

MUSIC-INDUCED SPIRIT POSSESSION TRANCE IN MOROCCO: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
ANTHROPOLOGY AND ALLIED DISCIPLINES

By

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To Truffiaut

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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MUSIC-INDUCED SPIRIT POSSESSION TRANCE IN MOROCCO: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
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By

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This dissertation, based on ethnographic fieldwork in the regions of Meknès and Moulay Idriss in Morocco, explores the ritual structure and the meanings of Moroccan music-induced spirit possession trance. The practices of this syncretic tradition revolve around the belief in supernatural entities that ritually occupy the body of a possessed individual. A trance episode is always triggered in a communal setting by auditory exposure to specific tunes associated with specific supernatural entities. My research inquiry is three-fold. I explore the ways possessed individuals experience the unfolding of their episodes, I determine whether trance episodes should be considered afflictive, and I identify the proximate variables, and the ultimate socio-political elements that affect the quality of the trancers' experience. The answers to those questions contribute cross-disciplinary theoretical and methodological insights.

Participant-observation, microanalysis of observed trance behavior episodes, and interview data show that Moroccan possession trance is a form of ritualized dissociation where individual agency is compromised and fragmented. Such fragmentation is not necessarily afflictive, although it can be, depending on individual life histories. Strongly determining factors in this regard are individual adjustment to community and family expectations, and the construction of self-image in the context of a nominally Islamic nation-state.

The findings provide support for maintaining “dissociation” as a useful concept for the cross-disciplinary study of possession-trance, but dismantle functionalist explanations of ritualized dissociation. Moroccan music-induced possession trance is a flexible cultural matrix available to a diverse body of participants who mold their experience around it in vastly dissimilar ways. Its functions and consequences for individual trancers are neither static, nor inherent to the phenomenon itself.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### Overview

This dissertation is about Moroccan music-induced possession trance. Its contents are based largely on field-research that was conducted in Morocco between 2005 and 2007. The Moroccan field project, however, was originally inspired when I walked into a small Pentecostal church in North Central Florida, two years before my first field trip to Morocco. I was struck by structural and behavioral similarities between Pentecostal trance and Moroccan possession trance despite their vastly dissimilar theological referents. I had grown up in largely Muslim Morocco routinely hearing accounts of, and sometimes witnessing, individuals who went into visibly altered states of behavior and presumably consciousness in certain folk religious contexts. Moroccans generally considered those individuals to be “possessed” by the jinn, and believed that special music, when played, made those men and women’s state of possession publicly manifest.

When I was introduced, later in life, to certain folk expressions of charismatic Christianity in the United States, I discovered such concepts as “speaking in tongues,” being “slain in the spirit,” or “touched by the Holy Ghost.” Worshipers in the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions maintain that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, can touch individuals in ways that supernaturally enable the manifestation of a variety of spiritual gifts during trance<sup>1</sup>. No reference in Pentecostal worship is ever made to non-Trinitarian spirits, much less to demonic ones as is the case of Moroccan trance. Until I saw Pentecostal trance, I used to dismiss Moroccan trance as merely symptomatic of a spiritual or psychiatric disorder seated in Morocco’s socioeconomic

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<sup>1</sup> For a general survey of Pentecostalism, see Anderson (2004)

woes. The turning point for me was the discovery of elements in American Pentecostalism that were uncannily reminiscent of Moroccan possession despite the lack of any prior cognitive connection I had established between those two traditions. So many concomitant elements in Pentecostal worship underlined vivid surface similarities with Moroccan trance. First, those who fully engaged in either ritual behaved markedly differently from those who simply observed or moved their bodies to the music. Second, individuals in an apparent state of trance sometimes had to be “protected” from injury (such from falling back) by more conscious participants or observers. Third, neither ritual systematically resembled rhythmic dance despite the fact that it was accompanied by music. In both rituals, body movements often became erratic at the climax of the trance and coordinated patterns of motion began to fade.

I started to wonder whether there existed covert connections that I had missed, but I could not find any at the historical, geographic, theological, ethnic or linguistic levels and I am no longer hoping to find any beyond the obvious truth that all human histories are ultimately connected by virtue of our shared evolutionary career as a species. But after my visit with the Pentecostal congregation, I became determined to study Moroccan possession trance in the field because the surface similarities I had seen, had nonetheless convinced me that Moroccan trance was more than a regional shred of human culture. Amassing cross-cultural data after all should hopefully point anthropology towards useful generalities about the human condition. I cannot claim that I have been able in this project to isolate any grandiosely nomothetic truths. However, the concluding chapters do include important findings from Morocco that are ripe for further testing in a comparative cross-cultural context.

Diverse phenomena labeled as “trance” exist cross-culturally. In Morocco's case, there is a repertoire of specific musical rhythms that temporarily induce, in many Moroccan men and

women, highly altered states of consciousness and behavior. Those trances are generally planned and ritualized, but they can also occur spontaneously upon accidental exposure. Individuals affected by those rhythms are considered to be possessed by one of many jinn entities. Each jinn is associated with a particular musical sequence which triggers trance behavior in the individual possessed by the particular jinn. Trances usually start as an involuntary activity at some point in the life course before the possessed subject starts to regularly attend special nightly trance concerts organized in private homes. Some possessed individuals seek the help of traditional spiritists, and in some cases psychiatrists, for a cure, but attempts at therapy often fail.

The next chapter overviews anthropological and closely-related literature as it pertains to the study of trance and other forms of altered states of consciousness found cross-culturally. My own theoretical framework is decidedly non-reductionistic although I do find eclectic context-specific value to interpretations that tie possession trance to variables of gender or power status. Chapter 3 provides essential background information about Islam, maraboutism and folk magic in their socio-political context in Moroccan society. Chapter 4 is entirely field-based and describes a typical planned trance night organized in a private Moroccan home to lay the foundation for the more analytical chapters.

Chapter 5 discusses the nature of Morocco's jinn, arguing that it would be inaccurate to see them as either functional metaphors or objective realities, but that they can be best understood as subjective constructs which acquire an objective autonomy in the process of their cultural adoption. Chapter 6 discusses the extent to which "conscious" personal agency is involved in the trance process and whether it would be possible to understand Moroccan possession trance as a cultural variant of dissociation. Chapter 7 furthers that same theme by focusing on the conflicting assessments Moroccan trancers provide of their experience, and the implications of such a blur

for determining whether these trances are truly syndromic. The final chapter focuses on a set of unique Moroccan (and Middle Eastern) identity problems uncovered by the study of Moroccan possession trance. The Conclusion is a synoptic statement integrating the findings of the different chapters with emphasis on implications for theory & methods.

### **Notes on Methodology**

The field-work for this dissertation was heavily participant observation-based. Apart from a set of dry quantitative surveys which were administered in the final phase of the fieldwork, I became extensively immersed in trance nights and in events that surrounded them. My primary field assistant and I were present at trance nights and sometimes contributed to their facilitation at the request of our hosts. Participation observation also involved reaching out, creating and accepting new friendships and being good listeners when sought out. Sometimes this meant providing personal thoughts when advice was requested, or when the ethical imperative to do so could not be ignored even at the expense of forgoing the collection of potentially valuable data<sup>2</sup>.

An important element of the fieldwork we had to constantly monitor is fieldworker mannerism, both proxemic and linguistic. Morocco is a deeply hierarchical society. When Moroccan political, medical, academic, or media professionals go the field, they usually keep a far bigger distance of body, dress and demeanor from the local people than would allow the latter to significantly open up and build trust. I took active care, therefore, to mingle with my subjects and be physically accessible to them, sometimes at the risk of being stigmatized by other Moroccan academics who nurtured a sense of shame that I had returned from a first-world country to spend time with “uncultured,” “demon-struck” folks who did not belong “with us,”

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<sup>2</sup> There are two instances when we actively worked (with varying success) to dissuade an individual from participating in possession trance events because of significant potential psycho-social harm that became manifest to us in the individual’s case.

socially. Language choice also had to be monitored. The questionnaires were developed in Colloquial Moroccan Arabic (CMA), not in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). I had to painstakingly train my field assistant in avoiding MSA formulations during the interviews<sup>3</sup>.

Observing while participating carried inevitable risks such as occasional attempts by individuals to exploit us financially in exchange for data leads that were either misleading or tangential to our work. This is mainly a problem in Morocco for fieldworkers whose Western phenotypes sometimes associate them with a perception of unlimited wealth in the mind of the locals. The fact that both my field-assistant and I were native Moroccans mitigated this problem, but it did not eliminate local awareness that I had lived in the United States, and that my fieldwork had connections to American academia.

Participant observation enabled us to create uncommonly close bonds with many of the people we worked with. For some of them, interacting with us without an amount of class or educational bias was not easy. Although my field-assistant is of the same socio-economic and educational profile as most of our subjects, he quickly became popular in some circles as *ustaad* (professor) by association with me. The personal care we sometimes showed during trance events for individual subjects, without yet going into trance ourselves, also occasionally earned us the title of *doctoor* (physician). We were relieved and touched that both of those designations were born less out of an urge for formality, and more out of a sense of appreciation of our availability and accessibility despite our presumably higher statuses. We were partly addressed in those terms because the function of an ethnographer was little known and difficult to explain satisfactorily to many of our subjects.

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike English, Arabic is a heavily diglossic language. The “High” variety is held in higher esteem than the “Low” varieties. The “High” variety is often laboriously emulated in interview contexts in Morocco. For a classic on Arabic diglossia, see Ferguson (1959)

Participation observation as a central tool and philosophy of this research project did not include actual participation in the trances themselves. Going into music-induced possession trance requires a complex set of cultural and personal pre-dispositions which I neither had nor desired to internalize. The same may be said of many Moroccans who merely attend these events. At most trance nights I have attended, there were fewer trancers than non-trancers.

### **Fieldwork Structure**

Most of the fieldwork for this dissertation was carried out in the Moroccan towns of Meknès and Moulay Idriss, and in neighboring villages. Most of the qualitative and quantitative data come from field observations and interviews of adepts and artists of the Gnawa, Morocco's most popular musical possession trance genre. Some of the data come from the other two major trance genres--the Hamadsha and the Aissawa. The three traditions use the same pantheon of spirits and flow considerably into each other as Chapter 3 shows.

In the first stage of the research, I established the necessary contacts to facilitate the observation, and in some cases, the filming of organized trance nights with the consent of the participants. Careful observation of some of the resulting footage inspired preliminary unstructured interviews with several individuals who had experienced trance during the visual documentation. The first interviews were not guided by a particular analytical angle, but focused more on my immediate curiosities. I basically asked the participants what they believed happened during the trances I observed and why. Those initial conversations highlighted a range of sociological and psychological variables which I suspected to be pertinent to understanding the phenomenon in its irreducible complexity. With those variables in mind, I then constructed detailed semi-structured questionnaires in order to collect demographic, socio-medical, as well as emic interpretative information from a larger pool of subjects. The questionnaires were tried out

several times and ameliorated to extract the most reliable information by accommodating a variety of cultural personality factors through the wording and order of the questions. Only the data collected with that final version, which was administered to 54 subjects in the final stages of the field research, was used to generate the percentages listed in this work<sup>4</sup>. However, valuable data from earlier versions are used qualitatively throughout this dissertation. The final version was strictly structured and included no open-ended questions even though I continued to administer separate unstructured interviews whenever opportunities to collect additional qualitative data materialized.

The numerical data collected at the end of this field project complements but cannot possibly substitute for the richness of the ethnography that was never quantified. Nor do the 54 subjects recruited for the final survey constitute a statistically random sample. Sample randomness is impossible to achieve in the field conditions where I worked, or with the primary goal I had in mind, which was investing more time in understanding individuals as they told stories, shared life histories and discussed perspectives. However, the final quantitative questionnaire, laboriously fine-tuned by that very qualitative process, can be considered the kernel for more extensive (and more expensive) quantitative research in the future that would include finely stratified mega-samples collected across Morocco's territory.

My quantitative sample however is not truly *ad lib*. I made sure that roughly half the subjects (29) were female. At the time of interviewing, 7 subjects were under the age of 20, 12 in their twenties, 16 in their thirties, 14 in their forties or fifties, and 5 were 60 or older. Beyond the diversity that the collected data spontaneously yielded, however, no stratification was pursued

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<sup>4</sup> Sample subsets provided that sometimes add up to 52 or 53, instead of 54, indicate one or two missing responses for a particular variable.

based on socio-economic and educational status. Obtaining interviews with trancers of high socio-economic status is difficult although I have evidence that they exist<sup>5</sup>. Educational status is especially problematic in Moroccan society because the formal scholastic level reached by an individual is often not meaningfully reflective of the various intellectual skills he or she commands. Descriptive statistical information will be pulled from this sample as needed throughout this dissertation, but no attempt will be made at probability measurements. The quantitative data collected include 45 variables for each of the 54 individuals covering demographic, medical, religious, trance-symptomatic, and self-evaluative information. During the orally administered interviews, the quantitative data was immediately transferred onto the questionnaire form.

The less structured qualitative interviews were not audio-recorded. Audio-recording is associated in ordinary Moroccan consciousness with a broad culture of political distrust which includes, among other things, a fear of abusive government eavesdropping. Moreover, even when an adequate level trust is achieved, many Moroccans have a tendency to switch from their natural conversation mode into a “public-media” mode in the presence of a microphone or a recording device. That unnatural mode involves monotonous and arduous combinations of Moroccan Colloquial Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic, and a didactic statement of views that are thought to be expected in an educated, journalistic context. For the same reasons, I found note-taking during interviews quite problematic, but I used it gingerly whenever I judged that it would not adversely affect the quality of the data extracted from the dialogue. In some cases, my field-assistant and I decided to take notes not during the interview, but immediately after via an

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<sup>5</sup> Some possession trance nights, for instance, are organized primarily by and for the benefit of trancing members of the royal family and their friends and associates. A royal security guard shared detailed information about this.

effective corroborative process of mental recall. We generally remembered the elements of interest in vivid detail and transferred them onto paper. This included not only interview answers, but also important tonal, facial and idiomatic cues. The direct field quotations included in this dissertation may not use the exact wording of the interviewees, but are highly accurate reconstructions of their verbal statements, rendered in English.

### **Field Assistant**

Driss Nouijjai, my primary field assistant, crucially and generously partnered in this research project from beginning to end. Driss is a 39-year old Moroccan man, married and with three young children. He and his wife are self-employed silk artisans, working out of their home to make elaborate pea-sized silk buttons used to decorate women's ceremonial dresses. When I first met him, they occupied two dingy rooms that doubled as a kitchen, bedroom, dining room, living area and workplace all at once. Driss never obtained a high school diploma, but he has multiple skills that he harnesses for his many seasonal jobs. He is a silk artisan, a leather tanner, a musician with 6 years of conservatory training, and a band singer for weddings and other communal celebrations that often take place in the summer season. This jack-of-all-trades, highly skilled at some of them, rubs shoulders with some of Meknès' richest elite who hire him to sing at weddings as well as with the town's outcast including homeless men, street gangs, prostitutes and seriously disfigured individuals.

I credit Driss for his deep honesty and emotional involvement in my research topic. He has an uncommonly extensive knowledge of the heart of the old Medina of Meknès where he lives and of its social pains. He helped me uncover fascinating aspects of possession trance in the Meknès region. He also showed me many of the old Medina's little-known art and architectural

treasures that public authorities abandoned to decrepitude instead of guarding them as jealously as they do the mausoleum of Sultan Ismail, who is great grand-father of the current monarch.

While I personally administered most of the qualitative interviews and the proto-questionnaires, the final quantitative survey was carried out by either one of us with different subsets of subjects. I trained Driss in specific interview techniques, had him carry out a few pilot surveys in my presence, and provided him with a written guide. I was thoroughly pleased with his performance and with the quality of the data he collected on his own. He was very adaptable and quick-learning. He also travelled with me on my field trips to other towns and villages, and facilitated the interviewing of a few key subjects who otherwise would not have been particularly comfortable with my profile as an ethnographer from an American university, despite my Moroccan identity.

Driss served as much more than just a performer of assigned field tasks. This work is ultimately the fruit of a reiterative and maturing dialectic between the qualitative ethnography and the quantitative surveys in a context where teamwork was important. The conclusions I have reached both on a scholarly and human-relational level are narrated in the field-based chapters of this work.

## CHAPTER 2 POSSESSION AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL LITERATURE

This chapter will survey a selection of past anthropological research of possession trance cross-culturally. After addressing the problem of terminology, pioneering spirit-possession ethnographies will be overviewed, and a presentation will follow of the various theoretical paradigms that have hitherto surrounded the study of possession trance.

### **Terminology and Scope**

The earliest occurrences, that I could find in the anthropological literature, of the phrase “altered states of consciousness” (ASC) are in the works of Erika Bourguignon. Bourguignon (1973, 1976) used ASC as an all-encompassing designation for all those cross-cultural modes of human mental function that are presumably different from ordinary consciousness on the basis of empirical behavior observation. The Society of the Anthropology of Consciousness (SAC), a relatively new American Anthropological Association (AAA) section with a more focused interest in a universalistic evolutionistic study of human consciousness, adopted the ASC designation two decades later<sup>1</sup>. Most anthropologists studying religious behavior today continue to use more or less context-specific designations such as “shamanism”, “spirit possession”, “trance,” or “religious experience.” SAC's universalizing penchant still has only a limited influence, partly perhaps because of that section's historical association with para-psychology<sup>2</sup>.

I do believe that idiographic and nomothetic approaches are fully reconcilable in anthropology, and I consider Moroccan music-induced possession trance to be one many different cross-cultural expressions of altered consciousness which include, for instance, Haitian

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<sup>1</sup> See the official SAC homepage, especially the history section for more details:  
[http://www.sacaaa.org/Boulders\\_in\\_the\\_Stream.pdf](http://www.sacaaa.org/Boulders_in_the_Stream.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Vodou, Caribbean Santeria, Brazilian Candomblé, Christian Pentecostal, and Native American shamanic trance<sup>3</sup>. I fully concur for instance with Lewis (2003) that the separate treatment of shamanism in American anthropology reflects more of a culturological bias than a scientifically useful difference between spirit possession and shamanic flight<sup>4</sup>. I find Moroccan possession trance comparable in many ways to other culturally ritualized ASC's that expressly involve a folk doctrine of the numinous<sup>5</sup>.

Both “ASC”, and “possession trance” have broad descriptive power as well as limitations in a comparative context. ASC can include experiences that are not usually attributed to mysterious forces, such as the apparent trance states induced in some rock and heavy metal fans. “Possession trance” on the other hand may not adequately describe out-of-body or near-death experiences. While those experiences are usually reported in clinical settings (Corazza 2008), I have found them pertinent to some aspects of Moroccan possession trance<sup>6</sup>. Human consciousness is a complex non-linear continuum and the differences between depersonalization and multiple personality experiences become blurred as the data are examined. Because most Moroccan trance rituals invoke spirits, “possession trance” will be the primary designation used to label the phenomenon under study, but references to ASC will also be made contextually.

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<sup>3</sup> Morris (2006) is an appropriate comparative survey of these and other world traditions involving a form of trance.

<sup>4</sup>Shamans' guiding spirits take them on supernatural out-of-body flights. Jinn-possessed Moroccans sometimes use similar metaphors. Several of my subjects referred to their experience as being “taken up and away” (*terfaa*)

<sup>5</sup>The “numinous” is probably a less tainted term than the “supernatural” in reference to mysterious experiences of gods, spirits or other culturally defined entities. This term is rightly favored by Levy and Mageo (1996).

<sup>6</sup>A rare climactic phase of the possession trance ritual in Morocco involves a near-death state where the individual is physically passive, considered temporarily “dead” and is ritually prepared for “burial”. Anecdotes abound of ritually dead individuals accidentally not returning to life at the end of the ritual.

## Pioneers in Anthropology

Two of the earliest ethnographies of possession trance are visual documentaries. The best known one in American anthropology was produced in 1952 by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. *Trance and Dance in Bali* depicts a Balinese ceremonial dance where agonistic encounters between a witch and dragon are dramatized via comedy and trance seizures (Mead and Bateson 2006). The other one is a cinematic ethnofiction produced in 1955 by French anthropologist Jean Rouch. His short film *Les Maîtres Fous* (The Mad Masters) is based on the Hauka, a religious movement in French colonial Africa, which consisted of possession trance rituals that mimicked (and satirized) French colonial administrators (Stoller 1992).

Cultural anthropology's classic written ethnographies of spirit possession, however clump mostly during the 1970's, and at least two of them, by the same author (Crapanzano 1973, 1980) involve Morocco. One of the earliest ones by a major contributor to general anthropological theory is Turner's study of the religious practice of the Ndembu of Zambia (Turner 1968). Spirit possession in Turner's ethnography is of the afflictive type which requires ritual treatment. Individuals who are in breach of a custom may be struck by the spirit of a deceased kinsman who must then be identified, placated and evicted. There are similarities with Moroccan trance because Ndembu patients are initiated into a special cult of the possessed in the process of their healing. However, unlike Moroccan trancers, they are unequivocally treated as sufferers, at least if we use Turner's ethnographic lens. In Morocco, there is far more ambiguity as to whether or not the possession trance experience is pathological. Those among the Ndembu who become healer-mediums must have successfully been healed themselves. In Morocco, however, mediums are not healed "ex-trancers". They continue to experience the full symptoms of possession and enter instead into a lifelong "contractual" relationship with the spirits who endow them with

special powers. Marshalling his and Van Gennep's concepts of "rites of passage" and "liminality", Turner treats the Nbdembu trance ritual as a functional symbolic system of social redress and individual re-integration. Nbdemu trance (which is partly music-induced) is geared towards the removal of possession. In Morocco, music-induced trance is an opportunity to periodically manifest possession, and is not used to facilitate spirit eviction.

The periodicity and non-afflictive dimension of Moroccan trance was noticed to some extent by Crapanzano (1973) throughout his classic ethnography of the Hamadsha, one of Morocco's three most popular possession trance genres. In his analysis of the goal of the trance ceremony, he correctly prevaricates between references to states of "health" and "proximate health" (Crapanzano 1973:212). His approach however is tainted in my assessment by his premise that Moroccan trance is primarily therapeutic and is part of what he consistently refers to as a system of "ethnopsychiatry"<sup>7</sup>. But the strength of the Crapanzano's ethnography is that it is a meticulous scouting of historical, religious, and other elements in Moroccan culture that he suspects to be of relevance. Although he does not mobilize all of those elements in his analysis, he does a good job of maintaining a respectable agnostic distance from the material he studies, neither reducing it to cultural materialistic terms, nor becoming one with the folk perspective. Crapanzano's 1968 book is one of American anthropology's very few classics whose French translation<sup>8</sup> can be seen today in the windows of major Moroccan bookstores.

The crowning achievement of Crapanzano, both to Moroccan trance studies and to interpretative anthropology, came twelve years after his book on the Hamadasha. Crapanzano (1980) uses extensive dialogue with Tuhami to focus on the experience of this Moroccan man

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<sup>7</sup>If pressed, I would find "ethnopsychology," more appropriate because it does not necessarily medicalize the phenomenon. Based on my field data, the Hamadsha do not medicalize it either.

<sup>8</sup> Crapanzano 2000, a translation by Olivier Ralet.

who is married to Aisha, the major spirit of the Moroccan folk pantheon. Unlike his previous work, his book on Tuhami eschews reference to “ethnopsychiatry” and engages more into an intimate inquisitive quest of Tuhami's personality through Tuhami's own eyes, while rarely interposing theory between the dialogues. The result is not a book which provides any gratifying answers on the level of explanatory model-building, but an incredibly rich ethnography of Morocco that continues to be tapped today, and an invitation to anthropology to continuously question its view of itself. *Tuhami* is a solid spirit possession narrative that leaves itself open to multiple interpretations. At a seminar on the supernatural I attended at the 2001 AAA annual meetings in Washington DC where both Crapanzano and Edith Turner, an Inuit ethnographer, spoke, Turner said that it was time for anthropology to boldly recognize that Crapanzano's famous informant was factually possessed by an *afreet*<sup>9</sup>. Crapanzano, however, immediately balked at the suggestion, saying that it was impossible to draw conclusions.

