CONSTRUCTING A DIASPORIC IDENTITY: TRACING THE ORIGINS OF THE GNAWA SPIRITUAL GROUP IN MOROCCO*

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ABSTRACT: This article reconstructs the forgotten past of the Gnawa who, over many generations, productively negotiated their forced presence in Morocco to create acceptance and group solidarity. The diaspora of black West Africans in Morocco, the majority of whom were forcefully transported across the Sahara and sold in different parts of Morocco, shares some important traits with the African trans-Atlantic diaspora, but differs at the same time. There are two crucial differences: the internal African diaspora in Morocco has primarily a musical significance and it lacks the desire to return to the original homeland. This diaspora is constructed positively around the right to belong to the culture of Islam, unlike the construction of the African American diasporic double consciousness. Black consciousness in Morocco exists in analogy to the Berber consciousness or the Arab notion of collective identity; it does not constitute a contradiction with itself. Black Moroccans perceive themselves first and foremost to be Muslim Moroccans and only perceive themselves secondarily as participants in a different tradition.

KEY WORDS: Morocco, Islam, slavery, African diaspora, music, memory, ritual.

Many Western visitors to Morocco have probably encountered Gnawa musicians. In the coastal Atlantic town of Essaouira, where an annual festival of Gnawa music takes place, and in Marrakesh, at its spectacular central square called Jamaa el-Fna, the colorful sight of the Gnawa players and the distinct sound of their instruments – gowns and caps covered with cowry shells, metallic castanets (qarqaba, pl. qraqeb), heavy drums (tbel or ganga) and a three-stringed bass lute-tambour (guenbri or hajhuj) – provide confirmation of the Gnawa presence. Of all the musical traditions found in

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1 In Morocco, Gnawa music and its spiritual order are visible mainly where black people live in large numbers – large enough to form a distinctive community like those found in Marrakesh, Essaouira and Fez. These three cities are known to have had slave markets connected to the trans-Saharan slave trade. However, even in remote areas where blacks migrated in relatively small numbers, they founded communal centers where their culture is celebrated. For information on slavery in Morocco, see Mohammed Ennaji, Soldats, domestiques et concubines. L'esclavage au Maroc au XIXe siècle (Casablanca, 1994); and John Ralph Willis (ed.), Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa, vol. 1: Islam and the Ideology of Slavery (Totowa, 1985).
Morocco, the roots of Gnawa music are probably the most obscure. The study of the Gnawa is instructive because of their relation to slavery and its legacy in Morocco. One finds a reluctance to discuss issues of slavery and race in Morocco as a result of Islamic pride about the absence of prejudice and outright oppression in Islam. Recently, 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 rather than relying on the flawed assumption that integration and assimilation are a kind of unilateral absorption into the social fabric, an assumption found too commonly in earlier historic treatments of the diaspora. In a similar spirit, my research attempts to reconstruct the historical odyssey of the Gnawa in Morocco and to turn the historian’s analytical lens to their fascinating integration into the Moroccan social landscape, an integration that has allowed them to preserve elements of their culture and forge a new identity within the dominant Arabo-Berber culture in Morocco. This article not only focuses on the struggle of the Gnawa in their subaltern relationship with the ruling institutions, but also brings out how the Gnawa, as a marginal group, had a profound influence on the religion, rituals and music of the greater Arabo-Berber culture. The diaspora of black West Africans in Morocco shares some important traits with the African trans-Atlantic diaspora, and in the latter part of this article I will look at some work on slavery in the antebellum American South to present some relevant analogies.

The best-known genre of music in Morocco comes from the Andalusian legacy; it is regarded as the classical Andalusian music, reflecting

9 Cynthia Becker, ‘‘We are real slaves, real Ismghan’: memories of the trans-Saharan slave trade in the Tafilalet of south-eastern Morocco’, *Journal of North African Studies*, 7 (2002), 97–121.
11 It is also known colloquially as al-Ala (the instrument) as opposed to *Sama* which is a musical genre using only human voices. For more information on Andalusian music, see Ahmed Aydoun, *Musiques du Maroc* (Casablanca, 2001).
Morocco’s historic relationship with Spain. Andalusian music is recognized as a Moroccan national music and enjoys wide popularity mainly among middle and upper classes and especially in cities that were historically connected with Muslim Spain. Another musical genre stems from the Berbers (or Imazighen), which is an older traditional music and tends to be more rural, whereas the Andalusian genre is more urban. The Sephardic population has also contributed to Morocco’s musical heritage, but unfortunately the folksongs from the Jewish communities in Morocco are vanishing because most of Morocco’s Jewish population has relocated to Israel. Another important but often neglected genre of Moroccan music is that of the Gnawa, who appear mostly to have come from West Africa to Morocco by way of forced migration. Although the Gnawa are now fully integrated into Moroccan society, they still retain a cultural and a social distinctiveness.

It is difficult to define the initial ethnic identity of the Gnawa, but it originally developed in reference to blacks from West Africa. The term ‘Gnawa’ refers to black people from West Africa, as well as their religious/spiritual order and musical style.

In the case of their ethnic designation, all sources I have consulted in writing this essay consistently agree that the Gnawa who now live in Morocco were originally black slaves who became free over time under various historical circumstances. Historians believe that the Gnawa population originated from West Africa – from Senegal to Chad and from Mali in the north to Nigeria in the south. As a religious or spiritual order, the Gnawa are traditionally a mystic order, and this marks their exclusiveness within Islam. As a style of music, the ancestral memory of the displaced and enslaved people that were brought to Morocco has been preserved in their songs and dances. Both the religious and spiritual components of Gnawa practice are expressed through their music, which incorporates references to their origin and enslavement. Although the Gnawa have adopted the Arabo-Berber-Islamic form of social identification, their music represents a fascinating mixture of resistance to enslavement, the rigors of forced migration and the challenges of integration into their new social landscape. In the discussion that follows, I will elaborate on each of the three meanings of Gnawa in turn, with the caveat that, in the case of Gnawa as a religious spiritual order, and Gnawa as a style of music associated with this order, there is a good deal of overlap between these meanings, for they cannot be regarded as entirely separable. Indeed, in many ways they inform one another. By way of conclusion, I look at how Gnawa music has attained a degree of ‘pop’ status in the contemporary Moroccan social landscape.

