Slavery's Past in the Musical Present:
Ritual and Memory in the Moroccan Gnawa *Lila*

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In Morocco, there exist a number of musical-ritual "brotherhoods" or "associations" (Schuyler 1998) that provide music for trance to treat afflictions attributed to the influence of the *jnun*, unseen beings of the spirit world. For most of these practitioners, the authority to perform these rituals comes both from the mastery of a musical repertoire that supports possession trance, and from an identification with spiritual forbears that gives them license to perform that repertoire. For most Moroccan practitioners, that forbear is a spiritually potent individual from the past, a Muslim saint, who is sometimes attached to a chain of Sufi teachers. The one group that subverts this model, though, is the Gnawa. The spiritual authority of the Gnawa rests, in contrast, on their identification with disempowered black slaves of West African origin.

In this presentation, I argue that when the Gnawa sing about slaves and their experiences, they not only commemorate the lives of these spiritual and genealogical forbears, but in fact they claim an identification with them by adopting their voices in the musical present. At the same time, by singing praises of God, the Prophet Muhammad, and Muslim saints, the Gnawa situate themselves across an ontological divide from those powerful sources of religious authority and divine grace, identifying instead with the side of the disempowered. This divide separates the Gnawa from most other Moroccan trance

practitioners, such as the 'Aissawa brotherhood, who identify themselves in song with their spiritual forbears, the saints, and thereby with the side of divine grace.

By comparing musical performance practices of these two groups, I will demonstrate two points. Firstly, that when the Gnawa bring their forbears into the present through music, song, and dance, they are achieving the same ritual function as other Moroccan practitioners, namely, to demonstrate their claim to the spiritual authority. Secondly, that the nature of this authority proves to be of a categorically different nature than that of other Moroccan trance practitioners, because it originates in the moment of rupture caused by slavery rather than in a connection with divine grace.

Brief introduction to the Gnawa *lila*

The Gnawa *lila* is one possible technique used in Morocco for dealing with human misfortunes that are attributed to unseen beings, the *jnun*. The purpose of the *lila* is to reestablish good relations with the *jnun* to ward off possible future misfortunes, or to placate them if they have been offended. The ceremony takes place over the course of an entire evening, generally beginning around 11PM and ending around 8AM. It usually takes place at the home of the person seeking relief or at the home of a clairvoyant ritual specialist. While its purpose is therapeutic, the *lila* is also a social event. Thus, the invited guests may include not only the ritual specialists but also friends and family. The ritual specialists fall broadly into two groups: the Gnawa clairvoyant called a *muqaddma* (usually a woman) and her helpers, and the group of musician-dancers (always men). There are two main phases of the *lila*

1) *Fraja* (literally "entertainment")

Sections: *Uled Bambara* & *Negsha*

Dancing is done by the musicians.

2) *Mluk* (possessor spirits, literally "the owners")

Song suites dedicated to different categories of *jnun*:

Jilala (white)	Mluk l-Gurna (red)
Buhala (multicolored)	Shurfa (green)
Mimun (black)	Uled l-Ghaba (black)
Musa/Sma (blue)	'Ayalat (yellow)

Dancing is done by individuals in *jadba* trance.

Chart 1: Gnawa *Lila* – Main Ritual Phases

My discussion of the recollection of slavery in the *lila* will focus primarily on the Fraja, for it is in that phase that the bulk of lyrics dealing with slavery are sung.

