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The Diasporic Ummah: Identity, Resistance, and Diversity

BY

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ABSTRACT

This article works with the concepts of identity, resistance, and diversity under the scope of the socio-cultural customs practised by communities of enslaved African Muslims, present in different locations of the American continent throughout the nineteenth century. These practices, despite having a religious significance, are also perceived as autonomous acts, distancing themselves from a passive observance of religious duties towards an active and conscious socio-religious posture. The article, therefore, aims at presenting a system of practices, connecting them to the Muslim idea of the ummah, to understand how action and choice served as a tool to engender agency and potency in the lives of thousands of enslaved Muslims throughout the African diaspora, while also discussing the diversity within the Muslim diasporic community.

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the concepts of identity, resistance, and diversity in Muslim societies found in Brazil, Jamaica, and the southern United States throughout the nineteenth century. Its aim lies in demonstrating how a cultural practice, although seen as a religious aspect, is not essentially ritualistic. The notion of praxis as part of an individual's religious experience can therefore be treated less as a rule and/or rite and more as an action. These practices happen within the ummah, understood here as a Muslim community on a national level or an imagined community on a transnational level, and also under the concept of Imam, the act of reposing faith in Allah.¹ This community allows its individuals its own set of practices and concepts, generating an identity that in the context of slavery consequently prompted resistance. This assertion follows what is proposed by Katrin A. Jomaa in her book *Ummah: A New Paradigm for a Global World*, where she examines how Islam emphasizes the element of active and conscious choice in contrast to “an inherited tradition that is blindly followed.”² That is essential to the argument disclosed here, which aims to demonstrate, in the lives of enslaved Muslims, a devout disposition which was permeated with self-consciousness and agency. Thus, this concept of religious practice establishes itself as a premeditated attitude, a choice in search of a real objective rather than a passive attitude regarding a religious tradition, and seeks to show a conscious act imbued within a defiant and even life-risking stance. Therefore, according to Jomaa, the critical element of choice associated with the term ummah lays emphasis on the responsibility of embracing reality and taking active choices in that regard, that is, humans taking responsibility for their life.³

The diasporic ummah was a great example of this practice, as it can be seen amidst enslaved Muslims in the Americas, who exercised their faith despite the risks of doing so. This can be seen in the Muslim Bahian community of the 1830s, which created a structured and organized society within the Brazilian Empire. Known as the Malês, they enjoyed relative freedom to perform their customs and practices in the city of Salvador, despite occasional police raids.⁴ The houses of freed Africans were used to hold meetings for prayers, ritual feasts, and religious festivities, and they even built a mosque, where on 29 November 1834 the Lailat al-Miraj was celebrated.⁵ However, after the 1835 Malê uprising, the Islamic identity began to be strongly linked to a prospect of insurgency and impudence, producing a constant fear of another rebellion.

As a result, being a Muslim in nineteenth-century Brazil meant keeping an extremely secretive attitude while performing the duties of the faith. Nonetheless, it was based on action, both individually and collectively, in search of the common goal of creating an ethos faithful to what was expected of a Muslim. That is, in the words of Abul A'la Al-Maududi, “the plan of life which Islam envisages, this plan and code of conduct are known as the Shari'ah. Its sources are the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad.”⁶ This plan was also seen in the lives of other enslaved Muslims in Jamaica and the southern United States. Although not persecuted to the same extent as their Brazilian counterparts, many Muslims

in these regions had to convert to Christianity, even if only for show, and perform their actual faith in private.

Consequently, it is important to emphasise that despite its apparent religious content, the argument discussed here is in no way a proselytising or religious one. This article does not even propose to discuss religion, but rather the agency of enslaved and oppressed communities, who, despite their limitations, created means to subsist according to their own parameters, denying the slaver society the imposition of its racist and degrading discourses. However, it is also undeniable that religion was a fundamental factor in the sovereignty of these individuals, and as a consequence, even if indirectly, it is presented in a positive light. Likewise, this article does not insinuate an exclusivity of Islam in providing its faithful with autonomy and agency. Other diasporic communities, imbued with different religions, demonstrated the same.

Concerning diversity, the objective is to discuss the distinction of each Muslim community, despite each belonging to the same Sunni religious perspective. The ummah concept does not impose a global uniqueness, and certainly, there is no universal Islamic experience. Each society had its own characteristics, without, however, delegitimizing itself as Muslim. Due to its global scope, Islam is bound to attain differences amongst the communities that practice it. This relationship between diversity and unity is also examined by Katrin A. Jomaa and is central to the objectives proposed here. Jomaa works with the idea of several ummahs connecting themselves like a sewing thread, forming a conforming but paradoxically diverse fabric. She writes, "if we imagine each thread representing a single ummah, their coming together through bonds of covenants will result in the formation of an inclusive ummah that is unified and strengthened by its interconnected relationships."⁷ That was indeed what was apparent in the Muslim communities formed in the Americas.

