

TEA AND THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF ISLAM

By

JENNIFER DICK

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To my mom, dad, and brother

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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By

Jennifer Dick

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The history of Islam in America began with the transport of enslaved Africans to the American South. Slavery forced Africans to adapt their material and philosophical traditions to their new context. After centuries of oppression enslaved American populations achieved emancipation, and by the early twentieth century some of the newly freed African Americans migrated to the American North in search of economic prosperity. Since there is little written history concerning the daily lives of enslaved African Muslim populations, this thesis looks to the material link of cure-all tea consumption to grasp the passage of Islam from Africa, to the American South, and onward to American North. We begin with the Prophet's Tea consumed and distributed by the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), a black nationalistic Islamic movement that appeared in the early 1900s in Chicago. From the Prophet's Tea we will look to the larger Islamic material culture of the MSTA and trace potential material cultural continuities from the North to the American South through the consumption of Life Everlasting Tea in the Gullah Sea Islands. It is from Life Everlasting Tea and the Islamic material culture of the Gullah that avenues of continuity link these traditions to

Africa and the consumption of Never Die Tea, a botanical cognate to Life Everlasting. In this thesis, tea operates as a thematic device to explore the history of Islam in America.

CHAPTER 1 ISLAM AND THE MATERIAL RECORD

The Origins of a Scholastic Debate

Islam came to American soil with the onset of transatlantic slavery, where enslaved African Muslims were wretched from their homelands and forced into bondage across the Atlantic Ocean. In the Americas enslaved Muslims were subjected to the same horrific conditions as their non-Muslim African counterparts. Since Islam came from Africa into a system of bondage that dehumanized the enslaved Muslims, the early history of Islam in America is largely unknown. Few slaves were literate, and even fewer were able to write in languages unknown to their slave owners. Arabic documents make up only a small portion of the larger material culture of African Muslims enslaved in the Americas. Since there is a small amount of written material concerning the lives of African Muslim slaves in North America material culture helps to provide insights into their lives and practices. This thesis turns to material culture to explore the journey of Islam in North America.

Through material culture we are able to gain insight into the systems of knowledge that accompany materials. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits was one of the first scholars to use material culture to look for “Africanisms” or “survivals” of African artifacts and culture in the material record.¹ Similarly, through the examination of the material culture of the enslaved African populations we can work to shed light on transformations and continuities of Islam. Although, there is widespread scholarly consensus that the history of sustained Islamic practices in North America began on

¹ Melville Herskovits is credited as the founder of plantation archaeology, which aims to understand the material life of enslaved Africans and African Americans on American plantations. His seminal work is *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1958).

Southern plantations, the implications of this agreed upon beginning are the subject of debate.² The relationship between the early African Muslims on the plantations in the South and the multiple black nationalistic Islamic movements that emerge in the North in the 1920s is a particularly speculative period of this history.

The speculative nature of this period of history has led to debate about the lasting influence of Islam in the American South, and questions the role Southern Islam played in the formation of black nationalistic Islamic movements that emerge in the North after emancipation. After emancipation in 1865, some former slaves embarked on a northern migration. The former slaves who migrated believed the South held no avenues of economic opportunities so they advanced North in search of these opportunities. Some scholars take issue with the logical extension of this process that the former slaves would still retain any Islamic knowledge and re-negotiate it under the context of migration from the tumultuous post-antebellum Jim Crow South to the prosperous industrialized North.³ However, scholars such as Michael Gomez speculate the Islam may have been practiced on the Sea Islands into the 1920s.⁴ While scholars have yet to reach a consensus, published theories on the matter seem to divide into three specific camps: there is no connection between the Islam on the plantations and

² This is first documented by Allen Austin's *American Muslims in the Antebellum America: a Source Book* (1984). Scholar such as Robert Dannin (2002); Slyviane Diouf (1998); Michael Gomez (2005); and Richard Brent Turner (2003) all pay homage to Austin and elaborate on his findings in their respective works.

³ This debate will be address in more detail in Chapter One.

⁴ Michael Gomez makes this speculation in *The Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Gomez examines the life of Harriet Hall Grovner, who was a practicing Muslim until 1866 when she joined the newly assembled First African Baptist Church. But Grovner's conversion to Christianity is speculative, which will be discussed at greater length in chapter three, but Gomez believes she may have been a practicing Muslim until her death in 1922, and uses this to hypothesize that she could represent the continuation of Islam on the Sea Islands into the twentieth century. (Gomez, 2005:162).

the Islam of the North;⁵ there is an ideological connection, which is typically attributed to popularization of Edward Wilmot Blyden's Pan-Africanist ideology;⁶ or they employ the ideological connections to indicate a future avenue of materialist analysis.⁷ Though this scholarship is conflicted it does suggest that through the examination of material culture we can come to understand potential connection between the Islam of the South and the Islam of the North. In order to do this; however, we must step farther back and examine the material culture of Muslims in Africa.

Tea as a Material Indication of Knowledge

In this thesis I will employ material analysis to explore the presence and history of Islam in the American religious arena. More to the point, the heuristic device of cure-all tea consumption sheds light on material practices and their accompanying knowledge systems. From this we look at potential Islamic material practices and their presence in African Islam, Islam in the American South, and Islam in the American North. Muslims from these areas all practice herbal cure-all tea consumption to alleviate both physical and spiritual ailments.⁸ Through the consumption of the Prophet's Tea,

⁵ Scholars Sylviane Diouf (1998) and Aminah Beverly McCloud (1995) state they believe that the Islam from the Plantations in the South was eventually no longer transmitted to the slave descendents and over the generations, Islamic adherence dissipates.

⁶ Turner (2002) credits that there may be an ideological connection because of the influence of Blyden's work among the founders of the black nationalist Islamic movements in the North at the turn of the century.

⁷ Scholars like Moustafa Bayoumi (1999); Robert Dannin (2002); Edward Curtis and Danielle Brune Sigler (2009); and Michael Gomez (2005) continue to apply Herskovits' emphasis on material culture as essential in understanding the lives of slaves and elucidate that further inquiry into this methodology could illuminate the links between Islam in the American South and Islam in the American North.

⁸ It is important to note that African Muslims in the Americas were not the only consumers of cure-all teas or herbal remedies. This was a wide spread practice throughout Africa, and even many of the Native groups already in the Americas also employed herbs. Also herbal remedies and teas were typically used in the Americas by all populations that could not afford or chose not to use Western medical doctors, and herbs still provide a source of remedy for many cultures.

the larger material culture of the Moorish Science Temple of America, and the life of its founder Noble Drew Ali we will examine the potential transformation and continuities of Islamic practices in the American North in the early 1900s as former slaves and their descendents migrated and had to adapt to life in the North.

To gain insights into these possible adaptations and transformations of Islam with the Moorish Science Temple in the American North we will look to the American South, via the herbal cure-all Life Everlasting Tea consumed on the Gullah Sea Islands, to understand the origins of sustained Islamic practice in America. The plantation south, in particular the Gullah Sea Islands, was the first American region to document sustained Islamic practice in America.⁹ The Sea Islands span the coasts of Northern Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. The documented Muslim population of these Islands was a part of many African tribal groupings which later combined to become the Gullah culture.¹⁰ To gain insight into the lives of enslaved African Muslims and their lasting legacy and impact on Islam in America we will look to the life of Bilali of Sapelo Island and his legacy on the culture as it is remembered by his descendent Cornelia Bailey. Bailey recounts her family's consumption of an herbal cure-all tea called Life Everlasting; this plant most likely has origins from Africa.¹¹

The potential direct material link between African Never Die Tea and Southern Life Everlasting Tea are due to the fact that the same genus of plant appears in both

⁹ See Allen Austin (1984) for the detailed lives of enslaved Muslim Africans.

¹⁰ In particular, Allen Austin (1984) wrote about several Muslims from the Gullah Sea Island region.

¹¹ Cornelia Bailey, with Christena Bledsoe documents the oral culture and Bailey's memories are of childhood on the Sea Islands in *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolitoman* (2000). While Scholar William Pollitzer documents the botanical correlates between Africa and the Sea Islands in depth in his work *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (1999).

Africa and the American South.¹² This link is further enhanced by the employment of both plants as herbal cure-alls teas.¹³ This does not only indicate a material connection but it also reflects a continuity of knowledge most likely grounded in African origins. By extension we can begin to understand other knowledge systems, such as Islam, as it appears materially in Africa and materially in the American context. These African origins can be understood through an examination of: the material culture of African Muslims; the dual role of the *malam* as an Islamic scholar and herbal healer; and the politics of authenticity that contextualize Islam in Northern Nigeria. It is from Africa that Islam comes to the plantation South via enslaved Africans. Islam then migrates and transforms on the American continent with the movement of emancipated African Americans to the North in search of economic prosperity.

The first chapter begins with an examination of the Prophet's Tea and the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA). The MSTA was one of the earliest black nationalist Islamic groups to appear in the North at the turn of the century.¹⁴ This group consumed a cure-all tea known as the Prophet's Tea, also known as Moorish Body Builder and Blood Purifier; the tea was employed as a remedy for ailments that including the improvement of lung function to the loss of manhood.¹⁵ The Prophet's Tea was sold and distributed by the MSTA's economic arm, the Moorish Manufacturing Corporation (MMC). The goal of the MMC was to provide economic uplift to MSTA

¹² Pollitzer (1999).

¹³ See again Bailey (2000) and Pollitzer (1999).

¹⁴ Officially, the Moorish Science Temple of America began in 1926 in Chicago, but the founder of the MSTA, Noble Drew Ali, also founded several movements before this beginning in 1913 with the Canaanote Temple and including the 1916 Holy Moabite Temple of the World. (Gomez, 2005:215).

¹⁵ Gomez (2005:262-263).

members and ultimately sought to raise funds to create an autonomous Moorish Village on American soil. The material culture of this group is largely understood and contextualized through examination of the group's founder Noble Drew Ali. Drew Ali's history is rather mysterious, but his ideological influences and contributions to the material culture of the MSTA hints to lines of continuity between the Islamic practices in the American North enacted by the MSTA and the Islamic practices of slaves in the South.

The second chapter traces the material culture of the MSTA to the South via Life Everlasting Tea and the Gullah culture of the Sea Islands. They were the consumers of an herbal cure-all tea from a plant referred to as Life Everlasting.¹⁶ This plant was believed to have the ability to relieve ailments from asthma to diseased bowels.¹⁷ This tea is part of the herbal medicine cabinet of the Gullah culture and is reflective of the knowledge of the herbal cure-all tradition. The breadth of the Gullah material culture is largely un-documented because of the context of slavery and illiteracy of the people. This lack of scholarship has led to debates concerning the extent of the legacy of Islam in the region.¹⁸ But the voices of the enslaved populations can be understood through their material culture and their orally transmitted family histories. To understand some of the potential strands of continuity between the MSTA and the Gullah Islands, and then ultimately the strands that led back to Africa, this chapter examines the life and legacy of Bilali, a Muslim slave from Sapelo Island, part of the Sea Island chain. Bilali was the

¹⁶Use documented by both Bailey with Bledsoe (2000) and Pollitzer (1999).

¹⁷ Pollitzer (1999:99).

¹⁸ As previously stated, Diouf believes that there is no material connection between the Islam in the North and South as stated in her book *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (1998).

literate and a well trusted slave of Thomas Spaulding; he left Arabic documents, was known to pray facing the East several times a day, and even adorned himself with a Fez.¹⁹ One of his descendents Cornelia Bailey (believed to a modification of Bilali) has written an explicit history of her life growing up on Sapelo Island and tried to incorporate all of her knowledge of the island and the Gullah culture into a written document because she believes her culture to be dying.²⁰ It is in her memories that Life Everlasting Tea appears in the context of Sapelo Island. The connection of the MSTA's material culture to the Gullah material culture through the consumption of cure-all teas will provide the anchor to support evidence of cultural connections linking the American North and South to each other and to Africa.

The third chapter argues for the direct material connection of Life Everlasting Tea from the Sea Islands to Nigeria, where the tea is called Never Die.²¹ The exact application of Never Die Tea is less clear than its American counterpart, but the consumption of the plant as a tea originating in Africa demonstrates heuristically cultural continuities between the two geographies. The use of plants for healing purposes has a long history in Africa and is also practiced by non-Muslim populations across Africa. This chapter speaks broadly about Islamic practices in Africa, but specifically focuses on the use of herbs by Muslims in Nigeria. The employment of herbal remedies by Muslims in Nigeria can be understood through the role of the *malam*, a Quranic scholar

¹⁹ Works Progress Administration (WPA) Georgia Writer's Project interviewed the descendents of Bilali in the late 1930s and was published as *Drums and Shadows: Costal Studies Among The Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940) [reprint 1986].

²⁰ Bailey with Bledsoe (2000) explicitly states this fear in the closing few chapters of the book.

²¹ As stated by Bailey's documentation of a Nigeria man who indicates the connection (2000:327).

and herbal healer.²² It is this combination of traditional healing methods and Islamic sciences in Nigeria centers the question of authentic practice concerning the integration of African cultural practices into Islam and contributes to an attitude that equates Islam as the superior religion for Africans. These politics are part of the heritage of African American Islam and questions of authenticity plague hybrid Islamic practices throughout history. These questions concerning authentic Islamic practices appear in Nigeria in the form of religio-political campaigns initiated by Usman dan Fodio to “purify” Nigerian Islam from African based innovations, such as herbal healing.²³ This context is important in the comprehension of the influence of African origins on the material practice and biases of African Muslims in America. The use of herbs for medicinal purposes heuristically demonstrates plausible material and cultural continuities between Africans and African Americans.

