

**WOMEN IN THE GNAWA COMMUNITY IN MOROCCO:
PSYCHOTHERAPY, SPIRITS POSSESSION AND HEALING**

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Abstract:

Descendants of slaves from the Sub-Saharan countries brought to Morocco, characterized by their special music with unique rhythms accompanied with spiritual traditions and practices for healing purposes. The Gnawa community represents an intangible cultural heritage in Morocco due to its special rituals and traditions in healing the sick from various diseases by practicing syncretic rituals, trance dances and spiritual music that makes the participant left up with ecstasy. These practices are centred in a ceremony called 'lila' in which women play a significant role by leading the healing rituals and communicating with the spirits that possess the participant in order to reach God.

Keywords: Morocco, Women's role, Spirits possession, Psychotherapy, Healing

Discipline: Cultural Anthropology

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Absztrakt**A NŐK SZEREPE A MAROKKÓI GNAWA KÖZÖSSÉGBEN:
PSZICHOTERÁPIA, SZELLEMDÉZÉS ÉS GYÓGYÍTÁS**

A Gnawa közösség tagjai a Szubszaharai Afrikából Marokkóba hurcolt rabszolgák leszármazottai, akik különleges ritmusokkal kísért zenéjükéről, valamint spirituális hagyományaikról és gyógyító gyakorlataikról ismertek. A Gnawa kultúra Marokkó szellemi kulturális örökségének része, amely egyedülálló rituálékkal és hagyományokkal járul hozzá a betegek gyógyításához. A gyógyító szertartások szinkretikus rítusokat, transztáncokat és spirituális zenét foglalnak magukban, amelyek révén a résztvevők eksztatikus állapotba kerülnek. Ezek a gyakorlatok egy „*lila*” nevű ceremóniában összpontosulnak, amelyben a nők kiemelkedő szerepet játszanak: ők vezetik a gyógyító rítusokat, valamint kapcsolatot teremtenek a megszálló szellemekkel, hogy a résztvevők elérhessék Istent.

Kulcsszavak: Marokkó, nők szerepe, szellemidézés, pszichoterápia, gyógyítás

Diszciplína: kulturális antropológia

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). In June 2023, I conducted fieldwork research in Essaouira, Morocco, using anthropological and ethnographic methods to explore the intricate phenomenon of Gnawa. My approach was rooted in qualitative research, allowing for an in-depth understanding of this rich cultural tradition.

Women's status in Morocco

Morocco is a complex society, having inherited the great literary and religious traditions of Islam, and withstanding colonization the longest of North African countries while tolerating it the least (Combs-Schilling 1989; 'Arawi 1982). Since Morocco is not a post-industrial society, the term "liminoid" as defined by Turner may not apply here. But as a liminal nation in transit between complex and post-industrial, Morocco is rife with semantic diversity. Both liminal and liminoid apply, though neither term adequately describes the

transformations in Moroccan ritual life. (Kapchan 1996) In contemporary Morocco, women are the primary participants in all-night Gnawa spirit-possession ceremonies, the *lila*. Gnawa men play music to invoke spirits to possess their human hosts, who, in most cases, are women. As noted, photographs of female participation in Gnawa ceremonies from the colonial era are nonexistent. Compounding this ethnographic lacuna is the fact that detailed descriptions of Gnawa ceremonies and women's involvement are also rare. If Gnawa ceremonies are discussed at all in colonial accounts, it is in pejorative terms, signaling that Europeans had little interest in attending or recording such ceremonies. Legy, in his book *Folklore of Morocco*, for example, described Gnawa as a "devil-worshipping brotherhood organized on the lines of the religious societies," and wrote that orthodox Muslims referred to them as the "Brotherhood of Satan" (1935, 38). (Becker 2020)

Essaouira has become a city intimately connected to the term "Gnawa," which is used across the city to market such goods as paintings, clothing, hotels, and spices; numerous shops sell Gnawa recordings and musical instruments. So renowned are Gnawa in contemporary Essaouira that the artist Lamia

Naji, whose photographs were discussed at the beginning of this Introduction, traveled there to produce her series *couleurs primaires*. 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). Furthermore, the popularity of Gnawa music has spread across Morocco and led to the transition of Gnawa musicians from those hired at a modest fee to perform private spirit- possession ceremonies to professional recording artists playing on the global music circuit. (Becker 2020)

Gnawa religious brotherhood

Gnawa sufi confrerie

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).

