

A HISTORIOGRAPHY ON THE MOROCCAN GNAWA BROTHERHOOD

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*“Kings brought those people {the Gnawas} from everywhere and redistributed them in palaces, and noble families, where they remained. This is how it happened for slaves. The slaves were subjugated by the kings to work in the palaces, under the Caïd or the chorfa {nobles}, but all the slaves were part of the Tagnawite. There are two sorts of Gnawa : ones are the children of lalla Krïma and the others are Sidni Bilal’s”*¹. Al Ayachi, Moqqadem in Marrakech², here tells the story of the Gnawas, how they got to Morocco, why they stayed there and what they became.

The *Gnawa* are a muslim brotherhood located in Algeria and Morocco³. In this paper we will focus on historiography concerning Gnawas in Morocco. The kingdom of Morocco, with a population of 34 millions⁴, is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and is ruled by Mohammed VI since 1999. It is located in the Maghreb region of North Africa. The official languages are Arabic and Amazigh (Berber) but the majority of the population speaks *darïja*, a dialect derived from Arabic. The dominant approach of Islam in Morocco is *sunni* and follows the Maliki school⁵ of law.

The term *gnawa* refers to black people from West Africa but also to their mystic religious order and musical style. They were mainly brought as slaves under the reigns of the sultans Ahmed Al Mansour (1578-1603) and especially Moulay Ismaïl (1666-1727) to build an army. Slavery ended progressively in Morocco under the influence of the French protectorate (1912-1956). However, the former slaves, residing in the country since the sixteenth century, remained there, adopted Moroccan culture and converted to Islam, even though most of them were muslims even before being brought to Morocco.

The first articles of research that we are in possession of do not directly tackle the Gnawas specifically but mostly the black brotherhoods present in Morocco. This knowledge originates from ancient testimonies of travelers such as Ibn Battuta in the 14th century. However, the first ethnographic studies date from the beginning of the 20th century with Westermarck’s *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*⁶. Numerous articles and chapters in books are dedicated to Gnawas, with the ethnographer Emile Dermenghem⁷ as the first author dedicating a full volume to black brotherhoods in the Maghreb

¹ From French : “*Les Rois ont ramen  ces gens d’un peu partout et ils les ont distribu s, dans les Palais, dans les familles nobles, o  il sont rest s.  a s’est pass  comme cela pour les esclaves. Les esclaves ont  t  soumis par les Rois, pour travailler au palais, chez les Caïd ou les Chorfa (les nobles), mais tous les esclaves d pendaient de la Tagnawite. (...) Il y a deux sortes de Gnawa : d’une part, ...les enfants de Lalla Krïma, c’est- -dire de Lalla Mimouna. Les autres, ce sont ... ceux de Sidna Bilal.*”

² interviewed in 1988 by Jacques Willemont

³ We will focus here on the Moroccan Gnawi

⁴ http://www.hcp.ma/glossary/Recensement-General-de-la-Population-et-de-l-Habitat_gw115.html

⁵ School of law attributed to Malik ibn Anas al-Asbahi in the eighth century in the Arabian Peninsula. Originally referred to as the School of Hejaz or the School of Medina. Predominant in North Africa and significantly present in Upper Egypt, Sudan, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. Characterized by strong emphasis on hadith; many doctrines are attributed to early Muslims such as Muhammad 's wives, relatives, and Companions. A distinguishing feature of the Maliki school is its reliance on the practice of the Companions in Medina as a source of law. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*

⁶ Edward Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 1926, Londres: Macmillan

⁷ Emile Dermenghem, *Le culte des saints dans l’Islam Maghr bin*, 1954, Gallimard

(1953). In the second half of the 20th century, Gnawa trance and music gained popularity amongst jazz and rock-and-roll musicians⁸, writers and travellers⁹ as well as anthropologists and ethnomusicologists. The psycho-sociologue Georges Lapassade began researching the Gnawa in the 1970's¹⁰. Viviana Pâques is a French anthropologue focusing on the Gnawa with a symbolistic approach¹¹ of their musical rituals. In continuation of Pâques' research, we can cite Deborah Kapchan¹² and Bertrand Hell¹³. Chouki El Hamel is also an important scholar on the topic and focuses mainly on the slave and racial history of the Gnawa¹⁴.

This paper aims at offering a succinct overview of research carried out on the analysis of the Gnawa culture and history. For that purpose, we will first concentrate on ethnographic and anthropological studies that focused on the Gnawa cult, and especially on the religious ritual they execute. In a second part, research on the history of the Gnawa, their slave lineage and their "blackness" in an Arab and Berber country, will be presented. Lastly, and in a more contemporary approach to the Gnawa, we will emphasise studies concerning how Gnawa situate themselves in a globalised world. Through this paper, I hope to display the evolution of scholars' understanding of the Gnawa; it seems indeed that the analytic key shifted from "Gnawas as former African slaves and their trance rituals" to "Gnawa music and the *fetish of trance* in globalisation".

