

## **“A Critical Approach to the Life of Omar Ibn Saïd”**

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### **Abstract**

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Some years ago, a manuscript attributed to a former slave whose name was El hajj Omar Ibn Saïd and his nickname *Moroo* was discovered in America. Its owner, Derrick Beard, has then been searching for evidence and was able to trace back his homeland which he situates in Fouta Toro (North-East Senegal). On the political field, the manuscript somehow served to restore the image of America following the confusion that America's overt fight against terrorism in the world brought about in the minds of Muslims. The objective of this article is to demonstrate in the light of the manuscript that El hajj Omar Ibn Saïd never recognized his slave condition; instead, he was a passive resistant who fought against the debasement of Man and preached the sacredness of human freedom. This paper also questions the generally admitted thesis about his Fula origins, focusing on the linguistic properties of his name.

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**Keywords:** slave – identity – resistance – Islam – America

### **1. An overview of the history of Blacks and Islam in America**

Slave trade in the world has come to its peak in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the transatlantic slave trade. For more than two centuries, European slave-traders have shipped black Africans to America where they were sold to serve in plantations. They found themselves in a strange land where everything was unknown to them, from the language, to the perception of life through customs and religious beliefs. Yet, they had to adapt.

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Their powerlessness let them but only one choice which showed to be fatal because it implied their acceptance of acculturation and the loss of their identity in favor of the mainstream culture. No other compromise was conceivable. Their religious faith was “relentlessly challenged by the insistence that all slaves accept Christianity or face dire consequences”.<sup>2</sup> Many remained voiceless and died in anonymity because the only means they disposed of to communicate was their African ethnic language which was not intelligible to their American owners. Those who were lucky enough to know Arabic or any other written language could afford the privilege to immortalize their character by bequeathing some pieces of writings to posterity for the world to know about them, their deeds, and their remote origins<sup>3</sup>.

The world is a large network of races, ethnic, linguistic, religious... groups scattered in a large geographical area, yet maintaining close connections. As such, in the shaping of identity everybody need to situate themselves, to identify with one group for some reason while assuming their uniqueness. The move to a far remote new land, the utopian dream of a return back to one's roots and the everlasting journey in America have resulted to the up rootedness of the sons of former slaves and their metabolism. The necessity to reconstruct the lost identity of African-Americans from the rare and limited evidence which are extant has focused a great deal of works (research paper, exhibitions, lectures, panels, works of fiction displaying the dilemma of African-Americans etc.) in America and in Africa as well in the past decades.

The history of America is inseparable with the issues of religion. The journey of the Pilgrim Fathers who fled from England to America because of the religious persecution they were subjected to is illustrative enough. It is a land which has a long history of religious diversity and religious tolerance, which confirms that the American population has never been monolithic:

a visitor to early America would have found a rich array of often competing groups – Calvinists, Catholics, Mennonites and Quakers, to name a few, along with small communities of Jews, and scores of Native American tribes unconverted to any Church.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Derrick Beard's comment on the recount of the life of Omar Ibn Said

<sup>3</sup> Olouda Equiano is one example

<sup>4</sup> Gustav Niebuhr in a commentary for *All Things Considered*

Moreover, America has always appeared to be a land of hope, of freedom of worship. However, in the chaos of the aftermath of September 11, religious issues – with a special focus on Islam – have come back on the agenda and have become a hot issue. George W. Bush, then president of the United States, were accused of making a name for himself by declaring the war against Islam by Muslims almost all around the world, despite that he had declared that America was not attacking Islam but terrorism: “She praised President Bush for having made clear from the onset that in the aftermath of Sept. 11, the United States was at war against terrorism and not against Islam.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, despite that overt clarification some Islamic radicals are still not convinced; instead, they seek to fight back by attacking the USA and acting against their interests whenever they get the opportunity to do so<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. El-hajj Omar Ibn Saïd’s Life and Work: an Overview

