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RESEARCH

Gnawa rituals in trance. Between pietism and halalization

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Abstract
This work analyzes the responses of the Gnawa of northern Morocco to criticism from more orthodox agents that considers their rituals to be non-Muslim in the context of a diverse Moroccan religious landscape. Based on fieldwork involving interviews and observation of rituals, as well as comparisons between different generations of Gnawa, the results of the research challenge dichotomous discourses of orthodoxy and heterodoxy and reveal a plurality of views among Gnawa musicians who affirm the Muslim nature of their practices and those who engage in a supposed halalization of the ritual. My hypothesis is that even the Gnawa themselves may have incorporated a growing ethos based on religious puritanism. While Gnawa ceremonies contain aspects that demonstrate the Islamic nature of the practitioners, such as the declaration of faith or praise of the Prophet, various elements indicate that in recent years internal debates have emerged about prayer, the control of images, and the intention of sacrifice. The result is a pragmatic ethos that combines and reconciles elements that the ideological dichotomies of social actors or even the analytical categories of the social sciences seem to have separated.

Keywords Gnawa · Halalization · Morocco · Orthodoxy · Ritual · Sacrifice

Introduction

In this article, I show how Gnawa groups in northern Morocco, linked to this musical and therapeutic culture of the formerly enslaved and freedmen, defend their Islamic identity in a context of religious definitions that presents them as actors engaged in practices outside Islam, contrary to orthodoxy. As a result of these discussions on the definition of rituality, it is worth asking what response the Gnawa musicians themselves give to these critiques. In this work, I will shed light on this question

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based on intermittent fieldwork among Gnawa musicians and practitioners in northern Morocco, mainly Tetouan, between 2012 and 2025, as a continuation of previous fieldwork on traditional healing practices in the same area, which had focused on the practice of reciting the Quran (*ruqya*) (Mateo Dieste, 2015). These reinterpretations of ritual are taking place just as Gnawa culture was recognized as intangible culture heritage by UNESCO in 2019 and as Gnawa music is emerging in a new musical field at national and transnational levels.

This case study reveals a series of broader issues that contribute to thinking about the new anthropology of Islam (Marranci, 2008; Dupret et al., 2012; Bowen, 2012; Hafez, & Slyomovics, 2013), since Talal Asad first raised the challenge (Asad, 1986), particularly in relation to two aspects: the tension between norm and praxis, and the dichotomy that separates orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The problem is not only focused on the application of the terms orthodoxy and heterodoxy to the Arabic language,[1] but also on the distinction itself, which does not take into account the practical continuities between these multiple ritual forms, beyond the existence of a shared central doctrinal corpus (Langer & Simon, 2008; Wilson, 2009). The tension between the norm and praxis and the prestige of the norm itself (Benkheira, 1997) make it extremely difficult to distinguish between legitimacies, which ultimately depend on political power that supports the credibility of hegemonic perspectives.

My fieldwork is based on conversations with Gnawa from different generations, mainly from Tetouan, but also from Tangier and Asilah.[2] In addition to these conversations, I accompanied these Gnawa to their homes, spent time in the clubs and cafés where they gather, and participated in twenty *lilat* (ritual nights) and six concerts, in order to observe and capture these rituals not only from participant observation but also from what David Howes calls multisensory participation (Howes, 2022: 32). This contrast between generations shows the transformations of an art form such as Gnawa from the mid-20th century to the first quarter of the 21st century, and reflects the changes experienced in Moroccan society and in the religious sphere.

Before explaining these changes, it is necessary to briefly introduce who the Gnawa are and how they became the subject of study in literature. In fact, there are many uncertainties surrounding the history of the Gnawa themselves. Formally, they are a brotherhood that combines multiple musical and ritual practices, linked above all to the control of the *jinn* (genies). Gnawa are the product of a complex and diverse diaspora from West and Central Africa, through slavery, and their intersection with Maghreb society for centuries. The big problem is that we do not know when the ritual studied in the 20th century took shape, and although there are ancient references to instruments and rituals,[3] there are hypotheses that suggest that the Gnawa are a rather recent phenomenon, dating from the 19th century, linked to the progressive lib-

[1] The *sunna* represents the central path; and the *bid'a*, an innovation, but whether this innovation is lawful or unlawful depends on the context of interpretation. Many more concepts and nuances refer to tensions around compliance with the norm or forbidden acts: *zindiq*, to refer to hidden apostasy; *ilhad* to indicate deviation from the right path; or *kufr*, to define the infidel (Fierro, 1987: 178).

[2] The names that appear in the text have been changed, and others have been anonymized, with the exception of some names that are drawn from podcasts, documentaries and public social media.

[3] Georg Høst (1734–1794), a Dane who traveled to Essaouira between 1760 and 1768, included the oldest drawings we have of the instruments. Høst (1781: 262).

eration of enslaved people (Becker, 2020). As this debate is beyond the scope of this article, I will focus on defining the plurality of functions of the Gnawa. Unlike other brotherhoods, the Gnawa do not have *zawiya* with a few exceptions;[4] they do not have a hierarchy like the Sufi brotherhoods, nor a mystical chain of saints, although they do claim to be descendants of Sidna Bilal and the slave diaspora is present throughout their repertoire (El Hamel, 2008: 250). Musically dedicated to enlivening celebrations such as weddings, due to the symbolic significance of their practices of good fortune and baraka, the main ritual is linked to possession cults, the *lila*, which has been widely studied in anthropological literature since the 1980s.[5] The musicians are men, although recently young women have also emerged who play ritual instruments: *guembri* (lute drum), *tbal* (drum) and *qraqab* (metal castanets). Historically, authority was distributed among the *ma'allem* (master), the *muqaddam* of the group, and the *muqaddama*, due to her connection with women, who were the main participants in the rituals (Westermarck, 1968 vol. I: 346).[6] Throughout the 20th century, these rituals have undergone changes that will be described below. In this article, I present some of these transformations and, above all, I show the Gnawa people's own view of the challenges presented by purist sectors of society, which question their Islamic identity in a kind of foreignization linked to African slavery. But these topics of study are not neutral either. There is also a point of attraction among "Western" observers who have focused precisely on trance and rituality, excluding social and political aspects and reproducing a certain exoticism inherited from the colonial era (Aidi 2023a).

