



**MOROCCO** The Gnawa of Morocco are famed for their deep, soulful music and their healing and trance powers. To see the maalem spirit masters in action, Jane Cornwell visits the Gnawa Festival in Essaouira and Torben Holleufer witnesses trance in action at a religious festival

# NIGHTS OF TRANCE



The king of the maalems, Mahmoud Gania, performing with his group in Essaouira (inset)



## Maalems at Essaouira

WORDS JANE CORNWELL

Under a full moon, on a stadium-sized stage near a backlit ocean, maalem Mahmoud Gania is wielding his *gimbri* lute before a rapt Moroccan audience of 20 maybe 30,000 people. Young men, women in headscarves and women without chant along, football terrace-style, to the magisterial music of this imposing Gnawa master, the roar of their voices rising and falling with his bluesy pentatonic rhythms and Arabic and (occasionally) Bambana lyrics, and with the sound of the waves on the Atlantic town ramparts.

Dressed in a white *jellaba* and red-and-gold skullcap, Gania stands still and centred as he plays, his thumb dropping on the three strings of his acoustic bass-like instrument – one carved from wood and covered in camel skin – to produce a hypnotic pattern that resonates, transports and uplifts. A group of musicians in leather slippers and colourful tunics formation dance around him, knee bending and spinning as they chant, pound side drums and clack heavy iron castanets known as *qaraqab*.

The long tassels on their caps spin tight, fast circles as Gania builds up the pace, delivering call-and-response songs that tell of the privations of exile and slavery and praise Allah through repetitive lines and phrases. Many in the crowd are headbanging, whipping their hair back and forth; most have entered a sort of mass trance. Arguably the most revered Gnawa musician playing today, El Maalem (The Master) Gania smiles benignly, long used to the effect that he – and his *teknawit* (authentic) Gnawa music – has on those in his vicinity.

“This music is a therapy that is universal,” says Gania at the 13th annual Gnawa and World Music festival in Essaouira, a blue-and-white-washed metropolis of open public spaces and narrow medina alleyways that smell variously of spices, rosewater or piss, depending on the time of day. “It speaks to everyone, without barriers. It has a very spiritual dimension and attracts people so

Above: the huge crowds at Essaouira's main festival stage  
Below right: maalem Boussou, now based in France

that they almost become addicted to it,” he adds good-naturedly. “But you don’t need to be familiar with this music to be healed.”

It wasn’t that long ago that the Gnawa, the descendents of slaves brought to the Maghreb from West Africa, were treated as pariahs in Morocco; dismissed in the same way that, say, the Roma are in Eastern Europe. But since its beginning in 1998, this far-sighted celebration has raised the profile and respect for these healer and mystics, most of whom are open to fusing their sounds with artists from elsewhere; not for nothing is the festival nicknamed ‘the biggest jam session on the planet.’ All the Gnawa – be they brotherhoods from Marrakech or Casablanca, Rabat or Essaouira, or ex-pats in Europe and the US – are determined to keep their traditions alive.

“I inherited the pure repertoire from my ancestors,” says Mahmoud Gania, son of the late great Gnawa master maalem Boukbar Gania and his famed clairvoyant wife Aicha Qabral. (For the record Mahmoud’s surname tends to be erroneously stated as Guinea, a conceit apparently invented by a French producer). “You do not become a maalem randomly,” he continues. “You need the right cultural background. My father tested me several times to ensure I could control the process of the *lila* [Gnawa ritual]. Then to become a maalem I had to perform a *lila* for female Gnawa. I had to

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play them into trance, like a conductor.”

Concert *lilas* take place each night at the festival’s indoor venues, each hosted by some of the most heavyweight maalems around. Though not the real behind-closed-doors thing, while they might lack the animal sacrifices and other key elements, they still have the power to heal. All of which bestows enormous responsibility on the shoulders of the maalem, as Hassan Boussou – son of the late great Casablanca maalem Hamida Boussou – attests.

