

**PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC JOURNEYS INTO THE SPIRITUAL WORLD OF HEALING
ON THE WINGS OF GNAWA MUSIC: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY**

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Abstract

From the sufferings their art was born, from the torture they lived in during their life as slaves their music was created. From the torturing tools used on them they created their own musical instruments. From their screams as slaves, they composed a new music with unique rhythms. Gnawa become a cultural phenomenon in Morocco. A *sufi* confrerie imploring God, the prophet and the saints to release them from slavery, torture and the sufferings they encountered. Their music is considered spiritual because it calls souls to join its magic. Gnawa plays a psychotherapeutic role in healing people from various diseases through the practices of syncretic rituals and the trance state they put the participants into. All of these elements music, dances and rituals converge and synthesize into an event called *lila* a rich ceremony in which the sick tormented by spirits could get healed. This paper examines the practices and impact of the *lila* ceremony on the community from a psychological point of view revealing each step of the collective healing process and methods as used in the rituals.

Keywords: lila, spirits possession, psychotherapeutic healing, trance, beliefs.

Diszcipline: Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography

Absztrakt

PSZICHOTERÁPIÁS UTAZÁSOK A GYÓGYÍTÁS SPIRITUÁLIS VILÁGÁBA A GNAWA ZENE SZÁRNYÁN: EGY ANTROPOLÓGIAI TANULMÁNY

A szenvedésekből született a művészetük, a rabszolgaéletük során átélt kínzásokból született a zenéjük. A rabszolgák kínzó eszközeiből alkották meg saját hangszereiket. Rabszolgaként kiabálásukból egyedi

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ritmusokkal új zenét komponáltak. A *gnawa* kulturális jelenséggé vált Marokkóban. Egy *szúfi konfrerie*, amely Istenhez, a prófétához és a szentekhez könyörög, hogy szabadítsa meg őket a rabszolgaságtól, a kínzástól és a szenvedéstől, amellyel találkoztak. Zenéjüket spirituálisnak tartják, mert a lelkeket hívja, hogy csatlakozzanak a varázslatához. A *gnawa* a szinkretikus rituálék gyakorlata és a transzállapot révén pszichoterápiás szerepet játszik az emberek különböző betegségekből való gyógyításában, amelybe a résztvevőket helyezik. Mindezen elemek, a zene, a táncok és a rituálék egybeolvadnak és szintetizálódnak egy *lila* nevű eseményben, egy gazdag szertartásban, amelyben a szellemek által gyötört betegek meggyógyulhatnak. Ez a tanulmány pszichológiai szempontból vizsgálja a *lila* szertartás gyakorlatát és hatását a közösségre, feltárva a kollektív gyógyulási folyamat egyes lépéseit és a rituálék során alkalmazott módszereket.

Kulcsszavak: *lila*, szellemek megszállása, pszichoterápiás gyógyítás, transz, hiedelmek

Diszciplína: kulturális antropológia, néprajz

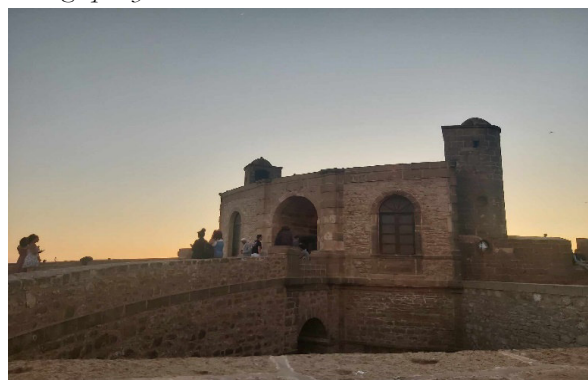
*They brought us,
the enemies of God brought us and sold us.
From our loved ones they separated us
From our children they took us
Brought us, beat us and tortured us
Brought us and with chains they cuffed us
Brought us, put us in bags
(Excerpt from a Gnawa song)*

This paper is constructed on my anthropological fieldwork research that I conducted in Morocco, Essaouira in June 2023. Using the anthropological and ethnographic methods of research and analyses in order to understand such a complex phenomenon such as Gnawa. I based my methods on the qualitative research. In the city of winds as it called Essaouira or ‘Mogador’, I started my anthropological and spiritual journey to the world of Gnawa with its cultural and artistic background. I have met and conducted interviews with Maallem Essedik Laarache who is a Gnawa music leader in Essaouira (Note: Maallem: The word ‘Maallem’ derives from the word ‘Mouallim’ in Arabic which means teacher. Maallem is the leader of the Gnawa music group).