Therefore, the purpose of the article lies in discussing the concepts of identity, resistance, and diversity within the acts, opinions, behaviours, and religious practices of the Muslim diasporic community. It outlines these examples that can vary from performing the duties of religion, writing letters or books, and rebelling, to the different interactions within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims, revealing how the concepts discussed here found their way into the material experience of life.

IDENTITY, RESISTANCE, AND DIVERSITY IN PRACTICE

During the whole of the Atlantic slave trade, thousands of enslaved Muslims were brought to the American continent, and in 1522 the Wolof of Hispaniola were already leading the first African slave revolt in the history of the Americas.⁸ Coming from Western Africa, these individuals formed and continued their own traditions on the new continent, forging a distinct community within an oppressive Christian slave-holding society. Despite being uprooted from their lands and having their community ties broken, they planted their

culture and built new ties, interconnecting themselves at a regional and an Atlantic level. Consequently, whilst performing their own identities, the enslaved individuals resisted the imposed *status quo*. In fact, Chartier affirms that “the identity construction of each individual is always located at the intersection of the representation he gives of himself and the credibility attributed or refused by others to this representation.”⁹ Thus, the presence of a community of believers reinforced that they were “the best community that emerged in humanity, because you recommend what is good, forbid the illicit, and believe in God.”¹⁰ It is in line with Ala Maududi’s depiction of Islamic moral order, which “stipulates for man a system of life which is based on all good and is free from all evil. It invokes the people, not only to practise virtue but also to establish virtue and eradicate vice, to bid good and to forbid wrong.”¹¹ This fact reflected an emancipatory stance, subversive and integrative, which credited its participants with a dignified identity, contesting the pejorative attributions imposed by the oppressing slaver society. This is equivalent to Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi’s reminder that oppression (*zulm*) is the second-largest moral wrong after disbelief, and that it is incumbent on each Muslim, as the hadith ordains, to remove it from themselves and from others by hand, tongue, or heart. In so doing, this allows for the ordering and unification of practices, actions, behaviours, and representations that converge to the understanding of the self, of the subject’s identity, and also of a given society in which the individual moves.¹² Hence, it explains the posture and the ethnic affinity of the diasporic ummah, under Islam and its concepts concerning praxis and identity.¹³ This article understands them as central pieces in the emancipation of the individual and the Islamic community’s main coordinating agents.

Moreover, a further concept present in the Muslim diasporic community and one of its leading identity-forming designers is the ummah. The ummah can be understood as a community united in faith, as the prominent historian and classical Qur’anic exegete Al-Ṭabarī (839-923 AD) thinks, stating that its original meaning is a group of people practising one religion.¹⁴ However, according to Muhammad Abduh, a nineteenth-century religious scholar from Egypt, the ummah is defined as more than just a religious group that has confined its religion to rituals, without a practical implementation in society. Consequently, it requires a religious performance that is imbued with conscious action and not passive practice, enjoining righteousness and deterring wrongness, monitoring its performance such that if it goes astray, it can be rectified.¹⁵

Thus, this is a principled society, a society radically different from those which are founded on the basis of race, colour or territory. This society is the result of a deliberate choice and effort, it is the outcome of a “contract” which takes place between human beings and the Creator.¹⁶

Naṣīf Naṣṣār, an Arab intellectual of the 1970s, also argues that the ummah is a community that agrees on following a specific way or path. Therefore, the concept of the path takes precedence over the concept of the community, whereby the community becomes known and determined by the path it follows.¹⁷ That can be noted among the Muslim community of Rio de Janeiro in 1865. Through the travel report of Abd al-Rahman al-Baghdadi, an Ottoman imam, it is possible to grasp many features concerning the members

of that society. Following a request from that community, Baghdadi decided to remain in Brazil between 1865 and 1868, teaching and instructing the Islamic brotherhood not only in Rio de Janeiro but also in Salvador and Recife, where there was also a well-established Muslim community. However, that was risky, as the Brazilian authorities, since the Malê uprising of 1835, were deeply concerned with anything that could be linked to Islam. Therefore, it is notable to perceive that the Muslim populace, even at the possibility of being persecuted, imprisoned, and banned, deliberately decided to educate themselves more about the religion they practiced, agreeing on taking a specific path.

The Muslim community in Rio de Janeiro therefore urged Baghdadi to stay and educate them, emphasising that they wanted neither material possessions nor protection, demonstrating, according to Baghdadi's narrative and discourse, a sincere and devoted desire.¹⁸ That is in line with the concept of an active and conscious religious practice that fomented resistance and identity. A similar attitude, embedded with the same concepts of resistance and identity within a religious practice, can also be seen in the account of Francis de Castelnau, a French consul stationed in Bahia in the mid-nineteenth century. Here, de Castelnau stated that a certain Fulo, a freed Black man named Mohammad-Abdullah, refused to work for him, saying that he would not return to a "Christian dog" house.¹⁹ Such behaviour is explainable by the fact that in the Islamic religious narrative, there are several reproaches, regarding the Christian religion, which misrepresented and denied the precepts of God. Therefore, by being Christian, Castelnau might have failed to hold Mohammad-Abdullah's respect. In fact, the Quran states that all of those who qualify the signs of God as lies are like dogs.²⁰ That is also in accordance with the views of Mohammed Ali Sa'id, a sergeant in the American Union Army and also an African Muslim from Borno, who reported that the Muslims "look upon the Christians, from a religious point of view, as no better than dogs."²¹

