



## Autobiography of Omar ibn Said (1831)

*Omar ibn Said is the customary English spelling of an Arabic name that can also be rendered as ‘Umar ibn Sayyid (“ibn” meaning “son of”). Omar was born into an elite family in the Islamic kingdom of Futa Toro, in the Senegambia region of western Africa. In his late 30s, he was captured in war and transported as a slave to South Carolina; he arrived in 1807, the last year before the international slave trade became illegal in the United States. Attempting to escape from slavery, Omar was jailed in North Carolina, where he attracted unusual publicity by writing pleas for his release, in Arabic, on the walls of his cell using embers from the fireplace. He spent the rest of his life enslaved to an elite white family—that of Jim Owen, a one-time US Congressional representative, whose brother John was a North Carolina governor. While with the Owens, Omar accepted Christian baptism, though the sincerity or totality of his conversion is a matter of dispute.*

*In 1831, when he was about 60 years old, Omar wrote, at the request of an unidentified white person, an account of his life in Arabic. This document circulated among whites who were interested in the Arabic language or in the possibility of converting Muslims in Africa to Christianity. A faulty English translation was published during Omar’s lifetime (likely without his knowledge) in a British missionary periodical. The translation from which the following edited selections come was produced in the 21st century by scholars Mbaye Lo and Carl Ernst.*

*[Omar starts the document by imperfectly copying from memory a surah, or chapter, from the Qur’an: surah 67, known as “Al-Mulk,” meaning “Sovereignty” (referring to God’s sovereignty). After that, Omar opens his account of his life with the following invocation.]*

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to God for his glorious kindness, his generosity and grace, who is worthy of all honor. Praise be to God, who created humanity to worship him, so he might test their actions, their words.

From ‘Umar to Shaykh Hunter:<sup>a</sup> You have asked me to write my life. I cannot write my life; I forget too much about my language and that of the Arabic language. I read now little grammar and little language. O my brothers, I beg you, in the name of God, do not blame me, for my eyes are weak, and so is my body.

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My name is ‘Umar ibn Sayyid; my birthplace is Futa Toro, between the two rivers. I sought knowledge in Bundu and Futa. The Shaykh was called Muhammad Sayyid, my brother, and Shaykh Sulaymaan Kumba, and Shaykh Jibril Abdal. I continued seeking knowledge for twenty-five years. I came back home for six years. Then there came to our country a large army. It killed many people, and brought me to the big sea, and sold me into the hands of a Christian, who bound me and sent me on board the big ship in the big sea. We sailed upon the big sea a month and a half, until we arrived to a place called Charleston in a Christian language. There they sold

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<sup>a</sup> The identity of the person whom Omar calls Shaykh [= Sheikh] Hunter is unknown.

me. A small, weak, and wicked little man called Johnson—a complete infidel, who had no fear of God in anything—bought me.

I am a small man, unable to do hard work, so I ran away from the hands of Johnson to the church,<sup>b</sup> and then I walked to a place called Fayetteville. I saw some church buildings, and I entered them to pray. A young fellow who was riding a horse saw me; then his father came to the place. He informed his father that he had seen a black man in the church building. A man named Handah<sup>c</sup> came with another man, one of them on horseback, attended by many dogs. They took me and made me go with them twelve miles to a place called Fayetteville, to big houses from which I could not go out. I remained in the big house (called *jail* in the Christian language) for sixteen days and nights.

One Friday, someone came and opened the door of the big house. I saw many men, all Christians. They called out to me: “Is your name ‘Umar? Is it Sayyid?” I did not understand the Christian language. I saw a man called Bob Mumford; he talked to me and asked me to get out of the big house. I agreed very much to go with them to their place. I stayed in Mumford’s place for four days and nights. Then a man called Jim Owen, the husband of Mumford’s daughter, Betsy Mumford, asked me if I agreed to go to a place called Bladen. I said yes, I agreed to go with them. So I have remained in the place of Jim Owen until now.

\* \* \*

O people of North Carolina, O people of South Carolina, O people of America, all of you! Have you among you any two good men such as Jim Owen and John Owen? These are good men. Whatever they eat, they give to me to eat; and whatever they wear, they give me to wear.

Jim, with his brother, has me read the Gospel. God is our Lord, our Creator, and our Master, the corrector of our conditions, both now and at the end, as a gift rather than as a constraint to his power.<sup>d</sup> This opened my heart to the way of guidance, to the way of Jesus the Messiah, to a great light.<sup>e</sup>

Before I came to the Christian country, my religion was the religion of Muhammad, the messenger of God, may blessing and peace be upon him. I would walk to the mosque before daybreak and would wash face, head, hands, and feet. I would pray at noon, would pray in the

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<sup>b</sup> In the Arabic manuscript, Omar writes *al-shahrā'*, which is an approximation in Arabic of what the English word church sounds like.

<sup>c</sup> Omar’s representation of an unidentified English name—perhaps Hunter, though Omar spelled that name differently earlier in the manuscript.

