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# Mohammed Ali Ben Said: Travels on Five Continents

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*Allan D. Austin*

## MOHAMMED ALI BEN SAID: TRAVELS ON FIVE CONTINENTS\*

**T**HIS ESSAY TELLS OF an uncommonly bright and congenial man whose original name (Mohammed Ali), people (Kanuri), and autobiographical references to Allah indicate his African Muslim beginnings. The land and the religion of his fathers was not forgotten, as the record shows, but by the time he arrived in the New World he had wandered so far and witnessed so much as a slave and freeman from Nigeria to Russia, and then on to England, that they had become elements in an extensive cultural baggage. The story of Nicholas Said, as he continued to call himself after a baptism into the Russian Orthodox Church, is by any standard an unusual one.

Said, born around 1835, was kidnapped from the heart of Africa between 1846 and 1850; forcibly marched across the Sahara Desert to Tripoli on the Mediterranean; taken to Mecca and Egypt; then shipped to Constantinople (Istanbul) where he was sold to a Russian. He served three masters across Russia (during which time he was freed); served throughout western Europe; and accompanied a fellow traveler to the Caribbean and South and North America. By 1863, at least, he had become a schoolteacher in Detroit, Michigan, and for the next two years, a soldier in the Union Army. Mustered out in the fall of 1865, he probably married, and then nearly disappeared from history but for a barely legible, handwritten note concerning his death: "Nicholas Said, Brownsville[?], Tenn. Aug. 6 1882."<sup>1</sup>

A traveler on five continents, Said had led a varied life and, according to his fellow soldiers, was a great storyteller. Unfortunately, too little of his multifaceted story has yet been found. But there is a short interview, statements from three military officers of the 55th Massachusetts Volunteers under whom he served in the Civil War, and an informative autobiography he wrote for one of them in 1865. The interview and autobiography are included below.

Said's biography may not be all that unique, for at least one other Union soldier, Martin Becker, from Said's own regiment, was also born in Africa, spent some time in Europe, and came to the United States about the same time as Said.<sup>2</sup> Becker's full story remains even less well known than Said's. But if not absolutely unique, Said's account is one of the few substantial life stories extant of ante-bellum Africans in America who

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\* This introductory essay and accompanying autobiography constitute a revision of Chapter X of Allan D. Austin's edited work, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Source Book* (New York: Garland, 1984). Incorporating newly discovered materials, Professor Austin is currently preparing a second edition of this now out-of-print and absolutely indispensable work.



1. MOHAMMED ALI BEN SAID, A.K.A. NICHOLAS SAID (1831?-1882).  
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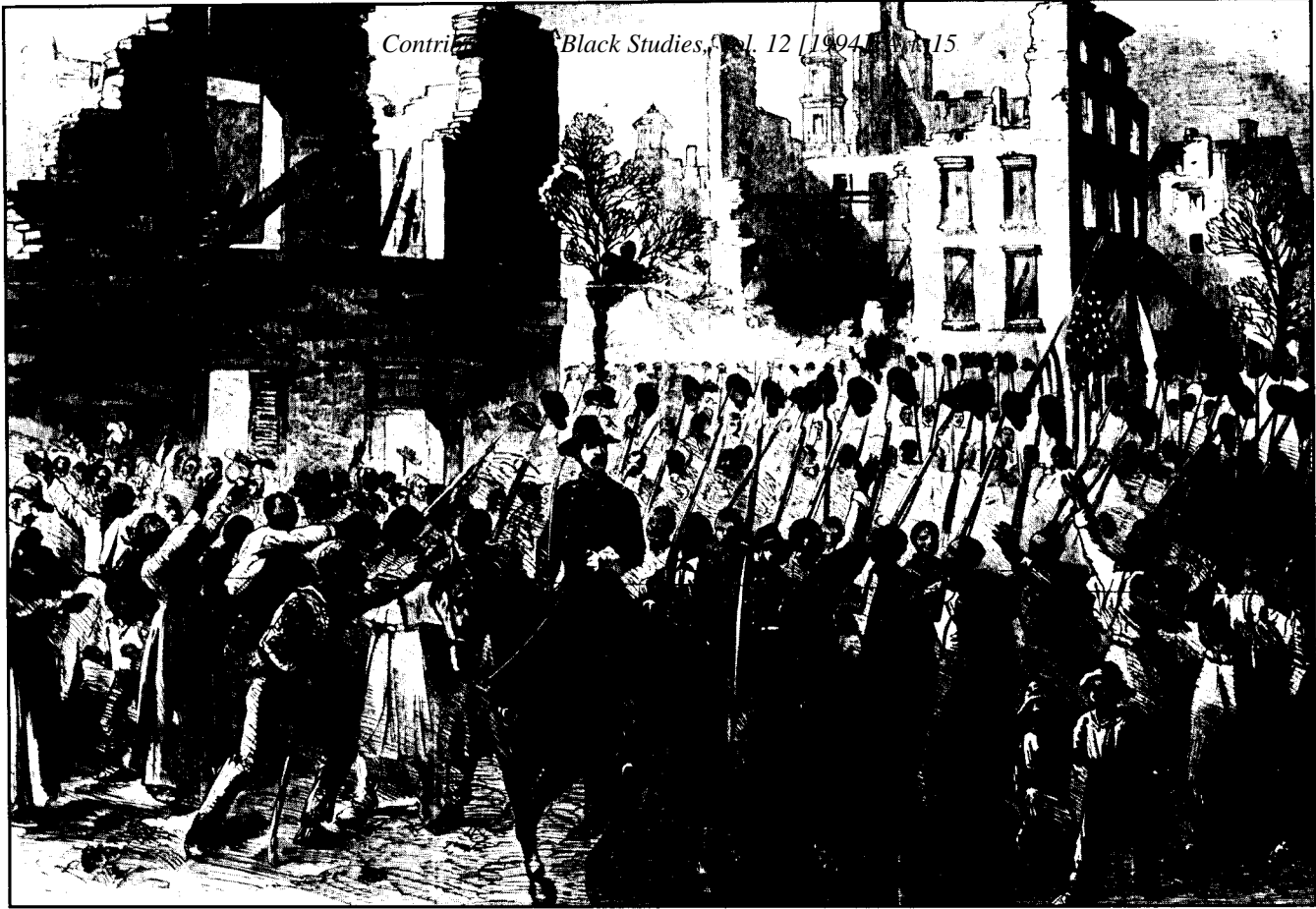
were not slaves here. The chief source of our knowledge is his autobiography, edited by an anonymous contributor to the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*, where it appeared under the title, "A Native of Borno," in 1867. Describing Said as quite "unthreatening" and "well-mannered," the editor's introduction expressed pleasure (or amazement) that Said was extensively acquainted with Africa and Europe and knew seven or more languages. In fact, Said was even more widely acquainted with the world than this; he had also been to Asia and the West Indies. His linguistic mastery was described in a later paper, perhaps by the same hand:

[Said] wrote and spoke fluently the English, French, German, and Italian languages, while there is no doubt he was master of Kanouri (his vernacular), Mandara, Arabic, Turkish and Russian — a total of nine languages.<sup>3</sup>

Corroboration of these observations is found in an interview from June 1863. The complete article follows.

NICHOLAS SAIB [sic] is the name of a sergeant<sup>4</sup> in the 55th Massachusetts volunteers, whose curious and even romantic history is one of much interest. He is an intelligent looking negro, perfectly black, modest and gentlemanly in his bearing, and remarkable alike for his experience and his culture. As we understood his story, as he told it in a brief interview, he is a native of Central Africa, born in the neighborhood of Timbuctoo [See Fig. 5].<sup>5</sup> In some way he was inveigled into slavery to a party of Arabs, and found his way first to Egypt and from thence to Turkey. After awhile he reached St. Petersburg, was converted to Christianity and baptized as a member of the Greek church, dropping the name of Mohammed and taking that of Nicholas. He is now a Protestant he says emphatically.<sup>6</sup> From St. Petersburg he went to Germany and entered the service of a "Hollander" with whom he came to this country and settled in Detroit. He enlisted "because all his folks seemed to be doing so."<sup>7</sup>

Saib speaks five languages, and can read and write three or four of them. His French is quite Parisian and his Italian correct. He gives an entertaining description of his native region, the employment of its inhabitants, and their manners and customs. They are generally Mohammedans. Were it not for his color and position, Saib would pass anywhere for a person of no small acquisitions. As it is no one can see or talk with him, without being most favorably impressed with his deportment and intelligence. He is one, but not the only one of the "persons of African descent" in camp at Readville, whose acquisitions and behavior go far to dispel ignorant and vulgar prejudices against the colored race.<sup>8</sup>



Contemporary and modern sources cited below endorse these observations and Said's account of his travels on five continents before he entered the Union Army. The military part of his story includes some confusion about his age. The records of Said's regiment report that he was twenty-six years old in 1865; but Said's autobiography and his editor's comments suggest an age closer to thirty-one. He enlisted in the 55th Regiment of Massachusetts Colored Volunteers organized in May 1863. Serving in Company I, he rose from corporal to sergeant by 16 July 1863; he was later reduced to corporal again at his own request and detailed to a hospital on 1 September 1864 in order to "acquire some knowledge of medicine," says his editor. There may have been other reasons: this detail may have been requested by Said because of a desire someday to educate his native countrymen in the "sciences of the West," as he wrote in his autobiography. He may also have been attempting to do something about the inadequate medical attention received by the 55th — and all other African-American regiments in the Union army.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, although his own regiment fought in important military battles (Ft. Mims and Honey Hill, 1864; James Island, Biggin Creek, S.C., 1865), its more serious and less-well-known struggles consisted of attempts to deal with the government's unfair treatment. In concert with Massachusetts' 54th Regiment, the regiment waged a successful fourteen-month-long campaign for pay equal to that given white troops, and a less successful one against extended fatigue duty beyond that required of their white counterparts. Despite mutinies and near-mutinies, the poorer treatment continued. Still, the unhappy regiment had its moments of glory when, for instance, it joined in the vanguard of the Union troops which marched in to take Charleston near the war's close. The regiment was eventually mustered out on 29 August 1865. No reference to this military exercise and sordid treatment is included in Said's autobiography; his war-time experiences must be discovered in the regimental record. His own reticence, perhaps, or his editor's sense of "propriety," may have led to this omission. But Nicholas Said was quite capable of speaking for himself. His charming autobiography was condensed — with how much loss? — "from [Said's] manuscript, and his own language has been retained as far as possible," claimed his editor.

The writing is far from that of a stranger to the English language, one unmindful of subtleties or of the mythic predilections of his probable readers. His history of his own nation is nicely tailored to Americans, with an African "father of his country" hero and a text cast in classical epic patterns which would appeal to any large Euro-American audience. Although they are not fully fleshed out in this short piece, the autobiography includes heroic military confrontations, political treachery at the highest levels, glimpses of several internationally prominent personalities, and the author-hero's attempts to make the best of unavoidable predicaments he meets while taking a long way home.

