

# Who Was 'Umar ibn Sayyid? A Critical Reevaluation of the Translations and Interpretations of the *Life*\*

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## Abstract

Recent criticism of the *Life* (1831) of 'Umar ibn Sayyid has sought to overturn prior assumptions that 'Umar was a Christian convert and a content slave to prove that 'Umar was a crypto-Muslim and an abolitionist. This criticism posits the existence of esoteric "concealed utterances" available to the initiated reader throughout 'Umar's autobiography as evidence of his abiding Islam and opposition to slavery in general and his enslavement in particular. This paper reexamines the translations and interpretations of 'Umar ibn Sayyid's *Life* to demonstrate how little about him we can know given his poor command of classical Arabic, the second language in which he wrote his autobiography. Through a reexamination of 'Umar's autobiography in light of 1) the political history of West Africa, 2) his relationship to classical Arabic and to language in general, and 3) a survey of the scholarship that verifiable mistranslations of his *Life* have generated, I will demonstrate that 'Umar's poor command of Arabic makes drawing conclusions about his ideas about enslavement and Islam nearly impossible.

*Keywords:* Slave narrative, Arabic, translation, Islam, second language attrition, United States

Of the more than six thousand American slave narratives, 'Umar ibn Sayyid's<sup>1</sup> departs significantly from the tradition. First of all, 'Umar wrote his *Life* in classical Arabic, an instrumental language he learned in school in Futa Toro, a Fulfulde-speaking Fula kingdom in modern-day Senegal. In addition to this, 'Umar wrote his *Life* in captivity, and it lacks the American slave narrative's canonical harrowing escape, fiery denunciations of slavery, and reflections on freedom. By reading closely 'Umar's *Life*, one comes to understand not that it contains "only, always more and more of the same,"<sup>2</sup> or that it is marked by similarity and repetitiveness common in other American slave narratives, but that 'Umar's *Life* defies most conventions of the American slave narrative.

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1 Alternatively rendered in English as Omar, Meroh, Umeroh, Moro, and Moreau. ALRYYES, "Introduction: 'Arabic Work,' Islam, and American Literature," in ALRYYES 2011: 39. 'Umar's name is rendered by him in Arabic in his *Life* as عمر ابن سيد, transliterated into English as 'Umar ibn Sayyid.

2 OLNEY 1985: 148.

Scholarship on 'Umar ibn Sayyid's life and writings has reflected the macro-historical trends in the historiography of slavery, and some of the more recent speculation about 'Umar's life and character borders on the saccharine. For example, Ala Alryyes writes that 'Umar was a "pious and peaceful man"<sup>3</sup>; speaking for himself, 'Umar ibn Sayyid writes that he "used to join the Jihad every year against the infidels,"<sup>4</sup> which could also refer to lax Muslims.<sup>5</sup> And as a Muslim Pullo,<sup>6</sup> 'Umar ibn Sayyid probably would have taken them as slaves, sold them into slavery, or forced them to convert to Islam. When 'Umar was a child, he reports, his family owned around seventy slaves.<sup>7</sup>

Studies of 'Umar's life and writings like Alryyes', Osman's, and Forbes' cast doubt on the sincerity of his conversion to Christianity and attempt to prove the Islam they claim he held in secret and reveals esoterically to the initiated reader through "concealed utterances."<sup>8</sup> But 'Umar's Arabic was rudimentary, and I suspect it was difficult, if not impossible, for him to convey subtle anti-slavery utterances in his text given his poor command of classical Arabic.

One of the sticking points these recent scholars have come across is 'Umar's apparently pro-slavery position. They have selectively interpreted his text, claiming that through his strange language he was decrying the institution of slavery. Apart from the weakness of those arguments that attempt to prove 'Umar's anti-slavery attitude based on ambiguities in his text, it is not unlikely that 'Umar was pro-slavery. First of all, the Islamic world, from whose southwestern reaches 'Umar hailed, was pro-slavery until the last century.<sup>9</sup> In an interview with the *North Carolina University Magazine* in 1854, when he was about 84, 'Umar claims that when he was a child, his family owned up to seventy slaves.<sup>10</sup> According to a contemporary account, after being settled at the Owens' North Carolina mansion, 'Umar "enjoyed life, without being treated as a slave, had a seat by himself in the country church, etc.; he spent his later years mostly at 'Owen Hill,' Governor Owen's estate, where he occupied his own home in the yard, and had his meals prepared by the Owens' cook and brought in by a little negro."<sup>11</sup> Even though he was an American slave, 'Umar might have had his own American slaves.

Though 'Umar's life and *Life* do not conform to the conventions of writers of slave narratives, a few antecedent slaves might help contextualize him and his experience. Job ben Solomon (1701-73) preceded 'Umar as an English-speaking, Arabic-writing Fulbe slave who won acclaim in the West. 'Umar's contemporary Simon Gray, who became a flatboat captain on the Mississippi River, was relatively privileged by his master, who defied the

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3 ALRYYES 2011: 32.

4 OMAR IBN SAID, "The Life: The Life of Omar ibn Said, Written by Himself", translated by Ala Alryyes, in ALRYYES 2011: 69.

5 DIOUF 2011: 170.

6 Pl. *Fulbe*.

7 According to ['Umar's] own account, his "father seems to have been a man of considerable wealth, owning as many as seventy slaves, and living upon the proceeds of their labor", in "Appendix 3: 'Uncle Moreau," from *North Carolina University Magazine* (September 1854)", in ALRYYES 2011: 209.

8 ALRYYES 2011: 46.

9 BRUNSCHVIG (2015).

10 See note 7 above.

11 JAMESON 2011: 87.

slave code to reunite his family and provide him with a high salary, good food, and healthcare. On the level of grammatical precision, John M. Washington and Wallace Turnage wrote slave narratives full of grammatical mistakes and misspellings that make reading them difficult at best.

Many of the claims scholars make about 'Umar ibn Sayyid's life and *Life* reveal more about the scholars, their projections and their innocence of classical Arabic than they do those scholars' engagement with 'Umar's text. The unfortunate fact is that very little is known about 'Umar's life. It is difficult to determine, for example, if he was a sincere Christian convert not only because of his awkward position as a literate slave asked to write an autobiography but also because his Arabic is so bad as to be almost incomprehensible.

In this paper I will reexamine 'Umar's Arabic text in light of Alryyes' 2011 English translation, Alryyes' English writings on 'Umar's text, and the interpretations and commentaries Alryyes' translation has generated. I will show that the ambiguity many scholars see in 'Umar's writing is a product of 'Umar's poor command of Arabic and that mistranslations of his text have led to an array of conclusions about 'Umar's life that his writing does not merit. It is controversial to say so, but 'Umar may have converted to Christianity sincerely. With a "little negro" at his command, 'Umar may have been comparatively content as a slave in North Carolina and loved his masters and their families. This is not to say that American slavery was not a despicable institution. But it is my responsibility as a scholar of Arabic and comparative literature not to throw another stone on the grave of American slavery but to read texts as closely as possible and to draw conclusions about them that they merit.

