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On Gnawa and Jazz: Melodious Rhythms Sing Back to Power

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Gnawa, historians agree, was introduced to Morocco mainly through the gates of Essaouira, a coastal city in the South West of Morocco. The musical tradition travelled with the slaves brought from Sudan, Mali, Ghana, and other African countries under the reign of Ahmed Al Mansour and later on by Moulay Ismail, the founder of the first black army. In the meantime, Morocco was at the crossroads of the trade route, and many sub-Saharan Africans together with their customs traveled along with their itinerary of caravans. Hence, ethnographers or, perhaps more aptly so, ethnomusicologists categorise the music as being distinct along these lines. The slaves, having been freed, mixed and mingled with their compatriots and subsequently with locals, gave birth to hybridised rituals which were translated into an artistic expression that came to be labeled Gnawa music. These individual and communal stories of diasporicity are here lyricised, versified, and composed into rythms specific to this genre and entermeshed with others, all the while being invested and infused with the power to merge and blend perfectly with other trans-Atlantic genres such as jazz.

New Orleans, Chicago, and New York are to jazz singers what Marrakech, Essaouira, and Fez are to gnawa singers. Ake notes that “New Orleans remains, in spirit, the most African city in the United States” (10). The music the city dances to transpires with Africanness. This said, the music being performed is far from uniform for being partitioned along “…two distinct African-diasporic communities—the Francocentric gens du couleur or “Creoles of color” and the English-speaking slaves and their descendants” (10). It is apparently conspicuous then that the latter, having experienced the ravages of slavery, have a lot in common with gnawa, whose fate was no better. Both groups seem to have found in music a path to forging and carving an identity entrenched in the throes of enslavement, forced journeys under duress, separation from kins and land and, last but not least, of exploitation and expiation through embracing the religion of the host country. In America, the slaves converted to Christianity and used the church as their sanctuary where they congregated in choirs to sing psalms. Elements taken from Islam, therefore, colour the music of gnawa gesticulating to their conversion to Islam, a religion that condems all forms of slavery, without abandoning who they really are or where they come from.

Thanks to Essaouira Gnawa festival, gnawa music has now garnerd more attention than ever before, thus harnessing an ever-greater power, which catapulted the singers on the local stage and then worldwide. However, such a universalisation has been met with malcontentment and skepticism. The staging and spectacularisation process of gnawa music has been regarded as nothing more than fetishistic and carnivalesque. When gnawa rites are thus “…appropriated, it

not only affects its performance context - the social milieu of its exchange - but the practice itself is transformed," (Kapchan 54). The Lila is not lost on stage as Kapchan thinks it would, but it multiplies into Lilat, each of which is similar to Lila but not quite so, testifying to the power inherent in this music to metamorphose. The internationalisation of the music amounts to its objectification as it turns it into a fetish, creating "the category of the "sacred" in a transnational context" (54). Kapchan disregards the fact that in being taken out to the public sphere, gnawa music, previously confined to the precincts of the private sphere, is gaining international appeal and recognition, enabling the subaltern to become the sovereign subject of history with a voice/voices to vent out their experiences and thoughts (Chakrabarty 102). By speaking on their behalf, Kapchan denies them agency. Kapchan, it appears, would rather museumify and mummify the music than see it taken out to the public to taste and savour. Her not-so-flexible take is commensurate with her ethnographic approach. As she documents, with an opulently stereotypical foreign eye, the way the French colonisers reported on Morocco and other colonies, she lapses into obsessively ritualising the music and possessively transfixing it into a condition without giving in to its power to transcend and transform its conditions of birth. Having arrogated to herself this exclusive right, she alone is privy to a world over which she claims ownership. In Saidian parlance, "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (Said 15). The essentialised binaristic division which Kapchan is so keen on upholding leaves no room for either resistance or co-existence, for the post-modern condition of being and being together, thus, condemning the Oriental/the gnawi to perpetual backwardness and oppositional inferiority. Having thus interred the Oriental in the abyss of history as a changeless subject, Kapchan condemns gnawa to perpetual stagnancy and constancy.

