

**GNAWA: SPIRITUAL SOUNDS OF HEALING
SLAVERY, RITUALS, MUSIC**

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Abstract

Morocco is known for its cultural and ethnic diversity. In this writing, I would like to shed light on a mystical ethnic group in Morocco that baffled many people from all over the globe; descendants of slaves who traced their origin to Sub-Saharan countries (Mali, Guinea, Ghana, Senegal, Niger). It also refers to a spiritual type of music that can be used as a method of healing with special rituals.

Keywords: Morocco, Gnawa, Slavery, Music, Rituals

Disziline: cultural anthropology

Absztrakt

GNAWA: A GYÓGYULÁS SPIRITUÁLIS ZENÉI. RABSZOLGASÁG, RITUÁLÉK, ZENE

Marokkó kulturális és etnikai sokszínűségéről ismert. Jelen tanulmányban egy misztikus marokkói etnikai csoportra szeretnénk rávilágítani, amely sok embert zavarba ejtett a világ minden tájáról, egy olyan népcsoport, akik a rabszolgák leszármazottai s származásukat a szubszaharai országokból (Mali, Guinea, Ghána, Szenegál, Niger) eredeztetik. Nevükhöz kapcsolódik az ún. Gnawa, amely egy spirituális zenei típus, amely speciális szertartásokkal gyógyító módszerként használható.

Kulcsszavak: Marokkó, Gnawa, Rabszolgaság, Zene, Rituálék

Diszciplína: kulturális antropológia

*The most important single element of Morocco's folk culture is its music
[. . .]. The entire history and mythology of the people is clothed in song.*
(Paul Bowles)

Origin of Gnawa

Identity cannot exist apart from a group, and symbols are themselves a part of culture, but ethnic identity and symbolic ethnicity require very different ethnic cultures and organizations than existed among earlier generations (Gans, 2010). The Gnawa are part of an ethnically and historically complex hybrid community that gradually emerged in the late nineteenth century with the slow disintegration of Moroccan slavery. Through travel, exchange, and negotiation, these former slaves merged aspects of various cultural influences from Sahelian and North Africa and, by the late nineteenth century, their identity crystallized and they started to market their culture (Becker, 2011).

In Morocco, the term Gnawa refers in general to all the ancient slaves of African origin. However, not all of them belong to the Gnawa brotherhood, neither their ethnic origin is a criteria to define their belonging to this brotherhood as the majority of the Gnaoui adepts are mongrel (of Arabic, Berber or African origins)(K'hal-Laayoun, 2019).

Etymologically speaking, according to Chouki El Hamel, 'Gnawa' refers particularly to physical colour, from which a good deal of insight into the origin of the Gnawa can be inferred. Historically, at least since the twelfth century, it means 'the black people'. It is important to note that not all blacks in Morocco were slaves who originated from West Africa. He also emphasized that Gnawa have over many generations, productively negotiated their forced presence in Morocco to create acceptance and group solidarity.

Unlike the conventional question in Black America 'Who are we?' Gnawa ask 'Who have we become?' Similar to the model of 'creolization' the

integration of freed black slaves into the French cultural landscape of the American state of Louisiana. Gnawa have created a model of their own creolization and integration into the Moroccan social landscape. This one of the most crucial and striking differences between blacks in America and blacks in Morocco (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019).

During the colonial period, many researchers and anthropologists tried to understand and classify this 'rather order' of Gnawa in the Maghreb countries. Among these researchers, J.B Andrews who conducted his studies at the beginning of the 19th century, thus, Gnawa have been identified since the turn of the 20th century as a religious popular brotherhood whose therapeutic practices would be the heritage of the Sub-Saharan animism rituals brought by generations of the slaves kept in the Maghreb. Thus Gnawa is traditionally defined as a religious group, a spiritual order, a ritual confrerie:

- A religious group integrated within Islam, acquiring from it its dogma without leaving any of their prints in this religion as ideas or tendencies.
- A spiritual order coexisting with other orders in Morocco as Aissawa (a religious confrerie, was founded in Meknes in Morocco by Sidi Mohamed Ben Aissa (1465-1526) and Hmadsha (the most important popular confreries in Morocco. Founded in the 17th century by the saint Sidi Ali Ben Hamdouch. This confrerie is well-known by its history and the originality of its rituals embodied in its repertory, its dances and the qualities of its trance-therapist members), and having reciprocal influences on each other.
- A ritual confrerie of Gnawa with their mystic beliefs and practices which mark their exclusiveness that incorporates references to their

African origin, their gloomy past of enslavement, and their aspiring hope for their salvation and identity (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019).

