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The Gnawa of Oujda: Music at the Margins in Morocco

Tony Langlois

Abstract

This paper describes some of my fieldwork encounters with the Gnawa, a group of ethnic minority musicians living in Oujda, north-eastern Morocco, where I conducted research in 1994. I recount how I met the group and some impressions of the places where they lived and worked. After discussing the structure and nature of the musical events through which they interacted with the rest of the population, I describe their instruments and comment upon their repertoire. The economic and political circumstances in which the Gnawa appear to live are considered, and I offer an explanation as to why women comprise the greater part of their audience. Returning to the performance itself, I observe its most dramatic high point, a gestured self-mutilation, which both raises the level of excitement of the event and serves to reinforce the belief in the Gnawa's supernatural powers. Finally, the relationships between Gnawi music, local saintly figures and colour are discussed. I conclude that the group's precarious economic and social niche depends upon their manipulation of their 'otherness', the maintenance of secrecy surrounding their practices, and the need of local women for the catharsis their rites allowed.

1. Introduction

Though families residing in the border town of Oujda during in the mid-1990s may have originally migrated there from almost anywhere in Morocco or Algeria, the overwhelming majority of the population were of Arab or Berber, rather than sub-Saharan, descent.¹ As a black-skinned community, the Gnawa therefore constituted a locally conspicuous minority, whom I found to be further distinguished from their neighbours by their unorthodox religious-musical practices. This paper considers the ways in which the Gnawa of Oujda exploit their peripheral social position in the town by specialising in psychotherapeutic musical rituals. These activities are performed primarily for the benefit of the town's poorer and less educated female population, another politically marginal group, if numerically much more substantial than the Gnawa.

Here it is not my intention to describe in any great detail the musical systems employed by the Gnawa, nor the cosmological and symbolic connotations these may bear. Gnawa musical practices and their own explanations for them have been well documented elsewhere, in particular by Baldassarre (1995) and Schuyler (1981), and do not appear to be identical to those I witnessed over four months in Oujda. What I am principally concerned with, and which I believe to be most germane to a study of local musical meanings, are the strategies by which musical practices are employed by the Gnawa to maintain a culturally and economically distinctive role in society. I will also suggest an explanation for the apparent tolerance of such heterodox practices by the broader religious and political community.

The Gnawa's performance of 'otherness', as expressed in their physical appearance and musical and religious practices, confirms certain 'popular' religious beliefs that have co-existed fairly unproblematically with orthodox Islam throughout the Maghreb. At the same time, this performance has created for them a significant ritual role within that community of believers. Furthermore, the Gnawa's musical gatherings allow women to perform a role which, though individually cathartic and collectively supportive, nevertheless embody gender stereotypes which contribute to their political disempowerment. In short, the practice places women in the emotional or even hysterical position of a discourse which, inevitably perhaps, conflates masculinity with reason and self-control.

Finally, I intend to show how the Gnawa control access to the skills and knowledge that grant them their special status in society. In this context at least, music was not simply a means of communication between performer and audience but served as a deliberately obscure symbol of mystery and supernatural power. This situation tends to support both Bloch's argument (1974) which considers much ritual behaviour to serve as a mask for political authority, as well as Lewis' (1996) observations about the widespread association between ecstatic cults and the absence of political power. Useful as such theories are, they tend to diminish the significant role such activities play in the creation of cohesive communities of participants and tend not to consider the often precarious political status of the ritual specialists themselves.

2. *Fête du trône*

March the third, the *Fête du trône*, is a national holiday in Morocco and the annual celebration of the coronation of the king, Mohammed V.² Throughout the Kingdom, the *Fête du trône* provides an opportunity for subjects to demonstrate their fealty through flag-waving attendance at exuberant street parades and other civic celebrations. As the occasion also enables the authorities to observe just how enthusiastically this is carried out, where and by whom, the event might also serve as a barometer of royal influence throughout the country.

It was during the fete celebrations in the town of Oujda in 1994 that I first met the local Gnawa musicians. A procession of various town organisations made its way

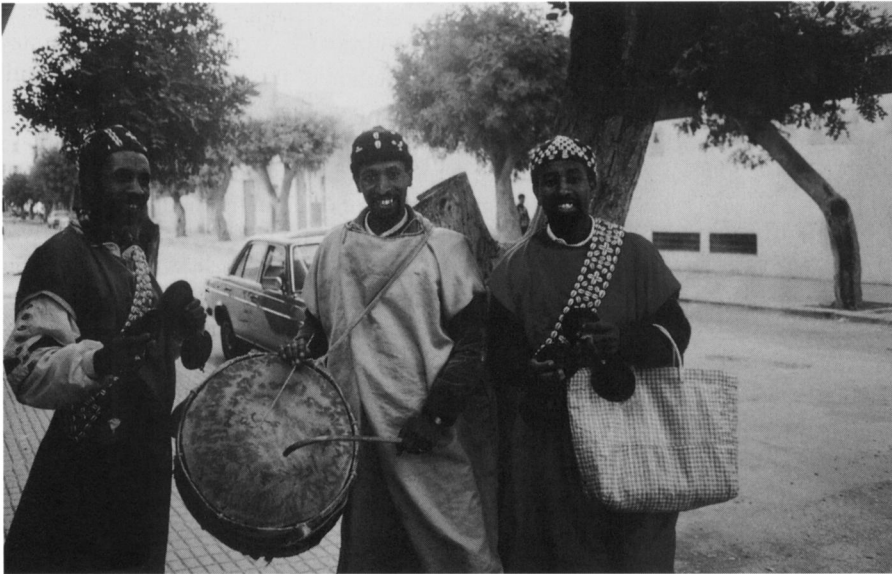


Fig. 1. The Gnawa troupe, on one of their perambulations in residential quarters. Note the tbel drum, collecting bag, and conch shells, used to ward off the 'evil eye' (photo by author).

down the main street of the town. Close to 150 people took part in the parade, including several local brass bands (known as *cliques*) in brightly coloured uniforms and a contingent from the Moroccan armed forces, based in large numbers in Oujda to maintain the nearby frontier with Algeria. Youth and sporting associations were also represented, along with various folk-music groups from the region. A large contingent of well-dressed schoolchildren bearing flags contributed to the spectacle of the occasion. Patriotic bunting and pictures of the royal family decorated all lamp posts and official buildings; hundreds of townspeople waved and cheered as the procession moved slowly past a stand where the *pasha* and other civic and military dignitaries were seated.³

