

***Prince Among Slaves* (2007)**

Directed by Andrea Kalin
Produced by Unity Productions Foundation,
in association with Spark Media and Duke Media

Introductory Essay and Viewing Considerations

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Prince among Slaves is a documentary film based on a remarkable book of the same title by Terry Alford. Alford researched histories of West Africa and pored over newspapers and scattered archives throughout the United States to document the extraordinary life story of 'Abdul Rahman Ibrahima¹ (ca.1762–1829). An African warrior and nobleman, Abdul Rahman fell victim to the transatlantic slave trade and ended up in Natchez, Mississippi, where he slaved for nearly forty years and raised a family before being manumitted at the behest of the U.S. government and repatriated to Africa.

Even though scholars estimate that Muslims numbered in the low thousands in colonial America and that their numbers increased to the tens of thousands after the founding of the Republic, their history has been largely erased from public memory. The final scenes of *Prince among Slaves*, in which Abdul Rahman's descendants in Africa and the United States meet one another for the first time, powerfully capture the consequences of this erasure in the lives of Americans today. As this documentary film demonstrates, this silence is not so much because there is a lack of evidence about the presence of Muslims in early American history, but rather because the existing evidence has not been placed within the larger story of early American history.

Records exist on the lives of a number of other African Muslims in antebellum America (e.g., Job Ben Solomon, Yarrow Mamout, 'Umar ibn Said, Salih Bilali, Mahommah Baquaqua, Nicholas Said). The individuality of their stories, however, has been muted by the institution of slavery and by historical narratives that treat all black Americans as a single corporate body.

While viewing this film, it is useful to consider the following questions:

What are some episodes in Abdul Rahman's biography that reveal larger historical events that are not usually included in histories of early America?

How does the inclusion of the life stories of African Muslims in antebellum America, such as Abdul Rahman's, affect popular understandings of early American history?

1 'Abdulrahman is an Arabic name that means "servant of the Merciful." It is transliterated variably as 'Abdul Rahman, 'Abd al-Rahman, 'Abdurrahman, and 'Abd ur-Rahman. 'Abd means "servant" or "slave" in Arabic, and al-Rahman is one of the names of God mentioned in the Qur'an. In Pular, an indigenous language spoken in Guinea, the name Ibrahima refers to Abraham.

Background

Below is some background on three sample episodes from the film that could be used to address these questions. All three episodes underscore the need to pay attention to how everyday life in America has been shaped by encounters and exchanges between diverse peoples.

Abdul Rahman's Capture

Abdul Rahman was kidnapped while returning from a campaign he had led for his father, Ibrahim Sori, a noted religious and political leader of Futa Jallon ca. 1751–84. The film depicts both Abdul Rahman and his captors with guns, which, as Sylvia Diuouf, a historian of the African Diaspora, states, were most likely purchased from Europeans for whom slaves were the currency of choice. The transatlantic slave trade is well known for radically changing the political and economic life of Western Europe and the Americas, but its effects in West Africa are not as widely known. This commerce in human beings brought new wealth to West Africa, which helped support “the intellectual expansion” discussed in the film and allowed some Muslim reformers and political leaders, such as Abdul Rahman’s father, to gain tighter control over vast amounts of territory. Non-Muslims violently resisted such expansions, and it was as a result of these wars in the late eighteenth century that many Muslims were captured, and tens of thousands of them—including Abdul Rahman—sold into slavery in what soon would become the United States. The story of Abdul Rahman’s capture thus highlights how connected the fates of Western Europe, West Africa, and the Americas were at this time.

Manumission at the Behest of the Federal Government

When Andrew Marshalk, a printer working on the American frontier, wanted to entice the U.S. government into repatriating Abdul Rahman to Africa, Marshalk misled the government into thinking that Abdul Rahman was “Moorish.” *Moor* was an epithet used to refer to Muslims of northwest African ancestry. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of independent and semi-independent states with a loose allegiance to the Ottoman Empire ruled along the northwest (Barbary) coast of Africa. They were collectively referred to as the Barbary States and played a significant role in Mediterranean trade. These states collected tributes from ships that entered the Mediterranean or docked on their piers.