The ambivalent definition of the Gnawa in the literature is closely linked to a conceptual debate in the social sciences regarding the transformation of religious phenomena in situations of contact, diaspora, and colonialism, as demonstrated in Roger Bastide's seminal work on African-American rituals (Bastide, 1947). In these debates, authors have employed concepts such as syncretism, métissage, or hybridization, but these concepts have also been subject to political interpretations. As historian Gutiérrez Estévez (2016) noted, rituals do not blend randomly in an egalitarian cultural encounter, since certain elements are imposed over others, reflecting power dynamics. The case of Gnawa history is also open to debate in this regard, as it can be interpreted as a process of acculturation of a group into the dominant culture through the adoption of Islamic elements, without renouncing its original African elements—just as has occurred with other slave-based cults embedded in Islamic contexts (Montana, 2022); although my interpretation is that Gnawa culture is actually like an open book that has gradually incorporated and blended elements from different historical

[4] In Essaouira, for instance, the *zawiya* of Sidna Bilal. See Khalil and Bouachrine (2021). In Ksar al-Kabir there is also a space known as the *zawiya* of Sidi Bilal, run by the family of the master Ba Miloud.

[5] Among others: Pâques, 1991; Chlyeh, 1998; Hell, 1999; Claisse, 2003; Kapchan, 2007; Pouchelon, 2014; Witulski, 2018; Becker, 2020.

[6] The *ma'allem* is always a man and leads the group of musicians, known as *koyo*. He plays the drum during the introductory phase, and he is the one who plays the *guembri* during the ritual phase, guiding the repertoire and singing as the lead vocalist. The *muqaddam* assists the *ma'allem*, directs various phases of the ritual, helps the dancers, and may act as a seer. The *muqaddama* is a woman who plays a central role in the ritual. She is usually the one who gathers the women, is in charge of the ritual objects, assists the women in trance, and acts as a medium to the world of the genies.

periods and different geographical areas through which it has passed. The Gnawa repertoire itself reflects this accumulation of influences.

The literature on the Gnawa has interpreted these connections, combinations, and diverse origins in different ways, as Aidi (2023b) has shown. While authors such as Pâques (1991) have argued for the persistence of structural elements of African myths among the Gnawa, some have sought specific connections with West African instruments and ritual terms (Becker, 2020: 114–117), while others have emphasized the intersection with Sufi elements, following the classic works of Brunel (1926) or Crapanzano (1973), or the fusion with Islamic elements (Pouchelon, 2014: 20), while still others have focused on highlighting their healing aspects and how the desert Gnawa construct their legitimacy through the exaltation of their expertise as healers (Montenegro, 2022). This article shows how the Gnawa themselves navigate these different categories and identifications, including regional categories, as the northern Gnawa interviewed call for greater recognition relative to the southern Gnawa.

Below, I outline the contemporary context that has shaped the diverse paths of the Gnawa, and how mainstream society views their situation.

Ritual policies: reformist critiques and colonial manipulations

The religious landscape of North Africa underwent significant changes during the first half of the 20th century. These changes were due to multiple external factors, such as the arrival of currents of thought that introduced tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, especially with the opposition of Salafism and reformism to Sufi practices, the cult of saints, and brotherhoods; and the effects of colonial penetration and its religious policy of supporting certain actors according to the interests of the moment. In this scenario, the different ritual and musical manifestations of the Gnawa were impacted by this new order of forces, either being attacked as religious deviation by Muslim reformists or as an example of primitivism and exoticism by colonizers.

Before presenting the religious context of the 20th century, it is necessary to mention an early precedent related to Wahhabism and the Gnawa. Around 1808, the Fulani scholar Ahmed al-Timbuktawi passed through Fez on his way to Mecca. Upon his return, he wrote two texts critical of African rituals: the first dedicated to the Bori cults of Tunis and the second criticizing the Gnawa of Fez (Montana, 2024: 4). Heavily influenced by Wahhabism, in his writings he labeled these cults *kuffar* (disbelief) and a deviation from Islam, for practicing association (*shirk*) with *jinn*, recommending that the authorities prohibit them and re-enslave those who practiced them.

In northern Morocco, Salafi reformism was introduced in various ways at the end of the 19th century (Abu-Nasr, 1963). It was brought by teachers from the Middle East who taught at Moroccan institutions, such as the Qarawiyyin University in Fez. It was also introduced through contacts established by Moroccans who traveled to the Middle East during the pilgrimage to Mecca or a study trip. The supporters of Salafiyya sought to purify Islam of alleged innovations and advocated a return to the virtuous ancestors (*salaf as-salih*) as a response to colonial domination (Munson, 1993: 78).

Among the intellectual precedents, we have a critique of the ecstatic brotherhoods by historian Ahmad al-Nasiri (1835–1897). In the first book of his *Istiqsa* (1894), he devoted a critical appendix to them. It was an explicit critique of the *hadra* (dance invoking divine presence) and the use of instruments to enter into a trance or worship the shaykh, considering it a challenge to divine uniqueness. Nasiri argued that during their ecstasy, practitioners are so imbued that they do not attend to their duty of prayer (al-Nasiri, 1923: 271). Al-Nasiri also censured the existence of tombs in the *zawiyat* and the practice of sacrifices, annual festivals, and gatherings of men and women. In his text, we can understand that he criticized the brotherhoods that perform *hadra* or use certain instruments such as drums, cymbals, and bagpipes. From this, we can deduce that he condemned as heretical groups that used these instruments in their rituals, such as the 'Isawa, the Hamadcha, and the Gnawa. Several aspects highlighted by al-Nasiri at this time, such as trance, prayer, and sacrifice, will appear in the fieldwork I present here.

The relative remoteness of northern Morocco from centers of learning, such as the Islamic universities of Fez and Marrakesh, and the division of the Protectorate into two zones, facilitated the development of a reformist movement linked to nationalism in the cities of the northwestern region. One the main driving forces behind this movement in the Spanish zone was the Tetouan native 'Abd as-Slam Bennuna. Between 1916 and 1918, Bennuna himself, from his position as *muhtasib* of Tetouan, prohibited the ecstatic brotherhoods of the 'Isawa and the Hamadcha from performing their rituals in public (Daoud, 2016: 222) (see Fig. 1).

