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Jamaica's Muslim past: disconcerting theories



File photo

Colonel Wright, right, of the Accompong Maroons leads other Maroons in paying tribute to Kajo of Accompong, St. Elizabeth, as they celebrated Kajo's Day in 1982.

Maureen Warner-Lewis, Contributor

Some weeks ago, Gordon Mullings issued a challenge to historians to comment publicly on the claims put forward by Dr. Sultana Afroz, a member of the Department of History at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies, regarding the high number of Muslim slaves who came to Jamaica and the Muslim foundations of the island's Maroon communities. Although not a historian by training, I have researched both African and Caribbean history enough to put forward my views with some degree of confidence.

There is no doubt that there were Muslims among the enslaved brought to the Caribbean. My oral interviews in the 1960s with Trinidadian descendants of such persons, bore testimony to this, findings which were published in the **African Studies Association of the West Indies** Bulletins 5 and 6 (1972, 1973), later republished in my **Guinea's Other Suns** (1991). These foreparents had come from the Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, and Mandingo ethnic groups of West Africa. Of these groups, the Mandingo of the Senegambia region were most associated with Islam. The religious ideas of these Muslims as well as the writing skills in Arabic which several of them possessed had in fact caught the attention of European planters, among them Jamaican-based Bryan Edwards (1819).

In fact, their numeracy and writing skills allowed them to secure jobs as storekeepers and tally clerks on estates. But many of the Africans who had come into contact with Islam before migrating were not literate in Arabic, and it is the literacy of those who belonged to families of established Muslim priests and scholars which most readily attracted the attention of European commentators.

ATTENDED MUSLIM SCHOOLS

Having attended Muslim schools, they were able to recite short or long sections of the Koran, as well as write Arabic words and letters. Indeed, Jonas Mohammed Bath of Port of Spain, Trinidad, wrote several petitions in English and Arabic during the 1830s on behalf of other Muslims who wished to be repatriated to their native lands.

In a 1974 article, Carl Campbell set out the life story of Mohammedu Sisei of the Gambia, who had arrived in Trinidad as a demobilised West India Regiment soldier in 1816 and who, through the agency of the Royal Geographical Society of England did return to the Gambia.

In an almost similar vein, Magistrate R. R. Madden of Jamaica alerted anti-slavery and Africa colonisation interests in London to the Arabic autobiography (1830s) of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, otherwise called Edward Donlan in Jamaica.

Moravian and Baptist missionaries collected other autobiographies; and European and American missionaries commented on the arguments they conducted with Muslims regarding the relative positions of Jesus, Abraham and other sacred figures shared by the Christian and Islamic orders of divinity. There is therefore, in the travelogues and histories of the 18th 19th centuries, mention of Muslim Africans, but the comment is consistently made that the presence of such persons was small.

Of course, Europeans did not understand much about the lives of the slaves. So other evidence must be adduced to bring to light fuller understandings of the Caribbean past. An important strand of evidence lies in the data on sources and destinations of the Caribbean's enslaved populations.

Orlando Patterson's ethnic ratios of slave imports into Jamaica given in **The Sociology of Slavery** (1967) have been consistent with the findings of later analysts such as Curtin, Higman, Eltis and others. Between 1655 and 1700 after the British seized the island, the main slave sources were the Gold Coast and the Senegambian Windward Coast comprised of today's Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Ivory Coast.

In the first half of the 18th century (1700-1750), the Windward Coast and Angola at the south-eastern extreme of the slaving zone parted with 27 per cent, and 33 per cent came from the Slave Coast (today's Togo and the Republic of Benin, previously called Dahomey), while the neighbouring Gold Coast yielded 25 per cent. By the second half of the 18th century, there was a noticeable shift toward the Niger and Cross deltas of today's Nigeria and Cameroon, but between 1790 and 1807 when the traffic was outlawed there was a rapid increase in slaves exported by the British from the Congo and Angola.