### What we know about 'Umar ibn Sayyid

'Umar ibn Sayyid was born around 1770 in the region of Futa Toro on the Senegal River. 'Umar writes that he "used to give alms (*zakat*) every year in gold, silver, harvest, cattle, sheep, goats, rice, wheat and barley."<sup>12</sup> Many scholars conclude from this that 'Umar came from a wealthy family, for Fula society is "marked by a caste system consisting of nobles (*rimbe*, plural of *dimo*), serfs (*rimaibe*), traders and herdsmen (*jawambe*), singers and weavers (*mabube*), leatherworkers (*sakebe* or *gargassabe*), woodworkers (*laobe* or *sakaebe*) and smiths (*wailbe*)."<sup>13</sup>

Ghada Osman and Camille Forbes draw attention to 'Umar's "pilgrimage to Mecca" as "an indication of his position as a learned man in his society," not just a wealthy one.<sup>14</sup> Ala Alryyes casts doubt on 'Umar's ever having made the great pilgrimage and suggests that 'Umar included that passage in his *Life* as a form of catechism: "he is enumerating some of the tenets and duties ... of Islam, rather than asserting what he had done. It is unlikely that he 'used to walk to Mecca and Medinah,' or that he gave alms in all of nine

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12 JAMESON 2011: 83.

13 CORNEVIN (2015).

14 OSMAN & FORBES 2011: 183.

different products. Maybe he performed the pilgrimage once; he probably gave alms of money and livestock.”<sup>15</sup>

To add to the speculation, ‘Umar could just as well have been from a poor background. As Sylviane Diouf writes, in the late eighteenth century in Futa Toro, a “dreadful famine settled in the land...the consequence of an invasion of locusts, recurrent droughts, wars, and the slave trade, which had wiped out entire villages of hard-working peasants.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, “the Denyake [Fulbe] sold their own Muslim subjects into slavery, which contradicted Islamic law,”<sup>17</sup> and regional instability led to the rise of the *torodbe* movement: “people belonging to the lower castes—including freed people—could join the group as long as they were willing to follow Islam and devote time to Qur’anic studies.”<sup>18</sup> Though Fulbe society was “stratified into castes, the *torodbe* offered social promotion through learning, an avenue that was accessible to anyone.”<sup>19</sup> As we already know, ‘Umar “lived...under the [*Torodbe*] almamate [and] was one of the beneficiaries of this emphasis on Islamic instruction.”<sup>20</sup> ‘Umar could have ridden the *torodbe* wave of upward mobility, given his twenty-five years of Qur’anic studies. In sum, we do not know whether ‘Umar came from a rich or a poor family. This intense, well-informed speculation about ‘Umar’s family’s position in society is just one example of how little is known about his origins and how much scholars have to say about them.

As a Pullo man living under the Torodbe who writes about fighting their infidel enemies every year, ‘Umar most likely took part in the Torodbe Fulbe’s wars against the “infidel” Bambara kingdoms to the east. Diouf writes that the Torodbe were “opposed to oppression wherever it came from, be it from non-Muslims or Muslims.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, they observed “an absolute prohibition on the sale of Muslims [in an agreement between France and the kingdom of Futa].”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, “[n]on-Muslim prisoners of war were not included in the ban and could transit through Futa on their way to Saint-Louis.”<sup>23</sup>

The Europeans were known for selling guns and goods to African tribes in return for slaves. And for all the Muslim Fulbe’s efforts to

...protect their own...“unbelievers” were fair game. Muslim traders and rulers were thus directly and actively involved in the slave trade. Moreover, those who professed reformism [such as Abdul Kader Kane’s Torodbe] did not hesitate to sell their brethren who, according to them, did not follow Islam to the letter. They branded them as unbelievers or even worse, apostates, and therefore had no qualm selling them to the Christians.<sup>24</sup>

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15 ALRYYES 2011: 26.

16 DIOUF 2011: 168.

17 Ibid. 164; “enslavement of so-called pagans is lawful in Islam, and it is, in theory, the only case in which a free person can be submitted to captivity”, in DIOUF 2011: 165.

18 Ibid. 168.

19 Ibid. 168.

20 Ibid. 170.

21 Ibid. 168.

22 Ibid. 169.

23 Ibid. 169.

24 Ibid. 176.

The *Encyclopedia of Islam* includes a description of a similar Fulbe practice: the “extraordinary spate of Fulani conquests of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries” in which 'Umar claims to have taken part.<sup>25</sup> Here is how the Fulbe would conquer another people: “at first, as guardians of the cattle which farmers entrusted to them, [the Fulbe] played an important economic role, and were fully conscious of their intellectual superiority. As a second step, the owner was reduced to slavery and his land and cattle appropriated.”<sup>26</sup> The Fulbe took advantage of the “miserable standard of living of the pagans, who were powerless to resist, having nothing to offer in opposition, and who were often quite ready to admire, to submit and to serve.”<sup>27</sup>

As little as we know about 'Umar, we certainly know a lot about the society he came from. 'Umar was a member of not only a slaveholding society but also one committed to converting others to Islam. The irony that 'Umar may have been an enslaver of fellow Muslims and non-Muslims and a converter to Islam who was later enslaved and converted to Christianity never appears in the literature regarding his life and *Life*. There is as much evidence for this as there is for 'Umar's being a peaceful, pious, courageous man struggling silently against the institution of American slavery in his house on the Owen Hill estate in North Carolina. Even if 'Umar were a warlike, impenitent, cowardly apostate, that fact would not make the institution of American slavery any less evil.

### 'Umar's Command of Classical Arabic

In the Introduction to *A Muslim American Slave*, 'Umar begs the reader to excuse him for his poor command of Arabic, writing “You asked me to write my life. I am not able to do this because I have much forgotten my own, as well as the Arabic language. Neither can I write very grammatically or according to the true idiom. And so, my brother, I beg you, in God's name, not to blame me, for I am a man of weak eyes, and of a weak body.”<sup>28</sup> Ala Alryyes claims that 'Umar ibn Sayyid's *apologia* “deceptively echoes the rhetorical claim that the author is not up to the task, a *de rigueur* flourish that accompanies many a literary preface.”<sup>29</sup> However, after a close reading of 'Umar's text, it is clear that 'Umar in fact had a very poor command of classical Arabic. His “demurrals” were not “surprising,” deceptive, or rhetorical at all.<sup>30</sup> His Arabic is rudimentary in terms of grammar, diction, and orthography.

The poor quality of the text is borne out ironically, and even painfully, in the poor quality of 'Umar's admission of the poor quality of his text. Ala Alryyes, though, has brought that admission into lucid English:

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25 CORNEVIN (2015).

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 OMAR IBN SAID, trans. Isaac Bird, in ALRYYES 2011: 89.

29 ALRYYES 2011: 6.

30 ALRYYES 2011: 6.

You asked me to write my life. I cannot write my life for I have forgotten much of my talk [language] as well as the talk of the Arabs.<sup>31</sup>

سالتني ان اكتب الحياة انا لا يستطيع ان اكتب الحياة انا ناشي كثيرا الكلام مع الكلام  
العرب<sup>32</sup>

*sa'altanī 'an 'aktub al-ḥayāh 'anā lā yastaṭīc 'an 'aktub al-ḥayāh 'anā nāšī kaṭīran al-kalām ma' al-kalām al-'arab*

So much about this sentence is incorrect: pronoun-verb disagreement, misspellings, and 'Umar's misuse of the construct state. If Alryyes had rendered 'Umar's mangled register of Arabic, the translation would have instead read something more like:

You asked me to write my life I he can't write my life I am forgit much my talk and the talk the Arabs

I will illuminate in detail all 'Umar's mistakes in the very short passage above to show the reader unacquainted with Arabic just how corrupt 'Umar's text is. 'Umar uses the third person masculine singular form of the verb "to be able to" (*istatā'a*) with a first person pronoun: he writes *anā la yastaṭīc* when he should have written *anā la 'astaṭīc*. Another mistake is his misspelling of the word "forget": he writes *nāšī* when he should write *nāsī*. Another mistake is his misuse of the construct state: he writes *al-kalām al-'arab* for "the talk of the Arabs," as Alryyes has translated it, when the correct form is *kalām al-'arab*. Similar mistakes populate the rest of 'Umar's text, and this is how the rest of 'Umar's text reads in Arabic—just shy of incomprehensible.