<sup>d</sup> This theological fragment, the doctrine that God’s generosity is free and not imposed as a necessity, is expressed in the typical language of Islamic theology. [Note by Mbaye Lo and Carl Ernst]

<sup>e</sup> This is the language used in the Qur’an to describe the Bible: “We revealed the Torah, in which there is guidance and light . . . and we gave him [Jesus] the Gospel, in which there is guidance and light” (Qur’an 5:44, 46). [Note by Lo and Ernst]

afternoon, would pray at sunset, would pray in the evening. I would give alms every year: gold, silver, harvest, cattle, sheep, goats, rice, wheat, and barley—all of them. I would give alms; I would go every year to jihad against the nonbelievers; I would go on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, for one who is able to. My father had six boys and five girls, and my mother had three boys and one girl. The day I left my country, I was thirty-seven. I have been residing in the land of the Christians for twenty-four years, in the year one thousand with eight hundred and one with thirty, of Jesus the Messiah.<sup>f</sup>

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I am ‘Umar, who at first loved to read the book of the Great Qur’an. General Jim Owen, with his wife, reads the Gospel; he has me read the Gospel very much. God is our Lord, our Creator, and our Master, the corrector of our conditions, both now and at the end, as a gift rather than as a constraint to his power. This opened my heart to the Gospel, to the way of guidance. Praise be to God, with much praise; he bestows bounties that overflow with the good.<sup>g</sup>

For the law was given through Moses, and bounty and truth through Jesus the Messiah.<sup>h</sup> At first I would pray what Muhammad said:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to God, the Lord of creation, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Master of the day of judgment. It is you whom we worship, and you whose aid we seek. Guide us on the straight path, the path of those who receive your bounty, not those who have angered you nor those who go astray.

But now I pray the word:

Our Father who is in the heavens, your name is sanctified. Your kingdom will come, your wish will be on the earth as it is in heaven. Our bread that is for tomorrow, give us today. And forgive us what we owe, as we forgive one who owes us. Do not put us into tests, but save us from evil; for the kingdom, and the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen.

I reside in our country by reason of great harm. The nonbelievers seized me unjustly and sold me to the Christians [...] Our Lord led me into the hands of a good man, who fears God, who loves to do good deeds [...] I remain in the hands of Jim Owen, who never beats me nor curses at me. There is no hunger nor nakedness nor hard work to do. I am a small and feeble man, who stayed twenty years, without any harm, in the hands of Jim Owen.

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<sup>f</sup> Omar uses an unconventional way of numbering the year, which reflects his training background in Arabic. [Note by Lo and Ernst]

<sup>g</sup> This [sentence] is a modified quotation from a major textbook on Islamic law and theology [by] Khalīl ibn Ishāq al-Mālikī. [Note by Lo and Ernst]

<sup>h</sup> This sentence is a translation into Arabic of John 1:17, from the New Testament.

**Source:** Mbaye Lo and Carl W. Ernst, eds., Document 4: Autobiography (Sira Dhatiyya), The Writings of Omar Ibn Said, Enslaved Scholars, Carolina Digital Repository, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <https://doi.org/10.17615/6rgc-xf61>. In copyright. Used here by permission.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy; annotations in *this italic font* by Duffy. Parenthetical clarifications in Lo and Ernst's translation have been omitted, as well as most endnotes. Four of Lo and Ernst's endnotes have been retained but have been converted to footnotes; one such note has been relocated from a point earlier in the source translation (where it was linked to a portion of Omar's text not excerpted here). The wording of Lo and Ernst's translation has been revised at a few points by Duffy, usually in favor of alternative translations that Lo and Ernst had placed in parenthetical clarifications or in endnotes. Lo and Ernst's translation favored the spelling *Omar* (with '*Umar*' in parentheses) but varied about favoring *Said* or *Sayyid*; as edited here by Duffy, the spellings '*Umar*' and *Sayyid*' are favored throughout the translated text for consistency with Lo and Ernst's style for representing other Arabic names, but *Omar* and *Said* are favored in the annotations for ease of recognition.

An additional paragraph break inserted for readability. A spelling error and two minor infelicities of English grammar corrected. Punctuation emended for readability. The formatting of a citation from the Qur'an emended to match the style used in the Empire and American Religion series for citations from the Bible. The word *jail* italicized because presented by Omar as a foreign word. Divine pronouns, epithets, and attributes, which are frequently but not consistently capitalized in the source translation, are consistently handled here as follows: divine epithets are capitalized (*the Merciful, Lord, Master, Father*, etc.), divine pronouns and attributes are downcased (*he, your, name*, etc.). The book titles *Gospel* (referring to the New Testament) and *Great Qur'an* are capitalized here as in Lo and Ernst's translation.

These edited excerpts from Lo and Ernst's translation of Omar bin Said's manuscript are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source document listed above.

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#### Additional sources:

Mbaye Lo and Carl W. Ernst, *I Cannot Write My Life: Islam, Arabic, and Slavery in Omar ibn Said's America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

A different 21st-century translation of Omar's manuscript can be found in Ala Alryyes, ed., *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 47-79.

Two translations of Omar's manuscript were produced during the 1800s by white Americans. One translation was by Alexander Cotheal, a merchant from New York who also pursued intellectual interests in ethnology. The other was by Isaac Bird, a New Englander who had been a Protestant missionary in what is now Lebanon.

[Alexander Cotheal, trans.], "The Life of Omar-ben-Saeed, a Foulah Slave," *General Baptist Repository and Missionary Observer*, December 1850, 556-558, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/\\_/xSQEAAAQAQAJ](https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/xSQEAAAQAQAJ).

[Isaac Bird, trans., with revisions by F. M. Moussa and introduction by John Franklin Jameson], "Autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina, 1831," *American Historical Review*, July 1925, 787-795, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/The\\_American\\_Historical\\_Review/1aQSAAAIAAJ](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_American_Historical_Review/1aQSAAAIAAJ).



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