El hajj Omar Ibn Saïd is said to be born in the early 1770s<sup>7</sup>. His place of birth is Futa Toro, although the geographical localization provided by Derrick Beard is questionable<sup>8</sup>. Indeed he states that Futa Toro is “a region that includes Mauritania, Senegal and Mali, the area through which Islam first entered West Africa”.<sup>9</sup> He was a learnt person who studied with great African Muslim scholar and had a good knowledge of the Koran. He also knew much about Christianity and Judaism which is not surprising, because Muslims are recommended to know about the revealed religions. This owed him to be nicknamed *Morro* : « *Omar Ibn Saïd, connu également en Amérique sous les appellations de Prince Moro, Morro, Meroh, Uncle Moreau, Umeroh, Monroe, etc., est né vers 1770 au Sénégal, plus précisément au Fouta* »<sup>10</sup>. At the time of European slave trade, El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd was captured during a military conflict and shipped to America (North Carolina) where he was sold to a man called Johnson, then to Mitchell, before becoming the property of General Owen of Fayetteville.

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<sup>5</sup> Yvonne Y. Haddad, reported by Mary-Jane Deeb in ‘Islam in America’ retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/lcib/0202/islam-symp.html>

<sup>6</sup> Bombing embassies, abducting tourists etc.

<sup>7</sup> There is a controversy on his date of birth. Derrick Beard, owner of the manuscript states that Saïd was born in 1770 while Gustav Niebuhr maintains that he was born in 1773

<sup>8</sup> We will focus on this point in the section on « questioning Omar’s fula ethnic origins”.

<sup>9</sup> Derrick Beard, Op.Cit

<sup>10</sup> Khadim Ndiaye « Omar Ibn Saïd, l’esclave américain originaire du Fouta au Sénégal » retrieved from <http://www.africahit.com/news/article/Divers/6277/>

While in captivity, his owner (Johnson) noticed that he used to write on the walls of his cell in a language that was unknown to him. The writing system was all the more bizarre as he went from the right to the left.

Omar devint du jour au lendemain célèbre pour avoir écrit sa plainte en arabe sur les murs de sa cellule grâce à du charbon trouvé sur place.

Ces "écritures étranges" fascinèrent ses geôliers et les habitants de la ville. Il sera racheté par un certain Mitchell puis devint propriété du général James Owen de Bladen County avec lequel il restera jusqu'à sa mort en 1864 (...) <sup>11</sup>.

He also used to scratch some Arabic words on the bark of the trees in the plantation where he was working. The manuscript of his autobiography which is the main focus of this article is actually not the only one attributed to El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd. They are more than ten; the first one dates back to 1819 while the last one was produced in 1857. El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd is a great figure in North Carolina and in American literature.

### **3. El hajj Omar Ibn Saïd: the Freedom Fighter**

El hajj Omar Ibn Saïd's narrative arouses the interest of all. As Ellen Barry puts it, "people who came in contact with Omar's story have a tendency to fixate on him but for widely varying reasons". That is all exact. However, while going through the various comments on the manuscript, one has the impression that both journalists and scholars seem to be over-emphasizing on its religious content as evidence to the long history of Islam in America: "in his Life, Saïd tells of the Islamic faith and culture he brought with him from Africa – and apparently retained, to a great extent, until his death in 1864". Yet they completely neglect to see in it what is almost obvious. But, as J. A. Coleman puts it, « one of the fundamental purposes of academic inquiry is to challenge assumptions » <sup>12</sup> and that is the intent of this paper.

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<sup>11</sup> Khadim Ndiaye « Omar Ibn Saïd, l'esclave américain originaire du Fouta au Sénégal » Op.Cit.

<sup>12</sup> J. A. Coleman. "Language Teaching, Language Learning, Language Testing". Inaugural Lecture, University of Portsmouth, 17 February 1994. p.1.

Even if the information we dispose on Omar's Life is from secondary sources, we have, at first contact, detected two dimensions of paramount importance with it: one that has to do with his resistance and his rejection of all form of ownership of a human being by another one, and one that is related to its exploitation for political needs.

### 3.1. Active Resistance

Almost all comments have mentioned that he wrote *suratu'l mulk* to indicate his belief in the authority of the Koran. When we recalled that chapter, our attention was captivated by the verse "[he] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best indeed – and He is the exalted in Might, the Forgiving". Definitely, one can say that Omar endured his captivity with much fair-play as he understood it to be a trial meant for testing the sincerity to his faith. This can back up the hypothesis that his faith in Islam has never been involved and even if he attended Christian Churches, all things considered, one can retain that "*al amwaalu bi niya*" [actions are judged by the intention that motivated them] and visibly, he never meant to attend those Churches willingly.