The application of the term Islam to the MSTA is contentious since some scholars debate the legitimacy of the Moorish Science Temple of America as an Islamic group for a number of reasons including: their reliance on the *Circle Seven Koran*²⁴ instead of the *Holy Quran* revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in seventh century Arabia as a guiding text, their unique appearance, and their seemingly secular focus on “social uplift” as some believe this to be a reimagining of the Islam of the plantation

²² Scholar Ismail Abdalla (1985) explores the role of the malam in his medical analysis of nineteenth century Nigeria.

²³ Scholar Frank Salamone (1991) discusses the circumstances that connect religion to ethnic identities and the creation of the Fulani identity as a result of dan Fodio’s *jihad*.

²⁴ This book was written by the MSTA founder Noble Drew Ali and was used by the group in 1927 as their primary religious text (Gomez, 2005:215). This text is discussed in further detail in chapter two.

South and not an extension of Islamic tradition.²⁵ However, when we turn to the material cultures of African and African American Islam we are able to explore the potential legacy of adaptation and change Islam has endured from Africa to the US, and then through the American South and North to new contexts. Much in the same light that Herskovits was novel in his attempts to find Africanisms that linked the material culture of Southern slaves to their African heritages; this thesis argues that we can use material culture to link Islam as it transitions from Africa to the South, and then prospectively to the North. We know that Islamic beliefs and practices endured what is often called the Middle Passage, so to believe that it dead ends with plantations in the South is short sighted. The history is difficult to uncover and is at times built on tentative links, such as Harriet Hall Grovner's potential practice of Islam into the 1920s. The use of cure-all teas heuristically evidences the potential for other, namely Islamic, material and cultural continuities which helps to illuminate the hidden historiography of Muslim Americans.

²⁵ Herbert Berg's "Mythmaking in the African American Muslim Context: The Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam and the American Society of Muslims." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73/3 (2005):685-703. Berg assumes in this essay that there are not actually any material connections between Islamic movements from the Antebellum South to the North at the turn of the century, that instead the process of creating mythic origins and cultivates credibility as a re-envisioning of the Islam from Africa and the American South.

CHAPTER 2 THE PROPHET'S TEA

The Prophet's Tea as an Herbal Cure-all

The Prophet's Tea, also known as Moorish Body Builder and Blood Purifier, first appeared on the Chicago market in the early 1900s as an herbal cure-all.¹ In Chicago the tea became identified with the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), an African American religious community that heralds Islam and Africa as the sources of their religious identity. As a material manifestation of the cultural continuity of African American thought, the tale of Prophet's Tea contributes to our understanding of the spread of Islam from Africa to the American South and then to the North.



Figure 2-1. Advertisement of the Prophet's Tea, also known as Moorish Body Builder and Blood Purifier. Image taken from *Moorish Guide* archived by the Historical Society of Islam.

¹ Michael Gomez provides a thorough analysis of the Moorish Science Temple's material culture in *The Black Crescent* (2005:262-263).

Brief History of the Moorish Science Temple of America

The Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) was officially established in 1926 in Chicago.² The founding members of the group were African American emigrants searching for economic opportunity in the North in the early 1920s. The creation of the MSTA reflects the historical context and charged racial attitudes of the early twentieth century. According to the *Moorish Guide*, the self-published newspaper of the MSTA, “The aim of the Moorish Science Temple of America is to promulgate the Mohammedan religion and give to all Moorish Americans their national free name.”³ Members of the MSTA saw themselves not as African Americans but as Moorish Americans as they identified with a Moroccan and Islamic historical past. By disassociating themselves from an identity tarnished by racism, they sought to create a space for “the uplifting of humanity,” which would be achieved through participation in the life of the Temple and an appropriation of an Islamic identity.⁴

As part of this adaption the MSTA did not use the traditional Muslim scriptures of the *Quran* and *Hadith*, but instead employed the *Circle Seven Koran*.⁵ The *Circle Seven Koran* is a text comprised of two sections; the first part appears to have been heavily

² Gomez (2005:215). It is important to note that MSTA members refer to themselves as Moors and Moorish Americans and these terms will be employed when referring to the members.

³ The MSTA’s newspaper from October 26, 1928, as documented in the *Moorish Minutes* (2010). Compiled by Muurish Gansul available through <http://muurishgansul.com>. The *Moorish Guide* is also referenced by Gomez (2005:262-263).

⁴ See McCloud (1995:14).

⁵ The scripture used by the MSTA is described in detail to varying degrees in the works of Gomez (2005); Turner (2003); Nance (2002); and Dannin (2002). Gomez indicates the original full title of the book is *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Holy Temple of Science 7, Know Yourself and Your Father God-Allah That You Learn to Love Instead of Hate. Everyman Need to Worship Under His Own Vine and Fig Tree. The Uniting of Asia* and was originally printed in 1927 (2005:217).

plagiarized from Levi Dowling's *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ*.⁶ Dowling's book came from "a long tradition of apocrypha describing Jesus as a mystical figure, only one of a number of 'Christs' in world history."⁷ Through the appropriation of Dowling's belief in continued revelation and multiple avatars of prophecy the *Circle Seven Koran* was interpreted by its Moorish Temple followers as a religious text in the tradition of the Abrahamic faiths. Unlike the *Quran* of the ancient Middle East, the *Circle Seven Koran* acknowledges the prophecy of various traditional figures including Buddha, Moses, Zoroaster, Muhammad, and Confucius, while emphasizing the life of Jesus Christ.⁸ The second part of the *Circle Seven Koran* is proscriptive containing rules and self-help messages pertaining to: daily practices; food taboos; relationships between friends, family, employers, and politicians; and the instruction to face east while in recitation of prayer.⁹ This is similar to the proscriptive aspects of the *Hadith*, the written compilation of the custom, usual procedure, or ways of acting of the Prophet Mohammad, but the *Circle Seven Koran* is still not considered by any of the larger Muslim world as orthodox Islam.¹⁰ It is this reliance on doctrines outside of the traditionally accepted Islamic cannon of *Hadith* and *Quran* as law and theology that is the foremost reason the authenticity of the MSTA's vision of Islam has been challenged.

Though often considered a decided variant of Islam, some of the MSTA's practices are consistent with Sunni and Sufi Islam. These practices include: the

⁶ Dowling (1907) [reprinted 1972]. For detailed analysis on the *Circle Seven Koran* see Susan Nance (Summer 2002:127).

⁷ Nance (Summer 2002:127).

⁸ Dannin (2002:27).

⁹ Nance (Summer 2002:131).

¹⁰ Used as defined by Frederick Mathewson Denny in *An Introduction to Islam*. Third Edition. (2006:404).

celebration of Friday as a holy day, sex-segregated seating in the Temple, and the Eastern direction of prayer.¹¹ Food taboos such as the Moors' abstinence from pork and intoxicants are also consistent as a widespread Muslim practice. Nevertheless, the use of the *Holy Koran* instead of the *Quran* has led to disputes over which represents the "true" Islam. More pointedly, critics argue that the *Circle Seven Koran's* incorporation of multiple prophets from various religious traditions and its emphasis on Jesus Christ, as well as their belief in continued prophecy disqualifies their claim to being Muslims. This "politics of authenticity" debate permeates scholarship that negates the validity of MSTA's claims to Islam.

The politics of authenticity are part of the heritage of Islam in Africa, and continues to be a point of contention between so-called orthodox Islam and African American Islamic movements. From the first spread of Islamic knowledge across Africa the religion had to adapt to the African context. Despite attempts to retain African Islamic practices, Islam faced new contextual challenges in the American South; and then when Islam transitions to the North, there is a third contextual transformation of Islam. As people are faced with new challenges they negotiate new avenues to achieve a solution. The unique circumstances of racism in the North shaped the development of the Moorish Science Temple of America. The MSTA, like other African American Muslim movements emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century had to deal with racism, and the MSTA did so by calling themselves Moors.

The MSTA's religious implications are often overshadowed in scholarship by a focus on their communal improvement programs. This focus was set into place because

¹¹ McCloud (1995:14) denotes these practices.

of northern whites' racial attitudes, and a need for not only religious but economic support networks for African Americans migrating from the South. While these aid programs may have a so-called secular focus, it is important to keep in mind that the MSTA identified foremost as Muslims, and displayed some so-called orthodox Muslim practices.

One of the practices of the MSTA and the larger Muslim world is known as one of the pillars of Islam: *zakat*, or giving alms.¹² The MSTA's focus on social outreach through economics is reflective of this mandate to help those in need. This larger practice embeds Muslims into their communities through religious mandate. Nevertheless, Sherman Jackson, who is a professor of Arabic and Islamic studies, states that, "It is important to recognize that these men were not so much interpreting Islam as they were appropriating it."¹³ The men Jackson refers to are the prophetic founders of the emergent African American Muslim movements, including the MSTA, of the early twentieth century. Jackson seeks to disassociate these movements with what he contends to be Islam. He further elaborates, "Black Religion functioned as the core, with the trappings (namely vocabulary) of Islam serving as the outer shell."¹⁴ This example is characteristic of a larger scholarly debate over the depiction of the MSTA as a secular socially oriented group.¹⁵

¹² Used as defined by Fredrick Denny (2006:411).

¹³ Jackson (2005:43). Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Forward the Third Resurrection* (2005) seeks to disassociate the terms Black Religion and Islam.

¹⁴ Jackson (2005:44).

¹⁵ For more contributions to the discussion see Austin (1984); Berg (2005); Dannin (2002); Diouf (1998); Gomez (2005); McCloud (1998); Turner (2003); and Amina Wadud "American Muslim identity: race and ethnicity in progressive Islam," *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*. Omid Sadie ed. (2003):270-285. She even states that "the first [Islamic] movements among African-Americans to combat

The racial attitudes of the North influenced the MSTA members to relocate their identity from Negroes to Moorish American.¹⁶ Part of this new identity was the specific appearance that was expected of members. Scholar Susan Nance holds that, “The Moors claimed royal descent; they donned fezzes, colorful gowns, and turbans and identified themselves as ‘Moslem’ in order to divorce black identity from black southern culture and the ostensible lawlessness, laziness, and immorality typically associated with it.”¹⁷ The MSTA frequently paraded around their temples in this distinctive apparel in an effort to both publicize their movement and attract others interest in the “uplift” of African Americans migrants from the Old South. Further, the MSTA issued Moroccan identity cards to physically demonstrate a non-Negro identity.¹⁸ The elaborate attire and identity cards are part of the material culture of the MSTA through which they demonstrate a distinction between their old identity and their new one.

While the MSTA sought to create a new and distinct image, their material culture demonstrates continuities to the very heritage they sought to obfuscate. This can be understood through the creation and consumption of the Prophet’s Tea, a cure-all tea marketed by the MSTA’s economic arm the Moorish Manufacturing Company (MMC). The Prophet’s Tea and other herbal products were advertised and sold through the

experiences of racism in American were primarily nationalist and pan-Africanist,” furthermore, “they were quite secular in nature.” (2003:275).

¹⁶ At this time all people perceived to be black were referred to as Negroes with no particular identity to a specific land mass or geographic region.

¹⁷ Susan Nance, “Respectability and Representation: The Moorish Science Temple, Morocco, and Black Public Culture in 1920s Chicago.” *American Quarterly* 54/4 (Dec 2002:624). It is in this essay that Nance provides key insights into the identity politics of the Moorish Science Temple, but does so with regard to the religious implications as well.

¹⁸ The Moorish identity cards stated, “I do hereby declare that you are a Moslem under the Divine Laws on the Holy Koran of Mecca. Love Truth Peace Freedom and Justice. ‘I AM A CITIZEN OF THE U.S.A.’” as documented by Dannin (2002:27).

Moorish Guide and other newspapers in ads placed by the MMC to anyone who could afford them.¹⁹ Another product was Moorish Mineral and Healing Oil, which claimed to remedy rheumatism, sore and tired feet, indigestion, stiff joints, and neuralgia.²⁰ One testimonial by a female stated the oil alleviated her throat problems to the point that she felt “like a young girl.”²¹ But the healing oil had a special application for males. According to historian Michael Gomez, the oil was to be applied ‘to the spine’ as well as the ‘lower parts of the stomach’ twice daily to treat ‘loss of manhood.’²² The MMC also marketed and sold a Moorish Antiseptic Bath Compound that alleviated the same general pains of rheumatism and stiff joints, but also claimed to be beneficial to the complexion when used daily as a face wash.²³ All of these herbal concoctions were said to be remedies created from traditional herbal medicinal knowledge possessed by MSTA’s mysterious founder Noble Drew Ali.

The Life of Drew Ali

The early history of the man known as Noble Drew Ali is shrouded in mystery. Before becoming the prophetic founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America, he was born Timothy Drew on January 8, 1886 in North Carolina.²⁴ It is believed that his mother was a Cherokee, and his father was a runaway slave, but there is a larger than

¹⁹ The 1927 prices ranged from fifty cents to one dollar. These goods can currently be purchased online, but they now cost seven to ten dollars plus shipping and handling from the www.moorishsciencetempleofamericainc.org.

²⁰ See Gomez (2005:263).

²¹ Gomez (2005:263).

²² Gomez (2005:263). Gomez does note that most of the testimonials were actually from women (eight out of ten), which is interesting given that these goods have male specific healing claims.