Recollection of slavery in *Fraja* lyrics :

The most explicit references to the slave experience in the Gnawa repertoire occur in the opening phase of the *lila,* the *Fraja*. In these songs, the Gnawa recall not only the history of abduction and servitude, but also the people and places from which their forbears were torn away. In the song *Lalla Imma* ("Lady Mother"), for example, they invoke by name the Bambara, the Fulani and the Hausa peoples of West Africa. For the Gnawa, all three of these ethnic groups fall under the category of the "Sudan". When Gnawa speak of their ancestors coming from the Sudan, they refer not to the present-day nation-state of the Sudan, but to any of the lands south of the Sahara desert. (It is worth noting that the name Sudan itself is an Arabic word meaning literally "The Blacks")

The experience of abduction and separation is also recalled. For example, in the song *Ya Sudan Ya Imma,* the Gnawa sing:

Ah Sudan ya Sudan
Oh Sudan, Oh Sudan
Ah jabuni jabuni
They brought me, they brought me
Ah jabuna min as-Sudan
They brought me from the Sudan
Ah duwzuni 'ala Bambara
They brought me by way of Bambara
Ah duwzuni 'ala Timbuktu
They brought me by way of Timbuktu
Wa min Sudan l-Fes l-Bali
From Sudan to Old Fez

Chart 2: Lyrics – *Ya Sudan Ya Imma*

In another song, *Sowiye*, they recall the loved ones from whom their forbears were separated:

Wo feenkum ya Uled s-Sudan
Where are you, Children of the Sudan?
Wo feenkum ya Uledi 'ammi
Where are you, Children of my uncle?

Chart 3: Lyrics – *Sowiye*

In both of these examples, the Gnawa singers adopt the subject position of the displaced slaves, their voices. (They brought ME, Where are you MY cousins)

The Gnawa bring back not only the voices of the slaves, but their tongues as well. Many songs contain lyrics that the Gnawa claim to be in Sudani or Bambara language. The meanings of lyrics like "Chalaba Titara", "Fangare Fangare" or "Yomala" are forgotten or at least disputed by Gnawa singers, but the fact is these lyrics remain in the repertoire and that they are understood to have been brought north by slaves. This fact in itself renders the words meaningful, or at least evocative.

In addition to the invocation of the displaced African-born slaves, the Gnawa also recall later generations of Moroccan-born slaves. In some songs they mention the figure of the *khadem*, the black female servant, or the *dada*, the black nanny. In other songs, they refer to the characters Khali Mbara and Khalti Mbarka (Uncle Mbara and Aunt Mbarka). The names Mbark and Mbarka are Arabic names that were commonly given to newborn black slaves (Westermarck 1926: ii, 406). In the song *Khali Mbara Meskin* ("Poor Uncle Mbara"), the Gnawa relate examples of inequality between the luxurious life of the masters and the poor lot of the slaves:

Ye Sidi yakul l-hayma	My Lord is eating meat
Lalla takul ash-shhayma	My Lady is eating fat
Mbara igeddad l-'adima	Mbara is gnawing on a bone
Khali Mbara mahbuul,	Uncle Mbara is crazy
Hada wa'do meskin	That's his lot, poor guy
Sidi sherbu shororo	My Lord is drinking tea
Lalla sherbu shororo	My Lady is drinking tea
Mbara yakul l-'iqama	Mbara is eating a mint leaf
Hada wa'do meskin	That's his lot, poor guy
Hada wa'do meskin	That's his lot, poor guy
Ye Sidi lebsu belgha	My Lord is wearing slippers
U Lalla tlebsu belgha	My Lady is wearing slippers
Mbarka telbes henqara	Mbarka is wearing old sandals
Rja f-Llah Ta'ala	Hope is God most High
Hada wa'do meskin	That's his lot, poor guy

Chart 4: Lyrics – *Khali Mbara Meskin*

In lyrics about their slave and Sudanese forbears, the Gnawa look back to a time before living memory to recall experiences of separation, loss, and alienation. However,

in other songs they transpose themes of death and separation into present time by recalling beloved Gnawa masters (*m'allem*-s) whom death has taken away.