The Gnawa borrowed, adapted, mixed, and blended aesthetic styles from various groups, crossing geographic, cultural, and religious borders. During the Gnawa lila, musicians invoke individually named spirits with identifiable personalities, religions, and genders, referred to by the generalized term jnun (singular: jinn). The jnun are a race of spiritual beings, created before humans and made of vapor or flame. They can take on animal or human form, and some, who are believed to have individual personalities and specific names, are well known among Moroccans. Jnun, therefore, can be male or female, Muslim or non Muslim, and good or evil. Jnun are sometimes dangerous and cause paralysis, mental illness, and even death; however, in certain cases one establishes a symbiotic relationship with a specific jinn to treat illness.(Carpanzano 1973) The fact that the jnun are also referred to by the Arabic term mluk, meaning "the owners," indicates that spirits inhabit and claim the body. The Gnawa believe that possession by these spirits can inflict a person with physical illness and misfortune until one accepts their power and appeases them with animal sacrifice, incense, music, and trance dancing. (Kapchan 2007)

Psychotherapy and spirits procession in Gnawa community

Spirits

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).

Elements, or figures, believed to be external to the individual, such as demons, angels, and saints, can serve to symbolize certain "psychological dispositions," and the relationship that obtains between these elements may be symbolic of certain "psychic structures" or "psychological processes" (Crapanzano, 1971). I call such elements symbolic-interpretive elements (Crapanzano, 1973a, pp. 5-6). They both symbolize a reality and offer an interpretation that is expressed in a manifestly non-psychological idiom. It is even possible to argue that they "create" the dispositions, much as the recounting the articulation of a dream "creates" the dream (Pfander, esp. pp. 10-11). In any case, the fact remains that the idiom determines the articulation of "psychic reality" and that such articulations constitute the discourse upon which psychological, especially psychoanalytic, investigations are based.

Possession by the spirits

In Sufi lexicon, the term *jadba* refers to a divinely inspired attraction to higher states of consciousness and a feeling of ecstasy that results in the desire to achieve a oneness with God, which is the general goal of Sufism (Fuson 2009, 24; Kapchan 2007,

42). Gnawa spirits, however, do not evoke a spiritual connection with God but permanently inhabit a person. A person possessed by a Gnawa spirit is referred to as *meskoun*, meaning "inhabited" in Arabic. People also refer to the possessed state as a *bal*, meaning a heightened state of emotion and transcendence (Chlyeh 1998; Kapchan 2007, 42). Possession by spirits is also common among groups in Sudanic Africa, and it is probable that the ancestors of the Ismkhan brought memories of these practices with them across the Sahara. For example, Hausa participants in bori believe that supernatural spirits may enter people and control them. Each spirit has its own personality, requires the follower to wear certain clothes, and perform particular trance dances that express the disposition of the spirit. (F.E. Besmer) Similar events occur during the holey-hoore of the Songhai in north-eastern Mali. (Jean Rouch) In the modern nation of the Sudan, spirit possession and trance are also features of the tumbura and the zar ceremonies. (G. Makris G. and Ahmed al-Safi) During the hadra Ismkhan men make a circle and men who wish to achieve trance stand in the middle. The men in the circle ensure that the dancers do not leave its centre. Ismkhan explained that the circle prevents men from breaking free and, in the midst of trance, attack an audience member wearing the colour associated with their malk. Women can also be possessed by the mlouk, but social conventions regarding female modesty prevent them from performing the hadra in public. Women, on the verge of going into trance, can sometimes be seen running from the public area so they can satisfy their malk away from the watchful eyes of the crowd. (Becker 2002).

In the article "Negro Influence in Morocco" (1934), Edward Westermarck also wrote about the many women possessed at a Gnawa ceremony, "danc[ing] for hours, even the whole night" and dressed in clothing associated with particular spirits.