Rituals and beliefs

The beliefs and practices of the Gnawa religious brotherhood represent a fusion of Islamic and West African ideas. The Gnawa claim spiritual descent from Bilal al- Habashi, an Ethiopian who was the Prophet Mohammed's first muezzin; they also recognize and respect all Muslim saints. Most aspects of Gnawa ritual, however, clearly come from South of the Sahara, brought to Morocco over the past 500 years or more by merchants, mercenaries and slaves. The name Gnawa itself is said to be derived from Guinea. (Schuyler, 1981).

Most Gnawa ceremonies (derdeba) are held to placate spirits, good or evil, which have inhabited a person or place. The goal may be to purge a spirit that has brought illness, infertility, or other affliction, or to prolong a happy relationship with a spirit that has brought wealth, clairvoyance, or other blessing. Before the derdeba, musicians and devotees assemble outside the house where the ceremony is to take place. Large side drums (*tbl* or *qanqa*, a Hausa word) and metal double castanets (*garageb*) announce to neighbours and spirits alike that the derdeba is about to begin. Once inside the house, the musicians put down their drums in favour of the *ginbri*, a three-stringed lute with sliding leather tuning rings and metal sound modifier (Schuyler, 1981).

Gnawa rituals and beliefs centre on the *lila* or *derdba*, two names for an all night, trance-based, spirit possession ceremony. The event engages the senses to incite possession trance in paying clients, in some invited family or friends, and potentially in other spectators who are present. The types of possession beliefs and trance activities that feature in this ritual share many similarities with other African and syncretic practices (Witulski, 2018).

Allila of *derdba* is a nocturnal ceremony animated by a Gnawoi Maallem playing his *guendbri*, and accompanied by musicians-dancers playing their *qraqech*. It is a ceremony when some participants in state of trance, are supposed to be haunted or rather inhabited by supernatural entities called *Mlouk*. It is a kind of an initiatic trip consisting of a successive quest for spiritual states called 'el hal' permitting the dancers in trance to approach what is spiritual or divine (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019). In the *gnawa lila*, colourful cloths and incense correspond to each group of spirits, helping them gain full control of those who need healing. Most frequently, the healing is physical or emotional (Witulski, 2018).

Jinn

The term 'jinn' derives etymologically from the Arabic origin 'jenn' which expresses the idea of what is hidden from the looks and wrapped by darkness as the case of 'janin' the foetus hidden in the womb of the pregnant female (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019). She also added that Gnawa have always affirmed their belonging and faithfulness to Islam; and when the Koran refers to 'Al Inss' (human-kind) and 'Al Jinn' (supernatural entities) in its verses, the evocation of these spirits _ *jinn* _ by Gnawa is inscribed in this context. According to their version, their appeal to jinn helps them accomplish miraculous deeds in the 'Allilas' of *Derdba* such as making sick people recover their good health, barren women to have children, spinster girls to have husbands,...

According to Westermarck (1899), The jinn have no fixed forms, but may assume almost any shape they like. They appear now as men, and now as goats, cats, dogs, donkeys, tortoises, snakes, or other animals, now as monsters with the body of a man and the legs of a donkey, now in other shapes, sometimes, for instance, with seven heads. Westermarck added that Gnawa, who stand in an

especially intimate relation to the jnun, and who are frequently called on to expel them from people who are ill, are said to dress both themselves and the patient in the colour of the jinn that is believed to be the cause of the patient's illness, but this I have not seen for myself. All the seven colours of the rainbow are used for magical purposes when the tribes of all the days of the week are concerned, and, also, when, as sometimes happens, the particular tribe immediately concerned cannot be found out. The performance by means of which the Gnawa endeavour to expel the jnun is often very complicated, and may last for days. They sing and dance; walk round the patient and make wry faces close to him; take him on their necks and carry him about (Westermarck, 1899).