Such language is not a vehicle for subtlety. Nevertheless, Osman and Forbes, following Alryyes' lead, write that 'Umar's narrative "evidences his manipulation of the Arabic language, rendering various readings possible. For him, Arabic represented his freedom of expression, just as earlier it had won him his freedom from jail. Thus, although reluctant to state explicitly any negative points of view throughout his narrative, ['Umar] nonetheless feels free symbolically—and thus subtly—to express them."<sup>33</sup>

'Umar's mistakes are not trivial. Twenty-four years before he wrote his *Life*, 'Umar had spent twenty-five years studying and then teaching the Qur'an, its exegesis (*tafsīr*), and *ḥadīth* literature, or the exemplary sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that are considered a source of spiritual authority in Islam. For someone who had studied the Qur'an for a quarter of a century and had presumably memorized large portions of it,<sup>34</sup> 'Umar's command of Arabic is very poor. Either 'Umar lost his command of Arabic in captivity, as he said, or he never had a strong command of Arabic in the first place. These mistakes reveal the veracity of his admission that, after twenty-four years as a slave in the United States, he had forgot-

31 OMAR IBN SAID, "The *Life*", trans. Ala Alryyes, in ALRYYES 2011: 61.

32 Ibid. 60.

33 OSMAN & FORBES 2011: 186.

34 "Omar's education in an Islamic *madrassa*, or religious school, would have comprised not only the study of Qur'anic exegesis, but also the memorization of large tracts of the Qur'an, if not the whole text," in ALRYYES 2011: "Introduction", 23.

ten a lot of Arabic *naḥwiyyan* (in terms of grammar) and *luḡawiyyan* (in terms of language or words) (74). As ‘Umar himself points out, Fulfulde was his first language. It is not unreasonable to suggest that many of his mistakes may be Fulfulde or English calques.

### ‘Umar’s Relationship to Language

As little as we know of ‘Umar’s life, we know even less about his relationship to language. As a Pullo, he probably grew up speaking Fulfulde. At an unspecified date after the age of five, he began learning classical Arabic in order to read the Qur’an, *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth*. At another unspecified date ‘Umar began to teach classical Arabic. Then he stopped teaching to go into trade and presumably quit his strong connection to classical Arabic. After he was captured and sold in Charleston, South Carolina, he presumably learned English, the language of his captors, though after he escaped from his cruel master Johnson, he wrote in Arabic on the walls of his jail cell and so awed the locals.<sup>35</sup> Once he was bought by General Owen, his brother Governor John Owen provided ‘Umar with an English Qur’an and an Arabic Bible, the latter of which he came to love and copy out selections from. A passage from the *North Carolina University Magazine* based on an interview with ‘Umar (here “Uncle Moreau”) may illuminate ‘Umar’s relationship to language:

Uncle Moreau is an Arabic scholar, reading the language with great facility, and translating it with ease. His pronunciation of the Arabic is remarkably fine. An eminent Virginia scholar said, not long since, that he read it more beautifully than any one he ever heard, save a distinguished savant of the University of Halle. His translations are somewhat imperfect, as he never mastered the English language, but they are often very striking.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to reading, pronunciation and translation, it was reported that ‘Umar could converse in Arabic, according to Dr. Jonas King, a visiting American who visited the Owens in Fayetteville.<sup>37</sup>

Here is a rough analog to ‘Umar’s weird life in terms of his relationship to language that might help contextualize ‘Umar’s experience for the Western reader unacquainted with classical Arabic’s sociolinguistics: a Christian Englishman who grows up speaking English, learns Latin sometime after the age of five in order to read Jerome’s Vulgate Bible and medieval textual criticism, teaches Latin at a local secondary school for a time and stops teaching it to engage in trade, is captured by Arab Muslim slavers, sold, and forced to learn Arabic, a third language. Our Englishman is confusingly provided by his Arab Muslim masters with a Latin Qur’an, which he could presumably read fluently, and an Arabic Bible, which he presumably couldn’t, at least not until he’d mastered Arabic in captivity. Our Englishman would occasionally correspond with fellow captives in broken medieval Latin but would not write in medieval Latin on a large enough scale to maintain his proficiency in it. Twenty-four years pass. Then a group of Arab Muslim scholars of medieval Latin

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<sup>35</sup> ALRYYES 2011: “Introduction”, 32.

<sup>36</sup> Appendix 3, *A Muslim American Slave*, 210.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

would hear about him and ask him to write his autobiography in medieval Latin. One could imagine that our Englishman's compositions in medieval Latin might be abstruse at best and incomprehensible at worst.

A number of reasons could account for 'Umar's lack of facility with classical Arabic, his second language. According to Peter Ecke's excellent review of the literature on second language attrition (2004), 'Umar's clumsiness in classical Arabic is most likely a product of language decay, language retrieval slowdown and failure, linguistic interference, cue-dependent language retrieval, or a combination of the four.

Language decay refers to the decay of "linguistic structures which are infrequently used or not used at all over extensive periods of time," such as "word finding problems" and "spelling errors."<sup>38</sup> In addition to the lack of use, language decay can be a product of "biological decline that leads to a weakening of connections between conceptual/semantic representations and phonological representations."<sup>39</sup> 'Umar's example conforms to both the cases that lead to language decay: 'Umar had stopped using classical Arabic long before he was asked to write his autobiography. Moreover, he wrote his *Life* at age 61, when biological decline in memory is already underway.

Language retrieval slowdown and failure, another possible reason for 'Umar's lack of facility with Arabic, occurs when "forgotten information is not erased from memory, but...access routes have become deteriorated, in particular, in recall and production tasks...It is possible that a person recognizes the meaning of a word in a text or phrase; however s/he may not be able to retrieve the word when it is needed for production."<sup>40</sup> This phenomenon would explain 'Umar's ability to read and understand the Bible in Arabic and to understand the Arabic of Dr. Jonas King alongside his inability to summon the vocabulary and structures needed to pen an autobiography.

A most probable reason for 'Umar's level of Arabic is linguistic interference, or language change. Indeed, the "large majority of cases of language attrition are embedded in contexts of language change for the bilingual individual and often community...through which generally two or more languages compete for cognitive resources in the individual speaker. As a consequence of competition and limited available resources...one language or language structure gains importance and frequency of use at the cost of another."<sup>41</sup> Ecke cites a 2001 experiment that illuminates the type of change 'Umar might have gone through in 1831:

Retroactive interference was found instrumental in the loss of vocabulary in a learning and recall experiment...in which subjects memorized and recalled the names of pictures in an L2 [for 'Umar, classical Arabic], and later in an L3 [for 'Umar, English]. A third recall test of the initially learned L2 words showed evidence of retroactive interference (L2 word loss), which was particularly strong if semantically similar L3 words (translation equivalents) had been learned compared to words of other concepts. In addition to similarity, also amount of exposure to the L3 affected

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38 ECKE 2004: 331.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid. 334.

