

Martina Hanašková, Itzana Dobbelaere, Heřleňne Sechehaye

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Martina Hanáková,
Itzana Dobbelaere,
Hélène Secheyaye

MASARYK UNIVERSITY (BRNO), UNIVERSITÉ LIBRE DE BRUXELLES,
JEAN MONNET UNIVERSITY

The *sersera* of the *guembri*: anthropological approach to the device in the context of Gnawa diasporas in Brussels and Morocco

1. Introduction

Gnawa is an ethnic group said to have originated from Black West African slaves who were brought to Morocco in the 16th century. Currently, Gnawa is not only a matter of ancestry and blood relation. It is a complex identity that carries various meanings. Indeed, being a Gnawa is also related to music, someone who plays Gnawa music can be considered a Gnawa. Among their instruments, there is a fretless percussive spike lute with three strings called the *guembri*. At the very end of its neck, there is usually a little hole for the input of the metallic timbre-modifying mechanism: the *sersera*.¹ It is a detachable

¹ The transcription of the Arabic words follows the paper *Transcription in written Arabic* by Bo Isaksson, professor of Semitic Languages in Uppsala University, [online] http://www.lingfil.uu.se/digitalAssets/168/168451_3transcription-of-arabice.pdf [accessed: 04.05.2015].

idiophone consisting of metal loops or rings fixed around the edges of a metal sheet. Even though this piece of metal is mentioned in literature, the *sersera* has never been the main focus of any study. If it is still made and carried by musicians, it is almost not used anymore. Musicians usually keep it in their house or inside a case.² The object itself still seems to have an importance, but the *sersera* has nearly become musically obsolete. By collecting musicians' explanations on reasons for abandoning it, this paper aims to find out how the timbre-modifying mechanism is used and conceptualized by the culture it belongs to. This analysis was done among the Gnawa diaspora in Brussels, a community interested in the preservation of its traditions in its new environment. We compared these observations with interviews conducted in Morocco (Marrakech and Rabat) by one of the authors of this article, Martina Hanáková.

In order to offer the new information collected among Gnawa, the article is divided into three parts: firstly, an introduction to the *guembri* and the *sersera* based on existing literature. Secondly, we will discuss our field observations and the reasons given by each of the interviewed musicians concerning the obsolescence of the *sersera*. To conclude, these two parts are going to be compared in a discussion.

2. General information

2.1. The *guembri*

The *guembri* (also spelled and called *gimbri*, *gmbri*, *gnibra*, *gombri*, *guinbri*, *gunbrii*, *guniibrii*, *gogo*, *hajhuj*; the last word in Moroccan dialect stands for “there are two [strings]”)³ is a Moroccan fretless percussive spike lute with three strings (see Example 1). The wooden base (*wajh*) of the instrument is coated with camel throat skin; three strings (*awtār*) from goat intestines are attached to the three spikes (*mas̄tara*) right next to the sound hole (*l-fumm*, literally “the mouth”),

2 This affirmation is based on what we noticed in Brussels and in Morocco (see below for the circumstances of collecting the information). It was also confirmed by the ethnomusicologist Tom Beardslee, who did his research on the square Jamaa El Fna in Marrakesh.

3 Apparently, according to musicians that were interviewed, there were originally only two strings on the instruments.



Example 1. *Guembri* © mim, Photo S. Egan

at the upper end they are tied with leather bands around the oval neck (*makhzina*). Contemporary musicians usually use an iron tuning mechanism instead of the ties. One of the strings, the middle one, is shorter and inserted in the middle of the neck. The tuning is not fixed⁴ but there are stable relations between each string: an octave between the lowest and the middle one and a fourth between the middle one and the highest. The wooden bridge (*hmmāl*) is removable. *Guembri*s are decorated in many different ways, e.g. by hanging various types of beads on the neck, with henna drawings on the leather surface or with shell embroidery on lace or velvet. At the very end of the neck, there is usually a little hole for the metallic timbre-modifying mechanism. When Gnawa play the lute, they say that the lute “speaks” (*itkellmū*).⁵ The instrument plays an important role in the ritual musical drama called the *lila* (“night”) or the *derdeba*, performed by Gnawa people. These events take place in the presence of an audience and the structure of the ritual is firmly established, with hidden rules,

4 Though *māllem* Hicham admits that he has three types of tuning depending on the performance context (Interview with Hicham, June 2015, Brussels.)