Amongst these diverse attractions I noticed one group whose music and appearance appeared quite distinct from the other ensembles in the celebration. This Gnawa band were all black men, robed in white, wearing small caps and belts decorated with cowry shells. Their instruments were comprised of a large barrel drum (*tbel*) and several pairs of *qaqarbat* (sing. *qraqreb*), large steel castanets which, when played produced a tight mesh of interlocking rhythmic patterns around the central drum beat (cf. Fig. 1).⁴

Above these loud percussion instruments, several performers sang in a call-and-response pattern; a soloist's short, pentatonic melody evoked a response from the other musicians. As the Gnawa played and danced, some members turned their heads

from side to side with eyes closed, communicating a complete absorption in the music they were playing; this movement also suggested, or rather, emulated, an entranced state of consciousness. The very presentation of this music was stylistically quite unlike other genres I had encountered in this part of Morocco where, in general, musicians appear to play down their emotional involvement in performance.

I was not, in fact, expecting to come across a Gnawa group as far north as Oujda. This black minority, many of whose ancestors were originally brought from the Sahel by trade and slavery, tended to reside in the larger southern cities, particularly in Marrakech. In such areas, their exotic appearance and sound enabled them to profit from the booming tourism industry.⁵ Even including Algerian visitors (who come more for business and family purposes than for sight-seeing), very few tourists came to Oujda, which meant that if this group were resident, they were not likely to be making a living from outsiders. Furthermore, in the two months I had already spent acquainting myself with the musicians of the town I had heard not a single reference to the existence of a Gnawa population in Oujda.⁶ At the end of the procession I caught up with the group and tried to introduce myself and to make my interests known to them. Communication was not easy, as my Arabic was quite limited at this time and I was often obliged to recourse to French to make myself understood. These men, unlike most urban Arabs or Berbers, seemed to speak only Darija, the local dialect of Arabic, but my interest seemed to be a pleasant surprise to them, making our efforts more fruitful. After exchanging names, I established that they did indeed live permanently in the town and would be glad to have me visit them at an address that was provided on a scrap of paper. The rest of the procession was by now arriving at the same end of the thoroughfare, and the growing crowd made conversation too difficult. Before we parted though, Aziz, one of the troupe, called out that if I was interested in their music, I should visit the day after next.

3. Were the Gnawa Guineans?

The name 'Gnawa' (or 'Gnawi', sing.) is possibly derived from the same root as Guinea or Ghana, suggesting that this Moroccan minority came originally from the West African seaboard. There may be some truth in this, as throughout much of the Islamic age caravans from the Maghreb crossed the Sahara to trade for salt, dates, gold, ivory and slaves, who were no doubt very often 'Guineans'. In exchange, merchants brought European manufactured goods, gunpowder and religion. In linguistic practice, however, I found that the term 'Gnawa' was also used to describe any Sahouari (dark-skinned person from the Sahel) involved in musical or religious practices differing markedly from the Arab and Berber traditions of the northern Maghreb. In fact, almost identical musical instruments, dress and customs to those employed by the Gnawa can be found amongst many of the peoples inhabiting the southern desert fringes, from Mauritania to Chad and elsewhere along the same ancient trade routes running from north to south (see, for example, Coolen 1983). Although the word 'Sa-

houari' refers principally to membership in such religious fraternities, in Morocco it may also be used to describe a person in the midst of a blind fury. This allusion to a loss of self-control was probably derived from a characteristic stereotype widely associated with this community, in turn sustained by the musical-religious practices that I will shortly describe.

4. The Hadra

My first rendezvous with the Gnawa occurred at their weekly performance, which was known as *hadra* and held in their neighbourhood.⁷ The address I had been given simply said 'Aziz, Sidi Youness, Oujda', but this was quite sufficient to locate the community. The 'Rue de Sidi Youness' led from the market area of the town to the shrine of Sidi Youness (an ancient holy man) and to the well and residential quarter named after him. The very first person I stopped to ask directions knew exactly which turns through the twisting laneways I should take, and within a couple of hundred metres of the Gnawa performance-space I was able simply to follow the sound of their instruments. This was a relatively poor suburb of Oujda, beyond the tight alleys of the old walled Medina, on the side of the city least 'modernised' by French colonisers and subsequent independent regimes. The housing in this quarter was largely single story, the roads unpaved, and banks of prickly pear separated the small garden plots around many of the dwellings. At this time, a new wave of construction was rapidly overtaking these garden suburbs, replacing them with taller concrete buildings, many colourfully decorated with mosaics on their street-facades, their interiors firmly shuttered and barred from view.⁸ The Gnawa 'house' was one of the older, open type, comprised of several single-story rooms facing onto a small courtyard. Above the doorway to this small compound a painted sign advertised their presence.

At the threshold I met one of the performers who, recognising me from earlier that week, led me to an adjoining, walled open space where perhaps 150 people, almost all women and children, sat crowded together on rugs, facing the direction of the music. Several of the women were standing in front of the crowd, dancing in stiff, repetitive movements to music coming from between themselves and the back wall. These dancers rhythmically bent double, then threw themselves upright, arms and long hair thrown outwards, eyes closed. With faces contorted as if in pain, their bare feet stamped in time upon the rugs before the musicians. Occasionally one called out 'Allah!' or gave a small cry of discomfort. Despite what seemed to me like displays of utter despair, I noted that most of the audience observed the proceedings only with a cool interest, often continuing conversations with their neighbours and children.