In this climate hostile to acts of mortification, we can locate what Emilio Spadola (2013) has classified as the "scandal of ecstasy," which led to the emergence of policies aimed at curbing public demonstrations by ecstatic brotherhoods. In 1932,



Fig. 1 Postcard, n.d. (around 1920s). Source: The author

the pasha of Fez issued an edict stating that anyone inviting the 'Isawa must obtain authorization and pay a fee of 500 francs.[7] The sultan himself decreed their prohibition in 1933 to prevent practices labeled as savage and contrary to Islam (Spadola, 2013: 30). Along the same lines, the Spanish authorities introduced some "prudent restrictions" in the northern part of the Protectorate (García Figueras, 1939: 48).

With the formal division of Morocco into two protectorates in 1912, under the auspices of France and Spain, religious issues became subject to the colonial policies. In the early years of armed resistance until 1926, the colonizers reproduced some clichés about the black legend of certain brotherhoods, such as the Darqawiya.[8] On the other hand, the 'Isawa, Hamadcha, and Gnawa brotherhoods did not arouse political interest as potential resisters. Rather, these brotherhoods were used by Africanists to spread the image of the primitive and backward savage. In fact, the incipient reformists of the north were aware of these colonial stereotypes and fought against those practices. In 1953, Muslim nationalists in Tangier commented that the French authorities had once again authorized "the savage practices" of the Hamadcha, 'Isawa and Gnawa in order to curb nationalism.[9] The issue remained alive for several years in the religious and political debates of the Protectorate, and we can say that its legacy has survived into the postcolonial period.

Postcolonial contradictions: from exclusion to heritage preservation

With the end of the Protectorate in 1956, the Gnawa gradually expanded their range of activities beyond possession rituals to weddings and other rites of passage, and with the development of tourism, performances for tourists in coastal hotels became a new means of subsistence among the Gnawa of the north. Witulski highlights this paradoxical process in which there was a gradual expansion of the Gnawa phenomenon as a public culture of entertainment and national folklore, while debates on racism and the consideration of the Gnawa possession ritual as a practice deviating from mainstream Islam remained unresolved in Moroccan society (Witulski, 2019: 94). What seems clear is that during the last quarter of the 20th century, the Gnawa went from being a despised practice to entering commercial, local, and international circuits (Kapchan, 2007), even transforming its rhythms (Majdouli, 2013). Thus, external actors have given legitimacy to the Gnawa and turned them into a subject of research or even "over-research" (Aidi 2023a).

The Gnawa contain the perfect ingredients for constructing political discourses of diversity and tolerance, due to their "African" origins and to an identification between the Gnawa, blackness and anti-racist discourses. The heritage status granted to the Gnawa at the Essaouira festival since 1998 also coincided with a state policy to curb religious radicalism. The tension between Salafism, reformism and Sufi Islam

[7] "Hoja reservada", 18 August 1933, Central de Intervenciones Militares de la Región del Rif (Box 1207, IDD 13, AFR, Archivo General de la Administración, AGA).

[8] This black legend stems from the participation of the Darqawa in numerous anti-colonial uprisings in Algeria and Morocco since the 19th century. Clancy-Smith (1994).

[9] Information of 10 April 1953 (Box 2764, IDD 13, AFR, AGA).

has been a constant, and it is not surprising that this policy emerged at that time, alongside other festivals such as the sacred music festival in Fez (1994) and later the 'Isawa Festival in Meknes (2010).

At the same time, another important factor that has led to the discrediting of certain Gnawa practices has been the interpretation of "Africanity"—that is, attributing the existence of polytheistic elements to their origins in sub-Saharan Africa. This factor is linked to popular and academic racialist identifications that fail to recognize the plural identity of the Gnawa (Faidi, 2025), although the great paradox is that the Moroccan state began implementing a policy of "Africanity" in the 1990s (Sambe, 2010), precisely through, among other measures, the aforementioned Gnawa festival in Essaouira. This fact contrasts with a state rhetoric that, until recently, had excluded Amazigh and African elements from the nation's composition, ever since independence in 1956 focused on the country's Arab identity as the primary element, thereby obscuring the Pan-Africanism that took place in Morocco itself during the independence process (Tolan-Szkilnik, 2023).

It is also worth noting the proximity of the Gnawa to the sultanate, due to the presence of troops of African and slave origin in the sultan's courts; an affinity that has remained to this present day (Claisse, 2003). In northern Morocco, many Gnawa families worked in the Calipha's Palace in the Spanish Protectorate zone, and in this sense they belong to the culture of the *makhzen*. This can be observed in public ritual outings in which the Gnawa appear with the portrait of the king, as do many other groups (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Gnawa of Tetouan with a portrait of Muhammad VI (2017). Source: The author

Criticisms: illusion, deviation, and falsehood

I will focus on some paradoxes arising from social tensions surrounding Islam since the 1980s (Beránek & Ťupek, 2022) and their consequences for the Gnawa. The so-called orthodox view identifies the Gnawa as practitioners of deviant rituals that have nothing to do with Islam. This criticism has come mainly from Salafist and Wahhabi movements in their many forms, which have openly attacked Sufism, tomb worship, and music since the 20th century (Sirriyeh, 2014), such as the influential Moroccan salafi Taqi al-Din al-Hilali, who also preached in Tetouan between 1942 and 1947, openly discrediting sufism (El Amraoui, 2015: 114). Added to this is the fact that Gnawa are considered the heirs of subordinate groups, slaves or freedmen; and as such, delegitimized and marginalized. Or foreignized: since they are thought of as Africans, their symbolic expressions are sometimes conceived as non-Muslim, linked to pagan cults. The actors inspired by Islamism in the last quarter of the 20th century are opposed to groups such as the Gnawa, considering them to be *bid'a* (illicit innovation). In Salafi and Wahhabi vocabulary, they are associators and illusionists who establish illicit relationships with genies. The accusation of *sha'wadha* (illusionism) is one of the most repeated, alluding to the idea of deception (Lakhsassi, 2007).