Said's native setting is near-Edenic, apart from man's depredations; his family is well-to-do, and his early years are archetypally representative of a hero's youth. They are marked by deep family love, tensions and anticipations of wealth and power, scholastic struggles, and an eventual escapade which leads to an abrupt end to it all. Thenceforward, the modest hero is a wanderer through the Sahara Desert and the great

ports and cities of the known world, ever longing for home. The autobiography rarely mentions women — an infrequent reference describes his being introduced to a young lady who was apparently afraid of him.

Another element largely missing in this introduction to the man who began as Mohammed Ali ben Said, concerns his religious beliefs. His autobiographical perspectives, nonetheless, give us a sense of his religious training. For example, Said asserts the existence of a lengthy history of Islam in his ancient country; he declares that Allah protected Mohammed El Kanemy, his country's "Washington," from Fellatah (Fulani) Muslims led by the equally great leader Usuman Dan Fodio; and Allah protected El Kanemy also from Begharmi attacks from the south. Said, however, took longer than he should have to learn Arabic, and he set out to picnic during Ramadan when he should have been fasting—hence his capture, perhaps.

His religion did not save him from being sold to several Muslims thereafter, and he regretted that, as a result of his slave status, he was not allowed to visit the grave of Mohammed at Mecca — that is, to complete the hajj or holy pilgrimage. He was troubled by his baptism into Christianity in Russia because he had not been told all that the ceremony implied. The gold cross he received thereafter, and language suggesting this act, changed him from slave to servant and probably made him feel much better. There is no indication of Said's devotion to the Five Pillars of Islam, and on at least one occasion he indulged in alcohol — a practice denied to true believers. It seems, then, that Said was quite adaptable: Eastern Orthodox in Russia, Protestant in Massachusetts, and perhaps even Roman Catholic in France. But he might also have liked to practice the religion of his fathers, as his references to Allah rather than Christ as the protector of El Kameny imply.

It is clear that Said's sense of self-worth, a result of his native curiosity and African education, was never in doubt. His family was, he says, "prominent." He claimed to have been the son of Barca Gana, a Bornuese or Bornawa Kashella or general, one of Shehu El Kanemy's most remarkable personal "slaves" who became well known in Europe and America because of his aid to a British exploratory expedition in the early 1820s — see note provided by Said's editor on page 139.<sup>10</sup> Slave professionals were common in Muslim societies where blackness did not suggest only menial capacities, and where blacks — if Muslim — could also be masters. Said seems not to have considered himself or his siblings to be slaves at home, nor does he name anyone he served in Bornu. He apparently felt free and wealthy there, and often thought about returning.<sup>11</sup>

Although Said suspected that he was doomed to be a slave or a servant after his kidnapping by Tuaregs (Berbers) — he calls them Bedouins (Arabs) — and was fatalistic with regard to that general status, he was aggressive about how he was treated within those variably elastic bounds. He appears to have impressed his owners with his dignified bearing and obvious intelligence. He naturally sought out rich and educated masters from whom he might learn and whose books he might read. This man of the book was an acute observer of both "upstairs" and "downstairs" worlds. Said has several remarks to make on the sociopolitical and personal circumstances of various Tuareg,

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Arab, Turk, and Russian masters — the Westernizers among the latter, especially. He also coolly compares the conditions of servants in some of the thirty-three nations he visited or lived in. He noted that, under certain circumstances, a servant might experience better times than a master. He also remarked upon subtler hardships which servants suffered from some masters, from the mockery of white children, or from confusion caused by alcohol.

Said's autobiography includes all these matters. It is essentially trustworthy, as most of its geographical and historical references may be found elsewhere. His country, Bornu, was made the headquarters for two very productive British exploratory expeditions in the 1820s and the 1850s, respectively, and the accounts of these square with Said's pictures of his homeland, while other works corroborate much of the rest of his story.<sup>12</sup> That Nicholas Said was not prevailed upon to produce a full-length book is a serious loss to mid-19th-century comparative history. With genuine moral and fiscal encouragement, he might well have produced a multi-volume "Travels on Five Continents" to balance a bookshelf and a point of view otherwise burdened only with volumes of "Travels" by Europeans. What we have must do — Said's autobiography follows his editor's comments below.



## A NATIVE OF BORNOO

*Nicholas Said, at the time of his enlistment in the army of the Union, during the third year of the great Rebellion, was about twenty-eight years of age, of medium height, somewhat slenderly built, with pleasing features, not of the extreme negro type, complexion perfectly black, and quiet and unassuming address.*

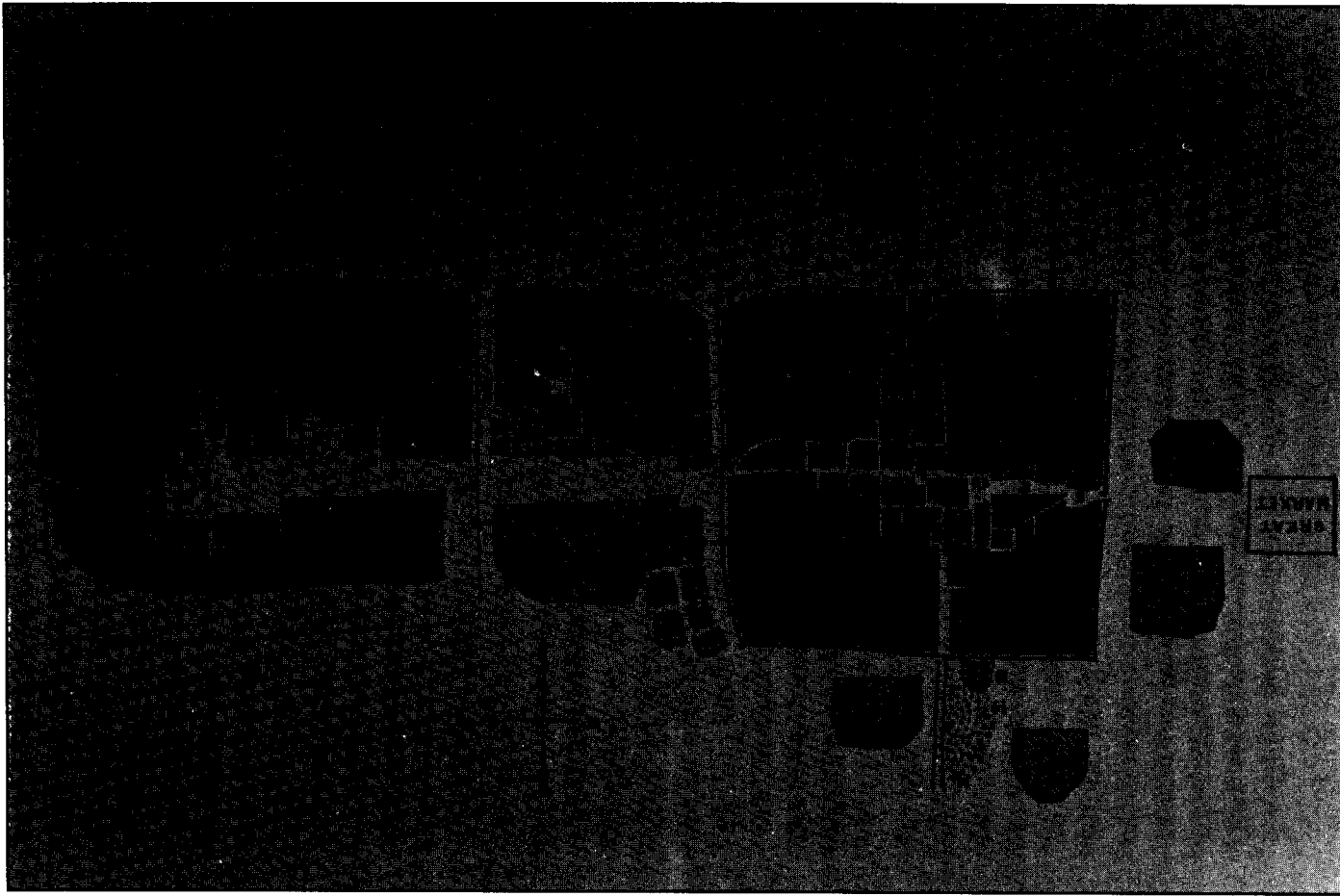
*He became known to the writer while serving in one of our colored regiments; and attention was first directed to his case by the tattooing on his face, and by the entry in the company descriptive book, which gave "Africa" as his birthplace.*

*Inquiry showed that he was more or less acquainted with seven different languages, in addition to his native tongue; that he had travelled extensively in Africa and Europe, and that his life had been one of such varied experience as to render it interesting both on that account and also on account of the mystery which surrounds, notwithstanding recent explorations, the country of his birth.*

*At the request of those who had been from time to time entertained by the recital of portions of his history, he was induced to put it in writing. The narrative which follows is condensed from his manuscript, and his own language has been retained as far as possible.*

Reader, you must excuse me for the mistakes which this article will contain, as you will bear in mind that this language in which I am now trying to write is not my mother tongue; on the other hand, I never had a teacher, nor ever was at school for the purpose of acquiring the English. The only way I learned what little of the language I





3. PLAN OF KUKA, HOME OF MOHAMMED ALI BEN SAID. FROM HEINRICH BARTH, *TRAVELS AND DISCOVERIES IN NORTH AND CENTRAL AFRICA . . .* (1856), II, FRONTISPIECE.



4. MOHAMMED EL KANEMY, BORNU'S FOUNDING FATHER. FROM DIXON DENHAM AND HUGH CLAPPERTON, *NARRATIVE OF TRAVELS AND DISCOVERIES IN NORTHERN AND CENTRAL AFRICA . . .* (1826), PLATE II.

know was through French books.

I was born in the kingdom of Bornoo, in Soodan, in the problematic central part of Africa, so imperfectly known to the civilized nations of Europe and America.

Soodan has several kingdoms, the country of the Fellatahs and Bornoo being the most powerful, — the territorial extent of the latter being some 810,000 square miles.

These nations are strict Mohammedans, having been converted some two or three centuries ago by the Bedouin Arabs and those from Morocco, who, pushed by want of riches, came to Soodan to acquire them. Different languages are found in each nation, some written and some not; but the Arabic is very much in use among the higher class of people, as the Latin is used by the Catholic priests. Especially the Koran is written in Arabic, and in my country no one is allowed to handle the Sacred Book unless he can read it and explain its contents.