Location

Essaouira has been associated with black slaves for centuries and it also implies ties between Europe and Morocco. In the sixteenth century, the ancient settlement of Essaouira was fortified and renamed Mogador by the Portuguese, who held it briefly. When Sultan Sidi Muhammad chose French engineers and architects to rebuild the city in the late eighteenth century, Essaouira's status as a liminal space between Europe and North Africa was cemented. (Schaefer, 2017)

*Picture 1. Morocco, Essaouira Skkala 2023.
Photograph by the author.*



Gnawa as a cultural and musical form has gone from being a marginal religious practice associated with the enslaved to becoming a crucial part of Essaouira's identity and a major contributor to the city's tourist industry (Ross et al., 2002, 44).

Zawiya Sidna Blal

The confrerie of Gnawa in Essaouira is the only one in Morocco to have a sanctuary called *Zawiya Sidna Blal* which pursues its ritual and therapeutic activities in spite of some divergences between its members about the attribution of the lieu management. This *zawiya* is situated inside the ramparts of the Medina at the side of the Atlantic Ocean. (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019)

Gnawa consider Bilal their father, he was the caller of the prayers during the prophet Mohamed era. He was a slave coming from Ethiopia who became free after converting to Islam.

Picture 2. Zawiya Sidna Blal, Essaouira Morocco 2023. Photograph by the author



Overview about Gnawa

The slave trade began as early as the seventh century and by the sixteenth century an increase in the number of people enslaved from Bilad al Sudan led to the equation of blackness with slavery in a Moroccan context. (El Hamel 2008) The largest

numbers of men, women, and children were enslaved during the nineteenth century. The scholar Mohammed Ennaji (for an overview of Moroccan slavery, see M. Ennaji, *Serving the Master: Slavery and Society in Nineteenth Century Morocco*, trans.) estimates that during this period 20,000 slaves entered Morocco from West Africa each year. Wolof Kingdoms in Senegal were involved in the trans-Saharan slave trade, as Senegalese kings and nobles exchanged slaves for North-African horses, cloth, and other imported goods. (J. Webb 1993) Caravans also left from Timbuktu (Mali) for the town of Tabalbala (Algeria). Caravans from the Hausa-controlled city of Kano (Niger) traveled to the town of In Salah (Algeria). Both routes eventually ended at the Tafilalet oasis in Morocco. (Becker, 2011)

Blackness and its link to marginalization is embodied during Gnawa spirit-possession ceremonies, referred to as *lila*, meaning “night” in Arabic. It is important to recognize that “spirit possession” is a very broad term that has been subject to a great deal of scholarly interest and critique. Among anthropologists and historians of religion, there is little consensus as to what the term “spirit possession” means, when to use it, and how. Some prefer to use the terms “trance,” “shamanism,” “dissociation,” or “ecstatic religious practice,” and a great deal has been written about the pros and cons of each. Deborah Kapchan (2009, 104.) reminds us that “analytical categories tend to tell us more about the historical moment of their enunciation and its preoccupations than about the ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’ of the enactments themselves” (Becker, 2020)

Gnawa background and beliefs

Maallam Esseddiq Laarache, Gnawa music leader emphasized on the Amazigh (Amazigh: indigenous people of North Africa also called berbers, it refer as well to the language used, which is ‘Tifinagh’ or ‘Imazighen’) root of the origin of Gnawa as an

ethnic community that has some of ‘Bambara (Bambara: is the language of the country Mali)’ language. He grew up among Gnawa, from his childhood he observed, participated and played music in the *lila* (Lila: It means night in Arabic. Lila is a ceremony in which they held the rituals with the music and dances in order the put the participants in trance for the purpose of healing). He learnt from the old Gnawa masters who passed away and he kept practicing more and more the art of Gnawa, he also added that he doesn’t give up his profession as a craft man to make a living!