Said ascribes the origin of all the nuances, epistemes, and intimations made about the Orient to ritualised violence rooted in "…a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections" (16). The Oriental, a gnawi in this case, is but a passive, inert, submissive, and subservient being hardly able to unshackle himself from the fetters imposed on him. He is still in many ways possesed and cannot dispossess his body and his past, let alone the present. However belated their response is, gnawa have risen beyond the seamlessness of this monolithic and denigrating portrayal by crossing borders. Kapchan obfuscates the fact that music, like any other merchandise, lives its age, the age of postmodernism and commodification. Jameson elucidates that "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (56). In a rejoinder, Chakarabarty notes that, "Subaltern pasts are like stubborn knots that stand out and break up the otherwise evenly woven surface of the fabric," (106) and are thus worth untying from a historiographic rather than an ethnographic point-of-view, Kapchan's in this case.

The blending of the two not so different styles, gnawa and jazz, which Kapchan is reticent and recalcitrant about, endows them with a freshness that sells, offering gnawa one of

those rare moments that resist pigeonholing. These "superstitious contemporaries", according to Chakarabarty, serve "as examples of an "earlier type," as human embodiments of the principle of anachronism" (238). One may as well contend that there is a malign and malicious form of residual "thinking which permeates and structures contemporary practices and representation" (Shohat and Stam 2). With gnawa's phenomenal rise to stardom, these dichotomies will be upset, differences will be blurred in the name of universal ethos. In due course, the gnawi will also acquire more visibility and audibility while ethnographers will be stripped of their trappings, denuded legitimacy, and hence their presence denied. This fear of what would become of them, of becoming redundant and superfluous, and of unbecomingness is what puts ethnographers on the defensive. What better way to turn the tables than by attacking any attempt at internationalisation.

Compared to recent trends, jazz was scantily colorful at its inception being more tied up with the then status quo the slaves were mired in. Their artistic expression which sprang from feelings of oppression met with further suppression as slave owners prevented their slaves from getting together to sing lest the drums should incite black communities to rebel in the face of their owners (Tirro 1993). The 1920's constituted a watershed in the history of jazz as it established a name for itself. Among a plethora of pre-eminent singers with unquestionable stature such as Smith, Morton, Oliver, Armstrong, and Bechet, none other than Paul Whiteman, ironically a white man, was labeled as the "King of Jazz" in the movie with the same name which came out in 1930 at the peak of ragtime. That a white man should be thus credited could be seen as evidence of the suppressive and oppressive attitude America held vis-à-vis the then speaking/singing subjects once held as abject objects. The heroism with which early jazz singers are now bestowed as the pioneers of America's classical music is but an afterstate, an overdue avowal that should by no means eclipse a longue durée of denial (Ake 11). Reactions to the rising popularity of jazz were far from being unanimous. While some Americans readily embraced the music, others condescendingly disapproved of it and even thought it to be morally twisted. Americans, who were repulsive of and averse to jazz, thought it only appealed to their feet instead of their intellect (Mooney 4). Shohat and Stam amply document the dialectics of presence/absence in musicals wherein jazz music is deafeningly audible, but the Afro-Americans "presence is largely inferential" (223) being conspicuous by their mere absence. Film directors intrusively appropriate these subgroups' musics and obtrusively screen them out in an act of stealth reminiscent of what happened to artefacts now found in European museums. While the music sounds good, the Afro-Americans behind it are not 'good' enough to appear in American movies. Black Americans were musically suppressed and their music was hijacked by the whites putting their Euro-American seal on what was essentially an Afro-American artistic expression. In a schizophrenic stance, Shohat and Stam state that while "black sounds were welcome, black images remained taboo" (225).

