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Islam and Black America

Islam and the Blues

Fatima El Shibli

Many enslaved Africans brought to the United States during the transatlantic slave trade were Muslims. Although eventually stripped of their beliefs, customs, and traditions in the New World, their religious faith would play a seminal role in the creation of a new music genre: the blues. This article argues that when comparing the early blues to the musical practices of Islam, the Islamic influences on the blues are strikingly evident.

Keywords: african retentions, blues, enslaved muslims, islam, melismas, solo singing

The blues is considered one of the most important American musical genres, yet we know remarkably little about the origins of this art form; the emergence of the blues has been understudied and undocumented, mainly because recording devices did not exist at the time of its inception, and unlike most notated European music, the blues was passed on orally. During slavery and following emancipation, European-Americans expressed little interest in African culture or religion. Africans were largely seen as savages with no sophisticated musical forms, ignorant of Western scales and harmony.¹ But scholars agree on the strong African influence in the music. In fact, the genre known as the blues would probably not exist were it not for the African presence in America. But it does not have to remain a mystery. Though the many cultures and beliefs that came together in the New World make it impossible to credit one particular people or culture as giving birth to the early blues, the African influence has to be regarded as one of the most important.

But, given the African continent's phenomenal ethno-linguistic and cultural diversity, it is not enough to simply assert such "African influences." In recent years, the need to identify the multiple African influences on the blues has produced a vast and scattered literature. Of particular interest is the hypothesis put forth by music critics and historians such as John Storm Roberts, Gerhard Kubik, and Sylviane Diouf pointing to the influences of

Islamic practices on the early blues. This thesis draws on the research of historians such as Allan Austin and Michael Gomez documenting the presence of West African Muslim slaves, brought to the New World during the transatlantic slave trade. One major element seldom mentioned is the musical influence Islamic practices had on the early blues. According to Gomez, at least 50 percent of enslaved Africans brought to North America came from regions that were Islamic.² Even though it is difficult to estimate the total number of Muslims among the enslaved Africans in the antebellum South, “they and their role in our history and their relations with and effect on Islam elsewhere cannot be neglected any longer.”³

Scholars such as Samuel Charters and Alan Lomax note characteristics of the early blues that resemble the music they collected and recorded in West African regions: Distinct vocal characteristics such as solo, unaccompanied singing, the use of melismas, slurring and gliding into pitches, and a nasal sound. In fact, when Ali Farka Toure the late great Malian musician, first heard a recording of blues singer John Lee Hooker, he believed that Hooker was playing music derived from his homeland of Mali. Toure, the Bluesman of Africa, emphasized the Islamic influences he heard in the American blues, saying, “Nearly two hundred years later, Africans hear American music and hear themselves, and Americans hear Africa and hear the blues.”⁴ Although Muslim slaves were for the most part not allowed to pursue their religious customs, it has become increasingly evident that the musical elements Islamic practices contain undoubtedly influenced their informal musical performances, which are believed to be the roots of the early blues.⁵

From North Africa, Islam spread southward toward the savanna region south of the Sahara Desert (Sahel) in the early ninth century AD. By the fourteenth century, Islam reached northern Nigeria, where Muslims became known as Malé. Cultural mixing occurred as Arabic and Islamic influences spread through the conversion of Africans and Islam itself became Africanized. In his book, entitled *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka estimates that close to 85 percent of all slaves brought to the United States came from West Africa, from areas that are today known as Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Gambia, Benin, Nigeria, and Liberia. One of the regions that exported the most slaves is the Savanna Belt, which had large groups of Muslims including the Wolof, Malinké, Hausa, Fulani, and Mandingo.

Evidence of an African Muslim presence in the New World includes documents such as lists of slaves, runaway advertisements with Muslim names, and narratives written by Muslim slaves.⁶ The fact that Islam stresses the importance of learning meant that many Muslim slaves were literate and kept journals or communicated through letters in Arabic with each other. Hence by the beginning of the nineteenth century, which is also the time of the first audio recordings, most enslaved Muslims had—willingly or unwillingly—converted to Christianity. But African slaves found other ways to follow their beliefs. Some practiced in secret; others pretended to accept Christianity but maintained their true faith of Islam, incorporating their beliefs into the Christian traditions producing a syncretic belief system. Diouf refers to this as “pseudoconversion.” Umar, a Muslim slave for example, was found to add Christian prayers to his belief, “a not uncommon practice for religious Muslims among Christians, pleasing the latter and consistent with the Quran that honors Jesus as an early prophet.”⁷

