

**COMMODITISED THE SACRED:
GNAWA FROM RITUALS AND TRADITIONS TO STARDOM**

Meryem Madili¹

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Abstract

Influenced remarkable iconic figures in the music scene, their echo reached the farthest corners of the world, attracted souls and spirits to join its magic. Led Zeppelin, Bob Marley, Jimmy Hendrix and many other artists from Jazz, blues and rock made a fusion music with their special music and rhythms. In Morocco, the community of Gnawa is not just an ethnic group but rather a significant cultural patrimony of the country that has been inscribed by the UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage due to its authenticity and special rituals. Despite the huge fame, the commoditisation factors and the tourism, Gnawa preserved its traditions and rituals for the healing purposes, which keep this community sacred and authentic. Gnawa became a cultural phenomenon and movement that influenced many people from all over the world.

Keywords: the sacred, commoditisation, popularity, rituals, music

Discipline: cultural anthropology

Absztrakt

A SZENT KOMMODIFIKÁCIÓJA: A GNAWA A RITUÁLÉKTÓL ÉS HAGYOMÁNYOKTÓL A NEMZETKÖZI ELISMERTSÉGIG

A gnawa zenei és rituális gyakorlatok jelentős hatást gyakoroltak a globális zenei színtér meghatározó alakjaira, visszhangjuk a világ legtávolabbi pontjaira is eljutott, és sajátos spirituális és esztétikai világába

¹ Meryem Madili (PhD Student), Department of Ethnography, Faculty of Arts, University of Debrecen, Program of Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology (Hungary)(Marokkó). E-mail meryemmadili27@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3843-9408>

különböző kulturális közösségeket vonzott. Olyan előadók, mint a Led Zeppelin, Bob Marley vagy Jimi Hendrix, valamint számos jazz-, blues- és rockzenész integrálták a gnawa ritmikái és zenei elemeit, hozzájárulva hibrid zenei formák kialakulásához. Marokkóban a gnawa közösség nem csupán etnikai csoportként értelmezhető, hanem az ország kiemelkedő kulturális örökségének része, amelyet az UNESCO az autenticitása és sajátos rituális gyakorlatai miatt az emberiség szellemi kulturális örökségéként ismert el. A növekvő nemzetközi ismertség, a kommodifikáció (árucikké válás) folyamatai és a turizmus hatásai ellenére a gnawa közösség megőrizte hagyományainak és rituáléinak – különösen a gyógyító célú gyakorlatoknak – lényegi elemeit. E folytonosságok hozzájárulnak ahhoz, hogy a gnawa kultúra továbbra is szakrális és autentikus jelleggel bírjon. Ennek következtében a gnawa napjainkra transznacionális kulturális jelenséggé és mozgalommá vált, amely világszerte hatást gyakorol különböző közösségekre és kulturális diskurzusokra.

Kulcsszavak: szentség; kommodifikáció; népszerűség; rituálék; zene

Tudományterület: kulturális antropológia

All these games, these sacrifices, these dances that everyone may attend are, of course, destined to hide the secret knowledge of the initiates, but they also constitute the processes of memory that allow them to find in the slightest detail all the alchemy of the human soul, which is that of the world and of God.
– Viviana Pâques

Introduction:

The history of Gnawa is rooted back to the enslavement period in Africa. With the end of the twentieth century, Gnawa identity became more porous with the creation of the Gnawa and World Music Festival in 1998. This contributed to the increased popularity and exposure of Gnawa music to the larger Moroccan public. Waves of people who did not self-identify as phenotypically Black, had no enslaved ancestors, and had no ancestral connection to the Sudan also joined the ranks of Gnawa (Becker 2020). 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).

Essaouira, Atlantic port city, western Morocco, midway between Safi and Agadir. The site was occupied by Phoenicians and then Carthaginians and was mentioned in the chronicles of the Carthaginian explorer Hanno (5th century bc) (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007).

