

2023

## Moroccan Trance: Unruly Bodies and the Colonial Imagination

Samuel Llano

University of Manchester, samuel.llano@manchester.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/wmt>

**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

---

### Recommended Citation

Llano, Samuel (2023) "Moroccan Trance: Unruly Bodies and the Colonial Imagination," *World Music Textbook*: Vol. 4, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/wmt.2023.003>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/wmt/vol4/iss1/3>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Music Textbook by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

# Moroccan Trance: Unruly Bodies and the Colonial Imagination

Samuel Llano | University of Manchester

**Abstract:** This article considers colonialism's impact on the production and perpetuation of negative stereotypes about Sufi trance in Morocco by exploring how it developed under strict scrutiny and control as an object of fear, misunderstanding, dismissal, and scorn.

**Keywords:** Africa, Europe, historical ethnomusicology, nationalism, politics, race

The online version of this chapter is available at <https://worldmusictextbook.org/llano-2023>.

---

Trance is a pillar of religion and traditional medicine in Morocco and the Maghreb. Embraced with fervor by its many followers, dismissed with scorn or disdain by its critics, and approached with curiosity by tourists, trance has long been a socially comprehensive practice.<sup>1</sup> Trance has become embedded in a range of cultural domains, as it gathers Moroccans from all walks of life and faiths, including Jewish and Muslim women and men.<sup>2</sup> Many Moroccans regard trance as a healing remedy capable of freeing those afflicted by malevolent spirits that cause all types of physical and psychological ailments. Trance is also a fixture in the gatherings of many Sufi brotherhoods, where it is used to communicate with the deity.

Sufism is a "mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God."<sup>3</sup> Through a variety of mystical paths, Sufis aim to ascertain the nature of God and bring its presence to the world. As the numbers of followers of Sufi teachers (*shuyukh*, pl. of *sheikh*) grew in the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, they began to form larger groups known as brotherhoods who saw their leaders as saints. Saints are related by kinship to the Prophet Muhammad and are revered for their austerity, generosity, and good deeds. A *hadra*, seen in a colonial-era image in Figure 1, is a ceremony that uses ritual dance and animal sacrifice

---

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their feedback. I would like to thank Christopher Witulski and Kristina Nielsen for their thorough comments and insights.

<sup>2</sup>It is a common misconception that trance in the Maghreb involves only Muslim men. See Somer and Saadon 2000.

<sup>3</sup>Schimmel, Annemarie. "Sufism". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8 May. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sufism>. Accessed 19 June 2023.



From a photograph taken by Captain Henissart of the French Army

Figure 1: “Moulay-Idriss: market-place on the day of the ritual dance of the Hamadchas”, from Edith Wharton’s *In Morocco* (New York: New York Scribner, 1920). From Wikimedia Commons, public domain, [link](#)

to bestow *baraka* (godly grace, blessing) upon those suffering from physical or mental ailments (Witulski 2019, 84–99; Kapchan 2007; Becker 2020, 123–56).

Despite enjoying wide popularity, trance in Morocco has often been the object of fear, misunderstanding, dismissal, or even scorn. Behind these different responses there has been a good degree of misinformation, affecting particularly the views of foreigners and outsiders to the practice. But ignorance or cultural estrangement alone do not explain the adverse feelings that trance has provoked since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and one must look at religious and political factors for an answer. Sufi trance in colonial Morocco (1912-1956) developed under the scrutiny and control of the French, Spanish and Moroccan authorities, and military personnel. It was also treated as a subject of study within a highly racialized system of knowledge that considered trance a characteristic manifestation of the “psychology” of certain ethnic groups –and by “psychology” I mean a preconceived set of mostly negative traits established through (pseudo)scholarly practice. Colonial scholars did not observe and study trance to learn about a cultural practice unknown to them thus far—or at least not only—but rather mostly to confirm their preconceived notions about Moroccans of different ethnic subgroups and classes.

