

A proposal/reflection on gnawa

For some years we have been active researching diverse manifestations of ritual practices around the world from a perspective that differs greatly from any anthropological undertaking. In fact our approach to the subject is rather that of an active participant in the field, taking into account that we have been a regular apprentice in the world of shamanism of the Lower Putumayo region of the Amazon jungle in Colombia - for at least a decade - where we have approached a personal, vision-based, trance-based assimilation of traditional healing practices from the Inga and Cofán traditions.

Part of our learning focuses on the use of “frequency” as a basis for the restitution and synchronization of physical and spiritual energies. This field is of course very broad, yet we have been keen to focus on specific cases where we have been able to mobilize the poetics and the political agency that these ancient practices of healing-through-sound may have in our contemporary world. One example is our research in Northern Sweden with the Samis, whose ritual drums were destroyed as a violent act of colonizing power, when it was understood by the Swedes that by abolishing this technology-of-healing-through-trance they could break the fabric of these peoples and leave them dispossessed of their sources of power, and therefore exiled in their own territory. In 2016 we also participated in the Festival Artifariti in the liberated territories of the Western Sahara where we witnessed the decay of practically all forms of ritual practices in the Refugee Camps where most of the Saharai people now live in a “provisional” state that has become a permanent state of exception. An idea that involved dealing with the demeaning, damaging, degrading state of identity loss of the second and third generation Saharai refugees sprang from this experience. The Saharai case is emblematic of other exile situations. They were traditional nomadic peoples whose first trauma was being forced to surrender to their way of life, thanks to the artificial frontiers of European colonizers. Their next trauma came when the colonizers left: when they were left unprotected and promptly dislodged from their territories by Morocco that built a mammoth wall in the desert with millions of mines flanking it.

We also visited Morocco where he ran into the deep roots of Gnawa music. This genre has its roots in central Africa and with the Arab tribes that migrated to North of Africa. Gnawa has become a folkloric attraction for the tourists and there are even European examples of groups that have taken Gnawa to untold pop reaches. The true representatives of this medicinal tradition are called “Maalens”, they are highly respected in their shamanic role within the Moroccan society, especially at festivals such as the one in Essaouira, where “lila” or “derbeda” takes place: the *liturgy* of the *first sacrifice* and *Universal genesis*. Amongst the group of gnawa players there is the Master Maalens who guides the ceremony by playing a string instrument that guides the rest of the group. The Master is the one who leads the rhythm, touching on certain frequencies where certain participants may enter into

deep states of trance. As the participant enters the trance, there are certain specific Djinn (genius) that manifest through them and “come out” to dance. A Western word for Djinn could certainly be “complex” or “neurosis”. Among the Djinn that come out are a self-mutilator, a beggar, a low self-esteem creeper etc. Some participants come to the ceremony already disguised in a specific way knowing from past experience what Djinn is likely to possess them. The objective of the ritual is of course to exorcise the Djinn or, in other words to reintegrate and balance the energies in the body, the same energies that sustain all perceptible phenomena, the very source of all creative activity in the Universe.

Our project seeks to go into the depth of Gnawa and to restore it as what it was in its origin: a social medicine. The project entails creating a provisional architecture in a park or a public space where the healing ritual powers of Gnawa can be re activated. The focus group is the immigrant population (North African and other, since the procedure is Universal) and the European population as well. The concept is creating a scenario, a live performative theater where this kind of millenary exorcism can be tantalized in the present as a healing procedure. Also there will be a more specific focus, which is at the heart of the procedure, and perhaps its most propositional aspect: the idea of seeking to tease out the *Djinn of exile*. And by this to undo the condition by which an immigrant refugee *perceives themselves as illegal*, unworthy, disconnected from the land they left behind; and disconnected as well from the land where they now live. This *complex* is at the heart of a malady that is definitely not only in the body of the immigrant but in the society that hosts them. A 21st Century conducive line of sensitive thinking entails healing the wounds that are in the root of the commonality between the German word “Fremd” (foreign) and “friend”; or in the words “hostility” and “hospitality”. Seeking to exorcise the *Djinn of exile* or the “complex of feeling illegal or displaced” is the basic proposal; both to exorcise it from the mind of the immigrant and from the mind of the host. This is the locus where the future of the human race resides, according to this projection, in the coming tumult of the 21st Century and beyond. First and foremost there is a fellow human being that shares Planet Earth with his *Other*; no other considerations, shielded by bureaucracy and civilian laws should ever cover up this basic layout: the awakening of the planetary being.

Our project seeks to create poetic devices that refract the political realities of the moment, in order to invoke other states of consciousness that act, literally or metaphorically as potential healing opportunities for the collective psyche. Jean Rouch’s *Les Maitres Fous*, 1955, an early ethnographic film about the ritual of the *Haukas* in Nigeria, is a clear predecessor: it portrays a ritual where the subjects set themselves free from the oppressive machinery of British Colonialism with the use of drums conducive to trance states. One of Rouch’s last utterances in the voiceover of the film wishes for similar mechanisms in the Western world whereby the white man might also find such a miraculous way to free himself from his own demons.