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Crossing Paths:

Musical and Ritual Interactivity between the Ḥamadsha and Gnawa in Sidi Ali, Morocco

Christopher Witulski

Ritual practice in Morocco is animated by a rich collection of music from diverse religious brotherhoods. All-night ceremonies from the *ʿīsāwa*, *ḥamadsha*, *gnawa*, and *jilāla* step outside the bounds of normative Islamic practice and engage healing spirit possession (*jadba*) in conjunction with praise poetry and supplications to Allah and his prophets, but each does so differently. This does not even touch upon the wealth of brotherhoods and sisterhoods whose devotional chants bring about a different condition: *al-ḥāl*, the extinction of the self into Allah's oneness (*tawḥīd*). The lines between all of these groups, their ritual practices, and their musical expression can be blurry, as can their claims to legitimacy within the wider Moroccan Muslim community. Even so, sounds associated with each permeate local, regional, and national identity through the convergence of heritage and popular culture. Even the most historically marginalized or maligned brotherhoods pervade festivals, popular music of all types, and each other's ceremonies.

This article examines processions as sites of, first, music from private rituals entering public space and, second, arenas for innovation within both popular culture and ritual practice. In it, I draw upon my experiences with members of the ḥamadsha and gnawa communities in Fez and Meknes as they participate in the annual pilgrimage in Sidi Ali, a small town in the nearby mountains. By carving out distinct, yet intersecting, pathways for repeated processions, ensembles from these and other brotherhoods geographically map the diversity of religious practice within this town and its surrounding region. They also navigate the demands of clients and listeners by performing a type of ritual work that is related to, but distinct from, the all-night ceremonies that they host throughout the year.

My research is based on two and half years of fieldwork in Morocco, including three visits to the annual pilgrimage in Sidi Ali between 2007 and 2013. I argue that processions such as the ones I describe influence and make clear the tastes of listeners. Whether religious insiders or noninitiated listeners, these audiences provide an opportunity for the musicians who animate the pilgrimage. Ritual practitioners, in turn, adapt to meet those tastes on performance stages and in homes during ceremonies. Not only do they occasionally use musical ideas from other traditions, but the Sidi Ali pilgrimage has given rise to brotherhoods going so far as to borrow each other's spirits.

Much scholarship about local Islamic practice in Morocco focuses on differentiation. In broad strokes, classic anthropological writings such as those by Clifford Geertz and Dale Eickelman identify generalities that make Moroccan Islam distinct from practices that are more

geographically central: they place Morocco as a periphery.¹ Other scholars, such as Vincent Crapanzano, Mehdi Nabti, Bertrand Hell, Deborah Kapchan, and Ben Yarmolinsky, look closely at specific practices, noting the wealth of diversity within local systems of belief.² This focus on difference, manifest in either specific particularities or regional generalization, sets boundaries around religious practices that do not always match the expectations of practitioners, listeners, and clients. While the rising influence of reformist conservatism pushes back against local variation or innovation within dogma and worship across Morocco's neighborhoods, many view the contested religious music and rituals of diverse local brotherhoods as compelling, even entertaining.

To this end, the scholarship surprised me as I began the earliest stages of my own fieldwork. In my preparation, I had naively misunderstood much of the scholarship, failing to recognize the porous boundaries that exist between what seemed to be rigidly defined practices.³ I did not recognize the importance of daily life's experiences to those who enter into ritual moments, no matter the tradition. I assumed—wrongly—that ritual and enjoyment are incompatible and that religious boundaries are firm and well guarded. My time spent in Morocco, as well as reflections on my experiences in religious communities in the United States, quickly corrected my perspectives. The processions that opened ceremonies and crossed each other's paths in Sidi Ali proved to be powerful literal and figurative moments emphasizing this permeability.

Furthermore, these processions reflect on Morocco's import within the broader anthropological study of pilgrimage and religion. Whereas many ethnographers orienting a functional approach to religious life—those cited above, as well as Bernard Lortat-Jacob, Paul Rabinow, and many others—have found important context in Moroccan cities and rural areas, these noisy sacred moments simultaneously lower certain boundaries between faith variants, locality, and class.⁴ They open the opportunity for a *communitas* while reinforcing social boundaries, a seemingly contradictory pair of activities.⁵ In a sense, the crossing paths that influence taste, attitudes toward entertainment within sacred time and space, and the commercial potential of pilgrimage sites live in a contemporary moment. The ways in which processions

¹ Dale F. Eickelman, *Moroccan Islam: Tradition and Society in a Pilgrimage Center* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

² Vincent Crapanzano, *The Ḥamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Bertrand Hell, *Le tourbillon des génies: Au Maroc avec les Gnawa* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002); Deborah Kapchan, *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Mehdi Nabti, "La confrérie des Aïssâwa du Maroc en milieu urbain. Les pratiques rituelles et sociales du mysticisme contemporain" (Ph.D. diss., Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2007); Ben Yarmolinsky, "Some Remarks on Jilala Music from Tangier, Morocco," in *The Arab-African and Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies*, ed. R. Kevin Lacey and Ralph M. Coury (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

³ Crapanzano's discussion of the *ḥāḍra gnawiyya* in *The Hamadsha* (p. 209) is an exception—one of the scholarly approaches to these musics that recognizes the permeability of musical and ritual practice.

⁴ Bernard Lortat-Jacob, *Musique et fêtes au Haut-Atlas* (Paris: Mouton, 1980); Paul Rabinow, *Symbolic Domination: Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁵ See John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, "Introduction," in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 1–30; and Victor Turner, and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

reinforce certain elements of social life while operationalizing interactivity between others is a product of contemporary technology, mass mediation (of both music and religion), politics, and innumerable other influences. That is not to say that boundaries have not been contradictorily erected and transgressed in the past; they may have just been different ones, and altered in different ways.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these varying modes of personal and communal experience, these rituals serve to heal. Spirits that possess trancing bodies overcome physical, mental, or environmental troubles to improve one's life. Building and maintaining that supernatural relationship bring a powerful benefit, despite the potential of social marginalization from those who question the spirit's holy provenance. Social cohesion around these ritual processions similarly connects friends, family, and neighbors, again to the dismay of those who question the practices' legitimacy. Finally, the localization and history of Sufism in Morocco connect these groups and their music to regional, national, and supranational identities.⁶

The intensifying pressures of globalization and the music industry have brought dramatic changes to these disparate groups, and many have addressed new opportunities and hindrances in similar ways. The aforementioned reformism undermines their religious legitimacy, questioning the sacredness of musical possession rituals that are extracurricular to normative Islamic practice. The Moroccan state's efforts to promote festivals and tourism, however, show an adept hand at leveraging these local styles both as national symbols for foreign markets and as educational barriers against encroaching ideologies of terrorism.⁷

Musical opportunities also enact change across these groups and their listeners. Scholars of the gnawa have long noted the negotiations that individual ritual musicians have had to make in order to find successful careers in the music industry.⁸ In many ways, this population's successes lay out a pathway that others hope to follow, as I describe in the case of the ḥamadsha leader Abd al-Rahim Amrani below. The growing presence of these ritual sounds—music that is most commonly heard by noninitiates through processional marches in neighborhoods and increasingly on television—bleeds into popular music genres and even across perceived religious boundaries. Competition can turn fierce for ritual or wedding clients and staged gigs, making a nuanced balance of novelty and appeal against an adherence to ritual norms extraordinarily important.