Within a year of the publication of 1980 Crapanzano's classic, another highly influential ethnography came on the scene. Obeyesekere (1981) contains vivid descriptions of the possession rituals of popular Sri Lankan ecstasies who subjected themselves to injurious acts during devotional trances to the gods. There are important similarities with Morocco. As with Moroccan trance, Sinhalese trance is syncretic, involving in Sri Lanka's case, elements from both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It is also increasingly popular against the thrust of official Sinhalese Buddhism, and is frowned upon by purists of the latter, just as Moroccan trance is anathematized overtly by Moroccan fundamentalist Islam, and covertly by state Islam. Obeyesekere's contribution in the way of theory however is very problematic. His ethnography is steeped in psychoanalytical (Freudian) imagery. Many elements of Sinhalese ecstatic trance are

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<sup>9</sup>Another Arabic word for *jinn*

rendered as symbolic expressions of unconscious drives, repressions and conflicts with a special emphasis on the sexual. Freudian psychoanalysis is notoriously easy and tempting to mobilize. In Moroccan trance too, there are elements that are powerfully suggestive of sexuality because some of the trance motions are evocative of intercourse and orgasm. One of the Moroccan psychiatrists I interviewed explained Moroccan trance strictly in those terms, and non-trancers at Gnawa nights sometimes project erotic meanings on the ritual behavior of female trancers<sup>10</sup>. In the qualitative interviews, however, I was not able to detect any reliable indicators of a possible correspondence between my subjects' trance behavior and the level of their supposed sexual (dis)satisfaction. That leads me to seriously suspect the same in the case of Obeyesekere's ecstasies. On non-participating viewers, the semi-chaotic routine of possession trance will always have a Rorschach effect, and projections of sexual imagery are only some of many that can be made.

### **Contemporary Models**

For all practical purposes, variants of Freudian psychoanalysis such as Obeyesekere's have largely retreated in American anthropological discussions of possession trance except as accessories in a larger box of theoretical tools. Perhaps the only place where primarily psychoanalytic anthropology still thrives is in the historic Collège de France in Paris where there is a small circle of mainly French anthropologists who specifically label their study group in Freudian terms: *Anthropologie Psychanalytique*<sup>11</sup>. Contemporary possession studies originating in the US or the UK tend to be more liberally eclectic, a fact which I personally consider to be a good herald of a less paradigm-centered, yet sound anthropology which navigates both the

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 8

<sup>11</sup> Based on personal communication with Bernard Juillerat, one of the founders.

scientific and the human. There are nonetheless important distinguishable trends in the modern American and British anthropological literature which I will respectively label here as the gender, the political, the medical, and the evolutionist.

The gender-oriented approach is best exemplified in Bourguignon's continuing work on possession trance. The argument she advances is based on a long-held (and possibly accurate) assumption accumulated from world ethnographies that more women than men participate in possession trance across cultures. Bourguignon (2004) concludes that female possession trance is a form of culturally ritualized dissociation which provides a means of gratifying wishes that are normally denied women in different societies. Although this might at first sound like old-fashioned psychoanalysis, the essence of the modern gender theory of possession trance is not so much female sexuality as unequal access to power by women in all spheres, economic, political and domestic. Although neither is cited in Bourguignon's article, two notable champions of the gender approach in the case of Moroccan possession trance are Kapchan (1996) and Rausch (2000). Kapchan uses a heavily interpretive approach to read messages of defiance of male power in the utterances of possessed women and women herbalists in Morocco. Rausch focuses more on the circles of mutual support women create for themselves as healers and patients. One of the well-publicized modern gender-oriented ethnographies of possession trance in places other than Morocco is Borgen (1997). Borgen argues that the Genji possession trance in Japan is an unconscious act of aggression against male oppression as well as a repression-relieving device in a society with serious imbalances in gender power-sharing.

While it is no coincidence that the main proponents of the feminist approach to possession trance are women anthropologists, equally prominent male anthropologists often fully accept the premise that women are preponderantly present in possession trance worldwide, and they

acknowledge that gender subordination may be fundamental to understanding that gender skew<sup>12</sup>. Although I nurtured that same assumption at the beginning of my fieldwork, my own position has become increasingly nuanced over the time I spent in the field. I realized that certain fieldwork conditions, as well as prior cultural assumptions, can very easily make women ethnographically more salient in possession trance than they truly are. Moreover, I was also able to find little field support for a correlation between the amount of Moroccan women's actual power status vis-à-vis men and the likelihood of their being possessed. Some of the married women trancers I interviewed actually held more decision-making and financial authority in the household than their husbands, because they had stronger personalities, and manifested a high level of social independence outside the home.

In some way, the gender-based approach to trance is a variant of a much broader model which sees in possession trance a form of socio-political resistance, irrespective of gender. In this model, trance is either the poor man's way of rebelling against, or obtaining ritual relief from, the stress generated by the politically and economically oppressive status quo imposed by an elite class. In Brown (1991), the female identity of the central character, a Haitian Vodou priestess, is almost incidental to the anthropologist's assessment of Haitian Vodou possession trance as a response to memories of slavery, daily political violence, and extreme poverty which does not discriminate much on the basis of gender. Kapferer (1997) portrays witchcraft and spirit possession practices as conscious responses to political pressures and changes brought about by colonialism and modernity. The latest book on Moroccan spirit possession, by a Moroccan critical theorist, one of the very few to actually experiment with ethnography, portrays Moroccan healing rituals as an idiom of power relationships defined by grimly hierarchical socio-cultural

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance Levi & Mageo. (1996:19) Lewis (2003:70-79)

ideologies in Moroccan society (Maarouf 2007). As with the gender approach, similar problems arise. I was able to document the existence of regular possession trancers from multiple socio-political strata including some of the most powerful elite despite the fact that the visible majority of Moroccan trancers are indeed low to middle class.

An even broader approach that may be considered as both encompassing and transcending the gender and the political models together is a medical one. This is an approach which explains possession trance by its supposed most proximate etiology: not gender or politics, but psychological or physiological stress, period. In this sense, both the gender and the political approaches can be considered medical approaches at the core. There have always been studies, such as Ward (1989) and (Raybeck et al. 1989), that showed interest in trance specifically as a personal stress-induced pathology that is ritually circumscribed. Academic trends medicalizing possession trance reached an important climax with the 1992 29<sup>th</sup> issue of *Transcultural Psychiatry* (TP) which was wholly devoted to the proposed (and subsequent) listing of possession trance as a dissociative disorder in DSM IV<sup>13</sup>. The validity of that classification continued to be questioned in TP, including by a few mental health professionals, until quite recently<sup>14</sup>. It is curious however that what spilled so much ink in TP was not reference to dissociation per se, but the official medical labeling. The fact is that several prominent contemporary anthropologists of possession trance who never stepped into the TP debate have actually chosen to define possession trance in terms of dissociation. Levy and Mageo (1996:19) for instance, state that: “Two conditions are necessary for full possession to flourish: people who are psychologically disposed to dissociation, and a cultural environment that makes conventional

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<sup>13</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. See Chapter 6.

<sup>14</sup>See for instance Duijl et al. (2005)

use of possession episodes.” Whether dissociation is a useful concept for (at least partially) understanding Moroccan music-induced possession trance will be discussed in Chapter 6.

One final important theoretical model used by a handful of contemporary anthropologists was popularized by the Society of the Anthropology of Consciousness and its flagstaff journal. The basic premises of this paradigm which I have labeled as evolutionist<sup>15</sup> are summarized in Winkelman (2000). Winkelman hybridizes shamanism studies with broad concepts from evolutionary brain anatomy and behavioral ecology to argue that all contemporary religious experience have universal shamanic roots based in the periodic exploration of pre-mammalian emotions associated with ancient adaptational needs. In shamanism, according to Winkelman, those mental explorations are expressed as experiences of death and rebirth, and as soul journeys. I personally find Winkelman's approach to be great interest and potential if its tools are embedded in a broader anthropology of religion. As it currently stands, however, it reduces the numinous to mere evolutionary neural algorithms.

The author of this dissertation considers the various approaches described in this chapter, not as models of analysis, but as theoretical tools of interest. Moroccan possession trance inescapably routes through and back to all the varied human experiences of the numinous, past and present, cradled between culture-specific complex, fascinating, and sometimes elusive spatial, temporal and existential markers. To contribute to general anthropology, Moroccan possession trance merits a fully idiographic description of both its context and its substance. The next chapter is devoted to context.

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<sup>15</sup>To distinguish it from “evolutionary” which has strictly Darwinian and neo-Darwinian overtones

## CHAPTER 3 THE MOROCCAN CONTEXT

This chapter will introduce key elements of Moroccan culture that are necessary to understanding the context of the field-based chapters that follow. Special attention will be devoted to those components that have played a determining role in configuring contemporary Moroccan possession trance traditions. These are Islam, Sufism, witchcraft, and 20<sup>th</sup> century Moroccan political history.

### **Morocco: An Overview**

The Kingdom of Morocco<sup>1</sup> is located in the north westernmost tip of Africa, bordering Algeria to the east, the disputed Western Sahara territory and Mauritania to the south, and Spain to the North across a very narrow strip of the Mediterranean. The latitude line mapped 30° north of the equator connects it horizontally across the Atlantic to the US state of Georgia. At approximately 172,400 square miles, Morocco is just a bit larger than California, boasts two coastlines and a very diverse climate across its complex physical geography. While summer temperatures can hit the hundreds (°F) in the Sahara as well as in the plains, Ifrane, one of Morocco's many high altitude towns along the Atlas Mountains is reputed as the spot where the lowest temperature in Africa (-11 °F) was ever recorded, in 1935 (World Meteorological Organization 2007). The Atlas Mountains, a three-tired chain that criss-crosses the upper half of Morocco's terrain are home to several popular ski resorts.

The current urban population is best seen as Arab-Berber mix because of centuries of intermarriage, but there is also an ever dwindling number of Moroccan Sephardi Jews. There are no reliable statistics as to the percentage of ethnically “pure” Arabs or Berbers in Morocco. From

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter on Morocco in *Regional Surveys of the World* (2004), and numerous publicly accessible encyclopedic references provide basic surveys of Morocco's physical and social geography, including most of the information given in this section.

a linguistic standpoint, Berbers are definitely a minority. The vast majority of Moroccans, including many of determinable Berber descent, speak Colloquial Moroccan Arabic (CMA) rather than Berber as their only native, or their first language. There have been attempts under the current monarch to introduce Berber in public educational curricula, but Arabic remains the only language that Morocco's constitution enshrines as the official tongue<sup>2</sup>. By “Arabic”, Morocco's constitution seems to refer to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is considerably different from CMA. With the negligible exception of a few recent experimental ventures, all Moroccan media and modern literature are written in MSA. In everyday situations however, Moroccans converse in CMA. Fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted in CMA, except for references to the Qur’anic text, which is written in Classical Arabic, a form ancestral to both MSA and CMA.

Defining Moroccan ethnicities by skin color is even more complicated. It is generally impossible to distinguish Arabs from Berbers based on phenotypic observation. Most Moroccan are light brown-skinned, but the pigmentation spectrum runs the entire gamut from very dark or very fair complexions among both self-identified Arabs and Berbers. It is not uncommon for a broad range of skin colors to run in the same family, including the author’s own. Centuries of simultaneous demographic proximity to sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and the Middle East have fashioned Morocco's contemporary ethnic melt. This also means the presence of a complex array of Sunni, Shi'ite, Judeo-Christian, animistic, and even pre-Roman elements that lurk beneath the surface of Morocco's official Sunni Malekite Muslim identity (Njoku 2006). However, Islam is Morocco's state religion, and unless born Jewish, all Moroccans are considered judicially Muslim even if they choose to adopt a different personal faith.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Preamble to Morocco’s Constitution, cited in the bibliography under “Kingdom of Morocco”

Since 788 AD and parallel to Muslim conquests of North Africa and Iberia, Morocco has been consecutively ruled by Sunni and Shia, Arab and Berber Muslim dynasties (Julien 1970). Morocco became a French protectorate between 1912 and 1956 during the rule of The Alaouite sultans, an Arab Sunni dynasty which has been in power since 1666. Alaouite rule evolved into a full-fledged constitutional hereditary monarchy shortly after Morocco's independence from France in 1956. The current Alaouite monarch has been in power since 1999.

Contemporary Morocco has a mixed economic and human rights record. Dramatic social class discrepancies put Morocco's most recently published Human Development Index (0.646) just below that of Botswana and Namibia (UNDP 2007). There is a variable margin of political and religious freedom, but specific topics, especially the person of the King and some elements of the Muslim religion are generally considered off the limit of critique, both constitutionally and in practice.

The kind of music-induced possession trances discussed in this dissertation are very popular, widely tolerated and sometimes sponsored by the government, but much of their substance is routinely denounced by government theologians as un-Islamic. Modern Moroccan possession trance contains the elements of three religious traditions all of which need to be understood separately before their synthesis in Moroccan possession trance is discerned. The sections that follow provide that general information. A separate section will be bring into focus a critical period in modern Moroccan political history that had lasting impacts on the sociology of Moroccan trance as on many elements of Moroccan contemporary identity.

Much of the information below is readily available in all standard introductory texts to Islam and Sufism, and some of it is based on the author's lifelong ethnographic exposure as a native of Morocco. For ampler initiation to Islam, readers may wish to consult Schimmel (1992),

and to Sufism, Baldick (2008). For a classic ethnographic authority on indigenous Moroccan belief systems and rituals, especially witchcraft, see Westermarck (1968).

### **A Tri-partite Tradition**

#### **Islam**

Islam is a post-biblical monotheistic religion founded by Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (570-632 AD) in Mecca, the economic and cultural heart of the Arabian peninsula. Islam is often referred to as one of the three “Abrahamic” religions because Judaism, Christianity and Islam all have a theological claim to Abraham, the patriarch featured in the Book of Genesis. From the Muslim point of view, Abraham is a prophet who, like other prophets before him beginning with Adam, preached a pure unadulterated form of strict monotheism revealed and corrected by God multiple times over human history. The final messenger in this line of prophets is believed to be Muhammad whose message supersedes, and essentially annuls, all previous versions of the biblical revelation, including Christianity and Judaism which are seen as having been corrupted over the centuries by human tradition, according to Muslim doctrine.

The Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be God's final revelation to mankind through Muhammad is considered to be God's very own speech in Arabic literally dictated to the Prophet by the angel Gabriel over a period of twenty years. The text of the Qur'an is roughly the size of the New Testament, but is very different from Christian and Jewish scriptures in many ways. In the Quran, God personally talks in the first person of the plural (a royal “We”) about various issues that pertain to the needs of Muhammad's community: moral conduct, theological argument with non-believers, observances, political affairs, and various renderings of biblical stories. The many individual fragments revealed over two decades to Muhammad were later compiled into 114 *suras* (chapters) listed roughly from longest to shortest with no regard to theme or

chronological order of revelation. Unlike the Bible, the Quran is not compiled as a history of progressive revelation, but as a kaleidoscopic text meant for melodic recitation and memorization. It must be orally recited in a state of ritual purity and is often used in and of itself as a tool of exorcism. It is written in a unique idiom of Classical Arabic which is strikingly different from all the other known literature of Muhammad's time. This bolsters Muslim doctrines not only of its divine origin, but also of its miraculous inimitableness. Muhammad received Qur'anic revelations while he was in episodes of altered consciousness which Muslims regard as evidence of communication from the angel who delivered the revelation. It is true that the idiom of the Qur'an is very different from Muhammad's own normal "conscious" speech. Apart from the Qur'an, Muhammad also spoke profusely in the ordinary idiom of his time about religious, social and political matters. Those discourses are recorded in larger volumes of the Hadith<sup>3</sup> and constitute the second most important body of Muslim scriptures.

Muslims believe that there is only One God and that Muhammad is his final messenger to humanity. Muslims are to minimally perform five mandatory daily prayers, fast during Ramadan, the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Muslim lunar calendar, give prescribed alms, and perform a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime if they are financially and physically able. The prayers, fast, alms and pilgrimage are rigorously scripted and must be performed precisely in the fashion laid out in the Qur'an and Hadith for them to be valid. In Islam, ritual rigor is at least as important as broad moral values. The slightest straying away from the script can void the ritual. Strict ablution rules must be followed in preparation for prayer. The physical and verbal actions of the daily prayers also scripted down to the minutest detail, and ingesting even the tiniest amount of a solid or a liquid could void a full day's fast and require make-ups and penalties. In a later chapter, we will

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<sup>3</sup> Literally means "discourse"

examine the importance of Muslim ritual rigor for the contemporary sociology of Moroccan possession trance.

Muslims believe in the existence of spiritual beings created from fire (called *jinn* in MSA, *jnun* in CMA.) They are similar, but not exactly equivalent, to “demons” because they can be either good or evil. By extension of his cosmic significance, Muhammad is believed to be God's messenger not only to humanity, but to also to the jinn (Qur'an 72:1-3). Some of the jinn accept his message and convert to Islam, but many reject Islam and become indistinguishable from the devil as the latter is understood in the biblical tradition, but the Qur'an is not entirely clear as to whether all the jinn have inherited the evil nature of the original Lucifer<sup>4</sup>. At any rate, the Qur'an (72:5) discourages human contact with the jinn for any purpose because of the uncertain and potentially harmful spiritual consequences of such contact. For similar reasons, witchcraft is strictly prohibited in Islam (Qur'an 2:102).

### **Sufism**

Sufism is not a branch of Islam *per se*. It is a broad spiritual tradition that began hatching within a Muslim context as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Buehler 98:11), and continued to permeate much of Islam across sectarian lines as well as non-Muslim religious traditions. Sufis attempt a more mystical and intimate communion with the divine through a variety of ascetic and non-ascetic disciplines. They have traditionally organized themselves as *tariqas* or “ways”. Every Sufi way points to a Muslim historical founder, a master who is believed to have attained a unique level of intimacy with the divine, beyond that which can be attained through ordinary devotions, demonstrated his spiritual status via lifestyle, special signs or wisdom, and gathered a following. Because the movements described as “Sufi” run the entire gamut from theologically

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<sup>4</sup> Compare for instance Quran 18:50 to Quran 72:11.

very liberal and essentially universalistic to Islam-centered or fundamentalist, the etymology of the word itself is very hazy. Some refer it to asceticism because the Arabic word “*suf*” means “wool”, alluding thus to the simple cloaks early Muslim ascetics may have donned (Baldick 2000:29). Some refer it to the so-called Companions of the *Suffa* (porch), a group of impoverished disciples who would have spent much of their time in the yard of Muhammad's mosque eagerly praying and waiting for the next Qur'anic revelation (Sells 1996:333). Some have even suggested a symbolic connection to the Greek word *sophia* meaning “wisdom” (Michon and Gaetani 2006:1)

Some early Sufi masters such as Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) took a doctrinally rigorous route and made the case against what they considered heretical theologies inspired by Greek philosophy<sup>5</sup>. At the other extreme is Mansur Al-Hallaj (858-922) who proclaimed his own divinity and was executed for heresy (Massignon 1982). The most popular Sufi in the Western world is Persian Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) whose works are widely translated in English<sup>6</sup>. He is the father of the Mevlevi order, famous for its whirling song and dance. Rumi and other early masters of Sufism such as Ibn Arabi and Attar were true theological universalists, hence the reach of their influence far beyond Islam, and the founding in the 20th century of non Islam-centered mystical expressions such as Inayat Khan's (1882-1927) universal Sufism, currently stationed in the United States and in India (Malik and Hinnells 2006:11).

Whether liberal or fundamentalist, Sufi orders share broadly similar practices centered on sessions of collective, often repetitive, chanting of God's names and attributes, called *dhikr* sessions, supplemented with readings from the Qur'an and poetry praising the prophet

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<sup>5</sup> See his major work *Incoherence of Philosophers* published in English in 1997 by Michael E. Marmura.

<sup>6</sup> *The Essential Rumi* is one of his best known collaborative English translations, edited by Coleman Barks (1996).

Muhammad and/or the founder of the particular Sufi order. The repetitive chanting and the mild rhythmic physical swaying is used to facilitate a state of ecstatic trance which adepts describe as a spiritual experience or gift enabled by the divine in favor of his lovers. Many Sufi traditions use percussion, wind or stringed instruments to accompany their chanting, but this is frowned upon by the more austere orders who regard the use of music as Islamically illicit or at least potentially arousing to spiritually doubtful passions (Berkey 2003:237).

Moroccan Sufism is centered on the putative burial sites of holy men who came to be known as in French and English as marabouts from the Arabic word *murabit*. That word literally means “or one who takes camp,” or “one who is garrisoned.” This appears to be in reference to Muslim missionaries who settled in and Islamized the harder-to-reach rural areas during the Muslim conquest of North Africa (Eickelman 1976:25). Morocco's rural and urban scenery is studded with white-washed domes marking the tombs of these men, and some are more important than others. The more important ones are better-maintained and become major centers of pilgrimage, festivities and commerce. This is the case, for example, of El-Hadi ben Aissa of Meknès, better known as El-Sheikh El-Kamel, and Sidi Ali in the pilgrimage town named after him in the Moulay Idriss region a few kilometers away from Meknès.

Although they sometimes use simple musical instruments in their gatherings, Moroccan Sufi brotherhoods tend to be theologically of the conservative type, but only the doctrinal surface. While they do set themselves apart as special “ways” within Islam guided by the particular piety of a historical founder, they vehemently affirm doctrinal orthodoxy. Virtually all affiliates of known Sufi orders I met in Morocco re-iterated dogmas that are *superficially* indistinguishable from those of strict Muslim orthodoxy: That Islam, rigorously practiced in its five-pillared Sunni form, is the only valid religion, and that it supersedes all other human

spiritualities which were either corrupted (such as Christianity) or are inherently false such as all paganism and non-biblical religions. Moroccan Sufi gatherings also do not usually include female participants.

It is very important to note that this outward conservativeness on the part of Moroccan Sufis is by no means a pro-active agenda. It is simply part of a transmitted static historic creed. On a human level, Moroccan Sufis, and average Moroccan Muslims in general, blend in quite seamlessly with other components of Morocco's cultural fabric. Women are not *banned* as such from esoteric Sufi worship gatherings. *Dhikr* sessions have simply generally been understood to be a male activity. And despite outwardly intolerant theologies, Moroccan Sufis routinely mingle with non-Muslim friends, non-observant Muslims, and women outside these official gatherings. Moroccan Sufis seem content with observing the “rules” of their own communities internally. But as an extension to their *dhikr* activities, they actually tolerate and even facilitate a very large and fascinating area of continuity between their own traditional practices and those of music-induced possession trance. On the periphery of the male-only Sufi divine *dhikr* worship, there is a proliferation of more popular forms of ecstatic trance, led by Sufi brotherhoods themselves, where demonic possession is involved, and both genders participate.

### **Witchcraft**

Moroccan witchcraft has a life of its own apart from both mainstream Islam and ecstatic Sufism. It can be best described as a complex repertoire of utilitarian magical practices that bring good, fend evil, or place curses. It intersects with mainstream Islam in that it recognizes the power of the jinn, but differs from it in that it actively mobilizes their power to achieve desired positive or negative ends in human life. While paranormal encounters are frequently reported, the main interface with the jinn are material objects ranging from plants and minerals to animal

(and reportedly human) parts. Morocco's bazaars teem with witchcraft supply shops displaying dried hyena, lizard and other animal parts. Witches prepare or prescribe complex recipes of faunal and floral elements to bring about specific effects in oneself or in other people. Customer needs range from cures for minor ailments to the achievement of emotional and behavioral control over other individuals. The perceived mechanism of action is magical in the sense that specific recipes constitute supernatural commands that translate into behavioral changes via the agency of the jinn. But many Moroccans will admit that they believe that the effects of ingestible preparations are purely biochemical and often hazardously so when they are placed in the food of unsuspecting victims.

Ingestible magic however is only one component of Moroccan witchcraft. Esoteric magic charts, talismans, body fluid stains, grave dirt, and dyes strategically placed in homes or in the path of someone also bring about similar effects either alone or in combination with ingested material. Whatever the means, Moroccan witchcraft undoubtedly contains complex traces of Sub-Saharan animistic religions whose details are beyond the scope of this research, but which will be touched upon in chapter 5. The one distinctly Arab/Muslim element in Moroccan witchcraft is that credit for the effect of magic is always specifically given to that particular category of spiritual beings in Muslim mythology called the jinn.

