**Islam and the Blues**

**Introduction**

For more than a century the blues, born in the Deep South, has conjured up images of cotton fields, oppressed sharecroppers, pain, lonesomeness and misery. When one thinks about a music so embedded into rural African-American culture, Islam does not come to mind. Yet it should, because the deepest roots of the blues are not in the Mississippi Delta, but thousands of miles away.

It all started in the Sahel (shore, in Arabic) – the 1000-mile wide savannah belt just south of the Sahara Desert, stretching from the Atlantic Coast in the West to the Red Sea in the East. In the Sahel, people from Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, and neighboring countries created, out of various influences, the musical style that eventually traveled west with the Transatlantic Slave Trade and transformed itself on the American plantations.

As early as the 8th century, Sahelian West Africans came into contact with Muslim Arab and Berber traders from North Africa. By the dawn of the 11th century, many had converted to Islam, which had spread peacefully, not through wars or conquests. The sub-Saharan Muslims traded with the North Africans, traveling to Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, and even as far as Arabia – 3,800 miles away – to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Among the cultural exchanges that took place between North Africa and the Middle East, on the one hand, and the Sahel, on the other, were music and a singing style of a particular kind.  The characteristics of the Islamic type of singing that Sahelians adopted are found, primarily, in the recitation of the Qur’an and the call to prayer (the Adhan).

When reciting the Qur’an, the individual, male or female, uses wavy intonations, strong trembling sounds, vibrato, long pauses between sentences; they lengthen the notes and they use melisma (changes to the note of a syllable) while they are chanting it. These techniques are also used by the muezzin in delivering the call to prayer five times a day from the minaret of the mosque. Although the recitation of the Qur’an and the call to prayer are not music, they are musical, and have influenced religious and secular singing throughout the Muslim world. Sahelian Muslims adapted and transformed the Islamic style of declamation and solo reciting and singing to make it their own.  In parallel, West Africans deported through the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade brought their music and rhythms to North Africa and the Middle East where they were often employed as musicians. They too influenced the musical and singing style of the countries they were forced to live in. Especially among Sufis, an Africanization of Islamic elements took place.

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These techniques are also present in the call to prayer that the muezzin delivers five times a day from the minaret of the mosque. Although the recitation of the Qur’an and the call to prayer are not music, they are musical and have influenced religious and secular singing throughout the Muslim world. Sahelian Muslims adapted and transformed the Islamic style of declamation and solo reciting and singing to make it their own. In parallel, West Africans deported through the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade brought their music and rhythms to North Africa and the Middle East where they were often employed as musicians, and they too influenced the musical and singing style of the countries they were forced to live in. Especially among Sufi, there was an Africanization of Islamic elements.

**West African Music in America**

It is this rich heritage that West African Muslims brought to the United States. About 24 percent of the estimated 400,000 Africans who landed in this country came from Senegambia, where Islam had been implanted the longest. Not all Senegambians were Muslims, but many had lived in Muslim kingdoms or in proximity to Muslims, and they too were familiar with the Islamic singing style. In addition, Muslims from other areas of West Africa were also deported to North America. In the American South, Africans from different regions, representing a variety of religions and cultures came into contact, each bringing its own musical style.

The more numerous non-Muslims from coastal West Africa and Central Africa relied heavily on drumming, complex rhythms and above all group singing and dancing; while the Senegambians and other Muslims were used to playing string instruments—they had dozens of kinds of lutes-- and singing solo. In the end one kind of music predominated, due in part to a significant event that took place in South Carolina. In 1739, Africans originally from the Central African country of Angola launched an uprising during which they used drums to call to revolt and to encourage their troops. The following year, drums were forbidden throughout the South, except in Louisiana, which at the time was French. Following this law, Senegambian musicians who traditionally played string and wind instruments could continue to perform while other Africans were prohibited from playing their drum-based, collective music.

The fact that the blues, or anything remotely sounding like it, does not exist in any other countries in the Americas is thus due to two main reasons. The United States received the highest proportion of men and women from the Sahel; and it is also the only country in the Americas where drumming was strictly forbidden. Whereas Afro-Caribbean’s, Afro-Brazilians, or Afro-Uruguayans developed a strong drumming tradition, African Americans did not and what makes their music so different is precisely the dominance of Sahelian /Islamic elements.

Moreover, the Senegambians quickly adapted to European string instruments such as the fiddle and the guitar, and from their lutes, they created the banjo later adopted by white musicians. They also continued to fashion the typical instrument of the Mandinka people, the kora**,** as witnessed by Benjamin Latrobe who saw one at a gathering in Congo Square in New Orleans in 1819.

**The Blues**

When over one million Africans and African Americans, victims of the domestic slave trade (1790s-1865) were transported from the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland to the Deep South following the expansion of cotton cultivation, they carried their musical culture to the new territories of Alabama, Mississippi and Texas.

There, the individual style of singing typical of the Sahel imposed itself in a new environment where slave gatherings of any sorts being severely suppressed, the Central Africans’ collective expressions of culture could hardly survive.

It is in the bleak Deep South that the blues evolved. One of its early ancestors was the field holler. Contrary to the work song, the field holler was sung solo. Traveler and author Frederick Law Olmsted heard in 1853 a man in South Carolina raising a “long, loud, musical shout, rising and falling and breaking into falsetto his voice ringing through the woods in the clear, frosty night air, like a bugle call.” As noted by historian Sylviane A. Diouf, this type of call brings to mind another call: the Muslim call to prayer, the *adhan*. Like the *adhan*, she has shown, the song “Levee Camp Holler,” recorded by musicologist Alan Lomax in a Mississippi penitentiary in the 1930s, could have floated from a minaret. Field hollers have the same ornamented notes, tortuously elongated sounds, pauses, humming, melisma, and simple melody as the call to prayer. Traditional blues singer Horace Sprott, born on a plantation in Alabama, recalled hearing the elders sing in that manner in the nineteenth century and he kept the style alive well into the twentieth century. There is little doubt that African Muslims who continued to pray on the plantations also called to prayer. To non-Muslim whites and blacks, the *adhan* would have sounded just like another song.

The similarities between the blues and the chanting of the Qur’an are equally strong and melisma, wavy intonations, and declamation became the traditional style of blues singers. The techniques used by blues guitarists are also similar to those developed in the Sahel as noted by musicologist John Storm Roberts. The kora, he wrote, is “played in a rhythmic-melodic style that uses constantly changing rhythms, often providing a ground bass overlaid with complex treble patterns, while vocal supplies a third rhythmic layer,” and concludes, “similar techniques can be found in hundreds of blues records.” Yet, African Muslims were not the only contributors to the blues. For example, sliding the cords of a guitar with a bottleneck; and the mouth instrument called the diddley bow all found their origin in Central Africa.

Still, as blues expert Gerhard Kubik emphasizes, “most of the blues tradition in the rural areas of Mississippi has prevailed as a recognizable extension in the New World” of the musical style of the Sahelians. It is one of the most familiar but also the most hidden and forgotten contributions of West African Muslims to American culture.

**For further reading**  
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Roberts, John Storm. *Black Music of Two Worlds*. New York: Praeger, 1972.

**Links**

Afropop interview of Gerhard Kubik

<http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/112/Gerhard+Kubik-2007>

The Origins of the West African Lute

http://musc265proj.blogs.wesleyan.edu/ngoni/history-of-the-instrument/