

## MOHAMMED'S CURSED SECT

The viceroy didn't say what he thought those "perverse ideas" were. Rarely did Spanish bureaucrats and Catholic theologians go into details when they discussed the problem of Muslims in America. They didn't have to. Islam was too familiar, too deeply pressed into the very identity of the Spanish people, to need explaining. Everybody knew what they were talking about when they were talking about Islam. The long, long fight against the religion in Europe gave rise to many of the beliefs that Spaniards took with them when they crossed the ocean to found their empire in America, and it played a fundamental role in shaping the institution, slavery, that made that empire possible.

Spaniards called their war against Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula, starting in 722 and ending in 1492, the *reconquista*, or reconquest. The word is deceptive for it implies a return to the old and a restoration of what was. The fact is, prior to the arrival of Islam, Iberia was a fractious place of Visigoth wretchedness on the margins of Christendom. Al-Andalus, as Arab and Berber Muslims called the land, was the true restoration, returning a magnificence that had been absent since the time of the Romans. The peninsula, especially under the caliphate of Córdoba, became a center of law, science, architecture, engineering, and literature—even Christians called it garden, fountained, lit, and learned capital, the city of Córdoba, the world's "brilliant ornament."

The *reconquista* created something new entirely: the Catholic kingdoms of Spain and Portugal.

It is easy to think of the *reconquista* as a bloody clash of civilizations, the western front of a wider struggle between a besieged Christian Europe and an expansionist Islam. A large part of the God-sanctioned absolutism we associate with medieval Catholicism and Islam was forged during this conflict. Yet 770 years is a long time, throughout which there were sustained periods of peace. Even during the war's most violent phases, Catholics and Muslims lived among each other, trading goods and establishing refuges of hospitality. Iberia during these eight centuries was a crucible where each of the world's three major one-God religions—Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism—shaped the others in ways subtle and obvious.

Anyone who travels today through modern Spain can see evidence of the obvious. It's there in the cool, clean mosquelike interiors of Catholic churches and of synagogues. It's present in the food, of course, and in the Spanish language. The farther back in time one goes reading Spanish the more cursive the calligraphy, until by the sixteenth century it is absolutely arabesque, its flourishes and curlicues binding the two bookish cultures together. The syntax and structure of Spanish derives from Latin. But hundreds of common words come from al-Andalus, many used to describe the most primal experiences of what it means to be human and live together in a society: of pleasure and food, law and authority, trade and taxes, and will, fate, and acceptance. As such, they have something to do with this story. That is, they have something to do with slavery.

*Azúcar* means sugar in Spanish and comes from the Arabic *sukkar*. Muslims introduced the sweetener to Europe and had begun to plant it in Spain in the late thirteenth century. The Portuguese and Spaniards took the crop first to the Atlantic islands, including the Azores and Madeira, and then to the plantations of the New World, which needed large numbers of slaves for cutting the cane and grinding the stalks into juice. If the West Africans on the *Neptune* had made it to the Caribbean, that's most likely what they would have been put to work doing. The Arabic-derived *aduana* means customs, while *alcabala* and *almojarifazgo*

refer to taxes, words that Spaniards used in America to regulate the importation and sale of Africans, among other items. *Azotar*, to whip, also comes from Arabic and describes a common punishment Catholic and Islamic masters inflicted on slaves. *Ahorrar*—to accumulate wealth—and *ahorrarse*—to save one's self, including by saving enough money to purchase one's freedom—come from the Arabic words *hurr*, which signifies free, and *harra*, which means to liberate or emancipate oneself from servitude, to be free.<sup>1</sup>

Military conquests and pirate raids were the chief sources of slaves for Christians and Muslims alike. Yet before being considered true slaves, prisoners were often considered hostages, or *rehenes*—from the Arabic *raha'in*, meaning captives used as pledges or security. It was common for Catholics to ransom Arabs or Berbers, either to obtain gold or black slaves or to free Christian ones. Muslims did the same to free Arabs and Berbers taken by Catholics. *Mulato*, a Spanish word referring to a person of mixed European and African race, is related to the Arabic *mulo*, or mule, as well as *muxālatah*, which means a “mixture of things or people of diverse kinds,” often of an illicit or forbidden nature. The obsolete *mujalata* meant business dealings between Muslims and non-Muslims, including slave trading.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond wealth, power, and social standing, Arabic loan words conjure up a fatalism associated with slave societies, feelings of destiny, doom, and luck—resignation, or not, to one's place in society. *Mezquino* means “wretched,” a word often used to refer to enslaved peoples. The origin of *afán*, which in Spanish means “zeal” or “desire,” is more difficult to trace. According to one lexicographer, it might derive from Arabic words signifying grief or worry. It could also mean mystical extinction, a spiritual experience like what Mori, Babo, and their other Muslim companions might have felt as they began their Andean ascent at the beginning of Ramadan. *Ojalá* and *qaxalá* are popular Spanish and Portuguese expressions. They originate from the Arabic *inshallah* and mean “if God wills.”<sup>3</sup>

