

Moroccan Islam(s): Debating Religious Authority Through Ritual and Musical Performance

CHRISTOPHER WITULSKI

Since 2005 I have been spending time in Morocco researching the music of the Gnawa, a previously enslaved population from the south of the country. With each passing trip to North Africa, I am able to further probe the complexities of the relationship between these people, their religion, Sufism, Islam, rituals, and popular music. The ritual music of the Gnawa, unlike that of most Sufi groups in the region, has two parallel goals. It not only attempts to create a bridge between the individual and the divine, it also engages spirits or *mluk* (owner), asking them to participate in the ceremony by capturing, or possessing, adepts. The blessings from these spirits rest upon the house and the family of those who are possessed or *maskun* (lived within).

Questions remain unanswered, however, as orthodox groups and everyday Moroccans ask about these *mluk*: are they syncretic Muslim/African spiritual figures, as the Gnawa say, or are they jinns, troublesome demons aiming to separate Muslims from Allah?

When this contentious set of beliefs is conflated with the already tenuous position of music within the Islamic world, criticisms and religious struggles between brotherhoods and other organizations percolate to the surface. Simultaneously, however, groups like the 'Aissawa, a Sufi path originating in 18th century Meknes, adopt Gnawa songs and even spirits, placing them within their own ritual practices.

This past summer I was able to return to Fez and investigate the theological, social, and economic relationships between these different religious organizations. By examining the motivations that drove 'Aissawa and other Sufi groups to include Gnawa material in their rituals and theological worldviews, I worked to unravel small corners of the



densely woven Moroccan cultural “web.” As a nation renowned for “hybridity,” social relations in Morocco fall upon innumerable parallel and intersecting axis, with race, belief, and language, three that implicate the Gnawa directly, proving to be a few of the most prominent.

During this trip, I had the opportunity to work closely with a diverse range of musical and ritual leaders including Abderrahim Abd ar-Rzaq and Gaga, both Gnawa *maalems*, Adil and Abdullah Yaqubi, 'Aissawa *muqaddems* from two different groups, and two members of a Hamadcha brotherhood, Abderrahim

al-Marrakechi and Fredrick Calmus. These individuals welcomed me into their lives and social circles, teaching me to play and sing their music while spending countless hours humoring my questions about rituals, beliefs, society, and Islam as they appear in Fez and Morocco.

Christopher Witulski is a doctoral student in Ethnomusicology. His research was funded by the University of Florida Alumni Grant Program and a summer pre-dissertation research grant from the Center for African Studies.