The Gnawa are a diasporic culture and one finds artistic and spiritual parallels between the Gnawa order and other spiritual black groups in Africa: the Stambouli in Tunisia, the Sambani in Libya, the Bilali in

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12 The Berbers usually refer to themselves linguistically and ethnically as Imazighen. The term ‘Berber’ is a foreign word, most likely of Roman origin.
Algeria, the Zar cult in Sudan and Bori among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria and Niger. Outside Africa, a parallel can be seen in the case of the Candomble in Salvador, Brazil, where the African enslaved population found their beliefs in African spirits compatible with local beliefs and with the introduction of Catholicism, creating a syncretic religious form while still enduring the horrors of servitude. The Vodoun or Voodoo religion practiced in Caribbean countries is also a mix of Roman Catholic ritual elements and traditional rituals from Dahomey. The similarities in the artistic, spiritual and scriptural (e.g. a link to Abrahamic written traditions) representations seem to reflect a shared experience of many African diasporic groups. As in these other spiritual traditions, the belief in possession and trance is crucial to Gnawa religious life, and their music has served a patterned function in this belief, intrinsically linked to the Gnawa religious rituals and to their specific historic and cultural memories. The Gnawa music embodies these memories, celebrated and invoked in songs, dances and musical chants, all of which are claimed and used by the Gnawa as the means to access the spiritual realm. Although present-day Gnawa musicians speak only Arabic and/or Berber, some West African religious words and phrases do survive even though their meaning is lost.

The term ‘Gnawa’ refers particularly to physical color, 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. Some blacks were actually native to southern Morocco. Some scholars suggest that groups of black people were indigenous to the Draa valley. They were sedentary agriculturists. With the advance of the Romans into the Moroccan interior in the third century BCE, the Berbers, who inhabited the coastal areas of the Maghreb of North Africa, may have been forced towards the south and into competition with the black population who inhabited the oases of the Draa, entering into an interdependent or clientele relationship with the blacks, with the Berbers assuming the patron role. However, no sources I have found indicate that the Gnawa were indigenous to the south of Morocco. Some scholars argue that some of the indigenous blacks of the south of Morocco were referred to as ‘Haratin’, a sedentary agricultural group


16 For more information, see Yvonne Daniel, Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé (Urbana, 2005); and Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean (New Brunswick, 1997).

who inhabited the region, but these blacks are culturally and historically distinct from the Gnawa.

Some scholars, such as Viviana Pâques and J.-M. Lesage, argue that the term ‘Gnawa’ derives from ‘medieval’ Ghana, a Sahelian kingdom north of Mali in the eighth through the twelfth centuries, as much linguistically as historically. But this connection seems unlikely, as J. D. Fage explains: ‘if only on the ground that the pronunciation of the initial letter of Ghana, which is the Arabic ghain, is more nearly “rh” than “gh”’. Thus, in Arabic, ‘Ghana’ and the adjective ‘Ghani’, or even ‘Ghanawi’, are different from ‘Gnawi’, ‘Knwai’ or ‘Jnawi’.

Another possible etymology for ‘Gnawa’ may derive from the influence of the sixteenth-century Moroccan historian Leo Africanus, who used the words ‘Jinni’ or ‘Jenne’ to refer to Guinea: ‘This kingdom called by the African merchants Gheneoa, by its inhabitants Jinni, and by the Portuguese and other Europeans who know the area [as] Guinea’. The term was indeed adopted by the Portuguese and appeared pervasively as ‘Guinea’ on European maps dating from the fourteenth century. Jenne (also spelled ‘Djenné’) is a city situated in present-day Mali, on the Bani, a tributary of the Niger River. The seventeenth-century Timbuktu historian, ‘Abd ar-Rahman as-Sa’di, designated the date of the foundation of this city around AD 767. But it is more likely that Leo Africanus conflated Guinea and Jenne, assuming they were one and the same. Hence, linguistically speaking there is no connection between Gnawa and Jenne.

Linguistically, the meaning of ‘Gnawa’ most likely derives from the Berber word ‘gnawi’, which is connected with skin color. It means ‘black man’ in contrast to the light-skinned Berber. In the Sanhaja language (or Zenaga), ‘gnawa’ derives from a word root g[nw meaning ‘black’. The ‘g’ sound as in ‘goal’ does not exist in Arabic, hence the use of the equivalent


22 Al-Hasan al-Wezaz al-Fasi, known as Leo Africanus, The History and Description of Africa: and of the Notable Things Therein Contained, ed. and trans. Robert Brown and John Pory (3 vols.) (London, 1806), i, 322. I have also used the Arabic translation which I believe is more accurate, especially as the two Moroccan translators have made many annotations where Leo Africanus’s memory has failed him. The Arabic translation is entitled: Wasf Ifriqiya, trans. Muhammad Hajji and Mohammed Lakhdar (Beirut, 1982), 162. See, for instance, the sixteenth-century Portuguese explorer Duarte Pereira, Esmeraldo de situ orbis, ed. and trans. George H. T. Kimble (London, 1937), 2–3.


sound of, usually, ‘j’ or ‘k’ and less commonly ‘q’. Therefore, the Arab writers or scribes transcribed ‘Gnawi’ as ‘Knawi’ or ‘Jnawi’ (sometimes vocalized ‘Kanawi’ or ‘Janawi’) interchangeably. This word could be the origin of the name ‘Guinea’ because ‘akal n-iguinamen’ (sing. ‘aguinaw’), in Berber, means the ‘land of the black men’, synonymous with the Arabic term ‘bilad as-sudan’, which means, ‘land of the black people’. It is interesting to note that there are other words that derive from the same root gnw and have different import—for instance, in the Zenaga language, the word ‘Ignwi’ (pl. ‘Guinawn’) derives from the same root gnw and means ‘Sérère’ and ‘Wolof’ (ethnic groups of Senegal).27 Also, in the Tuareg language, ‘Iguinawin’ means ‘a mass of dark clouds’.28 Nevertheless, all these meanings have one thing in common: a dark coloring.