“As the master of ceremonies it is up to me to control the ceremony,” says the street smart 40-year-old, smoking Marlboro Reds from behind Aviator shades, a tiny pair of silver *qaraqab* on a chain around his neck. “There are different stages of the trance; I have to know the exact moment to speed up the rhythm or to slow it down. I have to know the right words to use. I have to make sure that no one gets hurt or loses consciousness.”

“Even in *lilas* there is music for entertainment and music for trance,” insists Gania, who has performed with Pharoah Sanders and Santana and for the festival, the likes of Cheikh Tidiane Seck and Daby

Touré. “Whenever I am in concert I begin by playing *teknawit*, pure Gnawa, first. Once I’ve let it unfold, I invite the international artists to come and join me.” Most of the time it works: “They have to love the Gnawa music, be sensitive to it, so they can find a way in. Performing with West African artists is usually effortless because we have the same roots [Gania’s ancestors were soldiers from Mali]; we don’t even need to rehearse.”

Boussou agrees. “The *gimbri* is descended from the [West Africa] *ngoni*, which was originally made from a fruit that didn’t exist in North Africa so they adapted it,” he says. Despite helming a series of jazz-leaning side-projects from his home in Lille, where his children live, Boussou’s foremost musical priority is upholding the Gnawa tradition. “It doesn’t need modernising, it needs preservation and recognition. This festival has done incredible things for Gnawa music. Previous generations of Gnawi really suffered a lot.” A small smile. “Each year in Essaouira we are thanking them,” he says, “and paying tribute to their memories.”



All over Essaouira, Gnawa sounds pulse over roof tops, across squares, around corners. Cassette stalls heave under the prodigious output of Mahmoud Gania, whose very presence bestows gravitas – and who attracts wealthy benefactors as a result (“It is not easy making a living out of my art; maalems should be paid the same as international artists”). Each maalem has his own aesthetic: Gania is the king. Omar Hayat is the showman. Allal Soudani is the dreamer.

The maalems of Morocco perform elsewhere during the year, of course. But in Essaouira each June – as the focal points of a festival that promotes tolerance and unity and is now more vital than ever – they are larger-than-life national heroes. ♣

**DATES** The next festival is June 23-26 2011

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**ENTICING?** Songlines Music Travel is running a trip in June to the Gnawa and World Music Festival for 5 or 8 days. Our tour offers a long weekend in Essaouira, with time to enjoy the full range of music and the opportunity to explore the narrow lanes of the medina and the wonderful long beaches beyond. See p24 or visit [www.songlinesmusictravel.com](http://www.songlinesmusictravel.com)





The dusky pink minaret in Tamesloht, where every year all the leading *maalems* gather for the *moussem* (Gnawa religious festival)

TORBEN HOLLEUFER

## A Gnawa Trance experience

WORDS TORBEN HOLLEUFER

Screams and moans pierce the night. Fumes of incense fill the air. You can just make out the dancers in front of *maalem* Ahmed Baqbou and his group. He is the master at work, revered in Marrakech and the Gnawa world as one of the true masters, who 'has' the spirits. With the low notes of his three stringed *gimbri* he guides the way for the devotees, who are almost all women. They sway with their long, black hair flowing to a gentle tune about Lalla Aicha, the female saint, who is so feared and revered all over Morocco.

When you enter the trance, you become like an animal bound for market – you have to submit. There's no escape. The ram waiting for the knife all dressed up in Islamic green. The Arabic word for it is '*slim*' and it's central to Islam – to submit. A Gnawa trance is like a little death, but with a hope for rebirth. Brian

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### The voices call and the women start the ululations that send the energy soaring

Jones, the Rolling Stone, described it so well when witnessing a lamb having its throat slit in the village of Jajouka in 1968, he said: "I am the lamb!"

Earlier in the day, we reluctantly witnessed the ritual sacrifice of a camel. It is always a painful sight, because this special friend of the Gnawa seems to know what's coming and weeps. The camel is entwined with Gnawa history, as former slaves who came up from West Africa with caravans across the Sahara. The *gimbri*, the Gnawa's sacred instrument, has skin from a camel's neck stretched over the sound box. And the strings are made of the intestines.

