

Decolonizing Gnawa Music

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“Some day a wonderful new music is destined to come out of North Africa.”

Claude McKay, Harlem Renaissance poet, 1931

The story of the rise of Gnawa music is fascinating, and offers a lens into Morocco’s relationship to Europe and America since the colonial era, and into the kingdom’s shifting cultural hierarchies. A few decades ago, Gnawa music was a marginalized practice, frowned upon by the Moroccan cultural elite and the religious establishment alike. Today Gnawa music is the most well-known music coming out of Morocco, if not North Africa. In 2019, the music was designated by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. How did Gnawa become the musical face of Morocco? Why did the United Nations choose this genre over *‘ala*, the country’s stately music? In this piece, I examine how Gnawa music was elevated to its global status first by French (colonial) interests and African American jazz artists, such that the reigning narrative surrounding Gnawa music today is an amalgam of French colonial and academic interpretations, and African American musical takes on the genre.

A decolonial interpretation and “revalorization” of Gnawa music has yet to be written, as we have seen with other Moroccan genres of music like *‘aita* or *abidat ar-rma*, in part because Gnawa music’s association with and domination by external (non-Moroccan) actors has put off local scholars and critics (Ciucci, 2010). If French colonialist ethnographers neglected and “degraded” musical forms like *‘aita* and *chikhat*, leading Moroccan scholars in recent years to try to rescue these genres (Najmi, 2007). Gnawa music has suffered from the opposite trend: it was played up and over-valorized by the French, and then by American scholars and artists, and

tourists, such that any local attempt to write about this tourist music would only further contribute to its popularity and “over-researchedness” (Button and Aiken, 2022). French colonial ethnographers were intrigued by Sufi practice, and particularly keen on photographing and exhibiting Gnawa performers. It was in *Souffles-Anfas*, in the decade after independence, where some of the earliest critiques of French colonial depictions of Moroccan music first appeared, with editor Abdellatif Laabi drawing attention to the role of Alexis Chottin, the director of the Conservatory of Moroccan Music in Rabat (1929-1939 and 1956-1960), and whose bifurcation, of Moroccan music into “classical” and “folk” music, continues to shape discourse about in Morocco (Laâbi, 1967).

Colonial Sufism

Trance-healing ceremonies are not unique to the Gnawa. Other Sufi brotherhoods—the Issawa, the Darqawa, the Hamadsha, and other North African orders—have similar rituals, used to heal conditions that Western psychiatrists call bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and epilepsy. North African officials have long looked down upon these devotional practices, not only because they depart from official interpretations of Islam, but also because during the colonial era, French administrators supported these Sufi orders against the nationalist movements, which embraced a more puritan version of Islam (Trimingham, 1998, p. 255). French rule encouraged Sufi rites and festivals to control populations, but also to promote tourism: Europeans were intrigued by Sufi hysteria. Sufi trance ceremonies were staged at the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris. Eugène Delacroix’s famous painting *The Fanatics of Tangier* painted after his visit to Morocco in 1838, shows trancers, as he put it, “spreading through the streets” in “a state of ecstasy which allowed them to walk on red-hot coals, eat scorpions, lick red-hot irons and walk on sword blades” (Sharpe, 2008, p. 22). But in the 1930s, the growing nationalist movement in Morocco resented the colonial use of Sufism and denounced the “imperial imposters who exploit [the masses’] ignorance and poverty” (Spadola, 2013, p. 33). The Sultan Mohammed V supported the nationalist position, and in 1946 he passed a decree banning the processions of brotherhoods like the Issawa, and prohibiting the establishment of new Sufi lodges (*zawaya*) without his authorization.

Upon independence, the Algerian and Tunisian governments outlawed a host of Sufi brotherhoods, including West African-derived orders like the Stamboli in Tunisia. But in Morocco, partly because of their close ties to the palace, the government never banned the Gnawa.