Tgnawit (Tagnawit: is the act of practicing Gnawa as a music, art and rituals) was only for the craft men. They work all the week long until Thursday evening or Saturday evening then they start organizing the *lila* of Gnawa. They choose Thursday evening because the day after it is Friday which is a sacred day for the Muslims in which they pray collectively and Saturday because the day after it is a day off. There is also the *moussem* (Moussem: is a fair of double function: economical and spiritual. It is generally held near the sanctuary of the venerated saint of the regions. Beside the trade exchanges, the *moussem* is organized in homage of the saint and for his honour, and for the sake of the posthumous commemoration - K’hal-Laayoun, 2019) of *Chaaban* (Chaaban: It is a month in the Islamic calendar that precedes the month of Ramadan which is considered a holy month because of the religious practices of fasting, praying and being in a close contact to God) that has three days and it can take seven days it called *nachra* (Nachra: The seven days of the *moussem*) there are seven colours (based on the Islamic belief that there are seven skies, seven earths, seven seas, seven waves), each day with a colour from the series of colours that they use during the seven days. (There is also the entrance with the drum that is just a ‘habit’ played by *wled bambra* (Wled Bambra: It is an individual dance of the Gnawi dancer) with the dance and the rituals, there is *nokcha*. Nokcha it is a collective

dance. While the word Nksha itself does not have any agreed-upon meaning among Gnawa practitioners, the Moroccan colloquialism *feltet-lu nksha* is often used to mean “he’s gone mad,” more specifically that someone is doing something outside of his control. This suggests that the term may have denoted a connection between madness and loss of consciousness and Gnawa spirit possession—which can both mimic a condition associated with madness or mental illness and serve as a cure for it (Becker, 2020) (this is just for warming up and gathering the people).

In the *lila* which means the trance ceremony, They begin with a colour, the next day another different colour and it goes like this until they complete the seven days of the *moussem*. Each series has a colour and has its own performance. The people who dance they dance according to the rituals that follows that colour.

The complete ceremony includes seven sections, each controlled by a different saint or family of spirits. In the *derdeba* (Derdba: The ‘lila’ or ‘derdba’, two names for an all-night, trance-based, spirit possession ceremony - Witulski, 2018), a single tune can conjure up a complex set of associations and actions. The saints and spirits each have their own tunes, and a given melody (with or without a sung text) is said both to attract the spirit and to indicate its presence (Schuyler, 1981).

The music of Gnawa

The music the *Maallem* performs fulfills the necessary function for a given situation without much contemplation, leaving it to what they call *hak*: a state of transcendence or “state of oneness with God” (Kapchan, 2007, 42.). After all, he has no need for a formal exegesis. Given the situation, an outsider can only attain a meaningful understanding of the musical processes through analysis of musical and ethnographic data, piecing together fragments collected over the course of fieldwork in

a project of deconstruction and re-construction. (Sum 2011)

Picture 3: Gnawa performance during the parade organized by 'Gnawa and music of the world festival' in Essaouira, Morocco, June 2023. Photograph by the author.



Spiritual musical instruments

The Gnawa rely on their musical instruments to communicate with the spirit world. (El Hamel 2008) one of which, a three-stringed lute-tambour (guembri), is used primary invocation to call on the *jinn*s (spiritual entities). (Westermarck, 1899)

Guembri: Also named *el guembri* / *el guembri*, *el hajbouj* or *santir*. A musical instrument with three souls that become one soul stated *Maallem Essediq*. The *Guembri* is made from the skin of the camel specifically the neck. The cords of the *Guembri* are from the intestines of the goat and the third element is the wood that was before a tree. He added 'the wood has a soul, the camel has a soul and the goat has a soul. When we put them together it become one soul, the three souls reborn'. The *Guembri* has been created in the form of a boat because the slaves were taken on a boat. *el hajbouj* is not only a musical instrument for pleasure and joy, but when Gnawa use *el hajbouj* with intricate textures, astonishing patterns and rhythmic tones, it is a ritual instrument as well for

charming the *mlouk*, those supernatural entities. (K'hal-Laayoun 2019)

