in particular. The three analyses show how the effects of amanuensis, editorship, and translation inspire speculations about style, language acquisition and formation, as they complicate questions about authorship. The preservation of original manuscripts allows for conclusions about script and individual graphics, as well as about author intentions. Intertextuality as literary device plays a crucial role as it represents the complex transculturation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so-called New World, as well as that of individual identities inhabiting it involuntarily, at least at first. Additionally, the multilingualism of these accounts by enslaved Muslims reflects the richness and complexity of the slave narrative genre. An excellent initiative for future studies in this area is the site on “Arabic Slave Writings and the American Canon” hosted by

Northern Illinois University (<https://www.niu.edu/arabicslavewritings/>), which also centers on literary merit.

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