Still in the same surah, at verse 8 and 9:

It almost bursts with rage. Every time a company is thrown into it, its keepers ask them, "Did there not come to you a warner?"

They will say, "Yes, a man had come to us, but we denied and Saïd, 'Allah has not sent down anything. You are not but in great error."<sup>13</sup>

One can feel Omar's covert and humble mission as a messiah whose action should serve to peel the eyes of those "alienated" that forgot God's words and believe that they are powerful enough to own a human being. He imagined himself to be running a divine mission that nothing could stop short – which can explain why he rejected the offer to go back to Africa as a missionary. No matter the limited means and the religious oppression he faced, he had to keep on fighting relentlessly, as prophets did before him.

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<sup>13</sup> The Qur'an. English Revised and Meanings by Saheeh International. Al-muntada al-Islami, 2004. Surah67:8-9

He could have feared the dire consequences of practicing Islam but he knew perfectly that who God bless no one curse: "Or who is it that could be an army for you to aid you other than the Most Merciful? The disbelievers are not but in delusion."<sup>14</sup>

Omar's resistance runs through the whole surah; every verse of it contains a hint of the ideological foundation of his trust to Allah and his rejection of his very status as a slave owned by a human being whom he should obey blindly, and who has the right to life and death over him:

He writes the entire 'soorat Al-Mulk' (Dominion) to delineate that no man has ownership over another, de-emphasizing his position as a slave by highlighting that all human beings are ultimately owned by Allah

### 3.2. Glory

Did El HajjOmar Ibn Saïd achieve anything? One thing that is striking in this character's personality is that he never worried about what people thought of him. His own perception of the world around him is the only key to the understanding and assessment of his actions. His speech was enigmatic and only leant people could really capture his intents. He did not shoulder the responsibility for his words; instead the quotations of Gods words are explicit enough to voice his mind. The exploitation of his work shows that in his twilight year, people came to him and requested from him a text similar to the one he previously wrote – *Surah Al-Mulk*. He met their expectation but rather than "The Dominion", he wrote *Surah An-Nasr*. Such a fact is determinant and should be analyzed in the light of his fight. *Surah An-Nasr* means "The Victory" and is Saïd to be the last Surah of the *Qur'an*, the one which close the delivery of the message for which Mouhamad was sent as a prophet and marked the end of the mission assigned to him. So, in using it, one can say that El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd was playing the final act of his struggle. This is very meaningful because it acknowledges his satisfaction as to the well running of the mission he was sent for. The people who totally ignored his teachings from the beginning are now so much interested in it that they have come to him. Thus, it is the moment for him to give thanks and praise to the Lord.

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<sup>14</sup> The Qur'an. Surah 67:20.

When the victory of Allah has come and the conquest,  
And you see the people entering into the religion of Allah in multitudes,

Then exalt [Him] with praise of your Lord and ask forgiveness of Him, He is ever accepting of repentance.<sup>15</sup>

Although El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd did not rise to fame in his life time due to the sociopolitical context that was prevailing in America, nevertheless he deserves to be counted among black activists. "And conceal your speech or publicize it; indeed He is knowing of that within the breasts."<sup>16</sup>

#### **4. The political Interest of the Religious Theme in the Autobiography of El-hajj Omar Ibn Saïd**

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11 and America's subsequent declaration of war to terrorism, many negative stereotypes of America have appeared in the Moslem world. Since then, America has set an implicit policy of rehabilitating its reputation and bridging the gap with all Moslems round the world. Obama's speech to Cairo was not an exception

I have come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Moslems around the world; one based on mutual interest and mutual respect and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition, instead they overlap and share common principles, principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings<sup>17</sup>

In that 58mn speech, Obama traces back the long history of Islam in America and stresses the contribution of Moslem American to the construction of that world super power and recalls all relevant historical facts likely to evidence that Islam is at the core of American society:

I also know that Islam has always been a part of America's story. The first nation to recognize my country was Morocco in signing the treaty of Tripoli in 1796.

