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Music of Morocco

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MUSIC OF MOROCCO

The most important single element in Morocco's folk culture is its music. In a land where almost total illiteracy has been the rule, the production of written literature is practically negligible, but the Moroccans have a magnificent and highly evolved sense of rhythm which manifests itself in the twin arts of music and the dance. Because Islam does not look with favor upon any sort of dancing, however, the art of the dance, while being the natural mode of expression of the native population, has not been encouraged in Morocco since the arrival of the Arab conquerors. At the same time, the very illiteracy of the people through the centuries has abetted the development of music; the entire history and mythology of the people is clothed in song. Instrumentalists and singers have come into being in lieu of chroniclers and poets, and even during the most recent chapter in the country's evolution—the war for independence and the setting up of the present regime—each phase of the struggle has been celebrated in song.

The neolithic Berbers have always had their own music, a highly percussive art with complex juxtapositions of rhythms, limited scalar range (often no more than three adjacent tones), and a unique manner of vocalizing. Like other Africans, they developed a music of mass participation, which frequently aimed at the psychological effect of hypnosis. When the Arabs invaded the land, they brought with them music of a very different sort, addressed to the individual, music that existed only to embellish the word, with the property of inducing a state of philosophical speculativeness.

On the central plains and in the foothills of the north the people adopted elements of Arab music, while on the edges of the Sahara they borrowed from the Sudanese slaves they had imported, the musical result being hybrid in both cases. Only in the areas remaining generally inaccessible to non-Berbers—roughly speaking, the mountains themselves and the high plateaus between the ranges—was Berber music left intact, a purely autochthonous art.

European colonization spurred the growth of a nationwide, homogeneous, Maghribi-Arabic-speaking culture, thus encouraging the emergence of a "national" popular musical idiom among town

dwellers from the Algerian border to the Atlantic. Because the valleys and coastal plains contained all of the Maghribi-speaking population, it followed that any widely appreciated popular music that Morocco might develop would be based on the already hybridized idioms of these areas in which the Arab influence was greatest. There was an era when popular music was regionally diversified; several immediately recognizable styles existed. A few still do: the Haouziya, the Djebala, and the so-called Chleuh, exceptional as having the only popular repertory whose words are not in Maghribi. The present tendency, however, is toward an Egyptian-based esthetic. The more nearly a song can approximate, both in conception and performance, a creation of Om Kalthoum, Abd el Wahab, or Farid el Atrache, the better it is considered to be. It remains to be seen whether the practice will continue or whether the Moroccan voice will reassert itself.

The Andaluz repertory—a consciously preserved genre, the unvarying rules of its esthetic long since established—is the last living folk memory of the seven-century Moroccan occupation of Andalusia. It is extraordinary that medieval Iberian music, as it was heard and transformed by Arab musicians of the era, should have survived into the 20th century.

I made these recordings during the final five months of 1959, with the assistance of Christopher Wanklyn and Mohammed Larbi Djilali, using an Ampex 601 tape recorder. Inasmuch as the equipment required a 110-volt power source, complex arrangements were often necessary for transporting musicians from their remote villages to places where the electric power supply was compatible with the recording equipment. The cooperation of local Moroccan officials was essential—though not always attainable—in carrying out these arrangements. We made four six-week field trips in Morocco, covering the southwest, the northeast, the central south, and the cities, respectively. Coverage of the southeast was hindered by the Franco-Algerian War. The project was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Library of Congress, and the original tapes from which these discs were selected are in the Library's Archive of Folk Song.

Highlands—The Berbers L63—A

1. **Ahmeilou.** Played by Maallem Ahmed and ensemble, recorded in Tafraout.

The *ahouache* is a formalized sequence of music and dance peculiar to the Grand Atlas and regions to the south of the range (in the Middle Atlas the spectacle is called an *ahidous*). Often the opening number on the program is an *ahmeilou*, a circular dance for males accompanied only by percussion. Here the polymetric pattern characteristic of much Moroccan Berber music is apparent. Musically the *ahmeilou* is considered a concerto for solo drummer and percussive ensemble. In Tafraout the soloist used a *gannega*, an instrument like a very small side drum, played with sticks, and the other five drummers used the *bendir*, a large disc of goatskin with a reverberating wire stretched across its diameter and struck with the hand. Seven other participants in the dance provided the handclapping section. Thus the dance circle was composed of 13 men simultaneously dancing and making music. Constant acceleration of tempo within a given dance is usual; in this case it is noticeable but not marked.

2. **El Baz Ouichen** (song for male voice). Sung and played by Rais Ahmed ben Bakrim, in Tiznit.

This ballad is an example of what the French used to call "Chleuh" music. Chleuh is a synonym of Tachelhait, the language spoken in a large segment of southwestern Morocco. The musical idiom is one which has been evolved in the marketplace rather than the village; thus it could justifiably be classified as *chaabiya* (popular) and not as traditional folk music. There are numerous regional genres of *chaabiya* music in Morocco; the present tendency is for them to be replaced by the official (radio and television studio) *chaabiya* style, in strict imitation of Egyptian film music.