5 J. Pouchelon, *Les Gnawa du Maroc: intercesseurs de la différence? Étude ethnomusicologique, ethnopoétique et ethnochoréologique*, Paris 2015, p. 142.

though the contents of the performance differ from one *lila* to another.⁶ These happenings relate to the connection with spiritual world; in the case of Gnawa, it shapes cooperation with saints and supernatural beings called the *mluk*. During the ritual, a *mâllem* (the music master) plays specific melodies on the *guembri*, which are becoming musical codes for the beings who respond by taking possession of the initiates. An anthropologist Zineb Majdouli attended one *lila* and described the role of the *guembri* as follows: “The most coveted place is the one that is exactly in front of the *guembri*. The instrument calls the tune by attracting the *mluk* in the dance area and leading the trance.”⁷ The *guembri* plays the most important role in the whole process and participants take a great care of the instrument. It could take the form of bringing offerings to it, purifying it, sprinkling it with milk and orange blossom water and so forth.⁸

2.2. The *sersera*

The *sersera* is named after the sound it makes, “*srsrsr*”.⁹ It is also called the *rîsha*, which means “feather”, in relation to its shape. Each *guembri* has its own *sersera* because the hole on the top of the neck is not always of the same diameter. Moreover, the *sersera* is often made by the same person who made the *guembri* (the *mâllem* himself or somebody else). The metal in use can be iron or aluminium¹⁰ and it does not have a decorative purpose (see Example 2). The number of holes and rings

6 More details on the exact course and other information in: M. Sum, *Music of the Gnawa of Morocco: Evolving Spaces and Times*, Vancouver 2012, pp. 42–63, 71–84, 101–111, 193–272.

7 Translation: B. Comblez, *La place la plus convoitée est celle qui se trouve exactement en face du guembri. L'instrument est le maître du jeu, c'est lui qui attire les mlouks dans l'aire de la danse et c'est lui qui conduit la transe*. [Z. Majdouli, *Trajectoires des musiciens Gnawa: Approche ethnographique des cérémonies domestiques et des festivals de musique du monde*, Paris 2007, p. 46].

8 M. Sum, *Music of the Gnawa of Morocco: Evolving Spaces and Times*, Vancouver 2012, pp. 51, 126–7, 219.

9 As the *qraqab* and the *tbel*.

10 Information has been taken from an enquiry, answered by Omar's cousin. February 2015, Rabat.



Example 2. *Sersera* © mim, Photo S. Egan

is not important according to all the Gnawa we interviewed.¹¹ They choose their number depending on the sound they want.¹²

To get to know the origin and the history of this device, we refer to the work of an ethnomusicologist Eric Charry. In his article *Plucked lutes in West Africa: an Historical Overview*, he explains the similarities between plucked lutes in West Africa,¹³ which are distinct from those of North Africa. The *guembri* of the Gnawa would be a geographical exception. Indeed, from the organological perspective the Gnawa lute is similar to plucked lutes of West Africa. The so-called category “plucked lutes in West Africa” includes instruments carrying many different

names and varying in a few aspects, but sharing morphological characteristics. Among them, Charry mentions: “Most lutes have a removable buzzing and jingling device made of a flexible metal plaque with small metal rings attached to it, which is inserted into a slit in the far end of the neck. This kind of device is consistent with a widespread African practice rooted in an aesthetic that values a buzzing or jingling sound which frames the particular sound of the instrument.”¹⁴ According to history of the Gnawa people and the resemblance to West African lutes, it seems quite plausible that the *guembri* was made in

11 Although Viviana Pâques mentions that the number of rings should be sixty-four which corresponds of the number of pieces in which a body can virtually be broken up during a trance process and then be gathered by the sound of the *guembri* and the *sersera*. (V. Pâques, *La Religion des esclaves: recherches sur la confrérie marocaine des Gnawa*, Bergamo 1991, p. 284).

12 Rida, September 2015, Brussels.

13 E. Charry, *Plucked Lutes in West Africa: an Historical Overview*, “The Galpin Society Journal” 1996, Vol. 49, pp. 3–37.