Qraqeb: *Qraqeb* resembles the feet cuffs during the enslavement period. Essediq stated. The iron *qraqeb* exists throughout the Maghreb where it is given different names by various Black communities linked to the history of enslavement. In Tunisia, for instance, descendants of enslaved people play cymbals called *shqashiq* to evoke spirit possession, although, according to ethnomusicologist (Jankowsky, 2010), they are generally heavier than the Moroccan *qraqeb* and the style of playing is different. In Morocco, each pair of *qraqeb* is held together with a small circle of metal placed through a hole at one end of each cymbal, restricting the movement of each metal plate and limiting the volume that each pair can produce (Becker 2020).

Picture 4. Gnawa group playing music with the Qraqeb instrument during the parade organized by 'Gnawa and music of the world festival' in Essaouira, Morocco, June 2023. Photograph by the author.



Gnawa dance. During *Allila* of *Derdba*, beside the adepts and the initiates, sometimes the spectators become actors when so engrossed by the Gnawa music, they mysteriously dance without having control of themselves. At that time of the *jdib* – trance, Gnawa reveal that the dancer is carried away by *mlouk* which means the spirits.

(K'hal-Laayoun, 2019) 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). As soon as the music stops, the dancer falls down unconscious, to regain consciousness a few minutes later without remembering anything of his or her previous performance. If the dancer cannot get up, the music is resumed enabling the dancer to pursue his or her gestures until he or she is relieved from his or her trance (K'hal-Laayoun, 2019).

Picture 5: Gnawa dance performance during the march organized by 'Gnawa and music of the world festival' in Essaouira, Morocco, June 2023. Photograph by the author.



The therapeutic rituals of the *lila*

Through such ceremonies and practices, the Gnawa transform themselves from the socially constructed identities that are the result of centuries of acculturation into Moroccan society, in which they first arrived as enforced migrants; then,

through exclusionary practices, they re-embodied themselves as a spiritually constructed people, independent of their social identity in the world. (El Hamel, 2008)

The trance rituals: The trance ceremonies generally take place after sundown; for this reason they are called *lila* (meaning 'night' in Arabic). They are also called *derdeba* (ritual of possession). (El Hamel 2008) During the trance ceremony each participant has his own colour that he choose himself the *Maallem Essedik* confirmed. he said that it's him who choose the colour when he is dancing and falling during *jdib* (*Jdib*: is the dance in the state of trance during the *lila*) Gnawa play according to the colour that the sick fall in. While Gnawa are playing, following the rituals: *rahba* (*Rahba*: (the opening of the square), a mode during which the incenses of 'jaoui' and 'hsalabane' are burnt in a little brazier. By the time, ornamented with cowries put around the shoulder -K'hal-Laayoun, 2019) and *lbkhour* (*Lbkhour*: It is the fumigation Gnawa use to have a good incense in the place), after a while he fall, he goes to Gnawa, they put *lbkhour* and give him a towel of the colour that he fall into it.

There is somebody for example who has something in his chest that bothers him and makes him feel suffocated but when he goes to Gnawa, he dances and get recovered. *Maallem Essedik* confirmed that there are the patients who have physical illnesses and the others who have psychological ones as well. He added that we work for them and they got healed here in the town and outside. We go outside, we start with the *fatha*, *Baraka* (*Baraka*: It means the blessing from God) and good intention *niya* and the patient get recovered and there are the ones who organise the *lila* without being ill or having any kind of sickness. The patient invites his loved ones, neighbours and others and after that everyone goes to his own way.

Mqeddma: The Gnawa *mqeddma*, who is typically female, organizes the ceremony for one of her

clients and hires the musicians. Participants at a Gnawa ceremony come from various ethnic backgrounds –they may be Imazighen (Berber) or Arab– and most are women. The client of the *mqeddma* pays for the food consumed at the *lila* and hires the musicians, but also invited female guests to contribute offerings of money to the musicians during the ceremony. Most of these women would not define themselves as Gnawa, although they may regularly attend ceremonies (Becker, 2011).