Processions—ritual openings and closings that disseminate music loudly through quiet evenings—play a role in affecting tastes, just as they bring new audiences to ceremonies and other events. As they make ritual music public, many of the listeners practice or perform music

⁶ See, for example, Philip V. Bohlman, "Pilgrimage, Politics, and the Musical Remapping of the New Europe," *Ethnomusicology* 40/3 (1996): 375.

⁷ See Hicham D. Aidi, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 2014); Richard C. Jankowsky, "Absence and 'Presence': El-Hadhra and the Reconfiguration of Sufi Sound for the Tunisian Stage," Middle Eastern Studies Association National Conference, Washington, D.C., 2011; Jonathan Shannon, *Performing Al-Andalus: Music and Nostalgia across the Mediterranean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

⁸ Maisie Sum, "Staging the Sacred: Musical Structure and Processes of the Gnawa Lila in Morocco," *Ethnomusicology* 55/ 1 (2011): 77–111.

from other traditions. Tastes and interactions transgress perceived boundaries between brotherhoods. In this way, I argue, the life of ritual practices and the music that animates them adapts through time to remain relevant, even as it continues within strict doctrines. Popular music aesthetics weaves in and out of ceremonial music, borrowing freely from the ritual sounds and leaving its imprint on them. Each group's creative ideas and ritual approaches meander through those of the others: even spirits get borrowed and borrowed back. There are few places where this interactivity of otherwise bounded practices is as visible and audible—as loud—as it is in the annual pilgrimage to Sidi Ali.

The *Mūssem* at Sidi Ali

The ḥamadsha brotherhood traces its origins to Sidi Ali bin Hamdush and two of his acquaintances. His companion Sidi Ahmed Dghughi (about whom I will have more to say below) is important for one of the lesser-known strands of the ḥamadsha community, while a spirit named Lalla Aisha plays a central role in the belief and superstitions of many Moroccans, regardless of their affiliation with local Sufi practices. These three figures are important around the country, especially Lalla Aisha, who seems to have a cove or other sacred space in every city and village. In Fez, for example, there is a small bridge crossing a creek that runs through residential Fez Jdid, an area off the beaten tourist circuit. On one night every week, those who have a relationship with Lalla Aisha, who are possessed by this spirit or have a need to request its blessings, light candles and leave gifts under this footbridge.

The major pilgrimages to visit these figures' shrines and tombs orient toward the mountain town of Sidi Ali for the week of the *mūssem*, the days of pilgrimage surrounding the celebration of the Prophet Muhammed's birth. Taxi rides from Meknes to Sidi Ali go from 10 dirhams per seat each way to 20 during these events. Police stand guard at the entrance to the town, protecting against late-night arrivals of teenagers from Meknes looking for entertainment (and possibly trouble) after the bigger city's bars shut down for the night. The vast emptiness of Sidi Ali that I remember from "off-season" visits—huge deserted cafes, quiet views of the foothills below the mountain, and empty dirt patches that only hint at the lines of tents and shops that fill them during the *mūssem*—disappears during the pilgrimage. Peaceful Sidi Ali is overrun, packed shoulder to shoulder with pilgrims, merchants, mystic seers, herbalists, pop stars on stage in the main square, and ritual musicians whose processions crisscross the town's streets.

Many of these musicians rent apartments, whose prices skyrocket for this one week of the year. Residents leave town, hoping that the income from giving up their home to visit family or friends elsewhere will cover their costs for months to come. Hotels are packed, rooms rented by the bed. Basements and garages turn into overflow housing for those who were too late to book something with doors or who could not afford such luxuries. For visiting families, pilgrims, or those in need of ritual healing, beds are just beds: places to rest between ventures into the bustling town. For musicians, however, these home bases are temporary ritual spaces. They give a group the ability to contract clients and host ceremonies, healing those in need while widening their network of regional and national connections. For many—especially those who are not in Sidi Ali seeking to alleviate severe illness—the *mūssem* is a celebration and a reunion. It is both

fun and work, the kind of event whose long hours pass quickly and register as fond memories, stories to be told again and again.

Sidi Ali's Story

On December 12, 2012, a friend of mine named Abd al-Rahim Amrani called me to his home. He leads one of the foremost ḥamadsha troupes in Morocco and performs nationally. He and members of his group have traveled to Europe and the United States to demonstrate their ritual music, and his ensemble's members are ever-present on festival stages (and Facebook pages) across Morocco. Amrani had been scouring the Internet, looking at different references to the ḥamadsha. He found one on a blog by ethnomusicologist Timothy Fuson. Fuson shares background information and context for cassette tapes in his "stash," accumulating a trove of difficult-to-find information on the diverse genres of Morocco's popular music. One of his recent posts, focused on a tape made by Amrani over a decade before, had caught the performer's attention.⁹ Amrani wanted to give this online community some clarification on the central figures of ḥamadsha tradition.

There is a great deal of conjecture about Moroccan sainthood and the lives of spirits, especially in scholarship on the music and musicians that animate healing possession rituals.¹⁰ While Amrani's nuanced take is just one perspective on a highly contested subject, I prefer to risk foregrounding his story as it counters the description of Lalla Aisha as a she-demon that is threaded through much scholarship. That version, which is widely present in Morocco, speaks as a warning: the spirit most often appears to individuals, usually men, as a beautiful woman, seductive and jealous. Lalla Aisha demands sacrifice—ritual bloodletting—from her devotees, a practice that leads to self-mutilation and "head-slashing," where a trancing body cuts his or her own head with a knife, drawing blood.¹¹

While Amrani recognizes the prevalence of these questionable practices, he discards them as superstition. One of his major contributions to the ḥamadsha community is social and political: Amrani has successfully begun changing the stereotypes surrounding his musical tradition. A clearly articulated version of the ḥamadsha's origin story is one of many tools he wields in subtly adapting his approach to the contemporary theosophical and economic pressures that animate the profession of sacred music performance. I will return to some other elements of his toolkit later. Here I wish to give Amrani the floor:

⁹ The original post is available at <http://moroccantapestash.blogspot.com/2012/02/hamadsha-tunes-from-fez-lalla-aisha-in.html> (accessed Sept. 14, 2016).