Islamic influences on the early blues have also long been ignored because of the difference between Western and Islamic perceptions of what constitutes “music.” The Islamic practices that have strongly influenced any secular African music in Islamic regions are the vocal call to prayer and the recitation of the Koran. While these practices are highly musical, Muslims do not consider them to be music and non-Muslims are often not aware of the musicality they contain. Therefore both sides are unable to make the necessary connection. Moreover, the early blues, West African chants and the musical practices of Islam



“Ali Farka Toure Performing at the Africa Festival, Lisbon” July 2005 © Mário Pires

were often passed on orally, and music scholars however have often neglected oral history. Even though similarities between them are discernible, a notation in the sense of a Western understanding is difficult to identify. Any notation will most likely not capture the full performance. There are only so many ways of transcribing vocal fluctuations, volume increases, intonation, or the feeling and intention behind the vocal performers.

Islamic musical practices, in particular the melodic element, have strongly influenced the traditional music of West Africans who have incorporated some of these characteristics.⁸ Samuel Charters, who studied the roots of the blues in Africa, “was surprised to hear how much Arabic influence there was in the music.”⁹ When recording in Gambia, he focused on griot singers of the predominantly Muslim Wolof, Mandingo and Fula—“the tribes that had been part of the wave of slaves taken to the United States”—because, in his opinion, they most resembled blues singers.¹⁰ Gerhard Kubik argues that the vocal style of many blues singers is Islamic in origin: “The Muslim call to prayer is heard five times a day, seven days a week, wherever Islam is practiced. It has been heard for hundreds of years in many parts of Africa. Its relatively simple but long and highly decorated, very characteristic Arabic melodic approach found its way into much African music.”¹¹ Sylviane Diouf in turn notes that, “Even an untrained ear can recognize the similarities that exist between the blues and Islamic-influenced West African music; but parallels are as strong between some blues pieces and the musical recitation of the Koran.”¹² Some obvious influences a listener hears, such as gliding or the bending of notes, are not easily notated and therefore may have missed documentation altogether. An extensive Islamic oral tradition must be compressed into barlines and conformed to a notation system that is based on the twelve chromatic pitches of the Western scale system, a different musical reality.

Kubik identifies the Mississippi Delta as the most important area for African stylistic influences in the blues. Among these characteristics are a predominantly solo singing tradition, the related unaccompanied field hollers, the use of wavy intonation in many forms of the blues, “with plenty of melismas, slurs, gliss tones, and timbre-melodic sequences that form the non-Western expressive repertoire of the blues.”¹³ The bending of notes common in the vocal blues is also reminiscent of Islamic African music.¹⁴ This practice produces

“quarter tones, especially at the third and fifth and seventh of the scale.” Kubik confirms the close link to Islamic practices: “Coincidence or not, all these features are found in Islamic African music and hardly at all in other styles.”¹⁵ He credits the use of melismas and the wavy intonation of many blues singers to the “heritage of that large region of West Africa that had been in contact with the Arabic-Islamic world of the Mahgreb since the seventh and eighth centuries A.D.”¹⁶

Lomax’s research of the early blues, including his study of the Levee-Camp Holler (1961) and other hollers among prisoners in the penitentiary of the Delta regions is also revealing. He points out the same characteristics that are found in the practices of Islam: “All these hollers share a set of distinctive features. They are solos, slow in tempo, free in rhythm, composed of long, gliding, ornamented and melismatic phrases, given a melancholic character by minor intervals as well as by blued or bent tones. . .”¹⁷ Lomax notes that the long-meter hymns and the work hollers fall into a different genre of American slave songs. He cites a description by “Peabody” of hymns and songs as “long phrases there were without apparent measured rhythm, singularly hard to copy in notes” and “the singer was skilful in gliding from hymn-motive to those of the native chant.”¹⁸ This embellished unaccompanied singing can also be heard in the empires of North Africa, the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Lomax submits that these songs came into existence when some Wolof were brought to the Mississippi and they began singing these types of hollers. He notes that he heard these “song types” in the cattle-raising kingdoms of Northwest Africa particularly among the Wolof in Senegal, and the Islamic Hausa of Northern Nigeria. Lomax uses the image of a *muezzin* even though he does not directly link his findings to the Islamic origin, when describing the nature of the lonesome holler found in the Delta regions: “The *muezzin* calls the faithful to worship in this fashion . . . the complaint, the plea for mercy, shaped most cadences to a minor wail.” This song-type he concludes, “turns up in West Africa, and in the Americas gave rise to the blues.”¹⁹

There are similarities between the vocal characteristics of classic Islamic practices,²⁰ the West African singing styles of predominantly Muslim regions and the early blues. In my comparison, the focus is on male solo performance.