But these criticisms are well known and to be expected. More surprising are the internal criticisms coming from the Gnawa themselves, especially due to generational differences. There is a contrast in perception between different generations of Gnawa, with older generations condemning what they see as a degeneration of rituals and their deviation from what is correct and Islamic. Witulski already noted this phenomenon in his work on Fez (Witulski, 2018). It cannot be ruled out that these narratives about the present and the past are also filtered by changes in the Moroccan religious field and the emergence of puritanism. In this sense, the entire Gnawa ritual is subject to new social scrutiny, and my hypothesis is that the Gnawa themselves may have incorporated this dominant ethos. Turner (2022: 16–17) has observed similar experiences among the Algerian diwan, where some masters expressed a certain unease when interpreting the Hausa repertoire, also perceived as "African" and non-Islamic.

In some cases, it is not only a process of penetrating orthodoxy, but also a naturalistic perspective that ridicules possession. This is palpable in the testimony of the son of one of the most renowned masters in the north, *ma'allem* 'Abdellah el Ghourd. In a joint interview, the son stated that the possession rituals of the Gnawa *lila* are meaningless, because the *jinn* are not the explanation for trance. The supposed possession is merely theater promoted by many Gnawa, whom he branded as opportunists or deceivers, and he emphasized that scholars of the phenomenon, mostly foreigners, are lending credibility to a phenomenon that does not exist.[10] From this point of view, the *ma'allem*'s son expressed a worldview that Philippe Descola has defined as "naturalistic" and inspired by science (Descola, 2007). In fact, he gave psychological or sociological explanations for the symbolic effectiveness of the ritual, as it is practiced by women with social difficulties.

[10] Philippe Guiguet Bologne, Détroit 28. «Entretien avec Abdellah et Abdeljebbar El Gourd et Amine Chbihi de Dar Gnawa», 1 October 2023. https://www.philippe-guiguet-bologne.com/podcasts/.

These ideas are widespread among other *ma'allems*. For example, 'Abdeslam has made similar remarks to me over the years. He organizes and plays in *lilat* as a *ma'allem*, but he does not believe at all in everything that happens during these performances. He plays the *guembri*, knows the repertoire perfectly, but does not think that the ritual is due to the intervention of the *jinn*.[11] This type of testimony is not so rare. In one of the documentaries dedicated to the Gnawa in Essaouira, a Gnawa explains how the ritual works, but when commenting on the work of the seers (*shuwwafa*), he concludes that he does not believe in this because it is *sha'wadha*. [12]

The testimony of the *muqaddam* of an 'Isawa group reveals similar ideas. In March 2019, I attended an 'Isawa *lila* in Tetouan, organized by a woman living in Belgium who wanted to resolve personal troubles. During one of the tea breaks, I had a chat with the *muqaddam* of the group. After asking him about the meaning of the colors of the flags presiding over the ritual, he explained that the entities represented by these colors, such as Bacha Hammu (red), Lalla 'Arabiya (white), or Lalla Mira (yellow), entities shared by the Gnawa, do not exist. In contrast, he reminded me that *jinn* do exist, because he is a Muslim and all Muslims recognize their presence. This testimony summed up the paradox that runs through this research: the practice of rituals that blur the line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy and the obsession with defending one's own actions as appropriate to the norm.

The following ethnographic case is highly illustrative of this pragmatic limitation of theoretical dichotomies. In June 2023, I attended a women's *hadra* in Tetouan. The ceremony was led by a *muqaddama* from a Gnawa family and combined rituals and music from various Sufi brotherhoods. In the final phase, a group of Gnawa performed for an all-female audience in a traditional house in the heart of the old medina. At the musicians' invitation, I watched in a small room as the women—mostly friends and family members—danced the *jedba*, the trance dance. At the end of each ritual phase, divinations took place; the Gnawa *muqaddam* lowered his voice and, in the darkness, proceeded to answer the women's questions while shaking their hands, and the *muqaddama* scattered *jawi* (incense) throughout the room to invoke the *jinn*. The *muqaddam* spoke through Sidi Mimun, one of the non-human entities. The women would approach him to ask questions and seek advice about their everyday problems. The most striking case was that of a woman wearing a *niqab*. Although she had not danced, she followed the rhythm, and during the divinations she also approached to discuss her concerns, while handing a 50-dirham bill to the *muqaddam*. Undoubtedly, this highly eloquent image is an example of the defiant pragmatic continuities I discuss in this research, in which a woman dressed in attire consistent with the new Salafist movements participates in a trance and divination ceremony without any sense of remorse.[13]

[11] Conversation. Tetouan, 25/4/2013.

[12] "Gnawa Lila: Reportage avec Maàlem Abdelatif El Makhzoumi / Maàlem Lahsen Mhidi & GNART-ESS", minute 51:10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyE96cx6GAo.

[13] Fieldwork diary. Tetouan. 11/6/2023.

On the claimed Muslim nature of the Gnawa ritual universe

The intersection of seemingly conflicting religious perspectives is common, even in the decoration of the *lila* space itself. While Salafists consider all rituals inspired by Sufism to be a deviation, the Gnawa reconcile their ritual with Islamic pietism. In one of the ritual spaces in the medina, musicians play in front of a tiled wall and under a painting depicting Mecca, with two girls covered with veils and their hands in a position of prayer, a pietistic iconography that is quite widespread in Morocco (Fig. 3).[14]

Beyond the external stigmatization stemming from so-called orthodoxy, my hypothesis is that Gnawa rituals reflect a historical process of Islamization. The slaves were Islamized, or even came from Islamized regions, although uncertainty about their origins is inscribed in the repertoire itself, which mentions classificatory ethnonyms from West and Central Africa such as Bambara, Fulani and Hausa (Goodman, 2003). Rogers (2016: 132) has defended similar arguments, noting that the Gnawa seem to legitimize their Muslim origin by claiming to be descendants of Bilal, in response to accusations of heresy. However, this assertion of Muslim identity has less to do with canonical definitions of what it means to be Muslim than with the contextual meanings that Gnawa actors ascribe to notions such as "pure" or "deviant"—meanings that are relative to each historical context, subject to political definitions, or transformed into unquestioned, taken-for-granted indigenous categories.

Praise to Allah and the Prophet Muhammad constitute a significant part of the Gnawa ritual corpus. This corpus is certainly interspersed with references to sub-



Fig. 3 *Lila* Gnawa in Tetouan (2021). Source: The author

[14] Fieldwork diary. Tetouan, 11/7/2021 and 16/3/2023.

