

Slavery and Literacy

Directions: A major component of the dehumanization of enslaved people, and a major weapon against it, was the matter of literacy. Read the texts below, answer the questions that follow, and then, again, return to the question and provide additional short-term and long-term impacts of the slave trade.

A Mind Unchained

One of the many Muslim slaves taken to America was **Bilali Muhammad**. He was from the Fulbe tribe and was born around 1770 in the city of Timbo, in what is now Guinea. He came from a well-educated family, and received a high level of education himself in Africa before being captured as a slave some time in the late 1700s. He was fluent in the Fula language along with Arabic, and had knowledge of high level Islamic studies, including Hadith, Shari'ah, and Tafsir. How he was captured is unknown, but he was originally taken to an island plantation in the Caribbean, and by 1802, he arrived at Sapelo Island, off the coast of Georgia in the southern United States.



As a well-educated Muslim from West Africa, Bilali no doubt brought his Islamic education with him to America. This is evidenced

by a thirteen-page manuscript he wrote and gifted to a southern writer, Francis Robert Goulding, before he died in 1857. The manuscript was written in Arabic, and was thus unreadable for most Americans for decades. It made its way eventually to the Georgia State Library by 1931, who attempted to decipher the manuscript, which was popularly believed to have been Bilali's diary.



Omar ibn Said (1770–1864) was a writer and Islamic scholar, born and educated in what is now Senegal, who was enslaved and transported to the United States in 1807. There, while enslaved for the remainder of his life, he wrote a series of works of history and theology, including a posthumously famous autobiography.

After years of effort that involved numerous scholars as far away as al-Azhar University in Egypt, scholars finally managed to decipher the manuscript. It turned out that it wasn't a diary at all, but was actually a copy of passages from a treatise on Islamic law in the Maliki madhab written by a Muslim scholar of fiqh, Ibn Abu Zayd al-Qairawani in Tunisia in the 900s. The Risala of Ibn Abu Zayd was a part of the West African law curriculum prevalent in Bilali's homeland in the 1700s when he was a student. When he came to America as a slave, he was of course unable to bring any personal belongings with him, and thus his copy of the Risala was written entirely from memory decades after he learned it in West Africa. This exemplifies the level of knowledge present in West Africa, even as it was ravaged by the Atlantic slave trade.

Source: "The First Muslim-American Scholar", Firas Alkhateeb, Lost Islamic History

1. How might these stories impact or broaden or change the way people perceive enslaved Africans? Did they impact your perception at all?
2. Does literacy (and illiteracy) impact the perception of an individual's or group's humanity?

Narratives from Slavery

Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745 – 31 March 1797), known in his lifetime as Gustavus Vassa, was a writer and abolitionist from the Igbo region of what is today southeastern Nigeria according to his memoir, or from South Carolina according to other sources. Enslaved as a child, Equiano purchased his own freedom in 1766. He was a prominent abolitionist in the British movement to end the Atlantic slave trade. His autobiography, published in 1789, helped in the creation of the Slave Trade Act 1807 which ended the transatlantic slave trade for Britain and its colonies.



Ottobah Cugoano, also known as John Stuart (c. 1757 – after 1791), was an African abolitionist and natural rights philosopher[1] from Ghana who was active in England in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Captured in present-day Ghana and sold into slavery at the age of 13, he was shipped to Grenada in the Lesser Antilles, where he worked on a plantation. In 1772 he was purchased by an English merchant who took him to England, where he was taught to read and write, and was freed following the ruling in the *Somerset Case* (1772). Later working for artists Richard and Maria Cosway, he became acquainted with British political and cultural figures. He joined the Sons of Africa, African abolitionists in England.

Equiano is clear about the slave trade's damaging effect on African slaves: **“You stupify them with stripes (whip lashes), and then think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning; that their minds are such a barren soil.”** The majority of African slaves are kept from education in a ‘state of ignorance’, and the planters’ ill use of the slaves serves to ‘stupify’ them.

Henry Louis Gates confirms: **“by affirming himself as a writing subject, Equiano suggests that he too possesses those qualities of ‘reason’ and ‘humanity’ which the Enlightenment would like to preserve as purely white.”**

Slaves are disciplined with physical abuse, allowing Cugoano to accurately conclude: **“...slaves, like animals, are bought and sold, and dealt with as their capricious owners may think fit, even in torturing and tearing them to pieces, and wearing them out with hard labour, hunger and oppression.”** Cugoano attacks all individuals who are involved in the African slave trade calling them ‘beasts of the night’ who are constantly ‘prowling for their prey.’

He also uses a reversal of perspective in order to humanize Africans who are taken as slaves. He reverses the scenario and asks the British readership to consider how they would react if the British were sold into slavery against their will: **“...suppose that some of the African pirates had been as dextrous as the Europeans, and that they had made excursions on the coast of Great-Britain [...] and though even assisted by some of your insidious neighbours, for there may be some men even among you vile enough to do such a thing if they could get money by it; and that they should carry off your sons and your daughters, and your wives and friends, to a perpetual and barbarous slavery, you would certainly think that those African pirates were justly deserving of any punishment that could be put upon them. But the European pirates merchandizers of the human species, let them belong to what nation they will, are equally as bad.”** Cugoano appropriates the model of the slave trade, reverses the players, and uses this reversal to win the sympathy of his audience who are asked to imagine their reaction if similar events were to befall them.

3. In what ways could, and did, literacy help demonstrate the humanity of enslaved Africans, both then and now?
4. Why do you think slave owners, and the slave society in general were so determined to prevent slaves from education? What were the long-term impacts of these efforts?