

# Moroccan Gnawa and Transglobal Trance

*The Medium is the Music*

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT  
BY DEBORAH KAPCHAN

## THE GNAWA

ORIGINALLY FROM SUB-SAHARAN Africa, the Gnawa are ritual musicians who were brought to Morocco mostly as slaves in the 15th and 16th centuries from the Songhay region of West Africa and who heal those afflicted with possession through music that induces trance. (See Viviana Pacques' *Les Esclaves de Dieu* for a fuller discussion.)

Although many of the practitioners in Gnawa possession ceremonies today are not former slaves, there is a metonymic relation between the state of being possessed by a spirit and the historical state of being possessed by an owner. Indeed, the spirits in the Moroccan Gnawa tradition of belief are called *al-mluk*—the possessors, from the verb *ma-la-ka*, to own.

There is a relationship of power within the body of the possessed, which is often a conflictual one until the possessed submits to the possessor, ultimately learning to “work” the spirits and to symbolically master what had previously controlled them. Spirit possession invokes somatic memories of



Gnawa invoking the jnun.



slavery, while the ceremonies of the Gnawa provide a venue for healing and liberation, an experience that I discuss in detail in my forthcoming book *Travelling Spirit Masters*.

To be possessed in the Moroccan idiom is to be literally “inhabited,” *meskun*, by a disembodied but gendered spirit (or *jinn*), one with its own character, personality, and whims. These spirits all have different colors that correspond to them and may be said to embody different emotions as well. Sidi



Hamou, for example, is a spirit in the red pantheon. He exacts blood sacrifice and is thought to be a harsh and angry master. Sidi Abdelqadr al-Jilani, a Sufi saint, is in the white pantheon; he is beatific, bestowing feelings of well-being and grace on those who trance to him. Sidi Mimoun is a black spirit who often obliges the possessed to cut themselves with knives.

The Gnawa are practicing Muslims. The songs in their repertoire praise God, as well as the Prophet Muhammad; yet

Invoking trance in the Tuileries Gardens.

---

their ceremonies invoke the *jnun* (pl.), the genies that in Islamic belief are born of fire. (They believe that humans are born of earth, while angels are creatures of light.) The *jnun* are often mischievous and can possess humans, causing affliction. Although *jnun* may not be exorcised, they may be placated with music, trance, incense, and animal sacrifice.

The Gnawa offer these ceremonies to the *jnun*, while divining the possessing spirit for the person possessed. While not a Sufi *tariqa* (path) in the strict sense of the term, the Gnawa share elements of Sufi worship practices in their use of music and movement. But while Sufi groups gather to praise God and the Prophet, aspiring to *tawhid*, or unity with divinity, the Gnawa and their followers gather to propitiate the spirits and heal the possessed, while also praising God and his Messenger, the Prophet Mohammed.

The Gnawa are considered a *taifa*, or sect, in Morocco, and historically have been considered marginal, if not anathema, to mainstream Islam. Since the 1960s, however, the Gnawa have moved as comfortably in the worlds of professional music as in the worlds of spirit propitiation, becoming icons of Moroccan popular culture. What, if anything, is lost when the sacred rituals that mediate relations with the spirits are available to the uninitiated?

#### RABAT

Gnawa musicians are paid to come to people's homes to create a *hal*, a state, that will appease the spirits of the possessed and grant *baraka*, blessing, to those the spirits "accept," those who fall into light or heavy trance listening to their music. These musicians are spiritual healers, working on the body, embodying spiritual power.

Music-induced trance is their medium. "You have to know how to listen to the *hajhuj*," one possessed woman told me. "You listen and the spirits pass through [the music] and rise up within you."

The Gnawa are also festive performers, metonymic representations, icons of Moroccan folklore in chic hotels; the lucky ones having been discovered by jazz musicians like Randy Weston, Pharoah Sanders, and the late Don Cherry. In their role as popular performers, Gnawa elicit the contempt of those who consider them contaminated by the marketplace:

*Là où il y a de l'argent, il y a des diables*, one Moroccan scholar of the Enlightenment told me, "wherever there's money, there's devilry," he said, upon hearing that I was researching the Gnawa. He classified the rituals of the Gnawa as "*l'obscurantism*," superstition and backwardness.