Unlike Islam and Sufism, Moroccan witchcraft is purely utilitarian and has no internal system of ethics, but many practitioners and customers limit themselves by an external one when they choose to use witchcraft for the exclusive purpose of bringing good fortune or to undoing harmful spells. Beneficial witchcraft practices often use verses of the Qur'an in combination with edible or non-edible preparations. At the other extreme, Qura'nic verses penned sacrilegiously

backward in a spell can be used invoke the vilest jinn capable and willing to produce serious physical or emotional damage in a human victim.

### **Synthesis in Trance**

Moroccan possession trance is a tri-partite syncretic cultural phenomenon which we can only begin to understand at the crossroads of Islam, ecstatic Sufism, and witchcraft. The complex ways in which those three components are wed to produce music-induced jinn-possession trance are quite telling about some of the ways culture is fashioned and transformed. The basic structure of Moroccan music-induced trance, as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, involves musicians who play esoteric tunes that trigger dramatic changes in consciousness and behavior in certain subjects. Such changes can include apparently painless, even ecstatic, acts of extensive self-injury such as forearm or head-slashing or non-injurious contact with fire. In the Gnawa tradition, which is most of the data of this dissertation are pulled, those behavioral changes are attributed to possession by specific jinn who are capable of conferring unusual powers on the possessed during trance episodes. However, most Gnawa trance rituals are embedded in a looser Muslim framework because the names of God and the prophet are always invoked in the same songs side by side with the names of the jinn. In the Hamadsha tradition however, the syncretism is less complete and hence more revealing of the possible history of the synthesis of Islam and sub-Saharan demonology, discussed more amply in Chapter 5.

The Hamadsha have the features of a true historic Sufi brotherhood as evidenced by some of their mystical poetry manuals and mosque-lodges that I have visited, most of which are half-abandoned today. One of them preserves retired metal balls and axes historically used for head-slashing during ecstatic trance. Most Hamadsha will tell you that the origins of self-mutilation are found in the practice their 18<sup>th</sup> century founder Sidi Ali Ben Hamdoush who would spend

suspend a metal ball from the ceiling in front of his forehead while he spent the night praying in sitting posture. Whenever he dozed off and leaned forward, he was rudely awakened when his head struck the metal ball<sup>7</sup>.

However, while the Hamadsha always invoke this story, and while their major tunes during which they practice head-slashing are dedicated to chanting God's name, the ecstasy that they report (and that I have behaviorally observed) is mechanically very similar to that of the demonic trance which is more explicit in the Gnawa tradition. Most Hamadsha report involuntary emotions triggered by the *dhikr* tune, especially a sudden grief attack just before they “lose” consciousness and engage in self-mutilation. This is very similar to what many Gnawa trancers, men and women, report before they are controlled by a specific jinn. The Hamadsha and the Gnawa may have different spiritual histories, and certainly still today radically different musical genres, but the behavioral symptoms of their respective trances are for all practical purposes the same. When observing Hamadsha trances, I found myself witnessing a fascinating cultural phenomenon where the structural vestiges of an old tradition (ecstatic Middle Eastern Sufism) are retained while their theological content is increasingly purged, and replaced with spirit possession content.

Today, the Hamadsha also cater to the needs of the possessed by playing jinn tunes *in addition* to their more traditional *dhikr* tunes. The degree of physical violence in the trance does not seem to be in any way correlated to the nature of the invoked entity: God, saint, or jinn, good or evil. It strictly depends on the social setting and the particular behavioral script traditionally associated with the tune being played. The practices of the Gnawa are more frankly steeped in

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<sup>7</sup>What we know about Ben Hamdoush from historical sources, however, is extremely limited (Crapanzano 1973:22)

spirit possession. However, their primary lyrical repertoire is paradoxically infused with Qura'nic terminology and praises to the prophet and the saints.

Then there is the role of witchcraft. Users of witchcraft do not necessarily go into ritual trance, nor do all the possessed trancers necessarily have recourse to witchcraft as a potential solution or complement to their predicament, but some do. Witchcraft can have two different functions with regard to trance. It can be used to protect the individual from the particular spirits to whose control he or she is susceptible, and therefore, avoid going into trance altogether, or in the case of dedicated trancers, it can be used to maintain, with those spirits, a positive working relationship in which the possessed is said to "serve" them. Under those terms, the possessed goes into trance regularly, makes appropriate seasonal offerings, and are granted, in return, special supernatural favors in the form of protection from human enemies, financial success, or divination abilities.

Moroccan music-induced possession trance cannot be reduced, even for simplicity's sake, to any of the three components above. Moroccan music-induced possession trance is not Islam: As the data will show, trancers vary dramatically in the importance and function they attach to Muslim observances. 58% of the trancers in my sample regularly perform daily Muslim devotions, 9% do so sporadically, while 32% do not observe them at all. Possession trance is not ecstatic Sufism either because it is not centered on communion with the divine although its structural vestiges appear to be Sufi<sup>8</sup>. Nor is Moroccan trance witchcraft, because while witchcraft can be an important tool for managing the needs of some trancers, it seems to be practically irrelevant for others. Different trancers tap differentially into those three components.

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<sup>8</sup> The combined elements of song, intermittent but extensive invocations of God in the lyrics, altered consciousness, and the association of possession trance with the tombs of marabouts are strongly indicative of historical Sufi underpinnings.

Some are witchcraft-centered, some are Islamically very observant and consider ritual and moral purity in Islamic terms to be indispensable, and some, like some of the Hamadsha and Aissawa, are dhikr-centered and shun the discussion of any connections between ecstatic trance and jinn-possession unless pressed to explain the jinn tunes they supplement their musical repertoire with for the benefit of the laity. They vaguely refer to trance as *hal*, an Arabic word meaning a “state of being”.

The religious syncretism of Morocco's music-induced trance may be compared to that of Afro-Cuban traditions such as Voodoo or Santeria in their own relationship with Catholicism<sup>9</sup>. However, the sociological picture is far more complicated in Morocco because politically-speaking, Morocco is not a secular state. Morocco's state religion is mainstream Sunni Islam and all Moroccan citizens, with the exception of the members a small historical Jewish community, are born and remain *de jure* Sunni Muslims even if they choose other faiths. This fact is so engraved in the identity of ordinary Muslim Moroccans that while many of them may admit that they are remiss in their religious duties, or even routinely engaged in impure witchcraft practices, they still identify themselves and everyone around them as “errant” Muslims. Declaring a different religion, or even affiliation with different variants of Islam, is far more stigmatizing culturally than admitting to a life of sin. To understand how this state of affairs came to be in a society which otherwise does not impose individual religious observance on anyone, and where alcohol use and prostitution are practically uncensored components of the culture, it is necessary to place it in its modern political context.

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance Daniel (2005)

## **Special Impact of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Political Developments**

The institutional changes that happened during and immediately after Morocco's struggle for independence, especially the adoption of a non-secular constitution, left indelible marks on Morocco's modern identity including on the current status of contemporary possession trance. An anthropological understanding of modern developments in Moroccan trance must be anchored in a basic knowledge of Morocco's modern political history.

Between 1912 and 1956, Morocco was officially a French protectorate. France granted the Moroccan sultan nominal sovereignty in Morocco as long as he ensured stability and maintained a favorable attitude among the population toward French presence. Morocco came under French “protection” during the ongoing rule of the dynasty of Alaouite sultans who have been in power since 1666. The colonial years also favored intellectual and academic exchange across the Mediterranean between the two countries as a generation of Moroccan intellectuals traveled to France and were exposed to a heterogeneous range of modern theories of political liberation ranging from Marxism to liberal democracy. Many such movements, in addition to nascent Islamist ideologies from the Middle East, were transplanted to Morocco, and their relationship with the Sultan was not always cordial (Pennell 2000:205, 275). The Sultan was increasingly seen by a new generation of Moroccans as a tool of Morocco's economic and political subjugation to an imperial power.

In 1937, the *Istiqlal* (independence) Party, a centrist nationalist party, was established and seemed to have won the tug-of-war against more radical (mostly Marxist) components of the independence movement partly because of its relatively moderate views (Monjib 1992). In 1944 the Sultan (then Mohammed V) joined the increasingly loud popular calls for independence and signed a Manifesto to that effect, presented to him by leaders of the independence movement.

This triggered a series of brutal reprisals by the French against independence leaders and activists, and ultimately the Sultan's own deposition and exile, and replacement by a distant relative of his in 1953. The popular solidarity this garnered for the Mohammed V, and the bloody uprising that ensued, ultimately led to his re-instatement and Morocco's official independence in 1956. When he returned, the Sultan permitted the Istiqlal Party to hold its first convention and to subsequently participate in governments he appointed. But he also signed a friendship treaty with France which allowed for French military presence in Morocco at least through 1961 (Diamond 1970:59)

Divergent views in Moroccan society about the nature of the new Moroccan polity persisted. While the sultan, now renamed King Mohammed V, consolidated his powers and reduced hope for participatory democracy, he also promised a constitution and appointed a council to draft one, but that did not happen during his reign. One year after his death, his son Hassan II swiftly bypassed the council in 1962 and unilaterally produced a constitution which was adopted in a national referendum (Pennel 2000:442). The core provisions of that constitution (which has received negligible amendments since) were the institution of a hereditary monarchy and the effective consolidation of all powers in the person of the King. It also provided for a parliament and for multi-party elections, but ensured that the powers of Morocco's successive governments were largely symbolic. The most important provision for the purposes of this dissertation is the constitutional enshrinement of Islam as a religion of the state for the first time in Moroccan history<sup>10</sup>. The Alaouite dynasty claims descent from the family of the prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, the faith most Moroccans practice. In order to institute a quasi-absolute hereditary monarchy insulated against alternative political ideologies, King Hassan II

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<sup>10</sup> Preamble to the Constitution

appealed to Islam, the most powerful, and perhaps only, bastion of his popular legitimacy. The constitution conferred upon him the official title of “Amir Al-Muminin,” Commander of the Faithful. To this day, it declares his person to be sacred and inviolable and his decrees non-debatable<sup>11</sup>. It is true that even before 1962, Islam was clearly embedded in Moroccan culture, but there were no codified laws defining its relationship to the state. The prospects of a politically secular democratic monarchy could be and was indeed envisioned by many Moroccan independence activists (Kamrava 2005:344).

Moroccans do not uniformly observe Muslim law. Many people do not carry out the mandatory liturgies and it is Moroccan Muslims, not Moroccan Jews or foreigners, who are the biggest consumers of Morocco-produced alcohols. The actual application of Sharia (Muslim law) in Morocco is almost strictly limited to family law, the mandatory closing of liquor outlets during religious holidays, and the imposition of public fasting during the month of Ramadan. The sole reason why these outward (and highly arbitrary) minimal demonstrations of Muslim piety are enforced is that the monarch is expected to at least pay lip service to Islam as a state religion if he is to claim his legitimacy as “Commander of the Faithful,” and hence the seat of absolute power in Morocco. Scores of Muslim theologians are annexed to the palace as the King maintains a semblance of a non-secular Muslim state where shari’a<sup>12</sup> is eclectically enforced in some areas of public life. The monarchy’s appropriation of Islam steals legitimacy from one of its fiercest adversaries—militant fundamentalists<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Constitution Chapter 2, Articles 19, 26 and 28

<sup>12</sup> Islamic law

<sup>13</sup> Ironically, it is that very incomplete appropriation of Islam by Morocco’s monarchy that emboldens religious militants because they find in the constitution the theoretical basis for a “true” Islamic state.

The monarchy itself finds religious sentiment highly mobilizable in its favor when it is a matter of fighting “infidel” enemies whoever they might profitably be at a particular time, when they try to destabilize Morocco by fomenting domestic dissidence—the Spanish occupying the Sahara, Zionists planting the Baha’i religion in Morocco, Marxists wanting a republic, Shi’ites spreading Iranian revolutionary heresy, or military officers trying to topple the Commander of the Faithful. After the 1984 urban food riots which the military brutally squashed, King Hassan II announced on national television that the riots were “a communist, Zionist and Khomeinist” conspiracy (Gillespie and Youngs 2002:219). Religion is also a tool to deliver powerful symbolic messages of the King’s ability to keep things in control. Moroccans remember vividly the televised execution of the 1972 failed military coup leaders broadcast on the very dawn of Aid el Kebir, the Muslim feast which involves the killing and eating of a sacrificial sheep by every household.

The sociological consequences of Morocco’s brand of state Islam are fascinating, not to mention very problematic from a human development viewpoint. Moroccan state Islam only dictates a small list of easily enforceable, easily synchronizable *collective* acts of piety such as the prohibition of public eating or drinking in Ramadan. Moroccan state Islam has mainly a dramatic collateral impact in the area of civil liberties, even when it is not the monarch’s direct intent to limit such liberties. Declaring a different personal religion, or even a different brand of Islam from the one enshrined in the constitution theoretically frees a Moroccan subject from allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful whose sovereign authority is constitutionally defined by Islam. Unless they are historical indigenous Jews, all Moroccans are born *de jure* as Sunni Muslims and remain so for life.

This state of affairs is very important to understanding the current status of Moroccan possession trance practices. Possession trance is strongly anchored in Morocco's cultural heritage. Yet, it is not accommodated by Morocco's official brand of Sunni Islam whose theologians unequivocally denounce interaction with the jinn. This is evident for instance in responses official muftis always provide on Moroccan television (and now the internet) to individual queries about the use of witchcraft to undo evil spells. The only kind of healing “witchcraft” that they Islamically sanction is the occasional use of Qura’nic amulets, and possibly fragrant incense for its relaxing effect. Everything else is considered mortally *haram* (sinful)<sup>14</sup>. What further complicates the picture is that possession trance has never been assigned a religious label of its own, and a popular phenomenon of this scale cannot be merely dismissed as an “apostasy” as in the case of clandestine Moroccan Christians or Bahai's. As a result, it is quietly (and awkwardly) assimilated to Sufism. The same monarch, whose palace theologians routinely denounce possession trance as un-Islamic in Moroccan media, annually sends out generous royal gifts to the mausoleums that have become popular centers of jinn-possession trance festivals, including that of Al-Hadi Ben Aissa in Meknès. But when those festivals are reported in the official media, only the “model” life of the buried saint is highlighted, while the dramatic possession trance rituals at the center of the festivities at his shrine are completely eclipsed. Because popular possession trance is mutely subsumed in Muslim mysticism by Moroccan officials, no societal dialogue on other possible designations for it were ever broached, and contemporary Moroccan trancers merely self-identify as Muslims, “errant” ones if pressed to be more specific. This is one of the symptoms of a very complex identity crisis experienced

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, the answer (in Arabic) to this man’s question on the page of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs <http://www.habous.gov.ma/Ar/ndetailfatwaf.aspx?id2=873&id1=> (accessed 03/12/2009)

by Moroccan trancers, and whose sociological manifestations, as evidenced by fieldwork, will be discussed later.

In summary, Moroccan music-induced trance is a complex, heavily syncretic tradition, yet one that can be isolated and studied separately from other religious expressions in Morocco. It inherits the outward structure of Sufi song and dance, is steeped in spirit possession, taps into witchcraft, and uncomfortably embeds itself in a broader Sunni Muslim theological frame of reference. The interplay of those three components must be understood in the case of Morocco in the light of the institutionalization of Sunni Islam as a state religion since 1962, and the subsequent codification of certain shari'a provisions into modern Moroccan civil law.

## CHAPTER 4 THE STRUCTURE OF A GNAWA NIGHT

My exploration of Moroccan music-induced trance started in the old Medina of the city of Meknès. Meknès is one of Morocco's best known imperial cities, sometime dubbed by the locals as the "Versailles of Morocco". It is home to imposing walls, fortresses and city gates erected by Sultan Ismaïl (1672–1727). It also has the Sultan's football field-sized water reservoir that, in the late 20th century, became a suicide method of choice for some of the city's depressed youth, in an era of severe economic stagnation, as well as a dumping spot of babies conceived out of wedlock by young adolescent girls. Meknès also hosts the Sultan's underground dungeon where civilian and military criminals were confined and where, tourist guides will tell you, chained corpses were left hanging as an example to petty convicts that were confined there temporarily.

Sultan Ismaïl's mausoleum and mosque have been turned into one of Meknès' "official" tourist attractions by Morocco's royal family. However, the tyrannical rule of Sultan Ismaïl, great grandfather of the current King, and the impressive architectural impacts he left on the city, did not eradicate the spiritual authority of Meknès' most popular marabout Sidi Mohammed al-Hadi Ben Aissa. This Sufi, more popularly referred to as El-Sheikh El-Kamel (the Perfect Master,) had died and been entombed in 1518 in a mausoleum-mosque which remains a major pilgrimage center in Meknès to this day. Not too far from where the Sultan's remains are jealously guarded, stands the less imposing, but much more heavily frequented, shrine of Al-Sheikh Al-Kamel whose disciples, legend holds, were so distraught at his death that they went into a violent trance during which they lacerated their bodies and devoured a live lamb and a goat. This legend is at the origin of the periodically violent trance practices of Aissawa religious confraternity which was named after him and became one of Morocco's three most popular paths of ecstatic trance.

## Stepping into the Field

My field assistant initially helped me locate and visit Aissawa events because their music was more pleasing to my ears than the tunes of either the Hamadsha and the Gnawa, and because Meknès had the shrine of the founder of the Aissawa. But outside the annual season of El-Sheikh El-Kamel, Aissawa nights were organized very sporadically and sometimes were poorly timed for me or my assistant. We also often had to secure an invitation through a chain of individuals to be able to attend a total stranger's event.

Driss also introduced me to a number of individuals, mostly women, who regularly went into trance. One of these women in particular inspired my next step in this investigation. Rabia, in her forties, was widowed from a former soldier who had left her with several children to care for and with very few resources. She lived in a very poor section of the old Medina and resented her ex-husband's resourcelessness and debauchery. At one point, she found out that she was spirit-possessed and tried a variety of therapies, including seeing a psychiatrist, but to no avail.

Rabia described her trance experience as being extremely rejuvenating, but she said that it was a necessary evil since she did not have the financial means to go into trance regularly in order to satisfy the spirits, and was therefore seeking a cure for her condition. In order to stay well, she had to attend a trance night at least once a year, and that meant that she had to be invited to one or host one herself, at her own home, at her own expense. She also needed to go to an annual pilgrimage to the tomb of Sidi Ali Ben Hamdoush<sup>1</sup> located about 15 km away from Meknès, in the region of Moulay Idriss where the shrine of Morocco's most fearsome she-demon, Aicha Qandisha, is also found. Both the trance night and the pilgrimage were a heavy

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<sup>1</sup> Rabia responds mainly to Gnawa tunes, but she still visits the shrine of the Hamadsha founder because the three trance traditions routinely adopt each other's saints. The Gnawa do not have any entombed saints of their own (See chapter 5)

financial burden to a widowed mother who relied exclusively on a negligible pension of her deceased husband and the charity of relatives and the community. When she could not go into full trance at least once a year, she experienced serious symptoms such as an uncontrollable fear of stepping outside her house (to which she claimed that she sometimes stayed confined for weeks) and various other unpleasant emotional changes.

Driss made the suggestion that I host a trance night at my own home and invite the world to come. He believed that doing so would give me ample and controlled access to the material that I wanted to research without having to depend on the schedule and hospitality of others. Although I liked the idea, I had two major qualms with it at the beginning.

First, there was a research quality consideration. I did not know how much useful anthropological knowledge could be generated from field experiments that are brought about by the ethnographer. I quickly overcame this problem when I realized that many routinely organized trance nights in town were also “experiments” in a very real sense. In fact, there is a known Moroccan formula for this called *sadaqa*, literally meaning “alms” or “charity,” that is used to designate the kind of event Driss suggested that I host. A *sadaqa* is an occasional “open-house” night of free food and trance music hosted by a Moroccan individual or family. This usually happens when the host wishes to send the blessings of this act of communal hospitality to the soul of a deceased relative. A *sadaqa* night may also be organized in fulfillment of a religious pledge to do so if a personal prayer for a wish of some kind, such as a child passing his high school graduation exam, or the healing of an ailment, had been granted. My safe return to Meknès after several years of academic study across the Atlantic was more than a culturally appropriate reason for a *sadaqa* night.

Since I had never experienced a trance myself, there was however a personal ethical consideration. Going to trance nights and taking ethnographic notes was one thing, because I was not personally implicated, but facilitating one was quite another. I did not know in what ways the violent bodily movements of trance and the apparent modification of normal consciousness impacted the individuals involved. Moreover, I was not convinced, as many of my fellow academics are, that possession-trance was merely therapeutic play with psycho-social metaphors couched in supernatural language. My personal cultural and spiritual development has led me to believe that there is *some* objective or external truth to the numinous. Furthermore, my personal theology was inclined at the time to reduce the numinous that I considered “good” and “safe” to the familiar Persons of the Christian Trinity. Anything else, in my schema, was *potentially* harmful because of being vague and unknown.

Driss and Rabia firmly believed, however, that hosting a trance night would constitute an immense service to the community because most people could not afford to hire a band and provide for a large number of guests. They depended on the periodic generosity of one person to do so, so that they, too, could be part of the festivities, partake of the food, and go into trance when their particular spirit tune was played. I started to realize that many trancers considered periodic trance nights as an indispensable form of personal recreation, deeply embedded in their worldview, which could be forgone only for overwhelming financial reasons.

At one point, the decision to host a trance night was no longer mine. It became a collective one. Traditional Moroccan neighborhoods have a strong penchant for gossip, and in no time, the word was out among the women of the narrow Medina alleys, that someone, recently arrived from the United States, had enough money to offer a *sadaqa* trance night. I am not sure which pressure I ultimately caved in to—my intellectual fascination with the phenomenon, or the

community's pressure. All I know is that I ultimately decided to take matters in my own hands and guide the process in some fashion so I could at least learn something from it as an anthropologist. We did not have to mail out invitations, or even to set a date and a place. All it took is for Khadija, my assistant's wife to announce our intentions to a neighbor. Within two days, Driss informed me that we had dozens of RSVP's already and several offers of space for the event in private Medina homes. Most prospective guests also overwhelmingly preferred the Gnawa over the other two genres<sup>2</sup>

### **Planning the Gnawa Night**

We accepted the generous offer of one woman—her large historic Moroccan home of the old Medina and one of the few that had not fallen into complete dilapidation or transformed into luxury “traditional” *maisons d’hôtes* for tourists. This house still had many of the original mosaics, wood and plasterwork, and the inner roofless courtyard was not remodeled so the rooms of the house still opened onto to it in a circular fashion. For the event, Driss, a performer himself who had excellent connections in the music community, was also able to swiftly recruit Daoui, one of Morocco's top Gnawa masters who not only led private trance nights, but also produced a few albums and performed internationally on occasion. For private nights, the band master receives from the host a variable sum of money, a portion of which he divides up among members of his band. The band also collects voluntary offerings throughout the night from guests, especially from those who go into trance.

Good trance nights involve a full dinner served after approximately a quarter of the night had elapsed. Sometimes, a breakfast is also served at dawn. With that in mind, we planned a

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<sup>2</sup> Geographic proximity to the shrine of a saint does not make the trance genre associated with him more popular in that area. For purposes of trance, the Gnawa genre is more popular because it is more explicitly associated with possession than the other two. See Chapters 3 and 5.

main dinner course of couscous with chicken and vegetables in addition to two or three rounds of traditional spearmint tea and an assortment of cookies. There was no shortage for volunteer cooks. During the first part of the night, there was a stifling haze in the small Moroccan kitchen as squatting women stirred whole chicken in large shallow metal barrels full of boiling oil and spices over portable butane-powered brazier-styled stoves.

