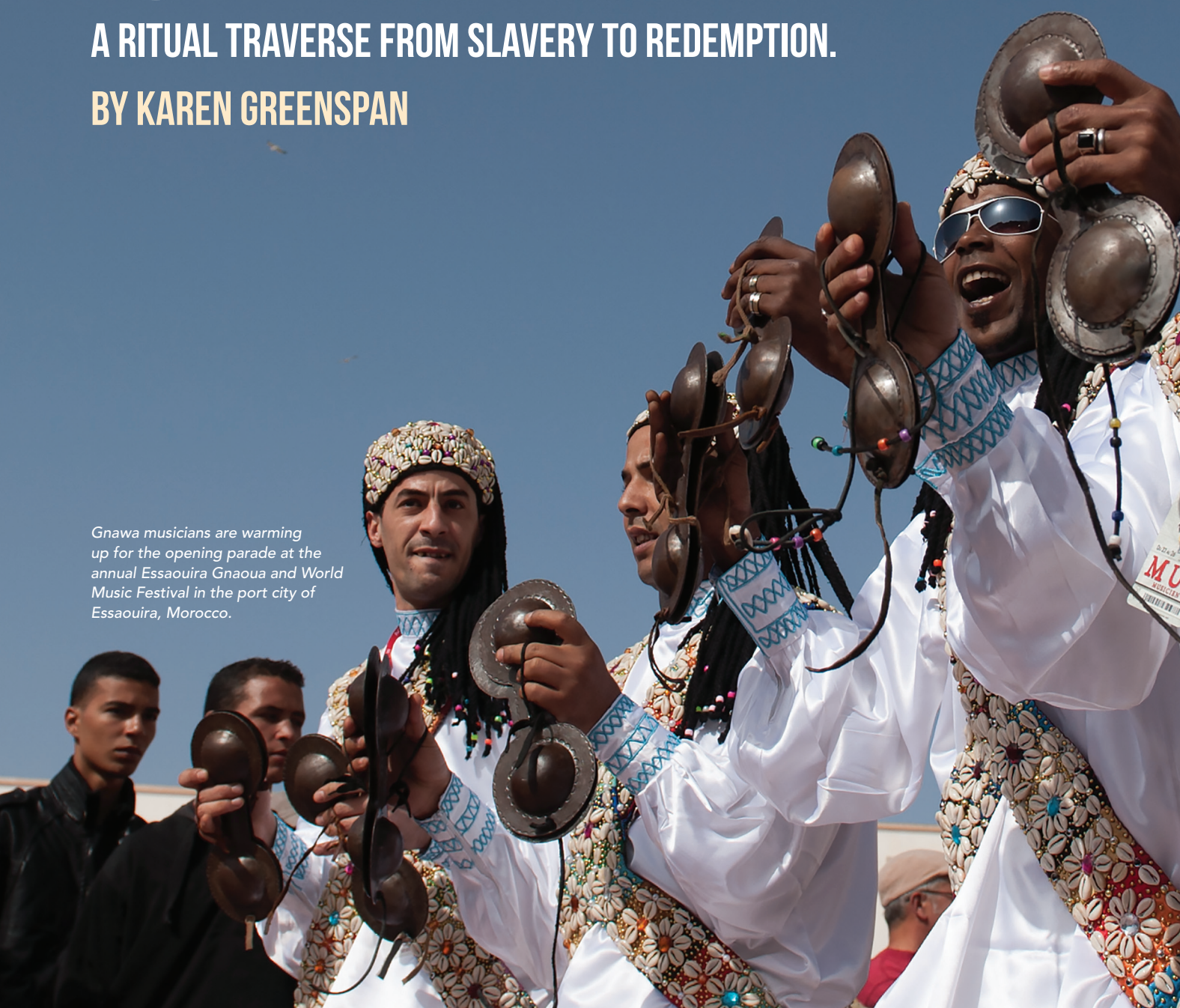
THE LILA OF THE GNAWA

A RITUAL TRAVERSE FROM SLAVERY TO REDEMPTION.

BY KAREN GREENSPAN



Gnawa musicians are warming up for the opening parade at the annual Essaouira Gnaoua and World Music Festival in the port city of Essaouira, Morocco.