But the consequences of this belief system cannot be so easily dismissed.

One winter day I go to see Si Mohammed, the master

Gnawa, at five in the afternoon at his home. I bring my recorder with me to tape the next series of ritual songs and transcribe the words. I tell the taxi driver to take me near the new mosque, past the public baths, up the hill. Si Mohammed's house is among many cinder-block domiciles that look over the Bouregreg River to Salé beyond—a shantytown turned into cement when the government gave land rights to the squatters on condition that they build.

Walking down the incline towards his narrow street, Si Mohammed's son Younis calls my name. I turn around and find him beside me. He tells me that his father has gone to his uncle's house. There is a ceremony tonight, and he has taken the three-stringed *hajhuj*, the drums, and the *qraqab*, or metal castanets, with him. His father will come back later to get me; meanwhile I am to have tea with Fatima, Si Mohammed's wife, Younis's mother.

"Mothers of twins have *baraka*," Fatima tells me, referring to herself. "They can heal broken bones by massaging them. But against spirits they have no power." She tells me about her baby who died at eight months: "Aisha," she says, "struck her. They brought her to the hospital. *Ma `and-ha walu*, nothing was the matter with her, the doctors told her, but leave her here and we'll examine her more closely. In the afternoon she was dead. Aisha struck her down."

Her little twins run around, one bare-bottomed, both bare-footed. The floor is cold. Si Mohammed's wife sets down a tray with tea and glasses, and accidentally knocks over the tea pot.



TOP LEFT: The *salahin*, the holy spirits. TOP RIGHT: Sidi Hamou.  
ABOVE: Spirit propitiation with candles and incense.



Divining the possessing spirit.



The *qraqab*, cymbals.



Beginning the ceremony.

Steaming hot water splatters on the cement floor. Flicked with tea leaves, it almost reaches our feet. An omen?

Again, she speaks of another child: at two years old—or was it at 18 months?—her limbs limp, her eyes wandering. “I wrapped her in a blanket and put her on a mat in the middle of the floor, lit some *jawi* (incense) and left her there. If she lives, she lives. If she dies, she dies, I said.” This child lived. “We hold a ceremony for Aisha every year now,

so she won’t be struck down again. She’s eight years old. So far she’s been okay.”

Si Mohamed comes back and we leave shortly afterward, taking a taxi to the medina. On the way he tells me that his *asl* or origin was in Sudan, that he used to work in the palace. Was his father a Gnawi? No. As a young man he was apprenticed to a master who gave him his vocation. It was his grandmother who was the Gnawiyya. Tall and thin, she played the *qraqab* and was a

*maqadama*, a female overseer of the ceremony who works with the master. Now Si Mohammed is a master musician, or *m'al-lam*, the lead instrumentalist and singer in the group, the one with the most ability to call down the spirits.

We get out of the taxi. We see Si Mohammed's brother waiting for us on the main street; he knows the house. They wait for me to buy a sugar cone, an offering to the hostess and a way to make change so that I will have money to offer during the ceremony in exchange for blessing and clairvoyance.

We follow his brother down a narrow street, knocking on a door towards the end of the passageway. Entering, we pass a large metal pot simmering on top of a *butagaz* stove in the hall and are seated on mattresses in a courtyard covered over by a tarp from the view of the upstairs neighbors. There are a few women sitting in an adjacent room. They are watching "Manuela," a Mexican soap opera dubbed in Lebanese Arabic. In the courtyard, the other Gnawi are already there—



The Gnawa in Brittany.

five in all. They smoke *kif*, Moroccan cannabis, nonchalantly, waiting for lunch.