²³ Advertisements from the *Moorish Guide* as compiled by thehistoricalsocietyofislam.com

²⁴ Gomez (2005). Gomez does note however, that mythology states Ali was born in Simpsonbuck County, but this is place that does not and seems to never have historically existed (2005:203).

life mythology that surrounds the MSTA's narrative of Ali's life.²⁵ Scholar Richard Brent Turner offers another hypothesis that Drew Ali "was a descendent of 'Bilali Mohammed,' the famous African Muslim slave who inhabited Sapelo Island in the nineteenth century."²⁶ This connection is based on speculative evidence linking Ali and Bilali by geographic location. Still, it is clear that Drew Ali spent some of his early life in the South, in particular in the Carolinas, where it is believed he learned root work and the recipes for all of the MMC concoctions, including the Prophet's Tea. Through the life of Drew Ali we can understand the foundations of the MSTA and are then able to highlight potential continuities between material practices of Islam in the North and South.

It is unknown how long Ali continued to reside in the Carolinas or if he migrated around the South. Some of the MSTA lore believes that he may have even gone to Egypt. This belief is used to further connect Ali to a Moorish identity and authentic Quranic training.²⁷ Ali's next documented move was to Newark, New Jersey where in 1913 he established the Canaanite Temple. While Drew Ali's life history is unclear there are several avenues of influence that are believed to have contributed to his unique understanding of Africa, Islam, and Moorish heritage.

The Ben Ishmael Tribe

One of these groups that scholars believe influenced Drew Ali's emphasis on a Moorish identity was the Ben Ishmael Tribe.²⁸ The extent of this early connection is

²⁵ This is the common belief about Ali's origins, documented by Tuner (2005); Dannin (2002); and Gomez (2005).

²⁶ Turner (1999:90). I have found no other information that makes this claim about Ali. The life and legacy of Bilali Mohammed will be later discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

²⁷ See Turner (1999:92).

²⁸ The Ben Ishmael Tribe is one of two groups chronicled by Michael Gomez's "Interlude." The other group is the Melungeons, a mysterious multi-racial group documented as early as 1674 in Tennessee,

shrouded in even more mystery than the life of Ali, but there are similarities between the marginalization experienced by both the MSTA and the Ben Ishmael Tribe. Further similarities are indicated by the religious nationalistic focuses of the groups which led to questions about this Islamic “authenticity.” Both the Moorish Science Temple and the Ben Ishmael Tribe claimed a specifically Moorish heritage.²⁹ The mysterious Ben Ishmael Tribe appears in historical records as early as 1790 in Noble County, Kentucky.³⁰ They referred to themselves as Ishmaelites, abstained from alcohol, and boasted an estimated membership of 10,000 members before the end of the nineteenth century.³¹ Their origins are relatively unknown, but scholar Michael Gomez believes they were a Muslim maroon or guerilla group comprised of a “triracial model of descent from African, Native American, and ‘poor white.’”³²

They lived as an isolated group with a triangular semi-nomadic migration pattern through Mahomet, Illinois; Morocco, Indiana; and Mecca, Indiana.³³ Historian Hugo Leaming finds this migratory pattern to be parallel to the Fulani, “one of the few migratory peoples of West Africa and at the same time the most militant missionaries of

Kentucky, and Virginia (Gomez, 2005:187). The history of this group is largely unknown but Gomez indicates that they identified as Moorish, as did the Ben Ishmael Tribe.

²⁹ See Gomez (2005:200).

³⁰ Hugo Leaming, “The Ben Ishmael Tribe: A Fugitive ‘Nation’ of the Old Northwest,” *The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest*. Ed. By Melvin G. Holli and Peter d’A Jones. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977:98.

³¹ See Leaming (1977:127) and Gomez (2005) “Interlude”. Gomez also notes that into the late nineteenth century the tribe had difficulty conforming to the encroaching settlements, and as a consequence he quotes “three-quarters of the patients in the Indianapolis City Hospital were from the Tribe of Ishmael,” a large portion of the Tribe was also plagued with other health problems due to poverty conditions, and were heavily persecuted in the early 1900s (2005:97).

³² Gomez (2005:196).

³³ See Leaming (1977:136).

Islam in that region during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.”³⁴ The names of these cities also support the belief that there was a Muslim population, or minimally a presence, who knew Arabic names in the Midwest. The appropriation of Arabic words is present in the family names of residents in the outlying areas of the tribe’s nomadic trade route. According to Leaming, names such as Aimen, Booromer, Sherfy, Pusha, and Osman appeared on rural directories in 1870, these names bear appearances to Islamic names or words respectively: Ameen, Omar, Sharrieff, Pasha, and Osman,³⁵ which was also “a name given to the leader of the Fulani holy war.”³⁶ This further extends the potential that the Ben Ishmael tribe is likely connected to African Islam, and this will later be linked to the MSTA.

The evidence of a connection between African Islam and the Ben Ishmael Tribe is supported further by the Islamic flare to architecture along their migration routes. It is said this unique architecture had been “constructed as if the builders had heard of Moorish architecture but had not seen a picture, and not realizing that the dome rises from a squared base, constructed elongated roofs that are all dome.” This use of Moorish architecture may reflect a material link to the Moorish identity claimed by the Ben Ishmael Tribe. The Ishmaelites, much like the MSTA, appropriated a Moorish identity, but it is likely, according to Leaming, that this identity was based on a racialized understanding of the Moorish identity and its connection to Islam.³⁷

³⁴ Leaming (1977:136).

³⁵ Usman and Uthman are also alternate spellings of this name.

³⁶ Leaming (1977:138). Chapter three contains more information on Usman dan Fodio, the leader of the Fulani holy war in Northern Nigeria, and the Islamic Fulani identity.

³⁷ See Leaming (1977:138).

The Ben Ishmael Tribe was subject to much persecution, the most brutal of which was racially motivated. They became the object of Reverend Oscar McCulloch's 1880 study of heredity and genetics, which was the foundation of McCulloch's social degradation theory.³⁸ This theory emerges almost simultaneously with the creation of the field of anthropology. Some anthropologists believe that "Modern anthropology's roots lie in the 19th-century European natural history traditions, with their focus on the classification and comparison of human populations and their search for indicators of 'mental capacity.'"³⁹ The establishment of eugenic sciences drastically affected this group and further heightened their marginalized status. Scholar Hugo Leaming adds that McCulloch's research on the Ben Ishmael Tribe "was to retain a respected place in the growing literature of eugenics for sixty years, until the movement's collapse."⁴⁰ The Ben Ishmael Tribe was one of the first groups in the United States to be subjected to eugenic ideologies and attempted sterilization procedures.⁴¹

This history of persecution and brutal eugenic torture effected the ideological commitments of the Ben Ishmael Tribe. Michael Gomez finds, "By the late nineteenth century, 'three-quarters of the patients at Indianapolis City Hospital were from the Tribe of Ishmael.'"⁴² The Ishmael Tribe was reduced to the "very dregs of society, impoverished and marginalized."⁴³ These extreme living conditions and governmentally

³⁸ See Leaming (1977:129).

³⁹ Mukhopadhyay and Moses (1997:517).

⁴⁰ Leaming (1977:129).

⁴¹ Leaming (1977:129).

⁴² Gomez (2005:197).

⁴³ Gomez (2005:198).

mandated marginalization would have affected their world view, since “the province of Ishmaelite influence appears to have been the non-Christian religious nationalist movements.”⁴⁴ Leaming elaborates the influence of the Ben Ishmael Tribe on religious nationalist movements in that, “It is not surprising that there should have been significant dialogue between those who had once been an independent nation in North America and those who sought the self-determination of the entire African-American people.”⁴⁵ The Ben Ishmael Tribe and the Moorish Science Temple share this history of marginalization, questions and unified themselves under the banner of non-Christian religious nationalism.

Drew Ali’s connection to the Ishmaelites is traced through his migration from New Jersey to Chicago, as he believed that “Islam is closer to the latter region.”⁴⁶ Ali’s emphasis on a Moorish identity for himself and his followers may also reflect a connection with the group. It is known that “some percentage of Noble Drew Ali’s adherents in the Midwest were recruited from the Ishmaelites.”⁴⁷ By the time of the MSTA the Ishmaelites as a group was largely defunct, so their identification with the teachings of Drew Ali come “presumably as a result of some resonance between Noble Drew Ali’s teachings and the latter’s own beliefs and lived experience.”⁴⁸ Leaming notes several individuals who claimed to have membership in both the MSTA and the Ben Ishmael Tribe. One of these individuals is Mrs. Gallivant, a women who joined the

⁴⁴ Leaming (1977:135).

⁴⁵ Leaming (1977:135).

⁴⁶ Gomez (2005:200).

⁴⁷ Gomez (2005:200).

⁴⁸ Gomez (2005:200).

MSTA in Detroit around 1920; she had previously called herself an Ishmaelite, Mrs. Gallivant even “spoke of the Tribe of Ishmael as a people who had dwelled downstate, and who after moving north were among the first to assist in the establishment of the Moorish Science in the Midwest.”⁴⁹ Leaming understands the sphere of influence with the tribe, Islam, and the MSTA to be:

The accumulation of the tribal traits of shunning Christian churches, abstinence from alcohol, polygamy, nomadic lifestyle, and names and vocabulary bearing resemblances to Arabic proves nothing conclusive. But they are sufficient to raise the question of Islamic influences on the old culture of the Tribe of Ishmael, in light of this established relationship with black nationalism after the diaspora [to the North], and then report of its participation in the Midwestern founding of Moorish Science.⁵⁰

While there is still more to understand about the connections between the Ben Ishmael Tribe, Drew Ali, and the MSTA, it is clear that they influenced the interpretations of emergent African American Islamic movements.

Intellectual Influences on Drew Ali

Drew Ali was exposed to several other ideological influences including: the writings of the “father of Pan-Africanism,” Edward Wilmot Blyden; personal relationships with the Ahmadiyya missionary, Mufti Muhammad Saddiq and Marcus Garvey; and his membership in the Freemasons.⁵¹

Christian missionary Edward Wilmot Blyden’s writings led to his title “father of Pan-Africanism.” He was the first scholar to link Islam to the continent of Africa as the “authentic” religion for Africans, and subsequently the correct religion for African

⁴⁹ Leaming (1977:135).

⁵⁰ Leaming (1977:136).

⁵¹ See Michael Gomez (2005) and Richard Turner (1999) for more details on these connections, for brevity’s sake only a few of these links are addressed by this thesis.

Americans.⁵² Blyden was born on St. Thomas in 1832.⁵³ His missionary work brought him to Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. He is best known for his book *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, where he began to develop a theory that saw Islam as an African religion and Christianity as European.⁵⁴ Celebrated as the founder of pan-African thought, Blyden saw Islam as the religion of Africans and those of African descent. Blyden was also influenced by the political movements within Islam in Africa and into his theory he absorbed the attitude of superiority regarding Islamic practices from jihadist movements, such as Usman dan Fodio's in Nigeria.⁵⁵ Blyden's linkage of Islam and African heritage partly inspired Ali's belief in Islam as the original religion of Africans which was believed to have been largely destroyed by slavery.⁵⁶ Hence, in Ali's view, to become a Muslim was to rediscover one's true identity.

While Blyden's ideological influence was inspirational for the MSTA in understanding the correlation of Islam to the traditional religious practice of Africans, there were also Islamic missionary influences contributing to the conception of Islam in 1920s American North. One of these missionaries was Mufti Muhammad Saddiq, the first Ahmadiyya missionary to the United States.⁵⁷ The Ahmadiyya are a Muslim group

⁵² Turner (1999:47).

⁵³ Gomez (2005:257).

⁵⁴ Blyden (1887) [reprint 1990]. Also discussed in Gomez (2005) and Turner (1999).

⁵⁵ Scholar Dean S. Gilliland examines the influence of the jihadist movements of 1802 in Nigeria on Blyden's understanding of Islam in *African Religion Meets Islam: Religious Change in Northern Nigeria*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986. He even cites Obarogie Ohonbamu's analysis of Blyden's influence as "The educated [black] northerners were given the impression that their Islamic culture was so superior that they never had the urge to ape of imitate the white administrators" (Gilliland, 1986:57).

⁵⁶ See Turner (1999:48-59).

⁵⁷ See Gomez (2005:251) for more detail about the life of Mufti Muhammad Saddiq. .

from the Punjab region of India who were widely persecuted for their beliefs in the late 1800s and early 1900s.⁵⁸ Their persecution stems from their founder Ahmad's claim that he was not only the Reformer of Islam (*Muhaddid*) but he was the messiah of all prophetic religious traditions including the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the avatar of Krishna. The Ahmadiyya movement achieved most of its missionary success amongst African Americans and prison populations in North America. The Ahmadiyya much like the MSTA, incorporated elements of Christianity and Judaism into Islam, believed in continued revelations, and were viewed as heterodox by other Muslims. But Ali and Saddiq were not only ideologically compatible. There is photographic evidence that links Saddiq, Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Drew Ali.⁵⁹ While Mufti Muhammad Saddiq was not an African American, he was a central figure in the African American intellectual community and most certainly was a contemporary and acquaintance of Drew Ali and would have influenced his understanding of Islam.

Another influence on Drew Ali was his contemporary Marcus Garvey. Both Garvey and Ali espoused ideologies of African American uplift and improvement. This is especially apparent in the title of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association or UNIA. The extent of these men's influence on one another is the subject of some scholarly debate. Historian Michael Gomez states that Ali's ideas and activities actually antedate those of Garvey.⁶⁰ While scholar Richard Brent Turner credits the latter's influence on the former. This debate aside, both men employed mutual aid solutions to alleviate unemployment and poverty within the African American community in the

⁵⁸ See Turner for more detail about the persecution endured by Saddiq and the Ahmadiyya (1999:112).