For many, jazz has played an especially strong role in representing "blackness" in America, and musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Nat "King" Cole, Miles Davis, Archie Shepp, and Wynton Marsalis have long exemplified the evolving hopes, fears, dangers, joys, and frustrations of living as African Americans" (Ake 11). One may dare say that the singers wore their hearts on their sleeves to express their sorrows. The insistence on blackness may be construed as part of the bands' craving for recognition. Thus, the apparel becomes an extension of their skin, race, and identity. The same things may be said of

gnawa, who are almost always black given their lineage. In this respect, the hats gnawa wear are usually dotted, letting out threads resembling dreadlocks, but wearing these seems to be an unforfeited tradition for recollection, pointing back to still unforgotten sub-Saharan roots. That all the band members don the same attire points to a deep-seated desire for equality otherwise lost. Unlike jazz singers, in gnawi bands, the master stands out with his differently colored outfit. The master with his *guembri*[1] occupies the center stage very much like the lead guitarist, the trumpeter, the saxophonist, or the pianist in jazz. He is surrounded with castinet players who are also gifted dancers, acrobats, and choreographers. The drummers stand on the edge, but their drumming is so deafening as to drown all else. Dancing, an inherent characteristic of both gnawa and jazz, takes various forms and shapes. Within a pattern, the dancers lurch forward or backward, move in circles or demi-circles, in pirouettes on one foot or two. "The origins of jazz music and dance are found in the rhythms and movements brought to America by African slaves. The style of African dance is earthy; low, knees bent, pulsating body movements emphasized by body isolations and hand-clapping" (Nalett 2005) much of which finds an echo in gnawa music and dance. "The rhythms and movements of African dance: the foot stamping and tapping, hand clapping and rhythmic vocal sounds," Nalett posits, reverberate through jazz and gnawa as well. Just as jazz and tapping go together, so does gnawa and clapping. In fine, what the feet do in jazz, the hands perform in gnawa.

Drums, *qraqebs* or localised castanets, and above all a *guembri* are all it takes to carry the auditor/audience to the mystic and mysterious world of Gnawa. *Guembri*, "a three-string bass lute with a wooden soundbox… covered with dromedary skin" is that "voice that whispers and leads the lament, the evocation and the invocation" (Morato 189), solicitations, supplications, declamations, and guembrification, so to speak. Despite its claim to predominance, its centrality, the *guembri* cannot be without its retinue, its attendant servants. According to some *mqadmin*[2], guembri is a phallic symbol which can only be aroused by the presence of female genitalia, which the drum with the castanets stand in for. The master is the one entrusted with the *guembri*, but without his band, his dancers, his 'dendin,' and strumming, it will not suffice. The drumming and clinking seem to carry the master in moments of respite, but also to abyss during crescendo. This is largely applicable to jazz. The saxophone, the trumpet, the guitar, or even the double bass synechdocally come in to mean what the *guembri* symbolises while the drums fulfil the function of arousal by carrying the tune and filling in the void. So, since its birth, gnawa singers have been using the same instruments while jazz singers have changed their ways introducing new instruments like the ones aforementioned.

The stage which typically represents the world from Shakespearean parlance, the gnawi and the jazz singers, once slaves, in someone's possession, are here in a position to rise atop the Hegelian master-slave dichotomy by dint of the very discourse which subdued and subjugated them. Their tale-telling, call and response, frees them from servitude, their mixing in with and appropriation of each other's styles figuratively salvages them from bondage without losing them their distinctness, their multilayered identity. This decolonisation/abolishionist process, of which art is the instigator, the liberator, entails "…a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses" (Tiffin 95). The

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[1]Editor's Note *(hereafter Ed. N.)*: A musical instrument also known as sintir.
[2]Ed. N.:Translated as 'wardens of religious shrines in Gnawa community.' Source: *Sharing the Sacra:The Politics and Pragmatics of Intercommunal Relations around Holy Places*, Edited by Glenn Bowman

gnawi and the palm trees so distinctive of his new home resemble each other in more ways than one could possibly enumerate.Through a number of songs, the gnawi affirms having roots as deep as the palm trees entrenched in his past in what one may describe as reconciliatory introductory phase to the present. Through other songs, which may be likened to a trunk so strong no winds can shake, the gnawi produces evidence of his long fought-for recognition, one sculpted with bare hands in the land that is now his and of which he is a member, an ambassador. The new mix and remix represents newly forming and formed branches sprouting onto the sky and branching out to merge with jazz, pop, rock ad infinitum.