We made the crucial decision to hire a local cameraman since I wanted to be able to review the footage for interviewing later. Under different circumstances, we would probably never have been able to film a private trance night. In a country where copyright laws are very relaxed and private dingy labs operating on the margin of legality churn out thousands of pirated audio and video CD's and DVD's of everything from the latest Hollywood blockbusters to trivial amateur footage, people are understandably concerned about clips of their wives or daughters dancing in private celebrations ending up on 50-cent CD's sold everywhere on the street side and in Old Medina bazaars. This is the main reason why cameras, camcorders, and camera phones are not allowed during private celebrations except when the host family is taping its own event. Because I was financing this event in its entirety, I was the "host family," and I had cultivated a profile of trust among the community. The equipment was a simple middle-range consumer camera tape recorder. But it was supplemented with professional lighting gear and a series of 70-watt light bulbs we strung over the roofless inner courtyard

### **The Event**

At about 10 pm, the Gnawa artists, all male, dressed mostly in long burgundy Saharan robes, and traditional Moroccan skull-caps, were inspecting their seating area and tuning their instruments. They also prepared their accessories. These usually include various kinds of incense and a bag or suitcase of robes and scarves of a different color each that will be used during the

night. Each color is associated with one particular spirit and the most popular ones are black, red, purple, green and blue. When the Gnawa play in public music festivals, or when they record commercial fusion albums that cater to a complex variety of modern tastes, they not only use sound and studio equipment, but they sometimes introduce non-Gnawa musical instruments as well and abridge each song significantly. In private night-long trance events such as this one, only three instruments are used, unaided by any sound amplifiers. The band leader, Daoui in this case, plays a three-string instrument variously called *hazhooz* or *guembri* in different parts of Morocco. This is a leather-covered, rectangular box lute with a fretless neck. The strings are traditionally made from animal intestines and are always tuned to a very low pitch. Gnawa artists told me that the intestine strings produce a deeper and richer sound that goes “to the gut” of the listener and are more effective than nylon strings at calling the spirits. When played, the sound of the *hazhooz* is very reminiscent of the double bass plucked in Jazz performances.

Accompanying the *hazhouz* are double 10-inch steel castanets, two pairs for each player. In this case there were five players, so ten pairs or twenty concave metal plates, 4-inch in diameter. To the unaccustomed ear, they are so blatant that they seem to cacophonously drown out the sound of the *hazhooz*. The third instrument used in a Gnawa night is one or more large shoulder-strapped drums. But these are only played during the *dekhla*, or the overture procession described below. The castanets are played during the *dekhla* and throughout the night, but the *hazhooz* is only introduced when the gnawa band actually take their seats to play the spirit tunes. The lyrics of each tune are a mix of panegyrics to the spirit in question, the prophet Muhammad, and invocations of mercy and help from the spirit.

The structure of a Gnawa night itself, which usually lasts throughout the night, is intensely rich. Various elements of it will be constantly referred back to in this dissertation. Table 4-1,

which provides a succinct outline of the structure of a typical Gnawa night, is followed by a selection of ethnographic moments, from the specific event that I filmed, that have steered the direction of further research. The order of the tunes may vary slightly from the sequence below, depending on the gender composition of the trancers and other considerations pertinent to the circumstances of each night. Both male and female trancers participate in virtually every tune. But a small number of tunes are always significantly gender-biased.

### **The Overture**

The dekhla started in front of the narrow alley leading to the house. The Gnawa, standing, surrounded a tray of lit candles and incense that was placed on the floor and incense. Another tray contained a plate of dates, a bowl of milk and a spoon. The women started caroling a traditional Moroccan salutation to the Prophet followed by jubilant youyous<sup>3</sup>. Soon thereafter, the big drums and the castanets joined in a blast and continued for about ten minutes outside the house.

The music of the overture is not trance music, and no one in the crowd was expected to go into an altered state at this stage, but the very sound of the Gnawa occasionally impels newly possessed individuals to fall into trance<sup>4</sup>. During the overture, an uninvited young woman, about 16 years of age, came running barefooted from a neighborhood house, dashed into the crowd, reached the inner edge of the circle and went into violent convulsions, standing, jerking her upper-body back and forth and stomping her feet. She was moving so fast that her face was completely hidden by a large shaking ball of long dark hair that had completely loosened.

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<sup>3</sup> The French word expresses this more aptly than “ululations” which is evocative of wailing.

<sup>4</sup> Driss, a pop (non-trance) musicians also reported to me unusual occurrences at weddings when someone in the audience randomly goes into possession trance-like convulsions when he plays ordinary music.

Two women in the crowd restrained her at the waist so that she did not get completely out of control and she continued trancing uninterruptedly in the same fashion for more than twenty minutes as the Gnawa processed inside the house and continued playing drums and castanets. Rabia, the widow mentioned earlier, was joyously decked out in her best make-up and clothes and actively involved in facilitating the event. Her usual crestfallen and nervous demeanor had left her. Joking heartily with the men, she carried the tray of incense in front of the Gnawa as they processed through the narrow alley inside the house.

I spotted another woman, whom I knew only by the title of the “Hajja<sup>5</sup>”, who carried the other tray, and used the spoon to sprinkle the walls of the narrow alley with milk from a spoon to purify the house and keep evil (or eviler<sup>6</sup>) spirits at bay. When the band played spirit tunes throughout the night, she appeared to have a leadership role by wearing different colors from the band’s suitcase and initiating the trance for each tune before other people joined in. Later interviews revealed that she had not been invited and that her presence was not particularly desired by several trancers<sup>7</sup>.

The prelude lasted for a good half-hour. Inside the house, the Gnawa, still standing, engaged in a show of acrobatic play. Gnawa artists stepped into the circle and wielded their castanets with special dexterity to impress, spinning and skipping. Two artists engaged in some kind of musical dueling with their castanets, dancing while facing each other in the middle of the circle, looking intently into each other’s eyes and seeming to challenge each other with bolder and more complex percussion patterns. At one point Daoui himself was spinning in the center

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<sup>5</sup> This is a common address of individuals who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>6</sup> The Gnawa talk very ambivalently about “moral” nature of the various jinn. See Chapter 5

<sup>7</sup> She was considered a witch. The place of witchcraft in possession trance, and its moral status is ambivalent, depending on individual piety, and needs, as discussed in Chapter 3

vigorously beating and swinging his shoulder-strapped drum at a precarious distance from the bystanders. When the prelude was over, the women broke again into youyous, and the 16-year old who had gone into an untimely trance collapsed before her relatives pulled her over to one side.

### **Samples from the Main Part**

#### **Jilali**

The Jilali tune consisted of three parts. During the first part, which lasted about thirty minutes, only one trancer, a thirty-some year old woman in a casual jellaba, joined in after the first five minutes. She walked calmly to the trance floor and started moving rhythmically but slowly before she went into full trance at least ten minutes later. She swayed her upper body sideways, making circles with her head. There was a strong asymmetry in her motions as she let her right arm swing loose while supporting her lower back with the back of her left hand.

Towards the middle of the tune, her movements became more rapid and her face contorted as if in pain. The sheer force of her movements made it appear as though her physical strength had suddenly multiplied. Towards the end of the song, but before the band stopped playing, she appeared to be at a climax. She rigidly stretched out her arms, fists closed, and fell back stiff on the floor, supported by two people. Apparently unconscious on the floor, her eyes were closed, and her facial expression was frozen in a state of either pain, ecstasy or both...or neither. Her entire body quivered for many minutes. She was later pulled aside and fanned for a long time into the night while she lay recovering her strength and ordinary state of consciousness.

#### **Malika**

Malika, whose ritual color is purple, is the feminine spirit par excellence. Like all Gnawa spirits, Malika is capable of possessing both men and women. I have seen one or two men trance

to Malika during late nights, but the overwhelming majority of her adepts are women. Malika is a very cheerful spirit. She expects her female subjects to don their best clothes, make-up and perfume every day, not just during the trance event.

Because the majority of our guests at this night were women, Malika was a great success. At first, five women joined the purple trance, but ten minutes into the tune, trancers became too many to count or to keep track of. There were so many women who tussled for every piece of purple or purple-like cloth they could chance upon, and we were short of these. At one point, Khadija, Driss' wife, came to the rescue of Hakima, a relative of theirs and one of our most interesting subjects<sup>8</sup>, who looked desperate for something purple. Khadija grabbed a more experienced trancer's purple scarf and put it on Hakima's head. Hakima, who was already in trance, looked widely euphoric and smothered Khadija with kisses as she continued to chaotically bounce around. When a woman produced an aerosol can of cologne, it feverishly changed hands among the trancers as each woman sought to profusely spray herself. Apart from the euphoria which was observed on this and other occasions of the Malika tune, body movements did not appreciably differ from those seen during the Jilali tune, but Malika lasted longer because it is more popular, especially among women who were the majority at this event. After about 45 minutes of continuous play, the band required an extended rest during which cookies and spear-mint tea were served.

### **Hammou**

Hammou is also known as the spirit of slaughterhouses. While it can possess both men and women, butchers and slaughterhouse workers (all of whom are men) are more likely to be possessed. Hammou does not seem to discriminate on the basis of profession or character when it

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<sup>8</sup> Discussed in Chapter 7

comes to its female subjects. Hammou requires the bloodletting of many, but not all, the individuals he possesses. This usually means repeatedly slashing away at one's forearm with a butcher's knife, or any other sharp instrument at the height of the trance. That night, we discovered Khalid, our first male subject.

Throughout most of the night, Khalid did not dance, trance or even sit with the guests. He did not face the trance floor or talk to anyone. He merely sat alone in a corner near the hallway and smoked cigarette after cigarette. When the Hammou tune started, he suddenly went into trance and darted forth to the trance floor like a magnet. His movements were significantly sharper and than those of the women who were also under the Hammou trance. The bending maneuver of his lean body was deeper and enabled him to nearly reach his toes, but had more of a twitch to it. Someone threw a red cloth over him, but he only managed to let it flow over his shoulders for a short period of time, pegging it with both hands behind his back while stomping. After a while, he freed both his hands and allowed his arms to convulsively lunge forward many times over. At the height of the trance, Khalid and two women were trancing in a piggy back posture very close to the band.

The uninvited "Hajja", who had already assumed a leadership role in initiating the trance, made an effort to keep Khalid from coming too close to the artists. She turned back facing him and gently stretched her arm out towards him to keep him at a safe distance. There was concern that, if he came too close, he might pull out a knife and start bleeding himself. Khalid did not have access to a sharp object, but at one point he started desperately mimicking forearm slashing motions with his hand. Khalid's spirit would not be satisfied until he has slashed himself, and theoretically the Hammou tune could continue forever. The Gnawa therefore used their "cooling" technique which consists of silencing the castanets and accompanying the hazhouz

with duller hand claps. But when they tried to actually end the tune, Khalid froze in a begging posture towards the band. They played an encore for him after someone handed them a 20 DHs bill. When they resumed Hammou, I saw a frozen smile of wild relief and ecstasy on Khalid's face as he span his index finger in circles as though conducting or asking for a faster tempo.

Since Khalid did not seem to be in a hurry to retreat, they decided to close in a very unusual way. Daoui resorted to playing Hammou very slowly on his hazhouz and signaled to the castanet players that, instead of stopping, they should very smoothly start transiting to the next tune, for one of the green spirits. While still playing Hammou, Daoui tossed a green scarf to the "Hajja" who quickly understood and started changing her red robes. Khalid noticed that the tune was getting increasingly unfamiliar and his body movements became slower and less confident. He lingered on awkwardly during the first few minutes of the green tune before he reluctantly stood up cupping his face, and slowly walked away from the trance floor.

### **Non-trancers**

Most of those present at trance nights do not actually go into trance. These include most people who come to watch, enjoy the music and partake of the food. But there are also men and women who sometimes bring a trancing family member to the event, but otherwise relax in the guestrooms facing the courtyard passively observing the unfolding of the night unless their intervention is called for the safety of their relative. The area of the courtyard nearest the exit is often lined with young men in their late teens or early twenties. They often stand against the wall, as though acknowledging that they were not invited guests or signaling that they were just stopping by from the neighborhood for a few minutes of entertainment. These men always observe the trance with intense curiosity. Their eyes are fixed on the trance floor and they do not engage in much conversation among themselves.

While young men tend to go in and out and stay at the periphery of the event, non-trancing young women, tend to sit in the circle of guests that directly surrounds the trance floor. This is not as much an active segregation of genders as it is an attempt by uninvited younger women to avoid unwelcome, or rather unwelcoming, attention. No one dares question a sitting person about the reason of their presence. On the other hand, I have noticed that when traffic becomes too chaotic on certain nights, the host's helpers often question the young men standing in the periphery and sometimes urge them repeatedly to leave, which they sometimes resist. Non-trancing women tend to blend in and sit still, and if they decide to leave, they do so quickly and discretely. They watch the trance intently, clap their hands to the music and occasionally join the trance floor to dance mildly to the merrier spirit tunes, especially Malika. Non-trancers, especially those who do not attend often, tend to have little useful knowledge to share about the spirits apart from the fact that other people are reputed to be somehow "possessed" by them and tend to engage in "bizarre" and potentially "comic" behaviors in connection with their condition. Trancers and Gnawa artists on the other hand, tend to give far more complex, intriguing yet unsatisfying definitions, of the possessing entities. Those will be discussed in the next chapter.

Table 4-1. Typical structure of a private Gnawa night

Spirit family	Most popular spirit-tune & its gender	Major color	Instruments	Special accessories (other than incense)	Trancer gender skew	Relative participation	Most common trance routine
Overture (no specific spirits)	None	None	Drums and castanets	Offering tray: candles, milk, and dates	None observed	No trance, <i>normally</i> .	None
The “Saints”	Jilali ♂	White	Hazhouz and castanets	Orange blossom water	None observed	Moderate	Rapid upper body movements; restraint sometimes called for; possible collapse at end of tune.
The “Black” spirits	Mimoun ♂ Mimouna ♀	Black	Hazhouz and castanets	None	None observed	Moderate	Same routine as for the “Saints”
The Moussaoui spirits	Sidi Moussa ♂	Blue	Hazhouz and castanets	Water bowl; sometimes cooked fish	None observed	Moderate	Same routine as for the “Saints”
The “Female” spirits	Malika ♀	Purple	Hazhouz and castanets	Cologne, orange blossom water	Female	High	Same routine as for the “Saints,” in addition to visible euphoria in some cases
The “Red” spirits	Hammou ♂	Red	Hazhouz and castanets	Daggers, knives	Male	High	Same routine as for the “Saints,” in addition to bloodletting usually via forearm slashing.
The “Noble” spirits	Shamharoush ♂	White; Green for most others	Hazhouz and castanets	None	None observed	Moderate	Same routine as for the “Saints”
Spirits of the “Forest”	No “major” spirit stands out Mostly ♂	Black	Hazhouz and castanets	None	Male, based on limited observations	Low	Same routine as for the “Saints”
Single Most important spirit; not part of a family	Aisha ♀	Black	Hazhouz and castanets	Buckets/jars of water	None	Very high	Same routine as for the “Saints,” in addition to mournful groans, weeping, self-dousing with water and the turning off of lights.

## CHAPTER 5 THE NATURE OF PERSONAL SPIRITS

As the preceding chapter describes, during Moroccan music-induced trance performances, possessed individuals enter into a publicly manifest relationship with the specific entities that possess them. This chapter will examine the nature of those entities through their origins, their contemporary folk metaphysical taxonomies, the extent to which the spirits may be understood empirically, and the manner in which they can be integrated (or not) in a scientific theory of culture without distorting valuable elements in the folk perspective. Important aspects of the cultural history of these spirits and their popular ontologies will be discussed as a foundation for further analysis.

### **Genesis of the Gnawa spirits**

The three trance genres adopt the same pantheon of spirits, but even my Hamadsha and Aissawa subjects give the Gnawa, the possession genre par excellence, credit for naming the jinn. Tracing the origin of the Gnawa spirits means tracing the origins of their human vehicle—the Gnawa brotherhood. Unfortunately almost nothing can be ascertained about the exact roots of the Gnawa beyond that the fact that there are definite sub-Saharan elements in their tradition intertwined manifestly with orthodox Sunni Muslim components. Hausa music-induced possession trances in northern Nigeria and southern Niger (Besmer 1983) exhibit interesting structural similarities to the Gnawa. But speculation of Gnawa origins also ranges the whole gamut of Western Africa and well beyond from the Songhai of Mali and Western Sudan (Kapchan 2007) to Ethiopia (Chlyeh 1998). A particularly attractive etymological hypothesis brings the Gnawa from as far south of Morocco as Guinea and even Ghana because of the phonological similarity between “Gnawa” and the names of those two countries. This is somehow corroborated with reference to the conquest of the geographically distinct Ghana

Empire in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Almoravids, Morocco's then-ruling Berber dynasty, that triggered a slave trade that would climax eight centuries later under the tyrannical rule of Alaouite Sultan Ismail, who was stationed in Meknès. Sultan Ismail surrounded himself with an imperial guard of more than 150,000 sub-Saharan slaves, an army of personal guards (Hell 2002). In fact, some the Gnawa lyrics do include brief, but sporadic, references to distant memories of the sub-Saharan slave trade in the direction of Morocco, specifically from "Sudan," a generic folk appellation for all of Sub-Saharan Africa, which etymologically means "the blacks".

Popular Gnawa lore as distilled from my interviews with Gnawa artists accepts all the historical interpretations above and many others. One of the most popular ones traces the Gnawa all the way to Bilal, the proverbial Ethiopian slave freed in Mecca by Abu Bakr, Muhammad's closest companions. He would have been one of the first converts to Islam who ultimately broke racial taboos in the Arabian Muslim community by becoming Muhammad's first muezzin, broadcasting the ritual call to prayer from atop the Kaaba, Arabia's and Islam's holiest structure. The triumphant Bilal story is in contrast with the pathos of exile evoked by some of the lyrics<sup>1</sup>. The Gnawa's only shrine, located in Essaouira one of Morocco's city gates to the Saharan desert, is named after him: Sidna *Boulal*, a distortion of Bilal.

It is very likely therefore that at least some of the Gnawa spirits are a continuation or re-invention of specific West African spirits of uncertain origins. This is supported by the fact that some of the spirit names I heard either flaunt the usual conventions of Moroccan Arabic (CMA) phonology, such as "Nga" which includes a very uncommon sequence, or "Kumi," "Kubayli" and "Ad Janagri" which, while morphologically normal, do not have a known Arabic or Berber

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<sup>1</sup> The lyrics include such short sporadic "reminiscences" as "Oh, they brought us from Sudan, Oh brother," sung in an almost sorrowful tune in between devotions to Mira, one of the female spirits.

derivation. Most Moroccans will tell you that those names sound “African”. One of non-trance Gnawa interludes refers to certain “*Ouled (children of) Bambara*” who according to the lyrics were brought from Sudan, despite the fact that the actual Bambara are a primarily Malian ethnic group. Regardless, the Gnawa spirits most likely evolved, in the words of Hell (2002:79) in the “context of continuous cross-fertilization of populations, punctuated by successive waves of Bambara, Fulani, Hausa and/or Songhai arrivals. [*trans. mine*]”

While the Aissawa and Hamadsha brotherhoods reach deep back into the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively (Eickelman 1976) and have brotherhood-specific mausoleums of Sufi saints all over Morocco, The Gnawa’s only sanctuary, Sidna Boulal, is merely dedicated to Bilal, the first Muslim slave, and is not a tomb. In fact, the Gnawa probably acquired that space no earlier than the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It would have been a gift from an affluent Essaouira family that employed sub-Saharan servants, both slaves and freed men and women (Chlyeh 1998:23). Because the Gnawa do not have their own entombed saints, they associate by default with the various local Hamadsha and Aissawa saints in every major city for purposes of pilgrimage and festivities. This is an important reminder that very few of the contemporary Gnawa are actually black, and that none claim sub-Saharan ancestry. Although they incorporate in their music unmistakable sub-Saharan elements, they are, in the vast majority, Moroccan Arabs, by language and skin color. Like the Aissawa and the Hamadsha, they also take offense at insinuations that they are not orthodox Sunni Muslims.

### **Folk Perspectives on the Spirits**

Do the culturally transmitted putative origins of Gnawa spirits mean that the average Gnawa trancer, or even the Gnawa band master, actually believe that individuals during trance are possessed by Malian, Nigerian or Sudanese spirits? Not quite. But they do affirm that they

are stricken by those fearsome fire-creatures of Muslim mythology that should never be referred to by their real tabooed name—*jnun*. All the main Gnawa spirits ones have fully Arabic (or Arabized) names as Table 4-1 shows. All of Gnawa spirits are understood to be *jnun*<sup>2</sup> of Qur’anic cosmos that are not necessarily associated with sub-Saharan Africa. Even when they are geographically labeled, Africa does not stand out, and the most common labels refer to Moroccan cities. Thus, there is for example Malika al-Bidaouia (Malika of Casablanca) and Malika al-Fassia (Malika of Fès) etc. From the same Malika, the Gnawa generate an infinite possibility of geographic associations. This is true across all possession trance traditions in Morocco, not just Gnawa. In reference to the best known spirit Aisha, found both in Hamadsha and Gnawa, Crapanzano’s most famous subject, Tuhami, pointed out to him that there also existed a “Franzawiyya” (French) Aisha, an “Inglissiya” (English) one, and even an “Amerikaniyya” one (Crapanzano 1980:100). It is not clear who the “Westernized” forms of Aisha would possess, but some of the Gnawa, Hamadsha, and Aissawa in Morocco do assume that the jinn possess people across national boundaries. I have even met Muslim Moroccan mediums who travel overseas to serve not only Moroccan expatriates, but allegedly also European citizens of no Muslim background. Some of them do this via the internet<sup>3</sup>.

In Morocco, almost every major spirit also “splits” into shades associated with tribal ethnicity in Morocco, or precise temperament such as Malika Al-Huwawyyia (Flirtatious Malika), who is supposed to be more encouraging of romantic promiscuity than her equally elegant, but more prudish counterpart of Fès. There are also distinctions built on association with different

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<sup>2</sup> This includes the “spirits” named after human saints.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the money transfer stubs they showed me from their clients also indicate that they make a decent living out of this.

ecological substrata. Aisha al-Bahria (the one of the sea) for example is less dangerous than the one who hangs out in dark stagnant ponds, Aisha Mulat al-Merja (Aisha of the Pond).

This raises the question as to whether the different Aisha's for example are different individual spirits or whether they are merely different behavioral profiles of the same Aisha from the perspective of the Gnawa. I was not able to find a precise answer to that question. In fact, there is probably is none. Different Gnawa artists and spirit-possessed individuals I interviewed generate different answers and sometimes even seem to change their mind during the interview if a logical problem is specifically pointed out to them (which I did experimentally, on occasion). While they all agree that the major spirits are distinct individuals, they are always willing to produce several specific utilitarian shades within the same spirit as needed. Some shades are better known than others, and some appear to be generated on the spur of the moment.

Another common folk distinction allows for "good" versus "bad" spirits. In general, a spirit is labeled either as *rabbani* (Godly) or *shaytani* or *xbith* (satanic, evil). At first glance, this distinction may seem to neatly correlate with the orthodox Muslim doctrine about believing (i.e. Muslim) infidel jinn. Many Gnawa will in fact make this correlation, and emphasize that all the spirits invoked in Gnawa nights are of the *rabbani* kind. In fact, these spirits are so meticulous about moral and ritual purity, that they theoretically will not come if invoked in a context where alcohol for example is served; or they may even punitively strike whoever impurely "messes" with them.

When trancers are specifically asked in the final sample whether the primary spirit that possessed them "Godly", or "UnGodly", the overwhelming majority (94%) choose "Godly" even in cases when their personal spirit happened to be markedly fierce and demanded blood-letting. "Godliness" depended not so much on the spirit's temperament, but on his or her putative

religion. Since possession rituals and lyrics are inextricably infused with praise given simultaneously to God, Muhammad, and the spirits, most trancers choose to label their spirits as Godly, at the end of the day. The possession spirits of the traditional Gnawa pantheon are considered Godly because they are putatively Muslim in contrast to infidel (usually Jewish) spirits invoked in a rare sub-culture of Gnawa which uses a different repertoire of tunes, excludes God from the lyrics, and aids the presence of Hebrew spirits at the trance night by the consumption of alcohol and pork<sup>4</sup>. Many Islamically pious Gnawa artists will point out that only the Jewish spirits are Satanic. Most of Gnawa artists do not conduct Jewish spirit trance nights, and many frown upon fellow artists who do so for money.