The Gnawi was seen as a healer, not an agitator, and adepts continued performing *lilas*. Yet after independence the cultural and political elite of Morocco rarely celebrated Gnawa music, seeing it as lowbrow, a little embarrassing—nowhere near as urbane as the country’s stately Andalusian repertoire (‘*ala*), held up by the intelligentsia and government as testament to Islamic Spain’s refinement. Prominent feminists like Fatima Mernissi argued that the folk belief in Aïcha Kandisha, a “repugnant female demon” with “pendulous breasts” who inhabits men, as symptomatic of a wider misogynist fear of female sexuality (Mernissi, 1987, p. 43).

The Seventies

Gnawa music would become popular among Moroccan youth in the 1970s, partly because of its growing associations with African American music. Groups like Nass El Ghiwane mixed traditional Gnawa rhythms with Middle Eastern genres to create a powerful protest sound. Over the past twenty years, Gnawa music has gained great popularity on the international scene. Whether in “traditional” form or in various blends of Gnawa jazz, Gnawa reggae, and Gnawa rock—it has captivated listeners. As Gnawa music has become one of the most popular “world music” genres in Europe, it has boomeranged back to the Gnawa’s land of origin, giving the genre a higher status. Upper-class Moroccans now have Gnawa music at their social gatherings and weddings. The government sponsors an annual Gnawa festival in Essaouira, one of the largest music festivals in the world; and formerly impoverished Gnawa masters are invited on television shows after returning from world tours.

The popularity of Gnawa music at home and abroad has raised all kinds of questions in the Maghreb: Why did this music go global in the first place? Of the numerous Sufi orders that use faith healing, and of the countless North African music genres with polyrhythmic syncopation, why has this music captivated Western listeners? Why have Moroccans and Algerians allowed the Western fetish for Sufi trance to alter national tastes and cultural hierarchy? Did Gnawa music travel from West Africa to Morocco as Western scholars – from the colonial era until today – have argued? Or is the music with its language, rhythms and instruments of local provenance?

The ascent of Gnawa music has inspired much debate. Devoted practitioners of *taghawit* are horrified to see not only their music played outside its ritual context, but also how their religious practices are being commodified and marketed as “trance dub” and “jedba beat” (Kapchan, 2007). Believers are stunned by the recklessness of the Western artists and entertainers who toy with

powerful spirits, chanting their names at dance parties. In 2008, the American actor David Carradine starred in a French-made film called *Kandisha*, a “supernatural thriller” about Aicha Kandisha, the “fourteenth-century evil spirit.” (The plot revolves around a lawyer who must defend a woman accused of killing her husband, when in reality the man was decapitated by Aicha Kandisha.) This film would be Carradine’s last: a few days after the film won an award at the Mexico International Film Festival, the seventy-two-year-old actor was found dead in a Bangkok hotel with a rope tied to his neck, wrists, and genitals. As fans and film critics speculated on this mysterious death, believers had no doubt: the deed was vintage Aicha Kandisha—the film had mocked and provoked the spirit and she had exacted her revenge grotesquely.

The Jinnealogists

In 1899, the Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck, offered one of the earliest descriptions of “The so-called Gnawa who stand in an especially intimate relation to gnun, and who are frequently called on to expel them from people who are ill...They are usually, but not always black from the Sudan and they form a regularly-constituted secret society” (Westermarck, 1899). He describes a *lila*, a Gnawa healing ceremony, or what he terms a “seance in the Moorish fashion.” Foreshadowing a debate which would kick off several decades later, Westermarck would ponder which beliefs are indigenous to Morocco and which come from outside. He notes the parallels between the belief systems of Morocco and the East, “this belief in all its essentials, and in a great many of its details, is identical with that of the Eastern Arabs, and may be said, in the main to represent part of the old Arab religion, in spite of the great mixture of race which has taken place on African soil” (Westermarck, 1899, p. 260). In his later work *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (1926), Westermarck reiterates this last point that “The Moorish jnun resemble in all essentials, and in many details the jinn of the East.” He suggests that Aicha Kandisha – today thought of as a quintessentially Moroccan jinniya, central to the Gnawa pantheon – derives from the Arabian desert jinn Sa-lewwah Gule.