14 *Ibid.*

Morocco by the Gnawa after they arrived there. Beside the fact that the removable metal piece can be found in West African lutes¹⁵ (and also in djembes¹⁶), the *sersera* in Morocco has been mentioned in the subject literature for a very long time. The Danish consul Georg Høst, who went to Essaouira in 1760, and later became a close friend of the Moroccan emperor, writes:¹⁷

[...] Gnawa guitar, which is used only by the Blacks. It is played with the fingers. At the upper extremity a thin metal plate with rings inserted which gives off a strong noise.¹⁸

Some old illustrations, for instance the *Two Studies of a Moorish Musician* drawn by Eugène Delacroix in 1832 show the *sersera* as well. Therefore, it is more than likely that the *sersera* has been used since the arrival of Gnawa in Morocco. What is not known is how often it was used.¹⁹ Even concerning contemporary use, nobody mentions the fact that the rattle has fallen almost entirely out of use. Similarly, if the existence of the *sersera* is mentioned in the literature, the spatial and temporal context is missing.

15 For pictures and mention of the metal idiophones on West African lutes, see: E. Charry, *Mande Music*, Chicago 2000. This device is also found on other instruments such as djembes or fiddles: see R.M. Stone, *Music in West Africa*, New York and Oxford 2005; B. Surugue, *Contribution à l'étude de la musique sacrée Zarma Songhay (République du Niger)*, Niamey 1972.

16 E. Charry, *Mande Music*, Chicago 2000 and R.M. Stone, *Music in West Africa*, New York and Oxford 2005.

17 G. Høst, *Nachrichten von Marokos und Fes, im Lande selbst gesammelt, in den Jahren 1760 bis 1768*, Kopenhagen 1781.

18 "Getara genaau (getara genawa), die gleichfalls allein von den Negeren gebraucht wird... sie wird nur mit den Fingern berührt, das oberste ist eine dünne eiserne Platte mit Ringen besetzt, die ein starkes Geräusch geben" (In Collaer and Elsner, 1983, p. 168-170). The quote is translated from German by Eric Charry in E. Charry, *Plucked Lutes in West Africa: an Historical Overview*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

19 We suppose that it was not an obligation to play with *sersera* even though it was used more often than it is nowadays. According to the British musicologist Henry George Farmer "in the more primitive types the upper extremity of the neck is quite plain, save perhaps for the addition of a metal ferrule" which means that there were ancient *guembri* without the hole (H.G. Farmer, *A North African Folk Instrument*, "Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland" 1928, Vol. 1, p. 28).

Apart from the chronological aspect, there is the question of its function. Concerning this point, we found some specific descriptions, including practical and symbolic ones. Jean During²⁰ says: “the rattles of the Gnawa lute (*guembri*) which tremble when the spirits are there” refer to the spiritual function of the *guembri*; the same idea recurs in the work of Viviana Pâques²¹ and of Antonio Baldassare, who states that the *sersera* corresponds to the head of the *guembri* and that its sound attracts the spirits. Additionally, Baldassare emphasises the Gnawa’s search for contrast in timbre, between “warm” and “cold” sounds corresponding to the non-metallic and the metallic materials (the *tbel* versus the *qraqab* and the *guembri*’s strings versus the *sersera*).²² Moreover, Pierre-Alain Claisse in *Les Gnawa marocains de tradition loyaliste*²³ points out:

When he approaches the sacred repertoire, *mluk*, the music master extracts from the soul of the *hajuj* an iron plate with rings called the “tongue” [*lisân*], *sarsala*, of the spirit sleeping inside the soundbox. Sitting on the top of the instrument, this resonator with the high-pitched rattles allows connection with the bass of the guitar. Moreover, the *hajuj* [another name for the *guembri*] vibrations can be heard from very far, even in the presence of dozens of pairs of *qraqab*.

Two ideas can be extracted from this excerpt: first, the anthropomorphic perception of the lute (the *sersera* viewed as a tongue, and the idea of soul) and the practical use of the *sersera* which helps the

20 Author’s translation: “[...] les sonnailles du luth gnawa (*guembri*) qui frémissent lorsque les esprits sont là” (J. During, *Hand Made. Pour une anthropologie du geste musical*, “Cahiers d’ethnomusicologie” 2001, Vol. 14, p. 63).