The tendency to call spirits Godly can only be isolated when individuals are queried about their personal spirit, exclusively, and in simple general terms<sup>5</sup>. The *rabbani/shaytani* dichotomy falls apart in unstructured interviews, when the Gnawa artists and the trancers, seemingly obliviously, begin to use curiously nuanced terms to differentiate between the various major spirits of the regular *hadra* night. There is no true consensus as to which ones are which. Of the eight spirits listed in Chapter 4, Hammou, the spirit of slaughterhouses, is singularly much more likely to be labeled as “evil” or non-*rabbani* than any of the others. This is manifestly because of the sanguineous self-mutilation he requires of its subjects. Within shades of the same spirit, some can be *rabbani* and other non-*rabbani*. The Malika of female high couture and perfume for example is Godly, but the other more promiscuous Malika, if distinction needs to be made, unGodly. In free, unstructured, discourse, judgments on the Godly and unGodly nature of the

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<sup>4</sup> Because both alcohol and pork are Muslim dietary taboos, many folk Muslims assume that both of those foods are fundamental components of the Jewish diet because Jews are supposed to be the asymmetrical opposite of Islam. Many folk Muslims are not aware that pork is just as tabooed in the Jewish tradition.

<sup>5</sup> The final survey question succinctly asked: “Is your spirit/tune *rabbani* or *non-rabbani*?”

regular Gnawa spirits seem to be pronounced situationally. This moral situationalism does not exactly reflect a belief that the same spirit is an amalgam of evil natures which variously manifest in different contexts, but reflects a profound and anthropologically informative psycho-cultural identity complex addressed in detail in Chapter 8.

Another highly elusive, but very interesting aspect of the Gnawa spirit taxonomy is that while some of the spirits are non-human entities such as Shamharoush and Hammou, real jinn so to speak, others are historical Muslim saints such as Abdelqader Jilali (1077 – 1166). Others, such as Bouhali (The Ravished One,) who is part of the broader spirit family of the Bouhala (Ravished Ones) are even general abstractions of all Sufis enchanted by divine love. This is especially fascinating because, whether demon or human saint (named or abstracted), all the spirits possess their subjects in essentially the same way, entailing the exact same patterns of physical convulsion and visibly altered consciousness. They all behave as jinn and are categorized as such when thought of globally by the Gnawa. Variations in the emotional intensity peculiar to each spirit does not depend on whether the entity is a nominal demon or the spirit of a deceased human saint, or even on its gender. The presence of Malika, for example, who is a “true” jinn, triggers milder trances in both men and women than either Jilali, who is a “human” saint, or Aisha, one of Malika’s own demonic kin.

The emic taxonomy is further complicated by the fact that, even for those entities that are nominal jinn, conflicting alternate stories of their human origins arise even among the most adept. Let us take Aisha for example. On the one hand popular descriptions and reported encounters with her portray her as a fiery camel-hoofed she-demon emerging from the dark recesses of the earth. On the other hand, an oft-repeated legend is that she is perfectly human, the would-be Sudanese wife of Sidi Ali ben Hamdoush, the 18<sup>th</sup> century mystic who died before the

marriage was contracted. Yet another legend refers to her as *La Contessa*, a heroic female Moroccan freedom fighter who led jihadist guerillas against 15<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese invasions. For both the average Gnawa trancer and to the Gnawa master, the precise metaphysical nature of the possessing entities seems to be of little practical relevance. During the same interview, the artists and trancers I spoke with sometimes commuted between contradicting stories of Aisha. She is a jinn in some stories, and a “historical” human female in others. However, whenever asked to clarify whether the spirit of the deceased human could somehow evolve into a jinn, my subjects seemed befuddled, but categorically denied such a possibility. There is no place for such an interpretation in the Muslim *imaginaire* which strictly separates humans, body and spirit, from the two other intelligent and mortal, but fundamentally different beings of the cosmos: the jinn and the angels.

The apparent mental “confusion” that Moroccan trancers and healers exhibit with regard to the jinn does not merely stem from the fact that they take the jinn for granted, and do not usually meditate on their nature. They do not really need to invent a new different account of the origin of those spirits whenever they are questioned about them. They simply tap into already existing alternate legends. All the legends I related above and several others are culturally shared and very well-circulated. What is probably at play here is the low value traditional Moroccans appear to culturally place on logical consistency, or on specific “veracity”, as opposed to the situational utility of the multiple narratives. This could be a general trait of all Semitic cultures. Canonical accounts of the life of Jesus often render the same stories of his interactions with vastly variable

details, between the four Gospels, of time, location, duration, number of characters and surrounding circumstances<sup>6</sup>.

### Conclusions

The *jnun*, to use the unspoken but perhaps aptest CMA term, are more often termed circumlocutionally as *mluk* (kings), *rijal al-blad* (men of the land), *mualin le-mkan* (masters of the premises). Their detailed popular definitions are richly loaded with subjective inconsistencies which are impossible to integrate in their raw form in an “etic” understanding of the Gnawa/Hamadsha/Aissawa phenomenon. In that sense, but only in that sense, those popular definitions are “wrong,” so to speak. However, it does not necessarily follow from that statement that the Gnawa spiritual entities are mere subjective cultural confabulations whose functional bottom line is metaphorical coping with the stresses of life on the part of the subjects. The subjective dimension of the Gnawa spirits lies in the fact that they are built of culture-specific and history-specific material in a way that would have been impossible elsewhere. That is the reason why Aisha does not normally strike North American subjects and why Moroccans never experience apparitions of the Virgin Mary. But both Aisha and the celestial Virgin Mary, while culture-bound, must be treated as existing on *some* objective level if mass or frequent experiences of their external presence are to be discussed intelligently<sup>7</sup>. This author believes that although Aisha may effectively function as a therapeutic device for many Moroccan trancers, she is not merely a symbolic avatar of their personal experience or a split therein. Aisha does owe her existence to Moroccan culture. But although she cannot exist autonomously, she still cannot

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<sup>6</sup> The examples are endless. Compare for instance the healing of the blind man/men in Matt 9:27-31, Mark 10:46-52 and Luke 18:35-43

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Oraison (1973) for a (Catholic) psychiatrist’s analysis of simultaneous mass experiences of Mary such as the well-documented public week-long visual phenomenon in Cairo, Egypt between 1968-1971.

be reduced to a metaphorical presence inside those who experience her. Based on my observations, Aisha and other spirits effectively behave during and surrounding trance episodes as semi-independent actors, existing at least partially outside the possessed. The trances are mechanically involuntary. Moreover, they are sometimes associated with behaviors that fall visibly outside the expected (or safe) range of the trancer's ordinary physical abilities. The next chapter microanalyses the episodic mechanics of music-induced trance, in order to formulate useful conclusions about personal agency during those events.

## CHAPTER 6 CONSCIOUSNESS, AGENCY AND PERSONHOOD

This chapter will examine a set of behavioral elements in Gnawa trance episodes to determine the extent to which these trances may be considered involuntary. Demarcating the boundaries of individual agency during trance can have important implications for human consciousness studies, as well as for the dialogue between anthropology and psychiatry. As noted in an earlier chapter, “dissociation” is a broad conceptual platform that is regularly shared by professionals from both fields, in reference to possession trance.

The first part of this analysis will examine proximate indicators of individual agency (or lack thereof) based on the observation of individual trance episodes. It is impossible to determine the episodic mental state of a trancer. It is possible, however, to construct a very useful picture based on a bundle of carefully gathered substitute cues. The aim here is to sketch an intelligible psychodynamic portrait of a typical individual in trance. Such a portrait must be model-independent in that it cannot seek to conform *a priori* to any existing psychomedical criteria, including those traditionally established for dissociation.

The second part will take the analysis a step further by investigating the possibilities of match or mismatch between the elements of the constructed portrait and the criteria of dissociative disorders as established by the American Psychiatric Association. As shown in Chapter 2, possession trance anthropologists rarely pathologize culturally defined trance behavior, but when a medical descriptor is called for, they tend to favor “dissociation” over other clinical concepts, even when a disorder is not implied.

## **Trance Volition and Consciousness**

Based on the field observations reported in Chapter 4, trance behavior cannot be termed “voluntary” in the accepted sense of the word as applied to ordinary states of consciousness. Since consciousness is visibly altered during trance, individual volition is either (1) not mobilized at all, (2) incompletely mobilized, or (3) mobilized at a non-proximate cultural or developmental level that is distantly anterior to the immediate triggers of the episode. Individuals enter the trance state quite suddenly and uncontrollably. There is no room for suggesting that the trancers engage in any conscious theatrics that society culturally disguises as involuntary behavior. Moroccan music-induced trance is not drama despite any metaphorical parallels that could be drawn between it and theater because intention, as we know it, is not involved. But it is legitimate to question the level of control, if any, that trancers may have over their behavior during the episodes, and the ways in which they pattern that control in order to fit their trance behavior into a cultural script. Below are two informative cases of individual trancers.

### **The Case of Karim**

Karim’s case is especially informative because in the pool of hundreds of subjects, he is the only “novice” trancer whom I chanced to encounter near the onset of his trance experience. Most of my subjects had experienced trance several times over the period of at least several months before we met them. Karim was 17 years old when I noticed him at a major Gnawa night hosted by a local seer on the occasion of the approach of the Ramadan season. He went into a violent trance when the Hammou tune<sup>1</sup> was played. He did not engage in any self-injurious behavior as Hammou devotees sometimes do, but his slender figure jerked uncontrollably to the beats. It was as though his body was literally hooked at the center of the back of his waist by an

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<sup>1</sup> The Red Spirit. See Table 4-1

overpowering but invisible force that churned him very loosely back and forth, merely allowing him to maintain some balance on his legs in a sharply crouched posture. His arms swung forth violently with no visible control over the joints of his shoulders, elbows or wrists, yet never came in contact with the ground. At the end of the tune, about 25 minutes later, Karim did not collapse. Nada, his older sister, who had been sitting next to me at the edge of the trance floor, grabbed him and seated him next to her. Karim was red-faced, sweating, and his body exuded the heat of the exertion as he leaned semi-consciously on his sister's shoulder and mine and groaned softly. His sister supported his back with her palm as she whispered nervously in his ears: "I told you not to come again after what happened two nights ago! You shouldn't come to the Gnawa. I told this would happen to you again!" I asked her what this was about and she explained to me that he had gone into trance for the first time ever at a different Gnawa night at his their aunt's house two nights before. A few days later, Nada showed both Karim and me cellular phone video footage of Karim's first-time trance episode. Karim glanced at the video clip with a slight expression of embarrassment and blank incredulity on his face.

For reasons that must be detailed separately in the chapters on syndrome and identity, Karim is one of only two trancers whom I agreed to provide some ongoing social company for, at the request of his immediate family and with his own fully cooperative consent. I attempted to coax him, with limited success, into avoiding frequent exposure to live trance-inducing tunes because the onset of his trance was concomitant with a series of worrisome behaviors, including hashish abuse<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This did not happen in conjunction with his trance episodes, but as part of broader concomitant behavior changes during the same year.

Karim insisted on attending yet another pre-Ramadan Gnawa night that someone else organized in the neighborhood<sup>3</sup>. I sat next to him through the night, and when the culprit tune approached, he seemed unable to verbally respond and was mildly shaking. We were sitting in the back of one of the guest rooms among non-trancers quite far from the trance floor in the center of the house. I gently put my arm over his shoulder<sup>4</sup> and encouraged him to collect himself. He seemed to trust and appreciate me. But while I did this, I could still feel his body temperature increasing and saw his face redden with a mild grimace of either mild pain or grief as he looked down. He seemed unable to enunciate but he mutely reassured me with a slow repetitive hand gesture that everything was going to be alright. Suddenly a very loud and uncanny roar came out of him as he literally seemed to be thrown off his seat horizontally into the air over the heads of the other guests in the crowded room, and towards the exit. Those sitting on the floor seemed to intuitively know what to do as their arms agilely conveyed his speeding body over their heads towards the exit that led to the trance floor. Once there, Karim was in full-blown trance through the end of the tune, and the rest was a *déjà-vu*. Karim said that he could not recall anything that he did or that happened to him during the two episodes I had observed, or during very first one reported by his sister. He did not however question the evidence that his sister had caught of his very first episode on her mobile camera.

Karim had been exposed to Gnawa nights since childhood by virtue of the traditional Medina quarter where he lived. He is among many Moroccans who, like myself, had come to enjoy the complex beauty of the Gnawa tunes by dint of exposure over many years, or many

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<sup>3</sup> Gnawa nights are organized with unusual frequency during the two weeks preceding Ramadan, because Moroccans believe that the jinn are chained by God during the annual season of fasting and are unable to possess humans. The extremely frequent Gnawa events just before Ramadan are some kind of a pre-Lenten Mardi Gras of indulgence in the relationship with the jinn. See the final chapter.

<sup>4</sup> This is common body language among same-sex Moroccans.

months in my case. For him, as for many Moroccans, attending Gnawa nights had been part of the experience of enjoying live music, socializing and partaking of the food.

Even when Karim insisted, after his first episode, on attending all the pre-Ramadan private concerts that were open to him, it was not because he pursued further trance opportunities. When defending his wish to continue attending Gnawa, he consistently spoke about “having fun” and wondered why his older sister had any concerns. The perceived risk of going into possession episodes did not bother him precisely because he did not recall them. While he conceded, based on recorded evidence, that something unusual had happened to him for the very first time that week, he was emotionally out of touch with its perceived seriousness because he did not remember the episodes. Merely intellectually acknowledging evidence after the fact did not motivate him against attending further freely available live Gnawa concerts, in a socio-economic context where affordable musical alternatives were almost always out of reach for someone like him<sup>5</sup>.

The private concerts Karim enjoyed lasted 8 or more hours, but in that span of time he only experienced trance for 30 or less minutes when a very specific tune was played. The brevity of his episode is one more reason why he did not seem to understand the perceived “gravity” of his situation. He dismissed family warnings that over time he might start having more episodes, triggered by even more tunes, and that he might even start injuring himself during trance.

It cannot be said that Karim had a particular conscious preference for the Hammou tune. He only went into trance during the second part of it.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, during ordinary

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<sup>5</sup> Karim’s family subsists well under the Moroccan poverty threshold.

<sup>6</sup> Most tunes associated with specific spirits, come in two or more parts divided by a very brief pause. Each part apparently reflects a slightly different manifestation of the same spirit or family of spirits of the same color. Individual trancers do not necessarily respond to each manifestation.

wakefulness, he had difficulty remembering the specific lyrics and beats of the the part that triggered his trance. He obviously did not attach a special aesthetic value to it, and had far less knowledge of it than any of the Gnawa artists for instance who knew it by heart, but did not go into trance in response to it.

The fresh onset of Karim's trance experience after many childhood and teen years of mere Gnawa enjoyment and the brevity of his episode contributed to his apparently nonchalant assessment of the perceived “hazards” he was running in the long term in the eyes of his older sister. Other contributing factors are the manifest loss of normal volition immediately before trance, and the complete lack of recall thereafter. Karim is not unique in this. Of the 54 subjects I managed to incorporate in the final quantitative survey, only one<sup>7</sup> claimed that he fully recalled the unfolding of his trance episodes; 27 subjects reported “very hazy” or incomplete recall of their episodes, and 25 reported total amnesia.

In Karim’s case, volition as we know it was not involved in the minutes preceding, or during, his trance episodes. This does not however imply that, during trance, he relegated full control of his behavior to whatever external agency may have invaded his body. During trance, Karim still maintained balance on his feet. Although his trunk and arms were flailed chaotically, his hands never came in contact with the floor. It could be conversely argued that the putative numinous entity, while taking possession of almost everything in Karim’s physique during trance, still ceded him a margin of control over that single aspect of his bipedal locomotion. It is impossible to determine how Karim and Hammou (the red spirit) “negotiated” such an arrangement because after his trance episodes, Karim had absolutely no recollection of whether he was standing, crawling, or groveling about during trance. One thing is sure. The spirit and/or

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<sup>7</sup> A 53-year old male who experiences exclusively the Hamadsha trance.

the trancer will generally “cooperate” to adhere to certain culturally accepted patterns during trance. I have rarely seen cases of individuals going into trance while in a supine or writhing posture for instance. When such postures occurred, they were usually considered as evidence of either a difficulty in the trancer’s relationship with his or her spirit, or of a serious error in the ritual or musical sequence that required immediate correction.

### **The Case of Bouchra**

Some of the trancers report some limited recall of the events of their episode. The case of Karim who remembered absolutely nothing may be contrasted to that a long-time 60-year old female trancer whose episode, triggered by Shamharoush, I observed at another private Gnawa night in a different location in Meknès. This trancer, whom we shall name Bouchra, was properly dressed in white, the ritual color of Shamharoush, in anticipation of the tune. She entered into a powerful trance when Shamharoush was played. Her feet shook the second floor of a small frail old Medina house, her entire body jerked back and forth, but her hands never touched the floor. Like many experienced female trancers who anticipate the dishevelment the episode would put them in, she wore several layers of clothes and had strapped her inner sleeves with rubber bands to avoid getting accidentally undressed during trance. While in full trance, something happened. Her hand reached into inside her bosom, pulled out a wallet which might have been weighing on her, and flung it across the room. The object fell somewhere among the tight crowd near the Gnawa band, and was quickly forgotten. One half-hour *after* the tune ended, she was fully rested from her episode, and frantically announced all of a sudden that her wallet was missing. When nobody returned the object, Bouchra started protesting that someone had stolen it. It is at this point that a memory from her trance episode appeared to surface. “Yes, I do go into trance,” she affirmed loudly, “but at the same time I remain aware of things. I still recall pulling out the

wallet and throwing it away!” Bouchra remained very civil as she collected herself. The wallet was not returned, and our hostess, manifestly embarrassed that a petty theft had occurred at her soirée, suggested collecting some money to help replace the contents of Bouchra's wallet.

The dynamics of consciousness/unconsciousness in Bouchra's trance behavior is very informative. She certainly was in a highly altered mental state when she flung the wallet into the crowd. She personally knew four or five other individuals, at the most, in the tightly packed crowd, so she cannot possibly have “assumed”, in terms of ordinary consciousness, that her wallet would land in good hands. She cannot have disposed of her wallet at once *unsafely*, as was evidently the case, yet *consciously*. But the paradox is that her very disposal of the wallet during trance seemed to betray a level of *consciousness* at the time that the object was cumbersome and had to be removed. That layer of awareness was rapidly superseded by amnesia of the fact that she had discarded an important object to begin with, and the amnesia lasted well into her wakefulness during the half-hour that followed her episode. The amnesia cleared when she found her wallet missing.

### **Synthesis: A Contractually Fragmented Consciousness**

In both Karim's and Bouchra's cases, the dichotomies of *conscious/unconscious*, *voluntary/involuntary*, and *controllable/uncontrollable* fall apart. It is not very useful to discretely pinpoint their respective experiences somewhere along a smooth continuum of consciousness. Their behavior, and the behavior of all the trancers we have seen, appears to be *selectively* unconscious. The state of consciousness of a Gnawa trancer appears to be a negotiated state in which certain cognitive functions are ceded to an apparently external entity while others are retained by the individual. For instance, one aspect of behavior that seems to remain under the trancer's control is their ability to avoid causing injury to individuals in their

vicinity if he or she wields sharp or burning objects as part of their trance ritual. This is especially remarkable given how crowded the trance floor sometimes gets. I have not witnessed a single accident, nor had one reported to me, throughout my fieldwork.

While the above-mentioned faculty of judgment or social discernment is retained, other normal cognitive operations, that carry no potential of harm to others, are seriously impaired. The trancer for instance will usually lose his or her ability to communicate verbally. The temporary aphonia we observed throughout is not mere articulatory impairment, but seems to be associated with a broader loss (or reduction) of the ability to process linguistic input. In other words, a trancer is not merely unable to communicate, as audible speech, thoughts that he may have. He or she does show no signs of having difficulties enunciating, but appears instead to lose the ability to comprehend and use language, a condition which is less like articulatory muteness, and more like the symptoms of the medical condition known as aphasia<sup>8</sup>. Beyond groans and similar non-linguistic vocalizations, I have only seen rare instances during trance where the individual will enunciate, loudly but indistinctly, the name of God or the title of an ambiguous entity<sup>9</sup> whose succor they seek or who could be the very source of their episodic “torment”.

I have noticed that when the negotiation of volition-sharing with the spirit proceeds smoothly, the individual exits the trance state uneventfully at the conclusion of the tune, but when negotiation fails, or the individual resists the advance of the spirit, they show clear signs of distress. This was the case of instance of a woman for whom the onset of trance happened much later in life than is typical. Her situation will be discussed in the next chapter because it is

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance Cohn (1995)

<sup>9</sup> The spirit (or saint) is never named, but the trancer might cry “*Moulay* (Master)!” at the climax of trance.

especially illuminating with regard to the “afflictive” quality of trance, should Moroccan possession trance need to be regarded as a disorder.

### **The Effect of Experience on Volitional Behavior**

The discrepancies observed between Karim, a novice trancer, and Bouchra, an experienced one, in the amount of volition they manifested during trance apply to other cases I was able to observe, and do not seem to be age-related. Teenage trancers exhibit variable levels of control, as well as variable levels of cultural understanding of their “condition” depending on how long they have been experiencing the episodes. Those few novices whom we had the opportunity to interview within the first months of their trance experience, often displayed considerable confusion and even surprise when describing their understanding of their “condition.” They only referred to it in the light of how other people assessed it. Many of them had been exposed to Gnawa for years before their episodes, but they showed very limited cultural knowledge of the Gnawa pantheon and limited interest in the nature of what was more recently happening to them. When they unexpectedly started trancing to a very specific tune, they often had to be “informed” by others<sup>10</sup> that their bodies had been usurped<sup>11</sup> by a specific entity. The surprise and hesitation we noted in the discourse of several new trancers is strongly indicative of the involuntary aspect of their episodes.

Younes, a 16-year old, is an example of novice trancers who are still coming to terms with their experience. I saw him go into a violent trance very similar to Karim’s when Malika<sup>12</sup> was

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<sup>10</sup> Either an observer, or in some cases, a seer whom they are taken to consult.

<sup>11</sup> At this stage, people will often use “hit”, or “touched” instead of “possessed” by the spirit. Direct reference to possession is only made when the individual has had a longer trancing experience. It is often assumed that beginners' relationship with the spirit might not go very far after all.

<sup>12</sup> See Table 4-1

played. The host in this case was a well-known seer who held an elaborate trance triduum<sup>13</sup> for his clients and the neighbors every year before Ramadan. Younes' family lived in upper floor of the seer's traditional Moroccan house. Younes' episode was very singular in that it was the only one I had seen that was interrupted in mid-tune without any visible distress to the trancer. The seer, a practicing Muslim and Hajj<sup>14</sup> in his 50's calmly approached Younes, gently stepped on his foot and placed something in his mouth<sup>15</sup>. Younes immediately exited the trance state as rapidly as he had entered it and looked calmly into the Hajj's eyes who was gently instructing him “not to ever do that again”. When I later interviewed Younes, he told me: “ I am not sure what happened. I think he is worried about me because he saw that happen to me last year too. He doesn't want me to start doing this<sup>16</sup>. I don't know a lot about Malika.” Younes, a successful and handsome high schooler with an ordinarily very calm and cheerful demeanor, had no explanations to offer for the radical and sudden transformation he had undergone during Malika, before his ordinary consciousness was likewise restored when the Hajj intervened.

During his very brief trance, Younes's body swung vigorously like Karim's and he showed absolutely no response to his surroundings, but Malika was swiftly “evicted” when the Hajj interfered. More experienced trancers of the same age betray more volition during trance and take more control of the unfolding of their episode, especially when they “feel” in mid-trance that they are missing an important ritual component such as the correct scarf color, or a sharp object for forearm slashing. I have seen young trancers in such situations mutely engage in

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<sup>13</sup> The three-night structure leading up to Ramadan is somewhat reminiscent of the Catholic Holy Week Triduum leading up to Easter.