Bornoo, my native country, is the most civilized part of Soodan, on account of the great commerce carried on between it and the Barbary States of Fezzan, Tunis, and Tripoli. They export all kinds of European articles to Central Africa, and take gold-dust, ivory, &c., in return.<sup>13</sup>

Bornoo has had a romantic history for the last one hundred years. The whole of Soodan, more than two thousand miles in extent, had been since the 11th century under the Mais of Bornoo; but by dissensions and civil wars nearly all the tributaries north of Lake Tchad were lost.<sup>14</sup> In 1809 a shepherd arose from the country of the Fellatahs and assumed the title of Prophet. He said to the ignorant portion of his countrymen, that Allah had given him orders to make war with the whole of Soodan, and had promised him victory. They believed his story, and the legitimate king was dethroned and the false prophet, Otman Dan Fodio, was proclaimed Emperor of the Fellatahs. The impostor went at once to work, and in less than two years conquered almost the whole of Soodan, excepting Kanem, a tributary to my country. Bornoo, after a manly effort, was compelled by force of arms to submit to the yoke of the Fellatahs.<sup>15</sup>

In 1815 Bornoo arose from its humiliating position, to shake off the yoke of Dan Fodio. Mohammed el Anim El Kanemy was the man who undertook to liberate his country and restore her former prestige. This immortal hero could collect from the villages of Bornoo but a few hundreds of horsemen; but in Kanem he got eight hundred men, and accepted an engagement with the enemy. He gained the first victory, and took such good advantage of his success, that in the space of two months he won forty battles, drove the enemy entirely out of Bornoo, and captured a great many places belonging to the Fellatahs.<sup>16</sup>

At the close of the war, El Kanemy found himself at the head of twenty-eight thousand horsemen, and the real ruler of Bornoo. Like all great men, he refused the sceptre, and, going to the legitimate heir of the throne, Mais Barnoma, told him he was at his disposal.<sup>17</sup> Barnoma, notwithstanding the noble actions of El Kanemy, was jealous of his fame; he tried a plan to dispose of El Kanemy which he believed would not cast public suspicion on himself. Accordingly, he wrote to the king of Begharmi, promising to pay the expenses of his troops and some extra compensation besides, if he would make as though he were really at war with Bornoo. The king agreed to the proposal, and crossed

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with his army the great river Shary, the natural frontier of the two kingdoms. El Kanemy was then in the city of Kooka, which he had built for himself. He heard finally of the war between Bornoo and Begharmi, and, hastily calling out his ancient veterans, he reported to Engornoo, where the king resided. The combined forces numbered some forty thousand men. El Kanemy knew nothing of the infamous act of the king; but Allah, who protects the innocent and punishes the guilty, was smiling over him. The armies pitched their camps opposite to each other; and the king of Begharmi sent a messenger with a letter to Mais Barnoma, informing him that the heaviest assault would be made upon the left, and that, if he would give El Kanemy command there, the bravest of the assailants would surround and kill him at once. This letter the messenger carried to El Kanemy instead of the king, who, at once seeing the plot immediately answered the important document, signing the name of Barnoma, and loading the messenger with presents of all descriptions for his master. The next morning El Kanemy went to the king and told him that the heaviest assault would be made on the right, and that he should not expose his precious life there. As Barnoma got no letter from the king of Begharmi, he thought El Kanemy was right, and acted accordingly.

The battle finally began, and the Sycaries of Begharmi, attacking the left where they thought El Kanemy was, surrounded Mais Barnoma and killed him, supposing him to be El Kanemy. The battle, however, went on, and the king of Begharmi found out before long that he had killed the wrong lion. His army, in spite of their usual courage, were beaten, and obliged to recross the river Shary, at that place more than two miles wide, with a loss of half their number. The victorious army of El Kanemy also crossed the river, and, pursuing the retreating forces, captured Mesna, the capital of Begharmi, and drove the king into the country of Waday.<sup>18</sup>

El Kanemy now found himself the absolute ruler of Bornoo, nor had that kingdom ever any greater ruler. Under his reign the nation prospered finely. He encouraged commerce with Northern and Eastern Africa, and, building a fleet of small vessels, sailed with a strong force against a tribe who inhabited the main islands of Lake Tchad, and who used to commit depredations upon the neighboring sections of Bornoo, and chastised them severely. These islanders are the finest type of the African race, possessing regular features, and large, expressive eyes, though they are the darkest of all Africans. El Kanemy also subdued many of the surrounding tribes and nations, until the population of Bornoo and its provinces amounted to nearly fifteen millions.<sup>19</sup>

My father was the descendant of a very illustrious family. He was the first man who had a commission under El Kanemy when he went to Kanem to recruit his forces. He was made a Bagafuby, or captain of one hundred cavalry, and was in every engagement which El Kanemy went through. The name by which my father was known was Barca Gana.<sup>20</sup> My great-grandfather was from Molgoi. He established himself in Bornoo many years ago, and was greatly favored by the monarchs of that country. My mother was a Mandara woman, the daughter of a chief.<sup>21</sup> I was born in Kooka, a few years after the Waday war of 1831.<sup>22</sup> We were in all nineteen children, twelve boys and seven

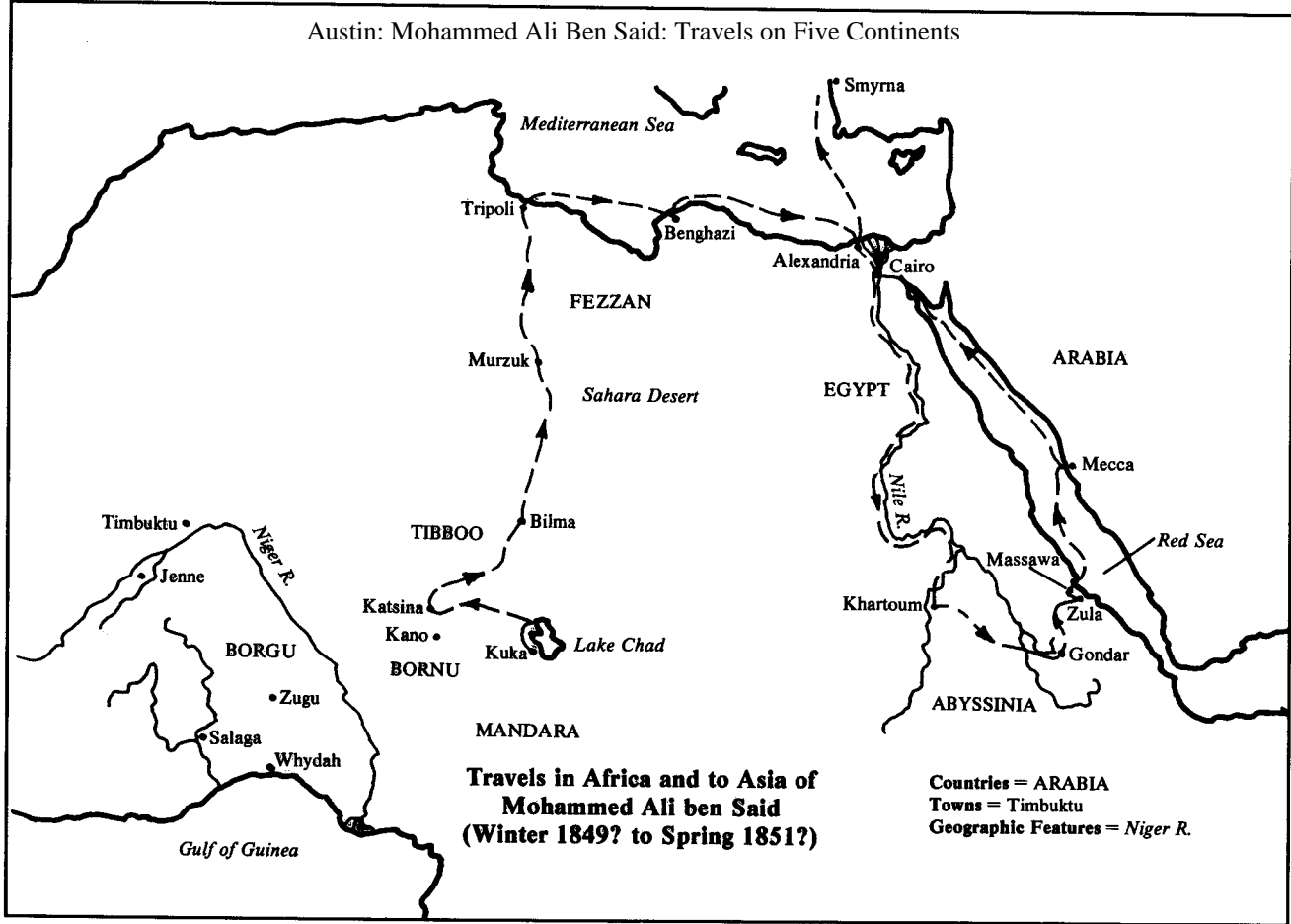
\* *Barca Gana* is alluded to in the *Encyclopaedia Briannica* (Vol. V, p. 54) as the general of the *Scheik of Borno*. Ed.

girls. I was the ninth child of my mother. All my brothers were well educated in Arabic and Turkish. Two of them, Mustapha and Abderahman, were very rich, having acquired their wealth by trading in ivory and gold-dust. Both had been to Mecca as pilgrims.<sup>23</sup> My father himself was rich, but when he was killed, our elder brother seized the greater part, and those who were not eighteen years of age had to leave their share in their mother's hands. Five cleared farms and a considerable amount of gold fell to my share. I do not know how much the gold amounted to, but my mother used to tell me, that, when I got to be twenty years of age, I would have as much as either of my elder brothers.

After my father's death I was given to a teacher to be instructed in my native tongue, and also in Arabic. In the space of three years I could read and write both languages. I was tried in my native tongue, and passed; but I could not pass in Arabic, and my mother and uncle returned me to the teacher for eighteen months. I stayed the required time, and then was tried and passed.

I was then old enough to be circumcised. Three hundred boys went through the ceremony at once, and were then dressed in white clothes, and received according to custom a great many presents. Fifteen days we ate the best that Kooka had, the king himself giving us the best he had in his palace. This generally happens only to the sons of those who have distinguished themselves in the army, or, to explain myself better, to those of the military aristocracy. At the end of this time all of us went home. For my part, this was the first time I had slept in my father's house for four years and seven months. I was very much welcomed by my mother, sisters, and brothers, and was a pet for some time.<sup>24</sup>

After returning from school to my father's house, I judge about four or five years afterwards, I was invited, in company with three of my brothers, by the eldest son of the governor of the province of Yaoori and Laree, who lived in the town of the latter name, to visit him. This part of the province is very charming. The forests are full of delicious game, and the lake of fish and beautiful aquatic birds; while in the dry seasons the woods and uncultivated plains are worthy to be called the garden of Eden. In my childhood I had quite a passion for hunting, one of my father's great passions also. In spite of the efforts of my elder brothers to check me in it, I would persuade the other boys to follow me into the thick woods, to the danger of their lives and mine. My worthy mother declared several times that I would be captured by the Kindils, a wandering tribe of the desert. Her prophecy was fulfilled after all, unhappily for myself and perhaps more so for those I had persuaded with me. While on the visit just spoken of, one day, — it was a Ramadan day, anniversary of the Prophet's day, — I persuaded a great number of boys, and we went into the woods a great way from any village. We came across nests of Guinea fowl, and gathered plenty of eggs, and killed several of the fowl. We made fire by rubbing two pieces of dry stick together, and broiled the chickens and eggs. Then we proceeded farther, and came across a tree called Agoua, bearing a delicious kind of fruit. We all went up the tree, eating fruit and making a great deal of noise. We frolicked on that tree for many hours. Presently several of the boys told me they heard the neighing of horses. We then all agreed not to make so much noise, but we were just too late. In about a quarter of an hour we were startled by the cry, "Kindil! Kindil!" The boys who



**Travels in Africa and to Asia of Mohammed Ali ben Said (Winter 1849? to Spring 1851?)**

Countries = ARABIA  
Towns = Timbuktu  
Geographic Features = Niger R.

were nearest to the ground contrived to hide themselves in the thicket. It happened that I was higher than any one, and while coming down with haste, I missed my hold and fell, and lay senseless. When I opened my eyes, I found myself on horseback behind a man, and tied to him with a rope. Out of forty boys, eighteen of us were taken captive [To follow Said's journey, see Figs. 5-7].<sup>25</sup> I wished then that it was a dream rather than a reality, and the warnings of my mother passed through my mind. Tears began to flow down my cheeks; I not only lamented for myself, but for those also whom I persuaded into those wild woods.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, our inhuman captors were laughing and talking merrily, but I could not understand them. About six hours' ride, as I suppose, brought us to their camp. The tents were then immediately taken down, the camels loaded, and we started again, travelling night, and day for three long days, until we came to a temporary village where their chief was. After we got there we were all chained together, except four, who were taken pity upon, on account of their age and birth. It was then night, and nearly all the camp was under the influence of hashish, an intoxicating mixture made of hemp-seed and other ingredients, which when too much is eaten will intoxicate worse than whiskey, or even spirits of wine. While the robbers were drunk, we boys were consulting and plotting to run away. We succeeded in breaking the chains, and four of the oldest boys took their captors' arms, cut their throats, jumped on their horses, and succeeded in making their escape. When it was found out, they gave each of us fifteen strokes in the hollows of our feet, because we did not inform them.