During the first five decades of America’s independence, some American ships were captured by these states and their passengers held ransom. From the late 1780s through the early 1830s, the United States signed several treaties with these states and at times even turned its navy on them in order to assure the safety of its ships. One of the Barbary States, the Kingdom of Morocco, was the first state to recognize U.S. independence. The United States and Morocco entered into a “treaty of peace and friendship” in 1786. In 1805, the first Muslim envoy to the United States arrived from another of the Barbary States, Tunis. These events provide a context for the interest in the “Moor” Abdul Rahman

on the part of the U.S. State Department, whose consul in Tangiers, Morocco, advised that “[Abdul Rahman’s] liberty would give me an important power,” presumably in negotiations with the king of Morocco.

That Marshalk, a common printer, knew that by both figuratively and literally dressing Abdul Rahman up as a Moor he would be able to get the attention of the federal government, says much about the state of relations between Muslim North Africa and the young American republic.

Abdul Rahman’s Literacy

Abdul Rahman was sold in Natchez along with one of his soldiers, Sambo, who was most likely also Muslim. We know almost nothing about Sambo’s life in America, however. Abdul Rahman’s life story was preserved largely because he was literate in Arabic. If he had not been able to write down Qur’anic verses for Marshalk to forward to Washington, D.C., it is unlikely that Secretary of State Henry Clay would have believed that he was an African of such importance. In fact, almost all the African Muslims who left behind a historical record were able to do so because they were literate. The fact that most of these Muslim slaves learned to read and write in Africa flew in the face of arguments in the nineteenth century that justified slavery as a “providential” means of “civilizing” an “illiterate and savage race” by exposing its members to Christianity and European civilization. For opponents of slavery, the discovery that there were literate black Muslims in West Africa presented an opportunity to share the Bible with them in Arabic and to enlist their help in spreading Christianity in Africa. It is thus not surprising that Abdul Rahman was given the gift of an Arabic copy of the Bible. Indeed, he read the writing on the wall: as he toured Northern cities with the American Colonization Society to raise funds for his family’s freedom and their passage back to Africa, he insinuated to prospective donors that he would help spread Christianity, as well as commercial trade with America, upon his return.

Humanities Themes

History and global interconnectedness: Today, we often think about globalization as a phenomenon limited to the past few decades. But *Prince among Slaves* shows that even in the time of Abdul Rahman, people from different corners of the globe were connected in interesting and sometimes surprising ways, and that their lives were occasionally altered by global events. In the film, we can see evidence of an interconnected world in the unexpected friendship between Abdul Rahman and Dr. John Cox (an Irish physician who first met Abdul Rahman in Africa), the importance of the relationship between the United States and Morocco in determining Abdul Rahman’s fate, and the diverse roots of Abdul Rahman’s descendants.

Slavery, diversity, and identity: Slavery muted the diversity found in the history of black America. By depicting the individual identity of Abdul Rahman and telling his story in

relation to his wife, Isabella, who was born in the United States, the film shows how slaves formed families despite disparate personal backgrounds (among many other challenges). The story of Abdul Rahman's family demonstrates that American identity today has been shaped by the interaction of many religious, ethnic, and racial identities throughout history.

Sample Discussion Points

How does the story of Abdul Rahman differ from the stories of other African slaves brought to the United States? How was his life in slavery affected by the fact that he was both of noble ancestry and a Muslim? Would we be as interested in his life if he did not possess these two unique attributes?

Describe the relationship between Abdul Rahman and the Mississippi plantation owner Thomas Foster, focusing on the issues of race, religion, and authority. In what ways was this master-slave relationship typical, and in what ways was it unique? Compare this relationship to that of Abdul Rahman and Dr. Cox.

Given what you saw in the film, how would you describe the role and place of Islam in early American history? How does it compare to the role and place of Islam in the United States today?

Black Africans who arrived as slaves in the United States came from varying religious and ethnic backgrounds and spoke different languages. Within a generation, however, these differences were erased. For example, there is no known record of descendants of African Muslims practicing Islam. Based on what you learned from the film, how were these differences in religion and culture erased under slavery?

Abdul Rahman's family plays an important role in his story. How did his family define both his identity while he was alive and his legacy after he died? Why do you think the makers of this film chose to end it by bringing descendants of Abdul Rahman together in Natchez, Mississippi?

The film uses actors to reenact the story of Abdul Rahman, as well as interviews with historians, who give the story depth and context. How does this dual storytelling method illuminate the personal struggles of Abdul Rahman and the historical circumstances that affected his life? What did you take from the film that you might not have taken from a book about Abdul Rahman's life?