The musicians themselves were seated by a back wall upon which the Moroccan flag had (I presume) inadvertently been hung upside down. The *qaqarbat* players were crouched in concentration, clapping out a continuous stream of interlocking rhythmic patterns and, singing short call-response refrains, whilst a bass ostinato was

provided by a *gimbri* (box-shaped lute) player. Without an obvious signal from the players, the music suddenly increased in speed, the singing ceased and the dancers tried desperately to keep up with the pace, until one by one they fell, swooning into the laps of the women seated at the front of the audience. As the last dancer collapsed, the music came to a halt, and one of the players led his *confreres* into a recitation of a litany of maraboutic 'saints', each name evoking the affirmation "*amin*" (roughly, "it will be so") from the audience.⁹

During an ensuing interval, individual women came forward to the older musicians to relate their personal difficulties: a child's illness, a loved one suffering from lack of work or hope, or poor treatment from the husband. Very often supplicants brought gifts as payment. These varied according to the woman's means but mostly comprised small amounts of cash, incense, candles, sugar, or cloth. Consultations were brief, and each was followed by a short chanted litany of local holy personages, reassuring all clients that with the intercession of the saints and the *baraka* (spiritual blessing) invoked by the Gnawa performance itself, God's will would prevail.¹⁰ This was not intended, nor, I believe, taken, as a guarantee that all would then be well; each person's fate was ultimately his or her own and largely predestined (literally; *m'ktub*, or "written"). Besides this, the poorer, less educated women of Oujda were, by necessity, rarely less than hardened realists. This ceremony did, however, reassure people that they might be rid of the lesser spiritual beings, known as *djnun* (sing. *djinn*), who, through some act of contamination, had attached themselves to their persons, depriving them of the strength they required to face life's problems.

After some preliminary benedictions, the *gimbri*-player picked out the introductory notes of a new piece of music, which he began by singing the 'call' part of the song. This was followed by the sung responses and *qaqarbat* playing of the rest of the ensemble. Upon hearing the first few bars of the song, a few women invariably scrambled out of the seated audience to dance in a small clear space in front of the musicians. Over several months of observing this process I never saw more than six or seven women dancing at a time. Fresh dancers appeared to be in a state of emotional distress, and I noticed that a Gnawa woman came quickly to their assistance, loosening their clothing and tying a coloured scarf around their waists. At some points of the dance, this cloth might be held from behind to prevent dancers from falling into one another or onto the players.

In this way the performance or ritual continued throughout the afternoon. The music began at a slow pace with an accompanying song, gradually increasing in tempo according to the state and stamina of the dancers, coming to an abrupt end as the last collapsed to the floor. The length of each piece of music was around ten to fifteen minutes, but the duration, speed and intensity of each performance was clearly dependent upon the state of the dancers themselves. If dancers remained standing at the end of the piece, the melody was reprised at high speed until the last of them swooned away. Although the melodies of the music were limited to very few notes, (see Fig. 3), these were performed in markedly syncopated relationships with the central rhythms. Although the pieces could be in one of several rhythmic patterns, in

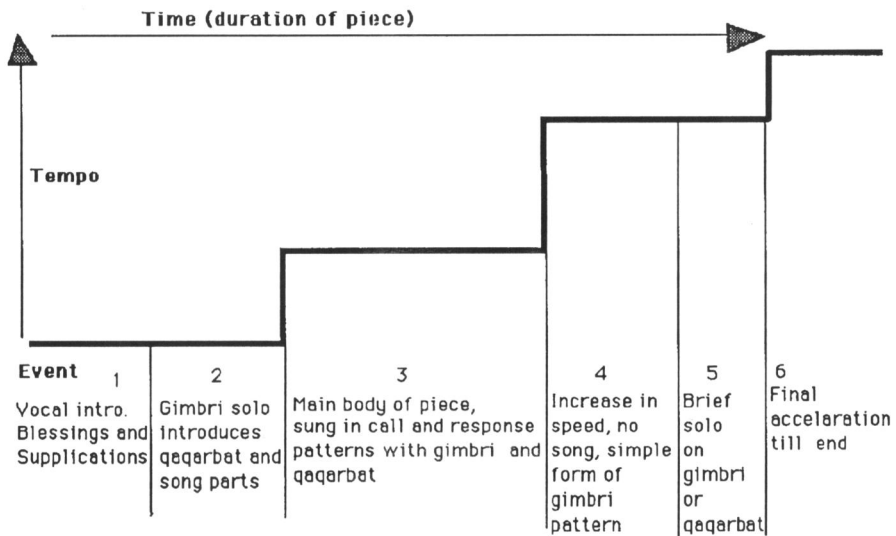


Fig. 2. Stylised structure of the performance of a Gnawa piece of music.

either 4/4 or 6/8 metres, the performance of each conformed to much the same structure, as shown in Fig. 2.

5. Instrumentation

The *gimbri* (also transliterated elsewhere as *gumbri* or *ginbri* and known as well as *hajhouj*) is a lute with three gut strings. It has a box-shaped wooden body, and the side that is played is covered with a resonating skin.¹¹ The neck is made from a cylindrical wooden piece, without frets. The strings are knotted at the top of the neck and are held in place by laces, which are adjusted to tune the instrument. The top, highest pitched string is laced closer to the body of the instrument (further down the neck) than the other two. The basic notes of the *gimbri* are played by striking the strings with a downward stroke of the right thumb and by plucking on the return with the r fingers of the right hand. However, elaborate ornamentation, especially in slower passages, is often added by the fingers of the left hand, which can pluck, as well as press, strings on the neck. As the music increases in speed, the melody is simplified to a steady ostinato. The sole *gimbri* of this particular Gnawa troupe is elaborately decorated with geometric patterns, and beads and charm-pouches dangle from the neck of the instrument. In Morocco the *gimbri* is uniquely identified with the Gnawa.

Because of its deep bass register and the relatively small size of its soundbox, the *gimbri* could only be heard clearly amongst several pairs of *qaqarbat* with the assis-

tance of electronic amplification. The Gnawa group that I knew used a small portable amplifier, with a contact pick-up attached to the bridge. This amplifier was powered by a long cable, drawn across various walls and gardens to a neighbour's house. It was always turned up to full volume, with a reverb effect in operation, which considerably altered the original sound of the instrument but made it clearly audible over the other sounds being produced.¹²

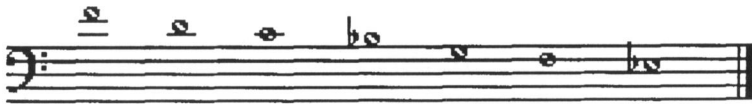


Fig. 3. The basic scale of the gimbri.