A little while after our comrades' escape we started on again. This time we had to go on foot for five days, until we reached a town called Kashna, belonging to the Emperor of the Fellatahs, but situated in the country of Houssa, where we were all dispersed to see each other no more.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately, none of my brothers were with me in the woods.

My lot was that of an Arab slave, for I was bought by a man named Abd-el-Kader, a merchant of Tripoli and Fezzan. He was not an Arabian, however, but a brown-skinned man, and undoubtedly had African blood in his veins. He had at this time a large load of ivory and other goods waiting for the caravan from Kano and Saccatoo.<sup>28</sup> This caravan soon came, and with it we started for Moorzook, capital of the pachalic of Fezzan. Although we numbered about five hundred, all armed except slaves who could not be trusted, a lion whom we met after starting, lying in our path, would not derange himself on our account, and we had to attack him. Twelve men fired into him. Four men he killed, and wounded five or six, and then escaped. He was hit somewhere, as they found blood where he lay, but it was not known where. When he roared, he scared all the horses and camels composing the caravan. Abd-el-Kader was one of those who attacked the lion, but he was not hurt.

Five days after we left Kashna, we came to the first oasis. Here the plains were all barren and sandy but full of gazelles, antelopes, and ostriches. The principal tree growing here was the date-palm, and the water was very bad, tasting salty.<sup>29</sup>

As the caravan travelled toward the east, the ground rose by degrees. If I am not mistaken, we passed five oases before we came into the country of Tibboo, a mountainous region between Bornoo and Fezzan, the inhabitants of which suffer

considerably from the Kindils, though they are also robbers themselves.<sup>30</sup> The capital of Tibboo is Boolma, built on a high mountain. I was disappointed when I saw the city, for I had heard that it was quite a large place. Laree, the smallest town in Bornoo, is a place of more importance. The people of Tibboo are of dark-brown complexion, and are noted in Soodan for their shrewdness. The day that the caravan happened to be at Boolma, two parties were in a warlike attitude about a fair maid whom each wished their chief to have for a wife. We did not stay long enough to see the issue of the fight, and two days' journey took us out of the kingdom of Tibboo.<sup>31</sup>

As soon as the oasis of Tibboo was left, the country became very rocky, — the rock being a kind of black granite; and the Arabs had to make shoes for both their camels and slaves, for the rocks were very sharp, and if this precaution had not been taken, in a few hours their feet would have been so cut that they could not have proceeded farther. Some Arabs would rather lose four or five slaves than a single camel. They rode very seldom. In a journey of ten or twelve weeks I saw Abd-el-Kader ride but once, and the majority never rode at all.

In these rocky regions of the desert a great amount of salt is found also, — what is called in our language Kalboo, and I believe, in English, carbonate of soda. Soodan is supplied by the Moors and Kindils with salt from the desert. Sea-shells are also occasionally found in this region.<sup>32</sup> After we left Tibboo fire was never allowed, even in the oases, but I do not know for what reason.<sup>33</sup>

The mountainous regions of the desert passed, we came to a more level country, but it was not long before we saw other mountains ahead. As we passed over the last of them, we found them very dangerous from their steepness, and a few camels were lost by falling into the ravines. After passing this dangerous place, a sign of vegetation was seen, oases were more frequent, and at last forests of date-palm the fruit of which forms the principal food of both the inhabitants of Fezzan and their camels, became abundant. El Kaheni is the first town or human habitation seen after leaving Tibboo. It is a small walled town like all other places in Fezzan. Here I first saw the curious way in which the Fezzaneers cultivate their land by irrigation. Each farm has a large well, wide at the top and sloping toward the bottom, out of which water is drawn by donkeys, and poured into a trough, from which it runs into small ditches. This process is renewed every few days until the crop no longer needs watering.

The people of El Kaheni were very courteous. I had a long talk with a young man, who gave me a description of the capital, Moorzook, but his story did not agree with that which Abd-el-Kader told me. I afterwards found that the young man's story was correct. We left El Kaheni the next day, taking a large load of dates, superior to those of Soodan in size and sweetness.<sup>34</sup> After three days' journey we could see in the distance a large flag on a long pole, on the top of the English Consulate, the largest house in the metropolis of Fezzan. We passed several villages of trifling importance, and at about noon arrived within the walls of Moorzook.<sup>35</sup> There the caravan dissolved, and each man went to his own house.<sup>36</sup>

I found Moorzook to be not larger than a quarter of my native town of Kooka; but the buildings were in general better, every house being of stone, though of course



very poorly built in comparison with European dwellings. The city has four gates, one toward each cardinal point of the compass. The northern is the one by which the caravan entered; the eastern is a ruin; the southern, which is behind the Pacha's palace, has mounted by it two guns of large calibre; while the western and the best of all, is situated near the barracks, which are fine buildings, larger even than the Pacha's palace. The pachalic of Fezzan is a tributary of the Ottoman Porte, and the Pacha, a Turk, is very much hated by the Bedouins.<sup>37</sup>

After reaching Abd-el-Kader's house, I found that he was a poor man. The reader can form some idea from his living in the capital, and having but one wife, all his property consisting of a piece of land about two and a half miles from the city, a few donkeys, ten camels, old and young, an Arab slave, and myself. While I was yet with him he bought also a young Fellatah girl. As soon as we arrived, he sent me with Hassan, his slave, to the farm, where I worked some fifteen days. I told him then that I was not used to such work, and prayed him to sell me to some Turk or Egyptian.<sup>38</sup> He asked me what my father used to do, and I told him that he was a warrior and also traded in gold-dust and ivory. On hearing my father's name he opened his eyes wide, and asked me why I did not tell him that in Soodan. He had known my father well, but had not seen him for fifteen rainy seasons. From that day Abd-el-Kader was very kind to me, and said he had a great notion to take me back. He, however, sold me after all to a young Turkish officer named Abdy Agra, an excellent young man, full of life and fun. This officer was always with the Pacha, and I believe was one of his aides. His wife was a Kanowry woman.<sup>39</sup> He used to bring home money every night and often gave me some. After he had dressed me up, I accompanied him to the Pacha's every day. He spoke my language very correctly, only with an accent, like all strangers trying to speak Kanowry, and he began to teach me Turkish. Strange to say, in Fezzan the Bornoo tongue is in great vogue, rich and poor speaking Kanowry.<sup>40</sup> I stayed with Abdy Agra more than three months; but one day he told me that he had to send me to his father in Tripoli. So long as I had to be a slave, I hated to leave so excellent a man, but I had to go. Accordingly, when the caravan was to start, he sent me in charge of Abd-el-Kader, the man from whom he had bought me. Before leaving the city we went to a house that I had never seen before, and had our names registered in a book by a very benevolent-looking man, who wore spectacles on his eyes, something I had never seen before, and which made me afraid of him. As we passed out of the city gate we were counted one by one by an officer.<sup>41</sup>

On our arrival at Tripoli, Abd-el-Kader took me to an old house in a street narrow and dirty beyond description, where we passed the night. The next morning he went with me to my new master, Hadji Daoud, the father of Abdy Agra. When we found him he was sitting on a divan of velvet, smoking his narghile. He looked at that time to be about forty-five years old, and was of very fine appearance, having a long beard, white as snow. Abd-el-Kader seemed well acquainted with him, for they shook hands and drank coffee together. After this we proceeded to the Turkish Bazaar, where I found that he was a merchant of tobacco, and had an extensive shop, his own property. Hadji Daoud had three wives; the principal one was an Arabian, one was a native of my country, and one and, to do her justice, the best looking of them all, was a Houssa girl.<sup>42</sup> He believed

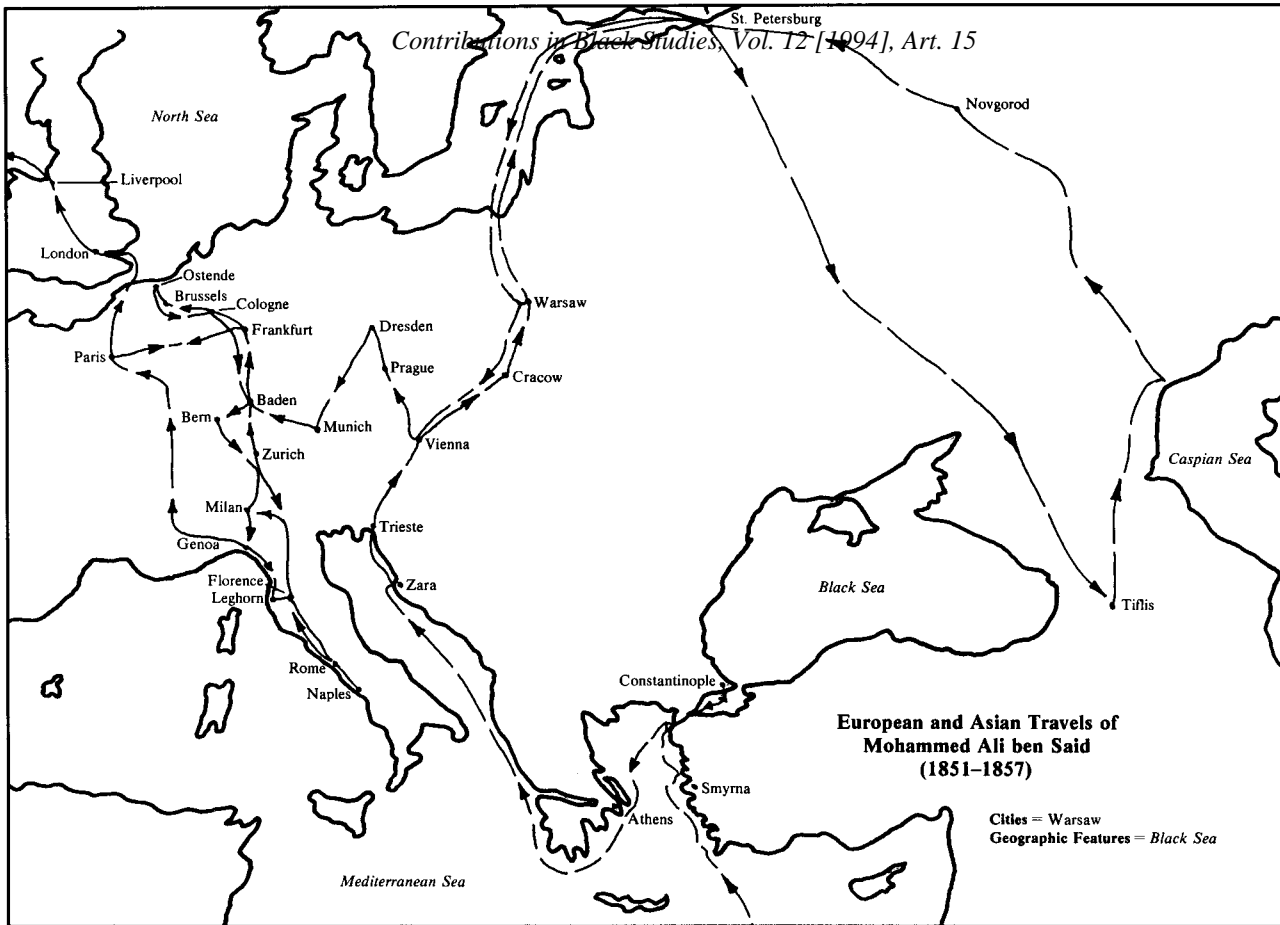
in keeping a comfortable table and we had mutton almost daily, and sometimes fowls. He had but one son, and he was far away. He told me that he intended to treat me as a son, and every day I went to the shop with him. He treated me always kindly, but madam was a cross and overbearing woman.