The recitation of the Koran is a male solo performance of which there are two basic styles: the *muarattal*, the straightforward style, and the *mujawwad*, the elaborate one, which here will be compared to the early blues. The *muarattal* is usually used for personal daily prayers and for the study of the Koran whereas the *mujawwad* serves live performances and recordings. Any reciter of the *mujawwad* uses his voice and musicality to the best of his ability. Reciters learn by listening to the melodic styles of other reciters and by imitating them. Any formal musical training they may have had teaches only the principles of Arabic music, and not how to melodically recite the Koran. The reciter then eventually develops his personal style.

In the *mujawwad*, the vocal ornamentation, which causes the elongation of the syllables, is an important characteristic. The ornamentation mostly ascends or descends stepwise or chromatically, in which the performer often chooses microtones that cannot be documented within the Western notation system. The choice of longer durations permits melodic play and the use of melismas. The art of melodic play and ornamentation marks each reciter and each one is particularly noted for his melodic cadences. “Varied, suspenseful and complex modulation is admired.”²¹ The typical use of melismas and the similar wavy intonation can also be heard in West Africans singing styles, particularly in regions influenced by Islam.²² Charters describes his listening experiences in Gambia as a long recitation when hearing Alhaji, a Muslim griot, and his singing style as slow and meditative with a lot of elaborate variation in his phrases. Roberts confirms his findings: “The African approach to singing includes the use of a large number of ornamental devices, of which one of the most common is to slide up to the first note of a phrase, and the slide down

off the last note.”²³ West Africans up to the present day are not that familiar with the European tempered scale, but approach the third and seventh steps of a diatonic scale with slides, slurs, or vibrato effects. In the early blues, most blues singers became known for their use of melismas and wavy intonation. Baraka notices a melodic diversity in the singer’s vocal interpretation. He describes a “sliding and slurring effects in Afro-American music” or blueing the notes and comments that no note is attacked in a straight manner. Instead the voice approaches the note from above or below and “plays around the implied pitch without ever remaining any length of time.”²⁴

In terms of register, the vocal production in the *mujawwad* during the recitation must change from a low to a high register and increase in volume when reaching higher-pitched notes. Admirable is a voice that can go to extreme registers, and that is able to excel in the high and the low register, making it the complete voice. For maximum projection, the reciter mostly uses the upper register to reach over long distances. Characteristic is also a sudden shift in the vocal register from phrase to phrase. In addition, “the higher register is used for conveying tension, excitement and textual climax.”²⁵ Important elements of the *mujawwad*, such as the use of the voice, the accepted standard of what constitutes a good voice, the manner of projecting music and tone requirements, however, were usually neglected in earlier Western studies.²⁶ Common in the blues is the story-telling approach that, like the recitation of the Koran, lies in a comfortable speech-like register. When reciting the Koran, the performer mostly uses a narrow range and approaches the text in a speech-like manner. The call to prayer on the other hand needs to reach over long distances and thus mostly lies in a higher register. This can be compared to the moments when the blues singer suddenly switches to a higher register because the story reaches its climax and the intensity rises. Courlander notes that this tendency to break into the upper register for a note or two or for a whole phrase is a specific vocal element found in Africa. Furthermore, specific vocal characteristics of the blues, such as the tendency to break into the falsetto voice, are mostly associated with Islamic traits.²⁷ This habit derives out of an esthetic value rather than an inability to reach higher notes. This use is usually found in an informal style of singing solo or in small groups, but in other parts of the Americas this practice is more used as “delicate,” “refined,” or “private” singing as it is the case for religious chanting.