¹⁰ Abdelhafid Chlyeh, ed., *L'univers des Gnaoua* (Casablanca: Pensée Sauvage, 1999); Mohammed Maarouf, *Jinn Eviction as a Discourse of Power: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Moroccan Magical Beliefs and Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Viviana Pâques, *La religion des esclaves: Recherches sur la confrérie marocaine des Gnawa* (Bergamo: Moretti and Vitali, 1991); Earle H. Waugh, *Memory, Music, and Religion: Morocco's Mystical Chanters* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005). See also Richard C. Jankowsky, *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) regarding the *stembeli*, a group in Tunisia that is similar to Morocco's gnawa.

¹¹ See Crapanzano, *The Ḥamadsha* and the resources cited in the previous note for more explicit descriptions of perceptions of Lalla Aisha that are common in Morocco.

The story of the ḥamadsha begins with Sidi Ali bin Hamdush in the 17th century (1135 *hijra*). Sidi Ali bin Hamdush, in that time, was studying at Qarawiyyin in Fez, where he lived. At one point during his religious studies, Sufi inspiration came to him and he fell into a trance. This state of Sufism was counter to his work in the *madrassa*. He stood at the door of scribes (a large entrance to Qarawiyyin) and sat, spitting on the ground. Afterward, he began to hate the life that he saw in his future, so he left Fez on foot and trekked across the nearby mountains until he reached the site of the current town that holds his namesake [Sidi Ali]. He arrived at a place called the Large Spring [Ain al-Kebir], where there was a tree near the water. Sidi Ali had a shaved head with a tuft of long hair hanging from the back, called a *gutaya*. He tied his rope of hair to a string of reeds and connected it to a branch on the tree, pulling it tightly so as to hold his head upright and keep him from falling asleep. He pulled out his prayer beads and recited. When sleep came over him [and his head began to sink down], the string tied between his hair and the branch above would pull him back up and awake, opening his eyes. He would continue to recite prayers and praise God.

Here, the first people to come to him were the Berbers who worked the nearby farms. They brought him a *handira* (a type of cloak now used in ḥamadsha processions). Then a man named Sidi Ahmed Dghughi, who lived nearby, came to him. He was a thief, stealing rams or roosters to feed himself due to his poverty. He was possessed and stole only to eat, like a wolf. He wandered the countryside until he found Sidi Ali sitting there, with his hair tied to a tree. He began to become close to Sidi Ali, bringing wood so he could warm this ascetic Sufi with fire. He became Sidi Ali's friend and would bring others to see him, providing food. [Sidi Ahmed] no longer stole and became [Sidi Ali's] servant. Day after day, Sidi Ahmed would return to see his master. Sidi Ali then sent Sidi Ahmed to the Sudan [the Sahara and West Africa]. He left by foot and visited the king of that region, Abd al-Malik bil-Khir. Bil-Khir gave him a servant woman named Aisha to bring to his master. We do not know his intention, if she was for marriage or as a slave for Sidi Ali.

For six months, Sidi Ahmed traveled to return to Sidi Ali with Ayisha. When he arrived at the place where Sidi Ali had been sitting, he found that his master was dead. Sidi Ahmed began to strike his head. In the poem "Al-Warshan" (The Carrier Pigeon), we hear the story. Then this Aisha, now without Sidi Ali there to marry or serve, began to do miracles of healing. She healed those who would come from afar: the desert, Algeria, and other cities across Morocco. She saw many people before suddenly disappearing. No one knew what happened to her or where she was. Her cave, however, remained and became a pilgrimage site just downhill from the *zawiya* [a Sufi lodge] of Sidi Ali bin Hamdush. Despite the fact that she was no longer there, her cavern became a place where one could bring a sacrifice, light candles, and be healed. This practice entered the tradition, as people would continue to visit and live within the proximity of her past and continuing miracles.

This is Aisha Sudaniyya. She was the one who came from the Sudan, from Bil-Khir, to Sidi Ali bin Hamdush.¹²

After Aisha disappeared, Sidi Ahmed Dghughi died, near to where Sidi Ali was buried. Those students and pilgrims who lived in this area decided that they would not entomb Sidi Ahmed in the vicinity of his master. A woman arrived who owned a mule. She said to them, take this mule of mine and put his body on top of it. Let the animal go. Where he stops, bury the body. They put the body on the mule and let him go. He walked and walked until he stopped next to a house on Jbal Dghugha, a nearby mountain. He sat and Sidi Ahmed fell from his back, into the house. This is where he is now buried.¹³

¹² Amrani here disassociates the ḥamadsha practice from more contentious ideas of Lalla Aisha's identity.

¹³ This history is my translation of Abd al-Rahim Amrani's contribution to the Moroccan Tape Stash blog. He requested that I pass it along to Timothy Fuson, who posted it to the site on January 13, 2013. See <http://moroccantapestash.blogspot.com/2013/01/hamadsha-information-and-jilala-tunes.html> (accessed Sept. 14, 2016).

Sidi Ali became a major pilgrimage site, first for the ḥamadsha and more recently, in the past four decades, for other musical ritual groups. Interactions between these groups are not exclusive to the bustling of the central square. The close proximity of heightened ritual and musical activity between so many types of practitioners, clients, and interested listeners in Sidi Ali during the annual mūssem creates a fertile space for innovations and opportunities. In part, these events and the processions that weave between them counter wider assumptions, sometimes unspoken, within both the scholarship on these religious traditions and the Moroccan communities who are not fully a part of them. Similarly, Amrani's successful career is born in part of his entrepreneurial skills, as are those of many artists from other traditions, like the gnawa, who circulate through this event and other similar ones. To better understand the importance of musical processions and ritual interactivity, however, it is important to grasp the idiosyncrasies of these individual brotherhoods.

The Music and Rituals of the Ḥamadsha and Gnawa

The Ḥamadsha Ceremony

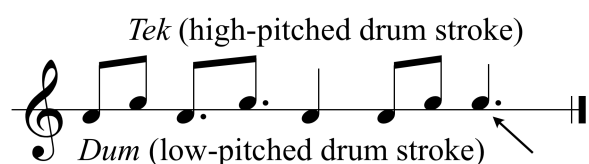
In January 2013, Abd al-Rahim Amrani invited a fellow researcher and me to watch and record a ḥamadsha ritual ceremony in a beautiful old house in Fez's *madina*, the old city. Because the event began in the evening and extended until morning, it was called a *līla* (literally, night). A man who grew up as a part of the Fez ḥamadsha community had moved away. He was returning to his family home and hosting a ceremony in hopes of alleviating certain stubborn health issues, problems that were potentially caused by Aisha or one of the other spirits that populate the ḥamadsha ceremony.