Furthermore, Castelnau's report allows us to analyse something peculiar: a freed black man despising a French consul. This fact goes in opposition to the belief which credited white people with a higher status and tells us a lot about how Mohammad-Abdullah perceived himself and consequently behaved. The disdain of the Muslims for the white population was also noted by another observer, this time in Rio de Janeiro. Elizabeth Agassiz, an American educator and naturalist who was part of a scientific expedition to Brazil in 1866, reported how the Muslims did not seem so affable and responsive as the Congo slaves. Feelings of contempt and a lack of envy for what they would have perceived as the degenerate, heathen way of life of the Christians are wholly consistent with the Muslims' mentality.²²

Another great example was the Malê community of 1835, in Salvador, Bahia. In that year, in January, they led one of the largest urban revolts in Brazil. Composed mostly of enslaved Muslims, they left valuable information about their community in the judicial files. Although their revolt was not successful, they still marked Brazilian society in such a way that even in 1865, dressing as a "Muslim" was still a reason for imprisonment. In his report, Baghdadi states that he

asked several times about the reasons for this exaggerated care in hiding, especially since the state granted all sorts of freedom to individuals. They informed me that a war had taken place between them and the Christians. Until now, if the Christians know that somebody is Muslim, they will probably kill him, exile him or jail him for life.²³

The Malês demonstrated in practice the link between identity and resistance. In the various reports on their revolt, it is possible to see how their community was well structured and how it allowed, despite the limiting conditions of its members, a breath of freedom, reinforcing the precepts and practices inherent to their religion. These practices and precepts are observed, for example, through the testimony of José, an enslaved man from the Nagô nation, who in responding to questions about his partner and his tie with the revolt said that

the black Joaquim, his partner, did not do anything suspicious in the house of his master so that he the respondent could see it because his custom was to kill sheep at Father Ignacio's house, and there he would chat, only bringing home sometimes his food that was made there and it is in the so said house where some blacks gathered.²⁴

Joaquim's act of slaughtering sheep is connected to lamb being one of the most consumed meats in regions with a strong Islamic tradition, especially on *Eid al-Adha*. This feast of sacrifice is celebrated in deference to the prophet Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael, following a divine vision. However, in the Islamic tradition, Allah only wanted to test Abraham's faith and given this, sent him a ram to be sacrificed in place of his son. That led to the Muslim practice of sacrificing domesticated animals such as sheep and distributing its meat among neighbours and friends, celebrating this date to mark Abraham's act of faith, something Joaquim probably did many times.

Another reference that the passage above allows us to discuss is the Islamic precept concerning the proper way to slay an animal for consumption. Therefore, Joaquim's custom of killing sheep may be related to the need that Salvadorian Muslims had to consume halal food. The fact that Joaquim brought his meal from Father Ignacio's house and that several other people gathered there may refer to this specific demand. Adding to José's narrative, another enslaved Nagô, named Antônio, confirmed that Joaquim killed sheep, and a freedwoman named Ellena, from the Gegê nation, who lived in the house of Father Ignacio also testified the same.²⁵ Furthermore, Ellena stated that Joaquim also used to

do functions in his room with his comrades during the day, together with black people from the beach below who came there to eat and party, which she does not understand because she is not Nagô, and also the black Limtam who is in jail, slave of the surgeon Mesquita, is [in] the same assemblage.²⁶

These could be related to prayers and Arabic/Quranic lessons, mainly due to the presence of the name Limtam in the report, which was in fact a misspelling of Licutan, one of the most influential people in the Muslim community of Salvador and also a Muslim teacher. João José Reis states that during the attacks on the day of the uprising, some Africans assaulted the city jail, in an attempt to free Licutan, a highly esteemed Malê leader who was imprisoned there.²⁷ Thus, these facts point to the community's effort to choose its own path, promoting its identity and resistance through its religious practice.

This entailed a series of religious and cultural duties that not even the limiting condition of their slavery prevented them from performing.

Such practices could still be observed thirty years later, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. According to Baghdadi:

At the time of prayers, the men close themselves in a room, apart from each other and their acquaintances and friends. They pray alone, fearing that the Christians will discover them. In the afternoon, some of them go to their places specifically to perform their prayers of *zuhr* and *asr*. Others do their duties in the evening after they finish the business of this low world.²⁸

In a slave-owning society as oppressive as the one established in the Americas, the ummah was one of the many means used by enslaved Muslims to maintain their identity, being both a community of believers practicing together a specific faith, and also, a source of identification.²⁹ Baghdadi corroborates it by reporting that the Muslim community deeply loved and protected each other.³⁰ Thus, for many, religion was a meaning of resistance and survival. Throughout the diaspora, enslaved people of different creeds and ethnicities organised themselves and sought a way to create and maintain their identities, forming a society of their own. Christianity was no exception, and neither was Islam and its ummah.