21 V. Pâques, *La Religion des esclaves*, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

22 A. Baldassare, *Musique et danse des Gnawa. La lila/derdeba comme hypertexte*, in Chlyeh Abdelhafid (dir.), Casablanca 1999, pp. 90–92.

23 Author’s translation: “Lorsqu’il aborde le répertoire sacré, *mluk*, le maître de musique extrait de l’âme du *hajuj* une plaque de fer bordée d’anneaux appelée la “langue”, *sarsala*, du génie endormi au creux de la caisse de résonance. Surmontant alors le manche de l’instrument, ce résonateur permet de faire connexion tonale des basses de la guitare avec les aiguës des crotales. De surcroît, les vibrations du *hajuj* s’entendent au loin, même en présence de dizaines de paires de crotales” (P. Claisse, *Les Gnawa marocains de tradition loyaliste*, Paris 2003, p. 99).

guembri to be heard among the *qraqab*.²⁴ Finally, Pouchelon, for his part, explains that the *guembri* gathers the three living kingdoms: animal (camel skin, goat guts), vegetal (the wood) and mineral (the metal of the rattle). From this point of view, the *sersera* is important because it completes the systematic categorisation of the *guembri* as a coherent assembly of the living manifestations of the elements. Pouchelon suggests a sub-Saharan origin for that animist conception.²⁵

3. Fieldwork

3.1. Materials and methods

This study is based on the information and sounds collected during the fieldwork that took place in Marrakech, Rabat and Brussels. One of the authors, Martina Hanáková, carried out a month-long fieldwork in Morocco in February 2015. She had the opportunity to interview four players of the *guembri*, however, most of the information comes from interviews with one of them called Omar. He replied to some questions in consultation with his cousin, who manufactures musical instruments, including the *guembri*. In parallel, in Brussels four *mallems* (Karim, Hicham, Rida, Rachid²⁶) were interviewed. All of them grew up in Morocco and arrived later in Europe (Belgium; and France – Rachid).

These men are recognized by the Gnawa community in Belgium as *mallems* and all the Gnawa musical activities in Brussels are organized around them. They are also recognized in Morocco as *mallems* and so, they play in Belgium and in Morocco. Karim and Rida are descendants of two very famous *mallems*. In Belgium, due to an audience more interested in concerts than in the *lila*, they are more active on the secular scene than on the ritual scene. They play for *lila* ceremonies, concerts, parades, neighbourhood festivities or Moroccan weddings. At Moroccan events, they are asked to play other styles of Moroccan

24 Unfortunately, the author does not quote the source of the information. Therefore, we do not know if he collected it from interviews with musicians, if he read it somewhere or if these are his own hypotheses.

25 J. Pouchelon, *Les Gnawa du Maroc, op. cit.*, pp. 162–163.

26 See Appendix 1 for information concerning the place, date and circumstances of the interviews.

music, which results in widening of the repertoire of the group to Moroccan music.²⁷ Beside the *mallems*, we spoke with a dozen Gnawa in the “Arts & Folklore Gnawa” Café, the headquarters of a non-profit organisation founded by Mohamed-Saïd Aksari and the *mallems* Rida in order to give their activities (lessons, presentation in schools, shows for elderly) a formal context. In addition, one of the researchers attended some rituals in Brussels in 2014.²⁸

3.2. Observations: Musicians' words

Among the interviewed *mallems*, Rachid and Karim claimed they never use the *sersera*. In Morocco, Omar's *guembri* did not even have the hole for it. However, after his encounter with Martina, who mainly focused on this part of the *guembri*, Omar decided to make one. Hicham and Rida said they sometimes put it on. In this section, we offer a list of reasons and the circumstances mentioned by the musicians for the use and non-use of the rattle. To make it clearer for the reader, we do not mention who said yes or no; but we illustrate the text with a table summarizing the ideas according to the speakers. “M” is for Morocco and “B” for Brussels (see the names and circumstances of interviews in Appendix 1).