⁵⁹ See Turner (1999:143).

⁶⁰ Gomez (2005:204).

North, yet they had very different ends. Ali sought to establish autonomous black economic systems like the MMC to lessen the exploitation of migrating African Americans; while Marcus Garvey, with the help of UNIA members, began the Black Star Line to raise funds and move people to Africa. The relationship between Ali and Garvey is difficult to pinpoint, yet they had a common message of economic uplift through community development projects.

Yet another intellectual influence on Drew Ali came from his affiliation with the Freemasons. Ali was a member of the Black Shriners or the Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order and used their Islamic symbolism, such as the red Fez, the title Noble, and the crescent moon and star.⁶¹ The image etched on Drew Ali's gravestone is one of him in a high-backed chair staring directly towards the viewer wearing the Fez. The red Fez was used by the Shriners inside the lodge, but the Moorish Americans wore them in public, and they were especially important regalia for the MSTA parades. Running deeper than the appropriation of material symbols, the Moorish appropriation of Freemasonry extended to the Fraternity's Rites of Passage where the MSTA developed similar rituals intended to result, as Susan Nance holds, in a "spiritual rebirth of the initiate through acquisition of secret truths to be used for personal fulfillment and the service of the community at large."⁶² In the establishment of the MSTA, Drew Ali was intellectually influenced by Edward Wilmot Blyden, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, Marcus Garvey, and the Freemasons. These intellectual connections are mirrored in the material culture of the MSTA as the MMC, established to increase economic prosperity, the adoption of the

⁶¹See Turner (2003:95).

⁶² Nance (Summer 2002:138).

Fez and other clothing articles, as well as the symbols of the crescent and star, and the use of the title Noble for Drew Ali. Other results of these influences are demonstrated culturally through Rites of Passage and the belief in Islam as the superior religion for Africans. These material and cultural influences on the life of Drew Ali and the MSTA further demonstrates potential connections regarding Islam from Africa, the American South, and the Moorish Science Temple of America.

The Prophet's Tea and Moorish Identity

The Moorish American identity of the MSTA evokes a connection to ancestral knowledge that migrated with Africans across the Atlantic and into plantation life. The foundations of the MSTA are rich with Islamic references, imagery, and materials that connect the cultural tradition of African American Islam from different northern and southern geographies and contexts. The life of Drew Ali and his ideological connections illuminates the potential continuities of Islam between the North and the South during the tumultuous uncertainty of early twentieth century America. As one member of the MSTA put it, "people in the Moorish Science Temple knew their herbs. They learned from their people in the South. Before that it came from the old country with some of the slaves they brought here."⁶³ While the employment of healing herbs was widely practiced by the larger population of enslaved Africans, the connection between Ali's knowledge of herbs to the South may also indicate potential for the influence of Southern Islam on Drew Ali. The traditional employment of cure-all teas follows a path from Africa to the Southern United States, but the tradition does not end here.

⁶³ Dannin (2002:29).

With the migration of former enslaved African Americans and their descendents to the North, the use of tea re-emerges in the context of black nationalist Islamic movements at the turn of the century. The Moorish Science Temple of America was the proprietor of such tea, called the Prophet's Tea or Moorish Body Builder and Blood Purifier. It is the consumption of the Prophet's Tea as an herbal cure-all tea that materially links the Moorish Science Temple back to the material practices of Southern herbal cure-all teas. But larger than this connection, the Prophet's Tea indicates a continued material tradition and knowledge system from Africa, to the American South, and to the American North which helps us to grasp the history of African American Islam and the origins of sustained Islamic practice in the Americas. We will now turn to this history in the American South.

CHAPTER 3 LIFE EVERLASTING TEA

Do you have a cold and cough with congestion and fever? Pick the annual herb 'life everlasting,' boil its leaves, stems, and yellow flowers, add another plant like pine tops or mullein or sea myrtle, to make one of the most popular cold remedies in South Carolina. Some say it will also relieve cramps, diseased bowels, and pulmonary complaints, and promote general well being. The dried plant is smoked for asthma, the leaves and flowers are chewed for quinsy, the crumbled leaves relieve toothache, and a bath of it eases foot pains.

William Pollitzer (1999:99).

Life Everlasting as an Herbal Cure-all

The first documented use of Life Everlasting¹ Tea in the American South came from the coastal regions of the Carolinas and Georgia, known as the Sea Islands. The tea was consumed by enslaved Africans on southern plantations as an herbal stimulant and cure-all tea, much like the Prophet's Tea of the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA). The traditional use of Life Everlasting Tea for healing most likely comes from Africa to the American South from enslaved Africans on the Sea Islands.² This medicinal use of cure-all teas, in particularly the plant Life Everlasting, is one of several material continuities between the island residents, known as the Gullah culture, and their ancestral homelands of Africa.

The African identities that transformed into the Gullah culture on the Sea Islands during American slavery were influenced not only by African origins, but were also shaped by the racist ideologies held by plantation owners and overseers about various African ethnic groups. It was the belief of the white plantation owners that some slaves

¹ Genus: *Gnaphalum* Species: *polycephalum*.

² See Pollitzer (1999:99).

were of higher value than others and one of the prized slave populations were Muslim Africans who were often skilled agriculturalists. The botanical continuities of Life Everlasting Tea and Islamic material continuities of African ethnic identities provide some of the documentation of the life, formation, and transformation of the Gullah cultural identity which is comprised of non-Muslim majority and Muslim minority African ethnicities under the harsh reality of slavery. The Islamic material continuities help to shed light on Islamic cultural continuities as Islam transitions from Africa to America. The unique population and documented presence of Islam in the Gullah material record may have influenced subsequent African American Islamic movements in the North at the turn of the century. We know that the employment of herbal cure-all teas were rumored by the MSTA to reflect their southern heritage, a practice typified by the employment Life Everlasting Tea on the Sea Islands, the influence of Islam in the South on Islam in the North is more difficult to discern, but prospective research may clarify these potential links.

Islam has a distinct material presence on the Sea Islands as evidenced by Arabic derived names and words documented throughout the unique Gullah language system. Moreover, some Gullah religious practices, such as the giving of *sakara* cakes and the ring shout ritual, suggest further continuities between African Islam and the American Southern Islam. We gain more insight into these Islamic practices when we look to the life and legacy of slaves such as Bilali, an enslaved African Muslim from Sapelo Islands who left his own written record in Arabic, used prayer beads, wore a Fez, prayed multiple times a day facing the East, observed some dietary restrictions, and even wrote

Quranic scripture.³ Bilali's life is further contextualized through the writings of his descendent Cornelia Bailey, who remembers not only her family history but also provides written documentation of Gullah culture and oral traditions. From her writing we are introduced to insider's history and perspective on contemporary issues facing the Gullah and Sapelo Island. By tracing the material threads between the Sea Islands and Africa, we are able to uncover some of the cultural continuities between Islam in both regions and further understand the historical narrative of African American Islam.

From Africa to Gullah

The geography of the Sea Island Atlantic coastal region helps to explain the continuity of herbal and medicinal plants from Africa to the Americas. The American South and West Africa, the homelands for the majority of the enslaved Africans during the transatlantic slavery system, are both subtropical zones of humidity, heat, luxuriant vegetation, and sandy soils.⁴ The Sea Island region is a 250 mile long and 40 mile wide coastal strip of low swamp and marsh lands that create an island chain from the coast of North Carolina to the Northern border of Florida.⁵ Over generations of enslavement, the island inhabitants developed their own Gullah African derived cultural and language systems.⁶ This culture was imported from Africa with the start of the North American slave trade in the 1600s. The Gullah identity began to coalesce through the institution of chattel slavery and relative isolation from the American mainland.

³ As documented by the WPA *Drums and Shadows* (1940) accounts of Bilali's ancestors.

⁴ See Pollitzer (1999:87).

⁵ See Pollitzer (1999:4).

⁶ The difference between the Gullah and Gechee cultures is delineated by the Georgia/South Carolina boarder. The Georgia Islands as technically the Gechee, but often the term Gullah is used interchangeably since their cultures are "nearly indistinguishable" Gomez (1998:102). For the purpose of simplicity only the term Gullah will be used to refer to the entire group of Sea Island cultures.

The story of Sea Island Gullah culture began with transatlantic slavery from Africa to the United States in the late 1500s and early 1600s and officially ends in 1865. While an estimated 530,000 Africans entered North America in chains, the total estimated population of African slaves to the Americas numbers close to twelve million.⁷ The diverse demographics of the enslaved populations have been estimated from the ledgers and cargo manifests of the ships as well as advertisements for slave auctions.⁸ The ethnic differences were not lost on the slave owners and this is reflected in the owner's preference for slaves from particular regions for specific labors. Scholar William Pollitzer finds, "West and Central Africa were the homeland of the ancestors of the Gullah."⁹ Pollitzer includes the specific groups of the Islamic Hausa states, such as the Fulani of Northern Nigeria, as a people whose "talents and experiences...were to be reflected on the shores of the Americas."¹⁰ These talents and experiences often refer to their agricultural abilities and these abilities were noticed by slave purchasers who began to develop preferences for African slaves from specific ethnic backgrounds.

The African populations selected for enslavement on the Sea Island plantations were based on the demand of slave owners and this was further influenced by their perception of racial characteristics projected on specific African ethnicities. Racial superiority is a one of the ideological constructs that supported the transatlantic slavery system, but these racial attitudes were applied beyond a black and white dichotomy as slave owners created further distinctions amongst African populations based on

⁷See Pollitzer (1999:38-39).

⁸ For an in-depth analysis and statistics see Gomez (2005) and Pollitzer (1999).

⁹Pollitzer (1999:26).

¹⁰Pollitzer (1999:28).

perceived ethnic differences. Slave owner's preferences were based on assumptions and reductions about height, skin pigment, ethnically derived scarifications, literacy, agricultural background, and demeanor. These preferences were often based on racist phenotypical observations which were often conflated with the Islamic religious tradition in the Sea Islands. For the Sea Islands, Muslim slaves were believed to possess the most desirable skills for rice, cotton, and indigo agricultural production. They were believed to be of both Arab and African descent and so valued over a perceived purely African ethnicity. Michael Gomez further states, "Vis-à-vis other Africans, Muslims were generally viewed by slave holders as a 'more intelligent, more reasonable, more physically attractive, more dignified people.'"¹¹ The preferences were sometimes more nuanced than this, for example Natchez planter William Dunbar was said to have "specifically preferred Muslims from Northern Nigeria as opposed to Senegambians, but they were Muslims nonetheless."¹² The literacy of some Muslim slaves also influenced plantation owner's perception of intelligence.¹³ According to Sylviane Diouf, slave owners believed that since Muslim Africans had a mixed racial background that they were not "true" Africans and they could be trusted, and they could "elevate themselves to the highest positions within the boundaries of rigid slave society."¹⁴ The unique Gullah culture of the Sea Islands begins with African diversity and was influenced by the perception of slave owners. The influence of Islam on the Gullah culture is difficult to

¹¹Gomez (1998:82).

¹²Gomez (1998:82). Northern Nigeria and Senegambia were just two regions from Africa that supplied the coastal plantations with a labor force.

¹³Diouf (1998:97-100).

¹⁴Diouf (1998:99-100).

elucidate, but light is shed on some of these strands as we look to the larger material culture of the Gullah.

The use of Life Everlasting Tea as an herbal cure-all demonstrates one of these potential botanical cognates between African cultural practices and Gullah cultural practices. Scholar William Pollitzer characterizes Life Everlasting as “only one of about one hundred plants used by the citizens of the Low County for centuries for healing aches and pains; the use of many of them is derived from ancient traditions of the Old World.”¹⁵ Given the similar climates, some of these medicinal plants may have been native to the American South, but it is difficult to discern which plants originate from Africa, and which ones were already growing in the American South. Pollitzer assumes that botanical continuity indicates a traditional continuity. More pointedly Pollitzer highlights this relationship, demonstrating that where plants have cognates, the applications of these plants will also have cognates.

The similar climates between Western Africa and the Southern US allowed for plant cognates to flourish, such as the cash crop rice. Africa supplied not only rice as a cash crop to America, but also contributed indigo. In fact indigo can be traced by species back to Africa to understand the influence of the ethnically Islamic group the Fulani of Nigeria on the spread of indigo.¹⁶ Pollitzer indicates that not only do these plant materials have correlations between the US and Africa, but their knowledge is based on traditions with threads that precede American territory and reflect a knowledge created in Africa. Through the continued use of Life Everlasting Tea as an herbal cure-

¹⁵Pollitzer (1999:99).

¹⁶Pollitzer traces the species *Indigofera tinctoria*, and *Indigofera arrecta* to Africa (specifically Senegal for the former species) to the “Kanuri dyers of the Cameroun who carried it from Bornu to the region of Lake Chad, “and there, “Fulani were also responsible for its spread.” (1999:91).

all in Africa and the Sea Islands we can see the continuity of knowledge. Given the documented presence of an Islamic material tradition in the Sea Islands, we can use this evidence of herbal material continuities and extrapolate to investigate the presence and transformation of Islam to the Sea Islands.

Beyond the crude materials of plants and tangible objects, Islam also came across the Atlantic Ocean. Islam was an established religion in Africa as early as the eleventh century.¹⁷ Early on there were Muslims amongst the Senegambian: Wolof, Fulbe, and Malinke groups. There was also a Muslim presence in Northern Nigeria that supplied slaves to the New World.¹⁸ The exact number of enslaved African Muslims taken to the United States is unknown, but Michael Gomez states that “their numbers were significant, probably reaching in the thousands.”¹⁹ While Islam first arrived on the shores of the Americas as early as the 1500s, it was in the 1600s that the first sustained practices of Islam in the United States have been documented.²⁰ The “epicenter of the African Muslim community in colonial and antebellum North America...was located along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts, comprising both islands and the immediate mainland vicinity.”²¹ It is this Sea Island region that also holds the keys to understanding the beginnings of Islam in America through the material record of the enslaved Muslims and their descendents.

