

Perceptions and Misperceptions of the Gnawa and their Music in Morocco

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Pre-dissertation fieldwork this summer allowed me to witness more thoroughly the complex relationship between people, their religion, and their music in Fez, Morocco. While living with a devout Tijaniyya family in Blida, a region of the old medina, I learned more concretely the place and meaning of *dhikr* (a prayerful act of remembrance) in this tailor's home and in the nearby *zawiya*, one of the most famous in the Arab world.

Simultaneously I had the opportunity to study the *hajbuj* (the primary Gnawa musical instrument), with Abd ar-Rzaq, a professional Gnawa *maalem* who has led *layla* possession ceremonies and "folkloric" performances in houses and on stages from the Congo to France. We sat in his small "office," decorated with pictures, certificates, and letters celebrating his musical and spiritual career. The Gnawa are a population in Morocco commonly presented as black ex-slaves whose

religion involves trance and possession by various spirits, personifications of significant Muslim figures. Examples include *shurfa* (from *sharif*, descendent of the Prophet), *Sidi Musa* (Moses), and *Lalla Aisha*. Religious debate surrounds the Gnawa centers on the ontology of these spirits: are they truly saints, or are they *jnun* (demons, evil spirits)?

While assembling activities for a short visit by a study abroad group from the University of Florida, I forged a close relationship with Adil, *muqaddem*



of a local Aissawa Sufi brotherhood. The Aissawas are renowned for their music, their own *layla* ceremonies, and more recently, for performing exorcisms.

The differences between these faiths and their accompanying musical traditions are not surprising, but the ease with which they participated in each others musical and ceremonial activities demonstrates much regarding the frequently cited "hybridity" in Moroccan religion and culture. This is despite the perceived marginalization of the Gnawa and heated intellectual debate regarding Sufism. The time in Morocco helped me to better comprehend the interesting ways in which these groups are interrelated and how they claim religious authenticity and validity.

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