Historically, the oldest evidence that indicates the origin of the term ‘Gnawa’ comes from the Arab historian az-Zuhri, who wrote in the 1140s. He noted that Janawa (or Kanawa in another copy) designated the land of the ‘blacks’, whose capital was Ghana. He placed the territory of Janawa, which represented the southern termini of Moroccan caravans, at the end of the land of the Sanhaja (Berber people).29 Az-Zuhri possibly collected his information while he was in Andalusia from the Sanhaja or Masmuda people. These Berbers of the Saharan desert had an early (pre-Arab-conquest) encounter with the Sahelian and sub-Saharan people of West Africa because of their shared proximity. Additional evidence comes from a twelfth-century Islamic legal scholar, ‘Ali al-Jaziri (died in 1189), who wrote a legal document in the form of a model contract of manumission of an enslaved person: ‘A person so and so manumitted his slave so and so al-Janawi or ar-Rumi with the description such and such and this manumission is definite’.30 Yaqut al-Hamawi (1179–1229), a Muslim geographer, used the spelling ‘Kinawa’ but may have confused the term, intended to refer to the Berbers who occupied the region adjacent to the land of Ghana, with the name of the ethnically different black population that lived in Ghana.31

Hasan ibn al-Qattan, a Moroccan historian, who lived around the middle of the thirteenth century, reported that in a battle of the Almohads against the Almoravids in Aghmat (a Berber town in southern Morocco east of Marrakesh) in 1130, 3,000 blacks from Jnawa were killed.32 Ibn al-Qattan’s historical reference gives little detail, but those blacks killed in the battle were presumably soldiers in the service of the Almoravids.

Another piece of evidence comes from the Portuguese, during their fifteenth-century Atlantic seafaring, who referred to black West Africa using

27 Ibid. 237.
32 Hasan ibn al-Qattan, Nuzum al-juman li-Tartib ma Salafa min Akhbar az-Zaman, annotated by Mahmud ‘Ali Makki (Beirut, 1990), 158.
a descriptive term for the blacks that probably derived from their encounter with the Berber people. In the words of the fifteenth-century Portuguese explorer Gomes Eannes de Azurara:

Now the people of this green land are wholly black, and hence this is called Land of the Negroes, or Land of Guinea. Wherefore also the men and women thereof are called ‘Guineas’, as if one were to say ‘Black Men’.

Clearly, ‘Guineas’ in this passage corresponds to the Berber word ‘guinwi’, which has the same meaning as ‘black’.

In the writings of a seventeenth-century Islamic legal scholar, Muhammad al-Masmudi, concerning some legal issues in a model contract of manumission of an enslaved person in Sijilmasa (an old city in the south of Morocco, presently in ruins), substantively similar to the contract of manumission written by the Islamic jurist ‘Ali al-Jaziri (above), states: ‘A person so and so manumitted his slave al-Kanawi [or ‘al-Janawi’ in another copy], with a specified name and specified characteristics. This manumission is licensed and is an accomplished fact’. Hence, according to these Islamic texts, ‘Janawi’ or ‘Kanawi’ (i.e. ‘Gnawi’) were used interchangeably as a generic term to designate a ‘black’ from West Africa.

My analysis so far points to the conclusion that the origin of the name ‘Gnawa’ derives from the writings of North Africans who used the designation ‘Gnawa’ as generally referring to ‘blacks’ from West Africa. The ‘Gnawa’, as a term that came to be used to describe a diverse group from West Africa transplanted by forced migration into Morocco, lumped together in one category a fictional ‘ethnic black’ group that had no differentiated ethnic or linguistic reality. Gradually, the Gnawa as a distinct ethnic group in modern-day Morocco turned their marginalized status into a collective identity. Yet Gnawa songs contain names of West African peoples and places that confirm their diverse origins. For instance, one particular song with a refrain ‘Lalla Yamma’ (Oh, our Mother) to stress a feeling of melancholy, recalls the different ancestors of the Gnawa: ‘Sudani (Oh, our Mother), Fulani (Oh, our Mother), Bambarawi (Oh, our Mother), Hausawi (Oh, our Mother)’. We can thus name among the ancestors of the black Moroccans of today the Soninke, the Bambara, the Fulani and the Hausa.

The obscurity involving the history of the blacks in Morocco is mainly a consequence of the increased number of slaves imported from West Africa, to the point that blackness was associated with slavery, especially by the end of the sixteenth century, when purchased slaves and captives of war from areas of Europe started to decline, especially after the fall of Granada in 1492. The Muslim North African countries turned to sub-Saharan Africa. Arabic sources indicate that there was an increased flow of human trafficking


36 Two Arab historians from Morocco: al-Hasan al-Wazzan generally known as Leo Africanus (died in 1550s) and Ahmad an-Nasiri (died in 1897).
across the Saharan desert from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. These enslaved groups were usually called either ‘Abid’ or ‘Sudan’, both Arabic words, and ‘Haratin’, ‘Ismgan’ or ‘Gnawa’, Berber (or Tamazight) words. Arabic texts used the Arabic terms ‘Sudan’ and ‘Abid’ more often than the Berber terms. The other terms are usually used in vernacular and regional locations, either Berber or Arabic, in connection with the black presence, but the ‘Gnawa’ designation is especially associated with the Moroccan black musical and spiritual group.

Archival sources indicate the use of blacks in the armies of the Makhzen, the central authority of Morocco, and, in many cases, entire garrisons consisted solely of black soldiers. Many dynasties relied on black soldiers to maintain their power. The first ruling dynasty in Morocco to use a large number of black slaves in the army during the Islamic era, in the eleventh century, was that of the Almoravids (al-Murabitun). During the Almoravid period, the ruler Yusuf Ibn Tashfin, ‘bought a body of black slaves and sent them to al-Andalus’. With the additional troops provided through the slave trade, the Almoravids defeated Alfonso VI of Castile in AD 1086 at the crucial battle of Zallaqa (near Badajoz). Arabic sources indicate that 4,000 black soldiers participated in this famous battle. During the succeeding Almohad dynasty, the rulers had a private garrison of black soldiers who served mainly as royal guards and, during the rule of Muhammad an-Nasir, around AD 1200, their numbers reached around 30,000. During this dynasty, the recruitment of enslaved blacks in the government became institutionalized, known as ‘Abid al-Makhzen, meaning ‘servants to the government’.

