

Bugs Bunny Gone Global: The Senegambian Roots of Gullah Culture and ðHippikatö
Migrations to the Bahamas, Trinidad, and Beyond

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Assala malekum. Or as Brer Rabbit would say to Tar Baby on the rice plantations of Georgia, nangadef waayei or in the words of his close kin, Bugs Bunny, ðWhatø up Doc?ö When I came to Senegal to work with a village rice cooperative near Richard Toll in 1983, I had no idea that I would be living in a place that had already shaped my reared (honk nop) culture. When eating blackeyed peas for New Yearø luck, when listening to the banjoø ancestor the halam before late night tales of Bouki and Hare, there came a time when I sat up and said, Waw kay, degg-na li-nge-wax. I wanted to begin really trying to become the open-eyed ðhippikatö of my early Jimi Hendrix inspired yearnings, with eyes and ears opened not just by Jimi Hendrix but by Jimi Mbaye. Their sounds have boomeranged across the Atlantic and Mediterranean in routes shared by that master hippikat, Compere Lapin, Brer Rabbit, a.k.a Buggs Bunny. As I essay his tales, his mastery of music, his cool hippikat vision and style, his now global savoir faire, I begin, I goor-goorlu as his apprenti, his low level apprentice, by examining routes that have shaped my own life, routes moving from Senegal to the creolized Geechee coast of Georgia and north Florida, the Bahamas and Trinidad, boomeranging back to the Waalo.

Enslaved Senegambians were brought to the rice coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and north Florida in large numbers because of their experience with rice production, because of trade ties between the region and depots in Gambia and Sierra Leone, and because of market stereotypes favoring Senegalese intelligence, beauty, and crosscultural sophistication. Since the British knew little about rice culture, they deferred

to West African expertise, adopting technologies of production readily apparent in the threshing process, using Senegalese-style coil fanner baskets and mortar and pestle. The Geechee culture of coastal Georgia was so deeply creolized by its substantial African majority that its language, cuisine, material culture, religion, tales, and music were all shaped by the Senegambians who helped to found the culture and who were often invested with significant power and authority within the slave regime. Senegambian Muslims were often appointed as headmen of their plantation workforces. In Georgia, we find Salih Bilali (from the Macina region) and Bilali Muhammad (from Futa Djallon) as respected Muslim headmen on plantations that had a substantial Muslim-led, Pulaar-speaking workforce.ⁱ Wolof women such as Anta Majigeen Nødiaye and Koomba Johnson appear as powerful wives, concubines, and house servants in regional narratives, bringing toubab culture into the creolizing sway of a Senegal-shaped Geechee culture.

It is this õbriar patchö that Brer Rabbit navigated in coastal Georgia, emerging as the coolest hippikat, master of the many codes of plantation speech and language, dance and song.ⁱⁱ In Georgia tales, Brer Rabbit uses his mastery of vernacular codes to outwit his adversaries and to see to it that they often meet with violence--a deft mastery of cool that Brer Rabbit bequeathed to Bugs Bunny of cartoon fame. A number of studies have pointed out the West African^o and often Senegambian^o origin of most of the Brer Rabbit tales. And Joel Chandler Harris's collections of Uncle Remus tales feature so many tales of Senegambian origin^o even a character named Koumba^o that Harris clearly shares a narrative tradition with Birago Diop and the griots of Senegambian epics.

While the Wolof target of Hare's trickery, Bouki the Hyena, did not retain his name in Georgia, as he did in Louisiana, the Bahamas and Haiti, we find the trace of his

memory in a Joel Chandler Harris tale in which Brer Fox follows Rabbit through the mouth of a cow in order to cut meat from the belly. The password for entry is "Bookay," and as usual Fox's greed and lack of discretion do him in. He cuts vital organs, gets trapped inside the dead cow, and is then beaten to death by the cow's owner in the same sequence as a Malinke tale collected by Frobenius in 1922. Bouki clearly has a long history of having the blues. While these tales are prevalent throughout West Africa, certain elements show a particularly strong line of Senegambian transmission. A good example is a tale in which Hare or Rabbit seeks endowments of spiritual knowledge and power, and is called by God or a man of power to complete tasks such as measuring a snake, filling a container with birds or wasps, bringing a dangerous animal's tooth, and obtaining the milk of a wild animal. Joel Chandler Harris's Geechee version of this common Georgia tale most closely matches one from a Wolof grammar book published in Paris in 1858. The Wolof tale is told with incredible fidelity in Georgia as Rabbit seeks power, performs impossible tasks, and is finally sent hopping by God for his dangerous audacity. One interesting point of difference is that some of the earlier Georgia tales feature rabbit seeking power from a "conjure man" rather than from God or Allah. It seems likely that the Georgia tales may transmit pre-Islamic versions of knowledge and power from the Senegambian region. Attentiveness to shifting patterns of initiation into spiritual power will call us to trace transfers of authority from secret society groups to the scriptural lines of authority favored by Islam and Christianity, as we read how trickster seeks endowments from Senegal to Georgia, the Bahamas, and Trinidad.

