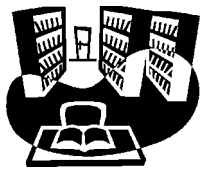
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QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU READ IT

Translating slavery

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"I have heard, Salim," said my master, "that you are a good dancer and singer. I wish you to show my guests what you can do!"

I felt dreadfully nervous—suffering from what an actor, I suppose, would describe as stage fright. But I drew a deep breath and plunged right into it.

My first "number" was a lively little song the Dinka children used to sing and dance to—approximating, I suppose, what is known in England as a "nursery rhyme"—only, of course, we poor Dinkas had no nurseries.

It had a lively little lilt, and I put all I knew into it, anxious to earn my master's praise. By the time I had embarked on the second verse I was glad to see that several of the listeners' heads and hands were keeping time to the lilt, and I knew that I "had got them," as an English performer would phrase it.

At the end of the song I did the dance, with a few variations of my own, humming the tune in time to my own movements.

When I had finished, I was told to give them another one, which I did. And I finished up with as good an imitation as I could give of a Dinka war-dance—which, strangely (and dangerously) enough, fired me with a sudden desire to attack these men who were the enemies and destroyers of my tribe. Luckily I was able to resist the inclination, or my end might have been something like that of Samson when he pulled the building down upon the Philistines. Only not so successful! It did not occur to me, either at the time or afterward, that if that Koran had really been up to its job it would certainly have told my master how near he and his guests were to being attacked by a Dinka boy rendered suddenly venomous by singing his tribal war song.

Anyway, my performance was received very well, and I was rewarded by hearing the guests tell each other, in my hearing, that I should grow into a fine man.[1]

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This excerpt comes from the 1939 edition of *I Was a Slave*, the autobiography of Salim C. Wilson, a Sudanese former slave. I am focusing on how 19th-century African slavery was remembered by slaves and slave owners in the Nile Valley, and one of the issues that recurs in the narratives is the language each writer chooses to relate stories of slavery. Memoirs by Egyptian or Sudanese writers discussing household relationships with family slaves were written first in Arabic.[2] This never seems to be the case, however, when writers who themselves had been slaves wrote about their experiences. These accounts were published only after the writer no longer lived in the Nile Valley and had learned to speak in languages like English, French, or Italian.

What also interests me is how former Sudanese slaves negotiated their way between languages as part of the experience of slavery itself. Beginning with the loss of their childhood names and the bestowal of new names once they were purchased, people like Salim Wilson had to translate their preenslaved lives from languages like Dinka into Arabic, the language of their masters. Writing his autobiography, Wilson had to explain all this again in English. An introductory chapter of *I Was a Slave* recounts how he got his Dinka name, Hatashil Masha Kathish, and what each of those three names meant to his family and to his tribe.[3] "Salim" was the name given by his first master and "Wilson" the name of his "first English friend."[4]

As the excerpt above shows, Salim Wilson's narrative demonstrates many other levels of translating, some of which may be attributed to his book being "ghost-written and heavily edited" and others to how many roles Salim saw himself playing during his enslaved adolescence.[5] He presents himself here trying to please his master and so putting all he can into the "lively little lilt" that he remembers from childhood. The desire to please quickly transforms into a desire to destroy his audience as he changes songs from a childhood ditty to a "Dinka war dance." He must count on his audience's ignorance of the Dinka language for the dance to be a success. Moreover, there is another indication of the fearsome power of Arabic here, the Arabic of the Qur'an, for as a new slave Salim has been told that the Qur'an has such power it can see into the minds of slaves and tell their masters when they are contemplating escape.[6] He thus takes refuge in the wrath of the war dance and the hope that the Qur'an, so powerful a symbol, cannot decipher the dance's true meaning as he dances both in obedience to Arabic speakers and in defiance of their language and their sacred book.

Many Salims seem to perform in this excerpt: the young slave, newly introduced to the Arabic language; the teenage man-child, dancing as he thinks a Dinka warrior would; and the fine man he became, as prophesied by his master, now so fluent in English that he can reclaim his independence in this one scene.

NOTES

[1]Salim C. Wilson, *I Was a Slave* (London: Stanley Paul and Company, 1935), 152–53.

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[2]Two important examples of these memoirs are Huda Sha'rawi's *Mudhakirati* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1981) and Babikr Bedri's *Mudhakirat*, translated as *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri* by Yusuf Bedri and George Scott (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

[3]Wilson, *I Was a Slave*, 20–26.

[4]Ibid., 229.

[5]Douglas H. Johnson, "Salim Wilson: The Black Evangelist of the North," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 21 (1991): 38.

[6]Wilson, *I Was a Slave*, 129.

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