The authors discussed here are unfortunately mostly Westerners, with the exception of Chouki El Hamel¹⁵, Abdelhafid Chlyeh¹⁶ and Zineb Majdouli¹⁷, who nonetheless received a western academic education. The debate whether research has to be performed by insiders or outsiders remains unsettled but I believe both situations have their perks and disadvantages. Translation from Moroccan Arabic is yet another limitation in this field of research as scholars do not all use the same retranscription models for words in *darija*, especially between anglophone and francophone scholars.

⁸ Randy Weston, *The spirit of our ancestors* (music album), 1991 ; Robert Plant & Jimmy Page, "Yallah", "City don't cry" and "Wah wah" in *No Quarter*, 1994

⁹ Paul Bowles, *Music of Morocco* (music album)

¹⁰ Lapassade Georges, *Les gnaoua d'Essaouira : Les rites de possession des anciens esclaves noirs au Maghreb, hier et aujourd'hui*, L'Homme et la société, N. 39-40, 1976, pp. 191-215

¹¹ Viviana Pâques "Le Tiers Caché du Monde dans la conception des Gnawa du Maroc", *Journal de La Société des Africanistes*, 1975 ; *Le monde des Gnawa*, in Jean Poirier and François Raveau, 1976 ; "Contenu Cosmogonique des Danses de Possession chez les Gnawa du Sud Marocain" ; *La Religion des Esclaves: Recherches sur la Confrérie Marocaine des Gnawa*. Bergamo: Moretti e Vitali, 1991

¹² Deborah Kapchan, *Traveling Spirit Masters : Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2007); "The Festive Sacred and the Fetish of Trance", *Gradhiva*, 7 | 2008

¹³ B. Hell, *Les tourbillons des génies : au Maroc avec les Gnawa*, Paris Flammarion, 2002

¹⁴ Chouki El Hamel, *Constructing a Diasporic Identity: Tracing the Origins of the Gnawa Spiritual Group in Morocco*, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 2008 ; *Black Morocco : A history of slavery, Race and Islam*, Cambridge University Press, 2013

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Abdelhafid Chlyeh, *Les Gnaoua du Maroc*, La Pensée sauvage, 1997

¹⁷ Majdouli Zineb, *Trajectoires des Musiciens Gnawa : Approche Ethnographique des Cérémonies Domestiques et des Festivals de Musiques du Monde*, 2007, Paris, L'Harmattan

THE FIRST WAVE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH 1970-2000

The first research carried out specifically on the Gnawa, mostly by anthropologists or sociologists, originally concentrated on their religious rituals. The *lîla*¹⁸, also known as *derdeba*, is an important healing ceremony that happens at least once a year. The *lîla* takes place at night inside a house where people from the guild gather to summon healing spirits, dance to specific music and go into trance. The ceremony is inaugurated by an animal sacrifice.

Viviana Pâques was a French anthropologist, a researcher at the CNRS under Griaule and Lévi-Strauss and director of the Institute of Ethnology in the University of Strasbourg. She is one of the most famous scholars on the study of the Gnawa. Her studies are based on thorough field research; she was instructed for twenty years by the Marrakchi moqaddem Layashi Qemshish¹⁹. Pâques offers a symbolistic approach of the brotherhood and focuses on their metaphysical and cosmogonic conception of the world:

*“The lyrics of the songs, seemingly seldom explicit, the dancing steps, the tempo of the music, everything is loaded with meaning, everything is codified, everything is a reference to a cosmogonic order (...)”*²⁰.

Georges Lapassade²¹ was a French psycho-sociologue and ethnologue who introduced ethnomethodology in France. From the 1970's onward he began research among the Gnawas of Essaouira²². He believed that personality was subdivided between divine and evil, but that, through the Gnawa trance ritual, this repressed aspect of one's personality could be publicly displayed²³ :

*“In the phenomenon of {trance} possession, in its psychological root, there is a division within the personality (...)”*²⁴.

¹⁸ Literally “night” in Arabic.