Figure 1. Photograph by Lamia Naji, *couleurs primaires*, 2005.



His account emphasizes the sensational aspects of the spectacle: “Some of the women beat their necks with cords, which were among the clothes, or with sticks, or lacerate their thighs with a dagger, and many of them eat fire” (1934, 625). Unfortunately, it appears that Westermarck, like most foreigners who give accounts of Gnawa ceremonies, did not actually attend one. He wrote, “Unfortunately I did not arrive at the spot until the proceedings were just over, but I am speaking from credible hearsay” (1934, 626). (Becker 2020)

In Mernissi’s book, one chapter dedicated to a woman named Lalla Mina provides insight into why spirit possession was restricted to shrines and/or private homes of Gnawa clients. Mernissi described Mina as a woman whose “serene black face” contrasted with the yellow gown and headscarf that she wore to honor the Gnawa spirit named Lalla Mira, whose preferred color was yellow (1994, 157). Mina attended Gnawa ceremonies in the home of a man named Sidi Belal, who, like Mina, “had originally come from the Sudan and begun his life in Morocco as an uprooted slave” (1994, 159). (Becker 2020) Mernissi refers to a Gnawa lila as a “forbidden” and “subversive” ceremony that was an expression of “women’s solidarity” that freed women “for once

of all external pressures” (1994, 158–61). According to her, Moroccan men from the privileged class, who were more likely to be literate, dismissed Gnawa spirit possession as superstition derived from sub-Saharan animism, and elite women hid participation from their families. Several early twentieth-century documents reinforce Mernissi’s account that both Moroccans and Europeans viewed Gnawa practices negatively, calling the elite women in Fes who attended *lila* with their slaves “ignorant” (Michaux-Bellaire 1907, 320).

Trance dance as a therapeutic practice

A Gnawa lila consists of a series of ritualized events typically occurring over a two-day period, commencing with an animal sacrifice on the first day. The second day starts with a public procession, followed by a performance known as *fraja*, which precedes the spirit-possession portion of the lila. Although the word *fraja* somewhat ironically means “amusement,” the song lyrics deal with the personal and collective traumas experienced by the enslaved, such as being kidnapped from West Africa, separated from their mothers, placed in sacks, and forced to subsist on scraps of food. Most importantly, *fraja* performances serve to geolocate Gnawa ceremonies within a narrative that links them to a Sudani identity. As the music recounts historical struggles and hardships, the stage is set for the later possession portion of the Gnawa lila. Men wearing colorful tunics and cowrie-adorned headdresses perform *fraja* songs in front of the *guinbri* player, with the audience sitting in a semicircle around them, watching as Gnawa musicians perform acrobatic dance moves. (Becker 2020) The music and dance of the Gnawas (or Gnaouas) of the High Atlas are of black African and Arab traditions. 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 ex-slave from Ethiopia who

became a highly respected caller to prayers (*muez-zin*), 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. Members of the brotherhood observe a nocturnal rite of ceremonious possession (*deiceba*), during which participants practice the dances of possession and trance called *derdeba*. A master musician accompanies his troupe, and a female medium usually leads the spirituals used to invoke saints and supernatural beings. The percussion for the ritual processions comes specifically from a lute drum with a low register (*guembri*) and castanets (*qraqech*). Drums are used only during the beginning stage preceding the rite of possession. This nighttime ceremony also includes an irreligious session intended solely for the entertainment of members. Today, the tumblers of the *Jemaa El Fna* (or *Djema el-Fna*) in Marrakech have transformed Gnawa music and dance into a popular form of entertainment. The group retains the traditional large drums and wroughtiron castanets and the cowry shells and glass beads that adorn the performers. These cultural emblems remind the people about the dance's historical origins. The Gnawa performers dance with much agility, and their dangerous acrobatics flow with the beat of the rhythm. (Njoku 2006)