41 Ibid. 336.

the extent of loss. The authors noted that the results resembled the loss patterns found in a naturalistic study of child L1 attrition.<sup>42</sup>

'Umar very likely experienced retroactive interference from English, which he probably spoke daily, and classical Arabic, 'Umar's second language that he used for reading the Bible. The study Ecke's survey cites reveals that "morphological structures of L1 can also be subject to interference from L2...One documented case is the loss of nominal inflections for grammatical gender and/or gender agreement under the influence of a language that does not possess gender markings."<sup>43</sup> Though it was an L2 replaced by an L3 (not an L1 replaced by an L2, as in the study), 'Umar's classical Arabic has in many cases lost gender agreement under the influence of English, a language that does not possess gender markings. Another documented case of retroactive interference is the "simplification of verbal morphology in the L1."<sup>44</sup> Again, 'Umar's experience was of an L3 replacing an L2, not an L2 replacing an L1, but his Arabic verbal morphology is indeed simple. For example, Alryyes translates "I used to go" and "I went" and "I go" when all 'Umar writes is *yamšī*, or the third person masculine singular imperfective form of the verb *mašā*, to walk: "he walks, he is walking."

A final explanation for 'Umar's poor Arabic in terms of second language attrition is cue-dependent language retrieval, in which the "external environment and the internal state (mood) that subjects were in during memorization can affect information retrieval."<sup>45</sup> The West Africa where 'Umar learned classical Arabic was certainly not the Fayetteville, North Carolina where he wrote his autobiography. Most convincingly, Ecke's survey notes that "bilingual speakers face problems of word retrieval when they are subject to abrupt changes in context or environment. These unexpected changes can lead to the sudden blocking of retrieval cues. Also anxiety, nervousness, fatigue, and tiredness may negatively affect cue availability and word retrieval in bilingual speakers."<sup>46</sup> Anxiety, nervousness, fatigue, and abrupt changes in context or environment are surely an understatement of the horrors of the Middle Passage.

Language development is a holistic process, dependent on the "interplay of environmental, cognitive, social-affective, and linguistic variables."<sup>47</sup> 'Umar ibn Sayyid was a man whose 94 years comprised three languages, two religions, two continents; a number of factors could have accounted for the attrition of his classical Arabic, the second language in which he wrote his autobiography.

Alryyes' speculations about 'Umar's crypto-Islamic beliefs and his concealed utterances all depend upon 'Umar's supposedly subtle language use. Alryyes writes that 'Umar's "*Life* is replete with concealed utterances that not only hide his views from potentially dangerous readers, but also test the readers, sifting them into those who can interpret the utterances and are, therefore, within Omar's circle—his community—and

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42 Ibid. 336.

43 Ibid. 336.

44 Ibid. 337.

45 Ibid. 339.

46 Ibid. 339.

47 Ibid. 341.

those who cannot decipher them, and are outside it.”<sup>48</sup> If ‘Umar could not command the rudiments of classical Arabic, then he could not have communicated much subtlety. First I will review some of ‘Umar’s mistakes and Alryyes’ English translations of ‘Umar’s text. Then I will return to conclusions drawn about ‘Umar’s life and *Life* based on these errors in writing and translation.

### Critical Sensationalism and ‘Umar’s *Life*

The title of Alryyes’ chapter that appears in Marc Shell’s and Werner Sollors’ *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* is the sensational “And in a Christian Language They Sold Me.” The hipshot reader leafing through the table of contents might perk up and think “What is a Christian language? What does it mean to sell a human in a *language*? In a *Christian* language?” All good, provocative questions. But ‘Umar’s text reads:

... يمشي في البحر الكبير شهر ونصف شهر جاء في المكان يسمى دالستن في كلام  
نصراني باعوا اشترى رجيل صغير ضعيف سوء يسمى دونسن كافر...

...yamšī fī l-baḥr al-kabīr šahr wa-niṣf šahr ġā’a fī l-makān yusammā dālstin fī kalām naṣrānī bā’ū štarā ruġayl ṣaġīr ḍa’īf sū’ yusammā dūnsin kāfir...

Rendered as closely to the original as possible, I have:

...he walks in the big sea a month and a half he came in a place called Dālstin in Christian talk they sold he bought an evil, weak, small little man called Dūnsin an infidel...

Isaac Bird’s 1926 translation gave:

...we sailed upon the great sea a month and a half, when we came to a place called Charleston in the Christian language. There they sold me to a small, weak, and wicked man, called Johnson, a complete infidel, who had no fear of God at all.<sup>49</sup>

Ala Alryyes translated:

We sailed in the big Sea for a month and a half until we came to a place called Charleston. And in a Christian language, they sold me. A weak, small, evil man called Johnson, an infidel (Kafir) who did not fear Allah at all, bought me.<sup>50</sup>

‘Umar’s text, a premodern Arabic text, has no punctuation—no periods, commas, question marks, or exclamation points. By including “in a Christian language” with the thought that followed it—they sold—instead of the thought that preceded it and to which it most likely referred—a town called Charleston—Alryyes has fashioned an interesting, provocative line. But ‘Umar never wrote “and in a Christian language they sold me”; he wrote “he came

48 ALRYYES 2011: “Introduction”, 18.

49 OMAR IBN SAID (2011a): 89.

50 OMAR IBN SAID (2011b): 63.

in a place called Dālstin in the Christian language they sold he bought an evil, weak, small little man named Dūnsin an infidel..." Yet in his Introduction to *A Muslim American Slave*, Alryyes writes: "The first [encounter with the Other's language] occurs when ['Umar] describes the earliest moments of his capture. 'In a Christian language,' he writes, 'they sold me.' At that moment perhaps the entire crime is encapsulated in the foreignness of that incomprehensible language that turns man into chattel in America."<sup>51</sup> What a pity that the rhetorical force of that sentence is based on a mistranslation! Before I turn to all the interpretations Alryyes' peculiar translation has spawned, I will discuss the features of this portion of text *qua* a classical Arabic text.

First, there is no tense in literary Arabic, only aspect. 'Umar accordingly uses the perfective aspect and the imperfective aspect to refer to both his past and his present. The verb 'Umar begins this portion of the text with is imperfective, all others are perfective, and they all refer to events that happened in the past.

Second, after a close reading of 'Umar's autobiography in light of all the translations that have been made of it, it is clear that 'Umar uses the third person masculine singular form to talk about himself. 'Umar writes "He came" to mean "I came."

Third, 'Umar uses the word "walk" to mean "go." This is a phenomenon observed in many dialects of Arabic and other languages besides. Of course, one cannot walk across a sea for one and a half months, so it is perfectly reasonable to assume that he intended the verb "go," or as Alryyes translated, "sail."

Fourth, 'Umar never wrote the pronoun "me" in Arabic. He wrote the verb "they sold" followed immediately by the verb "he bought." Though 'Umar was certainly sold and certainly bought and though the transaction most likely took place in English, a language spoken by Christians, the text does not contain the word "me." How many men did 'Umar's transatlantic slavers sell? How many slaves did the evil Johnson buy? These are questions that 'Umar's missing pronouns raise. But my point is that to someone intimately familiar with Arabic, 'Umar's autobiography does not read like a text written by someone intimately familiar with Arabic.

It is worth noting that because 'Umar's slave narrative was not grammatically correct does not detract from 'Umar's experience, only our ability to understand his experience. The narratives of John M. Washington (1862) and Wallace Turnage (1864) also present difficulties to the English reader:

And then hog killing time (near christmas) when great fires were kindled and large stones made red hot, then placed into great hogsheads of water until it boiled, for scalding the hogs. and Every body Was bussy, noisey and merry. Every one of the Slaves were permitted to raise their own hogs. and fowls and had a garden of their own from the Eldest man to me.<sup>52</sup>

Washington's description of hog killing time is not an easy read, but the contemporary English reader can make sense of his meaning. Not so with 'Umar's text. 'Umar's mistakes are basic and widespread, and though it is possible to discern the meaning of most of his

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51 ALRYYES 2011: "Introduction", 22.