¹⁹ *Les Gnaouas du Maroc, intercesseurs de la différence ?* Jean Pouchelon doctorate thesis, 2014, Montréal University and Université Paris Ouest Nanterre, p.25

²⁰ *“Les paroles des chants, apparemment peu explicites, les pas des danses, les tempi de la musique, tout est chargé de signification, tout est code, tout est référence à un ordre cosmique et au drame qui donna naissance à l'univers et assure la réincarnation infinie des âmes jusqu'à la fin des temps”* Viviana Pâques, *La Religion des Esclaves: Recherches sur la Confrérie Marocaine des Gnawa*, 1991, p.79

²¹ Colin Lucette & Hess Rémi, « *Georges Lapassade (1924-2008) : cinquante ans de psychosociologie* », *Bulletin de psychologie*, 2009/2 (Numéro 500), p. 191-193

²² Georges Lapassade, "Recherche sur la situation des Gnawas et des Religions Populaires Extatiques en Afrique du Nord", *Bulletin d'Études Berbères* 11, 1977 ; "Les Gnaoua d'Essaouira, thérapeutes de la différence", *Africultures*, 1998

²³ Georges Lapassade, "Trances et dissociations", 2000, In Abdelhafid Chlyeh, *La transe*, Marsam Editions, pp. 73-102

²⁴ *ibid* : from the French “Dans le phénomène de la possession, à sa racine psychologique, il y a une division de la personnalité (...)”

Abdelhafid Chlyeh, in *Les Gnaouas du Maroc* (1997) follows Lapassade's psycho-sociological approach of the Gnawa brotherhood and maintains the focus on trance and possession by spirits.

The importance given to the sacrificial aspect²⁵ and the trance ritual is representative of a specific approach of the Gnawa brotherhood. It is generally the case with anthropologists and sociologists from the last half of the twentieth century. This type of research has offered a lot to scholarly research on the Gnawa, especially since it is the first wave of study. Nonetheless, in my opinion, its approach of the religious ritual could benefit from a more Islamic centered perspective - Gnawa present themselves as proud heirs of Islam - rather than a "pagan" cult. Analysis and comparisons with Sufis, as Cynthia Becker²⁶ has done for example, could help situate them more within the muslim world.

THE HISTORIAN'S NARRATIVE

Another important wave of research on Gnawas examines their past heritage as slaves and their "blackness" in an Arab and Berber country. Indeed, the word "gnawa" itself relates to their black ancestry and a lot of researchers have attempted to analyse the etymology of the term "gnawa" in order to obtain its true meaning. If Pâques and Lesage²⁷ believed that the term "gnawa" came from medieval Ghana (Sahelian kingdom north of Mali from the eighth to the twelfth century), Chouki El Hamel argues that it seems unlikely because of the way "g" sound, that doesn't exist in the Arabic alphabet, is transliterated in Arabic²⁸. Rather, this denomination would come from the Berber word "gnawi" which means "black man"²⁹.

Chouki El Hamel, despite the few Moroccan written sources examining the slave history and because of the reluctance of the natives to discuss issues of slavery as a result of Islamic pride (argument that prejudices and oppression are absent in Islam), still managed to find important primary sources in records of libraries and archives of Morocco in Rabat. His work is considerable concerning writings on the history of slavery of Gnawas³⁰.

²⁵ Review by Azam Torab : *Sacrifices en Islam. Espaces et temps d'un rituel* by Pierre Bonte, Anne- Marie Brisebarre and Altan Gokalp, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Vol. 64, No. 2, 2001, pp. 274-276

²⁶ Cynthia Becker, *Hunters, Sufis, soldiers, and minstrels : The diaspora aesthetics of the Moroccan Gnawa*, Anthropology and Aesthetics, No 59/60 (spring /autumn 2011), pp. 132-136

²⁷ Jean-Marie Lesage, *La confrérie religieuse des Gnawa au Maroc : approche linguistique*, thesis presented in 1999

²⁸ Chouki El Hamel, *Constructing a Diasporic Identity: Tracing the Origins of the Gnawa Spiritual Group in Morocco*, The Journal of African History, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2008), pp. 245-246

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 245

³⁰ Review by Ellen Amster : Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam*, American Historical Review, June 2015

Moreover, the emphasis on oral tradition by the Gnawa could be a cause of there being so few written source. Through their songs, they tell and recreate their history as well as their original myth³¹. Chouki gives an example of songs where Gnawa tell their story³² :

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

THE SECOND WAVE : CONTINUATION AND REFINING (2000 onwards)

The last important wave of research, corresponding historically to the beginning of the twenty first century, focuses on the Gnawas' place in the globalised world and their adjustment to it, as well as a deeper focus on the ethnomusical approach. Deborah Kapchan³³, in her book *Travelling Spirit Masters : Moroccan Gnawa and Music in the Global Marketplace*, aims at examining the specificity of Gnawa trance as well as its transcultural potential. She additionally tackles the popularity Gnawa music gained during the last fifty years and Gnawas' involvement in music festivals such as Essaouira's³⁴. She believes it created a transnational notion of the sacred :

*"The phenomenon of the sacred music festival draws on the religious sentiment evoked by ritual music in order to create a transnational (thus mobile) notion of the sacred, what I call the "festive sacred," that is in many ways a counterpoint to the specificity and ideology of more orthodox forms of religious practice."*³⁵

Zineb Majdouli³⁶ is another contemporary researcher focusing on the transformations of Gnawa music. Her work presents the displacement of the Gnawa and their music from a local and ritualised environment towards the World Music stage. Her aim is to show that the Gnawa evolve in a complex process which represents the tension between tradition and modernity in Morocco.