## The Hadra

A *hadra* is a Sufi ritual that bestows *baraka* or godly grace upon those suffering from a particular ailment. It involves the recitation of religious and secular texts alongside music and bodily movement to cast away the spirits that inhabit the sufferer and cause different kinds of physical and psychological ailments. The only accounts of the *hadra* from this period that are available today were written by external observers, usually colonial Europeans. Their writings on trance were published as part of training manuals for the military officials or within collections of anthropological or musicological studies. These texts aimed to satisfy a growing curiosity about then-unknown practices while presenting ethnographic evidence for their authors' views that western culture and knowledge were superior to those of non-European lands. This racist intellectual project supported the notion that Morocco needed to be conquered and civilized. Their accounts are thus colored by a rhetoric and ideology suited to their pragmatic and oppressive agendas.<sup>4</sup>

In the last few decades, a few scholars have made up for the shortcomings of this problematic legacy of knowledge by sharing their personal experience of a *hadra* through self-reflective accounts grounded on more self-reflective contemporary anthropology (Kapchan 2007; Jankowsky 2021; Witulski 2019; Becker 2020). Their insights on today's practices cannot be used to describe a *hadra* from the early twentieth century without discussion though, because any attempt to extrapolate from them would imply that Sufi ritual trance has remained static and unchanging. In the light of all these caveats, describing a *hadra* from the colonial period is necessarily an exercise in abstraction that risks offering an incomplete or distorted image of the past.

Using a combination of primary sources from the colonial period and recent fieldwork, I suggest that the following conclusions can be established regarding how a *hadra* was performed during the colonial era. A *hadra* can vary in length, lasting up to eight hours. It can be a standalone ritual or take place as part of a seasonal pilgrimage. It is a structured ritual in which each stage is defined by specific textual and musical materials and by the use of various recitation techniques and musical textures.<sup>5</sup> Testimonies by colonial writers rarely if ever discussed any details of this complex structure. A *hadra* usually ends with an intensification of pace which may lead one or several partici-

---

<sup>4</sup>The fact that none of these testimonies reflects upon their authors' presence during the ritual further foregrounds their lack of reliability. There is no guarantee that what these witnesses saw and heard was not an altered version of what the brotherhoods used to perform under regular circumstances, that is, when not under direct or strict surveillance. Towards the 1940s and 50s, Spanish and French officials gained access as observants to Islamic rituals in Morocco, but, despite the rhetoric of tolerance and mutual understanding that characterized their reports on these events, this semblance of intimacy was achieved through a mix of coercion and bribes, including donations to build shrines and mosques. In addition to these epistemological hurdles, many of these accounts were not based on personal experience, but rather they sourced, adapted, and reproduced parts of previous accounts which already contained semi-fictional episodes and literary tropes added by their authors to spice up the narrative.

<sup>5</sup>See Witulski 2019, 108-12 for a detailed analysis of a *hadra's* structure and sources.



Figure 2: "Aissaoua. Danse du sabre" from an 1889 postcard, Algeria. Unknown author. From Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

pants into *hal*, the state of trance that captured the attention of most colonial writers and photographers (Figure 2). The music contributes to this increase in pace through repeated musical motives, the addition of instruments, increasing complexity of the repeated patterns, and a gradual increase in volume. Bodily movements that accompany these sounds are closely connected to the recitation and intonation of chants. As a result, the *hadra* could be considered a kinesthetically-enhanced form of recitation, rather than a "dance." The writings of colonial settlers or personnel read this body language in political terms, attributing meanings of defiance to certain gestures.<sup>6</sup>

## Moroccan Trance in the Colonial Imagination

The study of changes in Sufi ritual across time and place raises important questions about the relationship of ritual trance with its historical, social, and political context. This was a period of strife where intense rivalry between the

<sup>6</sup>For instance, praying with their arms extended and palms facing down was interpreted as a gesture of political defiance through which the Tijaniyya brotherhood summoned the divine power to chase the Christians away from Morocco (Interventor de Beni Uriaguel, 1933).

