Cynthia J. BECKER, *Blackness in Morocco. Gnawa Identity through Music and Visual Culture*

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In the wake of the senseless murder of George Floyd at the hand of police in Minneapolis during the summer of 2020, scholarly and civic discourse spurred by the Black Lives Matter Movement across the globe on the interconnection between slavery, race, racism, and anti-Blackness galvanized an attention to these issues to levels never seen before in North Africa and the Middle East. In *Blackness in Morocco. Gnawa Identity through Music and Visual Culture*, Cynthia Becker makes a timely and critical scholarly contribution to advance our understanding of these issues particularly the silent history of Blackness in Morocco through an interdisciplinary analysis of Gnawa identity. Building on Chouki El Hamel’s pioneering book, *Black Morocco. A History of Race, Slavery, and Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), which challenges the extant scholarly approaches to the historical roots and misconceptions underpinning the culture of silence surrounding race, racism and anti-Blackness in Morocco, Becker, like El Hamel before that, confronts the daunting legacy of this silence as it relates to Gnawa identity in Morocco. Becker, however, is upfront about her focus and central question over how and why Gnawa developed as an identity linked to Blackness and enslavement. Throughout the book, she draws on ethnographical research, oral interviews, music, performances, clothing, colonial photographs and postcards along with participant observations to demonstrate how Gnawa came to be central in uniting “people based on cultural and political understanding of Blackness” (p. 3). Through
these and the beautiful and evocative visuals, she establishes that contrary to popular opinion, Gnawa is not a biological ethnic identity, but a unified cultural identity connected to the legacy of slavery and enslavement.

2 The book aptly divided into six chapters and preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion is centered on Essaouira, the beautiful coastal city where the author’s initiation into Gnawa and decades long fascination with Blackness in Morocco all begun. Using Essaouira’s unique location as an Atlantic port city and as a gateway to the Sahara the author carefully situates Gnawa in its proper historical roots across the Bilad al-Sudan (the Land of the Blacks) lying south of Morocco while also engaging the trajectory behind the development of its identity from the 19th century to contemporary Moroccan history where its vibrancy serves as a hallmark of the city.

3 In chapter one, Becker investigates the role photography played in the representation of Gnawa in the early 20th century as a racialized identity connected to Blackness and public musical performances. Drawing on photographs reprinted in books and postcards, Becker contends that the gradual decline of slavery and the establishment of the French colonial government in Morocco facilitated the mass migration of formerly enslaved people to cities such as Essaouira where they performed for the European camera, projecting themselves as musicians and dancers giving rise to the visual trope of the Gnawa as Black male performers. In continuation with the analyses of photographs, chapter two addresses the invisibility of black women, their visual representation, and their agency. Becker highlights this invisibility as their active agency and their portrayal as passive victims of enslavement. She situates black women at the center of Gnawa history and argues that they chose to remain invisible, thereby obscuring their important role as diviners in Gnawa spirit possessions and healing ceremonies.

4 Chapter three posits a link between fraja performances and a “Sudani” identity. The rituals connected to fraja performances are described in detail by Becker, who contends that these performances in Gnawa spirit possession ceremonies (lila) allow for a conscious association with a Sudani identity and “are part of the complex process of constructing and negotiating racial identities in a society where Blackness was historically equated with enslavement” (p. 95). In chapter four, Becker examines how the Gnawa claim legitimacy and spiritual power by emphasizing their shared historical experiences of slavery, marginalization, and Blackness.

5 The final two chapters (five and six), look at the process of the commodification of culture and creation of an authentic Gnawa brand. Here, Becker examines the question of authenticity and the tensions between those who self-identify as Gnawa and those who claim ancestry to enslaved Sub-Saharan Africans. Becker places the control of the Zawiya of Sidna Bilal at the center of these tensions and asserts that the question of control “provide a point of entry for the consideration of the larger question of how cultural appropriation and marketing of culture influences collective identity.” Focusing on the guimbri and its transition from its “marginal status” (p. 185) to an “empowering icon” (p. 187) and a symbol of Morocco’s Africanness, Becker continues with an analysis of the porosity and fluidity of the Gnawa identity and how non-black Gnawa musicians like Abdeslam Alikane and other marginalized groups have adopted this identity.

6 Blackness in Morocco is a fascinating book that provides a unique perspective to the study of Gnawa identity rooted in Morocco’s historical and contemporary histories. One
of the strengths of this book is that it posits a turn to the study of “otherness” as a source of pride and empowerment. Another is its compelling and beautiful images and narratives to bridge the gap created by the culture of silence on our understanding of the varied legacy of slavery and enslavement in Morocco. This book is an essential resource for scholars and students of race, slavery, gender, Islam, African diaspora, African art history, and performance studies. Anyone else who wishes to gain a general understanding of the intersection of Gnawa identity with Blackness in Morocco as it relates Morocco’s historical and contemporary histories, this book is a must read.

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