Tylor, in expressing the sense of the meeting as to Westermarck's study of the jinn in Morocco, remarked that the first sentence of the paper showed the line along which he had approached the problem. The late Robertson Smith, by his work on the Religion of the Semites, vastly improved the method and enlarged the horizon, of current theology by the introduction of anthropological evidence. But through the influence of his friend J. F. McLennan's Primitive marriage, he was led to introduce too confidently the doctrine of totemism as a leading factor on the religious side of ancient society, and he put forward the idea that the Arab beliefs as to the jinn were evidence of an early stage of totemism among, the Semitic race. This view appearing to Westermarck questionable, he collected during his residence and travel in North Africa the particulars as to the beliefs as to the jinn prevailing there, which are generalised in his paper read to-night. (Westermarck, 1899).

When Westermarck resumes his inquiries in North Africa, he may be able more or less to clear up the interesting (question which he has doubtless had often before him, how to distinguish and delimit the two ways in which men or demons can appear and behave as beasts. Is transformation of

jinn into cats or tortoises or snakes something, related transmigration of souls, or is it considered to take place by quite a different process?

Gnawa brotherhood

There are other significant differences between Gnawa practice and Sufism. For the Gnawa, the spirit world is inhabited by ancestral spirits who, among other spiritual creatures, can be used for either good or evil purposes. Ancestors are believed to act as intermediaries between the living and the supreme God, and the Gnawa communicate with their ancestors through prayer and sacrifice. The spirit world is also invoked through special ceremonies, in which drumming, clapping, the sound of the castanets and dances were designed to enlist the aid of ancestral saints (El Hamel, 2008).

The Gnawa have created for themselves an imagined ancestral link to Bilal, a link that constitutes a piece of the patchwork of their identity despite not being historically feasible. According to the Gnawa, Bilal danced and sang to cheer the sorrowful Fatima, favourite daughter of the Prophet Muhammed. As a reward, Muhammed offered Fatima in marriage to Bilal who declined on the grounds that a lowly slave did not deserve to marry the Prophet's daughter. Since Bilal was of "black" African descent, this story reinforces the Gnawa claim to baraka and to a special status within Islam, even while it confirms their slave status (Becker, 2011).

From slaves to stars

In Morocco, Gnawa music is found mainly where black people live in a relatively large number; large enough to form a distinctive community like the ones in Marrakech and Essaouira. These two cities are known historically to have had slave markets connected to the trans-Saharan slave trade. Therefore, in these two towns, Gnawa are proximate by their history, culture, and geographical

situation (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019). From oppression was born their art, from cruelty arose their songs, these Gnawa, in majority slaves by origin, have saved their identity via their rite, art, and music. And this music remains vital to create a dialogue of tolerance and coexistence between culture and civilizations, and to generate a magical atmosphere where the festival of Essaouira has found its soul (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019).

Essaouira is a wind-swept resort town toward the southern end of Morocco's Atlantic coast, three hours west of Marrakech. The town is remarkable for its annual festival celebrating the music the Gnawa, a heterodox group of religious lodges whose members claim descent from formerly enslaved sub-Saharan Africans. Indeed, the town played a major role in the trans-Saharan slave trade and also has a significant Jewish history. Moreover, Gnawa music continued to grow and develop as a genre and form over the twentieth century from its ancient roots in spirit possession and trance rituals to increasing levels of commercial production for domestic and international consumption (Shaefer, 2017).

It is a typical trance music used by members of the Sufi brotherhood to attain mystical ecstasy. Members of the group, who claim descent from Sidi Bilal, the exslave from Ethiopia who became a highly respected caller to prayers (muezzin), include master musicians, drummers, intriguing-looking women, mediums, and others who a long time ago established their home in Marrakech and other southern regions. The West African slaves who arrived in North Africa in the sixteenth century brought this genre to Morocco; consequently, the lyrics have components of Senegalese, Guinean, and Malian traditions.

A lute (qsbah) with a long neck of African origin called the gimbri, double-iron cymbals (qaraqab), and a double-headed cylindrical drum (tbel or ganga) played with curved sticks are common instruments of the Gnawa music (Njoku, 2006).