If centuries of fighting and living together created a shared culture—including a shared culture of slavery—it also hardened divisions, deepened fault lines, and bred fundamentalism. There's no one instance that can be singled out as a turning point, a moment when tolerance, at least in practice, gave way to absolutism. The Catholic *reconquista* of Iberia had long been considered a religious war, since it was fought between people of two different faiths. And after years of bloodshed, religious theorists of both the crusade and the jihad elaborated ever more complex theories of “just war” and slavery, sanctioning the captivity of non-believers while forbidding the enslavement of the faithful.

But, importantly, Catholic theologians didn't argue that the goal of their *guerra buena*—good war—was the conversion of Muslims. Rather, they legitimated the *reconquista* as a just retaking of territory rightfully Christian (since the Visigoths had accepted Christ before the Arabs arrived).

The turn to empire was different. In 1492, the reconquest ended and the conquest began. In January, Catholic soldiers drove Muslims out of Granada, Europe's last Islamic stronghold. In April, Christopher Columbus sailed to America, shortly followed by ships full of warriors who imagined themselves extending a fight that had begun in Europe. “With the completion of the conquest of the Moors, which lasted more than eight hundred years,” wrote one chronicler in 1552, “the conquest of the Indians began.”\*

Catholic theologians, however, couldn't justify waging war on Native Americans the same way they justified doing so on Muslims in Iberia, because Spain—or Portugal, in the case of Brazil—couldn't invoke a

\* Hernán Cortes, Mexico's conqueror, called the sedentary Aztecs *moors*, while at least one priest thought the nomadic peoples who roamed the deserts of northern Mexico reminded him of *alárabes*, or Arabians. Spaniards used the word *mosque* to describe Aztec and Incan temples and believed Andean ritual baths and animal slaughtering practices to be suspiciously similar to Islamic rites. When royal officials arrived to survey Castile's new possessions, local bureaucrats welcomed them by staging reenactments in town plazas not of the conquest of the Americas but of the reconquest of Spain. And the saint the Spaniards picked to be the patron of America was Santiago Matamoros: Saint James the Moor Slayer. Columbus himself described his voyage as the next step in the struggle against the “sect of Mohamet and of all idolatries and heresies,” even though one of the reasons he sailed west was to avoid Islam, to find a way to bypass Muslim control of trade routes to Asia.

historical claim to the land. And the fact that Native Americans, unlike Muslims, had never “known” Christ and therefore had never had the opportunity to reject him took away another pretext to subjugate them. For Spain, these facts posed, as one historian writes, a “legal and moral problem of enormous proportions,” for other European empires were challenging Iberia’s exclusive dominion over the Americas (“I wish someone would show me the clause in Adam’s will that disinherits me,” the Catholic king of France reportedly said when he heard that the pope had given the New World to the Spaniards and Portuguese).<sup>4</sup>

Spain began to advance a series of religious arguments to make its case, the fine points of which were dense but the thrust of which was clear: its monopoly right to America was defended as a spiritual mission to save Native American souls. In order for the justification to work, America had to be kept pure. The Inquisition worked to purge native heresies (including those practices that reminded Spaniards of Muslim rites) while royal officials banned Jews, Jewish converts to Christianity, Muslims, and Muslim converts (who numbered as many as 400,000 people in 1609, almost 5 percent of Spain’s total population) from settling in the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

One of the first royal prohibitions of this kind was issued as early as 1501, less than a decade after Columbus set foot on Hispaniola. The Crown instructed its new governor of the Americas to carry out the “conversion of the Indians to our holy Catholic faith” with “great care”:

If you find persons suspect in matters of the faith present during the said conversion, it could create an impediment. Do not give consent or allow Muslims or Jews, heretics, anyone reconciled by the Inquisition, or persons newly converted to our Faith to pass, unless they are black slaves.<sup>6</sup>

Unless they are black slaves. There lay the problem, for slavery was the back door through which Islam came to America. Of the more than 123,000 slaves brought to the Americas between 1501 and 1575, over 100,000 were from the area surrounding the Senegal and Gambia Rivers. A majority were Wolof, Fulani, Walo, Mandinkas, or other groups found in West Africa. Which meant they included Muslims.