OUR senses were bombarded as we navigated through Djemaa el-Fna, the famous central square in Marrakesh. As we entered the square, passing by a perimeter of stands selling freshly squeezed orange juice and nuts, stimuli flooded in from all directions, most notably from an array of performers. In one area of this marketplace of foodstuffs and curiosities intermixed with talent, a seated circle of traditional Andalusian musicians were warming up. In another, snake charmers sat playing their reedy-sounding horns as cobras floated upward. Finally, I saw them—the Gnawa, the ones I had come to see. A line of dancer/musicians were dressed in their traditional white robes and colored knit caps. The younger members of the group took turns performing energetic dance solos of repetitive rebounding jumps from deep squats. The others maintained contagious rhythms with their black iron *qraqab* (castanets) as they swirled their heads, twirling in tight circles the tassels on the top of their *sheshiya* (knit caps) adorned with tiny white cowrie shells. The musician elders beat the large *tbal* (drum) strapped around their torsos and chanted calls that prompted sung responses from the others.

The Gnawa are a minority population living in Morocco, primarily in the cities of Marrakesh, Essaouira, Casablanca, and Tangiers. They are descendants of people brought to Morocco by the hundreds of thousands in the trans-Saharan slave trade from what are now Nigeria, Chad, Ghana, Guinea, Senegal, Mali, and other countries in Central and West Africa. Slaves were imported to the Arab Maghreb from the eighth century into the early twentieth century. The residual memory of their sub-Saharan roots exists in their music, liturgy, dance, and healing rituals, which reveal the ache of forced dislocation and the tyranny of enslavement, or being possessed by another.

Another layer of healing from the tyranny of possession is at work in Gnawa music and rituals. It is employed to placate possessing spirits called *mluk* (masters/possessors) or *jnun* (plural of *jinn*/genie). Gnawa practices may be a holdover from pre-Islamic traditions. However, Morocco also has a long relationship with jnun—a pantheon of spirits that are believed to inhabit the world along with humans. They are mentioned in the Qur'an as created with free will by Allah from smokeless fire. Some people feel that they are inhabited or possessed by such spirits, creating a troubled, or afflicted state. In the Moroccan folk belief system, spirits cannot be exorcized. Instead, they must be placated, accommodated, and propitiated for a satisfactory (or even beneficial) coexistence. An all-night Gnawa ceremony called *derdeba* (ritual of possession) or *lila* (night) involves devotional music, dance, incense, li-

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(Above) *Groups parade along the streets of the medina of Essaouira during the four-day music festival, now in its twentieth year.*

(Left) *Master Gnawa artisan, Said Rhatrhat, is a* lutier du gambri *(lute-maker) and an accomplished musician. In his tiny workshop along a narrow alley of the medina in the seaside town of Essaouira, he produces the beautifully crafted Gnawa instrument—the* guembri *(also called* sintir *or* hajhuj*). The lute is made of camel neck skin stretched over a mahogany or lemonwood, rectangular, carved-out box. A cylindrical staff forms the fretless neck. Rhatrhat decorates his instruments with detailed inlay of mother of pearl designs delicately outlined with aluminum. It takes Rhatrhat only ten days to two weeks to produce an instrument. He is demonstrating how percussion and melody are both played on the instrument as he plucks the goat gut strings downward with the knuckle of his index finger and the inside of his thumb, creating the deep-toned rhythmic themes (similar to the sounds of a double bass), while his knuckles drum against the body of the instrument.*

bation, ritual foods, animal sacrifice—all leading to a state of trance followed by a sense of well-being.

Numerous traditions of music-induced trance exist within the colorful tapestry of Moroccan culture, though most remain hidden from the public; they are performed in private gatherings by semi-secret groups. The practice of merging or harmonizing oneself with the Divine through music, prayer, dance, and trance is common within Sufism—the mystical branch of Islam that has many brotherhoods and followers in Morocco, as well as in other countries in the Muslim world. Each Sufi brotherhood is centered around its own Sufi saint, or founder, and each has its own music and trance rituals—some of which have been influenced by the Gnawa rituals and vice versa. In contrast to orthodox Islam, Sufism employs music, breathing exercises, and movement to induce ecstatic trance states as a form of union with Allah.