Picture 1. Fortress (Skkala) Essaouira, Morocco 2023.
Source: Meryem Madili.



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 (Becker 2020). Essaouira is also known by the wind-surf, the silver jewellery, the wood and painting art, the Hippism by its period (the seventies of the twentieth century), and above all the festival of Gnawa. For four days, this town becomes cosmopolitan when hundreds of thousands of Moroccans and foreigners get mingled in happiness and delight for the festival of Gnawa (K’hal-Laayoun 2019).

Music can communicate to its listeners on a number of levels, with varying degrees of specificity. Almost every society has one or more genres of music closely associated with certain community events (weddings, funerals, and so that the music alone is able to evoke the behaviour and emotions appropriate those events. Many cultures, from South Asia and the Middle East to Western Europe, attach images and ethical values to various melodic and rhythmic patters thus allowing musicians to play quite effectively on the emotions of their listeners (Schuyler 1981).

Tgnawit (*Tagnawit*: is the act of practicing Gnawa as a music, art and rituals) was only for the craft men. They work all the weeklong 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 (Madili 2024). To say that ‘tagnawit is like a woman,’ on the other hand, is to acknowledge that the culture and traditions of the Gnawa have an independent (and sexualized) agency. The master does not create tagnawit; he only interacts with it. In this sense, being a Gnawi is a dialogic enterprise- the Gnawi enters into a relationship with the possessed, who, themselves, have a relationship with all these entities (Kapchan 2007).

Kapchan also noted, those possessing *tagnawit* are most often born into a Gnawa milieu and come up through the ranks, learning the ritual in all its complexity by observation, participation, and slow initiation. Those who do not possess *tagnawit* are the populizers who, for purposes of commercialization, have adopted the Gnawa identity and music but know little of its deeper ritual significance, its history in the bones.

Gnawa Festival

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."

Picture 2. Gnawa performance in a March organized by Gnawa world festival in 2023, Essaouira, Morocco. Source: Meryem Madili.



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). The quietness of this city and its particular climate make of Essaouira a target for visitors by both Moroccans and foreigners. This small seaside resort is a landmark for the artists and the musicians especially at the festival of Gnawa. It

is also a lieu for predilection for the surfers coming from all over the world (K'hal-Laayoun 2019).

The music is considered so powerful that at one time it was thought that singing the songs outside of the ceremonial context would incite the wrath of the spirits, who would then exact retribution in the form of afflicting the transgressor (Kapchan). Today, however, Gnawa musicians either aver that they only commercialize the praise songs to dead saints (called the *mdah*) and not the invocations to the spirits, or that their intention (*niya*) mediates the relation between sound and spirit, thus neutralizing the effects that the desacralization of the music might cause (Kapchan 2007). Gnawa musicians now commonly perform in clubs, restaurants, and the massive Gnawa and World Music Festival in Essaouira. Indeed, many Gnawa musicians today have never performed at private spirit-possession ceremonies, never worked with a female diviner, and never witnessed spirit possession (Becker 2020).

Success within the Gnawa musical community is increasingly defined by the commercial standards of the music industry rather than by ritual criteria. Most performers and journalists locate ideas of ritual efficacy as the result of an effective command of two distinct sources of authenticity: Muslim piety and African heritage (Witulski 2018).

Ritualizing the sacred

Gnawa was inscribed in 2019 on UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The traditions and beliefs are kept alive for the healing purposes. 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 (Schuyler 1981). The history of Islam in Morocco has had profound effects on subcultures like the Gnawa. The predominant influence of Sufism and saint worship that characterizes Moroccan Islam has become part of Gnawa ritual, evident in ways of honouring the ancestors (Eickelman 1976; Cornell 1998). The Gnawa ritual is an event led by and oriented toward the paying host and the present audience of listeners. Although musicians and ritual leaders direct the proceedings, they also defer to the tastes and requests of those present in the room (Witulski 2018).