Yet Westermarck notes that the resemblance is not “due to Islamic influence alone” and influence ran in multiple directions. Many of these features of jinn in Morocco and Arabia are common in the world of spirits writ large: such as the belief among the Berbers of Morocco, Tuareg of Mali and Kabyles of Algeria in spirits (*alchinen*) that inhabit rocks and mountains, and that would be absorbed into the “Muhammadan doctrine of saints.” He ultimately concludes that

“Owing to our very defective knowledge of the early Berbers, it is to a large extent impossible to decide what elements in the demonology of Morocco are indigenous and what not” – though he calls for a more meticulous comparison between Moorish and Eastern practices, suggesting that the sacrificing of fowl is a North African peculiarity, and fear of butcher shops may be of Berber origin. He also draws attention to the influence of Northwest Africa on the Middle East, noting that Maghrebians had a reputation in the Arab East as masters of the “occult sciences.”

Westermarck observes that some jnun in Morocco are said to have Sudanese names (but he never says all named-jinn come from West Africa, as others would argue later). He says that chief magicians come from Sus, the southernmost part of Morocco “where the Negro influence is considerable.” He adds that there “can be no doubt that various practices connected with the belief in jnun have a Sudanese origin. We have seen that there are intimate relations between jnun and the negroes, and that the Gnawa chiefly consisting of Negroes are experts in expelling jnun from persons who are troubled by them.” But he doesn’t say Gnawa was introduced by black slaves from West Africa – he speaks of the Sus region as a possible origin. Westermarck suggests that black slaves from West Africa would have found the Moroccan spiritual context “more or less similar” to their own, including ostensibly un-Islamic practices like drinking the blood of sacrificed animals. “[T]he Gnawa are not only exorcists, they are actual jin-worshipers.... drink[ing] the blood of the sacrificed goat,” he writes, “It is easy to understand that the black slaves who came to Morocco found the Moorish belief in jnun particularly congenial to their own native superstitions and entered into close relations with these spirits by means of practice, which were more or less similar to those in vogue among their own people” (Westermarck, 2014, p. 381).

Westermarck was writing, at the peak of colonial expansion, when French colonial officials and scholars were attributing identities and genealogies to different groups in Morocco – and to their musical practices. Alexis Chottin, who was head of the National Conservatory in Rabat (1929-1939 and 1956-1960) wrote extensively on Moroccan music under the stewardship of the protectorate’s Service des Arts Indigenes (Pasler, 2015). He would famously divide Moroccan music into “classical music” meaning Andalusian music with its refined, courtly style, and “folk music” influenced by Andalusian and Berber singing, and folk music of foreign origin such as the music of “Negro confraternities” (Chottin, 1939, p.107; qtd. in Cuicci, 2022, p. 48). Chottin was obviously influenced by the earlier military ethnologists and Indigenous Affairs specialists who pondering the origins dark-skinned Moroccans, wondering whether the Haratin of the southeastern

oasis, were autochthonous, or of East African Kushite origin, or a mix of white Mediterranean people and the descendants of Ethiopians (Silverstein, 2020; Brémond, 1950). Westermarck did not support these particular colonial hypotheses. He viewed the Sahel and Morocco as more linked than separate, with common spiritual practices (that were either the product of diffusion or invention); nor did he give blacks in Morocco a foreign ancestry (as French colonials did).

French ethnographers and artists had a keen interest in the Gnawa. As art historian Cynthia Becker showed in her recent book *Blackness in Morocco: Gnawa Identity Through Music and Visual Culture*, Gnawa identity was a colonial construct of sorts, emerging with the onset of French colonial rule in 1912 (Becker, 2020). When the Sultan lifted the ban on photography, dark-skinned men in shell-adorned headdresses began posing and playing instruments for the foreign photographers and tourist industry. Former slaves became “Gnawa” by performing for the (mostly French) foreign camera, in a degrading manner comparable to the black-face minstrelsy in the United States. Becker showcases a beautiful set of photographs of Gnawa musicians posing for foreign camera, noting how the Western fascination with dark-skinned musicians “as embodiments of foreign exoticism” led to the “codification” of a Gnawa identity.