About this time my master started on his third pilgrimage to Mecca, leaving a friend in charge of his store, and taking me with him. We went by sail from Tripoli to Alexandria, touching at Bengazi. From Alexandria we went by cars to Ben Hadad, thence to Saida and Cairo, the capital of Egypt. From Cairo we travelled to Kartoom, at the forks of the Nile, and thence to Gondar, the capital of Abyssinia, where we stayed only twenty-four hours, my master being in continual fear of his life from the natives, who differed from him in belief and then started for Zela, a port on the Red Sea. From Zela we sailed to Muscat, and thence proceeded to Mecca.<sup>43</sup> I had not come of my own free will and for the express purpose of a pilgrimage, and therefore I was not permitted to go with Daoud to the grave of the Prophet, and was obliged to content myself without the title of Hadji, which is one much respected among the Mohammedans.

We had returned as far as Alexandria on our way home, when my master was informed that his store and a great deal of property, in fact, all his goods and money, had been destroyed by fire. This made the good man almost crazy. He did not hesitate to tell me that he should have to sell me, but said that he would take care that I should have a rich and good master, a promise which he kept. The next day, with the present of a good suit of clothes I was put on board a vessel bound for Smyrna and Constantinople. [See Fig. 6] I was to be landed at the former city. On this vessel was a young man of eighteen, one of the crew, who spoke my own language. I have heard it only twice, I think, since that time.

At Smyrna I was sold to a Turkish officer, Yousouf Effendi, a very wealthy man, and brother-in-law to the celebrated Reschid Pacha, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He had a great many houses in Smyrna, as well as Constantinople.<sup>44</sup> We sailed the next day for the latter city in a man-of-war steamer, the Abdul Medjid.<sup>45</sup> My duty was that of a Tchidboudji, which consists in filling and cleaning the pipes and narghiles. This was all that I had to do, while I was well dressed in cloths and silks, and had plenty of leisure time. After a service of eighteen months with Yousouf Effendi, he gave me to his younger brother, Yousouf Kavass, less wealthy than himself. This brother was, however, a very kind-hearted man, and treated his slaves, a Nubian, a native of Sennar, and myself, very kindly. While in this service I became known to Prince Mentchikoff, the Envoy Extraordinary of Russia at Constantinople, and was finally sold to him by my master. At the declaration of the Crimean war, after sending his things on board the Russian steamer Vladimir, the Prince started with despatches for his august master,<sup>46</sup> via Corfu, Athens, Zara, Trieste, Vienna, Cracow, and Warsaw, to St. Petersburg. I accompanied him on the journey, and, as the despatches were of the utmost importance, we travelled with the greatest speed.<sup>47</sup>

The house of my master, to which we went, in St. Petersburg, was situated on the Nevskoi Prospekt, the Broadway of the city, and was built of granite, in the Doric style, and very spacious. His family consisted of his wife, one son, and three daughters,



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while his servants numbered about thirty. The Prince, however, was not so immensely rich as some Russian aristocrats of his standing. Shortly after his arrival at St. Petersburg, Prince Mentchikoff was assigned to command in the army of the Crimea, and he hastened there, leaving me in St. Petersburg. After his departure, not being satisfied with the way in which the head servant treated me, I engaged service with Prince Nicholas Troubetzkoy.<sup>48</sup>

This family, better known as Le Grand Troubetzkoy, are descendants of the Grand Duke of Lithuania. The Prince's father was noted for skill and bravery in the war of 1828. The Troubetzkoy's claim relationship with the Emperor of France, the Duc de Morny, the half-brother of the Emperor, having married the daughter of Prince Serges Troubetzkoy.

Prince Nicholas was the youngest of five sons, and lived with his brother Andre, not far from the Italian Theatre, both of them being single.<sup>49</sup>

While in this service, I was baptized in St. Petersburg, November 12, 1855, into the Greek Church, my name being changed from Mohammed-Ali-Ben-Said to Nicholas Said. Prince Nicholas was my godfather. I shall always feel grateful, so long as I live, for Prince Nicholas's kindness to me; but I cannot help thinking that the way I was baptized was not right, for I think that I ought to have known perfectly well the nature of the thing beforehand. Still, it was a good intention the Prince had toward my moral welfare. After I was baptized he was very kind to me, and he bought me a solid gold cross to wear on my breast, after the Russian fashion.<sup>50</sup> I was the Prince's personal servant, going always in the carriage with him.

As the Czar Nicholas was godfather to the Prince, he had free access to the palace. Though he had several chances to become minister at some European court, he always refused, preferring to live a life of inaction. His health, however, was not very good, and he was very nervous. I have seen him faint scores of time in Russia; but when he left Russia, his health began to improve very much.

Everybody acquainted with Russia knows that Czar Nicholas used to make all the aristocracy tremble at his feet. No nobleman, to whatever rank he might belong, could leave the country without his consent, and paying a certain sum of money for the privilege. This measure of the Czar was not very well liked by the nobility, but his will was law, and had to be executed without grumbling.

Prince Troubetzkoy had several times made application for permission to travel, but without success, so long as Czar Nicholas lived; for he hated liberal ideas, and feared some of his subjects might, in the course of time, introduce those ideas from foreign countries into Russia.<sup>51</sup>

The Prince passed the summer season outside of the city, a distance of about twenty-five versts, at a splendid residence of his own, a marble house about the size of the Fifth Avenue Hotel of New York City. Adjoining it was a small theatre, or glass house, containing tropical fruits, and a menagerie, where I first saw a llama, and the interior of the palace was lined with pictures and statues. It was a magnificent building, but was getting to be quite old, and the Prince used to talk of repairing it, though he remarked it would cost many thousand roubles. This estate contained many thousand

acres, and four good-sized villages, and was about eight miles square. I had here some of the happiest days of my life.

About this time I went with the Prince to Georgia, — his brother-in-law, a general in that department, having been wounded by the Circassians under Schamyl. We reached Tiflis, the capital of Georgia, in January, and remained there until after the capture of Kars by the English and Turks.<sup>52</sup> While in the Caucasus, the Prince visited some of the neighboring parts of Persia, including Teheran and some smaller towns, and [we]<sup>53</sup> returned to Russia by way of Novgorod.

After the death of Czar Nicholas, Alexander, his successor, gave the Prince permission to travel where he chose, without limit of time, and on the 24th of February he started, going first to Warsaw, and thence, via Cracow, to Vienna.<sup>54</sup> Here I remained for two months, in charge of his effects, while he visited a sister in Pesth, in Hungary. On his return we went to Prague, and thence to Dresden.

At this place, I was greatly bothered by the children. They said that they had never seen a black man before. But the thing which most attracted them was my Turkish dress, which I wore all the time in Europe.<sup>55</sup> Every day, for the three weeks we remained in Dresden, whenever I went to take my walk I was surrounded by them to the number of several hundred. To keep myself from them, I used to ride in a carriage or on horseback, but this was too expensive. I thought the way I could do best was to be friendly with them. So I used to sit in the garden and speak with them, — that is, those who could understand French. They took a great liking to me, for I used sometimes to buy them fruits, candies, and other things, spending in this way a large amount. Prince Troubetzkoy had a brother, Prince Vladimir, living in Dresden, a very handsome and a very excellent man, but suffering from consumption. He treated me very kindly, and when we left gave me several very interesting books, both religious and secular.

From Dresden we went to Munich, thence to Baden-Baden, Wiesbaden, Coblenz, Cologne, Aix-la-Chapelle, Brussels, and Ostende; then, returning to Brussels, visited the field of Waterloo, and proceeded to Switzerland, passing through Berne, Interlachen, over the Jura and St. Gothard's, to Zurich. From Zurich we went to Como in Lombardy, where the Prince's eldest brother, Alexander, had a villa on the borders of the lake.<sup>56</sup> After a short stay here, we went on to Verona, and then to Milan, where I was left while the Prince made a short visit to Venice.

Here, while left alone, I did not behave as well as I might have done, sometimes drinking too much, and spending my money foolishly. Here also I saw, for the first time since leaving Africa, a countryman. He was named Mirza, and was born about thirty-five miles from Kooka, my native place. He was considerably older than I, and had been away from Africa some fifteen years. He was waiting on a Venetian Marquis whose name I have forgotten.

After a stay of four weeks in Milan, we started, via Genoa, Leghorn, and Pisa, for Florence. Here I attended my master at two levees, — one at the palace of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, where I believe I had a better time than the Prince, and the other at Prince Demidoff's. This latter gentleman is a very wealthy Russian, and is very widely known. He is not a nobleman in Russia, however, but has his title from the Grand Duke.

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He is well known for the disagreeable propensity he has for beating his servants. While he was in Vienna he was worsted in an attempt to chastise a Hungarian footman, but he would not quit the practice, and has paid several fines imposed by law in consequence.

