

Muhammad Kabā Saghanughu's Arabic Address on the Occasion of Emancipation in Jamaica

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In honor of full emancipation in the British West Indies in 1838, Muhammad Kabā Saghanughu, a ninety-year-old formerly enslaved man in Jamaica, wrote an address using Arabic letters to represent English sounds ('ajami) and submitted it to Sir Lionel Smith, governor of Jamaica, who kept it in his personal papers. Kabā Saghanughu is the only known author of a first-person slave narrative to have survived all phases of slavery, from his kidnapping in Africa in 1777 to emancipation sixty-one years later. This article describes the circumstances in which Kabā Saghanughu composed this newly discovered document and provides the first modern translation of the address. The translation reveals crucial differences between Kabā Saghanughu's original text and the imperial translation of his address provided in official colonial documents. Omitted from the latter are words that refer vividly to physical and psychological suffering under slavery and apprenticeship. Though other addresses produced by former apprentices or by their ministers on this occasion promised obedience and offered gratitude for freedom, Kabā Saghanughu seized this moment of imperial self-congratulation to decry the enormous human suffering caused by slavery, to reflect on his condition, and to transmit a concise account of his own life to posterity.