“Harlem to the Kasbah”

American jazz artists would encounter Gnawa music in the 1920s, shortly after the start of the French Protectorate. The Harlem Renaissance spread from New York to Paris during the 1920s, inspiring *Les Années Folles* and the Negritude movement. The Paris-based African- American expatriates, fascinated by the Orient, often visited North Africa. In 1908, the Pittsburgh-born romantic-realist painter Henry Ossawa Tanner spent several months in northern Morocco painting street scenes and landscapes, including *Palais de Justice* (1908), where the biblical flight to Egypt takes place against the background of a Moorish palace in Tangier. Jessie Redmon Fauset, novelist, editor of *The Crisis* (the magazine of the NAACP), Sorbonne alumna, and one of the few female luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance, also visited North Africa, sailing from France to Gibraltar and then to Tangier (Fauset, 1935).

One the first Americans to be struck by Gnawa music, was the Jazz Age poet Claude McKay, who witnessed a Gnawa healing ceremony in Casablanca in the 1930s and wrote movingly, in his memoir *A long Way From Home*, about how the rituals of these “Guinea sorcerers” reminded him of a similar ceremony practiced by peasants in his native Jamaica

(McKay, 1937, p. 228). From 1930 to 1934, McKay lived in Tangier, following the Harlem Renaissance in local European-language newspapers. It was in 1928, at the home of a Martinican friend in Casablanca, that McKay first witnessed a Gnawa ceremony. “The Gueanoua were exorcising a sick woman and they danced and whirled like devils,” he writes in his memoir *A Long Way from Home*, “I watched them dance a kind of primitive rumba, beat their heads against posts, and throw off their clothing in excitement” (McKay, 1937, p. 297). McKay’s masterwork *Banjo*, completed in Tangier in 1934, would go on to inspire the Négritude movement, the French-speaking world’s equivalent of the “New Negro” movement, led by poets Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. And the connections that McKay drew, in the 1930s, between the Caribbean and North Africa, foreshadowed a larger black internationalist movement toward Islam and the Orient. This American observer also noted the Gnawa’s connection to the Moroccan monarchy, and to claim a similarity between their tradition and Afro-Atlantic practices due to their supposed West African origin – a claim that would gain more currency a half century later as jazz musicians began recording with Gnawa artists. McKay’s pan-Africanist vision of a borderless Africa, and Gnawa as being of West African descent, would become more popular in the 1960s with the arrival of the jazz musicians. A parallel would be drawn between the trans-Atlantic and the trans-Sahara, an old abolitionist trope, that would be given a Black tilt, and enter the world of jazz music, starting with pianist Randy Weston’s classic album *Blue Moses* (1972; Aïdi, n.d.; McDougall 2002).

Paul Bowles was another American who would find the Gnawa interesting, if unsophisticated. In 1959, the American writer traveled through Morocco recording different musics including Gnawa, which he (unlike Westermarck) saw as a survival of music from Sub-Saharan Africa. Bowles acknowledged the “fair amount of admixture of Negro culture,” but as a Berberophile he saw Morocco as “Berber terrain just as Mexico is Indian terrain.” He minimized the Arab and “Negro influence” in the local music. Moroccan music, he argued, despite the presence of traditional Arabic vocalization, was not “strictly Arabic.” Unlike Westermarck, Bowles saw Arab influence as corrupting, and Negro influence as embellishing, but unsophisticated: “continuous sideshow of Negro Gnawa artists who tortured themselves to rhythm supplied by large bronze castanets” (Bowles, 1942). At the same time, Bowles argued that the Tuareg, a people he much admired, had “no directly traceable Negroisms in their musics.”