Women in the Moroccan society

The attitude and role of women in society are largely informed by the people's worldview, their customs, including prevalent economic, demo-

graphic, and political culture. (Rachel Simon 2000) In general, men enjoy a higher social status and appear to dominate the women in certain aspects of life. A stereotypical notion of a woman's role is to care for her children and the household. It is her responsibility to shop, cook, feed, and educate the children while the man is away at work. Moroccan women maintain a clean house, and during their leisure time they may visit family members, friends, or attend prayers at the neighborhood shrines or mosques. Even in the countryside, where Berber women share the agricultural duties with their husbands and do not wear restrictive veils, they are still obligated to conform to their primary responsibilities of childcare and food preparation. Also, Muslim women rarely accompany their husbands to social events outside the household, especially because they have so many responsibilities in the house to occupy their day. Whereas men live a much more unstructured life, women are expected, but not forced, to adhere to certain codes of behavior, especially before marriage. For instance, it is considered crude for young women to marry outside their race or faith, to travel abroad without obtaining parental consent, or to be unaccompanied late at night. In Morocco, it is forbidden for the predominantly Berber-Arab women to be married to either French, Spanish, or Jewish men, but their men are free to marry outsiders. Unlike men, women are scolded for smoking in public. When a wife errs, it is also part of the culture for a man to beat her—an act considered abuse in Western societies. (Njoku 2006)

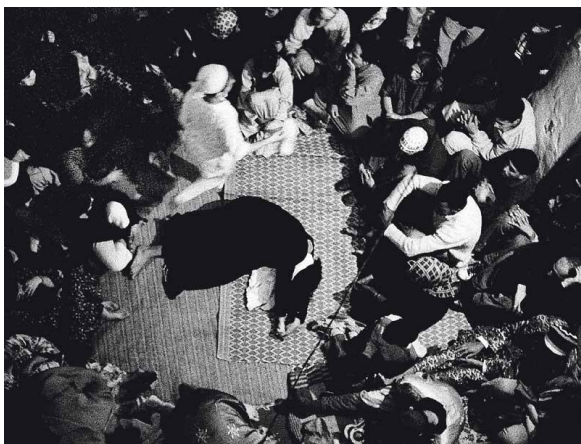
The role of women in Gnawa rituals and practices

The Mqaddema: the spiritual leader

The Gnawa *mqaddema*, 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 mqaddema 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. During Gnawa ceremonies women in possession-trance often remove their headscarves and dance by unrestrainedly swinging their long hair from side to side in front of the male musicians. This is unusual in Morocco, as most women will not dance or take their hair down, or both, in front of men who are not their relatives. However, women do not feel the need to restrict their behavior in front of the Gnawa because Gnawa continue to be linked to a history of slavery. In rural Morocco, a comfortable, familial-like joking relationship exists between the descendants of slaves (both male and female) and the descendants of their previous "owners" that does not require women to behave modestly. In other words, Gnawa are hired to perform a service, and, during the lila, their ancestral connection to slavery allows women to engage in unrestricted behavior, reenacting the historical relationship between "slaves" and their "owners" (Becker 2011)

Figure 2. Photograph by Lamia Naji, *couleurs primaires*, 2005.



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. If 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.

Women's hierarchy in the Gnawa community:

According to K'hal-Laayoun, In the Gnawa confrerie, there are some women having ritually professional activities depending to their hierarchy such as:

1) *Mqedma*: The Gnawa brotherhood in general or Dar in particular is directed by a mqeddem or mqedma (plural: mqedmate) is the chief-guard of the Gnawa sanctuary or dar. She is also the chief-organizer of Lila of Derdba or the Moussem. Chosen by all the Gnawa, and with the agreement of the mqeddem, Mqedma is assisted by Laarifa another woman designed by mqedma whose role consists of helping Tellaa (mediumnic fortune-teller) or shouwafan (non-mediumic fortune-teller) in carrying out the annual 'Lilla' of Derdba.

2) *Shouwafa*: This term derives from the verb 'shouf' which means in the Moroccan Arabic 'look' or 'see' or foresee the future. Therefore, 'shouwafa' (plural: shouwafate) is the therapeutic fortune-teller who participates only in the divination by manipulation, using various objects without entering in trance while consulting these objects.