The sound of the voice is crucial in the recitation of the Koran and the call to prayer because the listener is to be moved by its power and beauty. In addition to a good vocal quality, it is critical that the performer keeps the pitch. A good voice should be “fresh,” “soft,” “light,” and “deep.” The purpose of a beautiful voice is to stir the listener’s emotions and to entice him, in order to induce non-Muslims to convert to Islam. The reciter must also tailor his vocal quality to different concepts in the Koran. When a performer refers to hell, for example, he uses a full and heavy quality, in contrast to the evocation of heaven, which should sound bright and light. African music also does not generally strive for the regularity of pitch, time, timbre, and vibrato.²⁸ The voice undergoes a constant change of vibrato, tremolo, as well as overtone effects. A beautiful voice and the way the reciter embellishes melodic lines incite an emotional response on the part of the listener. The point of its melodic aspects is to touch the listener’s heart and to engage him fully in the experience of the religious revelation. Two important Arabic terms that need to be considered in relation to the early blues are *saba* and *huzn*. *Saba* refers to sorrow and soulful yearning and is a vocal quality that touches people’s emotions. The term *huzn* has several meanings that mostly translate into sorrow or grief, but that can also be used to describe the vocal quality. Early Arab tradition often used songs that were improvised and sad in tone. Conservative scholars that came from the Islamic tradition insisted that the Koran be recited in a sad voice. The concept of “softening the heart,” i.e., making it tender and vulnerable to being touched, is associated with this ideal of recitation.

When a reciter recites with *huzn*, the listener is encouraged to weep. The early blues also became known for the emotional impact. "This heritage of emotional religion was one of the strongest contributions that the African culture made to the Afro-American."²⁹ Moaning and groaning are often characterized as vocal elements of the blues that can be found in religious songs, as well as in work songs, old-style blues, and field cries. Here, moaning is not an element of grief but rather "a blissful or ecstatic rendition of a song, characterized by full and free exploitation of melodic variation and improvisation, sometimes with an open throat, sometimes with closed lips to create a humming effect."³⁰

Improvisation is a significant component of the blues. In the *mujawwad* the melodic lines are not to be rehearsed, but to remain free and natural. To Muslims and non-Muslims the melodic vocal play is considered to be the highest example of vocal improvisation. "Improvisation in recitation, however, is not only still highly valued, but is essential to the style and spirit of recitation of the Qur'an."³¹ The musical and melodic lines are inspired by the text and "the music in recitation should be improvised in response to the immediacy of the text."³² The challenge for any reciter is to let his religious inspiration guide him and within the rules of the recitation to improvise on the spot. No reciter is allowed to practice passages in advance, but only to recite them for the purpose of worshiping Allah's words. Blues singing has a deep personal quality and "the singer relied on the predictability and mobility of the human voice for their imaginative catalysts."³³ The blues provides a simple and flexible framework for the innovative improvising musician in which singers make up their own songs or create new versions of already existing songs.³⁴ Improvisation "is certainly one of the strongest survivals in American negro music."³⁵ These variations not only derive from the arrangement of the notes, but also because of the singer's vocal interpretation.

In addition, the repetition of phrases needs to be considered. In order to emphasize important sections of the Koran, a reciter may decide to repeat a single phrase of the text. He may anticipate the climactic phrase until "the reciter then delivers the same phrase, a third time, in the context of the whole verse"³⁶ and continues to melodically embellish the phrase. The repetition of a short phrase is another element found in the blues, usually traced to an African origin.³⁷ When repeating a phrase, the blues singer often adds another word to give his feelings or statement more emphasis. Kubik refers to the characteristic three-line strophic form, with a repeated first line and the third line introducing a new textual motif. A whole phrase, leading to repeating the first line twice, can be found in the shout and the holler. The shout usually has a three-line structure, which influenced the form that the blues later took. The singer repeated the first two lines while it seemed "the singer was waiting for the next line to come."³⁸

The art of the recitation consists of but is not limited to the organization of rhythm, timbre, language, and text that were revealed with the holy book of the Koran. This is where the recitation differs from any performance of secular music. It further conforms to detailed and complex rules of duration where syllables are divided into long and short. Most of the times "the reciter is free to choose his durations"³⁹ but he needs to be consistent and cannot shorten the length of a duration once he has started reciting. The text of the Koran consists further of sections that have rules of pause and beginning and are divided into single breath phrases, which relate to the phrase that follows. To support the clarity of the text, the rules determine where a reciter should start the next phrase or if he needs to repeat the last phrase he has just recited. Traces of original African chants can be heard in remaining African words or dialects, as well as in African accents and their syntactical construction of their original languages.⁴⁰ Religious songs, similar to the study of Islamic recitation, make use of consonants to produce desired aural effects.⁴¹ Consonants, such as *r* and *l*, are either altered or softened in order to produce a humming sound at the end. These traits are particular musical devices that are not otherwise found in the conventional speech of enslaved Africans.