Several pairs of *qaqarbat* provided loud rhythmic accompaniment to the *gimbri*. These large iron or steel castanets are not exclusive to the Gnawa and can be heard in a variety of popular and 'folk' musics throughout the region, though never as prominently as in this context. The instrument, which can be found throughout the Sahel, did however seem to have some common association with various kinds of trance-inducing musics.¹³ The technical simplicity of the instrument—it is simply a pair of metal 'figures of eight' loosely attached to another at one end—belies its capacity for rhythmic variations and volume. In performance, several pairs play varying parts which intersect on the main beats. In the normal course of playing them, the *qaqarbat* are often played just perceptibly out of time with one another. Whether this is deliberate or simply considered unimportant, the effect is that the percussive patterns always move in and out of phase, producing a dense, rhythmic roar.¹⁴

6. Djelloul and Hassan

Towards the end of the afternoon, after a final collection of money for the musicians, the women began to drift away in small groups to other parts of the neighbourhood. I was then better able to make the acquaintance of the members of the group and to find out something about them and their music and how they might explain the afternoon's activities. We removed to a cool room off their yard, and as Djelloul, the leader of the group, divided the money, cloth and sugar between them, Aziz tried to explain their work: "These women come to us to be cured of problems; like their husband leaves them, or maybe they can't have a child, or a brother gets sick, things like that. First though, they go to a shrine or to a *talib* (a diviner, or 'investigator'), and the guardian of the shrine or this *talib* tells them if their problem is because of *djnun*. They maybe spend the night at the shrine, or the *talib* writes something down for them to wear, and then they come to us, and the saint for their problem drives out the *djinn*." So how did the music bring this about? "Every saint has a song and a co-

lour, and a woman will come and say, ‘I’ve got such-and-such a problem, I’ve been to the shrine of Sidi Mimoun for it, so can you play that music for me?’ So we play the song of Sidi Mimoun and when she hears it she gets up and dances till the *djinn* is gone, and that’s how it works”. I asked if this was why the dancers were draped in different coloured scarves. “That’s right, so we know which tune is working for whom”.¹⁵

I was introduced to Djelloul, the leader of the Gnawa, a tall, gold-toothed man who invited me to attend any performance I wished. I was free to take photographs and record music; he was only a little disappointed that I had no video equipment with me. “Never mind,” he said, “I have some videos of us playing that you can come to see”. Having given me his approval, Djelloul took his afternoon’s earnings and departed. Later I asked the others how they came to choose a leader, was Djelloul perhaps the best musician? This question was greeted with laughter. No, it turned out that Djelloul was himself of a holy lineage, the guardian of a nearby maraboutic shrine and the possessor of certain supernatural powers. Although it emerged that all the Gnawa in this part of town came from the same six families (thereby sharing broadly similar genealogical claims to authority), Djelloul was the leader as he had personally received the *baraka* of the former incumbent. From a familiarity with the works of Gellner (1981) and Gilsenan (1990), amongst many others, I was aware that North African political and spiritual power were both closely bound to concepts of lineage. Being the *chosen* descendant of a holy personage was deemed to convey spiritual power, often manifested in actual (or claimed) political authority. The King of Morocco himself belonged to the social class of *shurfa*, all allegedly descending from the family of the prophet Mohammed. The similar claims of thousands of others in the country meant that such ancestry alone did not bestow temporal power. Instead, lineage was a quality which could be invoked strategically to gain political authority. Nevertheless, familial connections remain very important in most spheres of Moroccan life as a local system of practical support and constraint but equally as a model for political and spiritual relationships. From whom, then, was Djelloul descended? I was told that all North African Gnawa were originally descended from Bilal, a negro slave who, when freed by the Prophet Mohammed, became Islam’s first *muezzin* (who calls the faithful community to prayer five times each day).¹⁶ The local Gnawa, as a group, were also linked to the nearby Shrine of Sidi Youness, and here Djelloul was particularly sanctified as the chosen successor of that shrine’s previous guardian. Although genealogical inheritance was important amongst the Gnawa as a way of justifying hierarchical relationships, there were clearly other personal, and maybe economic, factors involved in the practice of local politics.

After my first encounter, I returned to visit the Gnawa on a regular basis for a further four months, attending many of their weekly afternoon gatherings and two all-night ‘housewarming’ parties (cf. Fig. 4).

I also discovered that, when otherwise unoccupied, three or four members of the group made their way on foot around different neighbourhoods each day, playing *qaqarbat* and *tbel* as they went. Whoever came out to donate money or goods to them



Fig. 4. Gimbri and qaqarbat, played at a nighttime 'housewarming' event (photo by author).

(and it was invariably women who did so), received the band's blessings and promises of good fortune in return. Although Ujdi men seemed to have very little to do with these rituals (and I never saw one dance), the musicians seemed quite certain that the women who came to their rituals or who came out to them on the street did so also on behalf of their menfolk. This may well have been the case because many of the men I came to know in Ujda admitted that they had some belief in the powers of the Gnawa, even if they considered those beliefs rather superstitious.¹⁷ I often came across this troupe in the course of their visits, often to mutual expressions of amusement and surprise, as in Ujda there was a strong tendency for people to spend most of their free time socialising within their own quarter, and both the Gnawa and I seemed to be unusually mobile. On these occasions, the fact that I knew members of the Gnawa by name seemed to impress whomever I was with at that time, which provided an opportunity to enquire about other outsider's view of their activities.

7. A Place in the Town

If I arrived at the Gnawa household when no musical activities were planned, we would drink tea, play cards or dominoes, or sometimes watch television. The set was powered by a car battery, as neither electricity nor water were connected to the house. Most members of the group, together with their wives and children, lived in

this small compound together, though Djelloul himself owned one of the new concrete houses being built all over Sidi Youness. One of the oldest members of the troupe, Hassan, who did not go out on forays into the neighbourhoods, took a keen interest in me and my activities. Possibly he wanted to find out if I was really there for the purposes I had given; in any case, he effectively controlled and limited the amount of information I received. This was, after all, his means of earning a living. Hassan sometimes played the *gimbri* at the weekly gatherings, but his central tasks were the collection of funds and the pronouncement of litanies and blessings. He supplemented his musical income by making intricate sculptures, mostly bird-cages, vases and models, from woven electrical wires he found in wrecked cars and from other leftovers. As I came to know the men individually, I found that many had other means of earning money. Although they were reluctant to talk about it, I gathered that younger members occasionally went “off to Nador” for a day or two at a time. This suggests that, like many other Oujdis in 1994, they invested their cash in goods brought over the border from Melilla, a Spanish enclave a few kilometres from the town of Nador. These goods could then be exchanged at a reasonable profit in Oujdi markets for hard currency brought out of Algeria. Whatever peripheral economic activities the Gnawa were engaged in, I became fairly certain that these were not white-collar occupations. Whether due to lack of education and social contacts or as the result of racist attitudes, I saw not a single Sahouari employed in any prestigious or official capacity in Oujda. Whatever authority the Gnawa enjoyed was undoubtedly amongst the poorest and most marginalised in their society.