Reasons to use the *sersera*:

	M1	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5
To give rhythm	X	X		X	X	X
To add noise	X	X				
To create contrast in the timbre			X	X	X	X
To increase the volume of the <i>guembri</i>		X	X	X		
To create special atmosphere			X			
To call the spirits	X		X	X		
To create contrast in the materials used				X		X
Because “I like [it]”					X	

27 H. Sechehaye, S. Weisser, *Les Musiciens gnawa à Bruxelles: une reconfiguration culturelle*, “Brussels Studies” 2015, Vol. 90, [online] <http://www.brusselsstudies.be/medias/publications/BruS90FR.pdf> [accessed: 23.09.2015].

28 *Lila* in June 2014, and *Lila* in January 2015.

Reasons not to use the *sersera*:

	M1	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5
Because of the amplification		X	X	X	X	X
Not to attract the spirits				X		
To have a clear sound			X	X		
Because of the evolution of the style, more sophisticated than before		X	X	X		
Because it is replaced by the <i>qraqab</i> and it is not heard				X		X
Because of the evolution of performance circumstances (before, inside and intimate contexts; now, outside and bigger contexts)		X		X	X	X
Because it is old-fashioned				X		

3.3. Reasons to use the *sersera*

The *sersera* is used to increase the sound of the *guembri* and to add rhythm and noise to the music. This added metallic sound provides contrast in timbre. Indeed, Hicham claimed that: “It is a high sound and the bass can go out.” Thus, the *sersera* contrasts with the *guembri*. In the same way, Rachid mentioned the complementarity in the sounds as well as in the materials: the contrast between “warm” and “cold”.

Guembri is warm. Wood is warm. Guts and skin are warm, too. The *qraqab* and the *sersera* are cold. The metal is cold. Warm needs cold and cold needs warm. They are complementary.

Another reason mentioned by the musicians Karim and Hicham is the tradition. Both interviewees said that the *sersera* was always used in the past and that it came from West Africa. Hicham also mentioned the fact that the device is still used in Africa, not only on lutes but also on djembes “to create an atmosphere.” Discussing further this particular atmosphere, it transpired that it is created by the presence of spirits. Rachid also explained that the *sersera* is used to call and attract the spirits. This is the reason why the *m'alle* who still uses the *sersera* puts it on for special occasions

such as *lilas* and not on stage or for the public. Illustrating this, Hicham said:

We are between us, we play and we sing the deepest of the Gnawa. So I play with the *sersera*.

One *m'alle*m only referred to the pleasure derived from playing with it.

3.4. Reasons not to use the *sersera*

The main reason claimed by all the interviewed Gnawa is the amplification. Because of the technologies and the lute amplification, the *sersera* is now useless. Its primary use was to increase the volume. Moreover, the musicians said that when the lute is amplified the *sersera* cannot be heard anymore. It seems that some Gnawa tried to amplify the *sersera* too, but the result was unsatisfactory. In addition, the *m'alle*ms said that there are more *qraqab* players than before because they play outside (in the streets, concerts and festivals) more often, and the musicians are so numerous that the *sersera* is not heard any more. Apart from this change, there is also the idea of the changes of performance circumstances, to which we can add the evolution of playing techniques. According to Rachid, in the past music was simple but now it has become complex. The *sersera* is said to be incompatible with this complexity because it would make too much noise and produce too many sounds at the same time. This *m'alle*m also told us that he personally does not like the sound of the *guembri* when the *sersera* is added, because:

In fact, when you stroke the strings, it makes schinschin, not a note. I like to listen to the strings. There is the contact with the instrument itself, the skin, the strings, the box. You can't improvise with the *sersera*, it will give a false note all the time.

The last reason uncovered was avoiding calling the spirits because the circumstances are not good to attract them. Rachid said that he wants to play music and does not want to deal with magic or the sacred part of the Gnawa.

3.5. "Slave's chains"

We already discussed the complementarity of the timbre of the materials with the cold and warm contrast. In the continuity of the material in use, the iron gives rise to some consideration: Rida and Hicham said that the metal symbolizes the chains with which slaves, Gnawa's ancestors, were tied. In the same way, the sound it makes would recall the noise of slaves walking. They also used to be blacksmiths. However Rachid did not agree with this hypothesis. According to his own research, the chains did not exist at the time and slaves were tied with ropes. Furthermore, he claimed that slaves did not have the energy to play music and think about entertainment.