¹⁷See Gomez (2005).

¹⁸Gomez (1998:43).

¹⁹Gomez (1998:60).

²⁰Both Turner (2003) and Gomez (2005) demonstrate that enslaved African Muslims were also on Spanish expeditions in the 1500s. Turner writes about Estevan, the first identifiable Muslim in North America, was a black Moroccan guide and interpreter who came to Florida from Spain in 1527 (2003:11).

²¹Gomez (2005:143).

Islam in the Material Record

Life Everlasting Tea, like the knowledge of its application as a cure-all, came across the Atlantic from Africa and has left a lasting influence on the material record of the Sea Islands. As Pollitzer indicates, botanical evidences indicate material continuities and are indicative of knowledge continuities between Africa and the Sea Islands. As we know Islam was an African religion before the onset of transatlantic slavery. We can expect from these correlations that Islam will be present in the material culture of the Sea Islands, and to understand the presence of Islam in the Sea Islands, we can look to the material record. Like the herbal knowledge of Life Everlasting Tea's healing abilities, Islam has material manifestations as evidenced by *sakara* cakes and the ring shout ritual, as well as in family names and the vocabulary of the Sea Island residents, but most concretely the continuation of Islam as a material and ideological system in the Sea Islands is demonstrated by written Arabic records by enslaved Muslim Sea Islanders. The importance of these Arabic records is understood through their ability to assert agency in the representation of Muslims. It is the uniqueness of the Gullah material culture that initiated scholastic investigation into the lives and practices of enslaved Africans, and it is this very material culture that also indicates the transition of Islam to the American South from Africa.

The material culture of the Sea Islands has been the subject of scholarly inquiry, and it is from research on one of the southernmost Sea Islands, Fort George Island, that "plantation archaeology" was created as a field of study.²² This new field took the material culture of enslaved Africans into consideration to understand their daily

²² Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-100*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992: Xxxvi.

activities, customs, and access to goods in an attempt to understand this largely undocumented culture. It is in this vein that we will look to the material culture of the Sea Islands in an attempt to highlight Islamic practices.

One of the materializations of Islam in the Sea Islands is *sakara* cakes. These sweetened rice cakes were recorded from the oral histories of the descendants of Gullah slaves by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1930s.²³ The cakes were made of overly water saturated rice sweetened with honey or sugar then mashed into flat cakes.²⁴ The origins of this cooking method, “probably spread from India through the Moslems to West Africa and thence to the Low country.”²⁵ In the Gullah coastal lowlands these cakes would have been offered as a tenant of Islam called *sadakha*, the giving of alms. Furthermore, scholar Sylviane Diouf indicates, “As in the case in Africa, the cakes in Georgia were given to the children, and being religious in nature, the distribution was accompanied by the traditional *ameen*.”²⁶ Diouf even notes that the cakes were so popular with the island children they memorialized them in song. While the cakes are remembered in fond childhood memories of Sea Islanders, their practical function was to serve the Islamic tenet of charity and they were most likely distributed as a form of alms giving. The cakes and the method employed to construct them reflect a further continuity of practice, food resources, and cooking technique between Muslims in America and Muslims in Africa. The presence of Islam in the Gullah material record is not always as transparent as in the case of the *sakara* cakes. To understand the less

²³ WPA *Drums and Shadows* (1940) [reprinted 1986].

²⁴ See Diouf (1998:65).

²⁵ Pollitzer (1999:90).

²⁶ Diouf (1998:65).

apparent connections some scholars, like Sylviane Diouf, aim to tease out traces of Islamic practice from the generic catch-all category of “African” practices used by scholars.

Diouf specifically targets the practice of the “ring shout” to deconstruct the assumption that this practice demonstrates an amalgamation of African derived polytheistic religious influences. She elaborates that the ring shout, is probably a linguistic derivative of *shaut*, which translates from Arabic to English to mean “to move around the Kaaba...until exhausted.”²⁷ This practice of circumambulation is practiced by Muslims on the *hajji*, one of the pillars of Islam, where pilgrims move as a unified mass around the holy shrine called the *Kaaba*.²⁸ The circular motion of the ring shout ritual supports the hypothesis that it has similarities to the Islamic practice of circumambulation at the Holy Shrine. The similarities between the ring shout ritual and the Islamic practice of circumambulation at the Kaaba indicates a continuity of religious practices with specifically Islamic influences. Diouf believes these terms “shout” and “shaut” to be cognates since there is larger evidence of African and Arabic vocabulary cognates and near cognates in the vocabulary and names of Sea Island residents.

African Arabic names and naming systems are also recorded from the Sea Island regions. These Arabic derived names are posted on the runaway slave advertisements searching for individuals with names like Bullaly (Bilali), Mustapha, Fatima, Sambo, Bocarrey (Bukari), and Mamado (Mamadu).²⁹ The name Sambo most likely comes from

²⁷ Diouf (1998:69); Pollitzer (1999:115) also supports this hypothesis.

²⁸ See Diouf (1998).

²⁹ Gomez (1998). Gomez elaborates the list of potential cognates to include “Adamu, Ali, Amina, Aminata, Ayisata, Bakari, Bilali, Binta, Bintu, Birahama, Birama, Fatimata, Gibril, Haruna, Hasana, Male, Mare,

the African area of the Fulbe, which is also a region known to have Muslims. Sambo, probably the derivative of the name Samba, means “second son,” the use of this name is consistent with Muslim names and naming patterns from Africa in the New World.³⁰ The continuation of these names and naming processes reflect the heritage of Islamic knowledge in the written English record. There was another written record in the Sea Islands, and this is perhaps the most informative writing because it is the writings of a few elite Muslim slaves. These Muslims slaves had the ability to assert agency in the written record which provides insights into the practice of Islam on the Sea Islands.³¹

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of Islam in the Sea Islands is this written record, since the employment of the Arabic alphabet directly identifies the educated nature of Muslims in Africa before the Atlantic slave trade. Islamic schools had been in Africa for centuries before the transatlantic slave trade. As a result of this some of the enslaved African Muslims were literate in Arabic. This is apparent in the documents from South Carolina written by enslaved Muslims. Allan Austin was the first scholar to chronicle several of these Muslim slaves who left documentation of their religious commitment to Islam.³² Austin follows the life of Omar Ibn Said, one of the most famous Muslims in nineteenth century America. Said was born in Africa 1770 and came to the United States in chains in 1807.³³ He is a legendary figure who supposedly “loved his

Mori, and Musa. He also includes a brief list of naming systems in his later work *The Black Crescent* (2005:159).

³⁰ Gomez (1998:69).

³¹ Allen Austin is credited with creating the seminal work on *African American Muslims in American Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (1984).

³² See Austin (1984).

³³ See Austin (1984).

master but ran away from a cruel overseer” and then was converted from Islam to Christianity.³⁴ The legend of Omar Ibn Said contributes some information to our understanding of Islam in the Americas. Said’s legendary conversion to Christianity meant he “supposedly abandoned his interest in African and Islam and continued in a love of white Americans and Christianity.”³⁵ Scholar Richard Turner believes that this legend is “a deliberate distortion of history intended to soothe American consciences and maintain, if not create, certain myths about the Old South.”³⁶ But Omar Ibn Said has more than just a legendary representation in the historical record; Said was a literate Muslim who left his own writings concerning his conversion.

While the narrative states Said converted to Christianity, this narrative is directly challenged by Said’s continued assertion of his Muslim identity in his writings. Said apparently wrote Surah 110 of the *Quran*, which focuses on the ultimate victory of Islam, on a manuscript entitled “The Lord’s Prayer.”³⁷ Omar Ibn Said’s writings are further linked to serious Islamic practice in that, “The Arabic drawings and pentacles inscribed on several of [Said’s] Arabic manuscripts are similar to those found on the amulets that African slaves in Brazil used in the Muslim insurrection of 1835 in Bahia.”³⁸ These amulets were also used for the same reasons in Africa.³⁹ In Africa both Muslims and non-Muslims carried amulets filled with Quranic scripture in the understanding that

³⁴ Turner (2003:38).

³⁵ Turner (2003:38).

³⁶ Turner (2003:38).

³⁷ Turner (2003:38).

³⁸ Turner (2003:40).

³⁹ Amulets containing Quranic scripture are used throughout the Muslim world, and are not specific to Africa, but for these purposes we will only highlight this practice in Africa and the Sea Islands.

“writing possessed particular efficacy.”⁴⁰ The use of amulets filled with Quranic scripture was a practice that came from the Muslim clerics of Africa and continued to be used by Muslims in the New World. Omar Ibn Said’s use of Islamic scripture and the designs of his calligraphy led scholars to connect the use of Islamic amulets carried on into the New World. Said was able to challenge in writing the assumptions about his religious identity demonstrating that some Muslim slaves converted to Christianity in public, but not necessarily in practice. The life and legacy of another enslaved Muslim from the Sea Islands, Bilali Mohamet, provides further insights into the material manifestations and continuation of Islam on the Sea Islands. The life of Bilali gives us insight in to the lasting material legacy from slavery through emancipation and into contemporary times and his legacy is represented in the oral history of Sapelo Island and his descendents as a part of their Gullah cultural heritage.

The Life and Legacy of Bilali

The life of Bilali indicates the lasting influence of Islam on the Sapelo, one of the Sea Islands. Bilali was originally from Timbo, Futa Jallon.⁴¹ Bilali was enslaved on the plantation of Thomas Spaulding where he eventually proved to be a “dependable driver.”⁴² Richard Turner quotes white Sapelo resident Georgia Conrad’s 1850s observation of Bilali and his family to indicate he “worshipped Mohamet (sic),” that they were “tall and well-formed with good features,” talked amongst themselves in “a foreign tongue that no one else understood,” and that Bilali always adorned himself with “a cap

⁴⁰ Gomez (1998:67).

⁴¹ Turner (2003:33).

⁴² Gomez (2005:154).

that resembled a Turkish fez.”⁴³ This description of Bilali is consistent with the previously noted assumptions of plantation owners on the perceived attributes of Muslim slaves. The legacy of Bilali as told by his descendents highlights the material practices of Bilali including his use of prayer beads and Quranic amulets indicating the transmission of Islamic practices throughout subsequent Sapelo Island generations.⁴⁴ The memories of Bilali’s descendent Cornelia Bailey not only sheds light on the continuation of Islam materially on the Sea Islands, but also the botanical application of Life Everlasting Tea as a traditional cure-all tea, which yet again confirms the connection between materials both botanical and religious, and knowledge systems both herbal and Islamic.

Bilali was an integral player in the prosperity of Spaulding’s plantation, and in Spaulding’s absence Bilali would be deemed the overseer.⁴⁵ This position of responsibility was rare for an enslaved person, but some literate Muslims were given this responsibility in spite of their bondage.⁴⁶ The prestige of enslaved Muslims on plantations was consistent with their stratified societies in Africa. The Muslims in Africa controlled the vast trade networks creating a difference between resource access between Muslims and non-Muslims in Africa. This is summarized by Gomez as “Muslim abilities and atypicality were celebrated, and their divergence from other Africans was rewarded with less demanding, more highly trained vocational jobs and assignments,

⁴³Turner (2003:32).

⁴⁴Bilali’s descendent Cornelia Bailey with Christena Bledsoe have compiled one of the most accessible histories, traditions, and oral culture of the Gullah people and gives us particular insights into the legacy of Bilali in *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolitoman* (2000).

⁴⁵See Austin (1984:265-68).

⁴⁶Muslim slaves were not always privileged on the plantations and in some cases their adherence to Islam brought them more persecution.

which necessarily contributed to the ways in which African-derived societies were stratified.”⁴⁷ Bilali’s ability to lead earned him his reputation, but his literacy allowed him to assert some agency in historical representation.

Bilali’s leadership abilities led to his achievements during the War of 1812 when he and approximately eighty armed slaves prevented the British from securing Sapelo Island.⁴⁸ Bilali was even the model of Joel Chandler Harris’s caricature “Ben Ali.”⁴⁹ Bilali “wore a fez and kaftan, prayed daily (facing the East), and also observed the Muslim feast days.”⁵⁰ His legacy was passed down to his seven daughters, Margret,⁵¹ Bentoo, Chaalut, Medina, Yaruba, Fatima, and Hestuh, which Gomez considers to be “most identifiably Muslim names.”⁵² Furthermore, Bilali’s Islamic influence provides a lasting legacy of Islamic images in the memory of Sapelo Island residents.

One of these images recorded by the WPA was that of Katie Brown, a descendent of Bilali, who claimed her famous great-grandfather and his wife Phoebe “pray on duh bead.”⁵³ This image is consistent with the use of prayer beads by Muslims.

⁴⁷ Gomez (2005:372).

⁴⁸ See Turner (2003:33).

⁴⁹ Gomez (2005). Joel Chandler Harris also created the character Uncle Remus, who would later become the narrator of Disney’s *Song of the South* directed by Harve Foster and Wilfred Jackson (1946). This film recants the tales of Ber Rabbit, also a popular mythological character in the Sea Islands literature which is believed to have African origins. For more information on the Ber Rabbit and Joel Chandler Harris connection see Pollitzer (1999).