A third dynasty that used a large army of blacks was the Sa’di. Under the rule of Mawlay al-Mansur who ordered the invasion of the Songhay empire (in present-day Mali) in 1591, Morocco had direct access to acquire more black slaves, essentially for military purposes. With this conquest, Morocco became a vast empire spreading from the Mediterranean Sea to the Niger River. ‘The Moroccan customs’, writes historian Michel Abitbol, ‘were henceforth stationed, not only in Sous, in Draa and in Tafilalt [and far south of Morocco], but also … in Timbuktu and Jenne’. Relations between Morocco and ‘Black’ West Africa, two regions separated by a sea of sand, historically had a remarkable continuity, given that a dominant aspect of that continuity was the slave trade. The conscription of black regiments was taken to the extreme when, in the late seventeenth century, Mawlay Isma’il gave orders to enslave all blacks, including free black people, to create his own army. Of course, this was an act utterly against Islamic law, but the

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37 Muhammad ad-Du’ayyif (1752–1818) noted that ‘Ismgan’ means ‘Haratin’ in the tongue of the Berber people of Sus. Muhammad ibn ’Abd as-Salam ad-Du’ayyif, Tarikh ad-Du’ayyif: Tarikh ad-Dawla as-Sa’ida (Rabat, 1986), 89. See also the article of Cynthia Becker, ‘‘We are Real Slaves, Real Ismkhan’’.


41 Michel Abitbol, Tombouctou et les Arma (Paris, 1979), 78.
socioeconomic and political factors proved to be more imperative for Mawlay Isma'il than the moral teachings of the Qur'an. In addition to the conscription of blacks into the army, enslaved black West Africans were also assigned numerous occupations, including tasks in the homes, farms, mines, oases and ports. In many towns, slaves were primarily women who were assigned domestic tasks or were concubines to the affluent class, while rural slaves were mainly male and worked in farming. Gradually, enslaved black people became free, either by manumission, by running away, or because their masters were forced to grant them freedom under different circumstances. After many generations, these freed black slaves eventually formed their own families and communities, such as those of the Gnawa mystic order.

Although the Gnawa adopted Islam, they did not totally abandon their animist traditions, for they continued to observe ritual possession. They combined Islamic belief with pre-Islamic African traditions, whether local or sub-Saharan West African. Gnawa ‘spirit possession’ practices were not fundamentally outside of standard Moroccan Islamic sufi practices, because, firstly, the notion of ‘a spirit world’ is accepted in Islam – namely angels and jinns (spiritual beings) are basic to Islamic literature as well as practice – and, secondly, most sufi orders sought a form of spirit possession through study and meditation.

The Gnawa do not have a holy place or a sanctuary (zawiya) where the master spiritual founder (wali) would be buried and to which they can be linked according to the model of the sufi brotherhoods. To accommodate their needs, they usually used other sufi orders (turuq plural of tariqa) as a model. Wherever they resided, they chose the local ‘holy person/s’ to whom they performed ritual visits (ziyyara).

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. Thus, human beings were protected from evil spirits and other predicaments, such as

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42 See El Hamel, ‘Blacks and slavery in Morocco’.
45 Abdelhafid Chlyeh, *Les Gnaoua du Maroc: itinéraires initiatiques, transe et possession* (Casablanca, 1998), 17–32. Chlyeh uses the word ‘pilgrimage’. This is not accurate, because pilgrimage (Hajj in Arabic) is reserved specifically for the performance of the Fifth Pillar of Islam: pilgrimage to Mecca.
illness or misfortune. These rites often involve spectacular trances in order to contact ancestral spirits and appeal to them.  

Historically, as a racialized minority, the Gnawa suffered much discrimination and injustice at the hands of the Arab–Berber majority within the regions that the Gnawa inhabited. After their initial conversion to Islam, while probably still in their country of origin, the Gnawa adopted Bilal as their ancestor and patron saint. Bilal was the first black person to convert to Islam and became a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Claiming Bilal as a patrilineal figure was not only to emphasize the nobility of belonging to Bilal but also an attempt to legitimize their identity in Islamic terms. Conscious of their difference and their blackness, they chose Bilal, a black man, as their ancestor. Bilal was a special man. Originally from Ethiopia, he was born into slavery. He converted to Islam while still in captivity and was tortured for his conversion by his master, Umayya b. Khalaf. When Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, a very close friend to the Prophet Muhammad, heard about the valor of Bilal, he bought him and set him free in the name of Islam. Bilal became the personal assistant of the Prophet. He was also the first muezzin – meaning ‘caller to prayer’ – of the newly established Islamic community in Medina. This special relationship with the Prophet brought Bilal a Baraka (a divine blessing). Furthermore, it is reported in the Sahih of the traditionist al-Bukhari (died 870) that the Prophet once said that he heard Bilal’s footsteps in Paradise.

The Gnawa have constructed their Islamic identity by claiming a privileged status among Muslims – they converted to Islam even before Quraysh, the tribe to whom Muhammad belonged. By emphasizing this early conversion, the Gnawa deny the stigma of slave origin. Hence, it is not surprising to find the name of Bilal in many Gnawa songs. Additionally, to honor their spiritual and emotional link with Bilal and Islam, the Gnawa built a unique shrine in Essaouira dedicated to Bilal: the Zawiya Sidna Bilal, a place to celebrate their culture. Bilal is the symbol of the dialectic between diaspora and homeland. Given that Bilal’s burial place is not in Morocco, the Gnawa venerate also the local ‘holy persons’ to whom they perform ritual visits.

Bilal was probably known to the Manding people of West Africa from the eleventh century. Muslim traders who inhabited Kumbi Saleh, the

For more information about ritual practices of the Gnawa, see Pâques, La religion des esclaves.