Shaefer questioning what contributed to its success? Following is an examination of reasons for the success of the Gnawa festival and an argument that a large part of this success is due to the way the festival enables the "festive sacred," the transnational capitalization of the sacred (Kapchan, 2008). The festival does this so well because the musicians at Essaouira productively combine participatory with presentational performance practices (Turino, 2008)

Shaefer (2017) added that folk musics are typically cast as participatory and elite musics as presentational but the goal in a festival like this one is to have enough participation to engage tourists and enough presentation to give them a show. With its great potential for participatory discrepancies (Keil 1994, 1995), Gnawa music is nearly perfectly positioned for such creative recombination.

For Victor Turner (1982), festivals were the "high tides" experiences" in a community. Festivals could be interpreted the members of the community, and they could do things community as well. Roger Abrahams, in particular (1982), attention to the kinds of things festivals do, which vary to the needs of the community in question - agricultural, industrial (Shaefer, 2017).

According to Christopher Witulski (2018) three interrelated but distinct narratives of gnawa authenticity are in play throughout the ritual community and music industry. They each draw upon the forms of authenticity described by Bigenho (2002), especially because they bring powerful authentic experiences together with forms of authority derived from music or musician's positionality within a cultural context or historical trajectory. These types inform an individual's perception of authenticity (Weiss, 2014). Traditionally or originally, the Gnawa music among the different branches inside the Gnawa confrerie has been much linked to rituals. It has been played in the streets, districts and at the time of ceremonies. Music has been useful for healing, protecting and

chasing the malefic spirits. Born from slavery, the Gnawa music, by echoing either the African or Arabic or Berber songs, is carrying a message in its purity to attract the audience into a smooth intimacy. And the more and more this music is implemented by Western tones and sounds, the wider this audience becomes (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019).

The Gnawa community is rapidly changing. While older masters in their sixties, seventies, and eighties pass away, their music captures the imagination of new generations. Some join the groups of older performers, helping out in any way they can. They take lessons, like a violin student might, while others sit alongside ensembles during rituals, beating out the rhythmic patterns on their knees and mouthing the words to the songs (Witulski, 2018).

Gnawa always tell their sufferings through their songs, a petition to god and saints to help them. According to Master Gania, the oldest Gnawa song is the Mbara song. This historical slave song goes:

Oh! God our lord,
My uncle Mbara is a miserable man
What a fate does he have?
My uncle Mbara is a poor man
Our lady eats meat
Our master eats meat
My uncle Mbara gnaws at the bone
Our lady wears elegant shoes
Our master wears beautiful shoes
My uncle Mbara wears sandals
Oh! God is our guide
This is the predicament of the deprived
Oh poor uncle Mbara. (El Hamel, Chouki, 2008)
Song 'Imploration'
Allah Allah Yallah
Hna fhmayt Allah
O' God Almighty
We are in God's mercy

Allah Allah Yallah
O'Mohamed Rassoul Allah
Our Lord's messenger
By his will our ressecuer

Allah Allah Yallah
Our redemption by Allah
Orassoullah shfaâa ya Rabbi
In Eden we will inchaalah be

Allah Allah Yallah
For the behalf of Allah
Sidna Bilal called
For prayers to God

Allah Allah Yallah
For the love of Allah
We mediate, smile or cry
In trance we cheer or soliloquy

Allah Allah Yallah
Finkom ya rijal Allah
Inss and Jinn all pray
For God's blessing as destiny.
(K'hal-Laayoun, 2019)

Conclusion

A number of scholars have turned their critical lens to examining slavery in and out of Africa. Scholars like Colin Palmer, Michael Gomez, Paul Lovejoy, Eve Troutt Powell, Deborah Kapchan, Patrick Manning, Tim Cleaveland, Cynthia Becker and Bouazza Benachir have given us fresh perspectives that emphasize a different starting point of analysis: they call attention to the agency and influence of marginalized groups on the greater social whole. Their analyses of marginalized groups bring out the complex dynamism of integration and the diaspora (El Hamel, 2008).

Various studies conducted by many researchers about this mystical ethnic group concerning the rituals, the music, the art and culture but the threatening acculturation motivates the scholars to investigate the process of sociocultural change.

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