The *līla* began with an entrance from the street called an '*āda* or *dākhla*. Some ensemble members huddled around a small coal burner, warming the heads of large and small goblet-shaped drums. Some players took the larger ones, called *guwwāl*, and tossed them up on their shoulders, balancing the drums so that they could walk and play at the same time. The smaller ones, *t'arījāt*, were easy to hold in one hand and play with the other. The procession that opened the ceremony was a loud one. As with many of the other ceremonies I attended and participated in, we started around the corner, making our way through the alleys leading to the family home. The cutting sound of the *ghīṭa* (oboe-like double reed instruments) and the five-beat patterns of the drums invite trance before the ceremony even technically begins, creating bookends of *ḥāḍra*, heightened possession-oriented music, around the more esoteric middle segments of the event. By popular demand, older '*āda* repertoire has fallen away to give hosts and clients more opportunities to listen and trance to the energetic *ḥāḍra*. The music for this segment of the event used to be distinct from the rest of the repertoire; it is now rare to hear anything but the chants, rhythms, and melodies that close the ceremony. After all, *ḥuma*, *māshī ḥunna*, '*alī kīḥakmū*: they (the hosts) are the ones, not us (the performers), who get to decide. Ensembles respond to the changing tastes of their clients, going so far as to prioritize and remove different elements of the repertoire.

The musicians took their seats, forming a horseshoe between two columns in the ornately tiled home. Family and friends were huddled along opposing walls, occasionally sneaking into adjacent rooms for conversation or short naps. The group began the *hizb*, a rhythmically chanted statement of faith that lasts 15–20 minutes. It maneuvered through predetermined calls and responses, melodic changes, and varying rhythmic intensities. The *hizb* includes many “songs” familiar to the larger Muslim population, as well as those specific to the *ḥamadsha*. The chants concluded in a repetition of standard Sufi textures, highlighting the proximity between the brotherhood and the ceremonies common to others around the country and the larger Muslim world. Blessings (*baraka*) were exchanged as an ensemble member recited prayers over individuals in the room, proclamations that were punctuated by the group’s repetitive statements of the *fatiḥa*, lines from the Qur’ān that seal these blessings and close the early portion of the ceremony.

The next major division of the ceremony was filled by three segments: *al-ūnāsa al-kabīra*, *at-tṣiliyya*, and *al-ūnāsa al-ṣaghīra*. The two *ūnāsa* sections are made up of long sung poems, perhaps one or two each, more in the case of a larger ceremony. The poetry is interchangeable between them, but the *kabīra* (large) *ūnāsa* features the use of drums, while the *ṣaghīra* (small) section’s meter is beaten out with rhythmic clapping. While the *ḥāḍra* that follows is easily the most famous portion of the brotherhood’s ceremony, the *ūnāsa* poetry includes many of its notable texts. Amrani accompanied the singing on his *gimbrī*, a small plucked three-stringed instrument made of wood and animal skin.¹⁴ The meter that underlies these poems is a fascinating study in its own right, as it brings into question Western ideas of consistent pulse (Ex. 1). The *tṣiliyya* interlude contains a number of shorter songs and progresses in much the same way as *malḥūn* sung poetry, moving from slow to fast as the group progresses through different poems.¹⁵

Example 1: Meter for the *al-ūnāsa al-kabīra* and *al-ūnāsa al-ṣaghīra* segments of the *ḥamadsha* ceremony. Beams denote irregular “beats” that repeat in every cycle throughout the sung poems. The arrow marks the fifth “irregular beat,” which is delayed through a hesitation on the part of the drummers and clapping ensemble members.



The *ḥāḍra* and *ṣāf al-gimbrī* that comprise the final third of the ritual return to straightforward metric groupings of five beats. The *ḥāḍra*, which was “previewed” in the opening ‘āda entrance, shifts the focus of the ceremony from praise of Allah and the Prophet to an

¹⁴ While this instrument is similar to one used by gnawa, as described below, there is no indication of derivation. Instead, they are both examples of a general type of string instrument construction—animal hide stretched over a wooden body—that is popular in many Moroccan styles.

¹⁵ Melanie Autumn Magidow, “Multicultural Solidarity: Performances of Malhun Poetry in Morocco” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2013); Philip D. Schuyler, “Malhun: Colloquial Song in Morocco,” *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 6, *The Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 495–500.

invitation for Aisha or other spirits to possess and heal participants. This is where the ḥamadsha most explicitly diverge from the more widely accepted esoteric Moroccan brotherhoods. At the ceremony I attended, the ghīṭa players, who had been sitting in the stairway enjoying a leisurely meal, smoking, and drinking tea, returned. They took up their instruments and stood on couches that abutted the walls to fill the room with their piercing sound, as I saw them do in other līla events. The effect was jarring, overwhelming, and far more powerful than when the ghīṭa players were outdoors. Everyone, now standing, crowded around the drummers. When someone fell into a trance, bending down at the waist or crawling on the floor, the drummers and others circled, intensifying the sound and, through it, the possession's healing potential.

At the slow starting tempo, the tension between some drummers' "swing" and the "straight" subdivisions accentuated the gradual increase of speed during the segment's 20 or 30 minutes. The pacing of ghīṭa melodies quickened, with long notes giving way to repetitive motives and drumbeats growing in intensity, density, and uniformity. By the end, the sweat-filled room fell into a sort of catharsis, the ḥāḍra complete. In the long ṣāf al-gimbrī that followed, Amrani pulled his gimbrī back out to play and sing melodies of eighth notes grouped in twos and threes. The ensemble stood in a line, singing the refrains, while one member, Abd al-Wahab, the eldest of the group, beat out the 5/8 pattern on the guwwāl. Occasionally, the group punctuated the song with coordinated barefoot stomping against the tile floor, moving forward as a front, dipping together, and gesturing as if shooting an arrow across the room. This timbre continued the trance, allowing Aisha or others a "cool" (*bārid*) possession following the intensity of the "hot" (*skhūn*) ḥāḍra. The homeowner, dressed in white, stared blankly around the large room, occasionally pounding his head on walls and pillars, bringing about the blood that so pleases Lalla Aisha.

There is much more in the ḥamadsha ritual worth exploring, starting with social structures, its historically marginalized status, and the contemporary pressures on both spiritual belief and economic realities. In Sidi Ali, however, the ḥāḍra processions are only a part of the cacophonous landscape. They cross paths with many others, both aurally and physically, just as do their listeners and followers. To better contextualize the interactions that proceed from these transversals, let us now consider the gnawa ceremony's music.