52 WASHINGTON 2007: 168.

text, it is unlikely that he either attempted to or was even capable of interpolating concealed utterances.

Besides the preceding portion of text that Alryyes sensationalizes in his translation, another is his mistranslation of the Arabic word *kalām*, translated into English as “talk, speech, language.”<sup>53</sup> ‘Umar refers to his native language Fulfulde as *kalām*<sup>54</sup> and to English as *kalām*, often as *kalām naṣrānī*—Christian talk.<sup>55</sup> The one time ‘Umar uses the word *luḡah* (لغة), the Arabic word most often translated as “language,” it is with reference to as exalted a language as classical Arabic.<sup>56</sup>

Here is ‘Umar’s admission that he has forgotten much of his language at the beginning of his autobiography, part of which I have discussed earlier:

انا لا يستطيع ان اكتب الحياة انا ناشي كثيرا الكلام مع الكلام العرب انا لا يفرع  
نحويا الا فليلا لا لغويا الا فليلا

It is difficult to render ‘Umar’s spelling and conjugation mistakes in English, but I’ve tried to make the English as difficult to understand as the Arabic:

I cannot write my life I have forjoten a lot of talk with the talk the Arabs I don’t  
wonk [know—the root letters are inverted] grammar but a littel nor language but a  
littel

Here is how Isaac Bird translated the same passage:

I am not able to do this because I have much forgotten my own, as well as the Arabic  
language. Neither can I write very grammatically or according to the true idiom.<sup>57</sup>

And here is Alryyes:

I cannot write my life for I have forgotten much of my talk [language] as well as the  
talk of the Arabs. Also I know little grammar and little vocabulary.<sup>58</sup>

So, when *kalām* refers to Christian *kalām*, it is “language.” But when it refers to Fulfulde’s *kalām* or the Arabs’ *kalām*, Alryyes renders it as “talk.” Why, to Alryyes, do the English-speaking Christians speak in a *language* but the Arabs and Fulbe only speak in *talk*? And why does the only “language” (*luḡah*) ‘Umar refers to happen to be Arabic? There is no reason for Alryyes to translate “Christian language” from *kalām naṣrānī* when, one page earlier, he translates *al-kalām* as “my talk” and *al-kalām al-‘arab* as “the talk of the Arabs.” I suspect that Alryyes translated as he did because “And in a Christian Language They Sold Me” sounds better as the title of a chapter than either “And in Christian Talk They Sold

53 *kalām*, in WEHR 1994: 982.

54 ALRYYES 2011: 58.

55 Ibid. 62, 64, 76.

56 Ibid. 60.

57 Omar ibn Said, trans. Bird, in ALRYYES 2011: 89.

58 Omar ibn Said, trans. Alryyes, in ALRYYES 2011: 61.

Me” or “in a place called Charleston in Christian talk they sold he bought...” This is one example of a sensationalized translation.

Another of Alryyes mistranslations appears on page 65. 'Umar writes:

رعى رجال كثير كلهم نصراني

*ra'ā riḡāl kaṭīr kulluhum naṣrānī*

Rendered as closely to the original as possible, I have:

he saw many men all of them Christian

Isaac Bird translated:

I saw a great many men, all Christians<sup>59</sup>

Alryyes translated:

I saw many men whose language was Christian<sup>60</sup>

At this point in his narrative, 'Umar has escaped from Johnson and been taken to a jail in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where the Arabic inscriptions he wrote in coal on the walls of his cell attracted the attention of locals. Even in 'Umar's strange Arabic, this text could not possibly mean what Alryyes has translated.

'Umar writes *kulluhum naṣrānī*, all of whom were Christian, not *kalāmuhum naṣrānī*, whose language was Christian. The word Alryyes has brought into English as “talk” was *kull*, which cannot ever mean “talk.” It means “all, every,” and, when combined with the pronoun for “them,” means “all of them” or “each one of them.” The word for talk (*kalām*) does not even appear in this portion of the text. Nevertheless, Osman and Forbes scooped up Alryyes' mistranslation and ran with it, going so far as to suggest that, “based on this distinction, it makes sense that Omar never felt the need to really learn to speak this Christian language (English), since it was not his language culturally or religiously.”<sup>61</sup> Never mind that 'Umar could speak English according to contemporary accounts.<sup>62</sup>

The list of 'Umar's solecisms goes on and on:

1) 'Umar writes *raḍa'tu* (رضعت) (“I sucked at the breast of my mother”) when he most certainly means *raḍaytu* (رضيت) (“I became satisfied, I consented”) when discussing how he “consented very much to walk with [the Mumfords] to their place.”<sup>63</sup> Isaac Bird's translation reads: “I was very well pleased to go with them to their place.”<sup>64</sup>

2) 'Umar incorrectly renders numbers in terms of number, gender and spelling. For example, he writes *sitt walad* (ست ولد) for “six sons.”<sup>65</sup> The correct rendering is *sittatu awlādin* (ستة أولاد).

59 Omar ibn Said, trans. Bird, in ALRYYES 2011: 89.

60 Omar ibn Said, trans. Alryyes, in ALRYYES 2011: 65.

61 Osman & Forbes 2011: 190.

62 ALRYYES 2011: Appendix 3, 209-11.

63 Omar ibn Said, trans. Alryyes, in ALRYYES 2011: 65.

64 Omar ibn Said, trans. Bird, in ALRYYES 2011: 90.

65 Omar ibn Said, in ALRYYES 2011: 68.

3) On the last page of his *Life*, 'Umar writes the year in which he penned those fifteen pages, 1831, as *wāḥid 'alf ṭamānīn mi'ah wāḥid ma'a ṭalāṭīn sanah*,<sup>66</sup> which is so off the mark in Arabic that it is most likely a calque of Fulfulde or English. In Arabic it reads something like “one one thousand eighty-hundred one with thirty years.” It takes a bit of detective work to determine what 'Umar meant, but it becomes clear that he meant 1831. This is what reading the rest of the text is like.

4) On page 84 'Umar writes *zawḡatuh yusammā* (“his wife is called” [using the third person *masculine* singular]) instead of the grammatically correct *zawḡatuhū tusammā* (“his wife is called” [using the third person *feminine* singular]). In Fulfulde as in English, the words for “he” and “she” take the same third person conjugation of the verb, so this mistake could very well be a Fulfulde or English calque. This is the “simplification of verbal morphology” that occurs because of linguistic interference.<sup>67</sup> Notwithstanding, Alryyes writes that 'Umar's “language is rich in hidden meanings, with nuances that seem to separate him from the white community of his owners, to guard his identity even as a slave.”<sup>68</sup>

Here is an example of an ambiguity in 'Umar's text that could send an overeager scholar into a frenzy of speculation. As 'Umar writes,<sup>69</sup>

مقام في البلد نصراني اربع وعشرين سنة

*maqām fī l-balad naṣrānī arba' wa-ʿiṣrīn sanah*

Given 'Umar's poor Arabic, this passage could be rendered into English in a number of ways. First of all, this portion of text is a noun phrase with no subject and no verb. Literally it reads “a stay (*maqām*) in the country (*fī l-balad*) Christian (*naṣrānī*) for 24 years (*arba' wa-ʿiṣrīn sanah*).”