The Gnawa are not Sufi. Although their music is devotional by dint of the lyrics, their trance is not a means to merge with the Divine but rather a way to conciliate the spirits and rebalance the human-spirit relationship. Gnawas are, however, Muslim and probably were so before their displacement and enslavement. They are considered a brotherhood with unique therapeutic skills dedicated to healing the afflicted and the possessed, which they do through their lila rituals. They commune with and appeal to their ancestral spirits.

The Gnawa claim descent from Bilal, a freed Ethiopian slave who was the only black companion of the Prophet Mohammed and supposedly chosen by the Prophet to be the first *muezzin* (one who calls the devout to prayer from the minarets of mosques) because of his beautiful voice. This relationship may simply be symbolic, as Bilal's experience of slavery and redemption resonates with the

Gnawa's own historical experience and their linkage with him adds legitimacy to their Muslim lineage.

The *maâllem* (ritual master) officiates and leads his ensemble of Gnawa musicians in concert with a female officiant (*mqaddema,* meaning "one who goes before") who organizes, directs, and manages the physical accessories of the all-night lila. The ritual slaughter of an animal initiates the formalities. It is a central means of establishing contact with and propitiating the spirits. The drained blood is dabbed on the musicians' instruments as well as on their skin.

Attendees may meet at a private home, or at a shrine or a Gnawa center, and after dark, the celebrants parade out into the street while drumming, singing, and dancing. This procession, or overture, called *al-'Aada* (custom), begins when the mqaddema leads the assembled group outside bearing trays of offerings: incense, dates, and a bowl of milk. The unmarried women enter the procession singing and ululating as they carry lit candles. The musicians form a circle around the offerings, which have been placed on the ground, and invoke the spirits with their drumming, castanet playing, dancing, and singing of salutations. This noisy invocation is also a public announcement of the event to the neighborhood. It is a non-trance phase that marks a separation between the mundane world and the realm of the sacred by calling prayers upon the Prophet Mohammed, which also serves to purify the intentions of the musicians.

Afterward, the participants proceed back indoors for the main body of the lila, which will continue until dawn. The milk is a purifying substance and is sprinkled from the ceremonial bowl along the way, in the four corners of the room, the four cardinal directions, on the musical instruments of the Gnawa, and into the mouths of the Gnawa and participants.

Once inside, guests eat in shifts while the lila continues with a celebratory interlude in which the musicians dance, moving seamlessly from a circular formation to a line—in solos, pairs, and as a group—in a demonstration of acrobatic showmanship. Facing the maâllem, the musicians provide handclapping percussion as they perform this sustained aerobic dance that appears to be a competition with spins, jumps, fancy step work, deep squats, and layouts executed in a joyful, playful spirit. It is a preliminary warm-up—preparation for the serious business ahead of working the spirits.

The first section of this pre-trance interlude is called *Uled Bambara* (Children of Bambara) in which the maâllem and musicians sing homage to the spirits and saints of Bambara, the Gnawa ancestors, the saints of Islam, and then a formula praising the Prophet Mohammed. Bambara refers to the people and language of West Africa, notably Mali, which at its height as an empire (1200-1350 CE) encompassed much of the homeland of the Gnawa.

KAREN GREENSPAN

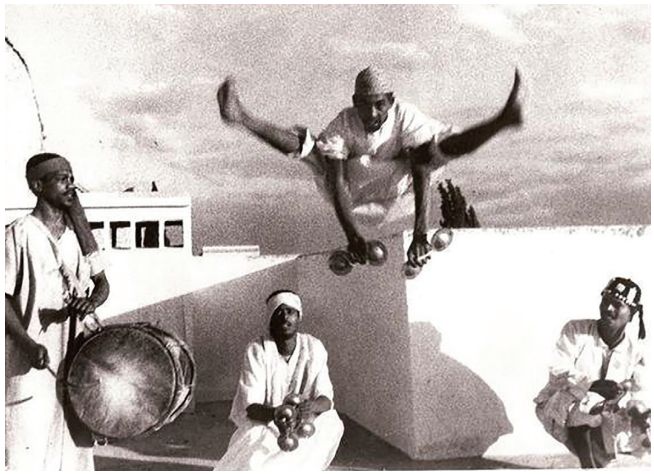
A Gnawa musician plays his tbal *(drum) at the entrance to The Citadel of Chellah Gardens in Rabat, the capital city of Morocco.*