Like Brer Rabbit's transferal to seeking spiritual gifts from God rather than from an "Affykin" man of power, early slave society on the rice plantations of coastal Georgia

reforged means for integrating new initiates into its ranks. Entry into the congregation was the initiatory culmination of a period of spiritual travels known as "seeking." This period of journey "in the wilderness" began with the seeker being apprenticed to a spiritual parent who would monitor the seeker's spiritual travels: dreams, visions, and long periods of prayer in the wilderness--usually by a specific tree, waterway, or grave. Following this ritual period of retreat and the spiritual parent's approval of the visions attained, the congregation would examine the seeker's testimony, and conduct a river or ocean baptism in living waters to initiate the seeker into the fold. Clearly this process has certain parallels in the initiations narrated in such foundational Senegambian texts as *L'œnfant noir* and presented in the story of Kunta Kinte's manhood training in Gambia. Margaret Washington Creel has called attention to how closely Gullah/Geechee processes of seeking parallel the Gola/Kissi Sande and Poro societies whereby initiates were reborn under bush apprenticeship to ritual elders.ⁱⁱⁱ As congregations sought to incorporate wild power into the bonds of a necessarily sequestered Afro-creole society, diverse ritual elements of the population coalesced around a shared cultural grammar and also gravitated toward an acceptable public face translatable to rites of book religions: the Protestantism of the toubobs and West African Islam.

Following ritual death and rebirth beneath living baptismal waters, congregants could emerge to the ring shout, the holy dance that in its polyrhythm, call and response improvisation, and counterclockwise circular movement, provided the vehicle whereby nation dances honoring African ancestries, worship practices of Sufi Islam, and Afro-Baptist hymns found common ground. Lorenzo Dow Turner argued that the word "shout" came from the Arabic "saut," the circling movement around the Kaaba performed during

the spiritual travel of the hajj. Shouts often enacted Islamic modes of prayer. ðKneebone Bendö notes the times and actions of Muslim prayer. In ðDown to de Myuh,ö shouters lower heads down to ðde myuhö in a song that likely calls them to the river or ðmaayoö remembered by so many Pulaar-speaking congregants, some of whom were found in the region well into the 1930s. Songs in the Mende language also appear to have been utilized in funeral shouts, and we may find spiritual presences from the Bight of Benin in the upturned iron pots (Ogun) and mentions of Oshun found in ring shouts. Use of drums in nightlong shouts gave way to clapping, patting and stomping. White preachers constantly bemoaned what they called this ðbarbarous expression of religion, handed down from African ancestorsö (in Epstein 280). African bodies, spirits, and memories of sacred authority refused to be stilled by those who would try to own them body and soul as spirited shouts like ðAdam in the Gardenö and ðBlow Gabrielö make clear.

While Mende funeral chants and Fulbe invocations to come to the maayo honored the ways of West African forebears, we know that a Muslim ritual calendar was observed on Sea Island plantations. Sapelo Island descendants of Bilali Muhammad recalled rice ðsaracaö cakes distributed to children on key holy days. Katie Brown spoke of her grandmother, Bilaliø Bahamian born creole daughter Margaret, who would ðmake funny flat cake she call ðsaraka.øShe make um same day ebry yeah, an it big day. When dey finish, she call us in, all duh chillum, an put in hans lill flat cake an we eats ití øSarakaø she call umö (162). Shad Hall recalled the tradition as passed on by another Bilali daughter, would ðmake strange cake...She call it ðsarakaø she call us all in an deah she hab great big fannuh full an she gib us each cake. Den e all stands roun table, and she says, ðAmeen, Ameen, Ameenø(167). The saraka tradition appears to have survived in

highly creolized form as carried to Trinidad by coastal Georgia slaves who chose the British offer of freedom during the War of 1812, and then resettled in Company Villages of Trinidad. In Trinidad Spiritual Baptist worship a key ancestral rite is called *õsaracaõ* or *õthanksgivingö* or *õfeeding the childrenö* and involves setting a ritual table with candles, honey, cakes, candies, flowers, etc, and may be associated with nation dances (Houk 81).