In Morocco today, clients hire musicians to welcome spirits into a ritual for healing purposes. Other clients, notably concerts producers or promoters, hire musicians to entertain crowds. Both sets of clients might demand performers who are authentic (Witulski 2018). The music the *m'alle* 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). Judith Becker defines trance as a state of mind characterized by intense focus) the loss of the strong sense of self and access to types of knowledge and experience that are inaccessible in non- trance states. While Rouget prefers to distinguish between states of "trance" and "ecstasy," I prefer a generic category of "trance" that includes meditative states, possession trance, shamanic trance, communal trance, aesthetic trance and isolated moments of transcendence (Becker 1994).

Trances are gestures towards flow in the sense implied by this verb, employing codified movements to literally create the space of flow. Enacting the ritualized gesture of falling or the movements of trance itself are also ways of moving into other experiences of time (Csikszentmihaly 1990). The ritualized gestures of trance also create a sacred space, but this space is not one of stone, vault, or corridor. Rather the gestures transform existent and

usually interior spaces of domesticity into places of sacred play or ritual drama (indeed the introductory part of the ceremony is called *al-la'ba*, 'play'). The transformation and sacralization of space is created in self-conscious gestures at the beginning of the ceremonies, as milk- a pure and purifying substance- is taken from the ceremonial bowl with a ladle and a lightly spilled in strategic places: in the four corners of the room, in the four cardinal directions, on the instruments of the Gnawa, and finally again from the same ladle, into the mouths of Gnawa themselves, offered also by the *mqaddem* to all those present at the ceremony (Kapchan 2007). Trance states can be of different kinds: there is the trance of the performer who feels herself to be one with the music she plays; the mild trance of the listener whose whole attention becomes focused on the music; possession trance, in which one's self appears to be displaced and one's body is taken over by a deity or a spirit; the trance of Sufi mystics who feel themselves unified with Allah; or the meditation trance of Vajrayana Buddhists, who feel themselves become the deity. Trance is not a digital on- off state. There can be many degrees of trance (Becker Judith 1994).

Picture 3. Another Gnawa group performance in a March organized by Gnawa world festival in 2023, Essaouira, Morocco. Source: Meryem Madili.



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).

Gnawa diviners describe the experience as having a spirit, as one has an illness, indicating a sense of powerlessness over the experience; during possession the person's actions are determined by the desires of the spirit inhabiting him or her (Spadola 2014, 88). When a spirit resides in that human body, the spirit lives there permanently and expects to be served through that person's daily behaviour, demanding that the possessed wear the spirit's favourite perfume, eat foods that please the spirit, and attend ceremonies that allow the spirit to manifest him- or herself materially (Becker 2020). The possessed in Morocco may be said to inhabit a culture of trance, one with a particular relation to the senses and their expression. This culture of trance is not limited to Gnawa practitioners but permeates Moroccan society at many levels (Kapchan 2007).

Methodology

My analysis draws upon the qualitative research method. In Morocco, Essaouira I began my Anthropological journey to investigate this complex phenomenon and culture. I conducted interviews with Maallem Essedik Laarache who is a Gnawa music master in Essaouira, 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 to 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! (Madili 2024)

Commoditization

Commercialization made Gnawa reach a wide audience through the festival, the fusion music and tourism. The strongest catalyst for Gnawa commercial popularity was the creation of the Gnawa and World Music Festival in Essaouira, the goal of which was to present Gnawa music as a national heritage and a reflection of Morocco's tolerance of ethnic diversity (Becker 2020).

Picture 4. Gnawa Festival advertisement poster in both languages Arabic and French in Essaouira, Morocco 2023. Source: Meryem Madili



Becker also added that the increased commercialization of Gnawa culture has prompted some to lament the loss of a pure and authentic Gnawa heritage uncontaminated by the consumptive attention of the non-Gnawa world and the global music scene. The scholar Deborah Kapchan notes that those who identify as Gnawa fear being dispossessed of their culture, an unease that has increasingly caused people to emphasize the idea of *tag-nawit*, translated to mean “Gnawa-ness,” to distinguish between what is “authentic” Gnawa and what is “imitation” and “inauthentic” (2007, 22–23).