All of the *mallems* interviewed agreed that with or without the *sersera*, the meaning does not change. And most of the time, the hole where the *sersera* is inserted exists even if the idiophone is rarely used. Martina told Hicham that she saw only one Gnawa playing with the *sersera* in the street in Morocco. The rest of the musicians played without it and did not even have a hole for it; he stated that: "It is less traditional [playing without *sersera*]. But it is not a problem."

4. Discussions

4.1. Acoustics

The *sersera* is not heard with an amplified lute but only during acoustic solo, during which the *sersera*'s high frequencies contrast with the *guembri*'s low ones. One of the main reasons given to use the *sersera* was to bring out the *guembri*'s warm sound in contrast with the cold sound of the *sersera*. Following this idea, the *sersera* appears to be a complementary element in the *guembri*'s timbre. Also, the spectral components strengthened by the *sersera* are where the ear hears the best (1000-3000 Hz). Thus, if it makes noise in the spectrum, the *sersera* makes the *guembri* cut through a bunch of singers or *qraqrab* players and singers and it mostly increases the loudness of the sound.

4.2. Sacred and secular music

In the musicians' representations, the *sersera* is linked with the spirits and the intimacy of Gnawa music. In this respect, the preponderance of the secular contexts of playing compared to the sacred contexts explains the abandonment of the *sersera*. Frequently, the decrease of showing the spiritual dimension in Gnawa music is linked to new performance contexts such as concert stages and street performances. Gnawa play for a broadening audience and they adapt their instruments for acoustical reasons: the *guembri* has to be heard and so they amplify it. Beside the fact that the microphones can affect the musician's mentality by putting him in the situation of presentation,²⁹ this new technology is not so compatible with the *sersera*. Its musical features are replaced by the *graqab* (metallic sound, rhythmic dimension), whereas the sacred aspect is not necessary anymore. In fact, this secular habit has spread in the sacred performances. Although some musicians claimed to apply the *sersera* in *lilas*, we did not see this practice in the ritual contexts in Brussels.³⁰ The explanation given to us concerning this obvious contradiction is again the quality of the sound due to the amplification. Similarly, in Morocco, we noticed the same and it is confirmed by Tom Beardslee, an ethnomusicologist who spent one year there and never saw Gnawa putting on the *sersera* except once.³¹ Therefore this obsolescence concerns all Gnawa and not only those on exile. However, in the migration context, the question of tradition and legitimacy of new practices is more complex and necessitates other considerations than in Morocco.

4.3. The exile issue

In relation to the sacred/secular issue, the diasporic context deserves some consideration. We collected the information from the first generation of immigrant musicians in Belgium. They still have a lot of contacts in Morocco. Music seems to be the way they chose to settle

29 M. Métalsi, *Les musiques traditionnelles et la scène: l'exemple des Gnaoua*, in: Chlyeh A. (ed.), *L'Univers des Gnaoua*, Casablanca 1999, p. 114.

30 The first one in June 2014 was amplified and the second one in January 2015, was not.

31 Interview with Tom Beardslee, on the 23th of June, Brussels.

in the new country and keep the link with their original culture. The issue they are confronted with is their image and identity. They define themselves as “traditional” Gnawa but they also admit changes have taken place; for example, not using of the *sersera*, employing instruments from other forms of traditional Moroccan music styles and involving women within the musical groups.³² This process of combining, adapting and borrowing is inherent to Gnawa culture as a consequence of their diasporic identity and their history of slavery, as explained by Cynthia Becker:³³

As a diaspora population with a history of slavery, the performance of music and trance in exchange for financial compensation allowed them to survive economically, since liberated slaves typically had low economic status, no land to farm, and lacked a network of family support. [...]

In this way, they adapt easily to new technologies, and new circumstances of playing. Paying close attention to the expectation of the public, the idea of “tradition” and “authenticity” is something closely linked to the “here and now”. Due to the interviews, we noticed the importance of interaction between “us” and “them”: Hicham seems to put the *sersera* more often since we have been interested in it or at least, we can say that our contacts have led to a reflexion on the object itself. The anecdote of Omar making the hole in his *guembri* illustrates also the constant process of adaptation intrinsic to the aesthetics of Gnawa.