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<sup>15</sup> The Qur'ân. Surah 110:1-2-3.

<sup>16</sup> The Qur'ân. Surah 67:13.

<sup>17</sup> President Obama Speech to Muslim World in Cairo

Our second president John Adams wrote “the United States has in itself no character of embody against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims”. And since our founding, American Moslems have enriched the United States; they have fought on our wars; they have served in our government; they have stood for civil rights; they have taught in our universities; they have excelled in our sports winners; they have won Nobel prizes, built our tallest buildings and lit the Olympic torch. And when the first Muslim American was recently elected to the Congress, he took the oath to defend our constitution using the same holy Qur’an that one of our founding fathers – Thomas Jefferson – kept in his personal library.<sup>18</sup>

## **5. Questioning El-hajj Omar Ibn Saïd’s Fula Ethnic Origin**

### 5.1. His Name

El hajj is a common noun that means “the male pilgrim” in Arabic. Pilgrimage is one of the bedrocks of Islam. After acknowledging their belief that their exist no other divinity except God, and that Mouhamad is his messenger, Muslims should perform the prayers (five time a day at specific moments), fast (keep themselves from eating, drinking and carnal acts from dawn to dusk during the whole Ramadan month) give charity to the needy and go to Mecca on pilgrimage if they have the means for it. In West Africa, “El hajj” is received as a title for all men who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca; then it becomes an integral part of their first name from that moment to their death. Some people may receive it just because they were named after someone who has been to Mecca.

A far as Omar is concerned, it is a name brought in West Africa in the course of the expansion of Islam and Arab civilization. Many of the people converted to Islam took on new names drawn from the kind Mouhamad and his followers bore. It is following that practice that Malcom X changed his name after his conversion into Islam.

Ibn is another Arab common name that means “son”. It may be used to display the genetic relationship between a parent and his/her son; in that case, it is place in between the son’s first name and his father’s or his mother’s. If the child is a female, we use Bint instead of Ibn.

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<sup>18</sup> President Obama Speech to Muslim World in Cairo



The whole structure should then line up as follow:

The name of the male child + ibn + the name of his father or his mother.

- Omar Ibn Hattab (Omar son of Hattab)
- Issa Ibn Mariam (Issa son of Mariam)

As for Saïd, it is also a name derived from the Arab civilization. In West Africa, it is variable and may just become Seydou. This is due to the phonological properties of Saïd which involves a glottal occlusive sound that is not recorded in the phonological systems of several West African languages. Thus it underwent a phonological change passing from Saïd [saʔi:d] to Seydou [sejdu]. This approach is even supported by the following statement which revealed El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd's father's name: "*Son père s'appelait Saïd et sa mère Oum Hani'*"<sup>19</sup>.

After dissecting all the elements that compose Omar's full name, we will now show what makes it strange in the socio-cultural context of Fouta Tooro (Senegal) where he is Saïd to be originated from. In Senegal, all ethnic groups use a naming system that associates a first name to a family name; sometimes a second name may be inserted between them. A person may even have many names depending on the customs of his people but the family name does not vary, it is the common feature of all the members of a family. Some family names in Senegal have been traced back to Arab origins<sup>20</sup>

Une analyse à la fois chronologique et linguistique de cette généalogie laisse à penser que le patronyme "Sy" que portent tous les descendants de Sams Ad Dîn Ibn Yahyâ Al Qalqamî, l'ancêtre de Thierno Ousmane Sy et d'El Hadj Malick Sy de Tivaoune, dériverait de « Diam Sy », déformation de Sams Dîn.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Khadim Ndiaye. « Omar Ibn Saïd, l'esclave américain originaire du Fouta au Sénégal » 19-10-2010. <http://www.africahit.com/news/article/Divers/6277/>

<sup>20</sup> In his doctoral dissertation, Cheikhou Diouf demonstrates that the family name Sy of the religious family of Tivaoune (Senegal) comes from the distortion of Shams dîn which underwent phonological changes to become Jamsi and then Sy. In the same vein, the family name Mbacké bore by the members of the religious family in Touba is Saïd to derive from the Arab "Al bakhîyyu" and was originally a mere nickname.