⁵⁰ Gomez (1998:74).

⁵¹ Margaret was also documented as wearing a head covering that extended to her shoulders. This is a practice that her granddaughter Katie Brown also continued into the 1930s according to the WPA interview (1986: 158-172). Gomez to show consistency of veiling amongst the enslaved African Muslims and their children (2005:155).

⁵² Gomez (2005:155).

⁵³ WPA (1986:61).

An even more persuasive image of Islam on Sapelo Island is in the memory of Shad Hall, grandson of Hestuh, Bilali's daughter. Shad Hall recalls,

Hestuh an all ub um sho pray on duh bead. Dey weah duh string uh beads on duh wais. Sometime duh string on duh neck. Dey pray at sun-up and face duh sun on duh knees an bow tuh it tree times, kneelin' on a lill mat.⁵⁴

The use of prayer beads and a mat, as well as a prostrated posture indicates consistency with widely accepted Muslim prayer practices.⁵⁵

Another prayer artifact is that of the amulet. The use of Quranic scripture amulets is recorded in the writings of Bilali descendent Cornelia Bailey. Cornelia Bailey also refers to her ancestor's use of small amulet pouches similar to the ones Muslims in Africa used. She states,

After Grandpa died, I opened the little bag and pulled the paper out and it said, 'With God, all things are possible.' I later found out that Muslim clerics in African used to hand out little sealed pouches with religious sayings on them.⁵⁶

These consistent practices lingered in the minds of Sea Island residents throughout slavery and into the present and are preserved in the writings of Cornelia Bailey.

Cornelia Bailey, whose great-grandmother was Harriet Hall Grovner, the granddaughter of Bentoo, Bilali's daughter; has contributed much to the documentation of Gullah culture and oral traditions, her memoires provide road maps and insights into the material culture of her Gullah heritage and she contributes a written legacy for the oral traditions of her people. Michael Gomez states, "Cornelia Bailey offers a glimpse with her observation that Bilali's children would not eat 'wild' animals or 'fresh' meat,

⁵⁴ WPA (1986:165-68).

⁵⁵ It should also be noted that the WPA recorded Islamic practices on other Islands near Sapelo. Some of these practices were prayer three times a day and an emphasis on Friday prayer (1986:162).

⁵⁶ Bailey (2000:66).

and that seafood such as crab was avoided as were certain kinds of fish.”⁵⁷ Cornelia Bailey’s memories support much of Gomez’s findings and reports of the WPA. Bailey further recalls that Bilali used a mat for prayer purposes, prostrated in prayer three times a day, employed prayer beads, and that his wife Phoebe’s rice cakes were something to be remembered for generations.⁵⁸ Her understanding of Bilali’s leadership role on the plantation and his victory against the British in the War of 1812 also matches Gomez’s analysis.⁵⁹

It is from Cornelia Bailey’s memories and transmission of oral history to written history that we can understand the lasting effects of the Muslim presence on Sapelo Island. Bailey highlights these connections in her story of family members, such as Harriet Hall Grovner, who many have been practicing Islam as late as the 1920s.⁶⁰ She documents the peculiar Eastern prayer direction the congregation of the First Baptist African Church of Sapelo faces for prayer. Bailey also documents a tension between the South and North ends of Sapelo which may be a product of the tension between Muslims and non-Muslims reflected by the privileged positions achieved by Muslims within the plantation hierarchy, as we know Bilali had achieved one of these positions. Bailey also links her family’s material traditions to the use of Life Everlasting Tea as an

⁵⁷ Gomez (2005:156).

⁵⁸ See Bailey (2000).

⁵⁹ See Bailey (2000).

⁶⁰ See Gomez (2005:162). This link is speculative, but this potential indicates that Islam may have been practiced on the Sea Islands into the twentieth century. Gomez does however, find that Harriet Hall Grovner was practicing Islam until 1866, which does mean that Islam was practiced in the Sea Island region a year after emancipation in 1865.

herbal cure-all, which is reminiscent of the mixture of Islam and herbal medicinal applications in Africa.⁶¹

The writings of Cornelia Bailey further substantiate the claims of some scholars. Scholars, like Michael Gomez speculate about the conversion experience of Harriet Hall Grovner, Bailey's great-grandmother, from Islam to Christianity with the establishment of the First African Baptist Church in 1866.⁶² Given the knowledge that some Sea Islanders converted to Christianity more so in name than perhaps practice, i.e. Omar Ibn Said, Gomez is suspicious about the extent of Grovner's conversion since she often went into the woods to pray, a rather peculiar behavior given church membership and attendance. Bailey is able to support Gomez's speculation with her memory which recalled:

Grandma said that people had to sneak out into the woods at night to pray...When freedom came, Bilali's children and grandchildren formed the First African Baptist Church. Some of them would have been Muslim still and some likely were Christian by then, and they wanted to go to church together so they patched things up, and they used Muslim traditions in a Christian church.⁶³

A documented example of this Islamic influence is also apparent in the Eastern direction of prayer for the First African Baptist Church.⁶⁴ Bailey's memories of life on the Sea Islands contextualize many of the assumptions scholars had long speculated about Muslim people on the island chain. She is able to further illuminate a potential lasting

⁶¹ This notion is discussed at length in the next chapter in the context of the Northern Nigerian *malam*.

⁶² Gomez (2005:162).

⁶³ Bailey (2000:158). But this is also noted by Diouf (1998:193).

⁶⁴ See Bailey (2000), chapter sixteen, here Bailey explains the importance of the direction of the East in the Gullah culture.

presence of Islam on Sapelo Island through her documentation of the historic conflict between the north and south ends of Sapelo Island.

Cornelia Bailey indicates that Sapelo Island itself is still segregated between the north and south ends of the Island. The north end people were the field workers, and according to Bailey they “wanted to keep their own identity” while the south enders were “used to being around the white man,” which reflected their material access to Ivory soap called “sweet soap,” instead of having to use Borax like the field slaves.⁶⁵ The division on the island is a relic of the social system created by slavery.⁶⁶ This dichotomy could further reflect the division between the Muslims and non-Muslims of Sapelo Island. Bilali was a Muslim who achieved the title of overseer in the absence of Spaulding; Bilali would have been one of these more privileged slaves of the south end. This North and South dichotomy on Sapelo Island demonstrates that continuity of racial and potentially religious ideologies and identities created at the time of slavery still has implications on the lives of Sea Islanders into the present. Bailey is also the link between a continued Islamic material culture and botanical material culture coming from Africa to the Sea Islands through the use of Life Everlasting Tea.

Bailey’s description of the material traditions of Sapelo Island also includes mention of the use of Life Everlasting Tea as a part of her family’s medicine cabinet. She states, “We had roots and herbs growing all over Sapelo, and we used them for everything.”⁶⁷ Her father drank the tea daily in the evening, as in the evening Life Everlasting was drunk as “the poor man’s Lipton, with its own stimulant, and it got you

⁶⁵ Bailey (2000:113).

⁶⁶ Bailey (2000:112).

⁶⁷ Bailey (2000:201).

up and going.”⁶⁸ She further elaborates that even when her father could afford coffee he still chose to drink the Life Everlasting Tea.⁶⁹ Bailey also informs her audience that the tea was given to her when she was a sick child as a cure for severe colds. Bailey further notes that “most of my family did live to old age.”⁷⁰ Life Everlasting Tea has a long history of use on the plantations on the Sea Islands and has materially and ideologically become part of the culture, but the historic use of this tea as a cure-all probably originates in Africa.

The use of plants for healing was widely practiced by slaves on Southern plantations since enslaved people did not typically have access to doctors in the traditional European sense. They relied on those who knew how to use roots and herbs to concoct remedies out of local botany. The creation of this knowledge is difficult to trace, since we have few records of this process. But employment and development of root knowledge, much like Life Everlasting Tea, has its origins in a land separated by the Atlantic Ocean. The knowledge of Life Everlasting Tea as a cure-all most likely endured the middle passage, from Africa to America. There is specifically documented use of Life Everlasting Tea as an herbal supplement in Nigeria, where they refer to the plant as Never Die.⁷¹ More than the transfer of crude materials, the continued use and knowledge of the benefit of Life Everlasting Tea consumption highlight something deeper; it indicates that materials, as well as knowledge and ideas survived the Middle Passage from Africa to the American South. The life of Bilali and the memories of

⁶⁸ Bailey (2000:203).

⁶⁹ Bailey (2000:203).

⁷⁰ Bailey (2000:203).

⁷¹ According to Bailey (2000:327).

Cornelia Bailey illuminate more of the material influences that demonstrate links to other knowledge and ideologies that survived this treacherous passage, including Islam.

Islam appears in the American material record as herbal remedies, prayer sacraments, writings, and familial names which indicate the legacies and remembrances of heritages from Africa in the Americas. When we follow these material cognates we are able to highlight the daily life practices of these enslaved populations as well as fill in gaps in the historical narrative of the African experience in America. The material record clearly indicates that not only botanical materials have continuities, but also Islamic artifacts and practices do as well. It is through the material objects that we are able to speculate the cultural continuities that originate from African Muslims and transform as they reach the new context of the American South initiating African American Islam. So to understand these material manifestations in the United States, we must also understand the larger practice, history, and material culture of Islam in Africa. By understanding the method in which Islam adapts to Africa from Middle Eastern trade networks as they spread through the continent we can understand the tradition of adaptation in African Islam.

CHAPTER 4 NEVER DIE TEA

A man from Nigeria who visited [Sapelo] saw some Life Everlasting and said to his son, 'Look. We have this at home too.' So Life Everlasting grows in West Africa. The only difference is that people there call the plant 'never die.'

Cornelia Bailey (2000:326-327)

Never Die Tea as an Herbal Cure-all

The Nigerian visitor described by Cornelia Bailey identified the plant Life Everlasting as a botanical cognate to a Nigerian plant called Never Die.¹ The connection of Life Everlasting Tea in Sapelo Island and Nigeria has further implications than just botanical continuities. The use of Life Everlasting Tea as an herbal cure-all tea supports continuities between other material cultures and belief systems as well. This can be highlighted through the material tradition of Islam in Nigeria.

Islam was transmitted through Africa via trade networks established and controlled by Middle Eastern Muslims.² The association between Islam and trade opened the avenues for Islam to be associated with political power as well. As Islam spread throughout Africa it began to take on uniquely African features, such as the reliance on cure-all herbal teas for healing purposes. This transmission of Islam through Africa as a base of mercantilism, political power, religious ideology, and source of healing is demonstrated in Nigeria by the role of the *malam*. But the conflation of African traditional knowledge and Islamic knowledge created the base of a politics of authenticity concerning the idea of a "true" or "pure" Arabian Islam versus an "un-pure"

¹ The same plant is found in both Nigeria and Sapelo Island, but it is unknown if the plant originated in Africa and was brought to the Americas, or if the plant was already a native species to the Americas.

² Gomez (2005:6).

African Islam. These politics are demonstrated by the *jihad* movement of Usman dan Fodio in 1802, which sought to disassociate herbal remedies and African innovations from Islam and concretized the conflicts between Fulani Muslims of Northern Nigeria and other Muslim and non-Muslim ethnic groups.³ Dan Fodio's persecution set the tone for his successor Muhammad Bello, who continued to eradicate innovation from Nigerian Islam.⁴ These conflicts potentially influenced Bilali's attitude to other enslaved Africans on Sapelo Island and may have also contributed to Edward Wilmot Blyden's understanding of Islam as an "authentic" African religion. Furthermore, this innovation of herbal remedies into Islamic practices in Africa contributes to tracing the legacy of Islamic material culture in North America and the sheds light on the overarching beliefs connected to this controversial practice. Through the Islamic practices of the *malam*: the employment of blessings; Quranic amulets; the use of assault magic practices; and herbal consumption methods, help us investigate the transition of Islam to Nigeria. This further illuminates the potential origins and possible material continuities between African and African American Islam. The use of cure-all tea in Nigeria indicates insights into the lives of Muslims in Africa and the underlying politics of authenticity that begins in Africa and continues in North America.

Islam in Africa

Before the institution of transatlantic slavery, where Africans were taken to the Americas, there was the transsaharan slave trade during which Africans were taken to the Middle East. It was this slave trade that originally brought the knowledge of Islam to

³ Gilliland (1986:56). This subject is further explored by Gilliland (1986) and Michael Gomez (2005).

⁴ Abdalla (1985:15). For more about Muhammad Bello see Ismail Abdalla's essay, "The Ulama of Sokoto in the Nineteenth Century: A Medical Review," in *African Healing Strategies*. Edited by Brian M du Toit and Ismail Abdalla. New York: Traco-Medic Books, 1985.

Africa as early as the seventh century.⁵ It was, however, from the eleventh century onward that Islam not only became an African religion, but took on an influential role in politics.⁶ The political ties of Islam to trade networks and the elite class led to the establishment of Muslim states throughout Africa. This Muslim state development began when “the king of Takrur (in Senegambia) became a Muslim; Islam in West Africa was closely connected with the development of states such as ancient Ghana, Mali and Songhay.”⁷ As Islam spread from these trade networks throughout Africa it became the religion practiced by many of the merchants. This connection contributes to the later politicization of Islam. Islam in Africa was not only the religion of the elite and political leaders. With this eleventh century spread of Islam across Africa, it transitioned “from being a religion of traders and scholars, Islam was increasingly adopted by West Africans societies who fused elements of the new Islamic religion to their own traditional beliefs, thus resulting in a situation where ‘mixed’ Islam took root.”⁸ In Nigeria this African influence on Islam is demonstrated materially by the use of cure-all teas and herbal remedies for healing. These innovations, however, have been the subject of much persecution in Nigeria, as we will see in the *jihad* led by Usman dan Fodio and the lasting effect of this *jihad* on the Fulani ethnicity both in Africa and in the Americas.