brotherhoods combined with efforts to maintain themselves despite the pressures put on them by the French and Spanish colonial authorities. One of the most pressing questions is the extent to which Sufi trance in colonial Morocco functioned as a political act. The most comprehensive study of music published in colonial Morocco, *Tableaux de la Musique Marocaine* by the Algeria-born French musicologist Alexis Chottin lays out a taxonomy of music in Morocco (1939). Chottin places the Arab dance music categorically opposite that of Amazigh communities who had been in the region before earlier Arab expansion. Although he does not delve explicitly into political questions, this opposition is closely aligned with the French authorities' implementation of policies that segregate these two groups in order to weaken a growing Moroccan nationalism (Wyrzten 2016). The most detailed study of Morocco's rural dances by a Spanish scholar, Emilio Blanco Izaga's *Las danzas rifeñas* similarly avoids religious or political questions and limits itself to describing the participants' bodily movements and the structure of the dances (Blanco Izaga 1946a, 1946b, 1946c). However, the ways in which he depicts Amazigh communities as "primitive" people untainted by civilization, no matter how well-intentioned, evokes the trope of the "noble savage" that had been central in propaganda supporting colonialism since the Early Modern era.

The question of whether the brotherhoods used trance politically is impossible to answer given the lack of unbiased scholarship from the period. Because most writings from the colonial period were written by military personnel who were concerned with security, they generally conflate religious practice and politics as they describe trance dancing as demonic, anti-Christian, and anti-European. Furthermore, they depict trance as fake—a superstition with no proper place in Islam—and a dubious remedy that deprived Moroccans of the benefits of European biomedicine (Padilla 1930, 8; García Figueras 1953, 317). The soldier and scholar Eduardo Maldonado Vázquez's claim that "superstition and the lack of culture attributes curative power to dance" (Maldonado Vázquez 1932, 41) was representative of the general state of mind among the Spanish and the French. Scholars and the military regarded biomedicine both as a rational counterweight to the frenzy caused by trance among the Moroccan population and as a weapon against anti-colonial resistance. Manuel Nido y Torres's manual for officials argued that the Spanish doctors in Morocco should not restrict themselves to curing the "ailments of the body," but should treat those of the "soul" too, in order to cast away any "superstitious practices," "attract the rebels," and carry out a "pacific penetration" of the country (Nido y Torres 1925, 187).

The writings of protectorate scholars and military personnel deployed these and similar strategies, emptying trance of religious meaning and political legitimacy. Sufi trance featured recurrently in Spanish scholarship as a stunning activity that numbed the senses of the practitioners and interfered with their perception mechanism. The Spanish described trance as a state that impaired the participants' cognitive capacities, and in which a wide range of overwhelmingly intense stimuli saturated their senses, reducing the dancers to a half-conscious, unresponsive state. The following examples show that the Spanish

in Morocco used their own notions of sonic harmony as indexes of modernity and—as did Europeans (Boutin 2015; Llano 2018a, 2018b)—to formulate ideas of the colonial order that the “noisy” dances threatened to destabilize. Maldonado Vázquez described the *hadra* as a true cacophony, in which “The noise of cymbals, drums, tabors, and flutes,” mixes with the “stomping of the feet on the floor,” the “shrieks,” and “the smell of incense and sweat,” reducing the participants to a “state of torpor,” in which they “say all sorts of stupid things” (Maldonado Vázquez 1932, 18). Enrique Arqués described the *hadra* as a “loud, barbaric music” whose effect is comparable to “the roaring of a tempest falling upon us” (Arqués 1946, 68).

Such descriptions echo many other comparisons of non-western music with “noise” that are commonplace in European writings about their colonial subjects. Consider however the specific religious connotations of these testimonies, particularly the denial of spiritual depth implicit in portraying trance as chaos—Maldonado Vázquez attributed to “ignorance” the participants’ belief that “they get closer to the Deity” (1932, 18). A condemnatory tone prevailed even in testimonies that did not discuss or dismiss religious aspects and focused instead on formal questions, such as the use of repetition. Blanco Izaga, one of Amazigh culture’s greatest champions, described Rifian dances as an “amorphous mass,” because they “end in the same way that they begin,” and because “there is not a single theme in them to be developed” (1946b).