Brought by Arab and Berber merchants and clerics, Islam had spread among the people below the Sahara hundreds of years before the first slave ship sailed to America. It created a strange kind of continuity, for even as Iberian Catholics were purifying Europe of Islam, they began sailing to West Africa and finding “Mohammed’s cursed sect” spread far and wide among its black-skinned peoples. “Jalofofs, Fulos, and Mandingas,” in particular, wrote a Spanish priest in the late 1500s, were “infected with the wicked fungus of Mohammed” and “professed the false doctrine of the Antichrist.”

Belief in the “reality of Allah” and his “inaccessible mystery,” as the Qur’an writes, took diverse forms in West Africa. On one end of the spectrum was a tolerant strand that existed peacefully with animists, even combining pre-Islamic practices with Islamic rites like divination and sorcery, that in theory should have been forbidden by Qur’anic law. In this sense, Islam in West Africa, especially in rural areas, looked much like the fusion of Catholic saints and Native American gods that took root in much of Spanish America. The historian Lansiné Kapa writes that West African ancestor worship could exist side by side with Islamic monotheism, with “lesser spirits” believed to derive their power from Allah. On the other end was a jihadist orthodoxy that waged war on both nonbelievers and apostates.<sup>7</sup>

In both cases, West African Islam was a creed with a strong egalitarian ethos and sense of justice. Its menace was that it challenged Catholicism on its own terms, with a universal monotheism and belief in a mysterious, unseeable, and eternal god.\* Catholics had recognized the threat in Iberia, where its theologians often depicted Islam as a profane plagiarizer, perverting the true Church’s rituals, vestments, and beliefs (like celebrating its weekly holy day on Friday—*viernes*, in Spanish—

\* According to one Christian traveler among the Fulbe in the early 1800s, West African Muslims recognized the resemblance as well: there was “a belief that Islam is, in fact, true and primitive Christianity as really taught by Christ and his Apostles,—reformed by Mohammed, with equal authority, from the corruptions which had by his time been introduced.”

rather than Sunday, even though, as one Catholic priest wrote, “we know that Venus was a shameless whore”).<sup>8</sup>

And they recognized the threat in West Africa. Speaking of black Muslims along the Gambia River system, a sixteenth-century Portuguese trader reported that their clerics “count months as we do.” Like Catholicism, West African Islam was a literate religion. They “write in bound books,” he continued, in which “they tell many lies.” Like Catholics, they had a clergy, but their “heathen priests go about looking thin and worn out by their abstinences, their fasts and their dieting, since they will not eat flesh of a creature killed by a person who is not one of them.” Their clerics wore robes, like Catholic priests, “with large black and white hats.” And they practiced rites similar to the Holy Mass: “They make their ritual prayers with the faces turned towards the East, and before doing this, first wash their nether parts and then their face. They recite their prayers all together, in a high voice noisily, like a group of clerics in choir, and at the end they finish with ‘Ala, Arabi.’” And “black ears . . . believe the lies.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet unlike the Latin Catholic Mass, the Word in West Africa wasn’t just received. It was discussed in language the faithful could understand. Literacy and faith were intertwined. One eyewitness account written in 1608 by a Jesuit describes Mandinka Muslims establishing mosques and schools through West Africa where “they teach reading and writing in the Arabic script.” Books were written out and bound in cities like Gao and Timbuktu or arrived from northern Africa and Arabia, brought by “trading moors,” and included not just Qur’ans and qur’anic commentaries but scientific treatises and Arabic language versions of the Psalm of David, the Book of Isaiah, and the Pentateuch of Moses. By the late seventeenth century, Timbo, in the northern highlands of Guinea with a population of 10,000, was a respected center of learning. “Considerable attention,” wrote one American observer, “is devoted to the acquirements of knowledge,” which included law, arithmetic, astronomy, and languages. It was mostly men who had the privilege of literacy, but not always. A slaver traveling through the region said that he often had seen elderly women “at sunset reading the Koran.” Other travelers reported seeing girls learning to read.<sup>10</sup>