We are beginning to be able to trace routes whereby Brer Rabbit and his hippikat consciousness navigated a complexly creolized Afro-Atlantic world from core shouting congregations like the Mount Calvary Baptist Church of Briar Patch, Georgia. We know that Georgia, with 33% of its African slave shipments coming from the Senegambian region, offers a heartland of Senegambia-impacted creole culture in North America.. Senegambians and their children worked as powerful agents spreading a creolizing hippikat culture in the Afro-Atlantic world. We have seen how early Georgia Baptist churches emerged from heterodox mixes of worship styles, repertoires, and beliefs, providing incorporation of independent, free-spirited black agency in the plantation world. When the conflicts of the American Revolution and the War of 1812 allowed (or forced) slaves into alliances with the British, black Georgians found themselves exiled into yet another Babylon following British defeat and forced relocation. In fact, refugee Baptist leaders from Georgia founded the first black Baptist congregations in the Bahamas, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, Trinidad, and Sierra Leone. This mass exile of 1783-84 and of 1815-1816 would involve as diverse a mixture of Africans and creoles as was found in Georgia itself. The most substantial of these Georgia exoduses proved foundational to the development of the Bahamas (1783-84) and Trinidad (1815-16).

Following the American Revolution, the Loyalist migration to the Bahamas (a majority enslaved) more than doubled the population of the capital, Nassau, and provided the source of initial settlement for most of the Out Islands. A number of writers have noted the similarities between Geechee and Bahamian creole. Bahamian creole language and culture, like its Sea Island sibling, uses the term *õday cleanõ* (after Wolof *ber set*) for dawn, utilizes the Wolof-inflected second person pronoun *õyinna,õ* features the verb *õnyamõ* for to eat, offers sesame benni cakes, tabby building styles (from *tabix* and *tabax*), coil fanner baskets, and retold tales of Buh Rabbyø's tricking of the Wolof dupe Bouki. Boukiø's name survives in the Bahamas even as it disappeared from Georgia, but a close reading of Bahamian folktales shows their closest matches to be the Geechee reworkings of Wolof, Fulbe, and Mande folk repertoires. The Nassau slave market shared the Savannah and Charleston markets' demand for Senegambians, creating a strong Senegalese presence that was massively reinvigorated by arriving Gullah and Geechee slaves. Since many of the Loyalist whites returned to Georgia after several years with their Geechee slaves and with newly bought slaves from the Bahamas, the circuits of cultural exchange between Senegambia, Georgia, and the Bahamas are indeed complex. The Fulbe headmen Bilali Muhammad and Salih Bilali both came to Georgia after being purchased in the Bahamas by returning Loyalist refugees.^{iv} Bahamian slave registries and runaway notices from the period following the Loyalist migration reveal Senegambian names such as Mahomet, Moosa, Boucarry, Samba, Fatima, Cumba, Janaba, Penda, and Silla. Islands such as Long Island and Exuma were populated largely by Georgia slaves, and we know that one missionary arriving on Exuma in 1802 met many who *õ*called themselves followers of Mahometõ (Pascoe 223). Afro-Baptist praise houses were

founded by refugees such as Samuel Scriven and Prince Williams, both of whom appear to have been Africans with country marks.^v The Geechee shouts became known as *õrushingõ* in the Bahamas, and the song repertoires remained true to Geechee and Gullah sources. The Bahamian national *õcarnivalõ* of *junkanoo*, featuring masked *õrushersõ*, may have arisen from Bambara slaves recreating their agricultural *kono* rite (Bethel 14). Over time, the Bahamas became a Baptist nation, but its congregations have been shaped by diverse forces, including the presence of Senegambian Islam, Yoruba societies, and the emergence of a hybrid *õJumper Churchõ* that harkens back to the old Geechee praise houses and ring shouts that gave birth to the Baptist faith in the Bahamas.

While the movement of Africans and creoles from the Sea Islands to the Bahamas was mostly a forced exodus of enslaved peoples to new islands of Babylon, the decision of slaves from the Georgia Sea Islands to choose sides with the invading British Royal Marines during the War of 1812 was a calculated risk that led to their eventual relocation as free farmers in Trinidad in 1815-16. When the Marines landed upon the southern islands of Georgia, whole families went over to the British in the largest movement to black liberation between the Haitian Revolution of the 1790s and British colonial abolition during the 1830s.^{vi} 781 black American refugees, from Georgia and Virginia, were resettled in Trinidad as the six *õMerikenõ* companies of Colonial Marines were disbanded and reunited with their families in six Company Villages. These Anglo-creole and African settlers would prove foundational to an emerging Anglo-creole Trinidadian culture. One St. Simons Island, Georgia refugee, William Hamilton, founded the first black Baptist church in Trinidad as he led the erection of a praise house in the Fifth Company village made up of Georgia ex-slaves. The Baptist Praise House they founded