Saharan entities and repertoires that show the trajectory of slaves and their diverse sub-Saharan origins, such as the Awlad Bambara during the festive part of the dances prior to the trance, the Hausa or the Awlad Ghaba ("children of the forest"), a cohort of genies. In fact, the Gnawa pantheon is a reflection of the plurality of Moroccan society. It is a metaphor for historical processes such as the transfer of non-Muslim peoples and spirits from West Africa, while reflecting Islamization itself and the incorporation of saints such as Mawlay ʻAbdelqader, founder of the Qadiriya. The role of ʻAbdelqader Jilani of Baghdad is crucial in this regard. This figure is central to the process of Islamization of the Gnawa. He appears first in the spiritual (*ruhani*) phase of the ritual and is represented by the color white. The Gnawa do not usually have their own *zawiya*, so they were welcomed by the Qadiriya *tariqa*. In Tetouan, this link can still be observed. The Gnawa visit the *zawiya* annually at certain times of the religious calendar, such as the month of *Shaʻaban* or the Mawlid, as a reflection of this shelter granted by the Muslim saints (Fig. 4).

This connection with a saint is widespread, so that slaves and freedmen, or the Gnawa, placed themselves under the protection of a saint in a clientelistic relationship.[15] Even today, *maʻallem* and Gnawa musicians make ritual visits (*ziyara*) to the tombs of these saints. Visual representations of these rituals show the Gnawa in a pious position next to the cenotaphs, with their hands in a position of prayer and blessing. These pilgrimages are common among the Gnawa of the north, who often post about them on social media[16] or simply show their visits to local shrines.



Fig. 4 Gnawa at the Qadiriya *zawiya* of Tetouan (March 2024). Source: The author

[15] For this relationship between saints and slaves, see Naji (2012).

[16] For example, the son of the Tangier *maʻallem* Abdelwahid Stitu, Said, recounts his visit from Sidi ʻAli to Mawlay Dris Zerhoun, continuing through Wazzan to Dar Dmana and the tomb of Mawlay ʻAbdellah Sharif, and ending in Beni ʻAros, at Mawlay ʻAbdeslam ben Mchich and Sidi Heddi. October 2023. Facebook.

Praises to the Prophet and declarations of faith are repeated throughout the Gnawa repertoire: this is evidence of the Islamization process claimed by the former slaves in the past, and a declaration of the Muslim identity of the Gnawa people today.[17] When entering the house from the street, in the ritual known as *al-'ada*, and before beating the drum, the *ma'allem* and the *koyo* (gnawa musicians) sing this praise to the Prophet: "*alhum sali 'alik a rasul-lah* (peace be upon you, O Prophet) / bis / *ya Mawlay Muhammad*." The ritual phrase is composed in Darija and is not specific to the Gnawa; it is used in other ritual situations in Morocco. At the beginning of each phase of the *lila* and each cohort of genies and saints, the *ma'allem* invokes the musicians and everyone repeats this same phrase in unison. Also, at the end of the musical part of each phase, the master and the musicians recreate the blessing before proceeding to the *ftuh*, a collection of gifts from the attendees in exchange for baraka.

The *takbir*, the declaration that Allah is the greatest, appears in many songs, and is even intertwined with references in West African languages: "*fangaro*, *fangaro*, *kwe*, *allahu akbar*."[18] And the *shahada*'s own affirmation that "there is no god but God" ("*la ilah ila lah*") also emerges in many passages, such as the one accompanying Mawlay 'Abdelqader and so many other verses referring to the blessing of the shurafa. I have collected these examples from the current sung repertoire in Tetouan, although these phrases are repeated, with variations, in other Gnawa rituals in Morocco (Welte & Aguadé, 1996; Pouchelon, 2014). Finally, the *lila* itself comes to be labeled by some Gnawa as "*lila gnawa rabbaniya*," that is, as an Islamic ritual, since it uses the term *rabbani* (from "lord," understood as Allah).[19]

Paradoxes of halalization

To what extent has the spread of an orthodox view of Islam among Morocco's middle and lower classes also shaped the practices of the Gnawa and other brotherhoods since the 1980s? My hypothesis is that, in a certain sense, the Gnawa have also incorporated strict interpretations of Islam that coexist with Gnawa ritual practices, within the recent obsession with halalization among many sectors of Moroccan society. In this sense, halalization means "a major preoccupation with the proliferation of the concept of halal [lícit] in a multitude of commodified forms" (Fischer, 2011: 32).

Someone accompanying the *ma'allem* at a *lila* concert for tourists and local youth in Tetouan commented that the *ma'allem* was not practicing Gnawa properly, as he worked too much with the *jinn* and that practice was an act of *sha'wadha*.[20] It is very paradoxical that this person likes Gnawa but wants to strip it of everything that, in his eyes, does not fit with Islam. Around the same time, another witness who used to frequent the Gnawa tells me that he now renounces them. He uses rumors

[17] For examples from the Marrakech repertoire, see Pouchelon (2014: 239–243).

[18] *Kwe* would be the term for God in West Africa, according to the version of the master Abdelqader Zefzaf. In https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytZmUAB_OmA&list=RDytZmUAB_OmA&start_radio=1. 57'23".

[19] FB. 31 October 2023.

[20] Fiedlwork diary, Tetouan, 2/6/2024.

as a weapon, saying that some Gnawa are linked to drugs and witchcraft, that is, to impure practices. He explains that they are no longer called to play at Ikea because they do not come dressed properly. But above all, he casts suspicion that they "do ugly things" such as *sihr* (magic) with henna and eggs. Ultimately, the testimony represented currents of opinion that stigmatize certain rituals as *sha'wadha* or *shirk* ("illicit associaton"). It seems as if the Gnawa themselves are debating this issue, now that they have been recognized by UNESCO, in order to reformulate a kind of halal Gnawa. This hypothesis can be contrasted with some specific examples related to ways of presenting the body and ritual. It is no coincidence that, in the face of these accusations, the Gnawa are also following halalization processes, while maintaining practices that run counter to orthodoxy.