<sup>14</sup> He had performed the *haj*, a once-in-a-life-time mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>15</sup> It later turned out to be a piece of incense. Incense is considered “food” for the spirits and is used to appease them.

<sup>16</sup> The Hajj later explained later to me in a separate interview the reasons why he was opposed to Younes becoming a trancer. That story will be revisited in the chapter about identity.

begging behavior such as falling to their knees, looking intently at someone in the vicinity, kissing the palm-side of their fingers and stretching them out, a characteristic Moroccan gesture of solicitation. Some become aggressive if they are not allowed access to a sharp object to bleed themselves during Hammou. This was the case for instance of Mariam, a long-time 19-year old trancer whom I saw agilely and forcefully yank a pair of metal castanets from one of musicians in order to slash herself, before the instrument was swiftly taken away from her. Mariam then compensated by falling headlong and successfully used the impact against her dental braces to bleed from her gums. At the thud, there was a sob of terror in the crowd that her injury could be more serious, but she continued in full trance. Less than fifteen minutes after her episode, she was catering and washing dishes in the kitchen with no signs of trauma.<sup>17</sup>

### **A Composite Psychodynamic Profile**

Among trancers, I have noticed some variation in volitional control that seems to be based on length of experience. This cannot be ascertained statistically, however, because of the small number of novices I was able to incorporate in the final quantitative sample. At any rate, *a temporary state of sharply reduced awareness of their surroundings is common to virtually all trancers.* This is always preceded by more or less consistent psychosomatic symptoms whose sum total has helped me sketch a useful composite profile of the average Moroccan trancer.

The cognitive operations involved during trance can only be inferred as I have attempted to do so above, and those that occur in the half-hour after trance are impossible to determine because subjects often either go into an extended period of passivity (physical rest with eyes closed, or sleep), or transition almost immediately into an ordinary state of consciousness.

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<sup>17</sup> She reluctantly and somewhat self-consciously opened her mouth to reassure me that she had done no damage to her dentition.

Trancers however report a consistent bundle of physical and emotional symptoms in the few seconds or minutes that precede their trance episode. These include headaches (37% in my final sample), tremors (87%), horripilation<sup>18</sup> (92.5%), difficulty breathing (20%), an exaggerated sensation of gravity (39%), blurred vision (76%), speech loss<sup>19</sup> (31%), panic (28%), in addition to two highly tune-specific symptoms: euphoria (41%, mostly Malika trancers<sup>20</sup>) and dysphoria (59% mostly Aisha trancers<sup>21</sup>).

Table 6-1 is based on the entire body of the qualitative and quantitative data and summarizes the generic behavioral profile of a Gnawa trancer immediately before, during, and after a 20 to 45-minute trance episode. The time frames given are approximations based on repeat observations and interviews. The symptoms and outcomes listed in each column do not need to occur in their totality in every single trance episode, and some of them, such as euphoria and dysphoria are mutually exclusive. The column describing cognitive operations *during* trance does not posit a distinction between the trancer and the putative external agency. Emotional state during trance cannot be reliably determined because facial expressions are usually frozen in grimaces ordinarily associated with pain, joy, or mourning. In a few cases, when a trancer is denied access to hazardous objects during some rituals, I have noted highly mechanical *begging* postures or apparent anger.

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<sup>18</sup> Goose bumps

<sup>19</sup> Difficulty speaking, inability to produce audible speech

<sup>20</sup> 20% of the trancers in the sample are possessed by more than one entity and respond to more than one tune, one of which can be Malika as either one of their secondary spirits/tunes or as their primary one.

<sup>21</sup> Aisha is the most popular spirit. Most trancers possessed by one of the other spirits also respond to Aisha. A few trance exclusively to her.

## **A Form of Dissociation?**

The profile constructed in the previous section now can be compared to the criteria established in the fourth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) for what the manual labeled for the first time in 1994 as Dissociative Trance Disorder (DTD). This category was formally established to expressly accommodate a huge and growing body of anthropological trance-related data that could not be fit in other diagnostic criteria, but which involved symptoms that are normally associated in the clinical literature with dissociative disorders (DSM-IV-TR<sup>22</sup> 1994 : Appendix B). Discussing trance across the disciplines of anthropology and psychiatry is a step which was initiated by the American Psychiatric Association with anthropological collaboration a few years before DSM-IV was released (Kirmayer 1992). The effort received mixed reviews from clinicians, such as Cardena (1992) and anthropologists such as Bourguignon (1992), alike, in a dedicated issue of *Transcultural Psychiatry*. However, professionals from both fields stopped short of either fully rejecting or fully championing the newly proposed classification. Instead, caution and calls for improvement or modification were the dominant theme in 1992. Four years after the publication of DSM-IV, a single cultural critique of the new classification, published in the same journal (Lewis-Fernandez 1998) was overwhelming negative. But although Lewis-Fernandez questioned the validity of the criteria, he conceded to using the conceptual platform of “dissociation” and even “dissociative disorders” as a matter of principle. Another comprehensive critique in the same vein surfaced in the same forum eight years later (Tseng 2006). Tseng did not contest the DSM-IV nosology, but transcended it by suggesting that the focus should be culture-specific care rather than diagnostic

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<sup>22</sup> A text revision (TR), not a new edition, of DSM-IV was released in 2000, including minor textual changes. It is henceforth referred to simply as DSM-IV-TR. In the bibliography it is cited under “American Psychiatric Association”

classification. The term “dissociation” continued to be favored, over other clinical terms, even among prominent possession trance anthropologists working in vastly different cultural contexts<sup>23</sup>. This may be partly because the designation “dissociation” is semantically easier to unhinge from the idea “disorder” than for instance “schizophrenia”, “personality disorder” or “delirium”, all of which are also DSM categories.

DSM-IV-TR describes the fundamental component of all Dissociative Disorders as: “a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception. The disturbance may be sudden or gradual, transient or chronic.” The manual lists five main disorders under that rubric: Dissociative Amnesia, Dissociative Fugue, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Depersonalization Disorder, and Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. The fifth category “ is included for coding disorders in which the predominant feature is a dissociative symptom, but that do not meet the criteria for any specific Dissociative Disorder.” It is in that section that a number of less well-defined dissociative sub-conditions are enumerated, including the one pertinent to this study (DTD). Below is the full text of the summary description of DTD in DSM-IV-TR:

Single or episodic disturbances in the state of consciousness, identity, or memory that are indigenous to particular locations and cultures. Dissociative trance involves narrowing of awareness of immediate surroundings or stereotyped behaviors or movements that are experienced as being beyond one's control. Possession trance involves replacement of the customary sense of personal identity by a new identity, attributed to the influence of a spirit, power, deity, or other person, and associated with stereotyped "involuntary" movements or amnesia and is perhaps the most common Dissociative Disorder in Asia. Examples include *amok* (Indonesia), *bebainan* (Indonesia), *latah* (Malaysia), *pibloktoq* (Arctic), *ataque de nervios* (Latin America), and possession (India). The dissociative or trance disorder is not a normal part of a broadly accepted collective cultural or religious practice.

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<sup>23</sup> See for instance the contributions of Levy, Feinberg, Akin, Hollan, and Lambek in Mageo and Howard (1996)

The last sentence in that description was in all likelihood introduced to accommodate anthropological objections that not all possession trance may be considered pathological<sup>24</sup>. Symptoms of dissociative trance are further discussed outside the main text of the manual in an appendix which goes to great lengths in attempting to establish discrete research criteria for determining when those DTD symptoms should be considered as constituting (or not) a disorder. DTD is one of the very few conditions throughout the book that have required an appendix<sup>25</sup>, and at that, one that is much longer than the body of the main chapter dedicated to the condition.

Two of the four older “specified” dissociative categories, which were either retained or slightly modified in DSM-IV Furthermore, also include a section on cultural issues in the body of the chapter on Dissociative Disorders. For instance, the section on Dissociative Fugue whose symptoms are inevitably reminiscent of shamanic flight, suggests that while Dissociative Fugue is normally just a clinical condition, some individuals going into certain culturally defined “trancelike” states may qualify as Dissociative Fugue patients. The section on Dissociative Fugue further adds a cross-reference to the appendix B on Dissociative Trance Disorder, which yet refers to appendix I about “culture-bound syndromes”. There is evidently extensive overlap, and it is not obvious whether it was particularly useful to differentiate Dissociative Trance Disorder and still append extensive culture-related footnotes, not only to DSD, but also to other Dissociative Disorders in the manual.

Furthermore, several Dissociative Disorder classifications that are not connected to trance contain criteria that are aptly pertinent to the episodic profile of the generic Gnawa trancer. The most obvious one, from the section on Dissociative Amnesia, is *episodic* amnesia. The section on

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<sup>24</sup> See for instance (Boddy 1992)

<sup>25</sup> Two appendices, in fact. The second one discusses “culture-bound syndromes” in general.

Dissociative Identity Disorder also cites “identity fragmentation rather than a proliferation of separate personalities” as a diagnostic criterion. This is in harmony with the finding that the boundaries between the volitional identities of Gnawa trancers and their putative spirit during trance, are blurred rather than discrete. Interestingly, DSM IV also specifies that Dissociative Identity Disorder was “formerly” designated as Multiple Personality Disorder. No references to possession trance are made in the context of that label change.

The Dissociative Trance Disorder section itself lists “unusually narrow and selective focusing on environmental stimuli” as a diagnostic criteria. While this aptly describes what happens during the Gnawa trance episode, standardized nosology is again put to the test because the appendix on research criteria for Dissociative Trance Disorder specifies that narrowed awareness must occur without the manifestation of an “alternate identity.” In Gnawa trance behavior, alternate identities are manifest.

Looking more closely at the DSM research criteria for DTD (DSM-IV-TR Appendix B) reveals more about the limits of psychiatric nosology. To diagnose DTD, DSM-IV-TR yokes the experience of an external agency to stereotyped movement and/or full or partial amnesia of the event, but NOT to narrowed awareness of surroundings. On the other hand, for narrowed awareness to alternately qualify as a diagnostic criterion for DTD, it must occur with either stereotyped movement and/or narrowed awareness, but NOT with the experience of a new identity (DSM-IV-TR : Appendix B). Gnawa dissociation, if we choose to label it as such, criss-crosses both of those mandatorily alternate criteria. This cannot imply of course that the Gnawa possession trance does not sometimes cause a level of recurrent distress that may qualify it as a disorder, and that it would necessarily fall outside the purview of medical psychiatry.

The DSM-IV chapter on Dissociative Disorders establishes brief forms of dissociation and unwittingly comes back to question them. While the revised section on Dissociative Identity Disorder for instance, emphatically adds that the disorder does not involve “a proliferation of separate personalities,” it merely seems to append it to the otherwise unchanged text in the same passage which still refers to “the presence of two or more *distinct identities* or personality states [emph. mine]”.

Finally, no pre-episodic symptoms, of any kind, are discussed in the DSM chapter on dissociation. Pre-episodic symptoms could provide even more precise tools for discernment and classification. The main optional symptoms that DSM lists in connection with dissociative trance are the ones that are easiest to observe during the trance episode including: “increased pain threshold”, “consume[ing] inedible materials (e.g, glass)” and “ increased muscular strength”. All three apply occasionally to Gnawa trance episodes.

### **Recapitulation**

The average Gnawa trancer can be reliably said to experience important alterations in consciousness marked by:

- Highly selective re-allocation of the trancer’s immediate awareness.
- A seemingly negotiated sharing of his or her volition with an apparently external personality.
- A marked lowering of his or ordinary pain threshold
- Full or partial amnesia

These episodic alterations to ordinary consciousness are immediately preceded by a complex but consistent range of brief and pre-episodic psycho-somatic symptoms which are usually fully recalled. These pre-episodic symptoms may inform future comparisons with pre-episodic clinical observations of known medical conditions that share similarities with trance.

The symptoms observed during the actual trance episode significantly coincide with those established by the American Psychiatric Association for dissociative disorders. Dissociation is demonstrably a useful but loose concept for describing the Gnawa experience. However, the afflictive nature of such dissociation is impossible to determine on the basis of dissociative symptoms alone. Whether trance behavior signals a disorder likely depends on individual histories of personal adjustment and other culturological considerations. These will be addressed in the next two chapters.

Table 6-1. Structure of trance episode

Indicators immediately before (less than 5 minutes)			Indicators during (20-45 minutes)			Indicators immediately after (variable time frame)		
Somatic	Emotional	Cognitive	Somatic	Emotional	Cognitive	Somatic	Emotional	Cognitive
Headache	Panic	Reduced response and communication	Convulsions	Cannot be reliably determined	No or highly selective response and communication	Redness, sweating, and other normal signs of elevated heart rate and blood pressure from exercise	Visible Relaxation	Ordinary sleep
Tremors	Euphoria		Apparent analgesia					
Goose bumps	Dysphoria		Eyelids closed		Some visible control over convulsion patterns		In case of collapse: Facial signs of distress	Immediate Ordinary wakefulness (experience trancers)
Difficulty breathing			No eye movement if eyelids are open		Apparently impaired judgment (self-injury)	Collapse, unconsciousness with bodily rigidity if spirit is not "satisfied" or tune ends abruptly		
Heaviness			Self-injury with sharp object, or apparent self-immolation					In case of collapse: Lack of response or communication until tune is resumed if spirit was not "satisfied"
Blurred vision								
Speech loss								

## CHAPTER 7 POSSESSION TRANCE AND AFFLICTION

The episodic symptoms of Moroccan music-induced possession trance described in the previous chapter are strongly evocative of dissociation. However dramatic as some of the observed behavioral and cognitive changes during trance may be, even to the point of inflicted self-injury in some cases, they do not necessarily reflect a state of distress. Determining whether trance is a healthful psychosomatic exercise or a pathology must depend not so much on the symptoms, but on the individuals' assessment of their own well-being. Even “culture” as a sociological construct cannot be effectively used to evaluate individual well-being because that concept risks reification. Cultures do not think, feel, or have perspective. They are the composite, aggregate worldview and behavior of individuals who alone are capable of experiencing joy and pain, hold beliefs, and can be at varying levels of individual harmony or disharmony with a larger system. More than one third of the trancers in the final sample were unable to label their personal trance experience as either positive or negative. Many of them had never considered this question in isolation before it was presented it to them. However, when questions addressed specific variables such as family view, or personal psychosomatic changes on the day that followed the episode, responses were highly skewed away from neutrality in both directions. I conclude that Moroccan music-induced trance is not syndromic per se. It is a given cultural practice which can be afflictive only when a trancer personally experiences its psychosomatic aftermath as undesirable, is not sufficiently adjusted to disapproval of possession trance by his or her family, or when he or she experiences possession trance merely as one symptom of a different adverse behavioral condition. This chapter discusses the situational afflictiveness of possession trance by examining the distribution of data, and highlighting individual cases.

### **Trancer's Assessment and Affliction**

Since the symptoms described in Chapter 6 are not intrinsically telling of a disorder, trancers were asked about their own overall assessment of their experience<sup>1</sup>. Respondents found this question especially difficult to answer. They often seemed unsure and took several more seconds to produce a definitive response to this than to most other items. However their responses ultimately split almost evenly between the given options (Fig. 7-1): “positive” (17), “negative” (16), and “neither” (19). This rather uniform split indicates that many trancers did not necessarily consider their experience to be intrinsically adverse or beneficial, in the same way a fever or a good night's sleep can be, but that important individual or social factors intervened and variously colored the quality of the dissociative experience. I therefore probed more specific variables such as each trancer's report of their feelings on the day that followed each trance episode, and any attempts they have made at medical or religious treatment, in connection with trance. I also checked for signs of dependency, or seizures or hallucinations reported in the middle of ordinary daily routine, outside of the trance ritual. I furthermore asked the subjects to describe their immediate family's assessment of their status as a trancer.

The data for specific variables confirmed both the presence of intervening factors, as well as trends that I had suspected during the qualitative research. I was ultimately able to distinguish three sets of indicators which formulated the trancers' assessment of their own experience in different, sometimes paradoxical lights. Most respondents simultaneously produced neutral, positive and negative assessments, depending on the precise variable probed.

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<sup>1</sup> “Do you find trance to be good or bad for you, overall?”

### **Neutral Assessment Indicators**

Two specific variables cast possession trance in a decidedly non-pathological light, without yet qualifying it as beneficial. These were self-reports of voluntary treatment-seeking behavior, and of disruptive consciousness changes that occurred outside the ceremonial framework.

Subjects were asked whether they ever sought medical or religious treatment in connection with their trance experience. In the final sample, only one subject reported having seen a psychiatrist, at the behest of the family. The question about religious treatments, posed a red herring problem and had to be polished many times and formulated very carefully for the final quantitative interviews. It had become increasingly evident during fieldwork that many trancers consulted traditional healers, not to try to evict their jinn, but as a means of using trance as oracular experiences of divination for themselves and for others. After extensive experimenting in the trial interviews, I had to replace such formulations as: “Have you ever consulted a traditional healer about your experience,” with “Have you ever complained to a traditional healer about going into trance?” In the final sample, that question yielded only five affirmatives (9%) in the pool of 54 respondents. This is highly consistent with the responses to another variable: Only three subjects in the sample reported experiencing seizures in the middle of normal routine, outside of the Gnawa ceremony. Although a larger number (13/54, 24%) of respondents reported non-ceremonial visionary experiences that may be considered hallucinatory, only one subject described those visions as distressing or undesirable.

### **Positive Assessment Indicators**

The question about next-day effects yielded decidedly positive responses. Two subjects reported no psychosomatic changes on the day after trance, five (10%) reported negative

changes, but 46 (90%) reported positive changes. Positive changes were often described as feelings of relief, heightened energy, clarity of mind and a more positive attitude about life. This variable casts possession trance in a highly therapeutic, rather than pathological light. Many recreational activities have favorable psychosomatic impacts, but those benefits are probably intensified in possession trance because altered consciousness allows more cognitive-behavioral suggestibility. Many interviewees told me that they would definitely forgo attending non-trance communal celebrations or recreational activities they normally enjoyed if those events were to be scheduled in conflict with a trance night. Some trancers, including Hamadsha villagers who engaged in head-slashing rituals, insisted that they would also forgo rare lucrative business opportunities if they were to conflict with the schedule of a trance ceremony<sup>2</sup>. They heartily scoffed the suggestion that trance episodes could have any negative consequences for their well-being.

The question about next-day effects is also one which had to be polished over the course of the fieldwork before a standard version was implemented in the final quantitative surveys. Trance effects had to be disentangled from two misleading elements. The first one is the normal physical exhaustion which trancers reported in the few hours that followed the strenuous trance episode. A question such as: "Describe your feelings after trance" was sometimes misunderstood by interviewees until I started referring specifically to the day that followed the episode. Another element that had to be controlled was those few instances in which respondents reported an unpleasant psychosomatic aftermath (headaches, fatigue) even on day II because their episode

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<sup>2</sup> Although economics among other infrastructural forces always provide the substratum for symbolic culture, symbolic culture can have a life of its own and act relatively independently of materialist imperatives, sometimes re-configuring economic logic. This mutual feedback between the components of socio-cultural systems is nicely captured in Magnarella (1994)

had been prematurely interrupted, the band had played only an abridged version of their specific spirit-tune, or there had been musical or ritual errors in the performance.

Possession trance overall seems to have a powerfully cathartic effect, but it is impossible to point to a single source of the stress it relieves. Probing the interviewees' narratives about their life histories is not very informative. Most interviewees were unable to pinpoint a special event or factor that generated the stress that their trance periodically relieved. Some of them formulated theories about family dysfunction or romantic break-ups, but there was no overall consistency. One thing can be concluded. As an available cultural tool, and regardless of what other functions it may have, possession trance helps periodically evacuate accumulated daily stress produced by an indefinite number of social factors. Those stressors cannot be reduced to economic status, gender or sexual identity, or power relationships. Field experience revealed an extremely complex mosaic of dramatically variable life histories that make up the urban trance culture. A Gnawa trance night, for instance, is never the pre-meditated gathering of a particular mutual support "club". Except for designated annual nights that coincide with events in a local or national calendar, the average Gnawa night always starts out as a thought for consideration that spreads by word of mouth. It often gets postponed, re-scheduled or canceled. When it does take place, the diverse individuals who gravitate towards it from far and wide to experience trance often far outnumber those who organized it or were invited in the first place. There is always a tension between keeping a Gnawa trance night as private as possible, and quite often, its eventual transformation into an open-house event.

### **Negative Assessment Indicators**

One important experiential indicator conveyed a negative assessment of trance. It is the actual flip-side of the cathartic psychosomatic effects reported for the day that follows a trance

episode. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (41, 76%) also reported unpleasant dependency-like feelings when they did not have opportunities to experience trance over an extended period of time.<sup>3</sup> Gnawa nights benefit constantly shifting, but overlapping, pools of possessed individuals, invited and uninvited, in any given community. Most possessed individuals will seek to join trance nights instead of hosting their own, and the rate of encountering and benefiting from trance gatherings in the community fluctuates depending on season of the year, access to acquaintances, and personal schedule conflicts. Subjects described their feelings of dependency in broad, but decidedly negative, Moroccan Arabic (CMA) terms such as meghmum which could be variously translated from “tight in the chest,” “repressed,” “dejected” or “depressed”. Meghmum and similar terms in CMA are not used to describe ordinary feelings of deprivation from a habitual activity, but a deeper sense of dis-ease.

It is also important to note that of the 11 respondents who reported no dependency, five were 20 years old or younger, whereas only three, among the 41 who reported dependency, belonged in that same age bracket. These numbers and the qualitative data strongly indicate that possession trance generally becomes much harder to give up as the individual grows older. The majority of young beginning trancers I interviewed throughout the fieldwork dismissed the possibility that possession trance could be “addictive”. On the other hand, virtually all the interviewees who said that they struggled (usually unsuccessfully) to quit were in their mid-thirties and older.

Experienced trance masters and exorcists seem aware of this problem. As mentioned in Chapter 6, the Hajj, the Gnawa trance organizer and seer, was quick to terminate young Younes'

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<sup>3</sup> The “extended” period of time included at least “a few months” but was left open because it varied depending on trancer's perception and because Moroccans have a more fluid (less precise) concept of chronology.

Malika's trance episode. When I interviewed the Hajj, he explained to me that he "did not want Malika to settle in him[Younes]." The Hajj, as well as Si Mohammed, a Quranic exorcist I also interviewed, discouraged young novice trancers from pursuing the path of possession trance out of concern that they may develop dependency. In a real sense, the primary trade of people like the Hajj and Si Mohammed, is to streamline and optimize the trance experience of older individuals who are already "irremediably" possessed, and possibly help some of them on a path of initiation to the more arcane esoterics of possession.

Two additional negative assessment indicators pertained not so much to the trance experience of the respondents themselves, but to social variables that indirectly affected its quality. For instance, when asked to describe how members of their immediate families, who were not trancers, viewed their status as a trancer, 30 reported that non-trancing household relatives were neutral to the issue, and 22 said that family viewed them negatively and discouraged them from trance by applying varying levels of pressure or coercive authority. The respondents who reported a negative family assessment included both younger individuals of both genders living under a degree of parental authority, and older male heads of households who were describing the negative, but non-obstructive, views of their spouses or children. Family assessments were consistently reported at either "neutral" or "negative". None of the sample respondents, and no interviewees throughout the fieldwork, reported any actual encouragement or positive re-enforcement from non-trancing relatives. The negative family reactions described by respondents, do not highlight a religious judgment passed on trance by the relatives in question, but rather reveal a sense of social embarrassment that someone in their nuclear family should publicly manifest possession behavior. The ramifications of family view, and the role of religion are explored in the next chapter.

### **“Affliction” in Moroccan Arabic**

The paradoxical assessment indicators of recreative catharsis (positive) versus dependency (negative) are ingeniously captured in the Moroccan Arabic (CMA) passive verb *tebla b* which, depending on context, can alternately mean “was addicted to,” or “was captivated/raptured by”. When applied to nicotine, alcohol or pornography, it implies addiction. This is the original etymology because the verb derives from the classical stem *b.l.y* which generates vocabulary of affliction in Arabic. When applied to music, to divine love or to an intellectual ideal, however, *tebla b* always implies that the person was consumed by the beneficial pursuit in question. When applied to music-induced possession trance, and it frequently is, this verb cannot come in more handily inconclusive to Moroccan speakers as they describe their own or other people's experience. *Tebla b* stood out as the verb of choice for many interviewees who narrated the unfolding of their own or other people's trance history. *Tebla b* creates a convenient margin of equivocation as to whether possession trance is considered afflictive/addictive or enthralling/consuming. Used by a disapproving relative of a trancer, it has a categorically negative meaning. In the discourse of a master trancer, however, it can have positive, yet ambiguous, connotations, as the case of Hamid in the next section shows.