It's the climax of the *lila* at the *moussem* (festival) at Tamesloht, 25km south of

Marrakech. It's a healing ritual that involves calling down different *djinns* (spirits) according to the devotee and the ailment – and *lilas* don't get better than this.

Tamesloht is essentially a Berber village that has grown considerably over recent years. Every year at the time of Mouloud, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (February this year), Gnawas and devotees gather here for a week-long pilgrimage, centred around the graves of various Sufi saints. And in particular around the pink cluster of buildings, the shrine of a saint and a minaret with a huge stork's nest on top. Moulay Abdullah Ben Tsain, who is buried here, lived in the 17th century and is known as the 'Commander of the Djinn', the one in charge of the spirits, that for the Gnawa are faithful helpers from beyond.

Arriving from Marrakech, you first enter a huge plaza with a multitude of tents and a stage. There's a merry-go-round, bumper cars and a stage, with Berber violin, some Gnawa fusion and occasionally a local DJ. As you see the pink walls of the shrine and the sun going down, it creates a psychedelic feeling. Here cafés are packed with Gnawa musicians and devotees. There are enclosures with animals for sacrifice and right next door, skewers of meat sizzling over hot charcoal. Countless shops with incense, candles, bottles of orange flower water and heaps of stuff that spell voodoo in big letters. It's best to arrive just before nightfall, and get a place on the terrace adjacent to the shrine. And then it all breaks loose below.

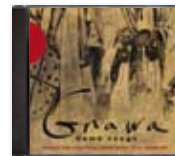
It's the drums you hear first and the high pitched *qaraqab* (metal castanets), while the voices call, and the women start the ululations that send the energy soaring. And then the *maalems* come out from the alleyways into the open hitting the drums, while the *moqadeema* and her helpers carry trays with milk and dates and the brazier with the incense. The *moqadeema* is the clairvoyant

in charge of the trance, and the one who works the spirits on the floor in front of the *maalem* in the *lila*.

Suddenly all the Gnawa masters are crowding at the entrance: The Baqbou Brothers, Abdelkebir and his sons Hicham and Zakariya and Abdelatif 'Sidi Amara' Makzoumi, all from Marrakech, Mahmoud Gania (aka Guinea) from Essaouira and *maalems* from Casablanca and Safi. They always come to Tamesloht and have not been tempted to the competing *moussem* at Sidi Ali in the north of the country. It's the place to catch some of the very best Gnawa musicians (and photography feels intrusive on occasions like this). Group after group pass through the narrow alley to enter the courtyard of the mausoleum. Inside the drumming stops and it's time for prayers and almsgiving.

As this sacred night falls in Tamesloht, *lilas* commence in houses all over the village. The dancing and the thuds of thumb and middle finger on the camel leather of the *gimbri*, the swift handclaps and then the clatter of the iron castanets goes on all night. This is the essence of Gnawa. Celebrating their African roots and paying homage to their past, while healing in the present. ●

### Recommended Gnawa Albums



**Various Artists, *Gnawa Home Songs* (Accords-Croisés, 2006)**

Recorded in Tamesloht with a stellar group of *maalems*, including Hamid El Kasri and Abdelkebir Merchane.

Outstanding and intimate.



**MaâlleM Mokhtar Gania, *Gnawa Sufi Trance* (Standard Records/Honest Jons, 2003)**

The youngest brother of Essaouira's main Gnawa dynasty taking us straight into the heart of the *lila*.



**Amida Boussou, *Gnawa Leila Vol 1* (Al Sur, 1992)**

This *maalem* (also spelled Hamida) was legendary. The first in an outstanding series.



**Night Spirit Masters – *Gnawa Music of Marrakech* (Axiom, 1991)**

Bill Laswell's landmark album with a bunch of the best *maalems* from Marrakech and Casablanca.



**Splendid Master Gnawa Musicians of Morocco feat. Randy Weston (Verve, 1994)**

A gathering of the great *maalems* at La Mamounia Hotel in Marrakech, including Boubker Gania (father of Mahmoud & Mokhtar) & Hamida Boussou. The pieces with Randy Weston are less convincing.