In my observations between 2012 and 2025, tobacco and kif consumption, in *sebsi* (pipes), is widespread among Gnawa musicians, both in everyday life and during breaks in rituals.[21] Some Gnawa from previous generations observe that young musicians "nowadays" are no longer respectful and they do not follow the rituals properly -for exemple, they do not pray before the ceremony. In contrast, they remember the old masters, idealized as true and righteous. This is explained by a veteran Gnawa from Tetouan who emigrated to Barcelona. Now retired, he recalls the rituals of the past as more authentic and pure. Among the aspects he highlights is the fact that in the past, men and women were not as mixed as they are today, and women were always covered: "The women in the *lila* wore a white tunic. But if they were going to dance, they had to put on the blue *qasaba* [tunic] over the white one. When they finished, they took it off and were left wearing the white one. If the song of the red (spirits) came on, for example, they had to put on the red tunic, and so on…"[22]

In addition to this generational contrast, we must also consider the effects of the halalization of society, as shown by the following examples relating to the presentation of the body in rituals and, above all, its public display on social media. At a Sha'abana, the annual festival preceding Ramadan, I attended the rituals in a house in the *mellah* (former Jewish quarter). I was able to observe the ritual preparations behind the scenes. One of the *ma'allem* showed me a pile of *djellaba*, emphasizing that they had been brought for the women so that they would be properly dressed when dancing. In other words, the *ma'allem* seemed to be responding to the criticism of the elders. However, in practice, almost no women wore the dresses that had been provided for the occasion.

In contrast, visual representations of rituals on social media follow stricter gender moral codes. In fact, photographs or filming are not allowed during the *rehba*[23] and dance phases, only during the previous stages of the entrance and the musicians' dances. While men generally appear in pictures without restriction, women's faces are covered with icons and emoticons. Becker (2020: 86) interprets this practice as an effect of women's agency, as they control their exposure to society. But in my view, these are also forms of self-control, brought about by the halalization of society. Over

[21] This consumption is common among other brotherhoods, such as the Heddawa of Jebala. See Brunel (1955).

[22] Conversation. Tetouan, 15/6/2024.

[23] Lit. "the (ritual) place", in fact it refers to the spiritual phase of the ritual.



Fig. 5 *Muqaddam* 'Ali Khamlichi of Tetouan (1980's). Source: 'Abdelwahid Nasiri

the years, I have come across many photos and videos of the rituals that have been removed from Facebook because they showed women who later asked not to appear.

Affirming Gnawa Islamic nature through prayer

Another important aspect is the expression of piety during the ritual, which is widespread on social media. The photos posted by the Gnawa community itself abound with bodily gestures that convey piety. These are canonical iconographies for expressing gratitude to God and form part of Muslim prayer itself, such as the upward positioning of the palms of the hands, also as a connection with Allah (Fig. 5).[24] This

[24] On the ways prayer is depicted on European and North African postcards, see Christian and Mittermaier (2017).

hand position is repeated in many group photos, but it is also part of some stages of the Gnawa ritual accompanied by praises and blessings in the name of Allah and the Prophet.

These gestures take place at the end of each ritual phase, when the *fatha*, a collection of offerings led by the *muqaddam*, is performed. In the *fatha*, the participants offer money and the *muqaddam* in return gives blessings, endorsed by the whole group, who arrange their bodies in a pious stance, with their hands in a position of invocation and repeating the word amen in unison. This pious bodily arrangement also occurs during visits to shrines venerated by the Gnawa, as depicted on Facebook by a muqaddam from Tetouan who pilgrims to Sidi ʻAli near Meknes and posts photos on social media of his visit to a shop selling votive objects (sugar cones, rose water, trays), opening his palms in a pious position and covering his face with an emoticon.

In a Facebook video posted by Radio Gnawa, an association that promotes Gnawa art on the internet, we see a Gnawa venue in Salé, with *maʻallem* ʻAbdeltif al-Wasif and *muqaddam* ʻAbdellah Sahli from Tangier. Before playing a piece from the Gnawa repertoire, the *muqaddam* recites the *fatiha*, the first surah of the Koran.[25] In these online performances, it is not usual to recite the Koran before performing Gnawa music, nor is it in the rituals I have attended.

However, it is more common for the Gnawa ritual to be interrupted when it coincides with the Maghreb or al-ʻIsha prayer. Once the ritual has begun, the music and activity stop when it falls during the call to prayer at the nearest mosque. This has always been the case in all the rituals I have attended and it is also a widespread practice in other musical genres. There is recorded evidence of this respect for prayer, even in a concert for a Western audience, when the late master Mahmud Guinia was performing for the Boiler Room in Marrakech and interrupted the music for a few minutes while the call to prayer could be heard in the background.[26]

This pause of respect is also common in informal gatherings of Gnawa musicians in clubs or cafés. When the voice of the muezzin, amplified by loudspeakers, penetrates the venue, those present stop the music, whether live or recorded.[27] This sonic incompatibility is very remarkable and should be interpreted in the context of historical debates about the relationship between music and legal texts. These debates even question the use of loudspeakers or the handling of echo during Koranic recitation (Mian, 2017). In fact, echo also occurs during Gnawa *lilat* with the introduction of microphones and loudspeakers, in addition to the use of amplifiers.

I present one last illustration, in which a Gnawa defends the importance of prayer and the value of the Koran. He works as a public servant and supplements his income by playing as a Gnawa at weddings and performing for tourists in restaurants. On his personal page, he posted an iconographic montage showing him on the street alongside some verses from the Koran and an image of the sacred book.[28] Being Muslim is beyond doubt for most Gnawa, and they express this on social media during the main

[25] FB, 11/1/2022.

[26] See minute 33', in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6blGJldtGWw.

[27] Fieldwork diary. Tetouan, 17/4/2013.

[28] Excerpt from a verse from Surah al-Baqra, 186. FB, 2023.

holidays of the religious calendar, in Friday prayers, or when someone dies and the customary grief phrases are posted.

The use of emoticons, the discussion about the portrayal of women in photographs, and the presentation of pious stances in the mass media all share a common context in which Muslim societies have been confronted with representation, imagery, and new information technologies. The ways in which Muslims represent themselves online have been discussed by Muslims themselves through a wide range of discourses (Larsson, 2016), including details and aspects of religiosity (Bunt, 2022). In my view, at the analytical level, the focus should not so much be on adopting a normative perspective based on what religious texts say on the matter, but rather on observing how actors creatively navigate the relationship between norm and practice, including forms of trance and possession within the framework of new technologies (Behrend, Dreschke & Zillinger, 2020).

The controversy surrounding sacrifice: to whom do the Gnawa sacrifice?