Maallem Essedik emphasized on the big role that the *Mqeddma* (Mqeddma: (plural:mqeddmate) is the chief-guard of the Gnawa sanctuary or dar. She is also the chief-organizer of Allila of Derdba or the Moussem. Chosen by all the Gnawa, and with the agreement of the mqeddem, Mqeddma is assisted by Laarifa another woman designed by mqeddma whose role consists of helping Tellaa (mediumnic fortune-teller) or Shouwafa (non-mediumnic fortune-teller) in carrying out the annual ‘Allila’ of Derdba -K’hal-Laayoun, 2019) plays because the *lila* can start with her, Women goes to the *Mqeddma*, she speaks to them, if it’s necessary to organise the *lila* then they start the preparations, they talk to the *Maallem*, they buy the animal in order to sacrifice it, they arrange the day and the time when they will organise it. They slaughter the animal during the day. They organise the *lila* at night or the day after until five or six am, at they end it with *fatha* (Fatha: (Fatiha) the first Surrah in the Quran). The *lila* starts after the prayer of *laacha* (Laacha: The evening prayer and the last prayer of the day for the Muslims) at night and they finish before the prayer of *sobh* (Sobh: The dawn prayer and the first prayer of the day for the Muslims). He added that’s what it was in the past. And there are the ones who starts after the prayer of *sobh* and they finish at ten or eleven in the morning. He said: ‘We had many *lila* (Lilat: is the plural of *lila* which means many nights) one after the other we didn’t have enough time to sleep just an hour’. In the month of *chaaban* in the past, they were many *lilat* not like now.

Gnawa evolution

Gnawa community recognized many changes in the last decades. When the time comes each summer for the Essaouira Festival of World Music, a festival that features the music of the Gnawa in collaboration with mostly American, European, and sub-Saharan African guests, groups of friends crowd onto buses and ride for hours to see them (Witulski, 2018).

The Essaouira festival is a secular festival supported by private capital, the state, and the crown. Its official title is *Festival d'Essaouira Gnaoua Musiques du Monde*, which can be translated into "Essaouira Festival of Gnawa and World Music." It serves two major purposes: it attracts tourists, and it bolsters Gnawa musicians' engagement in the music industry. A third probable goal of economic development in Essaouira cannot be discounted (Sum, 2011,105.)

Despite, or perhaps because of, this changing community, there remains a certain nostalgia for an earlier era, a time before the unquestionable power of fame, youth, and new media exerted such influence on contemporary religious life in Morocco. The past lives on, refracted through contemporary lenses. Whether a lamentation for something lost or a banner of continuity, tradition continues to inform Gnawa music and the conflicting wealth of attitudes toward it. Even the most adventurous and innovative performances feature iconic instruments or familiar melodic shapes. There is a respect for the past that permeates this music (Witulski, 2018).

Gnawa music is still primarily spiritual and used for healing purposes. Gnawa music has inspired the development of popular Moroccan music in general and is analogically similar to the African American spirituals, gospels and, eventually, the genre known as the Blues, also founded by former slaves. Recently, Western musicians interested in African traditional music have encountered the music of the Gnawa. As a result, much collaboration has ensued between Gnawa musicians and

famous jazz artists such as Randy Weston (El Hamel, 2008).

Conclusion

This anthropological research given me a valuable first hand information about this subject also a tremendous insight into the world of Gnawa culture in which I could examine the issue through an anthropological lens.

Gnawa has been considered the music of the marginalized category in the Moroccan society now it become a cultural phenomenon that influenced several artists such us: Jimmy Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Carlos Santana and many others.

Women's role in the Gnawa community is essential as *Maallem Essedik* explained and emphasized that Gnawa was made for women only. The healing process cannot be possible without Gnawa women. The healing rituals takes a great part of the Gnawa identity. Due to social and economic reasons, that has a massive impact on Gnawa community in Morocco and despite of the changes and the contemporary impacts Gnawa remains a spiritual art that has a significant position in the Moroccan culture.

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