The gnawi's prowess and power to adopt and adapt to a variety of styles signifies that Morocco is in full reconciliation with its past and now ready to open up to the future, to embrace other experiences from without, which makes the process of nation making and nation imagining, an all-inclusive ongoing one. The moments of grief which this music is steeped in as well as the exuberence which seeps through it call to mind the the ups and downs that led to the formation of present day Morocco one takes pride in. In this respect, gnawa and jazz recall each other in that "… both acknowledge the source in Africa itself – Abdullah El-Gourd by invoking the ma'llemin (pl.), the early Gnawa masters that left their legacy to the present in the bodies and songs of those who possess tagnawit[3] today, and Randy Weston by making frequent reference in his performances and presentations to mother Africa – the place – also defined as the source of musical and spiritual tradition" (Kapchan 2015). Gnawa and jazz empower the musicians to rise from the ashes of history to prominence and eminence. Having been marginalised for far too long, the disenfranchised claimed their own music to rewrite history in melodious terms. As Bhabha puts it forth, "art creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history and narrative" (35).

Although some would contend that the ritualised aspect is being absented and scanted, the Essaouira festival, which brings jazz and gnawa on the same stage, needs to be credited with elevating the heretofore ostracised Moroccan musicians to heights of fame they would never have achieved had they kept their music indoors. The festival also attracts famous singers from the world over to participate alongside Gnawa and to give their compositions the much needed gnawi air, the Oriental breeze. The contention that hybridity contaminates that state of purity inherent in music does not stand once tested. First and foremost, the very state of authenticiy purists are keen on defending cannot be retrieved as such, for it simply does not and has never existed. The lesson to be learnt in this regard, Appiah points out, "... is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous pure-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists" (124).

Nothing could be further from the truth than to presume and assume that external tampering with gnawa undermines its power to resist. The hybridising process which contact zones imbricate and implicate, "rather than indicating corruption or decline" should be understood to be "…the most common and effective form of subversive opposition since it displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (Ashcroft 9). Parry, having examined Bhabha's discourse on hybridity, comes to the

[3]Ed. N: Translated as 'Gnawa tradition.' Source: Re-creating Paul Bowles, the Other, and the Imagination: Music, Film, and Photography. By Raj Chandarlapaty.

conclusion that what should be retained from this discussion of whether hybridity serves the natives or subverts their enunciations is that as long as the hybrid moment, a thing in and of itself different from, if not opposed to, texts produced elsewhere, is fraught with "incongruities," it lays bare "…the uncertainties and ambivalences of the colonialist text" and denies "it an authorizing presence" (42). In coming together, gnawa and jazz musicians produce "postmodern knowledge" that "… refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's (the musician's) paralogy" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxv). Hegemony, the postcolonialist's currency, thus cedes way to heterogeneity, to a plurality of being and being together. As such, this togetherness, while celebratory of homogeneity, does not altogether discard differences.

Blanketing and bracketing all discourses of resistance from within, quite a few postcolonialist theorists, including JanMohamed, "… configure the colonial realm as a confrontation based on differences in race, language, social customs, cultural values, and modes of production" (18). In Signs Taken for Wonders, Bhabha stipulates that "The exercise of colonialist authority, however, requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred" (33) and forever and ever marred. Speaking in Manichean allegorical tropes will only lose us sight of the multitudinous possibilities inherent in reconfiguring, transfiguring, and hybridising the relations holding the West with other parts of the world without altogether effacing and defacing these differences. In precolonial times and during periods of colonisation, imperial powers mobilised the military to conquer land and ethnographers to collect data and produce knowledge to maintain the upper hand in what Said construes as a dialectic of information and control.