'Umar probably meant “I have stayed in the Christian country for 24 years.” But he also could have meant “I have stayed in this country as a Christian for 24 years,” a rendering that would undermine Alryyes' argument about 'Umar's concealed utterances and his crypto-Islam. By writing *maqām fī l-balad naṣrānī* (“A stay in the country as a Christian”) and not *maqām fī l-balad an-naṣrānī* (“A stay in the Christian country”), 'Umar could very well be telling the reader that he is a Christian and has been one ever since he got to the United States.

I hope it has become clear that 'Umar makes so many grammatical and orthographical mistakes in his autobiography that imputing to his work what Alryyes calls “concealed utterances” might be more the product of an overeager scholar's projections about a slave's thoughts about his enslavement than an honest appraisal of that slave's writing. Please believe me: I am not being picky or pedantic. 'Umar's is a corrupt text, and he even admits as much. Let us believe him.

66 Ibid.

67 ECKE 2004: 337.

68 ALRYYES 2011: “Introduction”, 22.

69 Omar ibn Said, *A Muslim American Slave*, 68.

### 'Umar ibn Sayyid's Peculiar Enslavement

'Umar's autobiography—*sūrat al-mulk* included—is only fifteen pages of quarto paper, and it could only comprise so much. Alryyes writes about 'Umar's approach to writing his life, noting some strange elisions: "[ 'Umar's] *Life* does not elaborate on his family life in Africa, neither further describing his birthplace after he mentions his kidnapping, nor openly condemning slavery or graphically dwelling on his own tribulations."<sup>70</sup> In a similar vein, Osman and Forbes write that 'Umar "gives very little information on the servile life he had to endure...this may have been due to his pride and dignity, but there is the consideration that he wanted to please his master...and therefore felt he should refrain from alluding too much to slavery."<sup>71</sup> This is true—in his fifteen-page autobiography, one reads nothing about Futa Toro, Abdul Kader Kane, the Bambaras or his family. Neither does 'Umar describe his kidnapping in detail, condemn slavery, describe his working conditions under Johnson or on the Owens' estate, or complain about his lot.

Indeed, I wonder how pitiful 'Umar found his condition. 'Umar grew up in a slaving environment, and for centuries Arab and European powers had taken advantage of African tribal infighting to acquire slaves. 'Umar himself claimed that he owned seventy slaves. And if he remained a Muslim in secret, perhaps 'Umar decided to keep his complaints about his life between himself and God, for revealing one's complaints to anyone other than God is a form of humiliation, as the Islamic saying goes (*aš-šakwā li-ġayr illāhi maḍallah*). These are all possibilities.

One account, which scholars are liable to discredit because of suspicion about the speaker's impartiality as a white woman living at the top of the antebellum South's social hierarchy, suggests that 'Umar did not have much to complain about. Anna Guion Stith of Wilmington, North Carolina was a connection of the Owen family and a relation of the husband of Mrs. Ellen Guion, Governor John Owen's daughter. Ms. Stith recalls "from tradition" that

General James Owen, brother of Governor John Owen, out of curiosity, when visiting Fayetteville, went to the jail to see this remarkable man, became interested, and purchased him, carrying him to his country home, "Milton," in Bladen County, where he enjoyed life, without being treated as a slave, had a seat by himself in the country church, etc.; he spent his later years mostly at "Owen Hill," Governor Owen's estate, where he occupied his own home in the yard, and had his meals prepared by the Owens' cook and brought in by a little negro, and where he was buried.<sup>72</sup>

The possibility exists that 'Umar ibn Sayyid was quite content as a slave at the Owens'. After experiencing three years of hard field labor under Johnson, his first master, 'Umar may have found life at Owen Hill a respite. And after a lifetime of observing slavery firsthand in Futa Toro and perhaps even taking and mistreating his own slaves, having "nice" masters would have been a lucky break indeed. That does not mean that it was right

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70 ALRYYES 2011: "Introduction", 8.

71 OSMAN & FORBES 2011: 185.

72 JAMESON 2011: 87.

or good that he was the Owens' property. But unlike most American slaves, 'Umar was allowed to attend a white church where he had his own seat. He also had his own house. The Owens' cook prepared meals for him. He had his *own* "negro," probably a slave. Given this information in the light of blacks' living conditions in the antebellum South, it is not hard to believe that 'Umar considered the Jim and John Owen "righteous" men (*ṣāliḥīn*).<sup>73</sup>

Another example of a relatively privileged slave is Simon Gray, a flatboat captain on the Mississippi River in the 1850s. His master, Andrew Donnan, let him to Andrew Brown, a Scottish-American lumber merchant in Natchez, Mississippi, who defied the slave code by reuniting Gray with his family, teaching him to read, write and do basic arithmetic, and entrusting him not just with lumber deliveries but large amounts of cash to deliver and a crew of mostly white men. As a trustworthy agent of his employer, Gray would often fetch his master the slaves he had bought from southern Mississippi. John Hebron Moore has shown how "almost every aspect of Simon Gray's career violates our modern conception of the lot of the slave in the lower South."<sup>74</sup> 'Umar's career also violates the categories into which critics have tried to fit him.

Alryyes argues for the clandestine existence of "literary intentions and achievement" in 'Umar's writing, "his 'Arabic work' of resistance and his double utterances" and how 'Umar's true intentions "remained opaque" to contemporary American readers.<sup>75</sup> This seems unlikely. I do not mean to suggest that what Alryyes has proposed is impossible, but given 'Umar's poor command of Arabic and the conditions of his life after the Owen family bought him, Alryyes' argument is certainly less than airtight.

### Crypto-Muslim or Christian Convert?

Until Alryyes' work on 'Umar ibn Sayyid, he had been considered a sincere convert to Christianity. Visiting preachers extolled his religiosity, and 'Umar was known for copying down the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23.<sup>76</sup> But Alryyes' recent work, along with that of many other contemporary scholars, has argued for 'Umar's secretly held Islamic beliefs that he reveals to the initiated reader through concealed utterances.

In his argument, Alryyes draws attention to the fact that 'Umar, in one passage, does not use the "past tense" to refer to his former belief and that he therefore was cluing the initiated reader into the fact that he was still a Muslim. Below is reproduced Alryyes quotation of Bird's 1926 translation followed by his own interpretation of it:

"Before I came to the Christian country, my religion *was* [emphasis added] the religion of Muhammad, the prophet of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. I used to walk to the mosque [*masjid*] before dawn, and to wash my face, head, hands, feet. I used to hold the noon prayers, the after-noon prayers, the sunset prayers, the night prayers. I used to give alms [*zakat*] every year in gold, silver, harvest, cattle, sheep, goats, rice, wheat and barley—all I used to give in alms. I used to join

73 Omar ibn Said, in ALRYYES 2011: 76.

74 MOORE 1962: 482.

75 ALRYYES 2011: "Introduction", 39.

76 ALRYYES 2011: "Introduction", 4.

the *Jihad* every year against the infidels [*Kuffar*]. I used to walk to Mecca and Medinah as did those who were able.” (*Life*, 67–69)

The message of the passage is ambiguous, however, for two reasons. Omar does not use the Arabic past construction (*kana*) to render the past state of his religion (the italicized “was”), matching the time of the adverb “before.” The literal translation into English would thus read: “Before . . . my religion is the religion of Muhammad.” So either this is a grammatical error or an indication that indeed his religion was, and is, that of Muhammad.<sup>77</sup>

Contrary to Alryyes’ claim, 'Umar does indeed use the Arabic past construction to render the state of his religion. The simple distinction Alryyes has posited between “was” and “is” does not hold up. As I’ve already mentioned, Arabic verbs have no tense, only aspect. But there is no verb here that connects “religion” and “religion.” 'Umar begins the entire passage with the adverb “before,” rendering the rest of the passage in the past. 'Umar’s statement about his religion’s being the religion of Muhammad has neither verb of being (*kāna*, *yakūnu*) nor copula (*huwa*) to link the two nouns (religion . . . religion). Contrary to Alryyes’ “literal translation,” there is no “is,” just like in Bird’s translation, there is no “was.” But there was an implied “was” supplied by the presence of the adverb “before.”