Even in places such as the U.S. and Jamaica, where enslaved Muslims found themselves isolated without a community of their own, the ummah still provided identity and resistance. Omar ibn Said, an enslaved man from Futa Toro, belonging to the Owen family of Bladen County, North Carolina, reveals, albeit subjectively, that despite suffering the imposition of a new identity, he still identified himself as a Muslim.³¹ It is important to emphasize that slavery, despite being legitimized by Islamic jurisprudence, was not considered legal when forced upon the Muslim faithful, especially in the case of the Atlantic slave trade where most of the potential buyers were Christians. In fact, according to Khalīl, a fourteenth-century Egyptian scholar and one of the main references of Maliki Islamic law, it was unlawful for Muslims to sell slaves to non-Muslims, as it was the responsibility of Muslims to initiate slaves to the religion of Islam.³² In addition, Chouki El-Hamel, a specialist in West and Northwest Africa and a professor at Arizona State University, also states that “all free or freed Muslims should not be enslaved under any circumstances.”³³ Therefore, the Islamic jurisprudence and its theological concept validated their distinction and the inconsistency of their enslaved status in the Americas.

As a consequence, a set of arguments written by Islamic scholars were produced to justify and legitimate those claims, especially in Western Africa. Among many, the most well-known was Ahmed Baba, the great Timbuktu jurist. He stated in a treatise written circa 1615 entitled *Mi'raj al-Su'ud* that the cause of slavery was a lack of belief. Thus, being Black or white was of no importance. However, he also linked ethnicity and its relationship to Islam to prove that certain ethnicities could not be enslaved, as there were some inquisitions about whether all Black Africans were by definition non-Muslims, and therefore, had permanent slave status, regardless of later conversions to Islam.³⁴ Baba concludes that

the Muslim ethnicities and those under their protection could not be enslaved.³⁵ Supporting this view, El-Hamel cites Sidi Abdullah bin al-Hajj Ibrahim al-Alawi who stated that in the “case of a newly enslaved person being sold shortly after her capture, her claims to be from free Muslim people are to be believed unless someone else can bring evidence to the contrary.”³⁶ Shaykh Bay al-Kunti, one of the greatest jurists of the Saharo-Sahelian area in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, also agrees with Ahmed Baba, linking one’s place of origin and connection with Islam as a guarantee of freedom.³⁷ In theory, a freeborn Muslim could never become a slave, and despite the few exceptions, the West African Muslims largely followed the rule that prohibited them from selling their brethren.³⁸

Consequently, enslavement was considered an attribute of the infidel, thus, not being incorporated into the ummah’s ethos. It is also important to note that this concept did not imply an Islamic opposition to the slave regime, but rather to the illegality or immorality of the enslavement of people who, from the Muslim legal perspective, would be immune to this condition.³⁹ For this reason, the Muslim resistance could also mean, besides the struggle which was common to all slaves, a religious practice. A good example of this can be seen in the writings of the aforementioned Omar ibn Said, known due to his 1831 autobiography. He begins the narrative of his history by quoting a sura of the Quran called Al-Mulk, which translates into English as The Sovereignty. That sura addresses the power of Allah in contrast to those of the unbelievers, attesting to their coming punishment. Accordingly, a particular verse of this sura states what Said might have thought of his condition in comparison to his owner’s. It reads: “Say, ‘O Prophet,’ Consider this: whether Allah causes me and those with me to die or shows us mercy, who will save the disbelievers from a painful punishment?”⁴⁰ That is in line with the sura’s fragment cited by Said in his book, which also reads:

It is He who has made the earth subservient to you. Walk about its regions and eat of His provisions. To Him all shall return at the Resurrection. Are you confident that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to cave in beneath you, so that it will shake to pieces and overwhelm you?⁴¹

It can be assumed that this passage alludes to the Owen family who enslaved him, and the all-powerful slaver and Christian society as a whole. Despite its power and importance, Said reminded that society of its insignificance before Allah, the supreme al-Mulk, the lord and judge of all human beings. Thus, Omar ibn Said reaffirmed his identity as a Muslim and resisted, maintaining his culture and religion, albeit hidden under an apparent conversion. It is also worth mentioning that the name of that sura comes from the Arabic word al-Mulk. That is not a coincidence, because the noun al-Mulk comes from the tripartite Arabic root “Malaka,” meaning both to own and to have dominion. The title is, therefore, the perfect allusion to slavery.⁴²

Similar to Said, there was also the example of Abon Becr Sadika, who maintained his Muslim identity despite being separated from an Islamic community. He was enslaved for thirty years in Jamaica, until being freed through the efforts of an Irish doctor named Richard Robert Madden, who was a member of the Anti-Slavery Society. In a letter, dated in

Kingston, September 15, 1834, and addressed to a certain JS Buckingham, Madden states the following:

A Negro was recently brought before me, to be sworn in as constable on his master's property. I discovered by the mere accident of seeing the man sign his name in very well-written Arabic, that he was a man of education, and on subsequent inquiry, a person of exalted rank in his own country, who had been kidnapped in a province bordering on Timbuctoo. He had been sold into Slavery in Jamaica nearly 30 years ago, and had preserved the knowledge of the learning of his country, and obtained the character of one a little more enlightened than the majority of his savage brethren, and that was all.⁴³

Notwithstanding Madden's blatant prejudice towards all other African cultures, it is interesting to note that many enslaved Muslims were noticed by Europeans during their excursions in America. Lovejoy affirms that the biographical accounts of Muslims indicate that despite their relatively low numbers, individual Muslims often stood out within a society that was still largely illiterate, in part because they were usually educated.⁴⁴ This contributed to the distinction and respect that many had for the Islamic community. Two examples of this can be seen through Thomas Ewbank's 1856 book *Life in Brazil, or A Journal of a Visit to the Land of the Cocoa and the Palm* and Allan D. Austin's citation of Bilali Mohamed, an enslaved man belonging to Thomas Spalding of Sapelo Island, Georgia, during the 1812 Anglo-American War. According to Ewbank, citing a Bahian planter, the enslaved Muslims were shrewd and intelligent, some wrote Arabic fluently and were vastly superior to most of their masters.⁴⁵ Bilali Mohamed, for instance,

told Spalding that he could defend his charges, and Spalding's faith in his promises led him to give Bilali eighty muskets to defend the island property while his master was elsewhere. This appears to have been the only instance in which slaves were given guns in Georgia during the antebellum period. Bilali put his own faith on the line; he declared to Spalding that in the event of an attack, "I will answer for every Negro of the true faith, but not for the Christian dogs you own."⁴⁶

This account and the classification of Christians as dogs are in line with the same attitude shown by Mohammad-Abdullah regarding Francis Castelnau, while also demonstrating a slave explicitly admitting his opinion about his master's religion. Correspondingly, Nicholas Owen, an eighteenth-century slave trader, reports the same contempt shown by Muslims towards the Christian faith. He asserts the following:

As to our religion, it has made no impression in at least otherwise than a matter of ridicule or laughter in so many years as they have had us among them, notwithstanding there have been some trials to convert them to a notion of a better state.⁴⁷

The enslaved Muslims were not interested in converting to a religion that was considered corrupt and which denied the prominence of their greatest prophet Muhammad, which was, along with other deviations, incompatible with what they had learned and practiced. Connecting also with what Max Weber notes, ethnic groups almost always believe that their way of life is more honourable than that of others.⁴⁸ Consequently, Europeans and other non-Muslim slaves could be spurned by the Muslim captives in the Americas. The sources make it clear that there were many cases of intentional segregation done by Muslims towards non-Muslim slaves, motivated by a desire to not mix with the *kafir*, that is,

the infidels. João José Reis states that the “Nagôs who know how to read, and partners in the Malê insurrection, did not shake hands, nor did they treat well those who were not, calling them infidel out of contempt.”⁴⁹ The same attitude was applied to a Catholic slave who was provoked by some of the Malês since she was “going to Mass to worship the wood that is on the altar because the images are not saints.”⁵⁰

This distinction can also be seen through the letters that Madden wrote concerning the enslaved man Abon Becr Sadika. In his missives, Madden recounts Sadika's story, translating it from Arabic. According to himself, Sadika was born in the city of Timbuktu, was raised in Gineh, and acquired Quranic knowledge in Gounah. He was taken captive when Abdengara, king of Buntuco, captured his city, taking many of its inhabitants as spoils to be sold on the coast. Sadika, in writing his story, states the following:

My parents' religion is of the Mussulmans: they are all circumcised, and their devotion are five times a day; they fast in the month Ramadan; they give tribute according to the law; they are married to four wives, but the fifth is an abomination to them. They fight for their religion, and they travel to Hedjaz (those who are capable). They don't eat meat except what they themselves kill. They do not drink wine nor spirits as it is held as an abomination so to do. They do not associate with any that worship idols, or profane the Lord's name, or do dishonor to their parents, or commit murder, or bear false witness, or who are covetous proud, or boastful; such faults are an abomination unto my religion. They are particularly careful in the education of their children, and in their behaviour.⁵¹

A number of these precepts and practices listed by Sadika can be more explicitly found in some hadiths, such as the one regarding praying five times a day and the one concerning circumcision. Both are reported in Sahih al-Bukhari's collection of hadiths.⁵² Other practices listed by Sadika (such as fasting, tribute, number of wives, jihad, hajj, food, drinking alcohol, and worshiping idols) are explained by both hadiths and the Quran.⁵³ In any case, Sadika sees them as a privilege and distinction lost due to his enslaved status, making him a Muslim at fault with Allah, as it is clear that Iman, the act of reposing faith in Allah, is a contract, a form of pledge between man and God and does not consist of a mere profession of belief in Allah.⁵⁴ Hence, action is extremely important in the practice of the Islamic faith, the ummah itself being a group of people in action. Consequently, Sadika found himself in a worrying condition for not performing what was considered pertinent to the faith. The now freedman continued to state in his letter the ensuing preoccupations:

I am lost to all these advantages: since my bondage I *am* become corrupt and I now conclude by begging the almighty God to lead me into the path that is proper for me, for he alone knows the secrets of my heart and what I am in need of.⁵⁵

Such an account shows a desire to remedy oneself, a desire akin to the enslaved Brazilians seen in Baghdadi's narrative. This story also shows the importance and difference that a community can make, as it may allow, even in a limiting way, a place where the faithful could exercise their faith. Madden also reports another interesting situation: shortly after Sadika's manumission, he received a letter from a Mr. Angell, residing in the parish of Manchester, also in Jamaica. The purpose of the missive was to put Sadika in contact with an enslaved African, named Tuffit, who was from the same region as Sadika and according to

Mr. Angell, had the objective of converting the fellow countryman to Christianity, as he had previously been a Muslim, but was now a devoted Christian. Madden reports that Tuffit wrote the letter in Arabic and was surprised at finding it commencing in these terms: "in the name of God, merciful and omnipotent, the blessing of God, the peace of his prophet Mahomet!" revealing that the Muslim slave might not have renounced Islam after all.⁵⁶

In conclusion, despite Omar ibn Said and Tuffit claiming to be Christians, they left clear signs that they had not abandoned their faith. Nevertheless, the Quran makes Christianity's incompatibility with Islam quite clear. Despite recognizing it as a predecessor, and even demanding respect for the people of the book, the Christians' insistence on declaring Jesus as the son of God and Christianity's persistence in denying the Prophet Muhammad's prominence and legitimacy make the religion, in the eyes of Islam, somewhat corrupt. Therefore, the apparent conversion of Omar ibn Said and Tuffit may reveal only a means of survival, mainly because they were alone, without a community of their own.

Another important concept that could explain the apparent conversion would be the *taqiyya*. This is an Islamic doctrine aimed for Muslims under persecution due to their faith, indicating the ability to forgo the ordinances of religion in cases of constraint and when there is a possibility of harm."⁵⁷ Therefore, these enslaved individuals could just be preserving their lives by pretending to be Christians while concealing their true faith. The Muslim community encountered by Baghdadi, for example, faced a similar situation. According to the commander of Baghdadi's ship, "the Muslims living here, unwillingly hide their Islamic beliefs and fear the Frankish communities very much because the latter know them publicly as Christians according to some English men."⁵⁸ Despite that, these Muslims were not willing to emigrate, made evident from Baghdadi's commander later on as they told him:

If you tell us to migrate to Islamic lands where we can learn to pray and fast, we will reply that we are bound within particular conditions. If one of us migrates, he will leave all his possessions for the state, and they will not be returned to him. This is difficult for our souls, especially since this country is a familiar land for us.⁵⁹

This extract allows some assumptions: first, this specific group was likely composed of freedmen since the biggest impediment to their migration was the fact that if they were to leave Brazil, they would lose their assets to the state. Another interesting point was the recognition of Brazil as their home. They did not want to migrate "back" to their supposed countries of origin, where they could exercise their religion freely, because they were already in a familiar place, regardless of belonging to a different culture. That event is interesting because it is the opposite of what a group of African Muslims in Trinidad, around 1825, did when they petitioned the British government to return them to Africa, demonstrating a materialistic approach to life and also a different view regarding being part of a specific place.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the Malês, together with Omar ibn Said, Abon Becr Sadika, and Tuffit revealed a trend found throughout the Muslim diaspora: the search or desire for more knowledge about Islam, the practice of its precepts, the enforcement of their identity as a Muslim, and the concern about their status as a believer. However, while

searching for all of these features, each Muslim community detained characteristics of their own, a good example of this which is shown through Baghdadi's account. Once in Brazilian territory, Baghdadi dedicated himself to teaching and instructing the local Muslim community on the Islamic religion, and consequently, carefully watched how each community practiced their faith. His total stay lasted three years and was not restricted to Rio de Janeiro, as the news of his presence spread along the national ummah. Baghdadi reports that the Muslim community of Salvador and Recife both invited him to instruct and teach them about the Quran and the precepts of Islam.