would find its diverse Afro-creole experiences to be rich ground for incorporating influences from the region's existing catholicized Afro-creole rites, and from the immigration of Yoruba, Hindu and Muslim East Indian peoples, feeding the growth of one of the most cross-culturally open faiths of the Anglo-Caribbean world: the Spiritual Baptists, also known as the Shouters.^{vii} Spiritual Baptist Archbishop Aham L. Stapleton locates the faith's founding in the Baptist church formed by the Georgia refugee William Hamilton. True to their Geechee roots, Spiritual Baptists valorize an initiatory period of spiritual "travels" undertaken under the watchful eye of a ritual elder in a period of vision-seeking known as "mourning," followed by public testimony and validation of the mourner's travels. The ritual rebirth of baptism must occur through immersion in living waters; and the music of services is often so loud and ecstatic that colonial authorities banned Spiritual Baptist worship in The Shouters Prohibition Ordinance of 1917. The improvisational, polyrhythmic training of mind, body, and spirit to come into agreement seeks maximal use of dreams, spirit possession, and readings of scripture. Thus Baptists "rituals devote attention to the entire person" (Glazier 29) as the shouters "march" around the church's sacred center pole and stamp feet to sound the ground's polyrhythmic vibrations. Baptists may hold a saraka, a ritual thanksgiving also known as "feeding the children" and may participate in other groups' rites, often including orisha worship.^{viii} Spiritual Baptists manage to be both heterodox and conservative as they juxtapose and accumulate ritual traditions in ways that honor rites borrowed from orisha, Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish traditions.^{ix} What Trinidad's Spiritual Baptist faith teaches, and what the original Geechee praise houses reveal, is that conservative religion need not

be fundamentalist in an exclusionary manner, but may be open to diverse practices as any religious effort to conserve and honor the diverse spirit-roots of creole peoples would be.

Unfortunately, it is at the time when the US and the world is only beginning to grasp the import of cultural legacies bequeathed by Sea Island communities that those communities are disappearing and being rescattered in the face of development. As Sapelo Island resident and Bilali Mohammad descendant Cornelia Bailey puts it "we are like an endangered species." Indeed there is an "endangered wisdom," a "subalternized knowledge," discredited only because black peoples' knowledge has been discredited for so long — even as it has fed hip-hop counter-cultures all over the globe. Golf courses close down access to the ancestral dead of plantation cemeteries. Developers buy up the land of Geechee communities and erect gated "Plantation" communities. And in extreme cases — as on Sea Island — (the site of filming of Kunta Kinte's Gambian village, and also of the most recent security-minded G-8 summit) — public bridge ownership may be deeded to private ownership following one instance of black on white crime. Meanwhile, greater crimes and greater terrorism go unheeded. Ibo Landing, the site of a mass suicide by Ibo slaves, has no public marker and is being allowed to slip beneath local memory even as it is one of the most enshrined locations in all of African American fiction. Environmental destruction caused by development on the islands is uprooting a natural, social, and historical landscape that Geechee culture so powerfully navigated. Following our recent active hurricane season, Sapelo Island resident Lulu Walker told me "God's angry — God don't like to see what he's made destroyed for so much greed." When Sea Island freemen insisted on "getting land enough to lay our Fathers bones upon" (in Berlin 270), they sought not maximum monocultural profit from the land but communal sustenance upon

the soil of their long labor, their ritual seeking. It is that investment in landscape and community that is being lost now, as folk catch a glimmer of the place's importance.

Long practiced at navigating crossways of sub-Saharan African, Islamic, and European trade routes, Senegambians were among the earliest and most adept navigators of the black Atlantic and its emergent creole modernism.^x From the Mandinka Francisco Menendez and the Wolof Anta Majigeen N'diaye of Spanish Florida, to Salih Bilali and Bilali Muhammad of Georgia. American fiction offers epic Senegambian patrimony in Kunta Kinte and Toni Morrison's Solomon, while Senegalese mammies such as Joel Chandler Harris's Mom Bi and Alfred Mercier's Mamrie creolized the language and sensibilities of their toubob charges, even as Melville's Fulbe Babo and Cable's Wolof Bras Coupe show themselves ready to proclaim liberty or death for all. Brer Rabbit's hippikat/hip-hop street smarts and bush wisdom inform American vernacular culture at its roots. Senegambians helped make the hybridized plantation praise houses out of which an Afro-Atlantic Baptist/Shouter faith emerged. They played the countercultural banjo music of the South and contributed to the Louisiana culture from which jazz emerged, contributing a second-sightedness and eye-opening style that has given our global vernacular culture its nyama, its energy of action. It should come as no surprise that bands like Orchestra Baobab, The Star Band of Dakar, and the Royal Band of Thies reworked Afro-Cuban sounds born of a creole mix of Africa and an already Africanized Iberian peninsula; or that Youssou N'dour's mbalax music would merge this Cuban sound with traditional Wolof music and the Afro-American r & b; or that Baaba Maal would bring blues riffs and reggae into an indigenous mix that had earlier informed those New World genres. As the contemporary hip-hop group Daara J represents clearly, the