The Post-Colonial Era

In 1964, the French ethnologist, Viviana Paques published a tome titled *L'Arbre cosmique dans la pensée populaire et dans la vie quotidienne du nord-ouest africain* (hereafter *L'Arbre cosmique*, or *The Cosmic Tree*), the first landmark academic treatment of Gnawa music. Paques, who died in 2007, was enormously influential in the study of religion and slavery in northwest Africa, having done decades of fieldwork in the Marrakesh region. She was a pillar of the Essaouira Gnawa festival (launched in 1998), her shadow still looming large over the Francophone conversation on music and slavery in the Maghreb; by some accounts, Paques became a practitioner and *mqademma* herself. In her 700-page volume, she argued, as if responding to McKay, that the Gnawa community includes not only black people or former slaves, but also adepts of the “white race” – Arabs, Berbers and Jews, who call themselves “sons of Bilal” (Pâcques, 200). Every Gnawi identifies as “slave” and “black” because they are children of Sidna Bilal “no matter what his ethnic or social origins maybe.” If others speculated that the term Gnawa came from Guinea, Ghana or Agnaw (meaning “mute” in Berber), she held that the term most likely originated in the Tamazight phrase *igri ignawen* (“in the field of the cloudy sky” or turbulent wind), as Gnawa describe themselves as the “people of turbulence.”

Paques also saw more phallic symbolism in Gnawa cosmogyny than earlier observers. “The Gnawa order,” Paques claims, “is found, with identical beliefs and rituals, throughout northern Africa, from the Mediterranean to Timbuktu, from Libya to Chad and the Sudan.” In chapter after chapter, Paques “decodes” the rituals, colors, types of incense and candles. “Everything is code,” she says, the big drum and small drum represent man and his genitals. “Man has a female organ which is his phallus... and the woman has a male organ which is the uterus.” She mentions symbols that the Gnawa share with other northern African orders: the blacksmith, who is in perpetual motion, representing the cycle of death and resurrection (also called the monkey because of the rising and falling, a term that also happens to be a euphemism for the male sex organ.) Paques underscored the continuity between Maghrebian orders (like Gnawa and Aissawa) and those in the Sahara. She holds that what’s true for Gnawa is true for Aissawa, who are speaking the same “meta -language.” Paques contends that there is a “*vieux fond Africain*” (an old African fount), a mystical African consciousness, underpinning the fundamentally homogenous civilization that is Saharan-Sudanese in origin, and that underlies most of West African or Northwest African culture. She even raises the possibility of a Saharan Moses (Pâcques, 1995, p. 14).

The Cosmic Tree may have been progressive and pro-African in 1960s Francophone context in showing how Africa fertilized Europe, and in portraying North and West Africa as culturally indivisible, but the book was not well received in the Anglophone world. American academics would give a larger role to West African transmission thesis and discover strong parallels with black Atlantic, deploying concepts of diaspora, indigeneity, and cultural edging out the more Berberphile interpretations held by colonial-era writers. In the American academy, an influential book that would make this continuities and retentions argument was Vincent Crapanzano’s *Tuhami: The Hamadsha* (1980), about a young Moroccan who believed himself married to the she-demon Aicha Kandisha. Citing Westermarck, the author argued that while belief in the jinn was part of Islamic practice, the Moroccan belief in a “named jinn” like Lala Mira or Kandisha, who have formal names and specific characteristics, are West African retentions (Crapanzano, 1980, p. 100-101). He saw these beliefs as sub-Saharan retentions that Gnawa musicians passed on to other quasi Sufi groups like the Hamadsha and Issawa. Westermarck, however, did not say Aicha Qandisha’s name or spirit came from West African, but rather that her name is distinctly of Eastern origin; he speculates it could be the cult of Astart worshipped by Canaanite, Hebrews, Phoenicians, and her husband Hammu Qayn was perhaps the Carthaginian god Haman. But as different social movements arose in America remapping north Africa – more people and the jinn is given a black origin.