The fact that 'Umar failed to include the verb *kāna* probably has more to do with his command of written classical Arabic than it does with any concealed utterances; I’ve taken pains to highlight how corrupt his text is. Most tellingly, in the succeeding part of the text, 'Umar writes that “now,” as opposed to “before,” his religion [is] Christianity, again with no linking verb or copula. 'Umar is without doubt writing that his religion used to be Islam but that now it is Christianity.

There is another misunderstanding that Osman and Forbes confront with regard to tense and timing. They quote Alryyes’ translation:

Despite his reading of the Bible and his copying down of several fundamental Christian beliefs, Omar explicitly writes in his autobiography “I am Omar, I love to read the book, the Great Qur’an,” before moving on to placate his masters by linking the Bible with “the path of righteousness.” Yet even here, he follows up with Qur’anic terminology, quoting the second verse of al-Fatiha and of the Qur’an as a whole: “Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.”<sup>78</sup>

If Osman and Forbes had glanced at the manuscript and then at Alryyes’ translation, they would have seen Alryyes’ mistake. Above 'Umar’s text that reads “I am Omar, I love to read the book, the Great Qur’an” is the word *al-awwal* (“at first”), which definitively places his loving to read the Great Qur’an in the past. Alryyes’ translation, unlike Bird’s, has left out the words “at first” most likely in order to enable him to interpret the text selectively according to the contemporary macro-historical trends in slave narrative historiography. But 'Umar’s use of the imperfective aspect of verbs does not mean that they occur at the time 'Umar wrote his autobiography. Unaware of this, Osman and Forbes echo Alryyes when they write that 'Umar “does not use the past tense in his descriptions, indicating his

77 ALRYYES 2011: “Introduction”, 25-6.

78 OSMAN & FORBES 2011: 189.

probable clandestine continuation of the practices.”<sup>79</sup> Again, classical Arabic has a number of ways to refer to past events but no “past tense” as we do in English, only a perfective aspect that is often used to refer to past events.

Osman and Forbes also conclude that ‘Umar was a crypto-Muslim because of his “Qur’anic literary style” and his quotation of “Qur’anic passages,” writing that the “Qur’an [was] the center of Omar’s weltanschauung.”<sup>80</sup> Another sign of ‘Umar’s crypto-Islam, according to Osman and Forbes, is ‘Umar’s use of iterative and vocative styles. But if we consider that ‘Umar studied the Qur’an for twenty-five years and only began studying Christianity after the age of 40, it is not implausible that a Qur’anic literary style would subsist in a writing style that also gave voice to his Christianity. Qur’anic literary style was perhaps the only literary style to which ‘Umar had been exposed besides that of Qur’anic exegesis and *ḥadīṭ* literature. His use of a Qur’anic literary style was not deliberately cryptic; it was his nuclear script. But to Osman and Forbes ‘Umar is winking at those of his initiated readers who can pick up on the subtlety of his meanings.

More evidence that Osman and Forbes did not read ‘Umar’s Arabic text is in their writing that ‘Umar’s writing about God’s giving humans health and wealth “by grace and not duty” as “a reference that could be taken by his slave owners to indicate the ascendancy of Christianity’s grace over Islam’s duties.”<sup>81</sup> But we must return to ‘Umar’s text. The word Alryyes translated for “grace” is the Arabic *faḍl*, which, in Islam, refers to God’s “favor” in bestowing blessings upon his Creation. *Faḍl* could be “grace” in the Christian sense of the term just as it could be “favor” in the Islamic sense. But there is nothing particularly Christian about ‘Umar’s use of the word *faḍl*. If ‘Umar wanted to write something to placate his slave owners and show them that he was a Christian, he would not have written *faḍl*.

To add to the litany, Alryyes asserts that ‘Umar “never alludes to the god-head of Jesus.”<sup>82</sup> But he does. Osman and Forbes recognize that he does, but they backpedal, claiming that the “fact that [‘Umar] couples [the word Messiah] with the word “Lord” (as in Lord Jesus the Messiah) does not indicate a recognition of the Messiah’s divinity.”<sup>83</sup> But it does. By calling Jesus his “Lord”—‘Umar calls him “Our Lord Jesus the Messiah” (*rabbunā yasū‘ al-masīḥ*)—“one of the usual names of God” in Islam,<sup>84</sup> ‘Umar is most explicitly acknowledging Jesus’ godhead.

Despite this, Alryyes has maintained in his many introductions that nowhere in his *Life* does ‘Umar’s religious expression contradict Islam. But for a Muslim to refer to Jesus as “Lord” is a form of *ṣirk*, “association” or the “accepting at [God’s] side of other divinities.”<sup>85</sup> *Ṣirk* is also sometimes rendered “polytheism,” and some Muslims deem Christians polytheists for the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>86</sup> For in Islam, God alone is Lord. ‘Umar is making an outright Christian and downright un-Islamic statement in calling Jesus his Lord.

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79 Ibid. 185.

80 Ibid. 190.

81 Ibid. 188.

82 ALRYYES 2011: “Introduction”, 26.

83 OSMAN & FORBES 2011: 190.

84 WENSINCK & FAHD (2015).

85 GIMARET (2015).

86 Ibid.

The post-Alryyes scholarly debate around 'Umar's true religion seems to stem from some sort of proposition that it should have been Islam. Perhaps it should have been; that is not my place to say. But there is very little robust evidence that 'Umar remained a Muslim.

### *Sūrat al-Mulk*: The Qur'an's "Book of Sovereignty"

The only convincing argument of 'Umar's abiding Islam is his interpolation of *sūrat al-mulk*, the 67th book of the Qur'an, at the beginning of his text, but not for any of the reasons that Alryyes, Osman and Forbes have given. Osman and Forbes write that 'Umar reveals his "point of view through his quotation of this *sūra* [*al-mulk*], the main theme of which is to recognize God as the sovereign of the world."<sup>87</sup> To them, 'Umar "de-emphasizes the significance of his position as a slave by highlighting that all human beings are ultimately owned by God, rather than by a human slave master."<sup>88</sup> Osman and Forbes go on to claim that this particular *sūra* would provide "solace to those in slavery in the recognition that supreme sovereignty rests with God alone, rather than with any slave master."<sup>89</sup> But many *sūras* recognize that God is the sovereign of the world and that all human beings are God's; there is nothing special about this *sūra* in that respect.

Alryyes writes that this *sūra* contends that "God...is the owner of all and everything," and that 'Umar is, in his intertextual choice, "[refuting] the right of his owners over him, since only God has the *mulk*, the power and the ownership."<sup>90</sup> Alryyes also holds that 'Umar uses the *sūra* for yet another purpose: "to cast a symbolic role for himself in that resistance [against slavery]."<sup>91</sup> To Alryyes, 'Umar saw himself like the Prophet Muhammad, a *naḍīr*, or warner, sent to warn his unbelieving, infidel masters (*kuffār*) of the punishment in store for them after they die and go to hell (*jahannam*). But in Islam, Christians, as *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book) are not necessarily considered infidels.<sup>92</sup> Even if they were considered infidels, Alryyes' argument would still be unsound because there is no evidence that 'Umar ever tried to convert his masters to Islam or that he resented his enslavement at Owen Hill.