Al-Bukhari, Sahih (Beirut, 2004), 214. It is important to note that Bilal was also a transmitter of the Prophet Muhammad’s reports.

Such as the following lyrics:

Father Bilal man of God
The Prophet’s servant, father Bilal.
capital of Ghana, related narratives of the life of the Prophet and his companions in their sermons, highlighting the story of Bilal as a device to appeal to blacks in order to establish trust. As Islam took root in the courts of West Africa, the Manding creatively adopted many elements of Islamic literature to serve their political agenda. The Keita dynasty, the history of which was well chronicled by their griots, a professional group of oral scholars, used the case of a black man who was tortured by ‘unbelievers’ and liberated by a Muslim as a source of black Islamic pride. Although the choice of Bilal as an ancestor is mythical, it nonetheless represents the importance of lineage for political stature among the Manding people. The griots were responsible for preserving the history of the Mali empire. They composed the epic of Sundiata Keita (died c. 1255), the founder of the empire; they traced his family lineage back to Bilali Bounama or Bilal ibn Rabah whose eldest son ‘left the Holy City and came to settle in Mali’. In the Manding oral traditions, the Keita family were the founders of the first dynasty of the Mali empire in the thirteenth century, claiming descent from Bilal in order to legitimize their power in Islamic terms.

Ibn Battuta (1304–68), famed for his historical travel accounts, wrote about the social status and musical function of the Mandé bards (griots or jelis) during his visit to Mali in 1352–3. Griots were also storytellers, praise singers and master musicians. The use of musical instruments and verses celebrating the legendary exploits of historical figures gave the griots considerable artistic status. The story of Bilal and the use of musical instruments, rhythms and lyrics are clearly present in the culture of the Gnawa in Morocco. Indeed, the Gnawa lyrics emphasize their link with their Manding heritage. The Africanist scholar, Thomas Hale, argues that one finds a strong referential relation between the words ‘Gnawa’ and ‘griot’: ‘The word agenaou, so deeply imbedded in the intertwined cultures of the North West African region, was most likely a step in the process of linguistic change that began with ghana and went on to gnawa, agenaou, guineo, and guiriot to produce griot.’

The lack of primary written sources concerning the Gnawa makes the historian’s task difficult in tracing an accurate history of this fascinating people. It is only from fragmentary primary records that I was able to assemble this description of the Gnawa people in Morocco, made more difficult because Arab Muslim scholars avoided writing about the rituals

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51 This is a Mandé pronunciation of ‘ben Hamama’. Hamama was his mother.
of animal sacrifice, spirit possession and mystical trances. Even *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, one of the more reliable sources about the world of Islam, has no entry on the Gnawa. Islamic orders that include such practices were considered heretical and a deviation from the *Sunna* (the right path of the Prophet Muhammad) and therefore dismissed altogether from any local scholarly inquiry. Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, in her book on the Moroccan harem during the 1940s, reported that Moroccan nationalists looked down on these trance rituals and considered them to be un-Islamic.\(^56\)

The historian must resort to ethnographical studies and Gnawa oral sources to reconstruct the historical background behind the formation and meaning of the Gnawa spiritual order.

Another way to attempt to recover the opaque history of the Gnawa is to trace their cultural practices and beliefs among other spiritual orders and brotherhoods. The Gnawa have influenced Berber or Arab mystic orders and brotherhoods, as can be seen in the case of the ‘Isawiyya (sixteenth century) and Hamdushiya (seventeenth century). These brotherhoods added new elements to the usual *sufi* devotional rituals, such as trances and contacts with spirits, most likely influenced by contact with the Gnawa order. Curiously, these Zawaya and other *sufi* Berber and Arabic orders have been far more socially accepted within the regions where they are found than has that of the Gnawa. Among Muslim intellectuals, these brotherhoods, including the Gnawa, are considered an inferior form of Sufism: a cult influenced by pagan black traditions and embraced mostly by lower-class people with little or no literacy and learning. The association of Gnawa with slavery and sub-Saharan traditions was a prejudice that blinded local scholars to the merits of Gnawa contributions to and influence on the rich cultural traditions of Morocco. Viviana Pâques, an ethnologist who has written extensively on the Gnawa, says that dismissing their influence:

is a serious mistake, because their cosmogonic system is not different from the other brotherhoods’ systems; regarding Gnawa practices, they have greatly influenced other brotherhoods, who at the end of their ceremonial songs and dances, add, for example like the ‘Isawiyya brotherhood, something from the Gnawa such as the veils of colors characteristic of their mystical journey.\(^57\)

The English anthropologist Edward Westermarck (1862–1939), after spending a total of seven years of fieldwork in Morocco between 1898 and 1926, observed and speculated that ‘this influence [on other mystic orders] is very conspicuous [from] the rites of the Gnawa, and will probably prove to have had a considerably larger scope than is known at present’.\(^58\) Later, in respect to the origin of Gnawa practices, he concluded that:

There can be no doubt that various practices connected with the belief in the *jnūn* [spirits] have a Sudanese origin. We have seen that there are intimate relations

\(^{56}\) Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Reading, 1994), 159.

\(^{57}\) Viviana Pâques, ‘Couleurs et génies au Maghreb’, in A. Chlyeh (ed.), *L’univers des Gnaoua* (Casablanca, 1999), 60. See also Pâques, *La religion des esclaves*.

between the \textit{jinun} and negroes, and the Gnawa, chiefly consisting of negroes, are experts in expelling \textit{jinun} from persons who are troubled with them.\textsuperscript{59}