From the beginning, the history of Islam in Africa had a uniquely African expression, and

⁵ Scholar J. Alexander provides a more thorough analysis of the transsaharan slaves trade in his article “Islam, archaeology, and slavery in Africa.” *World Archaeology* 33/1(2001):44-50.

⁶ Along with Alexander (2001), scholars Michael Gomez (2005) and Christopher Steed (1995) also provide insights into the trade networks and political networks that arose across Africa before the transatlantic slave trade, but for brevity the discussion will focus only on Nigeria.

⁷ Steed (1995:67).

⁸ Steed (1995:67).

consequentially the authenticity of some African Islamic practices has been a subject of scrutiny.

Scholar Ismail H. Abdalla emphasizes this connection between traditional African healing and Islamic influences to the larger understanding of Islam in Africa, “when the role of the Muslim cleric as a doctor in Islamized African societies is fully investigated and understood, we will perhaps better comprehend the process of conversion in Africa, and be able to explain, more convincingly, the influence of Islam on the life of the ordinary African.”⁹ In fact, “the participation of both animist and Muslims in traditional institutions of [witchcraft and magic] is of the highest importance.”¹⁰ To understand the relationship between Islam and traditional sources of healing we will look to Northern Nigeria, a region historically noted for the dynamics of Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs as well as being one of the sources of enslaved African Muslims to the New World in the 1600s.

A Brief History of Islam in Nigeria

The history of Islam in Nigeria is shaped by contentious interactions along ethnic borders between Islam, Christianity, and other African religions. Nigeria is typically divided into three religious majority regions with Islam associated with the North, Christianity in the “Middle Belt” region, and indigenous polytheistic African religions practiced in the South.¹¹ Islam transitioned to Northern Nigerian through trade networks

⁹ Abdalla (1985:8).

¹⁰ Gilliland (1986:50).

¹¹ For more explanation about the regional and ethnic ties across Nigeria see Jacob Olupona and Toyin Falola’s edited volume *Religion and Society in Nigeria: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*. Nigeria: Spectrum Books Limited, 1991.

in the eleventh century, and again in the late fourteenth century.¹² These networks spread material goods as well as Islam to the surrounding populations of Kanem-Borono and Hausa kingdoms, as well as connecting Islam to the Northern Nigerian merchant class. Islam in Northern Nigeria is also connected to the ethnic identities of the Fulani and Hausa. It was through the *jihad* movement of Usman dan Fodio that Fulani was connected to an Islamic identity.¹³

As a result, the Fulani claim an Arabian origin in their mythology, and they depict themselves as the upholders of “orthodox principles in the face of lax Hausa officials.”¹⁴ The claim to Arab descent allows for a continued lineage for the Fulani to legitimate their religious practice from the lineage of the prophet. The Fulani group sought to rid Islam in Northern Nigeria of its ties to African practices, in the attempt to establish a “true and pure Islamic state.”¹⁵ Usman dan Fodio was the initiator of this *jihad*, or holy war against innovation, which lasted until 1810, and sought to “purify an already semi-Islamized society by purging ‘venal’ Muslims, rather than forcibly convert non-Muslims.”¹⁶ Innovation was not the only focus of dan Fodio’s campaign, he also wished to eradicate the pagan practices, and force the Christians to pay tributes.¹⁷

¹² See Steed (1995:67).

¹³ Dan Fodio’s *jihad* was influenced by the Wahhabi movement of Arabia. (Steed, 1995:68).

¹⁴ Salamone (1991:47).

¹⁵ Salamone (1991:47).

¹⁶ Steed (1995:69). Steed indicates that dan Fodio perhaps did not emphasize conversion for the non-Muslims because it was because only non-Muslims could be enslaved according to Islamic jurisprudence. Also see Salamone (1991:48).

¹⁷ See Steed (1995:69-70).

Tensions like these between the religious groups of Nigeria were potentially transmitted in the prejudices of the slaves against one another in the American South, as is evidenced by Sapelo Island's Bilali, who found he "could depend only upon fellow Muslims, as opposed to the general slave population whom he characterized as 'Christian dogs.'¹⁸ This is further explained from the West African context of religious based conflict between Christians, Muslims, and polytheistic traditions. The *jihad* movement of Usman dan Fodio changed the way in which Islam co-existed with other religious practices. Moreover, dan Fodio's *jihad* occurred contemporaneously with transatlantic slavery, and makes it there for reasonable that slaves from the Hausa nation exported from 1804-12 to the Americas would have most likely been Muslim and non-Muslim war captives.¹⁹

Usman dan Fodio's successor Sultan Muhammad Bello understood the importance of both Islam and Arabic writing for Africa.²⁰ Bello sought to estrange African Muslim medicinal practices from the traditional African herbal remedies to instead employ what he understood as Quranic and Hadith sciences. It was apparently through health care that Bello thought governmental stability could be achieved, but more than this, "Bello's interest in the development of a sound medical and agricultural system in Hausaland cannot be separated from his overall commitment to the establishment of the ideal Muslim society in the land, which was the main aim of the *jihad* [led by dan Fodio]."²¹ Bello's support and research into Islamic medicines also aided in establishing

¹⁸ Gomez (1998:83).

¹⁹ Gomez (2005:145).

²⁰ See Abdalla (1985:14).

²¹ Abdalla (1985:15).

the hegemony of the Sokoto Caliphate.²² Bello carried on the rhetoric of eradicating African elements from Islamic practices, and in doing so questioned the authenticity of some so-called Islamic practices. Bello believed that it was through education Nigeria could become an authentic Islamic state, free of innovation. Bello's sultanate emphasized education and literacy to achieve a "true" Islamic state. Scholar Dean Gilliland notes that Bello's emphases in, "sparked a wave of enlightenment;" brought "dignity to the Muslim upper class;" and "affected hundreds of tribes ruled by Fulani emirs."²³ This further concretized dan Fodio's elitist idea of what is defined as "true" Islam versus non-Islamic practices which influenced the consciousness of Muslims in North America.²⁴

But more than this, "the importance of this movement in raising the consciousness for education and progress is reflected in the controversial work of Edward Blyden."²⁵ Blyden claims to describe Nigeria just after the *jihad* in his observations stating, "Where the Muslim in found...he looks upon himself as a separate and distinct being from his pagan neighbor, and immeasurably superior in intellectual and moral respects."²⁶ Blyden used this elitist notion in his equation of Islam as the superior religion for Africans, an idea which later influenced the Noble Drew Ali of the Moorish Science Temple.²⁷ The Fulani elitist religio-political networks were reinforced

²² See Robert Stock's "Islamic Medicine in Rural Hausaland," *African Healing Strategies*. Ed by Brian M. du Toit and Ismail H. Abdalla. New York: Trado-Medic Books, 1985:31.

²³ Gilliland (1986:56).

²⁴ Gilliland (1986:56).

²⁵ Gilliland (1986:56).

²⁶ Gilliland (1986:57).

²⁷ According to Stock (1985:31).

by transatlantic slavery, as *jihad* war captives were sold to slavers. This Fulani elitist notion was concretized by the colonial British endeavors in Nigeria. The belief in the superiority of Islam in Nigeria fostered by dan Fodio's *jihad* demonstrates the long standing history of this bias concerning Islamic practice and African heritage, and the legacy of this attitude is apparent in the attitudes of enslaved Muslims in the Americas.

Nigerian Islamic Practices

Some of these emergent practices of Islam with African influences are also referred to as folk Islam, which “emphasizes the altered forms of Islam which traditional society develops for the benefit of the society.”²⁸ Folk Islam has a long tradition in the history of Islam as it was first influenced by Arabic animism, and spread with the transition of Islam to Africa.²⁹ Islam was also influenced by African traditions and these were the types of innovations and practices targeted by Usman dan Fodio's *jihad* to “purify” Islamic worship Northern Nigeria.³⁰

However, Folk Islamic practices help us to grasp the history of Islam in North America. The merging of traditional African roles and traditional Islamic roles is apparent in the Nigerian figure of the *malam*.³¹ The *malam* was both a Quranic scholar

²⁸ Gilliland (1986:70).

²⁹ According to Gilliland (1986:70).

³⁰ See Steed (1995:69) and also Salamone (1991:48).

³¹ The term *malam* is used to refer to several different societal positions: it can mean anyone who is literate and has some status because of this; it is also used in a “historical sense, referring to the learned class that has always accompanied the spread of Islam,” but is also used to refer to folk doctors of traditional villages (Gilliland 1986:116). The original intent of the term applies it to Muslim scholars, but in the context of Africa the role is extended to incorporate knowledge of traditional medicines as well. In the rural Hausa areas the *malam*, also called the *malami*, resort to “both prophetic and herbal medicines, often in combination” (Stock 1985:29). The *malam* fulfills the combined role of a Muslim cleric, or scholar and healer, or magician. Thus, the *malam* has legitimacy in their Islamic prescriptions as well as herbal medicinal knowledge. For further elaboration on the *malam* of Nigeria see: Adballa (1985); Gilliland (1986); Gilliland (1991); Salamone (1991); and Stock (1985).

and a Nigerian herbal healer who had the ability to create protection charms, give blessings, had knowledge of an “evil” magic, and employed both African herbal remedies and Quranic consumption methods for medicinal and healing purposes. The herbs used for traditional healing purposes by the *malam* came from the “traditional Hausa pharmacopeia” and this tradition of herbal remedies as mentioned in previous chapters was part of the material transmission of African Islam to African American Islam.³² By examining the creation of this role in Nigeria we are able to highlight some of the origins to the material healing tradition we have traced from the American North and South.

Medical Historian Ismail Abdalla stresses the importance of the *malam* in Nigeria was so great that “he was also the diviner without whose prediction and blessing no business, trade, journey or marriage was considered safe or desirable.” Furthermore, this was all “made possible because of his ability, real or assumed, to control space-time events by manipulating the Word.”³³ The Word in this context means, Arabic, which likely indicates Islam. So the source of power for the *malam* is the Quran even though the *malam* uses traditional practices and herbal remedies.

The *malam* also has a tradition of applying Islamic prophetic medicines for healing as well as traditional African medicines. These prophetic medicines were administered in a variety of ways. The most common of these remedies was *Rubutu*, a practice of “writing appropriate verses from the Holy Koran (sic) on a writing board and then drinking the ink washed from the board. *Rubutu* may be used as a curative

³²Stock (1985:32).

³³ Abdalla (1985:12).

medicine, but it is more often employed as a tonic to preserve health and bring good fortune.³⁴ Another method was the *Laya*, or amulets, usually filled with Quranic verses, that would have either been worn or placed within a space in need of protection.³⁵ In chapter three we found that Muslims in the Sea Islands employed similar such amulets. This demonstrates the *malam's* ability to employ both African and prophetic cures for healing, a practice that seems to have continuities to North American Islamic practices.

In addition to the healing powers of the *malamai*, there was an "evil" side of "unscrupulous 'black' malamai" practices.³⁶ Medical geographer Robert Stock finds one example of this assault magic is the *jifa*, in which a curse is literally hurled at the conjured image of the victim, often using a needle as the symbolic medium of delivery.³⁷ The lines between secular and spiritual healing are merged to the point that many "malamai dispense herbal as well as Islamic medicines."³⁸ The way in which these unscrupulous 'black' *malamai* practices are understood within the context of African Islam is not exactly clear, but would be labeled by the Islamic reform movements as un-Islamic. The *malam* "rightly thought he had as much claim to the medicine of the Prophet as the orthodox Fulani reformers. He was often unaware or unwilling to admit any contradiction between this type of medicine and that advocated

³⁴ Stock (1985:33).

³⁵ Stock (1984) also examines the practices of *Tofi*, or rubbing the *malam's* saliva on to the center of pain; *Kamun Kai*, headache passages; *Addu'a*, or medical invocations to be said following prayer five times a day; and *Rokon Allah*, or begging Allah.

³⁶ Stock (1985:32).

³⁷ Stock (1985:32). There are potential similarities between this practice and other religions in the Americas that are believed to have African origins.

³⁸ Stock (1985:30).

by the jihadists.”³⁹ It is for these reasons that medical historian Ismail Abdalla finds dan Fodio and Bello’s missions to remove traditional Hausa healing ideologies and practices from Islam was to be unsuccessful as of 1989.⁴⁰ The dual use of prophetic and traditional healing remedies as well as the incorporation of unscrupulous practices of some made the *malam* a target for Islamic reformation movements in Nigeria.

As previously discussed the continuation of plant species between Africa and the Americas indicates a continuation of materials, but not only were the materials continuous; the consumption methods were also traditional. Gilliland finds this means “herbal remedies may be given as an infusion to be drunk and/or rubbed over the body, or fermented for several days...or put into the fire so the vapors (turare) may be inhaled, or rubbed on to the body in its raw state.”⁴¹ This tradition of drinking herbal cure-all teas continued from Africa to the Sea Islands. The accounts of Life Everlasting Tea use also appear in Yamacraw resident James “Stick Daddy” Cooper.”⁴² In the Works Progress Administrations (WPA) interview with Stick Daddy, he stated

I kin make a sho cou fuh chills an fevuh. Yuh take some cawn fodduh boil it an make a tea. Yuh drink some an bathe in some an yuh’ll git well soon. Fuh a cold yuh get some life-evuh-lastin and make a tea tuh drink.⁴³

The process of drinking herbal concoctions as a tea was consistent with traditional Africa healing practices, and had correlates in the herbal remedies of the descendents

³⁹ Abdalla (1985:17).