By contrast, Afroz in her 1995 article on "The Unsung Slaves: Islam in Plantation Jamaica" identifies Jamaican slaves as being Mandinka, Fula, Susu, Ashanti and Hausa, without indicating their relative strengths vis-a-vis other significant ethnicities such as Igbo-Ibibio from the Niger and Cross River deltas, Ewe-Fon from Togo and Dahomey, and people from Congo and Angola. Four of her five named categories came from cultures which had been either minimally, partially, or heavily converted to Islam between the 8th to the 19th centuries.

In a similar non-rigorous manner, by her 1999 article "From Moors to Marronage: the Islamic Heritage of the Maroons", Afroz moves from indicating that Muslims (called Moors) in Spain were among the earliest Spanish settlers in the Americas to speaking of Jamaica's Maroon settlements as being 'Muslim'.

Thereafter, her article continues to make extravagant claims for Muslim influence among them: the fact that windward and leeward Maroon links are couched in "brother" and "sister" terms; that Maroon communities are governed by councils; that Nanny's other name, reputedly Sarah, is Muslim; that since Salaam aleikum (peace be with you) has been used by the Moore Town Maroons, and since this term is confined to greetings among Muslims rather than by Muslims to non-Muslims, then this serves as proof that Muslim culture dominated Moore Town and that Islam was its "unifying force".

Regarding the salutation, studies on residual and dying languages show that grammatical forms in their original languages become abridged when languages are used by isolated minority groups who are under pressure to acquire the dominant languages of an exile environment; and the infrequency of usage also leads to a non-observance of the social conventions which govern the use of particular phrases or words, such as the appropriate differentiation between pronouns which are emphatic versus non-emphatic, familiar versus respectful.

Since speakers of a language most often speak it among themselves, Arabic speakers would most commonly use Salaam aleikum, rather than 'Assalamo-Ala-Manittaba'al Huda' which Afroz indicates is the proper greeting from a Muslim to a non-Muslim.

Furthermore, the shorter, less complicated phrase would be the one most likely to be remembered in a situation of exile, where an immigrant language is in disadvantageous competition with other languages.

As for the other claims, these are similarly untenable as proof of intense Muslim influence. African cultures in general use certain basic kinship terms, such as "father", "mother", "brother", "sister", "uncle", "aunt", "husband", "wife", to signal relationships among individuals for which European languages add "in-law", "adopted", "half-", or use words such as "cousin" or "friend"

In like fashion, all over Africa alliances between communities, villages, and ethnic groupings are rationalised in terms of descent from common ancestors, thus making the groups "brothers" and "sisters".

Another distortion is Afroz's, assertion that Akan day-names such as Kajo, Kwao and Kofi are Arabic. These names are so embedded in the Akan tradition of the Fanti (Coromanti) and Ashanti that in their ancient and cryptic drum poetry and religious verse, one of the aspects of God, Nyankopong or the Great Ananse, also bears Kwaku, the birthday-name for those born on Wednesday. And Mother Earth is named Asase Yaa, the final name being given to females born on Friday.

Given the fact that Islam did not become a serious political force in the royal court of Ashanti until the second half of the 1700s, it is surprising that names so deeply embedded in the Akan and Ga cultures to the east and west of the Volta River and extending from the savannah lands bordering the Sahel in the north and southward to the Gulf of Guinea coast could be Arabic in their source.

MUSLIM INFLUENCE

This is because Ashanti was one of several West African kingdoms where Muslim influence was confined to the royal court, rather than an aspect of mass popular culture and worldview.

Islam had penetrated sub-Saharan Africa from North Africa in the eighth century. Its first host was the ancient kingdom of Ghana in the vicinity of present-day Mali. It was introduced by Berber traders who opened up the trans-Saharan gold trade from Ghana to the Mediterranean.

Over the next 11 centuries, the international contacts stimulated by the trade in gold, slaves, salt, and kola, and the need of sub-Saharan rulers to communicate with the Arab world of traders, lawyers, and scholars led African kings to recruit Arabic speaking scribes-cum-merchants as diplomats and interpreters at their courts.