The French ethnologist René Brunel, who studied the mystic order of the ‘Isawa in the 1920s, argued that ritual sacrifice used by the ‘Isawa as a means to establish contact with the spirit world is a Sudanese (mainly Bambara)\textsuperscript{60} practice borrowed from the Gnawa group.\textsuperscript{61} Brunel observed that: ‘The ‘Isawa extensively devote themselves to the practices of spiritual possession and exorcism peculiar to the Gnawa’.\textsuperscript{62} He added: ‘The Gnawa are experts in exorcism and the ‘Isawa master healer-exorcists have adopted many Gnawa practices and rituals, including using the blood of those possessed to hasten the departure of demons incarnated in them’.\textsuperscript{63} The Gnawa rely on their musical instruments to communicate with the spirit world, one of which, a three-stringed lute-tambour (\textit{guenbri}), is used as the primary invocation to call on the \textit{jinns}.\textsuperscript{64} The ‘Isawa too use musical instruments to communicate with the spirit world, but turn to an oboe-like Andalusian instrument (\textit{ghaita}) as their primary means to call on the \textit{jinns}. Another inference that can be made about the influence of the Gnawa on the ‘Isawa derives from the ‘Isawa belief in at least five black spirits, and, even more suggestive, the king of their \textit{jinns} is black and called al-Gnawi. One finds other Arab Berber brotherhoods similar to the ‘Isawa who practice the saint-cult and the spirit-possession-cult, such as the Hamdushiyya brotherhood founded by Sidi ‘Ali Ben Hamdush, who is associated with a black she-spirit (\textit{jinniyya}), Gnawiyya Lalla ‘Aisha. An American anthropologist, Vincent Crapanzano, also concluded from his fieldwork in Morocco that, ‘The Hamadsha themselves, as well as most other Moroccans of their background, recognize the Gnawa origin of many of their named jnun’.\textsuperscript{65}

This discussion makes plain the indelible influence and contribution of the Gnawa to Moroccan mysticism. Gnawa trance ceremonies generally take place after sundown; for this reason they are called \textit{lila} (meaning ‘night’ in Arabic). They are also called \textit{derdeba} (ritual of possession).\textsuperscript{66} The Gnawa believe that many misfortunes are hardly accidental, but probably caused by evil spirits; then, through their musical ceremonies and trances, the Gnawa claim to cure insanity, freeing its victims from these malign influences. Many people from all walks of life who suffer from acute illness, infertility or depression seek the spiritual intercession of the Gnawa’s art. Sometimes people seek their intercession to preserve their good fortune.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.} 379. ‘Sudanese’ derives from the Arabic term ‘as-Sudan’ (plural of Aswad); it means ‘black people’ and it was the general name in medieval Arabic sources for the region of sub-Saharan West Africa.

\textsuperscript{60} During his fieldwork, René Brunel noticed that the Gnawa perform some of their songs in the Bambara language. René Brunel, \textit{Essai sur la confrérie religieuse des Aissaous au Maroc} (Casablanca, 1988), 181.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.} 10–11.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.} 178.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid.} 186.


\textsuperscript{65} Vincent Crapanzano, \textit{The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry} (Berkeley, 1973), 141.

\textsuperscript{66} The Gnawa of Essaouira use the term \textit{lila} but the Gnawa of Marrakesh use the term \textit{derdeba}.
The Gnawa orchestra has many musicians: the m’allelm (master or lead musician) plays the guenbri, and other members of the group play tbel (drums) and qarqaba (metallic castanets). Generally, they dance as well, for music and dance are spiritual partners to the Gnawa. According to Boubker Gania (1927–2000), an old Gnawa master and a native of Essaouira:

The guenbri is a crucial instrument in Gnawa rituals. It is through this device that the trance occurs. For this reason the Gnawa do not say ‘they play music’ but they say ‘they call out to [i.e. they request the spirits to appear]’. If there is no guenbri there will be no trance. The guenbri provides the rhythm for the trance.67

The ceremony usually takes place inside the house, shrine or center of a Gnawa family or group and probably will last throughout the night. The first part of the ceremony (or lila) is called al-‘ada (the custom), it is something of a warming-up exercise for what follows. It is also accompanied with dates, milk, candles and incense. This task is usually reserved for women. The first sèance that follows is called Kuyu or Awlad Bambara68 and starts with the invocation of blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad. Afterwards, it is ftih ar-rahiba (opening of the mluk repertoire of songs), a crucial ritual that sets the stage for the mluk (supernatural entities).69 The traditional Gnawa ceremony includes seven sections; each section represents seven saints or ancestral spirits. Each section is also associated with a particular color (white, light blue, dark blue, red, green, black and yellow), each of which symbolizes a particular function in nature and in the spirit world.70 The ceremony is characterized by well-established rituals, such as a sacrifice of a sheep or a goat, cloths of different colors, eating dates, drinking milk with rose-water and the burning of incense. The most visible and fundamental trait of the ceremony is something of a versicle-and-response chant, coupled with dance. Some participants go into a trance through which a particular spirit may express its wish for the appropriate tune and the preferred color. Lila will continue until the goal is achieved, the trance over and the participants have been cleansed of their afflictions.

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.

As a spiritual order within Moroccan Islamic society, the Gnawa were and continue to be marginalized. They believe that God is too powerful

67 This interview was conducted in the house of master Boubker Gania (also spelled and pronounced ‘Guinia’), Essaouira, on 7 July 2000, with myself and Professor Paul Lovejoy, Yacine Daddi Addoun (Ph.D. student) and Abdul Karim al-Asiri, author of the book ‘Alam at-Tuqus wa ‘l-Alwan Dakhil al-Layla al-Gnawiyya (Essaouira, 1999). I also conducted another interview with Gania’s son Mokhtar Gania, Essaouira, on 20 June 2005.
68 ‘Bambara’ is the name of the ethnic group and their language in present-day Mali.
69 Mluk (sing. malk) means ‘the possessors’; it derives from the verb ‘malaka’ (to possess or to own).
70 For more information see the work of the Moroccan scholar Abdelhai Diouri, Lahlou: nourriture sacrificielle des Gnaouas du Maroc (Madrid, 1990).
for bilateral communication or even direct manifestation, and thus God can
only be reached through spiritual manifestations in our world. Hence, the
Gnawa receive little attention in Islamic scholarship, presumably because
they are not a mystic order proper, as they do not seek the conventional
personal union with the divine. Instead, their contact with the spirit world
acts as an intermediary through which divine communion may be accom-
plished. The Gnawa have found legitimacy for their cultural identity
within the regions and societies they inhabit, despite their unusual, often
marginalized, religious rites, ceremonies and musical practices. The images
conveyed in their songs construct a coherent representation of displacement,
dispossession, deprivation, misery and nostalgia for a land and a former
life kept alive through their unique musical and ceremonial practices. The
historical experience of the Gnawa sketched in this essay is very similar to
those found in all forced African diasporas. Through their ceremonies, songs
and gatherings, they reconcile themselves with their fragmented past. Thus,
connected with their origins, they have a sense of location, sharing a common
experience through enslavement and its legacy. The Gnawa provide a fasci-
nating story of how a people reconstruct their identity against a broken
cultural continuity.