In the song *Zidumal*, for instance, the m'allem asks, "*Feen m'allem Mansum ah zidumal… Feen m'allem Lahcen ah zidumal?* (Where is M'allem Mansum? Where is M'allem Lahcen?" The singer now no longer sings with the VOICE OF THE SLAVE, but rather with the VOICE OF THE GNAWI, since these dear, departed masters are within living memory. To the question "where are they?", the Gnawa chorus answers, "*Da'im Allah* (God is Eternal)", for after all, it is written in the Qur'an (28: 88) that when everything in the material world passes away, all that remains is the face of God Eternal. In this case, it is not the brutality of slave abduction that has caused a separation from loved ones, but rather *al-mut al-ghaddara*, Death the Deceiver.

Opposition between slaves and saints in *Fraja* lyrics

In these Fraja lyrics, the Gnawa look back (with regret) at their African and slave ancestors, as well as the more recently departed Gnawa musicians. But the Gnawa also invoke a second group of historical forbears in the Fraja, namely, the people, places and conditions associated with Islamic religious authority. While invoking Allah (SWT) and the Prophet Muhammad, the Gnawa also mention figures from Islamic history such as the Four Caliphs, Abdelqader Gilani (the Sufi master of 12th century Baghdad), as well as a great number of the local Moroccan saints, whose whitewashed tombs dot the cities and countrysides of Morocco.

The invocation of God, the Prophet and the saints is common in many genres of Moroccan folk song and expression. What is interesting about the Gnawa's singing of

these invocations is the opposition it sets up between themselves and their disempowered slave forbears on one hand, and the spiritually powerful saints on the other hand. So, when the Gnawa sing of God, the Prophet and the saints they are doing more than just acknowledging and praising them. The Gnawa are in fact positioning themselves as diametrically opposed to those very sources.

This point is clearly demonstrated in the song “Negsha”. In this example, the Gnawa invoke, one by one, a litany of Moroccan saints, preceding the name of each one with the exhortation "Rwahu nzuru" ("let's make pilgrimage", or, literally," let's leave and visit"). These saints, although dead and buried, are said to still be in possession of *baraka*, a tangible aspect of divine grace. A pilgrim who"visits" a saint can benefit from contact with this *baraka*. While a visit to one of these saints is possible, the same cannot be said of the deceased Gnawa masters of days gone by. With the same melody in the same song, the Gnawa invoke a litany of old m'allems, preceding each name with the phrase "Tarhamu ya Llah", God have mercy on him. The expression “God have mercy on him” is used in Arabic when speaking of someone who is deceased. So in the same song, the Gnawa sing:

> Rwah u nzuru, Sidi ben sliman, rwah u nzuru
> Rwah u nzuru, wa ya Mul L-Qsur, rwah u nzuru
>
> Let's go visit Sidi Ben Sliman…
> Let's go visit Mul L-Qsur…

and then in the next verse

> Tarhamu ya Llah, A M‘allem ‘Omar, a Da’im Allah
> Tarhamu ya Llah, a Ba ‘Ayuch, a Da’im Allah
>
> Have mercy on him, oh God, M‘allem ‘Omar, God is Eternal
> Have mercy on him, oh God, Ba ‘Ayuch, God is Eternal

Taken together, these verses demonstrate that when the Gnawa invoke God, the Prophet, and the saints, they do more than just extol virtues of pilgrimage. In effect they say not just "let’s visit the saints", but “let’s visit the saints SINCE we certainly can’t visit our old m’allems”, of whom the question was asked “Where are they”.

The Gnawa sing another opposition when they refer to the birthplace of Islam in Mecca and Medina. A number of Gnawa songs feature lyrics encouraging pilgrimage to these holy places. Of course, pilgrimage to Mecca, in Islam, is a journey of both of return to the place of geographical origin of the religion, and a journey of completion of a Muslim's religious obligations. In the song "Sadie Fulani Mheriza", for instance, Gnawa sing:

Rah u nzuru	Let's go visit
Mecca u madina	Mecca and Medina
Jebel 'Arafa	Mount Arafa
Qabr l-Mustapha	The tomb of the Prophet (Muhammad)

This invocation of the journey to a place of origin sits in opposition to the Gnawa's reference to THEIR own place of origin, the Sudan. The Sudan is presented as a place from whence slaves were forcibly brought and to which a journey of return was never possible.