Despite barriers to certain kinds of social mobility, to which their main occupation no doubt contributed, the Gnawa were not the poorest of the poor in the town. This was evidenced by the relatively lavish home in which Djelloul lived. I visited this house a few times, and the contrast between the compound and his modern building were enormous. Whereas the compound had an earthen floor and its interior walls were simply painted bright blue or pink, the new house was elegantly furnished with settees, brass-topped tables and ornaments. However, I had my doubts that the building was solely Djelloul’s property, as whenever I was there, the house was always full with the same company of men and women whom I usually found at the compound. I eventually gathered that, although Djelloul might have a greater claim to the resources of the Gnawa, much of their property was held as joint investments. This view was borne out by many observations of the post-performance distribution of cash and materials between the group, which were scrupulously even-handed. Although I suspected that Djelloul’s leadership probably did bring him special prestige, he was undoubtedly aware of his dependence upon his *confreres* and shared proceeds accordingly. As membership in the group was based on familial and ethnic association rather than on musical or other acquired criteria, Djelloul was hardly in a position to hire or fire members. Furthermore, as a small minority population in Oujda, the Gnawa probably needed to act as a single community to survive economically. As most of the community appeared to share roughly equivalent genealogical grounds for leadership, I believe it quite possible that Djelloul’s authority was, in

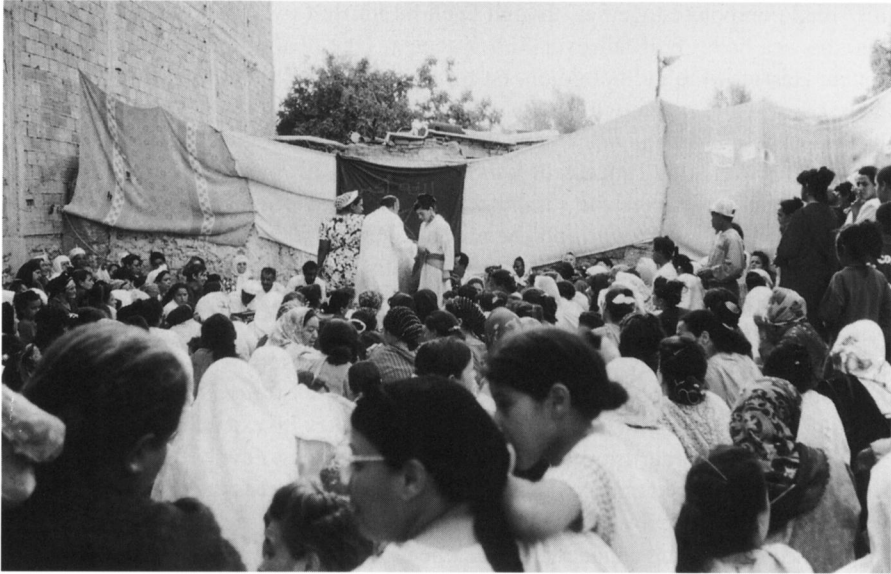


Fig. 5. At the weekly hadra gathering, members of the Gawa tie a green scarf around a dancer, whilst the women of the quarter look on (photo by author).

practice, more dependent upon group consensus than either he or the other group members revealed.¹⁸

From conversations with other, predominantly male, friends and acquaintances in Oujda, I received the impression that the Gnawa were certainly a community set apart from 'mainstream' society. Those who most wished to portray Morocco as modern or as religiously homogeneous were reluctant at first to even admit that such *hadras* took place. It was gradually conceded to me that a black minority did exist in the town, members of which persuaded superstitious women to pay them for cures. Other people I knew, though seemingly wary of appearing gullible before a foreigner, told me that the Gnawa possessed strange powers: some could drink boiling water, eat glass, or even levitate. They were able to cast out *djnnun*, but they were also capable of cursing those who crossed them. It appeared to me that this reputation for 'otherness' was one which the Gnawa, excluded as they were from 'ordinary' occupations, sought to emphasise through their public rituals and in their musical and visual distinctiveness from the rest of the population.¹⁹ The purpose of this distinction was most probably to maintain an economic and political niche amongst the underclasses of Oujda; this same emphasis upon their difference also provided some justification for their exclusion from other societal roles.

8. Why Women?

It seemed significant to me that in Oujda the *hadra* was almost entirely attended by women, who were also the largest donors of contributions on their ‘rounds’ of the suburbs (cf. Fig. 5).

It has been widely noted elsewhere (cf. Schaefer-Davis 1983 and Dwyer 1978) that in religious as in many other social practices in North Africa, participation tends to be gender specific. The local mosques, for example, appear to be overwhelmingly the domain of men, and most of the various heterodox religious fraternities also exclude women. Many reasons are given for this segregation, the most common being that the presence of mixed groups at prayer time might distract worshippers from their prayers. Effectively excluded from full participation in ‘orthodox’ communal religion, women are often free to take part in more marginal practices. These rituals (and those organised by similar, non-Gnawa groups, which I also attended but do not describe in this article) are arranged to take place at times of day when women are most able to attend, and, as I have mentioned, the event serves as a social occasion for attendants as much as as a therapeutic or religious occasion.

According to a view widely held by many Moroccan men I know, women are particularly and innately prone to being overwhelmed by their emotions. Attendance at a Gnawa ritual, whether as supplicant or audience, thereby constituted a performance of this particularly female ‘subject position’, simultaneously acknowledging and acting out this loss of reason and unbridled passion. Women who dance at the *hadra* often pull their hair loose and remove their *jalaba* (an outer garment worn in the street to keep dust and prying eyes from a woman’s body and domestic clothes), acts which, though hardly scandalous, would be inconceivable in other public arenas. After the dance, the women I spoke to told me that they could not remember what they had done, it was ‘as if they were asleep’. Whether or not this accurately describes the experience—and I have no reason to doubt that it does—, this state provides at any rate an opportunity to express all manner of powerful emotions and to be acknowledged by one’s neighbours without accusations of personal self-indulgence.²⁰ It seems logical to me that the Gnawa, themselves popularly mythologised as operating beyond mainstream ‘Arabic’ Maghreb culture, should be the catalysts of such a catharsis. As outsiders who are widely dismissed as harmless charlatans, but also considered exotic and mysterious, community members have little chance of entering the wider society and are thereby obliged to perform the magical role available to them.