This process took place at different times at varying locations from west to east across the savannah belt of West Africa, and in some cases this collaboration led to the conversion to Islam of court elites.

By cultural osmosis, and sometimes by upsurges of Islamic religious militancy, the village-level leadership, and later commoners, eventually became converted from various forms of African animistic religion and ancestor veneration to the monotheism and international religious culture of Islam. In contrast to Ashanti and Yoruba, by the 14th century Islam had already extensively penetrated into the urban culture of the Senegambian peoples.

The contention that the final segment of Juan de Bolas' name was a Yoruba name originating from Arabic is another glib assertion. In the first place, the Yoruba did not figure in the slave trade till the late 17th century whereas de Bolas or Lubolo or Libolo lived in Jamaica in the mid-17th.

Furthermore, "Bola is easily decoded as comprising two Yoruba segments of meaning. Then the assignment of Sarah as Arabic might be more helpfully denoted as Semitic, that is, common to the languages of the Red Sea, such as Hebrew and Arabic. This applies to names like Abraham/Ibrahim, Solomon/Suleiman, Miriam/Miram, and so on. "Sarah" having entered into English language and culture through Biblical influence, it would be preposterous to claim that every British girl who bore the name Sarah or Sally was Jewish, just as the slaves who carried such names cannot be identified as either Muslim or Jewish on that ground.

Another custom deeply embedded in African culture was prostration on the ground by the subordinate in deference to a superior. It was already the practice in Central Africa when the Portuguese arrived in the Congo at the end of the 15th century, and the northeastern segment of the vast Congo Basin only felt the effects of Islam approaching from East Africa in the 19th century.

Prostration in its full form, in which the subject lies full-length on the ground face downward in the presence of the superior in social status or age, or in truncated forms which involve touching the hands to the earth, is widely practised among several peoples of West Africa and predates Islamic intervention. Maroon Kajo's act of prostration during the signing of the Treaty with the British in 1739 cannot therefore be ascribed to Islamic influence in the light of the acts of respect and social distance which are indigenous to so many African cultures.

Another instance advanced by Afroz to assert the Islamic affiliation of Jamaican Maroons is the initial phrase of the Treaty drawn up between the British authorities and the Leeward Maroons led by Kajo (Cudjoe). The Treaty begins with the words "In the name of God, Amen," the equivalent to Arabic Bismillah "In the Name of Allah". Afroz asserts that "such an introduction to a treaty or contract was never the precedent in Christendom Europe."

On the other hand, the phrase in the Treaty occurs at the beginning of some British wills, and possibly was a reflection of the testator's religious faith. To cite two instances I know of, it occurs at the start of a will made by Sarah Hart in St. Elizabeth in 1822 and registered in 1834, and in a Scottish will registered in 1818, which begins: "Follows the Probate of the Defuncts last will and testament: In the name of God Amen. I Robert Douglass of Mains.:" Indeed, it is clear that Kajo did not himself draw up the wording of the Treaty; the British would hardly have allowed him that privilege. He was a formidable military tactician, but his signing the Treaty with an x indicates that the writing styles of legal documents was outside of his specialisation and that he wrote neither in Roman nor Arabic letters.

QUESTIONABLE DEVICE

Yet another questionable device in Afroz's two articles is the application of the term jihad to label acts of war and rebellion on the part of slaves and Maroons in Jamaica, Suriname and, by association in the same sentence, Haiti. Because two Suriname Maroon leaders bear names which she identifies as Arabic, her deduction is that their military actions constituted jihad.

Such an attribution cannot be made unless proof is adduced as to the motives for their actions. Similar over-reading affects her designation of the 1831-32 Jamaican slave rebellion as inspired by motives to effect an Islamic jihad.

No such evidence emerged in the several inquiries into the prolonged event and no Muslims were specifically singled out as pivotal to the action. Were Sam Sharpe and his principal lieutenants Muslim, then it is strange that they did not use the forum of their trials, their interviews with pastors, or their execution gibbets to proclaim their Islamic faith.