4.4. Symbolism

The *mallems* we interviewed associated the *sersera* with different connotations: it is an old African object which contrasts with the new technology. “Old” and “African” signify a link with their origins and the roots of Gnawa music which is an important issue for them. From this observation, we can deduce that the *sersera* is not compatible with the amplification (“old”) but it remains an important part of the

32 H. Secheyaye, S. Weisser, *Les Musiciens gnawa*, *op. cit.*, [online] <http://www.brusselsstudies.be/medias/publications/BruS9oFR.pdf> [accessed: 23.09.2015].

33 C. Becker, *Hunter, Sufis, Soldiers, and Minstrels. The Diaspora Aesthetics of the Moroccan Gnawa*, “Anthropology and Aesthetics” 2011, No. 59–60, p. 129.

guembri (“traditional”, “African”, “normal”). In fact, they still own the *sersera* even though they do not use it. As for the origins, the *m'allems* discuss the idea of the chains. We can observe two perspectives: according to one the metal is a remainder of the slaves' chains; according to the other one, there is no connection. Both points of view have the same purpose: to legitimate the “Gnawa”. The only interviewee who said the *sersera* is not linked with the metal, based his information on the research he made. He is the only *m'allelem* who has no Gnawa origins and who learned to play the *guembri* from different *m'allems*. He considers himself a Gnawa but not a traditional one: he chooses which music he wants to play and how, and he claims he knows better than others what is true or not concerning the Gnawa origins. With his knowledge in opposition to the oral tradition, he tries to find legitimacy among the *m'allems*.

5. Conclusions

The main concern about the *sersera* seems to be related to the perception of the meaning of the tradition. The musicians are divided in various positions. Obviously, the rattle is no longer useful in performance since the adoption of amplification made it no longer audible. Also the *sersera* is linked with the spiritual part of Gnawa music but the predominance of secular contexts of playing makes the metallic addition unnecessary. In spite of that, the device remains important. The Gnawa provided the *sersera* with symbolism which fits in the Gnawa mythology (the iron linked to slavery). They also justified the use or lack of use of the device. It has strong ties with tradition, which means that the musicians keep even without regular practical use. The perception of “tradition” is influenced by the expectations of the Western public. Thus, what is Gnawa and the notion of authenticity are continuously evolving in Morocco as well as in diasporic contexts, such as Brussels. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see in the future if the *sersera* will become totally obsolete (and if the hole at the neck's top will remain there or not), or whether it will be reintroduced and in which way. Exploring the role of amplification could also give a better general understanding of the changes occurring in Gnawa musical practice.

Abstract

In Gnawa music, the three-stringed lute called *guembri* plays a central role. According to Sum (2012, p. 52), “the *guembri* attracts the *mluk* (supernatural entities summoned in gnawa ceremonies) by sounding their musical identities, effectively sounding their names (...), (as well as) calling on the adept (...). Upon arrival of the spirit, the *guembri*, as the adept, becomes possessed.” The *guembri* is equipped with a detachable idiophone consisting of metal loops or rings fixed around the edges of a metal sheet, inserted into the neck. This device, called the *sersera*, is mostly audible during solo moments. It has been often noticed, or briefly described (Baldassarre 1999), but never analyzed in detail. However, it seems important for us to include the *sersera* in the analysis of the status, meaning and roles of the *guembri* timbre. Taking it into consideration will provide a new approach leading to better understanding of many facets of the instrument, including its cultural value. The *sersera* was used before and it is still made and carried by musicians, but nowadays it is barely employed either in Morocco or in Belgium. Through confrontation of the acoustical analysis and the information found in literature with the musicians’ experience, this paper tries to find the reasons of this obsolescence.

Keywords

sersera, *guembri*, Gnawa, Brussels, Morocco, amplification

Abstrakt

***Sersera guembri*. Antropologiczne podejście do instrumentu w kontekście diaspory Gnawa w Brukseli i Maroku**

W muzyce Gnawa główną rolę odgrywa trzystrunowa lutnia zwana *guembri*. Według Sum (2012, s. 52) „*guembri* przyciąga *mluki* [byty nadprzyrodzone przywoływane w trakcie rytuałów Gnawa] przez wybrzmiewanie ich muzycznych tożsamości, skuteczne oddawanie ich imion za pomocą dźwięków (...) [jak również] wzywanie adepta.