The Gnawa Ceremony

While they share certain general ritual characteristics, the gnawa ceremony and its music are quite distinct from those of the ḥamadsha. The event's purpose is to incite trance in clients and other participants. This trance comes to be when a possessing spirit inhabits a listener's body, moves to the open space facing the sitting musicians, breathes in the incense, and "syncs up" with the music—what Fuson calls "co-enunciation."¹⁶ Like the ḥamadsha event, the ritual progresses in stages, with the first being a dākhla, also called an 'ada. This "entrance" begins in front of the client's home, in the street or around the corner. The *m'alem*, the musician who leads the ritual, plays improvised rhythmic patterns on a marching drum called a *tbāl*, while one of his

¹⁶ Timothy Dale Fuson, "Musicking Moves and Ritual Grooves across the Moroccan Gnawa Night" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2009).

most trusted *ḍrārī* (ensemble members; literally, “dependents”) plays a consistent accompaniment on a second, larger *ṭbāl*. The rest of the ensemble, usually from two to five other *ḍrārī*, sing to welcome the spirits to the event while dancing in lines or circles, surprising the growing crowd with occasional virtuosic flourishes. They do all this while maintaining loud rhythmic motion on the *qarāqīb*, pairs of iron castanets tied together with leather at one end (Fig. 1). Sacrificial and ritual paraphernalia get blessed here, as does the client in need of healing, before the entire crowd makes its way through the doorway and into the home. After concluding this segment, the ensemble take a short break to set up their space, sit along one wall of the open room, and prepare themselves for the long night ahead.

Figure 1: *Left*, M’alemīn Abd al-Rzaq and Hamid, two gnawa musicians, playing the *ṭbāl* as they process toward Aisha’s cavern in Sidi Ali. *Right*, Rashid, a member of Abd al-Rzaq’s ensemble, using the *qarāqīb* during a *līla* ceremony in Fez. Photos by author.



The gnawa ritual ceremony in the Fez-Meknes region of Morocco is called a *līla* or ‘*ashiya* (night or evening), depending on its timing. Whereas there is a history of multiday events, today’s rituals usually begin around 12 P.M. and end eight to ten hours later, hence a “night.” The ‘*ashiya* “evening” begins earlier, between 8 and 10 P.M., and ends after midnight, allowing for some sleep before the next day’s work. Once the ensemble is situated indoors, other preparations need to be solidified for an effective (and efficient) evening. The *muqaddima*, usually a woman who is in charge of the ritual itself, prepares the *bkhūr* incense burner and gathers her bag of brightly colored garments, cloths, and head scarves for the segments to come. The ritual space, the empty tile floor immediately in front of the musicians, is cleared; chairs are set, lining the walls of the room for guests; and tea, cookies, or other snacks get passed around for the audience of guests.

Those who come to the gnawa for healing are not trying to exorcise spirits. They have a relationship with their spirit and need to host a ritual so that their sacrifice will appease it. This can lead to blessings (*baraka*) or alleviate problems in life: health issues, work trouble, family

conflict, and so on.¹⁷ The gnawa work with many spirits, who are organized by color. The white spirits are noble descendants of the Prophet Muhammed. The red ones relate to Sidi Hamu, a butcher. Two sets of blue spirits are the *samawiyyin* of the sky and those related to water, especially Sidi Musa, a local saint whose shrine sits along the Atlantic coast in Salé, just outside Rabat. Along with a color, each set of spirits has a scent. The incense that sits in front of the musicians feeds the spirits, facilitating their efforts to overtake the body of the possessed. The second main section of the ritual ceremony is called the *frāja*, the entertainment. Here the ensemble, now seated, has put aside the *ṭbāl*, and the *m'alem* plays a three-stringed instrument called the *ḥajḥūj*. The songs and dances of this segment recount the gnawa history in slavery, narrate an African ancestry, and welcome the spirits into the main portion of the evening's event.¹⁸

The longest section of the ceremony moves through the series of colors, allowing each set of spirits (*mlūk*, or “owners”) the opportunity to overtake those bodies in the room that carry a relationship with them. In Fez and Meknes, this begins with the white spirits, then moves to the black, blue, red, and so on, through eight sets. While there are subtle differences in the musical character of each segment, most of the songs have similar structures and oscillate between strophic sections and call-and-response refrains. Some are quite short, while others extend until the *mlūk* are satisfied. Rhythmically, the *qarāqib* gradually increase in tempo for a set of songs before the ensemble comes to a climax, rests, and begins anew, more slowly. The vast majority of this musical repertoire is in one of two pentatonic scales that are idiomatic to the main bass-like stringed instrument, the *ḥajḥūj*; features the high belting that attracts so many blues and jazz artists to the tradition's music; and is in a constant duple meter. Some exceptions do exist, however, and they are both popular and important. Arguably, the most notorious of these are the music and ritual segment dedicated to Lalla Aisha, to which I will return below.

These rituals, and those of many other religious brotherhoods and sisterhoods in Morocco, are enclosed in the privacy of homes or behind the doors of a *zawiya* tucked in one of Fez's twisting alleyways. Most of the population does not know much about these groups, only that they exist. Sometimes misinformation or out-of-date understandings of the groups tint the stereotypes that surround them. For many, the fact that they innovate on or add to Islamic theology (*bida'*) makes their practices questionable, even suspect. Healing trances and possessing spirits certainly do throw them into stark relief against advancing conservatism throughout the city.¹⁹ There are times, though, when these groups noisily proclaim their space within the public sphere. With drums and chants, even *ghīṭa* players on horseback, adorned by huge flags (*'alim*), these brotherhoods step out to celebration. They mark religious festivals or holy days as musical and spiritual symbols of Moroccan culture. These contested groups become

¹⁷ For examples of spirit healing in other African contexts, see Steven M. Friedson, *Dancing Prophets: Musical Experience in Tumbuka Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Paul Stoller, *Stranger in the Village of the Sick: A Memoir of Cancer, Sorcery, and Healing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ See Emilio Spadola, *The Calls of Islam: Sufis, Islamists, and Mass Mediation in Urban Morocco* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

a heritage to be celebrated. Families come out, kids join the parade, young men mimic the trancelike motions of their elders as they walk by—all this while holding cell phone cameras out for the inevitable selfie. Processions are fun, they are sacred, and they are a spectacle to behold. The ‘īsāwa, ḥamadsha, gnawa, and many others who process across city squares and squeeze through alleys—connecting public spaces to sacred ones—mirror their ritual in these larger celebrations. The longer walks are extensions of the dākhla or ‘āda that open and close their ceremonies. They bring the neighborhood announcement of a līla to a larger public and to the ears and hearts of listeners who may rarely hear or even care about such things.

Thanks in part to these events and their importance as ideals of locality, of “Moroccan-ness,” the sounds of the processions have entered popular culture. Through innovative musical collaborations, they layer diverse critical meanings and sounds onto hip hop²⁰ and electronica²¹ for Moroccan and foreign audiences alike. Owners of CD stalls compile ethnographic and studio-based fusion versions of the songs from these brotherhoods for the entertainment of neighbors and cab drivers. Ritual musicians frequent festival sites for domestic and international tourists alike. As contested as the religious ceremonies are, many people love the music that animates them. The processions, therefore, are what draw this wider attention toward these different traditions. Whether moving through a neighborhood for a household ceremony or circumscribing a city on an important holiday, they pull crowds into the street and send the music toward new audiences. The growing popularity of so many types of ritual procession music leads to other forms of innovation: commercial, musical, and ritual. There are few moments in the religious calendar where these three coincide as directly and powerfully as they do during the intersecting processions of the pilgrimage to Sidi Ali.