It was around this time that Abdelatif Laabi uttered his famous call in the magazine *Souffles* to decolonize Morocco’s elite cultural institutions, inherited from France, saying cultural criticism in independent Morocco was still suffused with elitism and prejudice, reducing Moroccan culture to exoticism and folklore. The *Souffles* collective would call for a re-evaluation of Moroccan popular culture, listing a range of artists, figures and practices that needed reassessment: “Haja Hamdaouia, hadra ceremonies, Aicha Kandicha, ghouls, acrobats of the Hmad ou Moussa brotherhood” (Sefrioui, 2013, p. 168-169). Gnawa was of particular interest to the *Souffles* writers as it could be a bridge to the African diaspora, and offer a critique of colonialists and the monarchy. Yet almost sixty years after this appeal, and with Gnawa music an increasingly popular form in Morocco, the narrative surrounding Gnawa music is still shaped by external actors. It is nowadays mostly American-based academics, who, building on earlier French colonial and American African interpretations, circulate the narrative of Gnawa music as diasporan and Sahelian in origin and therefore akin to the blues or jazz.

American Labels

One recent work that attempts to present a history of Gnawa is *Black Morocco* (2013) by the historian Chouki El Hamel. This book has numerous limitations – including his claim that racism arrived in North Africa with the advent of Islam, and his division of the Moroccan population into three bounded groups, Arab, Berber, and Black, as if one cannot be black and Berber, or black and Arab, or all three identities.¹ El Hamel infuses multiple American racial categories into Moroccan history. Not surprisingly, he views Gnawa music as akin to the blues and having the same historical trajectory – an argument more often heard from musicians and world music producers than historians.

Invoking the cultural diffusion thesis, El Hamel argues that the Gnawa are a “distinct social group” that have “retained many of the rituals and beliefs of their ancestors, expressed through [their] unique musical traditions” (El Hamel, 2013, p. 269). He claims “this fascinating people” have a connection to their Manding heritage, stressing that “Gnawa” and “Griot” (apparently) have a common etymological root. El Hamel views Gnawa music through a trans-Atlantic prism, as “analogous” to the blues and Negro spirituals sung by black Americans. He refers to this Sufi order today as a “distinct ethnic group,” with “ethnic solidarity” at a time when few of the leading practitioners are black, and when the ritual is changing rapidly and becoming commercialized. El Hamel defines “diaspora” as a shared identity that transcends geographic boundaries, and articulates a desire for return to their original homeland.

Quoting the late theologian James Cone, El Hamel says Gnawa is very similar to black spirituals which enabled slaves in America to “retain a measure of their African identity,” in an alien land. El Hamel’s account of Gnawa music echoes the story of Negro spirituals and the blues in the Antebellum South, replete with maroon communities and “lodges.” During the reign of Moulay Ismail, he says, there was a “great dispersion of the blacks across Morocco,” as they “scattered” across the kingdom, “they founded communal centres where their culture is celebrated.” El Hamel offers no description or evidence for said communal centres. The first Gnawa cultural centre established in Morocco is Dar Gnawa of Tangier founded in 1980 (Alami,

¹ For a more detailed review of El Hamel’s work, please see “Moulay Ismail and the Mumbo Jumbo: Black Morocco Revisited,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal* (Spring 2023) https://iphobiacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/BLACK-MORACCO.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0i1a76-aAfaWzUjpsKIgEGnU24p42aet0sCXpqMKzWSQJ_cKKVrK2F8gNI.

2021). The Gnawa, he writes, like other African diasporas try to “reconcile themselves with a fragmented past” – and once “connected with their origins, they have a sense of location.” El Hamel also asserts without evidence or explanation that Gnawa ceremonies happen on a regular basis because, “Slavery itself was the initial wound and because it was never officially recognised or healed it was therefore destined to repeat itself.” Not sure where the author gets this functionalist claptrap – but it raises the question: if the Moroccan authorities were to recognise slavery, would that end the need for *lila* healing ceremony?