All the same, there might well have been either crypto- or active Muslim believers among the hundreds of slaves who participated in the uprising. The sole piece of evidence that suggests a link in the mind of a contemporary slave was recorded by magistrate Madden regarding Muhammad Kaba of Spice Grove estate in Manchester who in Jamaica also carried the names Robert Peart and Robert Tuffit.

Given the repression by government, militia, and anti-missionary civilian elements, that followed the widespread devastation of the uprising, Kaba's wife destroyed a letter in Arabic which had been hand-delivered to Kaba in 1831 from a Muslim friend in Kingston. It was believed to have been written in Africa by a Muslim cleric and it "exhorted all the followers of Mahomet to be true and faithful, if they wished to go to Heaven."

What else it said is not recorded. But Kaba's wife thought it might be incriminating at a time when in several parishes local militia and army personnel were carrying out house-to-house searches and were posted outside churches, while slaves were being put to death on the slightest suspicion of disloyalty.

Indeed, Brother Pfeiffer, a German Moravian pastor, had been arrested in St. Elizabeth on January 7, taken on the 9th to Mandeville in Manchester and tried, and came within an inch of being executed, in addition to which Craton (1882) alludes to some events in Manchester on the night of January 11, 1832 which led to the army shooting six and executing two, so that there was reason for alarm by Kaba's wife, especially as Kaba had become a Moravian and so might have come under special scrutiny at this time.

If the letter to Kaba advanced the cause of jihad, it might have had the effect of triggering rebellion, in the way in which Muslim slaves rose against bondage in the city of Salvador in Bahia, Brazil, in January 1835.

In the Brazilian case, there was evidently a sufficiently large Muslim community of Yoruba and Hausa slaves united by a supra-ethnic religion to have made this prospect feasible, despite the fact that these two ethnicities had been engaged in a religious-political war in Africa since the end of the 1800s and this was feeding the 19th century slave trade with many war captives.

But there has not so far emerged evidence of concentrations of Yoruba or Nago in Jamaica sizeable enough to have spread their influence and shaken the system, though there are known to have been pockets of Nago in the post-slavery period of Hanover (where stu is practised), at Abekokutu in Westmoreland, in St. Mary and St. Thomas, and of course, there may have been a settlement at Naggo Head in St. Catherine. But there does appear to have been loose interconnected groupings of Muslim slaves generally referred to as "Mandingo" who debated the authenticity of Christianity even as they joined various Christian religions.

This network takes vague shape in the writings of magistrate Madden, even though he clearly did not comprehend the complexity of the religious lives of individuals such as Peart/Kaba.

Kaba's religious questionings also gained the attention of the Moravian clerics John Lang and Henry Buchner, while the recent discovery of a notebook with pastoral advice on prayer, fasting, and marriage written by Kaba in Arabic sheds more light on his spiritual conflicts and preoccupations. The contents of that notebook were discussed by Yacine Daddi Addoun and Paul Lovejoy in a paper on "The Arabic Manuscript of Muhamadd Kaba Saghannughu of Jamaica, c. 1823" at the Caribbean Culture conference at Mona in January 2002.

It is very useful that the understanding of Caribbean history should have the benefit of analysts who know the Arabic language, religion, and culture. It allows the researcher so equipped to spot information which another would miss. As for example, when Afroz (1999) informs us that the Koranic terms Din and Dunya still form "an integral part of the vocabulary of some of the living elderly Maroons in Portof town, Portland."

Unfortunately, the writer does not divulge precisely in what context or what sentences these terms were used, or whether the words were suggested to the speakers and responses thus elicited.

This lack of proper supporting evidence undermines the validity of her discovery. In general, then, it is to be lamented that Afroz's effort to throw new light on Caribbean history and culture is discredited by constant slippage from probability to bolder and bolder assertions, by misapplication of terminology, and disconcerting manipulation of evidence.

Dr. Maureen Warner-Lewis is a professor in the Department of Literatures in English at the UWI, Mona.

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