Sacrifice occupies a central place in Gnawa ritual as a way to communicate with the *jinn* (Hell, 1999: 388). Sacrifices are performed before the *lila* and during the *lila*. Reformist criticism of the cult of saints and accusations of *shirk* focus on sacrifice as a central element, since it is assumed that the sacrifice is not intended for Allah but for saints or genies, and for this reason they are usually celebrated at night (Hell, 1999: 392; Pouchelon, 2014: 172–175). But what do the Gnawa say about this?

I began by asking a Gnawa *muqaddam* a question that I had not considered until then.[29] It is a simple question that I repeated to my Gnawa acquaintances: in the ritual, the Gnawa perform *dabiha* (ritual slaughter), but is it a *dabiha* for Allah or for the *jinn*? In that first approach, I conditioned the question by commenting that the Salafists say that this is *haram*. He replied that the Gnawa always perform *dabiha* for Allah, pronouncing *taslim* (greeting Allah).[30] He commented that they grab the animal, wield a knife, carry out the *dabiha*, and say the name of Allah in a low voice. He lowered his voice and uttered these words, "*Allahu akbar*" (*takbir*). He then picked up a broomstick, sat down inside his shop, imitated the sound of a *guembri*, and began to sing songs from the repertoire in which the affirmation of faith (*shahadah*) is repeated: "*la ilaha ila allah*" (there is no god but Allah).

On another occasion, I raised the same questions with a young *ma'allem*.[31] His answer was categorical: the Gnawa do not sacrifice to Allah and cannot say the name of God, because in their rituals they are sacrificing to 'Aicha or Mimun. He insisted on disqualifying these practices and claimed that the only valid sacrifice in the Sunnah is the one devoted to Allah. He added that local Gnawa have gained a bad reputation, as people think they perform witchcraft and blood sacrifices, so there is less and less demand for these rituals. In short, a purist ethos would be affecting the frequency and success of ritual gatherings. I contrasted these opinions with another *ma'allem* of

[29] Excerpt from a verse from Surah al-Baqra, 186. FB, 4/11/2023.

[30] Brunel (1926: 156) already mentions the practice of *taslim* among the Gnawa of Meknes a century ago. See Hunwick (2004: 164–167).

[31] Fieldwork diary. Tetouan, 4/3/2024.

his same generation. When I asked him about the *dabiha*, he replied that the ulema and the Salafists criticize the sacrifice being performed for the *jinn*. His response revealed a strict and orthodox view, although it seemed more like a polite yes, following the formula pointed out by Benkheira of "amour de la loi".[32]

I posed the same question to the more veteran Gnawa, and they were much more critical of today's rituals. One of them pointed out that although the current Gnawa say *bismillah*, they are not actually making the sacrifice to God but to the *jinn*; and, therefore, it is a practice outside of Islam.[33] Talking to a veteran *ma'allem* in the port of Mdiq, we reviewed the relationship between the Gnawa and Islam.[34] When I asked him how the Gnawa are compatible with Islam, he reiterated that they are indeed Muslims; in their songs they praise God and Prophet Muhammad. But then he observed that "now" money has corrupted everything. Focusing on the *dabiha*, he pointed out that it should be centered on God, not on genies or saints. Only for Allah, not for figures such as Bacha Hammu: "*Dabiha* is devoted to God… But *dabiha* for the Saba'atu Rijal (the Seven Saints), for Sidi Heddi, for the saints, no! *Dabiha billah*. Everything else is a game, for money, with the devil". [35]

If the *dabiha* is an animal blood sacrifice, other parts of the ritual also include a kind of sacrifice by the people who mutilate themselves with a knife, embodying Bacha Hammu or Sidi Mimun.[36] These acts provoke controversy not only outside the Gnawa circle but also among its followers. Internal criticism focuses on the use of knives purely as a spectacle. A knowledgeable expert on the Gnawa used the term fakirism to label and criticize some acts of mortification with knives, whose practice historically derives from other brotherhoods such as the 'Isawa or the Hamadcha. According to him, the knife cuts would be a show to attract followers.[37] The issue of knife cuts in the Bacha Hammu phase is reviewed by the Gnawa themselves, especially by the more veteran members. 'Abdelqader explains the following in conversation with another person, while we see a young man walking down the street with cuts on his arms. He recalls that in the past, the Gnawa did not cut their arms.[38] When it was the Bacha Hammu's turn, they emulated cuts by running the *qarqaba* across their arms, but without knives or blood.

These ritual ambiguities are present in other settings in the city and in other ritual locations such as Sidi 'Ali, the shrine near Meknes dedicated to the founder of the Hamduchiya *tariqa*. As Bartel observes, in Sidi 'Ali pilgrims and Gnawa invoke Allah for protection, while the sacrifice is dedicated to Lalla 'Aicha (Bartel, 2013: 128–129). This ritual pragmatism allows the Gnawa and the people who attend them

[32] Fieldwork diary. Tetouan, 2/6/2024.

[33] Conversation. Tetouan, 6/3/2024.

[34] Conversation. Mdiq, 25/2/2025.

[35] Ídem.

[36] Hell (2002: 175–183, 200–205) provides the testimony of two people who cut themselves with a knife and explain the motivations behind this practice during the Gnawa ritual. I have observed this practice at most of the *lilat* I have attended in Tetouan.

[37] Conversation. Tetouan, 13/5/2014.

[38] Conversation. Tetouan, 10/6/2024.

to be healed to combine therapeutic techniques belonging to different ways of religious legitimacy.