9. The Red Tune

Throughout my many visits to Djelloul, Aziz and Hassan I attempted to glean clues which would reveal to me the relationship between the ‘songs’ (or *disques*, as Hassan referred to them) and the corresponding colours, saints and afflictions associated

with them. This endeavour was made difficult by the fact that, for all their hospitality, I was never able to hear them play outside the event itself. Music was not rehearsed but rather learned, apparently from childhood, by copying, and after all this was *ritual* music, which needed the rite to give it meaning. This meant, however, that I was only able to ask questions when the musicians were least able to explain what it was they were doing. Further, in my attempts to match various 'colours' with melodies and modes, I found that I was regularly given contradictory information by various musicians. I soon surmised that the Gnawa's obliqueness on these matters was probably deliberate; the information I wanted was not deemed any of my business. For example, when matching 'saintly figures' with their corresponding colours, Hassan told me that Sidi Mimoun had a 'black song', Sidi Moussa's was 'blue' and Sidi Abd el Kader Jilali's was 'white'. However, I was given quite different names and colours by other musicians. Also, when I asked members of the audience, I found that, even though they recognised the names of saints in the songs, they themselves had no clear idea which tune or colour went with which.²¹ I believe it most likely that the Gnawi keep their knowledge of the precise relationship between music, colour and saint out of the public domain. This knowledge maintains their role as ritual specialists in the community and possibly allows them a degree of creativity in their performances.

The one exception to this rule was the 'red' tune, which I was easily able to distinguish because of the dramatic performance that accompanied it.²² This melody is usually played only once during each afternoon session and almost always at a low point in the proceedings, when only a few dancers had come forward and the audience seemed to be losing interest. As the tune commences, one member of the troupe puts down his *qaqarbat* and begins to dance, very slowly, shuffling his left foot one step forward and back, followed by his right. Closing his eyes, the dancer gradually quickens his steps, and the movements become more forceful. The dancer then opens his shirt, and small knives are passed for him to hold in each hand. After a few minutes, during which the dancing and general mood become more intense, the performer begins to slash rhythmically at various parts of his body with the knives, first his forearms, then his head and tongue, producing a small amount of blood which he spits onto a white sheet placed before him (cf. Fig. 6).

The dancer then begins to strike repeatedly at his stomach with one knife after the other, apparently vigorously enough to cause wounds but in fact barely scratching himself. The finale to this performance comes with a complete halt in the music, when he picks up a *qraqeb* and uses it to hammer the knives into his stomach area.

This spectacle frequently draws shrieks of dismay and invariably massed ululation from the audience, which had become more agitated as it had progressed. The blessing that follows a red tune is distinct from others in that the dancer, who has quickly recovered with only the smallest grazes on his body, goes around the audience with one of the knives. With this, he makes small scratches on the sides of the heads of those wanting a share of the *baraka* the ritual had generated. In the tune immediately following a red piece, many women come forward to dance, having pre-



Fig. 6. As the 'red tune' is played, a musician slashes at his tongue and body with knives (photo by author).

sumably been roused to a higher emotional state by this part of the event. It seemed clear to me that the red tune served a dual purpose. Firstly, it reinforced beliefs that the Gnawa were capable of miraculous acts, thereby maintaining their credibility with the audience and marking their difference from them. Secondly, the spectacle also produced at the event an atmosphere of great communal excitement which was most conducive to the manifestation of ecstatic states.

10. Conclusions

I. M. Lewis (1996:122) argues that the matter of whether a ritual is intended to expel or otherwise placate unwanted spirits can be indicative of power relations within a society. He suggests that where possession cults are predominantly female, the spirits themselves are regarded as marginal, antiquated or of foreign origin. This he contrasts with male ecstatic cults, where demands are more likely to be made upon society through possessed 'spokesmen' of culturally central deities.²³ The Gnawa, though primarily administering to women in Oujda, appeared to both exorcise and praise supernatural beings simultaneously. Marginal and nameless spiritual afflictions were expelled through the invocation (and placation with gifts) of maraboutic saintly figures, themselves partly synonymous with decidedly un-Islamic spirits. One minor spirit was ousted through the negotiated intercession of another, more

powerful being. Lewis' argument still stands, however, if one considers that the Gnawa themselves, as male ritual specialists, had a quite different relationship to the same spirits. Women participated in the *hadra* as either supplicants or audience; they apparently did not control the proceedings but were dependent upon the Gnawa (and other ritual specialists, such as the *talib*) to mediate on their behalf. The female experience, then, is one of exorcism, or at least of emotional catharsis, which invokes a communal acknowledgement of individual problems but which performs a 'typically female' absence of self-control. The Gnawa, on the other hand, manage the event, even when one of their own (voluntarily) succumbs to trance and ritual self-sacrifice. These male musicians channel and embody the ritual authority through themselves, sharing specialist knowledge about the rites, music and spiritual beings that was kept secret from other adherents and the curious. If the names of maraboutic saints were used to mask the placation of non-Islamic spirits, as may be to some degree the case here, then it would be wise to keep such knowledge among a select few.

In this case I found it quite reasonable that Hassan, Djelloul and the other Gnawa were unwilling to divulge all the secrets and tricks of their trade to me. As a very small ethnic minority community in Oujda, they are obliged to exploit a highly specific economic and cultural niche in local society.²⁴ Besides this, their music is not only their livelihood but also part of a ritual practice, one which they have to ensure does not overstep its bounds and bring them into conflict with the authorities. On one occasion I asked Aziz how the police viewed their activities; "The police are our friends, very often they come and see what we do and they don't mind. Anyway we have the *pasha's* cards, so they know we are official". I asked him what he meant, as the *pasha*, the equivalent to a mayor, was not a figure I would normally associate with the promotion of heterodox ecstatic religious practices. Aziz pulled out his wallet, and, in addition to his national identity card, he showed he had another from the *pasha's* office with his photograph, name, address and occupation in Arabic and French, '*Musicien Folklorique*'. "You see", he said, "we all carry the *pasha's* card, and if we are in a neighbourhood, the police always ask to see it, if we don't have it with us, we can be in big trouble". Throughout Maghreb history, and particularly during the struggle against French colonisation (see Waterbury 1970, Gilsenan 1990 and Dunn 1977), religious fraternities have been used politically to inflame and organise resistance to unpopular or weak regimes. It is only to be expected that present governments keep a close eye on such groups as the Gnawa. Quiet but close surveillance guarantees that such groups restrict their own activities to relieving the psychological frustrations of women and marginal men. The very fact that women attend these events in such numbers also ensures that male participation is minimal. It is unlikely that men would 'let themselves go' in the midst of a largely female audience, for this would undermine the image of reason and self-control that men seek to maintain in mixed company.²⁵