### **Individual Variability**

We now turn to examine three cases to highlight the dramatic variability in individual states of well-being/ill-being with regard to possession trance, as can be concluded from unstructured interviews. Hamid is a trance master, poised and talented, Merzuga is a patient, afflicted and feisty, while Karim and Salma are carefree teenagers, tormented by family pressures.

## Case 1

Hamid, 44 at the time of the interview, is happily married but has no children. He is an ardent wood artist, makes a stable income from his own carpentry business, and owns a modest home. He is not only impassioned by the Gnawa, but is possessed by all their major spirits, and readily goes into trance at the playing of most tunes. Hamid informally helped lead the trances of the pre-Ramadan night hosted by his friend, the Hajj seer mentioned earlier, by being always the first to enter the trance floor. Hamid came to my attention because his body motions were the most elaborate I had seen to date. Most trancers drive their bodies in repetitively choppy movements that hardly resemble dancing. Hamid, on the other hand, engaged in dizzyingly complex play with his bare feet on the trance floor, subtly synchronized his limbs, head, and trunk to the beats, and created an infinite array of symmetrical geometric shapes as his body limberly darted back and forth across the trance floor. Had I focused on Hamid's kinesthetic skills, I would have probably concluded that he merely livened up the event with demonstrations of his agility while remaining ordinarily conscious. But when the band attempted to abridge the Sidi Moussa tune, one his favorite, it became obvious that he was in a full possession episode. From a dazzling display of fluidity, Hamid abruptly fell on the floor, body stiff, eyes comatose, mouth open, and chin bleeding from the impact, and he started crawling erratically on the floor in a visible state of distress. The error was ultimately corrected and he resumed his fluid trance for the rest of the night. When I later interviewed him, he recalled the incident and lambasted the band for what he described as a serious musical error, overlooked by the Hajj who was eager to accelerate the marathon all-night concert.

Hamid is a professional Gnawa trancer, so to speak. He takes the art to heart and is very meticulous in pointing out dilettante violations. The trance floor for him is a sacred space that

should always be purified with blessed milk before the event, and should never be trodden with shoes on, or by individuals in a state of ritual impurity<sup>4</sup> lest the spirits be offended. He has noticed, and laments, an increasing relaxation of taboos over the years, and the influx of improperly initiated youth into the Gnawa culture. He attends trance nights less frequently than before, and his presence at the annual pre-Ramadan night hosted by his friend, the seer-Hajj, was motivated by his expectation that the event would be ritually impeccable. Hamid has a very comfortable relationship with the spirits and reports no dependency whatsoever. He attends trance nights sporadically and is adamant about quality. He is able to prophesy, and transmit the good will of the spirits, in the form of healings from minor ailments, and sometimes their wrath as to human offenders as well, through admonitory strokes of ill luck such as the “accidental” breakage of treasured pottery or glassware. Nothing in my two interview sessions with Hamid betrayed any signs of imbalance in his personality. His speech was deliberate as he maintained excellent eye contact and looked away briefly to enjoy his smoke between chunks of discourse. He carefully considered his business schedule before he chose meeting times for our interviews, and was promptly on time at the designated café. He was neither nervous nor overly eager to be interviewed, and magnanimously insisted on buying my drink.

Hamid, who summarily derided my question as to whether he ever needed medical or religious treatment for trance, does not have the profile of an afflicted individual. There was, however a curious snippet, in his narrative of the start of his trancing career. He was fourteen years old when he became “raptured” (tebla). At one event, he mocked a master Gnawi who was hugging a large bundle of burning candles during trance while molten wax copiously trickled

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<sup>4</sup> Menstruating women, or individuals who have not performed a full-body ablution after intercourse are ritually impure.

down his bare chest. At Hamid's show of irreverence, the master Gnawi spoke to him in a highly prophetic register: "Old shall I discard it; New shall you wear it," then blew some hot wax from the candles over Hamid. Hamid recalls that he went uncontrollably into possession trance the next time he heard that same tune, and has been trancing ever since, apparently without any regrets. However, Hamid is loathe to encourage novices from experimenting with trance if he believes that "they cannot handle it". The equivocal usage of "belya" (rapture) in Hamid's and other veteran narratives, and their punitive contempt for the uninitiated who make light of the fearsome spirits and their human hosts, create a highly malleable semantic field where possession trance can be variously a blessing, a curse, and everything in between.

## **Case 2**

Merzuga is the exact opposite of Hamid. If Hamid has a fully amicable, cooperative relationship with his many spirits, Merzuga is permanently in painful confrontation with hers. Unlike Hamid, Merzuga was abruptly possessed in her mid-forties, by one spirit at first. This did not happen during a Gnawa night. She realized it when the spirit disrupted her daily routine on the farm where she lives with her husband and children. The jinn started periodically hijacking her persona and taking her on mysterious supernatural journeys during which she strayed for hours away from home in the fields. Merzuga is not a conciliatory personality. She resisted the jinn's advances as the entity started exacting that she go to Gnawa nights, which she had never done before. One night she finally traveled to a private ceremony in the city, where she succumbed to a violent trance at the tune of Aisha.

During the first weeks of her symptoms, Merzuga resisted all forms of religious or medical therapy, insisting that she could independently confront and drive away her supernatural harassers. But she was overpowered as Aisha multiplied into a legion of spirits that possessed.

All eventual treatments failed, but a local healer was able to reach an understanding with the jinn, that she would be spared daily disruption, and would be given gifts of divination and material prosperity if only she agreed to “serve them” on a regular basis by observing a regular ceremonial trance schedule for herself and dispensing various healings, via the spirits, to people who would seek her out. Merzuga, however, showed no interest in such an offer. She did not want to do any business with the spirits that intruded in her life. She merely wanted to resume her happy gregarious life on the farm where she used to magnanimously entertain family, in-laws, and friends with dinner parties and good humor. The more she resisted the jinn, however, the worse her condition became. The jinn invaded her everyday routine, raptured her often, and reduced her ability to socialize with friends and relatives to a minimum.

It was at that stage that I first met Merzuga at a Gnawa night I documented. Her husband had brought her at her request. During the night she succumbed to one or two tunes, and judging that she had tranced enough to keep her demons at bay for many days to come, she tried to retreat around midnight to go back to the village. But each time she and her husband reached the exit, her body was immobilized as the jinn demanded that she stay and trance to the remaining tunes. As Merzuga became more strong-willed over the six years she had been possessed, so did her demons. She was seen by many psychiatrists and traditional healers and her treatment costs amounted to several thousands of dollars, but to no avail. Merzuga does not think anything positive of her predicament. Unlike Hamid, she is afflicted, in the fullest sense of the word. Her affliction is barely palliated by the efforts of a caring and well-off husband who continues to be willing to try anything to help her.

### Case 3

Karim, already mentioned in Chapter 6, and Salma, another teenager, do not know each other. But their situations have so much in common. Both come from deeply troubled large low-income families in the Medina. Both have lost at least one parent, have left school, and are financially cared for by older siblings or members of the extended family. Salma had witnessed the suicide of an older sister over an unwanted pregnancy, and that of an older brother over a romantic break-up in the two years preceding my meeting with her. The deceased brother once brutally beat her when he found out that she went into possession trance, but she ultimately forgave him. According to her, he was deeply concerned that the beginning of her possession trance marked also the beginning of the ultimate unraveling of their family. In her brother's eyes, a teenage out-of-school sister from a troubled family going into possession trance was a very bad sign indeed, but only one among many. The brother's opposition to her trance went hand in hand with her family's embarrassment over a series of underage affairs the community believed that Salma had been having, and the many nights she periodically spent away from home with “girlfriends”. She is now possessed by three major Gnawa spirits: Jilali, Malika, and Aisha.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, the physical motions of possession trance can be visually assimilated to eroticism, often misleadingly. But Salma's possession trance and her perceived moral liberties are indeed intricately interwoven in the eyes of her family and community. Salma's possession trance is part of a larger mix of unapproved behaviors associated with her. But while Salma's assumed promiscuity does not, and cannot, occur in the open in a society that is, at least on the surface, heavily taboo-laden, her possession trance is fully manifest and visible in the Gnawa setting. While Salma's many presumed human lovers would never dare

identify themselves, her three demons are known by name as she publicly cedes control of her body to them during trance.

The situation of Karim, the novice teenage trancer described in Chapter 6, is very similar, except that, by virtue of being a male, he endured relatively less social scrutiny. When he first went into possession trance, Nada, his older sister and primary guardian after their mother's passing, disapproved. When I first interviewed the family, the conversation centered on concerns over eventual dependency to trance, and on the fear that Karim might even start physically injuring himself to satisfy the fearsome red spirit that was possessing him. But as later events unfolded, it came to my attention that Nada's disapproval was anchored in a more important concern. Karim had also been smoking hashish and stealing and selling items from the house in order provide the cash that he increasingly needed to satisfy his craving. He had pre-existing behavioral problems that were not directly linked to his more recent involvement with the Gnawa, but his family was quick to draw connections between the two, not too naively, I venture to add. His possession episodes were intuitively seen as yet another symptom of a more serious problem. As a matter of fact, while possession-trance is not chemically induced, the all-night gatherings do facilitate encounters with hashish dealers in the neighborhood. They also encourage collective experimentation by teenagers with potentially dangerous forms of recreation in the narrow Medina allies under the veil of the breezy summer nights, on the margin of the community Gnawa event.

One shared element in both Salma's and Karim's narratives, is that they both exhibited a characteristic matter-of-fact nonchalance vis-à-vis their stories, inextricably mixed with highly ambivalent guilt. Salma for instance actively pursued trance opportunities, but maintained that trance was “bad,” merely parroting the warnings of her family and the local seer during our

interviews. Karim on the other hand uneasily dismissed suggestions that he might become addicted to the fearsome red spirit of the slaughterhouses that convulsed him each time he attended the Gnawa. He acknowledged however that the atmosphere of trance nights provided him with opportunities to access and inhale cannabis, an activity which, he conceded, was potentially harmful.

### **Recapitulation**

To the extent that pathological behavior must be disruptive to social function or be indicative of individual maladjustment, the actual symptoms of Moroccan music-induced possession trance could, but do not necessarily signal a pathology. The significance of the Gnawa possession trance to mental health can only be understood on a case-by-case basis, and in the context of concomitant sociological variables. The data indicate that there is no single “cultural” assessment of the experience of possession trance even among trancers themselves. Hamid and Merzuga represent two telling individual extremes. Although they participate in the same Gnawa rituals, they have had dramatically different onsets and histories, and have experienced jarringly opposite long-term outcomes. Moroccan spirit possession trance can variably be experienced as a gift or as an affliction, reflecting opposing patterns found across widely different traditions of possession trance worldwide<sup>5</sup>.

Hamid and Merzuga are examples of trancers who have assessed their personal trance experience based exclusively on its personal utilitarian (or disruptive) impact, and who are not hindered by social pressure. Karim and Salma on the other hand are socially under scrutiny

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<sup>5</sup> Compare for instance Hindu gods who can make unwanted “forceful calls” on their subjects (Moreno 1996:103-122), to certain spirits of the Pacific Northwest by whom subjects can actively seek to be possessed for personal guardianship (Clark and Inverarity 2003:179-185).

because the onset of their experience is difficult to disentangle from outstanding signs of more encompassing problems in their respective cases.

Although it is very useful to outline the specific social and familial context that colors a Moroccan trancer's experience, such a context cannot be isolated from broader collective identity issues that are pertinent to the unique social psychology of Moroccans as willing or unwilling constituents of a non-secular Arab state. Trancers shape their thoughts and actions in the context of a worldview politically splintered between orthodox Islam, unorthodox witchcraft, and secular modernity. The implications of Moroccan music-induced possession trance for Moroccan identity development merit a chapter of their own.

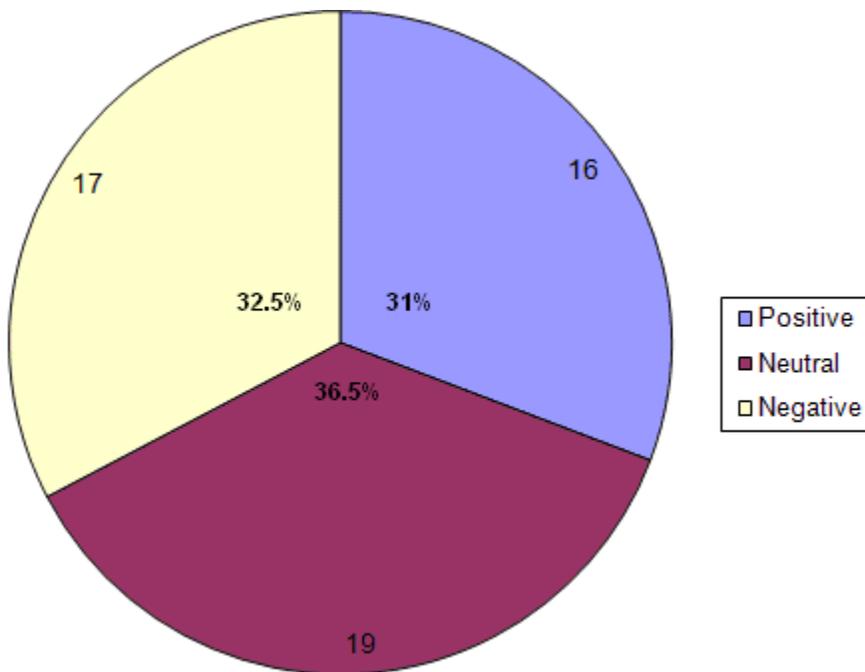


Figure 7-1. Overall trancer experience assessment

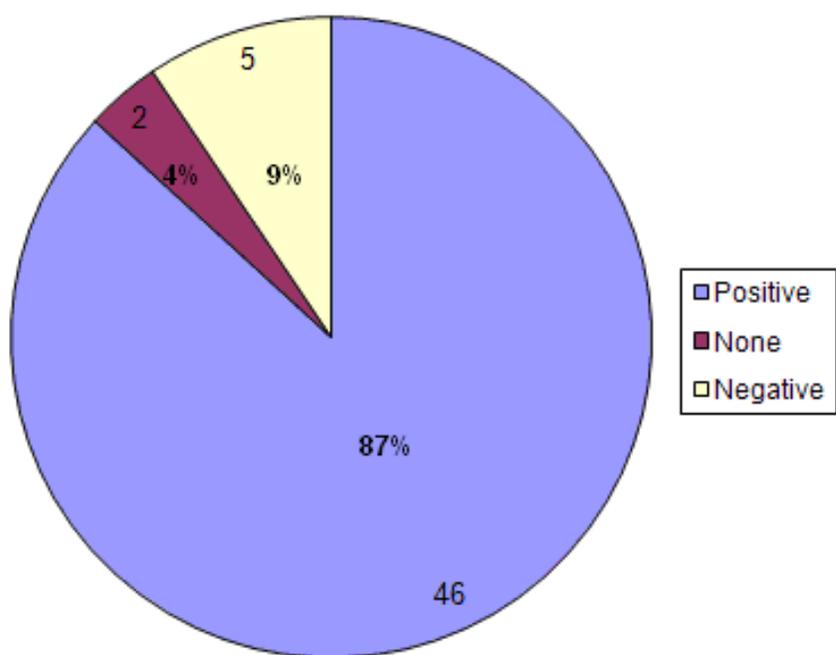


Figure 7-2. Reported next-day psychosomatic effects

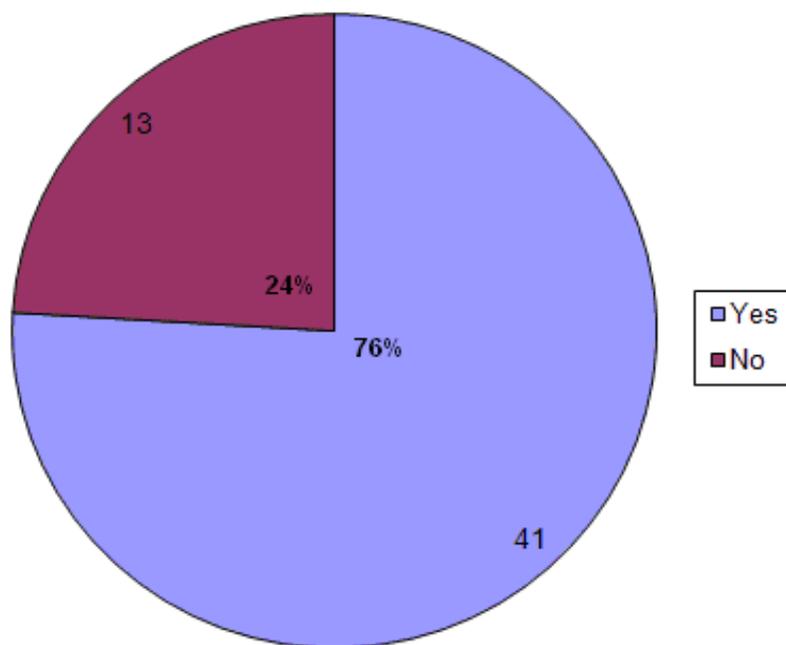


Figure 7-3. Reported dependency

## CHAPTER 8 IMPLICATIONS FOR IDENTITY

It has been noted in Chapter 7 that trancers, when describing their overall experience, split almost evenly between groups of positive, negative, and neutral assessors, unless probed about specific psychosomatic or social implications of the ritual they practiced. Overall assessment, taken alone, stills reveals interesting trends, however, when the responses are filtered by type of residential area or by gender. When rural and/or male respondents are discounted, the balance of responses dramatically shifts towards negative assessment. Evidence from this, and from the qualitative interviews, strongly suggests that urban, especially female, trancers are more ill-at-ease with their experience and social status as trancers than other groups. I argue that the reasons for the rural-urban differences are strongly connected to the ways in which Morocco's postcolonial institutionalization of Islam shaped Morocco's modern urban identity. The gender differences, however, are best accounted for by disproportionate social pressure on women in particular to conform to urban Morocco's postcolonial idealized image of itself.

### **Urban Post-Colonial Identity Formation**

Since Morocco's independence in 1956, Moroccan cities, by virtue of being seats of political power and centers of information exchange, were exposed to a critical set of institutional and ideological catalysts that, still today, penetrate rural Morocco only with difficulty because of the slower integration of modern information technology in Moroccan villages and the increasing rates of rural-to-urban migration (Newcomb 2008:40). As discussed in Chapter 3, although the vast majority of Moroccans have been Muslim historically, they did not have a *codified* relationship with Islam before the late monarch imposed Morocco's first constitution in 1962. Morocco's Constitution, politically and legally, tied Moroccan citizenship to Islam. Being a subject of the Moroccan monarch has since automatically meant being a Sunni

Muslim *de jure*.<sup>6</sup> To translate a non-secular constitution into specific laws, the monarch launched a few years later a full-fledged Ministry of Islamic Affairs<sup>7</sup> that would provide official edicts on matters of religion to the public and collaborate with the judiciary in standardizing the integration of certain provisions of shari'a in Moroccan family law.

Education was also impacted. The teaching of Sunni Islam became a mandatory component of the national pre-college curriculum which simultaneously maintained French-style academic structures and taught science, foreign literature, philosophy and even sex education. Urban Moroccans born and schooled in the post-colonial era received fundamentally conflicting educational contents shaped on the one hand by conservative religious scholars who controlled the religion curriculum component, and by mostly religiously disinterested, but legally Muslim, Moroccan academics of modern subjects, on the other hand. This policy fostered a vast generation of urban Moroccans who grew up to be, at once, dutifully Sunni on the doctrinal level, minimally observant, and beset by a chronic built-in guilt for failing to observe Sunni Islam's highly scripted laws of personal behavior in matters of prayer, ritual purity, abstinence, and chastity. Possession trance is among the items unequivocally condemned as "Satanic," "un-Islamic", and "pagan", by Morocco's modern religious curricula<sup>8</sup>.

Rural communities, who have received less exposure to government schooling than their urban counterparts, continue until today to practice music-induced possession trance<sup>9</sup> as part of an indigenous blend of Islam that seamlessly assimilates a *mélange* of Afro-Arab, Afro-Berber,

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<sup>6</sup> With special provisions granted solely for a small number of already-existing historical Moroccan Jews.

<sup>7</sup> See the re-naming history of the Ministry in the history section of its official website: <http://www.habous.gov.ma/fr/detail.aspx?ID=442&z=197&p=3>

<sup>8</sup> Personal Moroccan public schooling experience from Moroccan elementary school to the *baccalauréat* and beyond.

<sup>9</sup> When applicable only. Not all Moroccan rural communities have a possession trance tradition.

and Afro-Jewish traditions. Post-colonial urban Moroccan trancers, however, individually foster a deep identity split over possession trance, among other things “un-Islamic”. They affirm that possession trance is *haram*<sup>10</sup>, yet practice it, and see a monarch with conflicting tribal and political loyalties subsidize possession trance festivals in the guise of preserving “Sufism”. For instance, residents of the city of Meknès, where most of the data were collected, know full well that the shrine-mosque of El-Sheikh El-Kamel annually transforms into a public theatre for the most extreme possession rituals, the goriest orgies of “pagan” animal sacrifice, and even prostitution. Residents of Meknès are aware that the monarch annually sends generous gifts in cash or kind to the custodians of the popular festival, but possession rites are always thoroughly silenced by the official media.

Since the Kingdom’s adopted version of Islam by no means serves equal rights to women and men<sup>11</sup>, urban women are under disproportionate pressure to pretend to conform to Morocco’s political image of itself as a Muslim state. The urban identity crisis affects both genders, but it is more manifest in women.

### **Identity in The Survey Data**

Most of the quantitative data came from urban areas. The spectacular gregariousness of Morocco’s rural communities makes it difficult to successfully obtain multiple controlled one-on-one interviews with villagers. Most of the rural data had to be patiently extracted during boisterous all-male tea gatherings and group walks in the villages. Rural public spaces are heavily segregated by gender. Eventually, 13 rural all-male trancers were included in the survey. Although the rural set of respondents did not include women, disentangling the urban-rural effect

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<sup>10</sup> Islamically illicit, sinful.

<sup>11</sup> See the marriage, divorce, and inheritance provisions of Morocco’s Family Code, cited in the bibliography under “Kingdom of Morocco” The full English translation is available at <http://www.hrea.org/moudawana.html>

from the gender effect on the responses in the entire sample was not a difficult task. Important dissimilarities between the responses of the 13 all-male rural respondents and the 12 males in the urban set, as well as patterns in the responses of the 29 all-urban females, when corroborated with qualitative interview data, strongly show the gender effect. Urban Moroccan men and women internalize a shared postcolonial identity crisis in different ways. Four variables in the quantitative data reveal trends of interest when urbanity and gender are considered together or separately.

The final wording of the assessment questions that are pertinent to identity, were formulated with special care over months of qualitative interviewing, before they were implemented in the final survey. There are multiple words in CMA which can translate as “trance”. In order not to color the respondent’s assessment of trance in advance in the final survey, I had to carry out a progressive trial-and-error elimination of terms that seemed to carry overly positive or overly negative connotations in the native mindset. I finally settled on the words *tehyar* and *jedba*, neither of which stems from “possession” or carry an obvious religious judgment independently of discursive context.

### **Overall Personal Experience Assessment**

The relative balance of positive, neutral and negative assessments of personal experience in the sample is drastically upset when urban-rural and male-female subsets are treated separately (Figure 8-1). Most noteworthy is the fact that no rural respondents described their experience as negative, and only one rural respondent was neutral. In the interviews, both qualitative and quantitative, rural respondents sounded considerably more at ease, on a personal level, with their experience and status as trancers. This was evidenced not only in the

overwhelmingly positive ratings, but also in the verbal promptness, and confident tone with which they produced their answers to the question: “Overall, would you say that trance benefits or harms you?” Urban respondents generally hesitated longer before answering. The rural-urban discrepancy strongly persists even when females are filtered out from the urban set.