Wraz z przybyciem ducha *guembri* jako adept zostaje opętane”. Instrument ten jest wyposażony w zdejmowany idiofon składający się z metalowych kółek (pierścieni) nawiniętych na brzegi wprowadzonej do szyjki metalowej płytki. Ten element – *sersera* – najwyraźniej można usłyszeć w partiach solowych. Często znajduje się wzmianki na jego temat, został on również zwięźle opisany (Baldassarre 1999), lecz nigdy nie zbadano go szczegółowo. Tymczasem dla autorów niniejszego tekstu istotne wydaje się uwzględnienie *sersery* w analizie jej statusu, znaczenia oraz roli tembru *guembri*. Rozważenie tego elementu sprawi, że możliwe będzie spojrzenie na problem w nowy sposób, który pozwoli na lepsze zrozumienie wielu kwestii dotyczących instrumentu, włączając w to jego walor kulturowy. *Sersera* była w użyciu już wcześniej i nadal jest wytwarzana oraz wykorzystywana przez muzyków, lecz obecnie jej zastosowanie zarówno w Maroku, jak i w Belgii jest znikome. W niniejszym artykule dokonana zostanie próba odkrycia przyczyny tego spadku popularności poprzez konfrontację analizy audytywnej i informacji znalezionych w literaturze z doświadczeniem muzyków.

Słowa kluczowe

sersera, *guembri*, Gnawa, Bruksela, Maroko, amplifikacja

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Hicham, Karim, Rachid, Omar, Rida, Mohammed-Saïd, Ahmed, Aziz, Hamza, Stéphanie Weisser, Tom Beardslee, Saskia Willaert, Wim Bosmans, Jiří Horák

Appendix 1

Omar [M1]

Omar studied sociology and Islamic studies at the University of Mohammed 5, Rabat, Morocco. Currently he makes his living by playing on events, such as weddings or different celebrations. He would never use the *guembri* for busking, it means he would never put a hat or bowl for money in front of him while playing. Martina met him on 4th February 2015, in the Kasbah des Oudayas in Rabat.

Karim [B1]

Karim has been living in Belgium for seven years. He was born in Fès and his father was well-known Gnawa master, so Karim has been in contact with Gnawa since his childhood. His father was his teacher, firstly of the *qraqab*, then the *tbel* and finally the *guembri*. We arranged an appointment on the 23rd of June 2015 in the Museum of Musical Instruments of Brussels.

Hicham [B2]

Hicham was born in Fès, Morocco and arrived in Brussels in 2007. He is one of the three *mallems* in Brussels. The appointment was made for the 17th of June 2015 at the rehearsal room. Hicham played the *guembri* made by himself. We recorded each string for later acoustic analysis. We met Hicham a second time, the 15th of September, to record the strings again with and without the *sersera*. Both times, the recordings were made in context and not in an anechoic chamber or in a laboratory.

Rachid [B3]

Rachid was born in Fès. He has no Gnawa origins. He moved to France at the age of 13. He said he fell into the music of his roots by chance. In 1990, he went to Morocco where he attended a Gnawa concert. On this occasion, a *mallelem* of the troop gave him the *guembri*. He is different from other Gnawa we encountered because he did not want to play towards spirits or songs associated with Allah. It also means he never plays on *lilas*. We met him in the Gnawa bar the 22th of July 2015.

Rida [B4]

Rida arrived in Brussels in 1998. He is the son of a famous *mallelem* from Tanger, Abdelwahid Stitou Barrady. In Belgium, he plays concerts, he is responsible for lessons (Gnawa rhythms, dances, songs) which are

now mainly given by Karim. We met him in the headquarters of the NPO “Arts & Folklore Gnawa”, which is also a bar (see below), the 14th of September 2015.

Mohammed Said [B5]

Mohamed-Saïd Aksari is a non-Gnawa Moroccan who founded in 2000 with *mâlle*m Rida the NPO “Arts & Folklore Gnawa” in which he participates as an administrator and the president of the organization. Despite the fact he is not a Gnawa, he plays the *qraqrab* and took lessons with Rida within the association when he has time. We met him the 14th of September 2015 in the Café.