Teaching could be rote. Most young men “had read the Qur’an several times and copied it at least once.” The learned son of the Islamic ruler of Fouta Djallon, Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima, captured and made a slave in 1788, was literate in both Arabic and Pular and educated in schools in Timbo, Djenné, and Timbuktu. He said that he wrote out his lessons “forty-eight hours a day.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet even with all the rigidity that memorization through endless repetition entails, this combination of pedagogy and religious instruction could still be empowering, creating a common community of believers among diverse peoples. Unlike the Latin Catholic Mass, which awed the faithful from a distance, Islam in West Africa fused together received truth, participatory education, and historical experience, giving it a force that the Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval, writing in the early 1600s, described like this:

This language sounds like the speech of demons in hell. . . . In Guinea, the main priests of this cursed sect are Mandingas, who live along the Gambia River and inland more than five hundred leagues. They not only drink the poison of Mohammed’s sect themselves but also take it to other nations. They bring it with their trade goods to many kingdoms. . . . These priests have mosques and a clerical hierarchy similar to our rankings of archbishops and bishops. They have schools where they teach the Arabic letters they use to write their scrolls. When the high-ranking clergy travel, they are received in different places as if they came from heaven. When they arrive in a new town, they announce the day when they will begin their sermons so that many people from all over the region will know to gather there at that time. They decorate a plaza and hang a few scrolls that seem to give their lies some authority. Then the priests stand and raise their hands and eyes to heaven. After a while, they prostrate themselves before the infernal writings and bow to them. After getting up, they give thanks to Allah and to his great prophet Mohammed, sent to pardon their sins. Then they praise the doctrine written on the scrolls and ask everyone to pay attention. No one speaks, sleeps, or lets their eyes wander for two hours as they read and discuss the writings. Orators praise their kings and lords, puffing up their vanity, as the priests speak of their victories and those of their

ancestors. They mix many lies into their stories, degrading our holy faith and praising Mohammed's cursed sect, eloquently persuading the kings and everyone else to reject Christianity.\*

Centuries later, in the early 1800s, a Protestant traveler among the Fulbe similarly observed the importance of education in Islam conversion. Poor and rural families, he said, would embrace Allah in order to secure an education for their children. "The spread of Islam has been by

\* This paragraph is from Sandoval's 1627 treatise on slavery, originally titled *De instauranda Aethiopia salute*. Sandoval based his book on years of firsthand fieldwork on Cartagena's waterfront, one of the first slave ports set up by Spain on the American mainland, into which came tens of thousands of West Africans. By the early 1600s, when Sandoval was active, the city counted over seven thousand Africans or African-descended inhabitants, more than twice the number of Europeans. To communicate in the over seventy African languages or dialects that existed in the city, Sandoval worked through interpreters or used the Afro-Spanish pidgin that had evolved with the slave trade. Among the information he gathered were slave impressions of the forced collective baptisms performed on them before they left Africa, where sailors would push the heads of the captured Africans into pots of water as priests chanted Latin prayers. Compared with how Muslim clerics spread their faith in the regions south of the Sahara, these mass baptisms would do little, in Sandoval's view, to endear Christianity to African slaves. Some thought they were being marked, that the oil would be squeezed from their bodies and they would be eaten. Others believed it was a hex, meant to prevent them from rebelling on the ship. Sometimes slaves were baptized and branded during the same ceremony, their flesh seared with an R topped by a crown, a royal seal. They might not have understood the meaning of the water, but the pain made its point. Sandoval was especially pessimistic about the conversion of Muslim Wolofs, Fulanis, and Mandinkas. Sandoval's history didn't question the legitimacy of slavery. "Only God knows if these blacks are enslaved justly," he wrote. But he did depict Africans as suffering humans with souls equal to those of whites. He was one of the first Europeans to describe in graphic, horrible detail the torment we today associate with the slave trade, a description even more exceptional since it was based on the testimony of the slaves themselves. Sandoval was especially critical of "Christians" who "punish their slaves more in a week than" Muslim slave masters "do in a year." The priest was also among the first Europeans to understand slavery as a quintessential modern institution in the sense that it forced a psychic alienation, or schism, between appearance and reality, between one's interior thoughts and one's outer performance. Sandoval's Jesuit colleagues argued that as long as slaves didn't openly rebel against the Catholic Church, then their passivity could be taken as implicit consent that they had accepted Christ. But Sandoval recognized that slaves had inner lives and private thoughts concealed from their masters, that the brutality inherent to slavery forced slaves to use cunning to survive. The examples he gave of this deception were the rituals of branding and baptism: "Think about how they do not fight off the burning brand used to mark them and permanently imprison them in their masters' power to be abused and threatened," he wrote; "branding hurts them, and they do not want it, but they passively receive it and suffer through it, meanwhile detesting it on the inside." As to baptism, those Africans who understood it as a rite of religious conversion, often remarked afterward that, "their heart said nothing to them" (using their own words).