Furthermore, females produced almost all the negative ratings. In most urban contexts, genders are not segregated. Women and men have equal access to education, and participate side-by-side in the modern labor market. Many married Moroccan women across social strata also wield considerably more authority in their households than their husbands, by virtue of superior personal charisma, social skills, wealth or honored genealogy. This superficially gender-liberal urban social space, stimulated largely by the imperatives of economic growth in cities, remains nonetheless at odds with a collectively maintained misogynistic mental schema, found in Moroccan folklore, and legitimated over postcolonial decades by the political imposition of a patriarchal shari’a-based family law. Moroccan family law theoretically permits polygamy and identifies fathers and husbands as legal guardians of women. The facts on the ground are generally different. Such provisions, however, are occasionally exploited by men, either for personal interest, or retributively in domestic disputes.

Moroccan proverbs that portray women as inherently treacherous, polluting, and sexually insatiable (Webster 1982) persist to this day in contemporary usage by both genders.<sup>12</sup> Women bear the brunt of the social scrutiny carried by this folk schema of gender relations. Even when an urban Moroccan woman is factually understood to have amorous relationships, she is not shunned by family and neighbors as long as she dissimulates her adventures to the point of

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<sup>12</sup> Variants of this notion probably belongs in most cultures, including, based on personal experience, in US urban settings even when it is considered “politically incorrect” to formulate.

radically feigned denial and the expression of steeply defensive guilt. Female possession trance is more suspect than male possession trance because it threatens to metaphorically exhibit that most feared aspect of a woman—her sexuality. This, in my assessment, explains the overwhelming overall negative assessments given by female trancers of their experience. An urban Moroccan woman is under more social pressure than men to affirm and even internalize the orthodox doctrine that possession trance, along with all else that it could betray about character, is sinful. It is likely that female respondents calculated overall assessment as a balance of personal psychosomatic benefits and social scrutiny costs which eventually net out a negative rating. A majority (81%) of the women who rated their overall experience as either negative or neutral, still reported highly positive effects from trance in the 24 hours that followed their episodes<sup>13</sup>.

A similar pattern of variability by area of residence and gender emerges when subjects were specifically asked whether they hoped to continue or discontinue practicing trance in the future (Figure 8-2), but with proportionately more negatives in the total sample, and in all of the subsets except the rural one which still yielded no negatives. This question put the subjects in a more practical mode of potential decision-making. Mobilizing choice for the future also means factoring in a personal sense of moral and religious responsibility more heavily in the answer. Religious consideration, which became even more defined in other questions, probably explains the increase in negative answers to the question about how trancers envisioned their trancing status in the long run.

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 7 for reported next-day benefits.

## Considerations of Religion and Perceived Personal Spiritual State

When reference to religion (Figure 8-3) or to religious terminology (Figure 8-4) was included in questions about trance, a majority of urban trancers and female trancers selected answers that accorded with the idealized “official” perspective of Islam, while a majority of rural male trancers indicated a deeper level of harmony between personal behavior and personal theology. The question about religion asked: “What, in your opinion, does Islam say about trance?” The mention of “opinion” (and instruction to the field assistant to verbally emphasize it) in the final survey, was part of the fine-tuning of the questions that had to be tested and polished over months of qualitative research with hundreds of subjects. I tried to steer the subjects away from official “textbook” answers about religion, and to have them filter their answer as much as possible through their own individual perspective as to what they think is the *true* position of their faith. Still, as Figure 8-3 shows, there was a high number of negative answers that stated a belief that Islam prohibited trance<sup>14</sup>. Urban females in particular generated a very high number of negative answers both within their own subset and proportionately to the rest of the sample. In fact they produced the majority of negatives as well as the “unsure” answers. Males, especially the rural ones, manifested far more clarity of mind on the issue and for the most part indicated that they believed that Islam did not have a position on possession trance.

The question about pardon-seeking merits special attention. This question which roughly translates as “Have you ever sought “pardon” from trance?” stemmed from the discovery, during the qualitative research, of an inherent conceptual ambiguity of *laafu*, a key word frequently used in the context of possession trance. It literally means “pardon” or “amnesty”, and is

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<sup>14</sup> “Negative” is henceforth used to describe all answers indicating a negative assessment of trance. Answering “Yes” to the question about the perceived Islamic position is an example.

repeated often as an interjection in the lyrics of the possession tunes. However, it is never obvious whether the amnesty in question is sought from personal stress that the spirit is prayed to relieve, or whether it is an appeal to the spirit to consent, one day, to release their victim from the bondage of possession. I have encountered both interpretations in the discourse of trancers. The language of Moroccan music-induced possession trance is creatively loose and tailored to allow for the projection not only of vastly different personal predicaments, but also of fluctuating conceptual models by the same individual.

When *laafu* is used by trancers, it often acquires yet a third alternate meaning. A trancer seeking *laafu* can also be expressing a prayerful wish towards God, that he or she may ultimately “repent” and be pardoned once and for all from the sin of engaging in possession trance. Because *laafu* is a key word rich in paradoxical meanings that impinge on (or are impinged on) by self-image, I decided to formulate it into a separate question in the final survey.

A key difference between this question and the question about religion is that this one directly engages the respondent’s own perceived spiritual state. Except for rural males, there was a dramatic surge of negative answers stating that the individual was indeed hoping for “pardon”. Urban females produced an overwhelming majority of negatives. If “*laafu*” in the question was processed as meaning “divine pardon”, then the implications of the data for self-image cannot be more obvious. From the relative increase in negative answers<sup>15</sup> among rural males, however, there is reason to believe that at least some of the respondents in the total sample processed “*laafu*” with reference either to “amnesty” from their possessing entity, or from non trance-related distress that possession trance may help relieve.

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<sup>15</sup> Only one rural said that Islam prohibited trance (Figure 8-3), but four said they sought *laafu* (Figure 8-4)

## Discussion

The overwhelming majority of Moroccan possession trance events take place today in heavily populated urban centers, by men and women who have been at least minimally schooled and extensively exposed to audio-visual media which disseminate official ideology. Morocco's government does not openly promote possession trance per se since it is antithetical to Morocco's official orthodox version of Islam, an Islam that legitimates the power of a monarchy claiming descent from Muhammad and continuity with the larger *ummah*<sup>16</sup>. The spokespersons of Morocco's state religion condemn possession trance. The Gnawa, Hamadsha, and Aissawa, however, are enduring historical forms of folk Muslim piety in Morocco. Urban Moroccan trancers do not identify themselves as a separate sect of Islam with alternate variations on Sunni doctrine and morality. Instead, they tend to internalize the belief that they are *errant* Muslims. Moroccan urban female trancers are even under stronger pressure to internalize and affirm that belief because Islam and Moroccan folklore put them under heavier moral scrutiny than men.

The connection between nominally non-secular politics, Islam, and music-induced possession trance are extremely intricate and can have devastating effects on urban self-image. Karim, the urban teenage trancer with hashish abuse problems, mentioned in an earlier chapter, was once willing to consider his family's advice that reading or carrying the Qur'anic text could help him avert succumbing to the Red Spirit while still enjoying the music at Gnawa nights. Because Karim associated, like most Moroccans, with Islam, I offered to help by printing out a pocket-sized card with short positive messages from the Qur'an for him to discreetly carry and use for mental centering at the start of a Gnawa night during which I accompanied him. Karim, however, inexplicably insisted on returning the card back to me before that trance night during

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<sup>16</sup> Global community of Muslims, ideally envisioned as one consolidated political entity under the Qur'an.

which he again succumbed to Hammou. Days later, he explained to me that he had not used the card because carrying “words of God” was not compatible with attending the Gnawa, and that it would have been *haram* for him to carry Qur’anic text anyway because he had not performed the elaborate Muslim cleansing ablution since the last time he had had intercourse with a girlfriend. Karim is not alone. Millions, I dare say, of urban Moroccans, trancers and non-trancers, live in a permanent perceived state of deep religious errancy and ritual impurity because they are unable to reconcile official Islam’s highly exacting rites, which they fully internalize doctrinally, with a de facto Westernized urban lifestyle.

Fundamentalist-run satellite TV and Internet media that bypass traditional government controls are new arrivals on the Moroccan identity scene. The legitimacy of politically militant Islam is aided in the eyes of ordinary Moroccan Muslims by its activists' accurate claim that Morocco's rulers, who have not banned alcohol or imposed the headscarf, do not truly represent or enforce the form of Islam which constitutionally establishes the monarchy’s legitimacy. While I have heard countless urban Moroccans parrot this line, almost all the rural subjects I spoke with had a very different perspective on what constitutes morality, religiously and politically. They do not view possession trance as a vice that Moroccans and their government are Islamically obligated to denounce. “Trance *haram*?” said a rural trancer to me “We never heard of such a thing before those bearded guys<sup>17</sup> started visiting our area. I'll tell you what's *haram*: lying or harming people is *haram*.” By co-opting Islam, Morocco's government could be ironically losing the fight to fundamentalist Islam, beginning in the cities. The implications of this, not only on an increasingly scarred urban Moroccan identity, but also for the future of the region, are to ponder.

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<sup>17</sup> Islamist activists

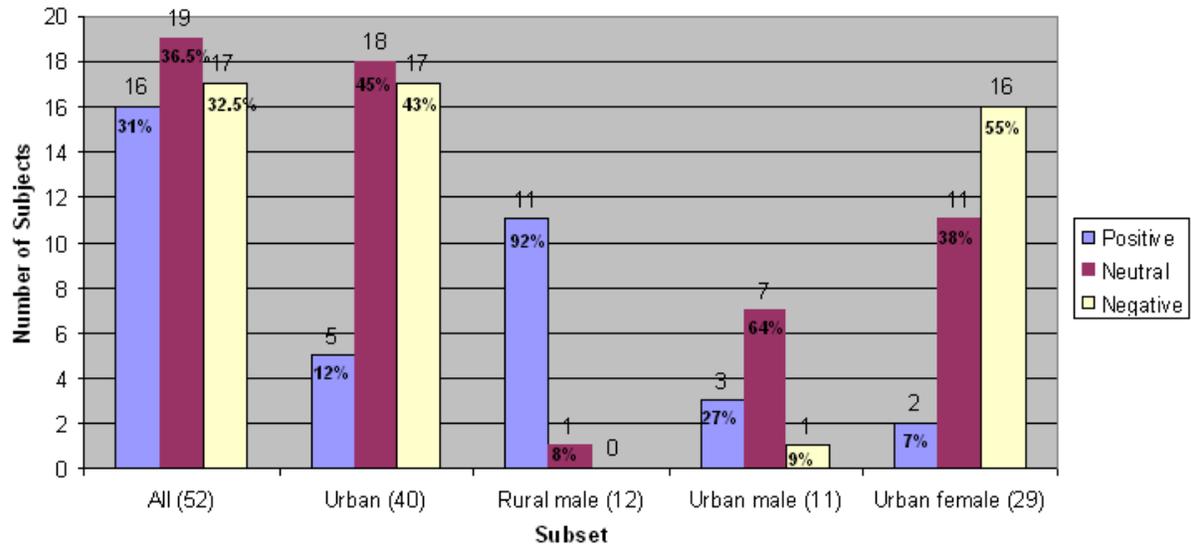


Figure 8-1. Overall personal trance experience assessment by respondent subset

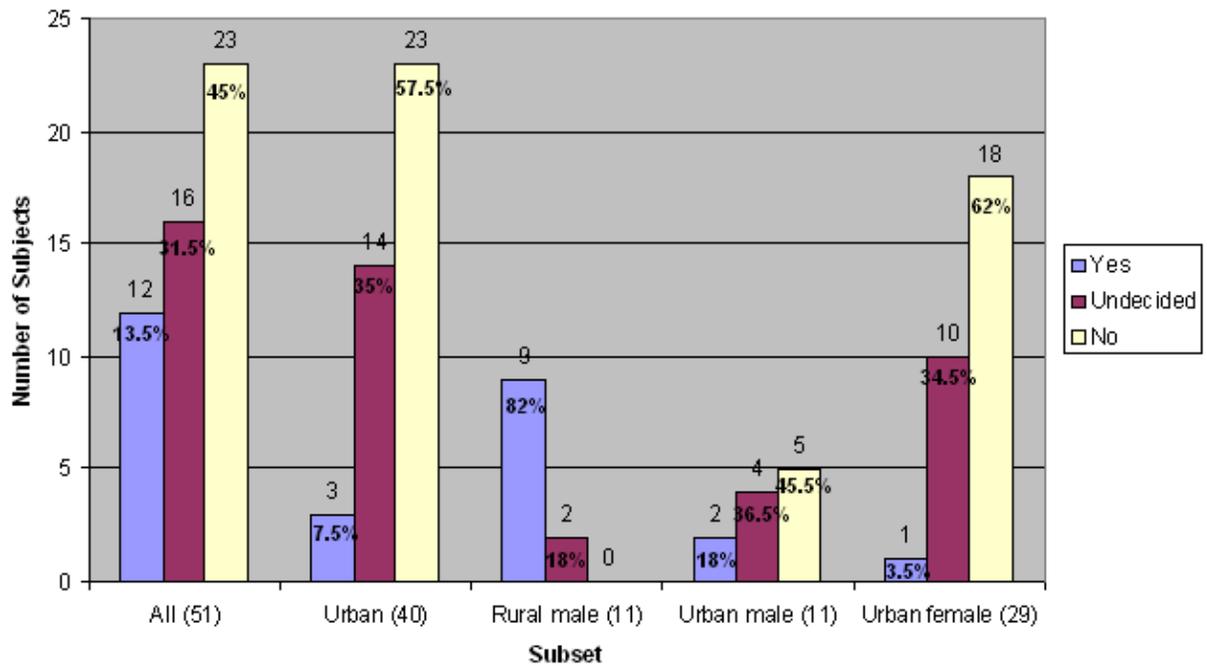


Figure 8-2. Desire to continue trance career by respondent subset

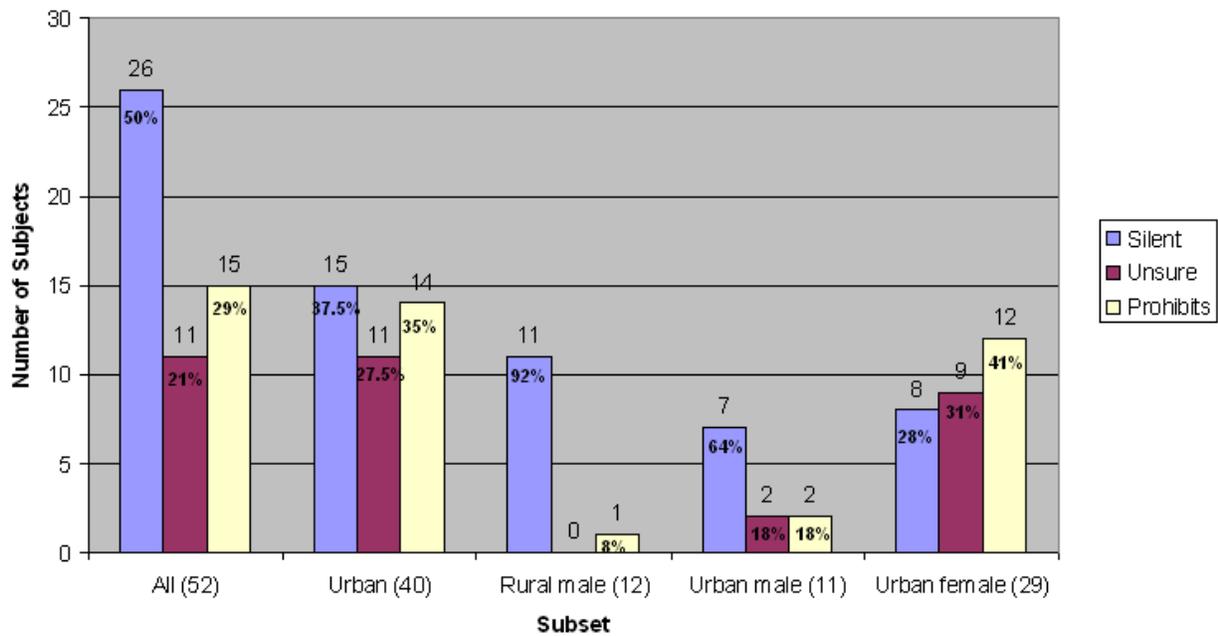


Figure 8-3. Perceived position of Islam by subset

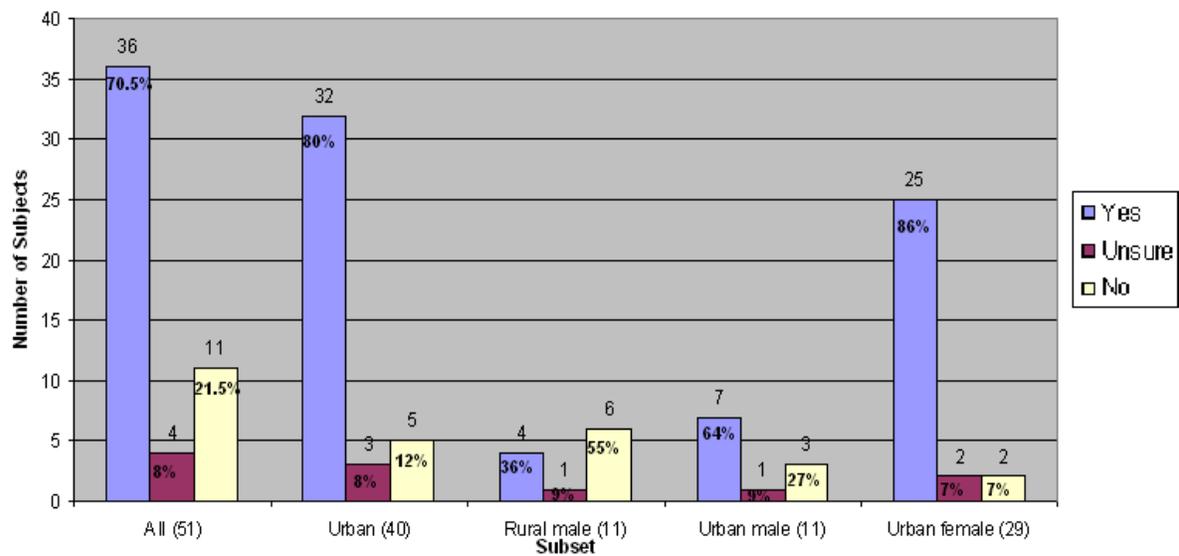


Figure 8-4. "Pardon-seeking" by subset

## CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

This dissertation shows that Moroccan music-induced spirit-possession trance is a living synthesis of at least three historical religious traditions associated with Morocco: orthodox Islam, ecstatic Sufism, and elements of witchcraft that are continuous with sub-Saharan animistic traditions. The resulting *mélange* is a ritualized, culturally perpetuated behavior, with strong dissociative symptoms, that some possessed individuals successfully harness as a stress-relieving device, while others regard as an affliction from which they seek emancipation. Determining the extent to which Moroccan music-induced spirit-possession trance is afflictive is strictly context-specific and depends on a balance of the contradictory psychosomatic effects trance can have on an individual: periodic catharsis versus long-term dependency. It also depends on the individual's level of personal adjustment to the expectations of his or her immediate community. Personal adjustment in urban Morocco is especially complicated by a post-colonial identity crisis deepened by the Kingdom's constitutional enshrinement of orthodox Islam as the legal religion of all Moroccans. Rural trancers who have had less exposure to the official state doctrine are far more at ease with their self-image than their urban counterparts. Urban trancers, especially females, tend to deeply internalize the official Islamic position that possession trance is a sin, and report a chronic sense of personal guilt because they practice it nonetheless.

Besides augmenting the cross-cultural ethnographic data repertoire for the anthropology of possession trance, this work has considerable theoretical contributions. The most important one is a fresh critique of anthropological functionalism. When Boddy (1994) produced a landmark survey of the state of spirit possession studies for the Annual Reviews of Anthropology, she found glimmers of hope for anthropology's shift away from functional analysis that reduced the meaning of possession trance to its gender, political or organizational uses. But although

classical functionalism that started from “the organic needs of man” (Malinowski 1944:72-73) to explain all symbolic behavior has largely subsided as an inexorably unidirectional model, it is still re-invented in new ways. Seven years after Boddy’s review, for instance, Smith (2001) and Mayaram (2001) auscultated the field once more, presenting works such as Kapferer (1997) which ties possession trance to political resistance. Today, the mostly recently published ethnography of Moroccan possession trance, Maarouf (2007), is firmly anchored in the instrumentalist approach as it casts Moroccan jinn exorcism primarily as a metaphorical re-enactment of power relationships in Moroccan society.

The present study is a committed departure from functionalism because it shows that possession trance is *not* primarily utilitarian. The uses to which trance is put are not the motives that generate it as a phenomenon. I wholeheartedly agree with Levi et al. (1996:17) that possession trance is simply a cultural domain, which, when available in a culture, allows dissociation to be recognized as possession. Ritualized dissociative behavior may be mobilized, consciously or unconsciously, to serve recreational catharsis, empowerment, or satire. Fundamentally, however, possession trance just *is*, in the same way that marriage as a self-perpetuating contractual institution, which provides “text” for a complex and variable array of social and personal goals, just *is* (Lambek 1989:52). Possessed/dissociated individuals in Morocco do indeed scaffold different individual circumstances to possession trance because trance is available to them as a cultural template with flexible meanings.

Another important contribution of this research is the attention brought to the very substance of possession trance: a marked alteration of ordinary consciousness accompanied by a variety of verifiable psychosomatic symptoms. As Chapter 6 demonstrates, those symptoms are empirically trackable and quantifiable. Their compilation, and the analysis of their frequency and

distribution in trancing populations can begin to usefully bridge the anthropology of possession trance to psychiatry, and enrich theory in both professions. My contribution provides the basis for future research which would require very large quantitative field samples to compile a statistically significant body of data related to episodic trance symptoms. That kind of research has not been broached yet in the anthropology of possession trance because the focus continues to be less on understanding the episodic experience of trance, and more on qualitatively interpreting the social environment of trance.

The discussion of Morocco's post-colonial identity crisis provides yet another contribution to general field methodology, especially with regards to interviewing techniques. In his seminal reference work, Bernard (2002:259) presents question-filtering as an unambiguously logical way of constructing questionnaires and linearly steering respondents to questionnaire items that are applicable to them. For instance, if a respondent states that he or she does not intend to have children, the interviewer would logically skip the question about the number of children the respondent would hope to have. Question-filtering assumes that a respondent will demonstrate logical consistency, which is not always true as interviews in urban Morocco have shown. Subjects with an identity crisis are capable of individually entertaining and formulating manifestly paradoxical views on the same issue. When urban trancers reported highly positive effects from trance, it did not follow that they rated their trance experience as positive. When they actually rated the experience as positive, it still did not follow that they desired future trance, or that they approved it morally. After months of qualitative investigation and trial questionnaires, I had to formulate a carefully selected bundle of "redundant" questions for the final survey. Chapter 7 shows that the logical inconsistencies generated by some of the answers are very telling sociologically because they are highly patterned across select population subsets.

I would not be surprised if the use of strict question-filtering sometimes unwittingly eclipsed critical identity information in ethnographic contexts other than Morocco.

Identifying patterned inconsistencies in the discourse of interviewees may provide very useful information for constructing accurate psycho-cultural profiles of the average members of a given community. Psycho-cultural profiles that accommodate individual worldview contradictions can point out to problematic society-wide traits that must be considered in applied human development projects. To improve general citizen well-being in Morocco, for instance, merely circulating more cash, services, and commodities in the urban economy would manifestly be insufficient. It is critical to ameliorate Moroccan politics in ways that unfetter the spiritual creativity of ordinary citizens, and heal the internalized religious guilt entrenched by the post-colonial identity crisis. This, in turn, can help promote structural development because economically productive citizens must first and foremost be psychologically at peace with their self-image.

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