<sup>21</sup> Cheikhou Diouf. *Saint-Louis une métropole islamique: le patrimoine culturel et architectural*. Saint-Louis : Presses Universitaires de Saint-Louis, 2008, p.81.

It is also a true that some family names are the remnant of a colonial heritage and were imposed to “ease” the identification of the individual in a wider social network (family members). In any case, what is constant is that people are identified by a first name and a family name and any other system outside this structure bears the sign of a foreign culture. Consequently, we can say that El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd’s name relates to a naming system unknown to ethnic cultures in Senegal.

## 5.2. His Origins and his Title

As stated by Charles Beker et Waly Coly Faye, « *dans chaque culture, les noms propres constituent un système qui fournit des indications sur la façon dont les groupes sociaux agencent le réel* »<sup>22</sup>. This is all the more revealing when a given person is called a name intrinsically associated with another ethnic group. To come to the point, El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd is Saïd to descend from a Fula family traced back to Fouta Toro. Fouta Toro is the homeland of the Fula ethnic group living in Senegal (West Africa). It includes part of the north district of Saint-Louis, the East district of Matam - all of them in Senegal. Yet, the geographical localization made for Futa Toro as an area including Senegal, Mauritania and Mali is completely erroneous and rather corresponds to the former kingdom of Tekrur which was known to be the gate through which Islam entered in Senegal. Historically, the Tekrur was a melting pot dwelled by negro-Africans and Berbere groups. The sociolinguistic situation was thus very complex and this opened the way to various influences, linguistic, cultural, religious, etc.

After this clarification about the geographical localization of Fouta Toro, we come to Omar’s title. He was called *Mooroo*. This is a word that we find in some varieties of Fula and in Seereer (another Senegalese ethnic group which has close ties with the Fulas and whose islamization was undertaken by the Mandingo people and the Fula). Actually the word *Mooroo* is a borrowing from Mandingo<sup>23</sup> which means a “fortune teller” or a “marabout”.<sup>24</sup> It sometimes has a semantic extension to subsume negative connotations as “witch doctors”.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Beker et Waly Coly Faye. « la nomination seereer » In Ethiopique : la civilisation serere d’hier à demain. P89 (89-100)

<sup>23</sup> Ibrahima Sarr. « Contact de langues en Sénégal : étude phonologique et sémantique des emprunts lexicaux d’origine mandingue en langue seereer ». Thèse pour le doctorat de l’Université Gaston Berger de Saint Louis. UFR Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> *The Mandinka-English Dictionary*. Banjul: Peace Corps The Gambia, 1995.

So we can assume that the title *Mooroo* has been granted to El Hajj Oma Ibn Saïd by some Mandinka disciples. This leads to three possible hypotheses:

- ✓ He might be practicing his profession in some Mandinka land
- ✓ Perhaps he used to get some Mandinka disciples coming from elsewhere
- ✓ He might dwell in a Fula/Mandinka mixed area that could be the Fulakunda area in South East Senegal
- ✓ He may be a Mandika and not a Fula origin as people sustain.

The above hypotheses, along with the clarifications about the geographical localization of Futa Tooro constitute enough evidence to question the generally accepted theory about his Fula identity and Futa Tooro origins.

## **Conclusion**

All along this paper, we have reexamined previous works on the life and work of El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd. The little we can say is that he was indeed a religious person, a freedom fighter who bequeathed a valuable work, much appreciated by specialists in various research fields. This paper was an attempt to complete what is known about him through a sociolinguistic approach. His resistance to human degradation and his status as a “messiah” have been highlighted in the light of the Surahs drawn from the Qur’an. The issue of his identity has also been dealt with and the analysis revealed new hypotheses which suggest that El Hajj Omar Ibn Saïd might have been an Arab descent or if the hypothesis that he was a Senegalese holds true, thus he might have been a Mandingo origin or a Fula dwelling in some Fula/Mandingo mix land, the Fulakunda Area, to be specific. However, as we said, these are mere hypotheses that still need to be verified with further investigations

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