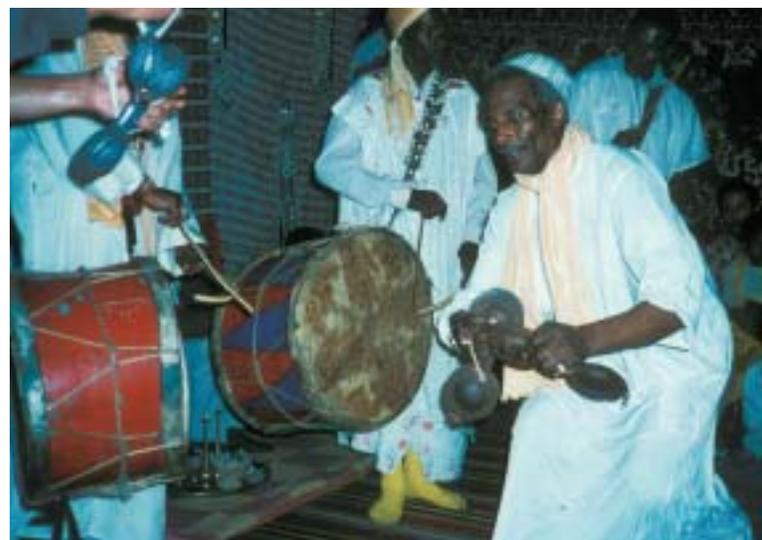
After a meal of chicken, olives, and pickled lemons that I share with the musicians, I am ushered into the women's room by the only daughter of the hostess. They want to know who I am, and I tell them: an American scholar doing research on the Gnawa. In the room are six other women—three young, two over sixty, and the hostess. I learn that the woman of the house has been visited by the powerful female spirit "Aisha" most of her life; she sees her in waking visions, even conversing with her.

Our hostess tells a woman dressed all in white about a vision she had recently when she was at the beach. Aisha appeared right next to her. The most dignified guest—al-Hajja—consoles the hostess, and tells her that all will soon be

well. But the woman of the house has been inviting the Gnawa for more than twenty years to propitiate her spirit. She knows what to expect.

The men in the courtyard stand, picking up two large drums, and removing two pairs of bent sticks and their large hand cymbals from a velour bag. They leave the house. The women bring another mattress into the main courtyard and the hostess goes to change her clothes. I wait inside, but hear the music from way down the street. The Gnawa are alerting the neighbors of their arrival. They are calling the *jnun* to manifest. Twenty minutes pass.

When the musicians finally re-enter the house, the hostess is seated in the middle of the floor, her eyes closed. They encircle her, moving in light steps to the rhythm of the cymbals. Slowly she gets up. She sways. The Hajja holds her by the sleeve so she will not lose her balance. The Gnawa sing. The music is loud; so loud, in fact, that I feel the beat perme-



The *qraqab* and the *tbal*.

ate my bones, the skin of my skull tingles like the curve of the cymbals, the timbre of clacking iron reverberating in my body. The hostess is moving more briskly. She bobs her head up and down. She beats the carpeted floor with her bare feet. Now her scarf falls off and her thinning blackened hair is thrown up and covers her eyes as she throws her head violently on her chest and then from side to side, as if her neck were made of rubber, the sweat of her forehead glistening against the cool air of February. This fifty-something woman collapses on the floor and the Hajja attends to her, coaxing her to the side of the room where she sits her down, wiping the sweat from her brow and sprinkling her hands and face with cool flower water. The Gnawa set their large drums aside and sit on cushions against the far wall.

Before us, a Gnawi flails his arms and his head, salivating profusely, his few teeth evident in his open mouth. The sound of the *hajhuj* resounds like a contrabass, the resonance of the cymbals, the steady beat of hands cupped and clapping, and the smell of cannabis as the smoke floats out of the musicians' lungs.

After a period of trancing, the hostess stands motionless in the middle of the room. A young girl approaches to give her money and to receive her blessing in return. The hostess is alert, her eyes wide. She is possessed by Sidi Chamharouch, the king of all the *jnun*. In his voice, the hostess holds the girl's hand and looks directly into her eyes. "Don't worry about what the others say. Go in through the door; it's a narrow door, not a wide door. What's right is difficult. Don't be afraid. Go in through the door." The girl nods. The allusions seem to be understood. The hostess gives her some anise bread and sugar cubes from a large scarf that she has slung around her side, the food of the spirit, containing blessing, *al-baraka*.