There is no doubt that Gnawa music has preserved the memory of slavery in Morocco, with lyrics speaking of suffering and privation, but El Hamel does not show how Gnawa is an ethnicity or even a distinct social group (as opposed to a Sufi organisation, or musical culture, or lineage). He stresses the Gnawa’s exclusion and segregation, but then accents their assimilation and “long integration” into Moroccan society. Haratin have been described as an “ethnic” group, but how are Gnawa an ethnicity? The conceptual fuzziness is in part because throughout the book El Hamel never defines the concepts of race or ethnicity. The history of Gnawa music that he outlines is more a description of what happened in the United States post-Reconstruction, a process of historical recovery and identity formation that allowed descendants of slaves to mobilise for rights as Black Americans in a partial democracy. No such mobilization by descendants of slaves has occurred in Morocco.

El Hamel also never addresses which Gnawa rituals or musical practices may have come from the Sahel. This is a complex, specialised debate – and El Hamel needs to engage more with the work of ethnomusicologists like Philip Schuyler, Tim Fuson and Chris Witulski, who have considered which elements of the Gnawa repertoire, musical (pentatonicism) or linguistic, may have come from the Sahel. In *Gnawa Lions*, ethnomusicologist Chris Witulski writes (in response to El Hamel), that Gnawa practice is more about piety and earning a living, than nostalgia for a homeland (Witulski, 2018). Yet El Hamel places himself solidly within the “cultural diffusion” camp, claiming that Gnawa music not only came from West Africa, but echoing anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano’s famous argument, that Gnawa went on to influence other Berber and Arab “mystic [sic] orders” in Morocco as well.

El Hamel favourably quotes René Brunel the French colonial Commissioner of Oujda, who wrote on Moroccan Sufi tariqas, and claimed that the Issawa master healers had adopted Gnawa

rituals, especially the use of blood. Brunel also held that in the 1900s the ‘Abid Al-Bukhari tended to affiliate en masse with the same order (Brunel, 1926). Historian Allen Meyers offered a critique of this colonial narrative forty years ago, reminding us that the Abid al-Bukhari was indeed reconstituted by the French after the establishment of the French Protetorate in 1912, but just because black troops congregated at a particular zawiya in the 1900s, “great care must be taken before projecting these data into the past. There is no evidence that the ‘Abid had been affiliated with any particular religious order before that time.” Also, no evidence exists to show that the Abid introduced these brotherhoods and rites into Morocco, “nor for that matter, has large-scale Sudanese immigration to Morocco in historical times proven to have occurred” (Meyers, 1977). French colonialism’s keen interest in Gnawa practice needs to be explored further. El Hamel doesn’t discuss the colonial state or the Moroccan regime’s support for Gnawa after independence, but notes, rather capriciously, that their “very existence” is a marvel.

One of the more unsavoury arguments presented in *Black Morocco* is that Arab and Muslim scholars, “blinded” by “prejudice” have avoided writing about Gnawa and spirit possession because it’s seen as “an inferior form of Sufism – a cult influenced by pagan black traditions and embraced mostly by lower-class people.” This is a canard. Gnawa music has drawn considerable academic attention in Morocco because of its globalization and rise in the Moroccan cultural hierarchy in recent decades. El Hamel namechecks a couple of studies, but does not engage with the writings of sociologist Abdelhai Diouri who has been researching and defending Gnawa practices for forty years, or younger scholars like Meriem Alaoui Btarny and musician-journalist Reda Zine, who is doing fascinating work on Gnawa and Afro-futurism (Btarny, 2012; Zine, 2009). What is missing is work that writes Gnawa history based on local texts and sources, instead of colonial sources.