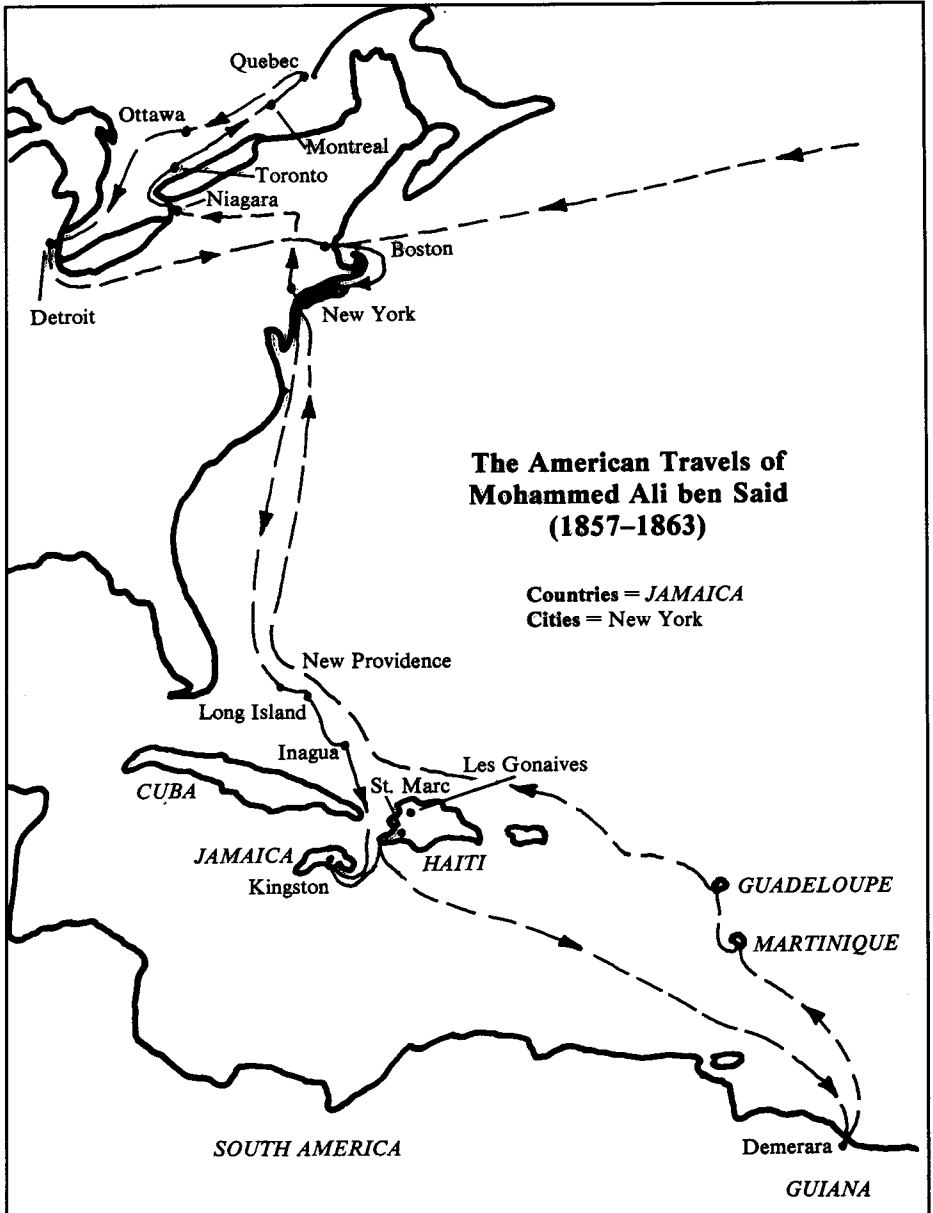
Our next stopping-place was Rome, where the Prince remained for the winter, making meanwhile a short visit to Naples, and leaving in the spring for Paris. We were in Paris when the Prince Imperial was born, and stayed until his christening, which was a very important day there.<sup>57</sup> I remember well the wonder of a young Russian servant-girl, that France should have still so many soldiers as appeared in the procession, — a fraction only, of course, of her army, — after losing so many in the Crimea. The Prince always took a great pride in dress, both for himself and his servants, and particularly here. I was always dressed in Turkish costume, embroidered with gold, and never costing less than two or three hundred dollars.

After a three months' stay in Paris we went to London, where the Prince took rooms at a first-class boarding-house; but he was invited almost all the time to different country seats, where I had very gay times, for the English servants live better than any in Europe.

At the conclusion of his English visit, the Prince returned to Baden-Baden, this time renting a house. While there Napoleon III passed through the place on his way to meet the Czar Alexander; and Prince Troubetzkoy was summoned to Frankfort-on-the-Main to attend on the latter. Here I was one day told by the Prince to dress myself in my best, and go to the Russian Ambassador's to wait on the Emperor at dinner. There were present beside the two Emperors, the King of Wurtemberg, the Grand Dukes of Baden, Hesse Darmstadt, and Nassau, the Ministers of France and Belgium, the Burgomaster of Frankfort, Messrs. Rothschild, and many others. A splendid dinner was served at six o'clock, the usual Russian dinner-hour, and was followed by a ball, which continued until two in the morning. A day previous to the monarch's departure Prince Gortchakoff handed my master thirty thalers as a present for me.<sup>58</sup>

About this time I began to think of the condition of Africa, my native country, how European encroachments might be stopped, and her nationalities united. I thought how powerful the United States had become since 1776, and I wondered if I were capable of persuading the kings of Soodan to send several hundred boys to learn the arts and sciences existing in civilized countries. I thought that I would willingly sacrifice my life, if need be, in realizing my dreams. I cried many times at the ignorance of my people, exposed to foreign ambition, who, however good warriors they might be, could not contend against superior weapons and tactics in the field. I prayed earnestly to be enabled to do some good to my race. The Prince could not but see that I was very sober, but I never told him my thoughts.<sup>59</sup>

We stayed at Baden-Baden all summer and part of the fall, and then left for Paris. The Prince made this journey to visit his niece, who had just been married to the Duc de Morny, formerly the French Ambassador to Russia. She was a most beautiful person, only seventeen years of age. I was taken to see her, and kiss her hand, according to custom. She at first hesitated to give me her hand, undoubtedly being afraid. I had never seen her in Russia, as she was at the Imperial University, studying.<sup>60</sup> After two



7. THE AMERICAN TRAVELS OF MOHAMMED ALI BEN SAID (1857-1863)

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weeks we again left Paris for Rome, via Switzerland, again passed the summer at Baden-Baden, again visited Paris, and various other points, until the year 1859 found the Prince again in London.

My desire to return to my native country had now become so strong, that I here told the Prince I must go home to my people. He tried to persuade me to the contrary, but I was inflexible in my determination. After he found that I was not to be persuaded, he got up with tears in his eyes, and said: "Said, I wish you good luck; you have served me honestly and faithfully, and if ever misfortune happens to you, remember I shall always be, as I always have been, interested in you." I, with many tears, replied that I was exceedingly thankful for all he had bestowed on me and done in my behalf, and that I should pray for him while I lived. I felt truly sorry to leave this most excellent Prince. As I was leaving, he gave me as a present two fifty-pound bills. It was many days before I overcame my regret. Often I could hardly eat for grief.

I now went to board at the Strangers' Home, at the West India Dock, five miles from where the Prince stopped. Here I waited for a steamer for Africa. Hardly had I been there two weeks, when a gentleman from Holland proposed to me a situation to travel with him in the United States and West India Islands. I had read much about these countries, and my desire to see them caused me to consent, and we left Liverpool soon after New Year's, 1860.

With this gentleman I went via Boston and New York to New Providence, Long Keys, Inagua, Kingston, Les Gonaives, St. Marc, Demerara, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and then back to New Providence, and from there by steamer to New York [See Fig. 7].<sup>61</sup> We remained in New York two months, and then visited Niagara Hamilton, Toronto, Kingston, Montreal, Quebec, and Ottawa until, finally, at a small village called Elmer, my employer's funds gave out, and I lent him five hundred dollars of my own money. Of this five hundred I received back only three hundred and eighty, and this failure compelled me to remain in this country and earn my living by work to which I was unaccustomed.

*At this point the written narrative of Nicholas ends at some date during the year 1861. He afterward went to Detroit, and taught a school for those of his own color, meeting there, I believe, a clergyman whom he had seen years before in Constantinople, while a servant to Prince Mentchikoff.<sup>62</sup> At Detroit he enlisted in a colored regiment in the summer of 1863. He served faithfully and bravely with his regiment as corporal and sergeant in the Department of the South, and near the close of the war was attached, at his own request, to the hospital department, to acquire some knowledge of medicine. He was mustered out with the company in which he served, in the fall of 1865. But, alas for his plans of service to his countrymen in his native land! like many a warrior before him, he fell captive to woman, married at the South, and for some time past the writer, amidst the changes of business, has entirely lost sight of him.*



NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Handwritten note in [Charles Barnard Fox], *Record of the Services of the 55th Colored Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (Cambridge, Mass.: John Wilson, 1868), copy held by Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass. — brought to my attention by Donald Yacavone. There is a Brownsville northeast of Memphis in *Colton's Atlas* (1856); no other town in Tennessee has a name closer to the one given in the handwritten note.
- <sup>2</sup> Becker became a Quartermaster Sergeant in March 1864, and was a member of the South Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1868. [Fox], *Record of the Services of the 55th*, 109, 112.
- <sup>3</sup> Norwood Hallowell, "The Negro as a Soldier in the War of the Rebellion," *Military Historical Society of Massachusetts Papers, XVII* (Read to the Society on 5 January 1892), 290. Col. Hallowell was in command of the 55th during the war.
- <sup>4</sup> The official records of the regiment have Said assuming this rank in July.
- <sup>5</sup> This "neighborhood" has been stretched at least 1,100 miles to the West — but Timbuctoo was probably the only interior African city Americans had heard of in 1863.
- <sup>6</sup> This baptism had been troublesome, as his autobiography makes clear.
- <sup>7</sup> A pleasing identification with native African Americans.
- <sup>8</sup> Readville, Massachusetts was the training camp for the famous 54th as well as the 55th Colored Regiments. *Groton Transcript*, June 23, 1863, in Hallowell Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston — brought to my attention by Donald Yacavone. Interview reprinted by permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society.
- <sup>9</sup> See *Record* for Company I activities, pp. 10, 12, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 30-31, 41-44, 47, 49, 53-58, 59, 66, 67, 68, 70, 74, 75; for second-class-soldier treatment and reactions including near mutinies, pp. 12, 14, 17-18; 28, 29, 31, 34, 35-37, 39, 47, 67; mustering out, p. 83; for official report on Said, p. 140. Further relevant information — including mentions of Said — may be found in Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), esp. 185, 200, 203; James M. McPherson, ed., *The Negro's Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1965), 194-95, 200, 201; and Hallowell, "The Negro as a Soldier," for comments on battles.
- <sup>10</sup> For more on Barca Gana see Louis Brenner, *The Shehus of Kukawa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 45-46, 60, 65, 100, and note 20 below.
- <sup>11</sup> For discussion of Bornu slavery and slave raiding in the 1800s, see Ronald Cohen and Louis Brenner, "Bornu in the Nineteenth Century," *History of West Africa*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976), II, 116, 124-25. For an argument that the 19th century trans-Saharan trade was mostly in slaves, based on accounts of European visitors in and expeditions toward Bornu, see John Wright, *Libya, Chad and the Central Sahara* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1989), 66-70. For a vivid description of one man's capture by Bornu raiders, an Arab raid which failed, and his conclusion that Kukawa, once Said's home, was a "slave city," see "The Life and Travels of Dorugu," Paul Newman, trans. and ed., in *West African Travels and Adventures: Two Autobiographical Narratives from Northern Nigeria* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1971), 28-129, esp. 34-38, 46-48, 80. Dorugu was a Hausa who served Barth — see below — over much of his travel. Dorugu's translator declares that, following a slave's capture, Bornu slavery was relatively humane compared to that in North Africa and America, p. 104, n. 1 — if they remained in Bornu, perhaps; but see also Cohen and Brenner, "Bornu in the Nineteenth Century," 24. Barth, in 1851, thought Bornu's slave trade to be mostly domestic. Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa: Being a Journal of an Expedition Undertaken under the Auspices of H. B. M. Government in the Years 1849-1855*, 3 vols. (1857-1858; rpt. London: Cass, 1965), I, xvii; II, 131-32. For a study of slave-master relations in Muslim-controlled East Africa offering intelligent comparisons with Christian slave societies, see Frederick Cooper,

- Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), introductory and final chapters. For suggestive comparisons between Africans enslaved in America, and Europeans or Americans enslaved by Muslims in North Africa, see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 49-65.
- <sup>12</sup> The British expeditions from 1822 to 1825 were led and reported on by Dixon Denham and Hugh Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa* (London, 1826), rpt. in *Missions to the Niger*, II, III (London: Hakluyt Society, 1966); and from 1850 to 1855 by Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*. For a narrative by another Kanuri, see H. F. C. Smith, D. M. Last, and Gambo Gubio, "Ali Eisami Gazirmabe of Bornu," in *Africa Remembered*, Philip D. Curtin, ed. (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 199-216. For other reporters see Frederick Hornemann (1798); Hanmer Warrington (1814-1845); George Lyon (1818-1820); James Richardson (1845-46).
- <sup>13</sup> This early commerce is described in Wright, *Libya, Chad and the Central Sahara*, 36-75 *passim*. Its revival under El Kanemy and the Karamanlis of Tripoli, and its lessening after the Turks took over the Fezzan in the 1830s, is discussed in Cohen and Brenner, "Bornu in the Nineteenth Century," 106, 113.
- <sup>14</sup> Bornu's royalty and business people adopted Islam in the early 12th century, beginning to the east of Lake Chad in Kanem. The territory of Kanem-Bornu has varying — often extensive — boundaries. Bornu lies now on the west side of the lake in present-day Nigeria. Bornu may hold the record for nationhood under one family, the Sefuwa Mais having been in power from the 10th century to 1846 — although in a very weak state from 1812 onward. Mai was the traditional title. Wright, *Libya, Chad and the Central Sahara*, 36-47; Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, II, 21.
- <sup>15</sup> *Fellatahs* is Arabic for the people called Fulbe or Fulani elsewhere. The story of Usuman Dan Fodio's dramatic rise may be found in Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usuman dan Fodio* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973).
- <sup>16</sup> Shaikh Mohammed al-Amin al-Kanemi's history as given by Said is essentially correct. El Kanemy was born in the Fezzan, studied in Egypt, and made the pilgrimage to Mecca. He died in 1837-38. He was an eloquent defender of his people in letters as well. Denham says El Kanemy called himself his country's savior. Barth calls him "the Liberator." Denham and Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, II, 767; Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, II, 601. For more on El Kanemy's life and his various names, see Cohen and Brenner, "Bornu in the Nineteenth Century," 95-106, 125-27; H. A. S. Johnston, *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 76-80; Johnston, 102-12; and Brenner, *The Shehus of Kukawa, passim*. For examples of his writings as ruler, poet, and diplomat, see Thomas Hodgkin, ed., *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), 27-29.
- There appears to be no final agreement on when these first Fulbe-Bornu struggles took place, but it was probably somewhere from 1807 to 1809. Brenner, *The Shehus of Kukawa*, 29-32; Cohen and Brenner, "Bornu in the Nineteenth Century," 96, n. 9. See also Smith, Last, and Gubio, "Ali Eisami," 199-201.
- <sup>17</sup> El Kameny's refusal of the sceptre was the equivalent of George Washington's refusal of a crown. Wright, *Libya, Chad and the Central Sahara*, 61.
- <sup>18</sup> Said's story of Mais Barnoma's (Mai Dunama) jealousy and treachery does not appear in Denham's outline of Mai rulers or in Barth's. But this royal scheme gone awry is a popular tale in Bornu even in our own time, illustrating yet another value to Said's first-hand account. Cohen and Brenner, "Bornu in the Nineteenth Century," 103. The Bagirmi are people living south of Lake Chad. Wright, *Libya, Chad and the Central Sahara*, 64.

- <sup>19</sup> These Lake Chad pirates, the “pagan” Budduma, were also admired by Barth, and by a former slave he met in Bornu. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, I, 447; II, 35.
- <sup>20</sup> Barca Gana, favorite military officer, though a slave of El Kanemy (such dual status was common in Bornu and elsewhere in the Muslim world), was called not *bagafuby*, but *kashella*, first general or governor in Denham, where he was described as a “negro of noble aspect.” But *bagafuby* may refer to this *kashella*’s command outside the capital. *Bagah furby* was a name given to a “gatherer of horses,” according to Denham. The latter owed much to Barca Gana for several favors, including the saving of his life. Denham says that Barca Gana was from Sankaran to the northeast of Kuka. Denham and Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, II, 245, 249, 263, 272; III, 338, 339, 345, 349, 371, 378, 388, 458, 467, 483. For more on Barca Gana, see Cohen, 104, 107, 126. For Barca Gana and other royal slaves (a situation suggesting important distinctions between Western and Muslim slavery) in Bornu, see Allan G. B. Fisher and Humphrey Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1972), 158, 168-70.
- But was this “Barca Gana” Said’s father? Said gave no family name — which was derived from the maternal side — in his autobiography. Nor do we have a family name for Barca Gana himself. “Barca Gana” was a slave name which Dorugu also shared — given to him by his Kanuri captors as a reference to his small stature. “Life and Travels of Dorugu,” 39. Barth mentions a *Kashella* Said (*Travels and Discoveries*, II, 640; III, 589) and a military officer, *Yagha Gana* (*Ibid.*, II, 639); Barth also mentions as his servant a young man who had the same name as our narrator, Mohammed ben S’ad, but nothing there connects them with our narrator. Said describes a mercantile family — the second generation, presumably. See also Brenner, cited above.
- <sup>21</sup> This great grandfather (a misreading of Said’s manuscript?) and his mother are said to have come from southwest of Kuka. This latter is likely, as that is the direction from whence came Said’s second language, Mandara.
- <sup>22</sup> This war is passed over very quickly in Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, II, 601, and elsewhere. It may be noted that from the moment Said mentions his birth, his account completely drops the nation’s history and picks up the personal. This, too, is a loss. Was it thus in the original manuscript?
- <sup>23</sup> For introductory notes on Sudanese-Turkish-Tripoli relations, see Louis Brenner, “The North African Trading Community in the Nineteenth-Century Central Sudan,” *Aspects of West African Islam*, Daniel F. McCall and Norman R. Bennett, eds., Boston University Papers on Africa, V, 1971, 137-50, esp. 145-46. Barth was aware of many in Bornu who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. The great trading city of Kuka or Kukawa and its market is described and illustrated in Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, I, 590; see also I, 591, 597; II, 49-60.
- <sup>24</sup> This schooling began around the age of six or seven — a common practice for the wealthy across the Sudan. Circumcision usually took place near the age of puberty in Kanuri society — timed often for when the rich boys were being similarly served. Ronald Cohen, *The Kanuri of Bornu* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), 64.
- <sup>25</sup> Curiously, Said does not mention the near destruction of Kukawa by the Waday in 1846; perhaps he was out of town then — his manuscript was confusing at that point. Neither does Said name any of his nation’s rulers after El Kanemy — who, by the way, took the title *Shehu*; the king referred to may have been Ibrahim, the last of the Mais, killed by El Kanemy’s son, Umar, in 1846. Denham’s account similarly describes the area around Lari on Lake Chad, which Barth called a good hunting ground. Dorugu told of stocking up just south of Lari at Yo for the torturous trek across the Sahara. And Barth argued that too little was done by El Kanemy’s successor — his son, *Shehu Omar* — to counter the attacks of the Tuaregs (Said’s “*Kindil*”).

The Kanuri word for Tuareg was “Kandin.” Cohen and Brenner, “Bornu in the Nineteenth Century,” 107; Denham and Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, II, 230-32; Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, II, 243, 573; “Life and Travels of Dorugu,” 81.

The great linguist Sigismund Koelle found about thirty Kanuri (down from 200 who had been freed by the British from foreign slave ships) in Sierra Leone in the early 1850s. Some had been captured and sent to the coasts by Fulbe, others by Hausa. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana* (London, 1854; rpt. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, 1963), 10. For the weakness of this area in the late 1840s, see Cohen and Brenner, “Bornu in the Nineteenth Century,” 113.

<sup>26</sup> A very nineteenth-century Romantic theme — and Odyssean, of course, in the guilt expressed for letting down friends.

<sup>27</sup> Said’s Kashna is Katsina (Northern Nigeria) — unhappily, after a long struggle, in the hands of the Fulbe. Barth admired the site of this city; *Travels and Discoveries*, I, 479. The mothers of both Mahommah Baquaqua and Abu Bakr al Siddiq, two other African Muslims whose biographies appear in Allan D. Austin, ed., *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Source Book* (New York: Garland, 1984), were from this city.

<sup>28</sup> Kano was the leading Hausa city at this time; Sokoto, the capital of the Fulbe empire. This Abd al-Qadir of Katsina and the north may be the same black chief or merchant met by Barth, who heard of some of his trading activity. *Travels and Discoveries*, I, 320; III, 563-64.

<sup>29</sup> Dorugu’s narrative is helpful here; he describes this desert crossing, the deer, what the non-slave travelers ate after cinching their belts tightly so they would not have to eat much, 81-82. For a short sketch of the history of trans-Saharan slave journeys, which dated at least as far back as the 9th century C.E., see Fisher and Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa*, 71-73. In this area, Denham found steep hills, not “plains” — perhaps the narrator was using a too simple word here — but it was sandy. Denham and Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, II, 216-18.

<sup>30</sup> Tiboo is a reference to the people, the Tebu, in control of the oasis of Bilma — Said’s Boolma.

<sup>31</sup> A trip in the opposite direction, Bilma to Katsina, took seventeen days, according to Denham. Bilma (in-between mountains, but not on a mountain) looked pitiful to Barth, too, but Denham was less critical. Barth witnessed slaves of the Tuareg Tibu heading for Tripoli, singing as they went, he says; he also saw a Kanuri caravan of 750 slaves heading north. Dorugu, on the other hand, said little about Bilma or slave marches. Denham and Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, II, 214-16; III, 19; Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, II, 78; III, 608, 613. “The Life and Travels of Dorugu,” 82.