A few nights later I wake up hearing the beat of the Gnawa. For what seemed like a good five or ten minutes I sit up in bed, listening, expecting the sound to diminish as I eventually come out of a sound sleep. But it does not. I sit up, turn on the light and listen, as the beat continues...

### PARIS

The following summer I meet the Gnawa in Paris. They are playing at the nightclub, the Divan du Monde, for two months. It is the "Year of Morocco" (*L'Année du Maroc*) and there are many performances to celebrate the presence of North Africans in France. The Gnawa are on the bill with an Algerian *comedienne* and a dance troupe that performs to North African hip-hop. The Gnawa are the last act. They enter playing the large *tbal* drums, then arrange themselves on the floor. The master's daughter, along with his third wife and his brother, affect a trance, although the women would never do



Bringing in the dawn.

Our hostess proceeds around the room, speaking to each of her guests and giving them advice. She is in a state of grace and can therefore "see." To me she says, "your health has to come first, only then knowledge." This chills me, as I am worried about my health, feeling pains where I usually don't feel them pretty consistently.

this outside of a sacred ceremony in Morocco. The North Africans in the audience imitate the movements and the French observe. The ambiance in the room has clearly changed. It is charged and more serious. The master's brother, Khadir, is holding a handful of burning candles under his torso. People in the audience have their eyes closed





LEFT: The Gnawa at the Divan du Monde during the "Année du Maroc."  
RIGHT: The Gnawa in the Tuileries Gardens.

and are swaying back and forth.

When I ask the master after the show whether he has any reservations about performing a sacred ceremony in a nightclub he says, "No, with the spirits, it's all a matter of intention."

This echoed a statement by another Gnawi who responded that it wasn't his business where the music was performed. For him, the music created the sacred space. "The spirits do their work wherever they are," he told me. "I was given this ability [to bring them through], but they do the work."

Si Mohammed tells me that the secrets of the Gnawa will never be uncovered and will never be lost. For him, God made man and spirits, and the Gnawa mediate between the two worlds with music, healing those whom the spirits have afflicted, propitiating the spirits and thus partaking of their power. Whether it is in ceremonies in Morocco, or in performances in France, the Gnawa play the music and the spirits do their work. 🏠



ABOVE: The Gnawa play with Randy Weston and Benny Powell.  
OPPOSITE: Woman in trance in Paris.



DEBORAH KAPCHAN is Associate Professor of Performance Studies at New York University. She has been going to Morocco since 1982. She is the author of a book on Moroccan women's oral narrative (*Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and*

*the Revoicing of Tradition*, 1996) and has written extensively on performance and genre in Morocco. She is currently completing a book on the Gnawa entitled *Travelling Spirits Masters: Sound, Word and Image in the Global Marketplace*.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was funded by the Social Science Research Council, the American Institute for Maghreb Studies, and the Fulbright-Hays Foundation.

### For Further Reading

Chlyeh, Abdelhafid. *Les Gnaouas du Maroc: Itinéraires Initiatiques, Transe et Possession*. Paris: Editions Le Fennec/La Pensée Sauvage, 1999.

Fuson, Tim Abdellah. "Where Are You, Children of the Sudan?": The Recollection of Slavery in the Lila Ritual of the Gnawa of Morocco." Paper presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology Meetings, Miami, FL, 2002.

Hell, Bertrand. *Le Tourbillon des Génies: Au Maroc avec les Gnawa*. Paris: Flammarion, 2002.

Kapchan, Deborah. *Travelling Spirits Masters: Sound, Word and Image in the Global Marketplace*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, forthcoming.

Kapchan, Deborah. "Possessing Gnawa Culture: Displaying Sound, Creating History in an Unofficial Museum." *Music and Anthropology*, 2002.

Kapchan, Deborah. "Following the Entranced Ones: Gnawa Performances and Trance in Rabat." In *Garland Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern Music*. New York: Garland Publishers, 2000.

Kapchan, Deborah. "Le Marché de Transe: Le Cas des Gnaoua Marocain." In *La Transe*, edited by Abdelhafid Chlyeh, pp. 157-168. Rabat: Marsam, 2000.

Pacques, Viviana. *Les Esclaves de Dieu*. Rome: Vittalì, 1991.