Undeniably, East has been an inspiration for musicians across the world, and they do so without giving Easterners their due merit. However, one ought to aknowledge that these same musicians do Morocco a great service by giving the music a global recognition. Within the subversive discourse of Moroccon music, one can pinpoint moments of insurgence and resistance. The conspicuous silence Spivak records is here a vociferous and perspicuous presence, a lingering one. Essaouira provides an idyllic venue where, to some extent, a fair exchange among the players takes place. While on stage, both Moroccan and occidental singers find themselves on a par. Instead of being a place of coercion, the stage has now become a negotiated territory where musics overlap and musicians interact on an equal footing. As Ahmad concludes, instead of defining the world "in terms of a binary opposition," academics and researchers ought to probe "contradictions, differences, and profound overlaps" (80).

Erstwhile, "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern" was bereft of history and left speechless (Spivak 28). In contemporary context, nevertheless, the subaltern writes off oppression and narrativises his/her own history/story in his/her words using instruments of his own making against the dominant Western discourse. On stage, the Westerner is now seen stripped of the paraphernalia of power which he once came studded with to occupy our land. Contrary to Spivak who stickles that "the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference" (27), cannot know and speak itself and hence cannot represent itself , I deem it only appropriate and opportune for the subaltern to foreground these differences that set them apart to be able to speak/to sing. Differences in attire, in language, in the choice of instruments, in choreography,

among so many others, are being revisited, reasserted, juxtaposed and transposed to create an artistic creolised form of expression I may now chance to call *jaznawa*. In a symbolic redistribution of power, the native and the foreigner now occupy the same stage and bask in equal power, each asserting their presence through difference. Rather than baffle and muffle the gnawi, the jazz singer gives his rival a golden opportunity to shine and show his talent, and so does the gnawi. This works both ways in the sense that the gnawi does not only legitimise the presence of the Westerner, but also supply him with the chance to outshine his former self. In short, disavowal turns into mutual recognition. “In granting value to (what the centre calls) the margin or the Other, the post-modern challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality, even as it acknowledges that it cannot privilege the margin without acknowledging the power of the centre” (Hutcheon 132).

Ahmad’s classical repartition of the world or what he refers to as the ideological classification “between those who make history and those who are mere objects of it” (78) is upturned and upset here through the power music is imbued with. Stage, representative of the world, is bridging the divide and blurs the differences between those who make and do and those who are mere spectators. The occupants share their birthplace, the fused music is their newborn, the feeding of which is biumbilically sustained and maintained. Should one of the two not fulfil their parental duties, the whole process will miscarry. The fusion this encounter occasions represents the syncretic realm, the third space, where cohabitation is largely made possible and manifested through sonic blending. The only rivalry there is, if there is one, is manifest in the strife of each and every musician to achieve excellence to win the hearts of the cheering crowd. In fact, the collaborative process by which psychedelic trance or swing feeling, as it is known in jazz, are produced and induced only means that the success of one is by definition the success of the other. Either we thrive together, or we fall together. Both jazz and gnawa have in them what makes the audience want to dance, clap hands, and stomp feet. Grafting elements from these two styles, one onto the other, is sure to swing and entrance audiences across borders, on both sides of the Atlantic.

What makes the process possible is the fact that jazz and improvisation are two faces of the same coin. This interdependence/symbiosis can only indicate that the subaltern has at last spoken. The differences are not absolute, nor are the divergences nihilistic, insofar as it is plausible to weave a whole new argument that regards the confluence of the two traditions of music. The two bands, now larger than life, represent not just their nations but a collective experience, and hence the pertinence of Ahmad’s insights with regard to nations and collectivities. Ahmad states that, “If we replace the idea of the ‘nation’ with that larger, less restrictive idea of ‘collectivity,’ and if we start thinking of the process of allegorization not in nationalistic terms but simply as a relation between private and public, personal and communal, then it also becomes possible to see that allegorization is by no means specific to the so-called Third World” (82). The music carries universal themes which people on both sides of the Atlantic can identify with and dance to. In short, the music being produced is reflective of experiences common to mankind which are bound neither by time nor by space.

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