Often after a performance, I would ask a member of the troupe to explain to me what had taken place there. Most frequently I received a kind of party line amounting to: "we are merely helping these women, who are beset with misfortune and bad spir-

its". Once though, Hassan looked at me grimly, rubbed his cigarette out in the dust and said quite simply, "It's not good, none of this, people feel better after coming here, but it's just an addiction, it's like a drug".

There were strong indications in 1994 that the received culture of Oujda was shifting towards a more urbane, 'modern' habitus. Along with the development of a new suburban landscape of narrow concrete housing came the adoption of more orthodox religious perspectives, both influenced in their own ways by a globalising Arabic or Islamic aesthetic and ideology.²⁶ Perhaps Hassan's words were those of a man tired of making a precarious living at the margins of 'acceptable' society, maybe he was having his own doubts in the light of recent cultural developments. In any case, what can be confidently predicted is that so long as poorer women are free to gather and express their frustrations, there will be demand for the kind of ritual specialisation the Gnawa are able to offer.

Notes

- 1 See Yvette Katan (1990) for a thorough demographic history of Oujda.
- 2 The king occupies the dual position of head of state and, through his genealogical descent from the Prophet Mohammed himself, the position of *Amir el Mu'minin*, or 'leader of the faithful'. The Royal Family's key role in the development of modern Morocco is discussed at length in John Waterbury's book *The Commander of the Faithful* (1970).
- 3 The office of *pasha* is equivalent to 'mayor' or 'city manager' of the town. He is responsible for the day-to-day running of infrastructural services in Oujda such as the licensing of traders, street-cleaning etc., as well as having a ceremonial role. As Oujda is also the centre of the regional government (prefecture) and a military base, his actual authority is diminished by the presence of other important local bureaucrats and government appointees in the town.
- 4 These instruments are known under several names throughout the Maghreb and Sahel. In Morocco they are most often known as *qaraqreb*; the name used in Oujda is the same as that employed in Western Algeria.
- 5 For an illuminating study of the Gnawa and their practices in the larger cities to the south-west of Morocco, see Schuyler 1981; for a consideration of their music amongst other Moroccan genres, refer to Aydown 1992.
- 6 My main interests at the time were in the production and consumption of popular musics on either side of the Moroccan-Algerian border (Langlois 1996a and b). However, in order to better understand the significance of a single musical genre in the region I chose to survey a wide range of musical practices for comparative purposes. Not one of the musicians, teachers or recording engineers I knew had mentioned the Gnawa or their music before I came across them myself, though they subsequently admitted to knowing a good deal about them. There are many explanations for this, but it fits a pattern of engagement between myself and many Maghrebis I knew. Where matters of indigenous culture, language or music were concerned, I was almost invariably guided towards those fields that were broadly considered as 'refined'—in practice those modelled upon 'high' Arabic or Islamic traditions. Information on more marginal areas was seldom volunteered, but once I raised the subject was given in abundance.
- 7 The term *hadra* requires some explanation, as I have heard it used in several ways. On its sim-

plest level the word might mean an informal musical get-together, as might take place at a wedding party. However, I have also found it used to describe a kind of dance in which participants become entranced (Rouget 1985) and for the state of trance itself. I concluded that the word was used in each of these ways according to one's association with such events, but that every usage had some resonance of its other connotations.

- 8 This most recent urban design, which utilises modern materials and technology, owes much to the architectural aesthetic of the Medina, with its small, discrete courtyards, multi-storied buildings and 'backs' turned on the street. In contrast, the older housing tended to be constructed as small compounds with surrounding garden and hedges, which bore more resemblance to the rural *doar* family residence. In a sense this development might be regarded not only as the expansion of a particular form of architecture in place of another, but the change from one kind of *habitus* (mode of living, feeling and thinking) towards another (Bourdieu 1977). I consider it significant that the Gnawa straddle such an urban borderline as they do, crossing and negotiating between constructs of modernity and archaism, self-control and catharsis, and the visible and invisible worlds.
- 9 Maraboutism is the name commonly given to the 'folk' Islamic practices in North Africa which employ living or dead saintly personages as spiritual intermediaries between the individual and Allah. Although some writers (for example Gellner 1969) consider maraboutic practices as a primarily rural and illiterate alternative to the urban 'Islam of the mosque', others, such as Lewis (1996), recognise that both forms share a great deal in terms of beliefs and community of practitioners.
- 10 *Baraka* is a term which refers to a spiritual blessing, but often overlaps with the concept of 'good luck'. Special individuals, particularly marabouts but to some extent also 'saintly fools', are considered to be especially blessed with *baraka*, which can be inherited, transmitted and shared by partaking, for example, in communal religious practices or by sharing a meal. For more discussion of this concept, see Gilsenan 1990. My own particular interest here is in the ways in which *baraka* could be generated through psychologically disruptive performances.
- 11 This use of skin as a resonating medium relates the *gimbri* with other African lutes, as opposed to Arabic or European families of instruments. The *gimbri*, in fact, closely resembles the *tidinit* of Mauritania, the *xalan* of Senegal and many other Sahelian instruments. For a valuable organological study of the *gimbri*, see Farmer 1928. A more general treatment of Maghrebian instruments can be found in Boumedienne 1993.
- 12 From my observation of Gnawa music in other contexts and from listening to other field recordings, I conclude that the *gimbri* is not traditionally played alongside so many pairs of *qaqarbat* as they are in Oujda. Such a large section of percussive instruments can be found in more 'public' contexts, such as dance performances, where they are supported by the *tbel* (the large barrel drum), but never the *gimbri*. Here it is clearly the use of electronic amplification which makes their coincidence possible. This has surely involved changes in local musical aesthetics and possibly in performance practices as well.
- 13 Where the *qaqarbat* are used in other, particularly popular, musics, they are often employed to make an explicit reference to either the Gnawa themselves or ecstatic states of consciousness. In the popular imagination, *qaqarbat* belongs to a category of objects and concepts associated with 'the south' (in effect, the Sahara and Sahelian Africa) and bears both exotic and semi-mystical connotations.
- 14 The musicians explained to me that they *aimed for* perfect rhythmical synchronisation. Nevertheless, this involuntary mistiming by fractions of a second produces a slight 'rasping' effect which may well have been considered aesthetically acceptable. Given that other local percus-