The dancer/musicians take turns performing a solo hunting dance with a stick. The mimed movements recall the hunting tradition of their ancestors in Mali. This tribute narrates through song and dance the history of their ancestors, the experience of bondage, and finally redemption—which is accomplished through repeated liturgical requests for forgiveness. Healing through forgiveness is a repeated theme in the lyrics throughout the lila. The Uled Bambara section is considered secular entertainment rather than sacred, but the ceremony is moving forward on its spiritual path as the maâllem has transitioned to playing the guembri, the traditional Gnawa three-stringed lute, which is believed to commune with the spirits.

The words from the ritual song "The Sons of Bambara" describe the wrenching circumstances of the Gnawa's capture and enslavement:

> Tied in sacks they brought us, in the camel bags
> And they sold us in the wool market.
> May God pardon them.
> They took us from our country.
> They parted us from our parents.
> They brought us, alas, to the wool *suq* [market].
> And they sold us, children far from our country.

In the ritual song "Oh Sudan, Oh Mother", the words in-



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Internationally-recognized Gnawa musician Hassan Hakmoun is practicing in 1986 with fellow musician/dancers on the rooftop of a building in Marrakesh. Hakmoun is kneeling in the middle while his brother, Said, is performing repetitive rebounding jumps from deep squats.

dex the geography of the Gnawa's journey from abduction to bondage:

> Oh Sudan, Oh Sudan
> They brought me, they brought me
> They brought me from the Sudan
> They brought me by way of Bambara
> They brought me by way of Timbuktu
> From Sudan to Old Fez.

The word "Sudan" does not refer to the modern nation of Sudan, but to the lands of West Africa, as well as a general term meaning "the blacks." Timbuktu was the point from which caravans of slaves departed and traveled north across the Sahara for Morocco. In their songs, repeated invocations to the sons of Sudan, the Bambara, the spirits of the Fulani, and the Hausa reference the Gnawa roots within those three African groups.

The evening progresses onto a second entertainment, called *Negsha,* during which the qraqab are introduced into the instrumentation. The Negsha is significant for its commemoration of Gnawa maâllemin from recent history and the dedication of the ceremonial colored robes and veils.

The sacred, or trance, phase of the lila—the *ftuh arrahba,* pays tribute to the color-coded pantheon of Gnawa spirits. The traditional trance ceremony includes seven sections—each section dedicated to a group of ancestral spirits characterized by a color (white, light or sea blue, dark blue, red, green, black, and yellow—although there are some regional variations) derived from a function in nature and the spirit world. Experienced trancers are accustomed to their possessing spirits and their requirements. The mqaddema dispenses scarves or robes in the appropriate color for each spirit so the participants trance while draped in the colors of their possessors. Each spirit group requires a specific incense (musk, ambergris, sandalwood, benzoin, myrrh), ritual foods or sacrifice (milk, bread, dates, orange flower water, raw meat), and specific songs. The maâllem sanctifies his guembri with the smoke from the incense in preparation for calling forth and communicating with the mluk. The music for the trance phase of the lila is played exclusively on the guembri and the qraqab.

The rhythm of each section identifies each spirit. The guembri announces the musical motto of the spirit. Trancers recognize the music of the spirit that calls them and move toward a space near the musicians to inhale the familiar incense and initiate their dance. The mqaddema may drape a cloth in the appropriate spirit color around their shoulders or head as they come forward. The trance movements are often dictated by the music's rhythms and frequently begin with repetitive rhythmic actions that grow larger and more full-bodied. The trancers' body movements tend to become involuntary, erratic, and convulsive at the climax. There are also some spirits that are appeased with very specific actions and dances (challenging feats including handling fire, knives, and water). The mqaddema supports and attends the trancers so they don't get hurt when they lose physical control upon entering a state of trance.