A further trait that is regulated in the recitation of the Koran, as well as in the call to prayer, which can be closely related to the blues, is the tempo. The reciter delivers the recitation without rushing and articulates the consonants and vowels clearly. An important characteristic is the slow tempo. Some of the hollers of the Delta regions are slow in tempo and free in rhythm in addition to another type of song described as a long-meter hymn, which is recitative and also slow in tempo.⁴² Free melodic and rhythmic elements can be heard in field calls, spirituals, blues, solo work songs, as well as in prayers.⁴³

In Islamic practices the text is of extreme importance. It is only the voice of God that should be heard in the performance. Thus, the recitation of the Koran and the call to prayer are always done solo without accompaniment. For Muslims, the Koran is the word of God and its message must be heard and preserved. Its transmission is performed orally, making the accurate conveying of the meaning of the text the focal point. The challenge for any reciter is to “illuminate the meaning of the text for the listener who has perhaps heard the same text hundreds of times before.”⁴⁴ Among enslaved Africans in the United States, work songs and shouts were always sung a cappella and the “primitive blues” was very much a vocal music.⁴⁵ Some hollers found in the Delta regions, which were also mostly unaccompanied, have been described as solo chants, or long-meter hymns that sound like “an ego-oriented appeal for help from God.”⁴⁶ In general, the lyrics of African songs are usually as important or more important than the music.⁴⁷ In time, much of the lyrics of original African chants underwent a complete transfer of reference. Many times, slaves sang to God but since their white masters suppressed any references to gods that were not Christian, the enslaved African did not have many opportunities to practice their religious beliefs.

Identifying the musical characteristics of Islamic practices and considering them as an important contribution to the early blues creates a new listening experience. Scholars and music experts such as Lomax, Charters, Roberts, and Gomez have supported the irrefutable influence of Islam on the early blues. The early blues contains musical characteristics that strikingly resemble Islamic practices, in particular the recitation of the Koran and the call to prayer. Understanding the Islamic roots of the music that derived from African slavery in America leads to a more complete knowledge of one of the most important original American musical genres. A closer examination of the diverse ethnic groups in Africa and the regions Muslim slaves originated from reveals a more complete picture of their musical contribution. While historians have recognized Islam as an influential religion in Africa and among enslaved Africans, these findings have rarely been linked to the musical developments on the American continent.

Sparse evidence and documentation may be accounted for the fact that Islam has seldom been credited as an influence on the early blues. In the past, scholars and historians have neglected to include valuable oral history, but are acknowledging its importance today and making more of an effort to go beyond traditional Western methods to document them. Previously, the Western notation system was not always able to encompass the characteristics of West African music, the musicality of Islamic practices and the early blues, in particular the vocal style. Alternative ways of documenting this extensive oral tradition can illuminate the appreciation of the early blues. Furthermore, most Muslims are accustomed with the musical component of their faith but consider it the message of God rather than music. In fact, the enjoyment of secular music not related to Islamic practices is discouraged. This is why Muslims were probably not aware how much Islamic practices influenced Western music. At the same time, most non-Muslims, not accustomed with Islam, were often not aware of the musicality these religious practices contain. Thus a link between the Islamic musical practices and their influence on African and Western secular music has seldom been recognized. Most enslaved Muslims were not allowed to practice their religion and forced to convert to Christianity by their slaveholders, which further

adds to the difficulty of documenting Islamic musical influences. Acknowledging Islam as an important religion in West Africa before and during the transatlantic slave trade will assist in finding more evidence of the existence of enslaved Muslims and the Islamic roots of the early blues. As Diouf suggests, “Joint research by experts on African Islamic music and specialists of the blues is needed to delineate with more precision the Muslims’ contribution to the musical creations of the Americas.”⁴⁸

Notes

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