## Where the Spanish Got it Wrong

The scholarship and reports produced by the Spanish military and administration simultaneously blurred and affirmed the distinction between the real and the imaginary, the body and the mind, and the physical and the spiritual. This interplay with boundaries was designed to create epistemological confusion and make it harder to refute views of curative trance as anything other than a superstition that defiled sacred religious beliefs. The interpretation of trance by the Spanish is problematic on at least two counts. First, the brotherhoods do not inhabit a religious realm that is separate from the secular as described by western conventional medicine. For them, all is embedded into a single system of beliefs and practices (Crapanzano 1973, 131). Second, the presence of supernatural images such as “six-legged horses” (Mitjana 1905, 120) in Spanish descriptions of Sufi pilgrimages compromise the veracity of these testimonies, undermining claims that trance was pure superstition.

The skepticism of the Spanish was symptomatic of their inability to understand the nature and purpose of “medicine” in Morocco.<sup>7</sup> Morocco’s system of healing draws from a range of traditions, including prophetic medicine, which

<sup>7</sup>Some scholars might object to the use of the term “medicine,” preferring instead to use “healing.” I use “medicine” to avoid binaries such as scientific/intuitive or modern/primitive that structure comparisons between western and Moroccan forms of healing. I follow studies such as (Amster 2013) and (Dieste 2010), which distinguish between traditional medicine, practiced in Morocco before colonialism, and biomedicine, brought by the Europeans.

searches for answers in the Quran; humoral medicine, which is inspired in classic Arab medicine; the knowledge of seers, who use magic; the management of sanctuaries, which administer *baraka*; and biomedicine, which was introduced by Europeans in Morocco from the early twentieth century (Dieste 2010, 171). These different traditions do not exclude each other, but rather coexist within the same medical system, even within the same treatments. European scholars attributed this multiplicity to what they judged to be a lack of systematic thinking in Moroccan society. Europeans failed to appreciate the structural complexity of both the ritual and the music of Sufi trance. Curative trance is a system of therapy that is “a structured set of procedures for the rehabilitation of an incapacitated individual” (Crapanzano 1973, 4). The discharge of tension taking place during trance “is not merely an emotional outburst [...] but a highly structured process” (Crapanzano 1973, 6). Europeans underestimated the complex meaning of repetition in Sufi trance, dismissing it as a manifestation of a “primitive” mentality. Repetition in Sufi trance generates stability and motion at the same time, because the melodic and rhythmic motives that are repeated are not fixed, but rather subject to constant variation and shifting degrees of intensity during the *hadra* (Jankowsky 2021, 16–17, 29, 40, 51).

## Conclusions

The colonial history of Sufi trance in Morocco reveals important details about the ways in which the brotherhoods used dance to negotiate their identity at a critical moment of their history. The examples discussed above show that trance was a site of struggle and a tool of identity construction in the face of colonial oppression and persecution.<sup>8</sup> The study of trance’s colonial history helps to complicate the genealogy of this cultural practice by casting its colonial and postcolonial history through the lens of shifting encounters with power. The medical history of trance is the history of the body conceived as a site of struggle that has yet to be written into the history of Moroccan trance.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways do you imagine music contributing to the healing of physical and psychological suffering? Consider your own listening experiences. Have you ever felt that music had a physical impact upon your

---

<sup>8</sup>It is somewhat puzzling that no traces of this memory are apparent in today’s practice, which rather evokes and invokes a more distant past, whether it is the memory of each brotherhood’s founding saint, or a past of slavery and trans-Saharan migration. The reasons for this erasure of memory are partly related to the process of de-politization undergone by the brotherhoods following the independence of Morocco and its neighbors in the 1950s and 60s. The persecution that brotherhoods had experienced has led them to seek refuge on the stages of music festivals where they have enjoyed greater attention and a more lucrative and stable future. At the same time, they have been gradually pushed towards a space that is removed from politics where they tend to be regarded as “folklore.”



well-being?