One more opposition situates the Gnawa in a cosmological scheme dealing with the ultimate nature of Reality. As I mentioned earlier, the Gnawa sing "Da'im Allah" (God is Eternal), in answer to the question "Where is m'allem Mansum, where is m'allem Lahcen". This response is more than just an expression of resignation to fate. It also sets the Gnawa categorically apart from God's Eternal nature. Effectively they say God is Eternal, as opposed to US, THE GNAWA, who pass away. This is the ultimate

explanation of the "staying power" of the saints, who maintain their beneficial powers in their tombs, for theirs is a grace with Divine origin.

In sum, the Gnawa fall on the side of… (see right side of chart)

PLACED PEOPLE (“let’s visit the saints”)	DISPLACED PEOPLE (“where are you, children of the Sudan
PLACE OF JOYFUL RETURN (“let’s visit Mecca and Medina”)	PLACE OF NO RETURN (“They brought us from the Sudan”)
ETERNAL (“God is Eternal”)	EPHEMERAL (“God have mercy”)

Chart 4: Oppositions in *Fraja* Lyrics

While the Gnawa recognize the spiritual authority of the left side of the equation, they do not IDENTIFY with it as such.

Of course there is a difference between God’s divine spiritual power and the power of a slave trader or slave owner over the slave. However, both of these ideas of power come into play and nuance each other in the framework of the ritual.

To use the terminology of ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell (1992: 101), the construction of these sorts of oppositions and their organization into hierarchichal and conflated schemes is a key strategy in the process of ritualization. These conflated schemes refer back to each other in a circular way, accruing additional layers of signification. In the case of the Gnawa, the construction of these schemes is aided by meanings already present in the Arabic language, in such terms as Sidi and ‘Abd

The term Sidi signifies (see chart) whereas ‘Abd signifies (see chart):

SIDI
-"Master" (the slaveowner)
-"Saint" (term of respect for Prophets of God, as well as local saints)
-"Lord" (God)
'ABD
-"Slave" or by implication, Blacks
-"Slave of God" (ontological status of the Muslim believer, expressing humans' state of dependency on God)

Chart 4: Conflations of Signifiers

Through the process of ritualization, the Gnawa reappropriate the memory of slavery into a ritual environment, where it is opposed to the divine status of the saints. When the Gnawa sing and dance about slavery during the Fraja, they reappropriate that experience in a ritual environment where it refers at once to the domains of of race, class, place, and power, where it emerges as a source of authority.

In the remainder of this presentation, I will suggest that by embodying this ritualized slave identity in ritual performance, the Gnawa draw that authority into the present and thereby assert their own authority to perform the spirit possession repertoire. In order to do this, I will turn from the examination of sung texts to the way those texts are experienced musically and bodily.

Identification with spiritual forbears

The practice of drawing a past authority into the present is an important part of Sufi mystical practices. In Sufi ceremonies of dhikr (remembrance), adepts invoke the

founding teacher of their order, allying themselves with him, in order to gain access to the heart of the ceremony, the chanted repetition of the names of God. Moroccan trance practitioners such as the 'Aissawa and Hamadsha, use a similar structure in their *hadra* rituals. Before proceeding to music for spirit possession, they perform a preparatory phase that calls into presence their spiritual forbear and his divine grace or *baraka*. By doing this, these practitioners assert their authority to mobilize that *baraka* and perform effectively the trance repertoire.

The Gnawa preparatory phase, the Fraja, similarly calls into the present a ritual forbear, namely, the Gnawa's slave ancestors. Several aspects of musical performance suggest that this bringing of the past into the present through performance serves the same ritual function, to assert the authority to perform the trance repertoire.