these means so rapid," he wrote, that it would soon "supersede Paganism throughout Western Africa." He grudgingly admitted the attraction: its "influence is to a certain extent humanizing," offering something "on which the tired spirit may rest."<sup>12</sup>

No one knows how many Muslims were among the 12,500,000 Africans brought in chains to America. Some estimate as many as 10 percent. They were present in the earliest slave ships that began to arrive in 1501. Over three and a half centuries later, they were among some of the last. Muslims disembarked in America's northernmost slave ports, in New England, and its southernmost, in Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

For some enslaved Muslims brought to America, Islam was the religion of rule, the faith of expanding courtly states like the Mali and Songhai empires. These societies were highly literate in both Arabic and local languages and organized around urbane mosques, libraries, and schools. In other areas, Islam was a religion of resistance, of pastoral or farming Qur'anic communities fighting to win or keep their autonomy from unjust or unholy overlords. In 1804, for instance, Fulani and Hausa nomads launched a jihad against the Islamic rulers of the city-state of Gobir, who were enslaving freeborn Muslims. The insurgency was led by a rural Sufi preacher named Uthman dan Fodio, who freed slaves who joined his cause and advocated for the manumission of those who converted to Islam. The war lasted for over a decade and transformed much of West Africa, an event the historian Manuel Barcia has argued was as important to the history of the Atlantic world as were the French and Haitian revolutions. As fighting convulsed the upper Niger valley, Muslims and non-Muslims alike were captured in raids, sold to Europeans, and shipped to America, their religious differences giving way to the shared horrors of the Middle Passage. It was around this time that Babo, Mori, and the other *Tryal* rebels were first enslaved.<sup>13</sup>

Islam, then, provided American slaves with the law (a set of rules and expectations governing what constituted righteous slavery), the spirit (the experience of jihad or insurgency against illegitimate enslavers) needed to contest their bondage, and the literacy and theology to pro-

cess their experience. One English traveler noted that in Brazil, some Muslim slaves “write Arabic fluently, and are vastly superior to most of their masters.”<sup>14</sup>

Muslims were part of the first major slave revolt in America, which took place on Christmas Day, 1521, on a plantation run by Christopher Columbus’s son. Scores of Wolof men taken from Senegal revolted, killing Spaniards, burning plantations, and winning a week of freedom until they were captured and hung. After this rebellion, Spanish authorities issued the first edict, of many to follow, prohibiting the enslavement of Africans believed to be Muslims. Among those banned were blacks from the Levant or raised among Moors, people from Guinea, and “Gelfes,” or Wolofs, inhabitants of the region around the Senegal and Gambia Rivers. The Spaniards thought Wolofs to be especially “arrogant, disobedient, rebellious, and incorrigible.” They had, wrote one Spanish poet, “vain presumptions to be knights.”<sup>15</sup>

Muslims kept being captured and shipped to America. And they kept revolting. They were among those Africans and descendants of Africans who fought for their freedom in the Haitian Revolution. They were found on George Washington’s Mount Vernon farm and probably at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. They were part of Simón Bolívar’s army of freed slaves and mulattos that ended Spanish colonialism in South America. The largest concentration of Africans who professed Islam was in Bahia, Brazil, where well into the nineteenth century they read the Qur’an, worshiped in mosques, dressed in white linen, and kept Islamic holy days, fasting during Ramadan and celebrating under Eid’s full moon. In 1835, they staged the largest urban slave rebellion in the Americas. The day they chose to start their uprising was the same day Babo and Mori started theirs three decades earlier—Laylat al-Qadr, the Night of Power.<sup>16</sup>