Processing through Sidi Ali

The Ḥamadsha Procession

During the years when I visited Sidi Ali for the mūssem, I joined ḥamadsha and gnawa groups for a number of “descents.” These walks wove from up high, usually the parking lot for incoming taxis or a large tent atop a hillside dotted with many like it that serve as temporary ritual sites. They proceeded down, through the crowds, to the town’s central square, an open space between stalls selling animals like goats, chickens, and even cows for sacrifice, ritual candles, and other paraphernalia. No matter what time of day, the square was packed when one of these large processions came through. People resting in nearby apartments or watching rituals in the rented-out garages would come out to take part in the activity. There was always a stage set up next to a part of the old fortress wall that bordered the small square, but that was exclusively for popular or other nonritual sounds: the music of violinists, ‘ūd players, and singers

²⁰ Kendra Salois, “Make Some Noise, Drari: Embodied Listening and Counterpublic Formations in Moroccan Hip Hop,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87/4 (2014): 1017–48.

²¹ Amrani and his ensemble recently collaborated with DJ Click and released a video that is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzqoS_r-E8Y.

Moving down the hill, the procession passed coffee shops, small hotels, and apartment buildings (which were mostly rented out as hotels for the week). Those who were safely guarded from the raucous and growing mob of musicians, perched on patios and balconies, were forced to stop their conversation as the incoming mass of music drowned them out. The sheet grew heavier, with coins tossed from all directions in exchange for shouted blessings. The muqqadim appreciatively received each piece of baraka and returned it in kind. He would outstretch his hands toward the giver and recite a litany of blessings, each punctuated by an “Amīn” from the crowd. One older woman leaning far out of a second floor window carefully aimed her coins as she threw them down into the green sheet. Throughout a long exchange, the ensemble blessed her and hers before moving on.

We continued into the tight market that connected the square to the front of Sidi Ali’s shrine and tomb. Unlike the earlier shops that claimed nearby open spaces to sell animals alongside rosewater, candles, and incense, these tiny booths lined both sides of the skinny pathway. The drummers at the head of the crowd stopped and formed a tight circle at a fork, intensifying their playing within the tiny space. The acoustics were dramatically altered from the streets above: the corrugated steel formed a roof over the connecting shops. This last leg forced those who were following into a thinner line, slowing the procession as it approached Sidi Ali bin Hamdush’s tomb and shrine. Sellers took advantage of the new pace, hawking rosewater, incenses, soaps, and other small items to passersby.

By the time I emerged from the dark stream of shops, the musicians had circled in front of the shrine. It seemed even brighter in the sun than before, thanks in part to the slow push through the shade. The building was under construction, but nonetheless, this was the procession’s destination. The circle widened as men and women entered it, some falling into a trance to the music of the ḥāḍra. The procession’s closure mirrored that of a ritual. Ghīṭa blaring over accelerating drums pounding out five-beat patterns, an increasing tempo blurring the lines between even pulses and a momentum-building swing feel: the excitement grew to a peak while those within and outside of the circle moved in sync, bending at the waist and breathing heavily, fully engaging in this moment. Then, with a long tone from the ghīṭa players, it ended. Some hellos were exchanged and, after almost two hours together, the crowd scattered, returning to their families or, perhaps, to check out some of the shops’ wares from along the way.

The Gnawa Procession

Whereas this ḥamadsha procession circumscribed the town, moving directly—albeit slowly—from the parking lots for incoming busses through the town square, and down to Sidi Ali bin Hamdush’s shrine, the gnawa wound through a somewhat more marginal route. In the summer of 2012, I joined a pair of ritual leaders from the region’s major cities on the pilgrimage to Sidi Ali. Abd al-Rahim Abd al-Rzaq had been working with me on my research with the gnawa in Fez since 2010. He often took the short train ride to Meknes to join his brother Hamid, playing a variety of important supportive roles as his brother led ceremonies there. Abd al-Rzaq and Hamid make the trek from Meknes to Sidi Ali for the pilgrimage each year, and this time they invited me to join them.

I arrived alone after navigating the train-to-taxi semipublic transportation system into the remote town. I was coming from another major *mūssem* in Tamesloght, outside of Marrakech. While that southern town was renowned for its gnawa community, the *mūssem* was more of a festival than I had expected. In the small desert settlement, there were crowded markets, concerts, and popular games of “bowling for packs of cigarettes” or “get the ring around the soda bottle.” In the cool evenings, I wandered around the town listening to gnawa music pouring from homes and religious sites, at least until it was time to grab another taxi back into Marrakech. This had been my first *mūssem* experience, though it felt familiar as it aligned with discussions of Sufi festival-ritual practices elsewhere.²²

Upon arriving in Sidi Ali, I quickly realized that I had no idea where to find my hosts. I started asking questions of the many shopkeepers who had set up tents along the road from the parking lot to the town square. It speaks to the community surrounding these events that this worked, eventually. After a few teas and small meals in the large tents, I found Abd al-Rzaq’s rented garage. This space was a garage in the most literal sense: a garage door rolled up to reveal a large square pink room with a concrete floor that housed the ensemble, family members, and others in the “entourage.” Other years, Abd al-Rzaq’s crew rented floors of apartment buildings for their things, but this one was a bit more makeshift. The room would serve through the week in Sidi Ali as a base of operations, sleeping quarters, and a site for hosting rituals for potential clients.

Perhaps because they lacked the space to hold larger rituals, Abd al-Rzaq, his brother, and their ensemble members often disappeared. I found them processing through the streets and began to follow them, only to learn that they carried on a grueling ethic of constant ceremonial descents from the mountainside to Lalla Aisha’s cavern. They would begin at the top of the hill, in a tent that was one of a row of many identical tents. Most of these temporary ritual spaces housed *ḥamadsha* ceremonies of the *dghūghiyīn* line, those who followed Sidi Ahmed Dghughi, the colleague, friend, or slave of Sidi Ali, depending on the particular history you follow. (The procession described above was carried out by members of the more standard *‘aliyīn* line, followers of Ali himself.) These tents were off of the paved roads, muddy in the rain, and dirty from the wind. The road up this hill passed the rear entrances of restaurants and cafes, pool halls and dance clubs. On one side were trash heaps and toilets, on the other a line of tents and beautiful views of the countryside below.