<sup>32</sup> The black earth was noticed by Oudney with Denham and Clapperton. Natron, or carbonate of soda, from Lake Chad, was traded across the central Sudan (e.g., Kano, Kukawa, and Agades). The salt came from Bilma. A “Kindin” in Sierra Leone who made six of these trips from Asben to Bilma (an eleven-day trip, then) was kidnapped by Kanuri. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, I, 515, 533; II, 428; Denham and Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, II, 211, 212, 215; Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana*, 17.

For pictures of an only slightly modernized but recent salt caravan coming out of Bilma, see Victor Englebert, “I Joined a Sahara Salt Caravan,” *National Geographic* (November 1965): 694-711. The sea shells may have come from a prehistoric lake or part of what was eventually reduced to the present Lake Chad. Abdullahi Smith, “The Early States of the Central Sudan,” *History of West Africa*, I, 154, n. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Dorugu told of being with raiders who allowed no fires. Said’s master probably feared discovery by raiding Tuaregs. “Life and Travels of Dorugu,” 46.

<sup>34</sup> The highest mountains are midway between Bilma and Murzuk. Said’s place names do not always agree with Barth’s, but they may not have stopped at the same places or followed the

- same path from Bilma to Murzuk. Probably there were parallel routes to avoid raiding Tuaregs. Several oases north of Bilma are noted in Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, III, 619; Denham and Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, III, 226. Dorugu (85) mentions dates near Gatron, Barth's El Gatroni (*Travels and Discoveries*, III, 625) — Said's El Kaheni? Large date orchards were seen below Gatroni by Denham, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries*, II, 199.
- <sup>35</sup> On his way south, Barth visited with M. Gagliuffi, the British agent who "registered" slaves passing through Murzuk in 1849. Murzuk is barely described in Denham, II, 145.
- <sup>36</sup> Not much is said by Said about the condition he was in after his long march. Nor is there any hint of there being a high female to male ratio — supposedly common in this trade; nor instances of wholesale slaughter; nor of death by natural Saharan causes, lack of water, or freezing; the material needs of these slaves were apparently being met. One wonders, however, if Said overlooked what happened to stragglers or captives who were beneath his class. For dangers of this crossing, and examples of successful caravans, see Fisher and Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa*, 94-95, 96, 97-98.
- <sup>37</sup> Barth did not much care for this town then under the control of the Turks. There he found only three usable gates, and further disagreed with Said's report by saying the largest gate was to the east, I, 149, 151, 152. I cannot account for the differences in these two reports. Perhaps Said was compressing several townscapes after an absence of nearly twenty years. His note about the relative quality of Murzuk and English houses, by the way, may be compared to Dorugu's asserting that after having seen both, he preferred those of Central Africa or, at least, Sokoto. "Life and Travels of Dorugu," 60. Murzuk is prettily pictured in Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, I, 153. The city was indeed controlled by the Pachalic of Fezzan under Turkish rule. The autobiography's tone here suggests something about the Said family's undoubtedly greater wealth.
- <sup>38</sup> His first task as a slave was disagreeable to one of his class — working in the fields.
- <sup>39</sup> Said's "Kanowry" is Kanuri — his own people in part.
- <sup>40</sup> The Kanuri controlled part of the Fezzan in the mid-13th century, and Kanuri place names still exist there. Kanuri teachers were famous even in Egypt, where a school for Kanuri scholars was founded about the 1240s. Abdullahi Smith, *History of West Africa*, I, 166, n. 38; 167; 169.
- <sup>41</sup> This bespectacled registrar may have been M. Gagliuffi. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, I, 149, 151, 157.
- <sup>42</sup> Said here provides more information on the trade and the business-like Abd-el-Kader. Hausa women seem to have been commonly preferred over Kanuri. Barth, a European, thought the former more attractive. *Travels and Discoveries*, I, 535-36.
- <sup>43</sup> Said's master was afraid because he was in the land of the Christians, of course. Did Said miss making a point here? Muscat was probably another editorial error — it should read Massawa. Nearly the same route (from Khartoum to Mecca) is discussed and illustrated in Owen Tweedy, "An Unbeliever Joins the Hadj," *National Geographic*, LXV (June 1934): 761-89.
- <sup>44</sup> Rashid (1803-1858), a Westernizer, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs after May 1853. Samuel M. Smucker, *Life and Reign of Nicholas the First, Emperor of Russia* (Philadelphia: J. W. Bradley, 1860), 293.
- <sup>45</sup> This ship was named after Abdul Medjid Khan, Sultan of Turkey, 1839-61. He was a sometime reformer; one of these reformations, urged by Rashid, concerned the abolition of African slave markets throughout the Empire. Joan Haslip, *The Sultan: The Life of Abdul Hamid II* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973), 24.
- <sup>46</sup> Was Said using "august master" ironically? War was not yet declared at this time.
- <sup>47</sup> Prince Alexander Sergeivitch Menshikoff (Menshikov) (1789-1869) had been sent to Constantinople by Czar Nicholas I in May 1853 as an Envoy Extraordinary trying to cow the

Turks into a peace giving the Russians powers. Within less than three weeks, Yusuf Kavass had sold Said to Menhikov. It was the Vladimir which took Menshikov on the first leg of the long trip to St. Petersburg from Constantinople on 21 May 1853. War was declared by Turkey in October 1853. Smucker, *Life and Reign of Nicholas the First*, 292-95. This is the handiest date for guessing at Said's chronology. In reverse order, if he was sold to Menshikov in the spring, had been sold to Kavass in the previous winter, had been owned eighteen months by Effendi, traveled to Mecca early in what must have been 1851, had been owned by Hadji Daoud not long before and by Abdy Agra for three months earlier, and was with Abu el-Kader for a few months, then he may have been kidnapped in 1849. However, insofar as Said did not mention the Waday attack on his home town in 1847, it is possible that he compressed his time spent in slavery in North Africa and Turkey.

- <sup>48</sup> Here, again, Said compares his owner's wealth favorably with that of others — a matter of great interest to him. Menshikov took command at the Alma River near Sebastopol in Sept. 1854. Smucker, *Life and Reign of Nicholas the First*, 314. Said also asserts himself and manages to lighten his burden. A beginning of the story of Africans in Russia was made in A. B. Davidson, D. A. Olderogge, and V. G. Sodobnikov, eds., *Russia and Africa* (Moscow, 1966). The work consists of a series of papers presented to the Conference on the Historical Relations of the Peoples of the Soviet Union and Africa, 1965. See especially Lily O. Golden-Hanga, "Africans in Russia," 25-38 and S. Y. Abramove, "Russia and the Struggle for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the Late 18th-Early 19th Centuries," 46-54. Dmitry Olderogge supplied the text for *The Art of Africa: Negro Art from the Institute of Ethnography, Leningrad* (London: Hamlyn, 1969). Since then, there is Mina Curtiss, "Some American Negroes in Russia in the Nineteenth Century," *Massachusetts Review* (Spring 1968), 268-96; Edward Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa Before World War II*, New York: Holmes & Meier, 1974; Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian Thought and History* (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1986); Yelena Khanga, *Soul to Soul: A Black Russian American Family, 1865-1992* (New York: Norton, 1992). (Khanga is the daughter of Lily Golden — herself the daughter of an African-American communist and his Polish-Jewish-American wife who moved to Russia — and Abdullah Khanga, a Muslim from Tanzania.) None of these texts provide direct support for Said's story, unfortunately.
- <sup>49</sup> The early Trubetzkoi fought against the Turks (1827-28). They were described as a "powerful family, [who] live at P—— and they attend the court," according to the Marquis de Custine, *Russia* (London, 1854), 263.
- <sup>50</sup> Said does not describe this baptism as if he were a sincere convert nor does his autobiography reflect it. This incident's being so strongly recalled, however — in ways users of his name could little suspect — does provide another useful date for his history.
- <sup>51</sup> A commonly held opinion on Czar Nicholas, and a subtle diagnosis by Said of his master.
- <sup>52</sup> Kars fell 29 Sept. 1855; Schamyl (1797-1871) was a famous Circassian military leader. Smucker, *Life and Reign of Nicholas the First*, 362-70.
- <sup>53</sup> Sic.
- <sup>54</sup> Czar Nicholas' death was announced on 2 March 1855 (18 February, Old calendar). Said and Trubetzkoi must have started out for Europe that same month.
- <sup>55</sup> An American in Russia at about this time described blacks in Moorish costumes. He also told of Russians thinking that Americans were predominantly black, as most U.S. representatives they had come into contact with were black, rather than white. Further, he attended a concert where one of the violinists was a black American. John S. Maxwell, *The Czar, His Court, and People* (New York, 1848), 153, 207-8.
- <sup>56</sup> St. Gothards, Zurich, and Interlaken seem to have become geographically confused.

- <sup>57</sup> A Prince Demidoff is mentioned in Maxwell, *The Czar, His Court, and People*, 152, and as being a cruel spouse to a French noblewoman in J. M. Thompson, *Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire* (New York: Norton, 1967), 64. The Prince Imperial, Sergei, was born in 1857.
- <sup>58</sup> Rev. Jonas King, referred to elsewhere in the present essay, called on Czar Alexander in Berlin on 20 Sept. 1857. F. E. H. Haines, *Jonas King: Missionary to Syria and Greece* (New York: American Tract Society, 1879), 338. The Czar's German tour — Berlin, Wurtemberg, Stuttgart — is mentioned in Stephen Graham, *Tsar of Freedom: The Life and Reign of Alexander II* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1935), 66. Prince Alexander Gorchakov (1798-1883) was Czar Alexander II's Foreign Minister. Graham, *Tsar of Freedom*, 142-45.
- <sup>59</sup> Said was acutely aware of the European threat to Africa, and thus quite early pondered a pan-African unity similar to that of United States federalism. This sense of the commonality of experience of the victims of the African Diaspora probably helped him to decide to visit those parts of the New World where Africans had been taken and where former colonies had united and made themselves free. It must also have been one of the reasons why Said joined the Union Army a few years later. It was a revolutionary and empire-building age.
- <sup>60</sup> The Duke de Morny was an important member of Louis Napoleon's government for many years. His name appears often, and there is a mention of his unnamed Russian wife in Thompson, *Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire*, e.g. 133.
- <sup>61</sup> That is, after visiting the Northamerican mainland, Said travelled to the Bahamas, Jamaica, Haiti, Guyana in South America, then back to North America.
- <sup>62</sup> Said obviously continued to despise manual labor after freedom as before. The clergyman was probably William Goodell (1792-1867). A missionary sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions in Constantinople, 1831-51, 1853-56, Goodell was well known among Turkey's Westernizers such as Rashid Pasha. He regularly gave sermons in English, German, Greek, Turkish, and Armenian — all in a single day. Goodell toured America to raise money for his fellow missionaries and might have met Said in 1865. Goodell's own story is poor on dates and organization, but it gives some sense of his brave enterprise. It also includes a color portrait of Sultan Abdul Medjid, whom Goodell praised for liberality. Goodell, *The Old and the New: or The Changes of Thirty Years in the East* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1853), 14, 86, 213. *Who Was Who: Historical Volume* (Chicago: Marquis, 19—), 209.