The various spirit songs follow a pattern of starting slowly in a ceremonial tempo with the maâllem chanting and eliciting responsive singing. At a certain point, the tune becomes completely instrumental, employing a systematic accelerando and crescendo—effectively stirring up a heightened emotional state. This technique, along with the olfaction stimulated by the incense, and prolonged repetitive head movements, works to trigger the desired trance state. These rituals and gesture movements are learned through exposure (children attend from an early age) and practiced with the intention of entering a trance. However, people have reported that upon attending a ceremony without previous trance experience, they were involuntarily seized to trance to a spirit when its music was played. The musicians are attentive to the cues of the dancer and play for as much time as the dancer needs to negotiate a relationship with the spirit. The maâllem must sense when a trancer needs more energy from the guembri or when to hold back. He manipulates the volume, rhythmic accents, and phrasing to make sure each person attains a fulfilled trance.

In a curious mix of Muslim piety and ancestral spirit worship, the song lyrics are partly in Arabic and in Gnawa. Between each Gnawa spirit section, the maâllem leads prayers in Arabic, requesting healing from the wounds of slavery— "May God forgive. May God heal." In a song to the spirit Sidi Musa, the lyrics begin: "There is no God but God, Musa / There is no God but God." Each line that follows contains a verse, using a Gnawa name followed by the refrain in Arabic, "*La illaha illa allah,*" which means

Sidi Hammou, oil, 31 x 33 cm, by Gnawa artist Mohamed Tabal. During a lila, dancers are dressed in red when they propitiate Sidi Hammou, the Spirit of the Slaughterhouse.

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Gnawa musician Hassan Hakmoun, who grew up in Marrakesh, now lives in the United States and performs internationally, as shown here in Senegal in 2011. He is the son of a mqademma, *meaning "one who goes before," who organizes, directs, and manages the physical accessories of an all-night lila. He plays an amplified* guembri, *or* sintir, *but his music is steeped in Gnawa devotional tradition.*

"There is no God but God"—the Muslim *shahada* (testament of faith). This blend of the foundational Muslim prayer with Gnawa narrative is an interesting example of the mosaic of diversity within Islam.

Of interest is Sidi Musa, one of the Gnawa spirits who was a living saint in the thirteenth century and is the Gnawa patron saint of travel. Sidi Musa and all the other spirits of the Musa (Musa is the word for Moses) pantheon are subject to the principal Musa spirit—the Prophet Moses of the Old Testament, and he is invoked in the lyrics of the opening *Aada* procession. Islam considers the earlier prophets from the Old and New Testaments to be authentic messengers of God. Associated with the color light blue—for the sea, Sidi Musa is invoked with libations of water and by a dance performed balancing a bowl of water with mint or anise on one's head while executing movements that resemble swimming motions. For the Gnawa, as with black slaves and their descendants in America, there is an affinity with the Prophet Moses, who freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt by parting the waters and leading them through the sea to freedom.

Although the Gnawa community has long been marginalized within Morocco's Arabo-Berber-centric society, it has gained respect, visibility, and interest from collaborations initiated by Western musicians such as Randy Weston, Pharoah Sanders, and others eager to connect with their historical roots by integrating ancestral sounds into their music. Peter Gabriel and others have brought Gnawa musicians to public attention through their pursuit and production of world music projects. This outside recognition has ushered the Gnawa onto the global music stage with international tours and participation in Moroccan and international music festivals. Expatriate Gnawa musicians have emerged and developed Gnawa music outside of its ritual context—enlarging it around the original themes, adding varied instruments, and using technology for concert presentation, again widening the audience attracted to its message and sound. But no matter how far this music travels from its roots and geography, the sound that inspires so many musicians and listeners, with its hypnotic rhythms and soulful melodies, was borne of suffering and the impulse to transcend.

Karen Greenspan, a New York City-based dance writer, researches and observes contemporary and traditional dance forms in the United States and abroad. A former professional dancer, she is a frequent contributor to *Natural History*. Most recently, she wrote "Cultural Diplomacy" [6/2016].