Drawing on their African musical heritage, the Gnawa have also created
a musical genre in Morocco that enabled them to cope with the horrors
of servitude and its legacies. The Gnawa originally used their music and
dance to express and to heal the pain of their abduction. Gnawa lyrics contain
many references to the privations of exile and enslavement. In this regard,
Gnawa music is very similar to Spirituals and Blues that are rooted in black
American slave songs. On Spirituals, also called ‘the Sorrow Songs’, the
African American theologian James Cone writes:

Through song, they built new structures for existence in an alien land. The
spirituals enabled blacks to retain a measure of African identity while living in
the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to
cope with human servitude.

The American abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818–95) explained that
these songs also reflected the masters’ unwillingness to see the humanity
of the enslaved people. He wrote:

[They would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning
jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have
sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress
some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole
volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

71 A few Moroccan scholars have recently embarked on the study of the Gnawa people,
mainly in the disciplines of music, ethnotherapy and ethnology. Abdelhafid Chlyeh, who
holds a Ph.D. in ethnology, is probably the best contributor to the study of the Gnawa.
73 James H. Cone, Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation,
1968–1998 (Boston, 1999), 16.
74 Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave
(New Haven, 2001), 20.
He continued to say: ‘Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains’.  

In some Gnawa songs we find words that express the trauma of being displaced and the sorrow of losing their homes, in the form of an open plaint, generally to God and His saints. This is well illustrated in the following song:

They brought from the Sudan  
The nobles of this country brought us  
They brought us to serve them  
They brought us to bow to them  
They brought us Oh there is no God but God  
We believe in God’s justice.

In another song, we find:

The Sudan, oh! Sudan  
The Sudan, the land of my people  
I was enslaved, I was sold,  
I was taken away from my loved ones.

René Brunel recorded similar lyrics during a Gnawa séance of possession in the city of Meknes. The group was playing the same instruments in the 1920s, when Brunel was engaged in his fieldwork, as they play today in Essaouira or Marrakesh – the three-stringed lute (guenbri), castanets and drums – and singing a song entitled ‘Sidi Mimoun’:

O Saint Sidi Mimoun!  
Our lord goes to the land of Sudan.  
He brought a servant Gnawiyya.  
O God! O Prophet!

Interestingly, William W. Brown (1814–84), who escaped from slavery in the American South in 1834, recorded a song with similar lyrics sung by the enslaved Africans as they were taken away:

See these poor souls from Africa  
Transported to America;  
We are stolen, and sold to Georgia,  
Will you go along with me?  
We are stolen, and sold to Georgia,  
Come sound the jubilee!

To find out more about slave songs, I was able briefly to interview M’allem (Gnawa master) Boubker Gania before death took him away shortly thereafter, in 2000. He was himself a son of an enslaved father in Essaouira.

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75 Ibid.
76 Earle Waugh, an American scholar of the Sufi and their rituals, thinks that many Gnawa songs are meant to preserve the memory of their historic migration. Waugh, Memory, 110.
77 Translation from al-Asiri, ‘Alam at-Tuqus, 33.
78 Ibid. 18.
81 Interview, Master Gania, Essaouira, 7 July 2000.
His father (although Muslim) was kidnapped from Mali or Guinea, taken to the Sahara and then sold as a slave in Morocco. Master Gania, who had a huge repertoire of songs, said that the Gnawa songs belonged to the whole group. They represented a collective memory of their life experience.

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.

It is important to note that this particular song, like all other songs characterized by improvisation, sometimes includes contemporary terms such as:

My master goes to the cinema
My uncle Mbara entertains in the market.

Thus, this song reflects the pained consciousness of the successive wrongs suffered by these enslaved black people. The historic and contemporary inequalities of the Gnawa’s social and economic status in Morocco are clearly displayed in this song. 82 A similar observation was made by William Faux, an English farmer, during his visit to Charleston, South Carolina, in 1819. He wrote: ‘I noticed to-day the galley-slaves all singing in chorus, regulated by the motion of their oars; … Some were plaintive songs. The verse was their own, and abounding either in praise or satire, intended for kind and unkind masters’. 83 In the 1830s, Frederick Douglass reported the lyrics of the following song to indicate, in his words ‘the meanness of the slaveholders’:

We raise the wheat,
Dey gib us de corn;
We bake de bread,
Dey gib us de crust;
We sif de meal
Dey gib us de huss;

82 This historical analysis is relevant to contemporary issues. This means that the historical lessons still hold true today. The legacy is still alive and, in order to establish a free society, taboos must be questioned.

We peel de meat,
Dey gib us de skin;
And dat’s de way
Dey take us in.\(^{84}\)

These examples from American and Moroccan slave songs show the parallels in African diasporic cultures. They represent an open plaint about suffering as a result of extreme poverty under enslavement.