- sive instruments such as the *bendir* bear snares to deliberately produce a similarly ‘blurred’ effect, I think this is a reasonable conjecture. In discussions with other musicians I had been told that the ‘buzzing’ sound produced by snares, traditional flutes, etc., was considered particularly sensual, and for this reason such snares are removed from *bendirs* used in male *dikhr* ceremonies. If this is the case, then the distortion produced by playing the *gimbri* at full volume through a small amplifier may well enhance, rather than detract from, its performance.
- 15 A detailed study of one man’s involvement in maraboutic religion, which sheds further light on the significance of various saintly figures and the cults surrounding them, can be found in Crapanzo 1980.
 - 16 It was never made clear to me whether the Oujda Gnawa group members considered themselves literally or symbolically the descendents of Bilal. In either case the purpose of such explanations is clearly to suggest a long history of playing a prominent role within Islam. Cultural and physical differences are here depicted as acceptable to the Prophet, and in fact these show a longer and closer connection with Islam than that of Maghrebi Berbers. Quite possibly, the distinctions between mythical and biological relationships to Bilal are deliberately blurred. The Oujdi Gnawa’s use of genealogical concepts to support a social position in any case resonates with many other social discourses to be found throughout Moroccan society, not simply those on its margins.
 - 17 Many men I knew in Oujda shared the opinion that the Gnawa’s practices, and others of a similar kind, were the antithesis of the modern, rational Moroccan culture to which they wished to ascribe. Nevertheless, few condemned these practices outright, and many admitted that such rituals were psychologically efficacious, even if they did not approve of them on religious grounds. Interestingly, those men whom I believed to be the most devout practitioners of Islam were often amongst those *least* critical of maraboutism. I suspect that, so long as these practices mostly involved women and marginalised men, such rituals and beliefs only serve to emphasise the distinctions between members of these groups and their own religious communities—effectively along lines of gender and social class.
 - 18 The fact that the Gnawa had two residences may have simply been a matter of coincidence. After all, the entire suburb was being redeveloped, and it probably made good economic sense to invest in real estate wherever possible. However, it was also apparent that it was the much humbler of the two buildings which was used for the Gnawa’s official business. The public face of the Gnawa, then, was that of relative poverty and humility, which, even if one were aware that they owned property elsewhere, was doubtless a more conducive setting to almsgiving than an opulent house might have been. As the simple compound bore a much closer resemblance to the homes of the female adherents themselves than did the town house, its use for such events perhaps displayed a measure of solidarity with them and allowed them to feel at ease.
 - 19 For an excellent discussion of the ways in which music can be used to mark identities, see Stokes 1994.
 - 20 I.M. Lewis (1996) provides a detailed comparison of female possession and exorcism cults in North Africa and beyond. He argues that such practices are frequently found wherever women are politically weak or suppressed, regardless of the world religion to which they technically belong. My own experience in urban Morocco tends to support this view, though I do not believe such movements can be considered expressions of a conscious political strategy.
 - 21 Other authors, for example Ahmed Aydoun (1992), have made similar correlations elsewhere in Morocco. I am also aware that in some areas of Morocco the ‘Saints’ have been syncretically conflated with non-Islamic ‘demons’ (*m'louk*), adding another dimension to this theoret-

ical system linking cosmologies with music, colour and state of health. I have not yet been able to discover the extent to which the Gnawa of Oujda share such a system. In this article, however, I am most interested in the ways in which this kind of information is withheld from outsiders like myself. Just as other specialists involved in ritual or trade maintain privileged positions through regulating access to knowledge, the Gnawa also preserve their power (political, symbolic and economic) through exclusion and the maintenance of boundaries. In some senses the power of the Gnawa lay in their ability to control access to such 'mysteries'.

- 22 Elsewhere in Morocco the Gnawa have a repertoire of several 'red' tunes, comprising a suite and dedicated to particular supernatural figures. In Oujda, however, only one single 'red' piece was used in my presence over the period of my fieldwork contact. This may suggest that either this group was not familiar with the larger repertoire or else that they reserved such pieces for other kinds of events.
- 23 In such contexts possession is not regarded as an affliction so much as a blessing, and initiatory schools develop innate predispositions towards this (see Rouget 1980 for a detailed discussion of these cults and techniques).
- 24 The very fact of being professionally involved in music set the Gnawa apart from 'ordinary' society, as this trade never seemed entirely respectable to people I knew in Oujda. Even highly esteemed musicians in other genres prefer to remain amateurs or semi-professionals, as 'musical entertainments' tended to be associated with other, immoral activities. The distinctions frequently made between Moroccan musicians and other members of their community is usefully discussed in the Berber context by Lortat-Jacob (1981).
- 25 There are a few exceptions to the rule that men do not take part in the *hadra*, but when they do so, they generally sit quietly to one side of the musicians, draped in coloured scarves, and do not dance. Some men who did attend told me that they were suffering from psychiatric problems and were also receiving orthodox medical treatment for their conditions.
- 26 Through improved literacy and access to global media (particularly satellite television), Moroccans I knew were often acutely aware of developments in the Islamic world, and many chose to identify themselves as part of a global *ummah*. One of the effects of this is that *local* cultural practices, as evidenced in language, music, dress, etc., are regarded as morally inferior to the *ideal* model most associated with the Arabian heartlands. Without a doubt, the conflation of 'proper' Islam with 'Arabism' has existed since the sixth century and has continued through the influences of Koranic schools, the *hadj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) and the prayerful orientation towards the East. Nevertheless, the recently increased flow of cultural phenomena from the Mashriq to the Maghreb has brought these models much closer to the everyday experience of Moroccan men and women than they had ever been previously. For valuable discussions of the negotiation of such cultural hierarchies within Middle-Eastern culture, see Armbrust 1996 and Ahmed 1992.

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