At the crux of the American conversation about Gnawa is the claim that not only did the Abid al-Bukhari come from the Sahel, but they – and subsequent slaves – brought musical practices, instruments and animist beliefs with them, and these retentions can be heard in Gnawa music. And, for American commentators, this is why this music is politically and morally significant and needs to be “salvaged.” The “retentions” are said to come in four places – rituals, language, (pentatonic) rhythms and instrumentation (Diouf, 2013). While the verbal references in Gnawa songs remain an indubitable reference to slavery and Sahelian/”Sudani” origins, it’s not clear that the non-Arabic words are “sub-Saharan” in origin, or if the instruments are Sahelian, or

if Gnawa rhythms contain a Sahelian pentatonic note that traveled simultaneously across the Atlantic and to North Africa.

In her recent book, Becker speculates about various etymologies in Gnawa practice – that the term *bangar* derives from an “unknown sub-Saharan African language,” but could come from *wagara* “a term initially used in West Africa that took different meanings at different locales during different time periods” (Becker, 2020, p. 128fn15). She says allusions to Timbuktu in Gnawa chants, are references to an imaginary homeland, that fill in for “missing biological family.” The origin of the term Gnawa has been the subject of much speculation: it has been said to derive from Guinea, Ghana, Kano, Agnaou, Maganin (possessed/crazy). Becker thinks the term “migrated” from the Kanuri region of Nigeria and means “little ones” or “inferior ones.” She also offers that the phrase Bu Gangi comes from the Zarma word *genji* (spirit). She says the *qraqeb*, iron castanets used by Gnawe evoke the mystical power of the West African blacksmith, and mimic the sound made by “the chains used to shackle the enslaved.” This too is dubious – *abidat ar-rma* also use metal percussive instruments. And it’s not clear what the point of all this avid speculating is.

Another alleged West African retention in Gnawa music is the pentatonic scale, with its flattened third and flattened seventh notes which allegedly also exists in the blues. Ethnomusicologist Tim Fuson questions this claim. In a much-cited paragraph from his 2009 dissertation, “Musicking Moves and Ritual Grooves across the Moroccan Gnawa Night,” Fuson writes, “there does not appear to be a single “parent” tradition anywhere south of Morocco that duplicates the sound or usage of the Gnawa guembri” (Fuson, 2009). Portrayals of the guembri as the first African bass – which traveled northward from its West African birthplace – is thus complicated by the absence of a “parent,” but also by the fact that while the guembri is played at a low register, the Gnawa scale itself is not particularly “bassy.” Also, scholars (like El Hamel and Becker) who speak so confidently of “retentions” in language, dress, and instrumentation don’t consider the possibility that these cultural elements – and the very discourse surrounding Gnawa - may be “invented traditions” created by colonial or post-colonial state officials, as the royal parasol and *garde noire* were “recreated” in 1912 – or simply introduced by the performers responding to market demands. The “Sudani” and “Bambara” terms used in rituals today could have been created for performances, just as today Gnawa performers invoke new spirits, and call out “Aicha Obama,” “Aicha Za’ara” (Aicha the Blonde), and “Waka-waka Africa” to entertain Western tourists. As

Chris Witulski observes, in *Gnawa Lions*, his ethnography of Gnawa performance in Fez, the Gnawa ceremony has shifted from a Sufi ritual to an “Africanized spectacle,” with spirits from other local traditions inducted into the lila, along with “outrageous acts of possession, with musicians cutting their arms with knives, drinking boiling water while possessed by Sidi Mumen” (Witulski, 2018, p. 154). Who’s to say the improvising, “inventing” and commercialization underway now wasn’t taking place a century ago when (colonial) state officials had much greater interest in Gnawa practices?

In conclusion: in this essay I have tried to show that despite the *Souffles*’ collective’s powerful calls to decolonize the scholarship and narrative surrounding different Moroccan musical genres, the conversation around Gnawa is taking still place outside of Morocco, particularly in America where this music has a particular cultural and political meaning. If Moroccan critics have been trying to decolonize (the French-dominated) image and narrative surrounding ‘*aita* and *abidat ar-rma* and *chikhat* music, it is high time that Moroccan scholars re-visit the history of the Gnawa.

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