Colin Palmer, who studies the African diaspora, describes communities formed by forced dislocation:

Diasporic communities, generally speaking, possess a number of characteristics. Regardless of their location, members of a diaspora share an emotional attachment to their ancestral land, are cognizant of their dispersal and, if conditions warrant, of their oppression and alienation in the countries in which they reside. Members of diasporic communities also tend to possess a sense of ‘racial’, ethnic, or religious identity that transcends geographic boundaries, share broad cultural similarities, and sometimes articulate a desire to return to their original homeland.\(^{85}\)

The diaspora of black West Africans in Morocco, the majority of whom were forcefully transported across the Sahara and sold in different parts of the country, shares some important traits with Palmer’s definition of the trans-Atlantic diaspora. For the Gnawa, their historical memory of forced migration is primarily preserved in their music. The Gnawa do not appear to have any desire to return to their ancestral homeland: their diaspora is positively constructed around the right to belong to the culture of Islam, and it is Islam, and not their consciousness of their ancestral roots and forced migration, that has allowed the Gnawa to integrate into their new homeland without the double consciousness often cited as a characteristic of the African American diasporic double experience. Du Bois argued: ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’.\(^{86}\) Unlike the African American double consciousness that Du Bois describes, black Moroccans perceive themselves first and foremost as Muslim Moroccans, and only secondarily as participants in a different tradition and/or as belonging to a specific ethnic or linguistic, real or imaginary, origin. Similar to the manner in which Berbers see themselves and identify with the collective consciousness of Arabo-Islamic historical experience, Moroccan blacks have found a way to reconcile themselves with, and to integrate themselves into, a Moroccan collective identity.

The Gnawa were Muslims, and were probably Muslims before enslavement. We do know that, in the seventeenth century, some of the sub-Saharan Africans who were enslaved and transported to Morocco were already Muslims, thus raising the question of whether or not sub-Saharan slaves were in fact brothers and sisters of Moroccans in the Islamic faith. For instance, the people of south Morocco wrote a letter to the renowned Islamic scholar in Timbuktu, Ahmad Baba (1556–1627), requesting his counsel on

\(^{84}\) Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History* (New York, 1962), 146.


the matter of slavery. Baba responded that the enslavement of black Muslims was against Islamic law. The Moroccan historian Ahmad an-Nasiri (1835–97) also expressed strong disapproval of his countrymen for their enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans and, unlike Ahmad Baba, thought it was wrong to enslave ‘unbelievers’.

The Gnawa who were, for instance, from the Muslim Mandé people of the western region of Africa simultaneously felt that they belonged to Dar al-Islam or al-Umma (the Islamic community) as well as the Mandé people. That is, Gnawa who were ethnically of Mandé descent also saw themselves as Muslims. As a consequence, the unfamiliar cultural landscapes far from the Mandé homelands were supposedly less inhospitable because of the familiarity provided by being a Muslim among other Muslims. Thus, Morocco was not a completely alien land. The 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?’, the 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 – the Gnawa have undergone their own type of creolization and integration into the Moroccan social landscape.

Gnawa people have created a distinct place for themselves in Moroccan society. They play a social and spiritual role and, in recent decades, have become well-known public performers. As early as the 1920s, Carleton Coon, an American anthropologist, made the following observation on the Gnawa during a trip to Morocco:

[They] are racially full Negroes, very black and broad-nosed. They are said to come from Rio de Oro. They wear rags and comic headdresses, belts covered with cowrie shells, and leather sandals. In their hands they carry pairs of iron clappers. Wandering through the streets of the towns, singly or in pairs, the Gnawa sing to attract a crowd. Once a few people have paused to see them, the Gnawa break into a fast jazzy dance, clicking out the time on their clappers, and singing a little song. They collect the few coins given to them, bow and bless the audience, and move on.

The character and practice of Gnawa changed over time. In the 1920s, Coon saw Gnawa as disorganized beggars and they often were forced to perform in the streets for survival, but nowadays they seem to be more organized, and to be professional singers and musicians.

Over the past fifty years in North Africa, Gnawa music, like the Blues in America, has spread and attracted practitioners from other ethnic groups,

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87 Mohamed Zaouit, in his doctoral thesis studying the fatawi (sing. fatwa) of Ahmad Baba regarding the legal status of ‘Blacks’ exported as slaves to North Africa, has succeeded in identifying the author of the letter. It was someone by the name of Sa’id Ibrahim al-Jirari who probably resided in Draa in southeast Morocco and the letter went by way of Touat to be delivered to Ahmad Baba in Timbuktu. See Mohamed Zaouit, ‘L’esclavage au Bilad as-Sudan au xvième siècle à travers deux consultations juridiques d’Ahmad Baba’ (thèse de doctorat, Paris-I Sorbonne, 1997), 66–8.


in this case Berbers and Arabs. Public, non-ceremonial performances outside the Gnawa mystic order are a recent development. The Gnawa have turned the mystical aspect of their music into a more popular musical art. In the 1970s, when the only popular music available was the Middle Eastern type, some Moroccan artists started to look into other Moroccan traditions. One of the best examples is the group Nass al-Ghiwan, who created an original Moroccan pop music inspired by Gnawa music and mystical beliefs. One member of the band is Abd er-Rahman Paco, himself a Gnawa master musician from Essaouira. In subsequent years, Gnawa music has engendered a style of pop music that appeals to a wide audience of listeners. Groups such as Nass al-Ghiwan and Jil-Jilala were the most listened to bands in Morocco in the 1970s and '80s. In the 1990s, other groups, such as Nass Marrakesh, emerged, who blend traditional music with new songs that connect with contemporary themes and audiences. Yet, for the Gnawa, their 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. The Gnawa are modernizing their style to make it more secular with more commercial appeal. With these recent developments and their appeal to tourists, the Moroccan government in 1997 established The Gnawa and World Music Festival in Essaouira.

The legacy of the Gnawa has become another rich thread woven into the cultural cloth of modern-day Morocco. As such, the Gnawa spiritual group provides a window through which we may view the history of blacks in Morocco. Thus, it is possible to discover and recover the African roots and dialogue that still live on in Morocco.

90 Paul Bowles made several recordings of Moroccan music that included Gnawa performances. One segment is entitled ‘Sudanese slave song in Arabic sung by a Gnawi’. See Paul Bowles, Christopher Wanklyn and Charles F. Gallagher, ‘Morocco, ca. 1959’. This sound recording was deposited at the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University, Bloomington, in 1962.

91 Randy Weston and other Western artists who admired the rhythmic richness of the Gnawa – such as Richard Horowitz, Henri Agnel, Pharoah Sanders, Adam Rudolph, Loy Ehrlich and Banning Eyre – helped raise the appreciation of Gnawa art, both inside and outside Morocco.