Scholars, public intellectuals, music producers, and advertisers who are not Gnawa practitioners themselves have flooded the local marketplace with consumable versions of Gnawa traditions, turning “Gnawa” into a consumable brand. Not surprisingly, the profits from such commercialization have not been evenly distributed within the Gnawa community (Becker 2020).

Fusion Music

In the last decades, Western musicians, interested in the African traditional music, have ‘discovered’ the music of Gnawa. As a result, many collaborations have ensued with famous jazz artists such as Randy Weston, or celebrities as Jimi Hendrix, Carlos Santana, Led Zippelin, ... Thus, Gnawa are modernizing their style to make it more secular and with more commercial appeal. With these recent developments and their appeal to tourists, the Moroccan government established in 1997 the Gnawa and World Music Festival in Essaouira (K’hal-Laayoun 2019).

Don Cherry, the late African American jazz trumpeter who, before he died, cut an album with Gnawa musician *Hassan Hakmoun*, was fond of saying that there are three kinds of music in the world-folk music, classical music and devotional music (Rudolph 2001). In this inception, Gnawa music falls into the latter category; it is sacred music by dint of its words, which praise and solicit blessings from

God, the prophet, particular Islamic saints, as well as pantheon of both sub-Saharan and North African, Islamic and non-Islamic spirits (Kapchan 2007).

From the bewitching voices of the gnaouis, the bewildering sounds and tones derived from the *guembri*, *qraqesh*, and sometimes *tbola*, a melody is emanating from African roots to Western performances turned more and more into the media events. Thus, the aim behind the festival of Gnawa in Essaouira, is to bring this art of Gnawa to modernity by giving to the music of Gnawa issues to other musical kinds that would provide it with a universal dimension, less 'ethnic', but more suitable to be admitted by other cultures without really abandoning neither the magic of its essence nor the depth of its spirituality (K'hal-Laayoun 2019). Gnawa superstars in contemporary Morocco achieve the highest levels of success, appearing on major television features and performing on the country's brightest stages.

Picture 5. Gnawa stage in Moulay Hassan Square in Essaouira, Morocco 2023. Source: Meryem Madili



They record pristine studio versions of the tradition's ceremonial music and play these tunes on world tours with jazz and reggae artists. Their fame within the popular music industries make them

influential markers of innovative approaches to this musical tradition and innumerable young musicians follow their lead (Witulski 2018).

Between the myths and dreams which long live in the city of the sun Marrakesh and the towns of winds Tangiers and Essaouira, Gnawa have inspired and made dream many legends of the world music such as Robert Plant, Jimmy PAGE, Led Zeppelin and his legendary group, Brian Jones, Mike Jagger, Randy Weston the New Yorkese Jazz-man who created the first festival of Jazz in Tangiers in 1972, and in 1999 he organized a concert in New York in a church of Brooklyn with Gnaoui maalmin as if he wanted to universalize more and more this music of Gnawa that he has appreciated as his proof in 'Song, Dance and Prayer'. As well as for Santana who has been hypnotized by the magical sonorities found in Morocco, and fascinated and inspired by Gnawa those musicians bearers of the '*baraka*'. Thereby, the genius of the guitar praises *el hajbouj* in its singularity when Santana gave concerts accompanied by *Maallem Guinea* or *Maallem Bakebou* (K'hal-Laayoun 2019).

Conclusion

Internationalization contributed in the popularity of Gnawa community in diverse dimensions which push many people to embrace this culture and art and embrace the magic of the Moroccan culture. Given that Essaouira is home to Morocco's massive Gnawa and World Music Festival, it is no surprise that Gnawa music has impacted the dozens of artists who exhibit in the city's multitude of art galleries (Becker 2020). Authenticity kept Gnawa art and culture alive despite the socio-economic changes.

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