music has boomeranged from Africa to America and back in successive waves that Senegalese musicians and narrators have long been among the most adept at handling. Indeed, the musical and spiritual legacy of Senegambia to the Afro-Atlantic's global culture is a profound gift, one we have only begun to appreciate for the hippikat vision and power so richly wielded by Bouki's old nemesis, Brer Rabbit.

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ⁱ Indeed, Pulaar appears to have been a language of considerable authority in coastal Georgia (as Salih Bilali's toubab noted a dozen Pulaar speakers on his plantation—most of whom appear to have been enslaved under Fulbe authority in Africa) and Bilali Muhammad's toubab family recall his leadership of a group of 70 armed slaves during the War of 1812 and his willingness to command armed Muslim slaves and a refusal to take responsibility for the arming of "Christian dogs." Interviews with ex-slaves from the Georgia coast reveal a substantial Muslim presence on the islands, and a lingering memory of that presence, including at least one creole woman who could count from 1-20 in the Pulaar language in the 1930s. The roots of contemporary dance music may lie in the rhythms of women's pestles pounding the rice and their songs improvised over the beat: an orientation toward music that circulated in the earliest Afro-Christian songs of the rice coast—the ring shout.

ⁱⁱ Indeed Hare's skills as sweet talker and hippikat or jive musician are so powerful and so consistently griotlike that many Wolof griots identify Hare as gewel (Magel 191). The lessons he teaches remain only too apt, as a political cartoon from America's first Gulf War—featuring Saddam Hussein as America's Tar Baby—makes increasingly clear.

ⁱⁱⁱ We must also recall similar processes at work in the Fon and Yoruba cultures that would continue to initiate seekers into the service of vodou loa and Yoruba orisha, all of whom made their presence felt along the Georgia coast. All of this is to say that we should not be surprised that it was Bilali Muhammad's grandchildren who founded the First African Baptist Church of Sapelo Island, Georgia, or that early hymns were transcribed in Arabic alphabet by literate Muslims, or that the Baptist faith of Georgia (impacted by Muslims, by Sande/Poro society, and by Fon and Yoruba rites of initiation) would travel to places as farflung as the Bahamas, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, Trinidad, and even back to Sierra Leone.

^{iv} Alexander Wylly of St. Simons recorded folk tales told him by the family's *ōmammyō* who would have told them from that family's repertoire of traversing and retraversing the Florida straits between St. Simons Island and Nassau. *ōMarriage to the Devilō* tales, orphans utilizing magic eggs in the wilderness, and a number of Rabby and Boukee tales kept Senegambian and Geechee memories alive in the Bahamas.

^v The country marks could have emerged from Georgia or Carolina slave societies' processes of seeking spiritual travels, baptismal rebirth, and celebrations of shouted nation dances in deeply Africanized praise house or bush arbor initiations and meetings.

^{vi} Several Senegambian Muslim headmen who had experienced slavery under British colonial rule in the Bahamas attempted to persuade the slaves under their watch to reconsider the risk of casting their lots with the British, but in the end large numbers of Geechee slaves from plantations on St. Simons Island, Cumberland Island, and the mainland chose a course that would lead to their freedom and subsequent relocation in Trinidad.

^{vii} Among the Shouters or Spiritual Baptists, one may find *ōa* virtual mosaic of African, Hindu, Islamic, Protestant, Catholic, and Pentecostal rites within a single service *ō* (Glazier 64).

^{viii} Trinidad's leading modern orisha priest, Ebenezer Eliot, was also a member of the Fifth Company Baptist Church that was the foundational Georgia refuge church of the contemporary Spiritual Baptist faith (Henry 205) and is buried by his Georgia ancestors who witnessed a similar diversity of belief and practice.

^{ix} See Stephen Glazier (29).

^x Even before European maritime contact with Senegal recorded in Portugal's epic *Lusiads* (1572), Senegambian peoples and cultures made their presence felt in the Iberian peninsula. Serving as a launching ground for the Almoravide empire, the Senegal River valley, with its dread soldiers and drummers, finds representation in Spain's epic of holy war, *El Cid*.