The topmost tent was our starting point. In it, the crew of gnawa ensemble members sang and played songs from the opening segments of the ceremony. They circled a client in need of healing or blessings, singing to her and her gifts—those items that were going to be carried down to Aisha’s cavern and left there for the spirit. Woven bowls held cartons of milk, candles, sweets, money, and all sorts of other items, sometimes a chicken or other meat. They were covered with a cloth for the walk and given to a man with long hair and a staff. He was dressed as Buhali, one of the spirits from the gnawa pantheon, a wandering mystic who wore patchwork cloth. The

²² As an example, see Michael Frishkopf, “Tarab in the Mystic Sufi Chant of Egypt,” in *Colors of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East*, ed. Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 233–69.

group then flowed out into the dirt road, loudly chanting over the *ṭbāl* (large marching drums) and the *qarāqib* (iron castanets).

Our Buhali led us down the path, around a sharp corner, and down a steep dirt incline. This pulled into a route that spoked off of the main square, where we were heading, and ran between the stables and pens of animals that were for sale, for sacrifice. We passed the uninterested goats, lambs, cows, and chickens, suddenly emerging from the darkness and onto the busy plaza. Even late into the night, other gnawa groups were intersecting here, as were *ḥamadsha*, *ʿīsāwa*, *jilala*, and *rahiliyya* groups, some men, some women, some mixed—all coming and going in different directions. Many, though, were heading the same way that we were: to Aisha’s cavern. Popular music, *shʿabī* music of the type that animates so many weddings and other events, blared from the stage that was erected against the old city wall each year for the week.

We turned down from the square in a different direction, away from Sidi Ali’s shrine. The road became dirt once more as we passed whitewashed buildings that were either under construction or in disarray (it was hard to tell the difference). One of these buildings had an unfinished concrete-block basement that served a gnawa ensemble from Casablanca as they hosted large rituals just across the way from the cavern. They brought large rugs to cover the concrete—marking out a ritual space—while listeners leaned against the long cinderblock walls and sat on more carpets, which were rolled to serve as couches in the evenings and then unrolled to be beds after the rituals concluded each night.

A hard left brought the group to another crowded space, this one smaller than the main plaza above. At the far end were gates and a sign forbidding cameras. This was the entrance to the cavern, which was little more than a pathway on the mountain that cut alongside the town, over a stream. In the darkness, the ensemble circled once again to raise the energy of their blessings over the gifts, the *baraka* for Lalla Aisha. Our Buhali passed the crowds at the gates and was gone, continuing his work out of sight.

On another morning, one of the ensemble members walked with me around town. We were following a pathway from the other side of the mountain and ended up over a stream littered with empty milk cartons and other trash, or so it seemed. My companion for this pleasant walk led me forward to an alcove under a long line of tarps. Every niche on the walls was filled with an extinguished candle, a gift from the previous night for Aisha. This was her cavern, where the men and women asking for blessings emptied their baskets, pouring milk and throwing sugar or other goods down into the stream where she is said to live, flowing past Sidi Ali’s eternal home.

Interactions and Interactivity

The sounds of ritual are often assumed to be entrenched in some way: in history, in tradition, in consistency, even in dogma. But rituals change, as do ritual leaders and followers. In the case of the groups that animate the cacophony of Sidi Ali’s *mūssem*, music is an important force in these changes. But people, not music, cause change. Listeners and performers work to meet each other during events or on stages. Listeners and performers borrow ideas, tastes, sounds, and spirits from others. What follows is one of many examples in which a back-and-forth dramatically

changes a variety of borrowers, communities, and even a supernatural being, or at least her affiliation.

In his book on the ḥamadsha, Vincent Crapanzano categorizes “named” and “unnamed” spirits.²³ Those who have distinct personalities within the tradition’s ritual are the same beings who frequent gnawa ceremonies: Sidi Hamu, Sidi Musa, Sidi Mimun, and so on. Following the initial possession, those who “have” these spirits build relationships with them, attending ceremonies and carrying out sacrifices both to maintain the benefits of baraka and to ward off the problems that the spirits can bring on when they are ignored. Even though the gnawa are the specialists who have worked with these figures, their incorporation into the rituals of the ḥamadsha and ‘īṣāwa shows a certain pragmatism in these brotherhoods.²⁴ They are able to perform a service by working with the gnawa spirits, and they are generally successful in doing so. Someone with Sidi Hamu has a few options, but if the situation is dire, he or she likely needs to go directly to the gnawa.

The rise of Lalla Aisha to prominence across the country is more recent. In the mid-1970s, a gnawa m’alem from Meknes brought his ensemble to Sidi Ali for the mūssem. M’alem Omar was the first to do so. Before this point, the event was solely ḥamadsha, still busy but more homogenous than it is today. Omar’s ensemble was able to find interested clients, but they wanted to hear some of the music from Aisha. She was not a part of the gnawa ceremony, but the m’alem knew a bit of her poetry from his experience with the ḥamadsha in his nearby home town. As the story goes, he sang part of the ḥamadsha poem called “Ḍmān al-Blād” to close his gnawa event. Instead of one or two trancers, as is the norm for most of the līla, the ritual space was overflowing with those falling under Aisha’s control. This was such a powerful moment that it caught on, likely as a reaction to requests from ritual clients and audiences, and m’alemīn around the region learned the piece.

In contemporary rituals, “Aisha Hamdushiyya” is the most potent moment of the gnawa ritual. In the Fez-Meknes region, it appears at the very end, a climactic close to an evening of trance. The hosts turn out the lights as many, if not most, of the women present (and occasionally men) get up to fall into the most violent possessions of the evening. Simultaneously, the men and woman are swaying at the waist, flinging their hair around, rolling on the floor and screaming in pain and ecstasy, just as in the ḥāḍra of the ḥamadsha ritual. When the musicians finish, these trancing bodies return to consciousness, stand, and return to their seats for a small breakfast of ḥummuṣ. Others simply put on their shoes, turn, say their goodbyes, and head home for the coming day of work.

Abd al-Rahim Amrani, the ḥamadsha leader who explained Sidi Ali’s history earlier, describes the contemporary gnawa version of “Aisha Hamdushiyya” as both a boon to his tradition and a misrepresentation of its music. The poem (*qaṣida*), one that appears regularly in the ḥamadsha līla, is long, though its melody and rhythm are comprised of melodically repetitive phrases. Like so much of the music, it is in quintuple meter and follows a melody that appears regularly in the ṣāf al-gimbrī segment. When I asked Amrani about the differences between the

²³ Crapanzano, *The Ḥamadsha*, 156–57.

²⁴ Crapanzano, *The Ḥamadsha*, 147–50; Nabti, “La confrérie des Aïssâwa du Maroc en milieu urbain,” 406.

two versions, he explained that the gnawa simply do not know the poem well enough. They take bits and pieces from one section. Moreover, he claims, they cannot sing the complex five-beat pattern. Instead, they sing it “in one”: not 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, but 1, 1, 1, 1, 1

At first this claim confused me, or at least made me wonder if Amrani’s understanding of meter aligned with mine. But after listening to a few more performers, I noticed that many gnawa singers take time, allowing for space to “reset” between verses or refrains. Not always, but often enough that, while the contours of the melody remain in five, there is a certain additive flexibility in practice. While it may have begun as a method for dealing with unfamiliar patterns, the gnawa ensemble makeup allows for these metric extensions to become opportunities, even powerful moments of engagement with audiences and spirits, in a way that is unavailable to the larger ḥamadsha ensemble. With only one lead singer who also plays the only melodic instrument, it is easy to make these adjustments. The ḍrārī can simply follow, entering upon the conclusion of each phrase without regard to how much space comes in between.