Baghdadi's role within different Muslim communities allowed him to point out the differences observed in each space, exposing attitudes and customs that he considered a mistake. Many of these supposed errors that Baghdadi criticised stemmed from the fact that many did not have a proper Islamic education, as they were captured and brought to Brazil at a very young age. Yet, some other aspects were just part of each community's own religious and practical experience, which were preserved regardless of Baghdadi's admonitions. Some of these practices were what Baghdadi referred to as geomancy and natural magic, which commonly consisted of foretelling the future, curing illnesses, and undoing spells.⁶¹ According to the imam, these works were rooted among the various group leaders within the Muslim community. Baghdadi reported that those leaders knew some Syriac words (which was in truth some other language unknown to Baghdadi) and tongue clacking. According to the Imam, each leader used these skills to attract members to their own group. In his goal of teaching what was considered the right way, Baghdadi stated that he had sworn to those leaders that their "sciences" were without benefit, repeating it several times and showing them that it was illicit to deal with these divinatory and "magic" practices.⁶² That was in line with Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi's critique of Islam's deviations that allowed all sorts of spiritual "experts" in fortune-telling, healing, and divination. According to al-Kawakibi, these practices had turned religion into a plaything and a fraud, something that Baghdadi also tried to revert, reflecting an orthodox view that discredited any other interpretation of Islam.⁶³

Nonetheless, these practices reveal the diversity of a Muslim community, one that was distinct from the religious experience of the Ottoman priest. The Muslims themselves followed multiple spiritual paths, subscribed to various legal schools, spoke many languages, and hailed from diverse backgrounds.⁶⁴ From Islam's beginning, not long after the death of Prophet Muhammad, internal tensions and intra-Muslim violence would mark the nascent Islamic community.⁶⁵ Baghdadi provides another example of this when reporting that the Muslim community in Rio de Janeiro had several leaders, emphasizing the hostility they secretly harboured toward one another, disputing disciples, and trying to increase their own group of followers.⁶⁶ In other words, not even in a community as small as the Muslim society of Rio de Janeiro was there a holistic and homogeneous socio-religious perspective.

The diversity of the Muslim society is also evidenced in Baghdadi's comments on Recife's community, which was, according to him, more diligent, being able after only six

months to demonstrate a better understanding of Islam than Baghdadi's companions.⁶⁷ More evidence of this fact exists in the request the Malês of Recife made to the chief of police in 1873, asking for allowance to practise their religion in private, which was granted. Therefore, unlike the other communities, the one in Recife had the authorization to exercise its faith and was tolerated by the authorities. Baghdadi states that this freedom came from the protection and "magic" services they provided, which increased the amount of influence they possessed.

Lastly, in 1877, an event that still involved the Malês of Recife, demonstrated once more the diversity of the Muslim community. In that year, in a series of letters published in the *Diário de Pernambuco*, a Recife newspaper, the local Muslims demonstrated a strong knowledge of Islam. In effect:

The Malês took the opportunity to teach a lesson on Islam to the readers of the journal. They taught about their great division between Sunnis and Shias, asserted the observance of the "main dogmas that unify them", as well as the abstinence from alcoholic beverages, the fasting of Ramadan, and the "ban from the cult of images."⁶⁸

The reason for publishing the letters was a dispute between two communities over the legitimacy of being Muslims. Supposedly, a group of non-Muslim Africans presented themselves as such, to protest against the police embargo on their festivities and religious practice, which was promptly refuted by the Muslims. In their response to the Malê's rebuttal, the interdicted community replied that the "Muslims were not all gathered under the same sect, neither in Africa nor Pernambuco, as the Malês wanted, in whose name the protest was made."⁶⁹ Despite not being Muslims, their replica, as well as the reports from Baghdadi, attest then to the plurality of the ummah. However, it did not reflect an absence of unity, as is evidenced by the fact that the whole national ummah organised themselves to accommodate Baghdadi.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed to demonstrate how the enslaved Muslims overcame the imposition of their degrading status as slaves and built their own community in the Americas, being as a diverse society which displayed unity amidst diversity. In short, the African-Muslim diasporic community engendered its own culture on the American continent, importing every element that structured their way of life and implementing them according to the degree of freedom they enjoyed in the new continent. As a consequence, in each decision made and in each exercised choice, as stated by Sylviane Diouf, in her book *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*:

they shaped their own world and re-created their culture as best they could. By their dress, diet, names, rituals, schools, and imported religious items and books, they clearly indicated that they intended to remain who they had been in Africa – be it emir, teacher, marabout, alfa, charno, imam, or simply believer.⁷⁰

Living by a conscience that was true to their belief of who they were, the Muslim communities portrayed in this article were a testament of resistance and identity embedded within a religious practice. That can be associated with al-Kawakibi's thought on political action, which required honour as its main drive, being a natural aspiration, a source of great satisfaction, and more important than life itself. Such a concept is in line with the risk that many Muslims assumed in practising their faith, showing how that conscience, which pervades the notions of dignity and honour, prompted them into action. According to al-Kawakibi, rather than an egoistic feeling, honour derives from serving the community, in the way of God and religion, and in the event of subjugation, it also meant resistance to oppression.⁷¹ That can be seen throughout the American ummah, where identity, religious practice, and resistance worked side by side. Thus, within the Muslim diaspora, each individual acted consciously and according to the precepts of the culture and religion, they followed, building an integrative and unsusceptible society, all defined under the precepts of Islam and its way of interpreting life.