Practical combinations of orthodoxy and heterodoxy: between *ruqya* and *lila*

In a conversation with a woman from a Gnawa family, I realized that the important question for many people needing healing is not so much ideological, about whether a practice is lawful or not, but rather pragmatic: what will be most effective in healing me? In this regard, she observed that *ruqya shara'iya* (Koranic recitation) is less powerful than the Gnawa ritual. It would be a good technique for relaxation, and in fact she herself listened to recorded *ruqya* before going to sleep to calm herself. But when it comes to dealing with *jinn*, *ruqya* does not always manage to drive them away; they always end up coming back. On the other hand, she added, the Gnawa ritual manages to tame the *jinn* in a more powerful way.[39] This argument contrasts with that offered to me by a Salafi-style *raqi* (Koranic reciter) from Tetouan, who said exactly the opposite, explaining that *ruqya* prevents the *jinn* from returning, while a *lila* requires their return.[40] Here the *raqi* seemed to reproduce Luc de Heusch's (1971) theory on the distinction between adorcism, which would correspond to the Gnawa, and exorcism, to the *raqi*. But what is interesting here is the combination and compatibility of methods that some people practice, beyond the dichotomies, as was the case when a veteran Gnawa explained to me that his son suffers from schizophrenia.[41] Being from a Gnawa family, he tells me that his son feels better when he attends a *lila* or visits a shrine. But he also adds that they have gone to a *faqih*. Throughout the conversation, the testimony concludes that it is not actually schizophrenia, but rather demons that are the cause of the illness, and he attributes this to his son falling in with bad company when he was fifteen. To make fun of him, they put nails in a cigarette, which is a type of poisoning witchcraft. The problems began, and they went to various healing places after trying biomedicine and seeing that he did not improve after receiving a diagnosis of schizophrenia and taking pills. They attended Gnawa *lilat*, went to shrines, but also went to the *faqih*, because the problem persisted. The son liked to listen to the Koran and always played it on his cell phone. The father observed that "*ruqya* is a real thing…" He recited to me a part of *ayat al-kursi* (the throne's versicle) that he had memorized and that serves to ward off demons. A Gnawa by family and by heart, his behaviour is not incompatible with this healing technique belonging to Prophetic medicine (*tibb al-nabawi*) and reinvented by Salafism since the 1990s.[42] Being Gnawa is not conflicting with this vision, quite the contrary. These practices are common in other parts of Morocco, including Sidi 'Ali, where the cave of 'Aicha Qandicha is located.[43]

[39] Conversation. Tetouan, 19/3/2022.

[40] Interview. Tetouan, 17/3/2023. For an analysis of the various ways of understanding *ruqya* in northern Morocco, see Mateo Dieste (2015).

[41] Fieldwork diary. Tetouan, 14/6/2023.

[42] For this reinvention, Loukili (2021).

[43] Bartel (2013: 149) details the case of a woman who suffers paralysis and prepares sacrifices and a *lila* for 'Aicha Qandicha, while her husband recites passages from the Koran to appease the genies.

Conclusions

A classic topic in the study of Islam is the notion of textual and universal Islam and its tension with forms of religious and pious expression that are branded as heterodox by those who claim a monopoly on definitions, although the very distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy has been discussed in this work. The data presented on the case of the Gnawa of northern Morocco indicate that this distinction is historical and circumstantial. From the 20th century to the present, state policies have varied on this issue throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods, sometimes supporting Islamic reformism and at other times opposing it by promoting Sufism and brotherhoods.

Despite the recent recognition of Gnawa culture by the state and its popularity among more liberal youth, the stigma surrounding Gnawa practitioners as deviants from authentic Islam persists in Moroccan society, which alienates them by linking them to the pre-Islamic slave past. Accusing the Gnawa of practicing *sha'wadha*, these criticisms do not so much assert the "falsehood" of their practices as their "deviation." However, although the rituals incorporate non-human entities from West Africa, they are also a historical account of the process of Islamization of slaves, with praises to Allah and the Prophet, and the adoption of elements of Moroccan Islam, such as saints and baraka. Furthermore, within Gnawa groups there are also discourses of re-Islamization, which accuse young masters of perverting tradition by smoking or mixing men and women, and evoke the memory of the old masters, presented as pious Muslims. One of the main findings of the research, which emerged almost unexpectedly, was this stark contrast between generations of Gnawa, such that age and generational experience play an important role in defining the different ways in which Gnawa people identify themselves. From this generational perspective, the elders present themselves as guardians of tradition and view younger practitioners as having strayed from the right path, both in musical style and moral behavior. This generational tension, common to other groups, is further fueled by the processes of "halalization" discussed in this article, which lead to a new self-defensive consciousness that asserts the compatibility of Gnawa rituals with Muslim identity.

Historically speaking, one can only wonder whether this kind of halalization of Gnawa in certain specific aspects is recent or whether this ritualistic mimicry of various practices with the pillars of Islam is ancient. It is clear that purist criticism of the Gnawa goes far beyond the observation of these Islamic elements incorporated into the Gnawa ritual. This criticism focuses above all on the management of the relationship with the *jinn* and the accusation of association with them through various rituals such as sacrifice and dance dedicated to the *jinn*, and practices of mortification of the body. Here, the contrast between a position that claims to be orthodox and another that is disqualified by the former is very clear. However, most of the musicians and attendees observed no incompatibility between Islam and the rituals they practice. They all declare their "love for the norm." In practice, people linked to the Gnawa world reproduce syncretism and do not perceive their practices as incompatible with Islam. But we also find people who participate in Gnawa culture who share some of the orthodox rhetoric. Like a young *ma'allem* from Tetouan, who criticizes what happens in the *lila* as theater and says that "there is nothing there." Or the case I observed in a concert-*lila* that took place in Barcelona for both a non-Muslim audience and a

Moroccan audience; on that occasion, a young Moroccan man made the following comments to me after dancing passionately to the rhythm of the *guembri* and the *qarqaba*: "I love Gnawa music, I am fascinated by it and needed it. Sometimes I go to concerts and *lilas* to Marrakech". At the same time he was dismissing the whole ritual surrounding possession as "trickery and falsehood", and then he added these words: "Did you notice they were asking for silence while they were dancing? To maintain a connection with what? There's nothing there…".[44] In reality, he spoke from an orthodox Islamic perspective, while acknowledging that he entered a kind of modern trance through music. Fascinated by rhythm, his explanations almost coincided with the reasoning I analyzed above from the son of the master El Ghourd of Tangier. For all these reasons, we can speak of an internal coexistence between two tendencies. The first one presents Gnawa from a "naturalistic" point of view, delegitimizing those parts considered "unreal", rather than "deviant". The second one adopts orthodox criticism and does not recognize Gnawa as heterodoxy, affirming their Muslim identity, as is the case with other brotherhoods in the Moroccan religious field. In other words, there is an ideological tension between ways of viewing Islam, but a practical reconciliation when it comes to living it (Schielke, 2012). Discussed Islam lives in parallel with practiced Islam.

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[44] Conversation. Barcelona, 29/3/2023.

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