³¹ As the heirs of Bilal, the muezzin and companion of the Prophet. Also see chap. 2 of *The Call of Bilal : Islam in the African Diaspora* by Edward E. Curtis IV, 2014

³² Translation from al-Asiri 'Alam at-Tuqus by Chouki El Hamel in *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race and Islam*, p.290

³³ Deborah Kapchan, *Traveling Spirit Masters : Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace*, Middletown, Conn.:Wesleyan University Press, 2007; *The Festive Sacred and the Fetish of Trance, Gradhiva*, 7 | 2008

³⁴ <http://festival-gnaoua.net/fr/>

³⁵ Deborah Kapchan, *The Festive Sacred and the Fetish of Trance, Gradhiva*, 7 | 2008, p.54

³⁶ Zineb Majdouli, *Trajectoires des Musiciens Gnawa : Approche Ethnographique des Cérémonies Domestiques et des Festivals de Musiques du Monde*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007

Indeed, with the interest that international musicians have given to Gnawa music, as well as the process of globalisation of the world, the traditional aspect of the brotherhood seems to have evolved into a more commercialised activity. The music that used to be played for religious trance rituals also became a proper profession.

Furthermore, in the twenty first century, ethnomusicology is given more space by researchers like Maisie Sum³⁷, Jean Pouchelon³⁸, but also Deborah Kapchan. In the past, very little attention was given to music itself in the analysis of musical processes and gesturing body in sacred ceremonies. Mostly, it was limited to brief or aesthetic descriptions of the instruments, melodies and percussions. Sum presents precisely and accurately the musical structure of the *lila* rituals while also making herself understandable to music amateurs : "*Elements essential to Gnawa music include the evocative melodies of the guembri and entraining rhythm of the qraqab that continue in an unending series of pieces for up to an hour.*" Pouchelon, in his thesis, proposes a very complete description; from poetic analysis of the songs to dance choreographies, including a thorough description of the instruments as well as the different melodies and rhythms.

Through this paper we have seen that the study of the Moroccan Gnawa brotherhood has had different waves of limelight. Indeed, from the sixties and the seventies onwards, anthropological study began focusing on this specific guild. Pâques and Lapassade were pioneers in the anthropological and sociological description of the Gnawa rituals. Before the seventies, very little scholarly information was accessible on the Gnawa. There was however some research by Westermarck (1968) and also broad analyses on black brotherhoods in the Maghreb.

Thereupon, we focused on the place of historians in the research process on the Gnawa. Unfortunately, little place has been taken by historians, maybe as a result of the undocumented origins of the Gnawas. Not a lot of written sources are at our disposal and it is delicate to ask questions about the Gnawa's slave origins due to the ethical rejection of slavery by Islam. Furthermore, the Gnawas transmitted their history orally through their songs. They are the wardens of their history, hence the importance of anthropologists and sociologists in this field.

In a third and last part, I presented what we could name as the second wave of anthropological research. Developed mostly in the twenty-first century, the interest is centered on the Gnawa and their music in the global world. A distinction is made

³⁷Maisie Sum "Analysis of Sonic Structure in Gnawa Music", *First International Conference On Analytical Approaches To World Music 2010*. University of Massachusetts : Amherst, 2010; "Staging the Sacred : Musical Structure and Processes of the Gnawa Lila in Morocco", *Ethnomusicology* 55(1), 2011, pp. 77-111

³⁸ Jean Pouchelon, *Les Gnawas du Maroc : intercesseurs de la différence ?* doctorate thesis, 2014, Montréal University and Université Paris Ouest Nanterre

between the “authentic” Gnawas and the “show performing” (concerning the trance ritual as much as the music) Gnawas. Tradition and modernity are questioned.

There seems to have been an hindsight between the first generation and second generation of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists on the question of Gnawa; Gnawa rituals are less perceived as a distant and unknown pagan cult. Maybe Edward Said’s *Orientalism* had something to do with it? Let’s not forget that most of the researchers in this field are Westerners. Nonetheless, in the last decades, more scholars of Moroccan origins are studying the Gnawas, even if they remain westerners in their way of thinking and researching.

To put an end to this analysis of the interpretation of the Moroccan Gnawa brotherhood I would like to point out the lack of secondary sources on the muslim aspect of the brotherhood. I believe a deeper analysis of the importance of Islam for the Gnawa could beneficiate this field of research.

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