Having access to the statute and responsibilities of a shouwafa emanates from heritage or an initiatic illness followed by an election. However, the vocation is a necessary condition for the statute of a shouwafa who is also:

- mamlouka: ritually possessed and even ravished at any time or tormented by the mlouk.
- mlaykia: having privileged relationships with the mlouk who assist her in her career.
- mllaka: revealing the identity and exigencies of the mlouk tormenting a person.

- mqedma: at the head of the adepts members of her group, and a privileged intermediate between the mlouk and the patients in her change.

Shouwafa is healing her adept or patient by:

- kitaba: magic writings
- fumigations
- hlou: ritual food without salt
- zriba: to make part of the enclosure of shouwafa
- tbiqa: to have access to the ritual tray of fumigations as a symbol of the confrery for having constant contact between the adepts and shouwafa.

In return, the adepts or patient has to give offerings and gifts to shouwafa in order to have her therapy and Baraka.

Both of shouwafa and tellaa are responsible of organizing Derdba and Moussem.

3) *Tellaa*: The term refers to the verb 'tellae' which means to make go up or show off. Therefore, 'tellaa' is a gnawi woman who calls upon the mlouk (supernatural entities) and speaks via their tongue while practicing the divination by initiating the mediumnic trance.

4) *Laarifa*: is the woman assisting either shouwafa in her initiatic, therapeutic and divinatory functions, or tellaa in the mediumnic cases by translating the messages and the incomprehensible languages of mlouk to the clients.

5) *Metaalma/ khaddama*: is the one executing domestic tasks in the aim of succeeding laarifa or waiting for a vocation initiating her to the foreseeing and therapeutic career. (K'hal-Laayoun 2019)

A shouwafa's initiation: K'hal-Laayoun stated 'as a Moroccan Doctor in Ethnology and a Psychotherapist, Mr Abdelhafid Chlieh accompanies us to the initiatic itinerary of the trance and possession of a Gnawi woman. However, the motivation of a researcher are not so easy to comprehend in the popular and traditional lieux, mainly by the members of the religious orders. Moreover, it is difficult for a man as man to initiate the woman's

world, especially that of the therapeutic fortune-teller, shouwafa, in order to collect the ethnographic and ritual elements concerning the divination, initiation, and therapy. With a great interest and importance, Mr Chliyah initiates us via some fragments of life recitals into the initiatic itinerary of a shouwafa from the Gnawa confrery named Zineb. After having been a simple adept for thirty years, Zineb finished by accepting the statute of shouwafa. She had been the subject of possession trances after a grave illness, when some invisible entities 'mlouk' incorporated in her, were often manifest in spectacular acrobatics according to her relatives. Then her vocation was confirmed by a ritual dance when at the trance, the mlouk required from her to be consecrated to the task of the therapy according to the gnawi ritual mode. Therby, the destiny of Zineb was traced by a serious illness leading her from a simple adept to a well known gnawi shouwafa 'therapeutic fortune-teller' in Marrakesh. (K'hal-Laayoun 2019)

Professional recordings featuring Gnawa music and ceremonies began to proliferate in the 1990s, a period that coincided with the creation of the Gnawa and World Music Festival in 1998, which gave Gnawa music greater international visibility. During the 1990s, various labels released recordings of male Gnawa musicians performing songs sung during the evocation of spirits, as well as recordings of fusion music recorded with jazz musicians from the United States, such as Randy Weston (Becker 2020)-

Gnawa: Au-delà de la musique includes a recognition of the increased national and global popularity of Gnawa music, with the narrator noting, "Now that Gnawa music has become popular, some musicians are so demanding that many followers abandon the idea of a derdeba [possession ceremony]." In other words, the international popularity of Gnawa musicians has resulted in male musicians demanding higher prices to perform at the traditional ceremonies (a fact also

noted by the scholar Deborah Kapchan in her recent book on Gnawa), further marginalizing women in Gnawa ritual life as many women can no longer afford to hire musicians to play at their lila (Kapchan 2007).

Conclusion

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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