

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 5 No. 2, August 2021

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-5-issue-2-aug-2021/>

Einboden, Jeffrey. *Jefferson's Muslim Fugitives. The Lost Story of Enslaved Africans, their Arabic Letters, and an American President*. Publication: Oxford University Press, New York, 2020, pp, xv + 330, ISBN 978 0190 844 479.

Reviewed by: Amidu Olalekan Sanni, Vice-Chancellor/President Fountain University, Nigeria.

The volume under review is made up of twenty-two chapters in all and the core and kernel of it is “the story of . . . Arabic writings by Muslim slaves fleeing their captivity in Kentucky.” (p.7). Also included here is a 1750 writing sample from Georgia which Einboden characterizes as “. . . the earliest surviving instance of Arabic slave writings in the newly found United States” (p. 9). On October 4, 1807, Thomas Jefferson the third American President (r. 1801-1809) was presented with two Arabic manuscripts that were “irregularly inscribed, interrupted by ink blots and obscured by misspellings” (p.144). Both were authored by anonymous literate Africans protesting their captivity.

The two manuscripts, here published for the first time, indexicalise America's early entanglement with Africa, religion (Islam), slavery, and Arabic literacy at the two ends of the American social stratum. At one end is the zenith, the President of the country, and at the other end is the duo of obscure, literate, freedom seeking enslaved African Muslims. Detained as slaves lacking in oral skills to communicate in English, both nonetheless had “a literacy that was equally incomprehensible” (p.149). Einboden gives some reasons for the near neglect or obscurity of the contributions and compositions of Muslim slaves in the American literary and cultural legacy. These include physical loss of some of the Arabic writings, obscurity of the surviving bits, partly due to their illegibility, limitations of their Arabic authorship, and the limitedness of their audiences.

Beyond the historical value of the two manuscripts as a representation of the American literary legacy from the early history of the Union as exemplified in this

volume, Einboden also gives fresh insights into the efforts and characters of some early cultivators of the Arabic-Islamic culture in the US. One such character was Ezra Stiles (1727-1795), a “diligent student of the Qur’ān. . . and one of the few Arabists in the new State who, as the President of Yale University in 1781, gave a Commencement Address in Hebrew, Chaldaic, and Arabic. (p. 34). Stiles is also reported to have been receiving between 1786-87 letters authored in Arabic by Muslim slaves in the New World. An entry dated 17 August 1787 in his personal diary confirms this much: “Captain Todd presented me with four specimens of Negro writing in Arabic, written by four Negro slaves in Trinidad in the West Indies, who were brought from the Fouile [Fula] Nation in Africa. . . I find I can read it; it being written in fair Arabic Characters; & begins بسم الله الرحمن (sic). Two of them are Mahometans & two Pagans, but all educated to write the Arabic”. (p. 38).

This statement provides a fresh insight into the narrative on the early American interface with the Islamic cultural bequest *a la* transatlantic slavery. Firstly, it indicates that by the second half of the 18thC, American/Western public and military personnel had access to, and perhaps some remarkable familiarity with, slave writings in Arabic, whatever the subject matter of such writings. Secondly, negroes with corrupted Arabic-Islamic or native names who could write Arabic were presumed to be pagans by their Western discussants. Non-Muslim West Africans could not have mastered Arabic to the level of employing it for authorship, if at all they ever ventured to acquire the skill, and any suggestion to the contrary, even if remotely, is hardly demonstrable or verifiable.

Yet another significant figure was Stiles’s student at Yale and a Church minister, Abiel Holmes (1763-1837). He described the Futa Jalon born enslaved ‘Usman whom he had met on the plantation as “a great literary curiosity” (p.32) who had, on February 21, 1788, penned some Qur’anic (petitionary) passages (p. 51) which Holmes characterized as the outcry of an enslaved negro “suffering brutal inequalities” (p.56). The exemplar, which is published here for the first time, represents the earliest extant Arabic writing sample by a slave in post-independence US. The whole of Chapter Six focuses on ‘Usman (pp. 55-63). He is said to have been raised “in a Muslim region famed for scholarship. . . memorizing Qur’anic chapters [and] trained not merely to recite this sacred text orally, but to write in elegant lines”. (p. 56).

The availability of ‘Usman’s writings to Stiles in 1788 inspired the Yale University President to further develop an interest in Arabic materials. The second

extant Arabic writing authored by ‘Usman, a 31-line prayer formula also being published here for the first time (p. 58), deserves a deeper study for a variety of reasons as an exemplar of late 18thC Arabic authorship in the New World. Holmes got the manuscript in 1790, his wedding year, from ‘Usman. Could this have been a marriage gift or nuptial benediction (*baraka*)?

Samuel Brown Wylie (1773-1852) is another important Pennsylvania Ivy League professor who was spurred into intensive engagement with Arabic through interaction with the two anonymous Arabic Manuscripts by the Kentucky “freedom seekers”. In his view, the Arabic manuscripts were not written by “ignorant men” but were produced by “authors capable of teaching even an Ivy League professor” (p.167). Edward Everett (1794-1865) is yet another iconic figure discussed by Einboden, not least for being the first to receive the first recorded Arabic missive that was written on 3 October 1826 by Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al- Raḥmān (d.1838). This letter in Arabic made Ibrāhīm the most celebrated Muslim slave in the United States, as it contains some Qur’anic formulae along with a plea for his release from slavery. Everett’s assessment of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān is very insightful; he is described as “an African Prince” (p.225) who “embodied an African ideal, one unsurpassed by Western peers” (p. 239).

An important issue in the American literacy legacy which the title under review has adumbrated, albeit superficially, relates to reverse Ajami/zation, that is, adapting Latin scripts for Arabic letters not found in Indo-European languages (cf Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World. The Odyssey of ‘ajami and the Murīdiyya*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016; and Fiona McLaughlin, “Ajami writing practices in Atlantic-speaking Africa”, in Friederike Lüpke, ed. *The Oxford Guide to the Atlantic Languages of West Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press ;2021], forthcoming). It is insightful to note that the French Orientalist and linguist, Comte de Volney (1757-1820) had, in his 1794 *Simplification des langues orientales*, addressed the problem of orthographical rendering in Latin script of Arabic letters that are not found in European languages.

In all, Einboden has offered to the academic and general readership a well-researched masterpiece “of historical recovery, unearthing for the first time, the story of two African travellers” (p.249). His effort has eloquently portrayed the interplay between specific American political undercurrents, especially during the early history of the US vis-a-vis the African representation of the Islam in the North and West African regions from the 18th century onward. Moreover, this work has also

given a fair reconstruction of the nature and depth of intellectual exertions by enslaved Africans and their impact on the socio-cultural cosmos of the emerging new United States of America.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2021 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990