From this perspective, religious practice is not seen as a tradition that believers blindly follow, but as a choice that permeates a series of attitudes, establishing an interpretive discourse of itself. Therefore, despite the subjugating and humiliating status given to the enslaved, Islam and its ummah determined another status of its own. As a result, the ignoble place imposed on the enslaved did not define or keep them there.⁷² They used all the advantages and tools Islam gave them in their means of survival, including fortitude, faith, literacy, occult protection, common language, sense of community, organization, frugality, and especially, hope.⁷³

Concurrently, the Muslim diasporic communities were also distinct. Although Islam had a global trajectory, its adherents were not homogeneous. These communities had their own customs and practices, which reflected their identity and way of living. Still, paradoxically, they were part of a whole. Lastly, the ummah knew how to cultivate its identity amidst its diversity, in a continuous resistance to the oppressive culture in which it was inserted. This fact does not mitigate the brutality of slavery, and such concepts do not summarize its entire structure. However, the idea of identity, resistance, and diversity can help understand the diasporic society and how it endured and to some extent even prospered in such a hostile environment.

NOTES

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- ³ Jomaa, *Ummah*, 30.
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- ⁵ Reis, *Rebelião Escrava no Brasil*, 216, 234.
- ⁶ Maududi, *Islamic Way of Life*, 19.
- ⁷ Jomaa, *Ummah*, 48.
- ⁸ Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 38.
- ⁹ Roger Chartier, *A história cultural entre práticas e representações*, trans. Maria Manuela Galhardo (Lisboa: Difusão Editorial, 1988), 112.
- ¹⁰ Quran 3:110.
- ¹¹ Maududi, *Islamic Way of Life*, 46.
- ¹² Itzchak Weismann, *Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi Islamic Reform and Arab Revival* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), 115; Pierre Bourdieu, "L'illusion Biographique," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 62-63 (June 1986): 70.
- ¹³ Max Weber, *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978), 390.
- ¹⁴ Jomaa, *Ummah*, 22.
- ¹⁵ Jomaa, *Ummah*, 116-118.
- ¹⁶ Maududi, *Islamic Way of Life*, 20-21.
- ¹⁷ Jomaa, *Ummah*, 23-24.
- ¹⁸ Baghdadi, 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn 'Abd Allah al-Baghdadi. *Musalliyyat al-Gharib bi Kull Amr 'Ajib*. Trad. de Paulo Daniel Farah (Argel, Rio de Janeiro, Caracas: Al-Maktaba al-Wataniyya al-Jaza'iriyya, Ministério da Cultura, Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho, 2007), 70.
- ¹⁹ Francis de Castelnau, *Renseignements sur l'Afrique centrale et sur une nation d'hommes à queue qui s'y trouverait, d'après le rapport des nègres du Soudan, esclaves à Bahia* (Paris: P. Bertrand, Libraire-Éditeur, 1851), 46-48, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1049562/f26.image>.
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- ²¹ Paul E. Lovejoy, "Mohammed Ali Nicholas Sa'id: From Enslavement to American Civil War Veteran," *Millars: Espai i Història* 42, no. 1 (2017): 220-221, <https://www.e-revistas.uji.es/index.php/millars/article/download/3252/2677/>; Nicholas Said, *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said, A Native of*

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²³ Baghdadi, 2007, 89-90.

²⁴ Anais nº 38, 1968, Arquivo do Estado da Bahia (1967-1984), 7, http://www.atom.fpc.ba.gov.br/uploads/r/arquivo-publico-do-estado-da-bahia/3/a/b/3abb023e211291972e76a2d3c2ac678f7e502533b3f599027227f6cea86025da/BR_BAAPEB_APEB_PUB_ANS_36.pdf.

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²⁷ Reis, *Rebelião Escrava no Brasil*, 137.

²⁸ Baghdadi, 2007, 83.

²⁹ Jomaa, *Ummah*, 29.

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³⁹ Thiago Henrique Mota, "Significados Da escravidão Para Africanos muçulmanos: Ideias jurídicas e Religiosas Islâmicas no Mundo Atlântico (séculos XVI E XVII)," *Anos 90*, no. 26 (2019):14, <https://doi.org/10.22456/1983-201X.87105>.

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- ⁴⁷ Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 127.
- ⁴⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 391.
- ⁴⁹ Reis, *Rebelião Escrava no Brasil*, 237.
- ⁵⁰ Reis, *Rebelião Escrava no Brasil*, 238.
- ⁵¹ R.R Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies, During the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship* (London: James Cochrane and Co., 1835), 129, <http://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/AA/00/01/45/03/00002/mdp39015014707494.pdf>.
- ⁵² Sahih al-Bukhari 9:7, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:528>; Sahih al-Bukhari 60:31, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:3356>.
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- ⁵⁵ Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies*, 129-130.
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- ⁵⁸ Baghdadi, 2007, 74.
- ⁵⁹ Baghdadi, 2007, 76.
- ⁶⁰ Clyde-Ahmad Winters, "Afro-American Muslims—from Slavery To Freedom," *Islamic Studies* 17, no. 4 (1978): 196, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20847086>.
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⁷³ Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 250.