Both claims holds true in some sense: gnawa music allows for a range of other adaptations, drastically changing the poem while establishing it as a pinnacle moment in an increasingly well-known tradition. The gnawa “Aisha Hamdushiyya” has a few distinct sections, but they are not always there, nor are they always in the same order. In a recording that I made with Fessi gnawa m’alem Abd al-Rzaq, after roughly four minutes he moves from an iconic opening into an instrumental passage that introduces the ḥamadsha melody and lyrics borrowed from “Ḍmān al-Blād.” Then the song shifts to the poem’s fifth verse, alternating rough approximations of nine of the ḥamadsha text’s 110 lines. Abd al-Rzaq trades phrases with his ḍrārī. After each line that he sings, his group repeats the next one from the poem twice.

Suddenly the pattern ends. The m’alem caps off this section by returning to a phrase similar to the one that opened it. By this point, in other recordings from ceremonies, the room is full of the sounds of trances. Staged performances of this song are similarly powerful, as Aisha’s music sounds so distinct from the rest of the gnawa repertoire. Crowds of listeners in festivals or restaurants respond to the sudden change in timbre, the distinct melodic colors, scalar patterns, and musical textures. “Aisha Hamdushiyya” is not only the peak of many ritual events, it is arguably the most popular song within the repertoire. And this popularity has fueled many fusion and folkloric projects.²⁵

This piece of music serves as an example for the potency of Sidi Ali’s interchanges. What was born of a request from a listener in a Sidi Ali ritual, a listener who had likely frequented many ḥamadsha events during that year’s mūssem, grew into a climax of the ceremony. The gnawa borrowed Lalla Aisha, just as the ḥamadsha had done with other spirits. The musical exchange that is so audible in Sidi Ali’s intersecting processions has thus played a part in the gnawa’s immense surge in Moroccan popular culture from extreme marginality to the country’s largest festival stages, where the population and its music stand as a symbol of state diversity and religious tolerance.²⁶ This dramatic change in stature has not gone unnoticed by the other groups

²⁵ See, for example, Majid Bekkas’s version of the song on his album *African Gnaoua Blues* (2012), called “Hamdouchi.”

²⁶ See Theodore C. Grame, “Music in the Jma Al-Fna of Marrakesh,” *Musical Quarterly* 56 (1970): 74–87.

who frequent Sidi Ali. Ensembles and practitioners of each work tirelessly to reinvent themselves within the changing ritual economy. They are not without detractors, but their influence on the wider threads of Moroccan religious practice and popular culture is difficult to deny.

Inspired Renovation

In 2012, Abd al-Rahim Amrani invited me and a few other music researchers to join his ensemble at a Ramadan performance in Rabat. We drove from Fez sitting on plastic chairs in the back of a van. Ḥamadsha troupe members sprawled through the little space in the van, sleeping on bags and instruments in an attempt to avoid the heat and make fasting a bit easier throughout the long summer Ramadan day. We arrived and were told to dress in some extra ḥamadsha garb, which we did. Before we knew it, however, cameras and news crews from the major national satellite stations were lighting our way. My colleagues and I processed with the group, pounding out the rhythms that we knew on whatever drums ended up in our hands as we went around busy city blocks. Friends later told us that they saw us on the news, that the ḥamadsha procession made it into prime-time reporting. The evening also featured concerts of other “traditional” Moroccan culture, a common theme during the holidays. Amrani’s group *was* traditional culture, something to be celebrated.

His night was not over, however. The headliner in the night’s concert was Hamid al-Qasri, arguably the most popular current gnawa performer. Qasri’s studio recordings are criticized by many other m’alemīn as being “inauthentic,” lacking a potent heft learned through ritual experience. He, they say, is an artist, a stage entertainer. Yet his popularity and adeptness with the media and music industry make him a figurehead for the community nonetheless. Qasri’s well-rehearsed group played many of the gnawa standards before inviting Amrani up on stage to sing “Aisha Hamdushiya” for the eager crowd.

Amrani loves these moments when he can join a gnawa group to perform this ḥamadsha favorite. He extends the song, moving past the well-worn snippets of the poem and continuing with more obscure lines of “Ḍmān al-Blād,” improvising, and showing his verbal and musical virtuosity. Like Qasri, he is a creature of the music industry, familiar with its workings and opportunities. And, he recognizes, any change to reinforce the ḥamadsha roots of this famous song will bring even more of those opportunities, hopefully helping him do for his tradition what the industry’s attention has done for the gnawa over the last 40 years. He is not alone in this thinking.

Another group that snakes through the paved and unpaved roads of Sidi Ali is the ‘īsāwa. Their processions now punctuate the beginnings of weddings and circumcisions across Fez and Meknes. As *dhikr* or līla rituals become far more rare, ‘īsāwa groups raise their stature through these other major life-event ceremonies. Groups like those led by Abdullah Yaqubi frequent the region’s swankest clubs as they perform for these events. They also appear on the country’s most revered stages, performing in events like the Fez Festival of Sacred Music. Popular musicians take note, as well. Violinist Zina Doudia sings in and about Sidi Ali, telling her many fans of the power of Lalla Aisha and the ḥamadsha ceremony. Vocalist Said Senhaji does the same. Teenagers and young adults take late-night cabs to find entertainment in Sidi Ali’s tented

temporary nightclubs after bars close in Meknes; there are so many of them that during the last few years, the police have monitored the incoming traffic. Sidi Ali is pregnant with ritual significance, but it is fun. The fun part of ritual activity brings contestation, but it also opens the space for playful adaptation.²⁷ Rituals and ritual performers are allowed flexibility by their clients and listeners, and between the heaviest moments of ceremonial work, they have a great time too.

During each of the years that I visited the ceremony, Sidi Ali's tomb and shrine were under construction. The city was making renovations. With the attention given to each of the semimarginalized groups that participate, especially in the always fluid world of popular culture, I cannot help but imagine that rituals and religious practices are similarly under renovation. They are being updated, beautified to meet the needs and tastes of a changing community of believers, not to mention the new community of fans. The exchanges between these musicians, believers, and fans that facilitate and inspire the constant renovation were instigated, and continue to be inspired, by the streets that are full of music, baraka, and purpose.

²⁷ Asef Bayat, "Islamism and the Politics of Fun," *Public Culture* 19/3 (2007): 433–59.