2. Why do you think European colonizers regarded Moroccan trance as a “superstition”? Do you believe they simply misinterpreted the practice, or do you think there could be additional reasons for labeling trance as “superstition”?
3. In what ways might Moroccan trance be considered a “political” practice? What might the study of Moroccan trance teach us about the relationship between music and politics? In your discussion consider whether “political” has a simple and fixed meaning, or one that is complex and contingent on the circumstances in which we define it.
4. The only sources that we have documenting earlier practices of Moroccan trance are the testimonies left by Europeans. Considering the degree to which they are biased and rife with prejudice, to what extent do you think they are worthy of our attention? Are there any lessons to be drawn from their study? Why do you think it might be important to consider the history of Moroccan trance during the colonial period rather than focus only on current practices and meanings?

## Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by funding from the European Research Council (ERC), as part of the project “Past and Present Musical Encounters Across the Strait of Gibraltar” (MESG-758221).

## References

- Amster, Ellen J. 2013. *Medicine and the Saints: Science, Islam, and the colonial encounter in Morocco, 1877-1956*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Arqués, Enrique. 1946. *El Culto a Los Yenuín*. Edited by Etnografía y Prehistoria Sociedad Española de Antropología. Madrid: Sociedad Española de Antropología, Etnografía y Prehistoria.
- Becker, Cynthia. 2020. *Blackness in Morocco: Gnawa Identity Through Music and Visual Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Blanco Izaga, Emilio. 1946a. “Las Danzas Rifeñas. I: Preámbulo.” *África: Revista de Acción Española* 55: 15–16.
- . 1946b. “Las Danzas Rifeñas. II: Su Interpretación.” *África: Revista de Acción Española* 56-57: 66–71.
- . 1946c. “Las Danzas Rifeñas. III.” *África: Revista de Acción Española* 5: 55–59.
- Boutin, Aimée. *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- Chottin, Alexis. 1939. *Tableau de la musique marocaine*. Paris: Paul Geuthner.

- Crapanzano, Vincent. 1973. *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dieste, Josep Lluís Mateo. 2010. *Salud y Ritual En Marruecos : Concepciones del Cuerpo y Prácticas de Curación*. Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra.
- García Figueras, Tomás. 1953. "Música y Danza en Marruecos." In *Miscelánea de Estudios Varios Sobre Marruecos*, edited by Tomás García Figueras, 313–30. Tetuán: Editoria Marroquí.
- Interventor de Beni Uriaguel. 1933. "Letter to the Spanish Consul." Archivo General de la Administración. Sección de África. Marruecos. (15) 13, 81/2178 (Cofradías religiosas 1936). Antiguo legajo no. 4483. Caja A.G.G no. M-2764. Al-Hoceima, 27 April.
- Jankowsky, Richard C. 2021. *Ambient Sufism: Ritual Niches and the Social Work of Musical Form*. First edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kahn, Douglas. 2001. *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Voice, Sound, and Aurality in the Arts*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Kapchan, Deborah. 2007. *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Llano, Samuel. 2018a. *Discordant Notes: Marginality and Social Control in Madrid, 1850-1930*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2018b. "Mapping Street Sounds in the Nineteenth-Century City: A Listener's Guide to Social Engineering." *Sound Studies* 4 (2): 143–61.
- Maldonado Vázquez, Eduardo. 1932. *Cofradías Religiosas En Marruecos, I. Curso de Perfeccionamiento de Oficiales de Servicio de Intervención: Subtitle*. Tetuán: Alta Comisaría de la República Española en Marruecos.
- Mitjana, Rafael. 1905. *En el Magreb-el-Aksa*. Valencia: Sempere y Compañía.
- Nido y Torres, Manuel. 1925. *Apuntes Para El Oficial de Intervención Y de Tropas Coloniales*. Tetuán: Editorial Hispano Africana.
- Padilla, Comandante R. 1930. *Cofradías Religiosas en el Rif y Diversas Taifas de Xorfas. Zauías Y Santuarios*. Tetuán: Alta Comisaría de España en Marruecos.
- Somer, Eli, and Meir Saadon. 2000. "Stambali: Dissociative Possession and Trance in a Tunisian Healing Dance." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 37 (4): 580–600.
- Witulski, Christopher. 2019. *Focus: Music and Religion of Morocco*. New York: Routledge.
- Wyrzten, Jonathan. *Making Morocco: Colonial intervention and the politics of identity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016.