Osman and Forbes review two medieval Islamic scholars' commentaries on *sūrat al-mulk* and then speculate. They quote al-Zamakhsharī (1074/5–1143/33 CE), who wrote that *sūrat al-mulk* "is apt to save and preserve him who takes its lessons to heart from suffering in the life to come,"<sup>93</sup> and another medieval Persian Islamic scholar al-Razi (854–925 CE), who wrote that *sūrat al-mulk* "is the *sūra* that saves its reciter from the punishment of the grave and of the life to come."<sup>94</sup> Osman and Forbes conclude that the *sūra* thus "serves as further affirmation of the primary importance of the eternal life to come, as opposed to pre-

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87 OSMAN & FORBES 2011: 187.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid. 188.

90 ALRYYES 2011: "Introduction", 46.

91 Ibid. 22.

92 BJÖRKMAN (2015).

93 OSMAN & FORBES 2011: 188.

94 Ibid.

sent life struggle and suffering.”<sup>95</sup> But the *sūra* itself contradicts Osman’s and Forbes’ judgment, saying that God created life to test humans’ faith in God.

‘Umar does not tell us why he chose to write *sūrat al-mulk*. Given that nothing in *sūrat al-mulk*, *sūrat al-naṣr* or *sūrat al-fātiḥah*—the *sūras* ‘Umar was known to copy down from memory—contradicts Christian beliefs, there is just as much evidence to see ‘Umar as a Christian as there is to see him as a crypto-Muslim. Perhaps ‘Umar was in search of Islamic texts that did not contradict his new Christian belief. And if we consider how poor ‘Umar’s Arabic was, it is clear just how subtle he could be with his ideas, how doubly significant he could make his *Life*.

But for those interpreters of ‘Umar’s *Life* eager to portray him as a crypto-Muslim, all ignore two very important aspects of *sūrat al-mulk*. First, the *sūra* also contains verses which might have meant very much to a slave whose life slavery made into a trial:

تبارك الذي بيده الملك وهو على كل شيء قدير<sup>1</sup> الذي خلق الموت والحياة ليبلوكم  
أيكم أحسن عملاً وهو العزيز الغفور<sup>2</sup>

Blessed is He in whose hand is dominion, and He is over all things competent (1)  
He who created death and life to test you as to which of you is best in deed – and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving (2)<sup>96</sup>

By viewing his life as a *balwā*, a test<sup>97</sup> that God arranged for him, perhaps ‘Umar could better bear separation from his home and family, find meaning in his miserable situation, and look forward to the reward of eternal life in Heaven.

Second of all, to a slave tasked with writing an autobiography in which voicing his objections to American slavery would have been at best awkward and at worst life-threatening, the following verses from *sūrat al-mulk* may have appealed to him:

وأسروا قولكم واجهروا به إنه عليم بذات الصدور<sup>13</sup> ألا يعلم من خلق وهو اللطيف  
الخبير<sup>14</sup>

And conceal your speech or publicize it; indeed, He is Knowing of that within the breasts (13) Does He who created not know, while He is the Subtle, the Acquainted? (14)<sup>98</sup>

As subtle as ‘Umar could not be in his *Life* given his poor Arabic, he could not let on directly about his objections to slavery, if indeed he had any. This verse might have comforted him because, no matter what he wrote or said, God would know what ‘Umar concealed within his breast.

95 Ibid.

96 *The Noble Qur’an*, 67: 1-2. Online, <<http://quran.com/67>> .

97 Or “trial; tribulation, visitation, affliction, distress, misfortune, calamity” – WEHR 1994: 91.

98 *The Noble Qur’an*, 67: 13-14. Online, <<http://quran.com/67>> .

Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, al-Tirmidhi quotes the Prophet Muhammad for saying about *sūrat al-mulk* that

سورة في القرآن ثلاثين آية شفعت ل صاحبها حتى غفر له: "تبارك الذي بيده الملك"

There is a chapter in the Qur'an which contains thirty verses that will intercede on behalf of its reciter until he is forgiven. It is "Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Dominion."<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps by including *sūrat al-mulk* before his main text 'Umar was excusing himself not of any subtle lies or concealed utterances he would sneak into his text but for the big lie of writing the entire thing. Perhaps in copying down this *sūra*, 'Umar was defending himself against God's punishment for lying. Despite 'Umar's relative luck in being found by masters who gave him his own house, his own food and his own slave, the interpolation of *sūrat al-mulk* directly before his main text may cast doubt on the entirety of it.

Contrary to what Alryyes, Osman and Forbes say, 'Umar's *Life* is actually a very Christian text. If 'Umar's interpolation of *sūrat al-mulk* was an utterance concealed esoterically in order to highlight his abiding Islam to the initiated reader, 'Umar was excusing himself of writing an untruthful version of his life because his Arabic was not subtle enough to conceal utterances.

## Conclusion

The reading I offer of 'Umar ibn Sayyid's *Life* resembles what John Samuel Harpham has identified in the history of the study of American slave revolts as micro-history.<sup>100</sup> Historians of American slave revolts often have to negotiate "old and unreliable texts"<sup>101</sup> that "conceal as much as they disclose,"<sup>102</sup> and those revolts then become "unresolved puzzle[s]";<sup>103</sup> micro-historical approaches are thus "constrained as contributors to knowledge."<sup>104</sup> As opposed to sweeping macro-historical approaches, micro-history "seeks to impress on its readers a sense of the distance of the past from the present, of the unsettling differences between their ways of being and ours, and to suggest as well the moral obligation of the historian to register the past on its own terms, in all its ambiguity and heterogeneity, rather than through the lens of, as Johnson put it, the 'reassuring expectations generated by our present-day convictions'."<sup>105</sup>

When he was captured, 'Umar ibn Sayyid was a Fulfulde-speaking Muslim Pullo. When, in 1831, Sheikh Hunter asked him to write his life, he had been a nominal Christian for over a decade. Many scholars have drawn attention to 'Umar's text's indirectness as

99 IBN KATHĪR.

100 HARPAM 2015: 257-264.

101 Ibid. 265.

102 Ibid. 266.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid. 268.

105 Ibid. 266.

proof that he wrote one thing but meant another. But the perceived ambiguity in 'Umar's *Life* is the result of his poor command of classical Arabic.

Ala Alryyes made a number of choices as a translator that are not borne out by the text: his opportunistic title "And in a Christian Language They Sold Me," the equally opportunistic rendering of "whose language was Christian" for "all of whom were Christian," and his translation of the imperfective aspect of Arabic verbs to indicate their actions' continuance at the time of writing and thus 'Umar's apparently concealed Islam. Along with Ghada Osman and Camille Forbes, Alryyes used his own corrupt translation to draw conclusions about 'Umar's putative crypto-Islamic beliefs that 'Umar's text does not merit.

The layering of language difference in the critical response to 'Umar's text after its unearthing in 1995 is a lesson in scholarly precision and close reading. In order to respect 'Umar ibn Sayyid the man—and not what details of his life can be manipulated to decry the inhumanity of American slavery—scholars should not project onto 'Umar's text what his text does not convey. For all the speculation surrounding 'Umar ibn Sayyid, we will probably never know, as his God does, what lay within his breast.

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