⁴⁰ Abdalla (1985:17).

⁴¹ Pollitzer, 1999:104.

⁴² Works Projects Administration (WPA), 1940 (reprint 1986):26. The WPA notes that Yamacraw was “established on the Savannah River bluff west of the township of Savannah, a community where, “the residents are drawn largely from coastal counties of Georgia and South Carolina.” (1986:23).

⁴³ WPA (reprint 1986:23).

of enslaved Africans on Southern plantations. Scholar William Pollitzer notes that “more important than the same species in linking Africa to the sea islands is the similar way in which these plants are regarded in the art of healing and the beliefs surrounding them.”⁴⁴ These cultural implications highlight the links between Islam in African and Islam on the American southern plantation.

The use of herbal remedies was an intricate part African culture before the inception of Islam to Africa. Gilliland observes, “Religious priests are intimately connected to African society. They know the characteristics of each ethnic community and are experts in the psychological approaches and the particular medicines to held (sic) cope with a myriad of problems.”⁴⁵ The religious priest responds to the needs of the community in a manner that they understand. This approach calls for the Muslim cleric to have to take on the same responsibilities as the traditional priest. Of the multiplicity of healing practices in Nigeria, it is the herbal remedies that “assume a dominant role in the treatment of spirit-related illness.”⁴⁶ This tradition of herbal based medicines to deal with spirit related illness is part of the cultural traditions of Africa and was also a cultural aspect of African Muslim practices. This cultural aspect potentially transfers to the New World with the enslaved African Muslims, as we know enslaved Muslim populations employed herbal remedies.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Pollitzer (1999:103).

⁴⁵ Gilliland (1985:76).

⁴⁶ Stock (1985:34).

⁴⁷ It is important to note that not only enslaved Muslim populations employed herbal cures, in fact, the larger populations of enslaved Africans were known for their employment of herbs for curing, seeing as slaves had little to no access to medical doctors in the Western sense.

The examination of Islam in Africa, and specifically Northern Nigeria, allows for a fuller comprehension of the history of African Islam in America and also that of subsequent African American Islamic movements. From Islam in Nigeria we are able to uncover some of the African origins of the material continuities we have traced from the American North to the South. The question of “true” or “authentic” Islam begins in Africa as a critique of the relationship between African based religions and African Islam, as compared to Islam of Arabia. We can clearly see these early tensions in the discussion of Usman dan Fodio and his initiation of *jihad* in 1802, his continued legacy of persecution by Muhammad Bello.⁴⁸ And these conflicts potentially influenced both Bilali and Blyden’s understanding of Islam. The role of the *malam* allows us to further understand the material practice of Islam in Nigeria and indicates more continuity between African Islam in the Americas. Islam from Arabia changed in its transmission to Africa and African Islam also changes to fit new circumstances as it crosses the Atlantic to the New World.⁴⁹ Because of this, Africanist Merrick Posnansky reminds scholars that “one should be careful not to look for one-to-one parallel...changes have to have been made. The way things are done, rather than the objects themselves, and the spatial relations at the intrasite level will be the indication of African Presence.”⁵⁰ While there are continuities between Islam from Africa to the American South, there are tentative and potential connections to American Northern Islamic movements at the turn

⁴⁸ Gilliland (1986:56).

⁴⁹ Despite attempts to retain Islamic traditions as practiced in Africa enslaved populations in the Americas would have adapted their religious practices because of persecution or lack of resources.

⁵⁰ Merrick Posnansky, “Toward an Archaeology of the Black Diaspora.” *Journal of Black Studies* 15/2 (1984):195-205. Posnansky’s quote comes from his discussion concerning specifically the relationship between African and the Caribbean, but it would be fair to speculate this to some varying degree may also hold true across the larger scale of the African Diaspora across the Americas (1984:201).

of the century, but there is also space for change and innovation as Islam is applied to new circumstances and lived experiences.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

The religion of Islam came historically to the American South when enslaved Muslim Africans were forcibly from Africa to the Americas in what is often called the Middle Passage from Africa to provide the labor force for American plantations. The brutal conditions of North American slavery treated the African slaves as sub-humans. Because of these conditions, there is some documentation of the daily life and experience of enslaved Africans, but there is still much we do not know. It was these enslaved Africans who would create the first generations of African Americans.

At the time of American slavery, Africa had metropolitan civilizations and a number of these cities were populated by African Muslims. Islam in Africa was tied to mercantile networks and ultimately became influential in political control from beginning in the eleventh century in Nigeria. The Nigerian context not only suggests a continuation of the role of Islam and the use of herbs in the material tradition of medicinal and Islamic artifacts in the Americas, but also suggests a parallel mixture of Islam and herbal knowledge systems in the Americas.

The combined use of herbal and Islamic healing practices in Africa, a point of contention in Northern Nigeria after the *jihad* of Usman dan Fodio, has some parallels to the Islam in the American South and North as they also consumed herbal cure-all teas. We know that there are herbal plant cognates in both African and the American South, and there is evidence that these herbs were employed for the similar physical and spiritual ailments. This continuation of herbal medicine also appears in the American North in the context of the Moorish Science Temple of America. This organization sold the Prophet's Tea and other herbal concoctions to alleviate similar conditions as their

Southern ancestors endured. The mysterious Southern origins of the MSTA's founder Noble Drew Ali and his lasting legacy on the black nationalist movements of the early 1900s sheds some light on these correlates as well, since it is widely accepted by MSTA members that Drew Ali learned his healing skills from the root work herbal practitioners in the South who were versed in the herbal tradition of medicine.¹

It is in chapter one with the Moorish Science Temple and Drew Ali that we began to trace the hidden history of African American Islam through the consumption of the Prophet's Tea. It is believed that Ali spent several years migrating around the South before he moved to Newark, New Jersey.² Drew Ali encountered several philosophies and people along his journeys that shaped his understanding of Islam and the Moorish identity. Drew Ali came into contact with members of the Ben Ishmael Tribe and was influenced by their nationalist identity and their attempt at autonomy from the American government. Ali was also influenced by the writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden, a man whose own bias were shaped by the outbreak of *jihad* movements in Africa, including dan Fodio's, as a base for his connection linking Islam to Africa as the superior religion for Africans.³ Ali was also personally connected to Muhammad Sadiq and Marcus Garvey, as well as retaining a membership with the Freemasons. All of these influences shaped his understanding of Islam, the Moorish identity, continued prophecy, and his emphasis on social aid.⁴ The combination of these ideologies, groups, and people merged under the onslaught of Northern migration at the turn of the nineteenth century

¹ See Gomez (2005).

² See Turner (2003:90-92).

³ See Gilliland (1986:57).

⁴ As documented by Gomez (2005) and Turner (2003).

and the subsequent growing racial tensions. It is in this new context that African American Islam takes on a black nationalistic focus. But to understand the larger history of Islam in America we must step back from this more contemporary example and look to the historical origins of the Muslim presence in the US, which traces historically back to the antebellum South.

We look to the South in the second chapter, particularly at the Gullah Sea Island culture, a society that also employed an herbal cure-all tea for healing purposes called Life Everlasting Tea. The Sea Island region which spans the coasts of Northern Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas, was also home to a few literate Muslim slaves. The written record of enslaved men such as Omar Ibn Said and Bilali Mohamet allow insights into the possible resistance to Christian conversion and commitment to Islam. Islam appears further in the Gullah material culture in the form of African and Arabic names and words in the vocabulary of Sea Island residents, the giving of *sakara* cakes as a form of alms, and the ring shout ritual which bears not only potential linguistic cognates, but also is reminiscent of the practice of circumambulation at the *Kaaba*.⁵ Given the climate of the American South and its similarity to West Africa many plant species have botanical cognates in both regions. The plantation cash crops rice and indigo also help to reflect this botanical continuity, as does Life Everlasting Tea, which also appears in Nigeria where it is called Never Die. It is when we trace Life Everlasting Tea to Nigeria; we again encounter the use of herbal cure-alls in the context of Islamic practices.

The third chapter examines the transformation of Islam on the continent of Africa and the politics of authenticity that surround various African Muslim groups who employ

⁵ Diouf (1998:69).

herbal cure-all teas, like Never Die, alongside Quranic healing methods. But to understand this transformation we must first look at the history of Islam in Africa. In Nigeria the roles of the Muslim cleric fell in synch with the role of the herbal healer forming the category of *malam*. It was innovations such as this that Usman dan Fodio sought to eradicate from Nigerian Islam, while also promoting the superiority of Islam over other religions during his reign of jihad in the early 1800s. These tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim groups in Nigeria influenced the understanding of Edward Wilmot Blyden, the father of pan-Africanism, who was influenced by this bias in his belief that Islam was the preferred religion for Africans as Christianity was the preferred religion for Caucasians. This race influenced understanding of religion comes from these types of missionary observations and becomes reified in the context of the Americas. More than this though, the tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims are also apparent in Bilali's derogatory language calling some slaves "Christian dogs."⁶

The legacy of these African tensions highlights some of the cultural continuities between African and the New World. It is through material practices that we are able to understand the potential cognates of plants and religious materials as they represent on a deeper level the transference of ideas as they across vast territories to contend with a very bleak reality on American shores. This thesis argues that through the examination of tea we are able to understand potential material links between Islam from Africa as Islam is transmitted and transformed by the context of Southern slavery, and potentially we will be able to further follow the materials to understand the continuities and

⁶ Gomez (1998:83).

transitions of Islam in the North in the black nationalist movements as a part of the larger history of African American Islam.

Melville Herskovits was novel in the field of anthropology for his inquiry into “Africanisms” in the archaeological record.⁷ Herskovits used material culture to attempt to understand the various cultures Africans brought to the American South. Other scholars such as Robert Dannin, Michael Gomez, and Moustafa Bayoumi understand the importance of the material record in attempting to illuminate the history of Islam in America, and in particularly the history of African American Islam.⁸ Since the written record regarding the daily life of Southern Muslim slaves leaves much of their experience still unknown, their voices can begin to be heard through the examination of their lasting legacy materially and from that we can enhance our knowledge of their lives spiritually. But there is still much to uncover concerning the history of Islam in America.

Although it was not the intention of this study to address the following deficiency in scholarship, I note in passing that one of the limitations of this budding field is that no hemispheric study of Islam in the Americas has been conducted. As a result we have only a particularist understanding of Islam in the Americas. Gomez has been the closest to producing a hemispheric analysis with his incorporation of African Muslims in the Caribbean and Brazil in *Black Crescent*.⁹ Diouf does find cross cultural correlates between enslaved Muslims in Brazil and enslaved Muslims in North America.¹⁰ But Diouf is quick to project between the experiences of Islam in the Americas when there is

⁷ Herskovits (1958).

⁸ See Bayoumi (1999); Dannin (2002); Gomez (2005).

⁹ Gomez (2005).

¹⁰ See Diouf (1998).

not the material evidence to support her claims, such as her argument that based on the presence of Brazilian Quranic schools, we can extrapolate from this the presence of Quranic schools in Americas “where the Muslim community was large and organized enough.”¹¹ There does not yet appear to be material to support this assumption. Moreover, both Gomez and Diouf fall short of a truly hemispheric approach with their focus on North American Muslims outweighing further insights that could be made between the Americas as a whole and Africa.

The mysterious histories of Noble Drew Ali and the Ben Ishmael Tribe may also hold more keys to understanding the movement of Islam across the Americas. Another mysterious group called the Melungoens has potential ties to Drew Ali and further research on this group could yield more insights into the history of Islam in America. Further exploration of the connection between Garvey and Ali may also aid in uncovering knowledge pertaining to the early history of Northern Islamic movements. Perhaps there are still some written documents that help to separate mythology from history or even concretize speculation regarding the ancestry of Drew Ali, his early history, and provide insights into the triangular migratory pattern of the Ben Ishmael Tribe. A thorough examination of the “triracial” influences on the Ben Ishmael Tribe would provide insights not only of the multiple other identities that contributed to their philosophy, but would also provide scholarship more knowledge about their Muslim identity.

There is still much of material culture and history to uncover and investigate. Islam was not the majority religious identity of enslaved Africans; they also brought

¹¹ Diouf (1998:121).

various other African religious traditions.¹² These multiple religious influences must be taken in to account when attempting to understand the spiritual life of African Americans in the American South. Scholars have previously conflated material evidences with religious identities that are potentially incorrect; this can be seen in the example of the ring shout ritual. Scholar Sylviane Diouf speculates that this previously believed indigenous African practice may actually have a strong Islamic influence.¹³ The interpretive process is not always correct, but by examining the larger history and contextualizing Islam we can illuminate the possible lines of continuity.

The history of Islam in America is far from being fully exposed, but by examining the material record of herbal cure-all tea consumption of the earliest American Muslims on the Southern plantations in conjunction with an examination of their African origins, we can begin to piece together the early history, and speculate the potential transition of Islam into the twentieth century American North.

¹² See Steed, Christopher and David Westerlund eds., *The Triple Religious Heritage of Nigeria*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 1995.

¹³ Diouf (1998).

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jennifer Dick received her undergraduate degree from the University of Florida in 2007 with a major in anthropology and a minor in religion. During her undergraduate work, she attended Kingsley Plantation Archaeological Field School in Jacksonville her final semester. It is through this experience that she became interested in the material culture of enslaved plantation populations and the connection material cultures have to knowledge systems. She returned to the University of Florida in the fall of 2008 to achieve a master's degree in religion, this thesis is the result of that process.