	GNAWA LILA	AISSAWA HADRA
Preparatory phase	*fraja* (entertainment)	*dikr* (remembrance)
Spatial orientation of musicians	inward	inward
Instrumental accompaniment	begins with only *guinbri* and handclaps	begins with only light percussion
Brings into present time:	slaves & their experience	saint & his divine grace

Chart 5: Moroccan Trance Music Rituals

In both the 'Aissawa and Gnawa rituals, musicans, singers and, in the case of the Gnawa, dancers face each other while performing. It suggests that the performers are performing first and foremost for themselves, that the action is directed inward. While these preparatory phases do demonstrate ritual authority to the gathered assembly, the performance, in each case, is not AIMED toward them per se.

Both rituals begin with instrumental accompaniment that is very subdued in contrast to the later trance phases. The Gnawa *fraja* begins only with the *guinbri* and handclaps, and the 'Aissawa *dikr* begins with very light percussion. The result of this texture is that sung lyrics are much more easily heard than in the later phases. Since it is through sung texts that the forbears are recalled, this texture supports this important ritual goal.

While these shared musical characteristics reveal the Gnawa *Fraja* to function, like the 'Aissawa *dikr*, as a demonstration of ritual authority, the character of the Gnawa's authority is markedly different from that of the 'Aissawa and the other groups.

	GNAWA FRAJA	AISSAWA DIKR
Act of bringing the past into the present is achieved via:	Decentralized leadership, shifting between singers, dancers, *guinbri* player	Centralized leadership resting solely in the solo singer
Nature of text	Variable, flexible text, short poetic phrases, quick call and response	Fixed text, longer poetic phrases, long verses before choral refrains
Chain of historical authority	broken line, through slaves, to the Sudan	unbroken line through the eponym to Muhammad & Mecca
Ultimate source of authority	From God Eternal through the slaves, by virtue of a disempowering rupture	From God Eternal through the Prophet Muhammad, by virtue of an empowering connection

Chart 5: Moroccan Trance Music Rituals – Dimensions of Authority

In the 'Aissawa *dikr,* the entire musical ensemble follows the leadership of the solo singer, who himself is faithfully reproducing a fixed text. This text consists of poetry praising the Hadi ben 'Aisa, the founding saint of the 'Aissawa brotherhood.

In the performance of Gnawa *Fraja*, on the other hand, there is a decentralized leadership structure. Over the course of one song, musical leadership switches between the *guinbri* player, the lead singer (who often IS the *guinbri* player), and the dancer or dancers. The text is flexible - stock phrases may be inserted or repeated and verses are not of fixed length. The vocal texture is characterized by short poetic phrases from the solo singer with quick choral responses.

To demonstrate this texture, I'd like to return the video clip.

[SHOW VIDEO]

For the 'Aissawa, their access to divine grace leads back in time in an unbroken chain through the founder of the order, all the way to the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and to God. This chain of authority gives them license to bring that divine grace into the present to animate spirit possession rituals.

For the Gnawa, on the other hand, their chain of ritual authority leads back not to a connection with divine sources, but to the moment of ruputre and exile that produced the identity of slaves. The decentralized musical leadership structure of the Fraja creates a highly interactive social experience that places ritual authority not in one individual, but in the cooperation of similarly disempowered subjects. When Gnawa musicians face each other, dancing, singing and playing, with the voices, the tongues, and the movements of their slave forbears, they musically create and re-embody all of the contradictions and oppositions that have accrued to the experience of slaves in the past, emerging, by the grace of God, empowered in the musical present.

Notes 2023:

- I didn't find a bibliography attached to this paper, though there aren't many citations.
    - I don't know what Schuyler 1998 is – maybe a conference paper from Philip Schuyler at the annual SEM meeting in Bloomington?
    - Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992
    - Westermarck, Edward. *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*. London: Macmillan, 1926.
- Charts were shown as transparencies from an overhead projector. I've incorporated that material into this document. I left spots in the text where I would spiel based on what's in the charts.
- I believe I began the presentation with some video, then returned to the clip toward the end of the paper. I'm pretty sure it was this clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9LXA-YCWX0]

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