The song is an invention of the man who sings and accompanies it, and its subject is a clever jackal. The singer holds the *rabab* vertically by its neck, its single gut being hit with horizontal strokes by a very short bow. The use of a pentatonic scale relieved by passages of *Sprechstimme* is fairly common in the Tachelhait *chaabiya* repertory.

3. **Aqlal.** Sung and played by Moqaddem Mohamed ben Salem and ensemble, in Zagora.

One of the uses of music among the Moroccans is to assist in effacing the boundaries between individual and group consciousness; perhaps with this in mind the dancer-musicians often arrange to touch one another during performances. In the *aqlal*, a dance ceremony of the Draa valley in the Pre-Sahara, the device of constant contact among players evolves into an ingenious and intricate choreographed routine. Each man in the line-up carries a square hand drum (*deff*) shaped like a large sandwich, which, by means of a complex gymnastic pattern of alternate overlaying and interlacing of arms, is being struck by the men on either side of him, while he in turn is hitting their drums, one with each hand. Seventeen men performed here: one *tara* (large disc-shaped hand drum), two *taarij* (small conical ceramic hand drums), nine *dfouf* (singular *deff*), and five handclappers. They divided themselves into two groups and sang antiphonally. The absence of rhythmical figures is compensated for by the equivocal nature of the meter with its passages of simultaneous 5/8 and 4/8.

4. **Ouakha dial Kheir** (women's chorus). Sung and played by Chikh Ayyad ou Haddou and ensemble, in Tahala.

The Ait Ouaraine live in the mountains southeast of Fez and until recently were in great demand among the residents of that city as entertainers at weddings and other household festivals. Here only women performed, one of them using a *bendir* as accompaniment. Before setting up the recording session I had been told by the governmental *katib* that I would be hiring three people to perform. When three men and four women arrived, I began to look forward to difficulties at the moment of payment. The leader of the group, however, was scrupulous about honoring his agreement. "Three people," he said when I came to pay him, and I remembered that women are not people; these four has been brought along as decorative assistants and did not expect to be paid.

5. **Aili ya Mali** (mixed chorus). Sung and played by Chikh Ayyad ou Haddou and ensemble, in Tahala.

The music of the Ait Ouaraine puts unusual emphasis on vocalization, almost to the exclusion of melody; the line tends to be monotonal, punctuated by minute and complex *fioriture*. The voices of the men are pitched so high that it is impossible to distinguish them from the women's. Here the singers were three men and four women. The percussive accompaniment consisted of a large brass tea tray struck with two teaspoons (sometimes two tea glasses are used for striking the tray).

6. **Ahouache** (men's chorus). Sung and played by Maallem Ahmed and ensemble, in Tafraout.

The repeated strophe, divided and sung antiphonally, is characteristic of those sections of the *ahouache* involving group singing. This sequence was recorded later during the same *ahouache* as the *ahmeilou* (side A, band 1) and represents the same 13 performers plus another 15 who in the meantime had joined their ranks, some playing the *bendir* and some clapping their hands. The dance was strenuous, and although it was 10 o'clock in the evening, the temperature in the compound still stood at 108 degrees. By the time the men finished they were streaming with sweat.

Performers were brought from villages higher up in the Anti-Atlas. There were no professional musicians—merely farmers living in inaccessible valleys where everyone still knew how to make good music.

L63-B

1. **Aouada Trio**. Played by Rais Mahamad ben Mohammed and ensemble, in Tamarar.

During the Middle Ages groups of musicians and acrobats from southwestern Morocco often toured the British Isles, performing what was called Moorish dancing. Subsequently the term was corrupted into Morris dancing. Whether this Haha music bears any resemblance to what was used at that time is a matter for conjecture. What is certain is that the meter is 6/8 and the melodic line invariably is built on a five-tone scale. Passages such as this one for three small recorders (*aouada*) are in the nature of preludes to the dances which eventually follow them.

2. **Chorus and Dance**. Sung and played by Rais Mahamad ben Mohammed and ensemble, in Tamarar.

The personnel consists of 16 men, with three *aouadas* (small cane recorders with a piccolo-like register) and one drum (*bendir*). Rhythmical intricacy is supplied by the dancers' hands and bare feet. A charge repeatedly levelled at Berber music by urban Moroccans is that it is monotonous. There is no doubt that it is repetitive with an insistence not common to all folk music. But a distinction should be made between static repetition and organic (or deceptive) repetition, in which the reiterated rhythmical or melodic motif is merely a device for capturing the attention, the music's ultimate aim being that of imposing itself totally upon the consciousness of the listener. The effect is not monotonous but hypnotic, and it becomes clear that the apparent repetitions contain variety and direction.

3. **Reh dial Beni Bouhiya** (qsbah solo). Played by Chikh Hamed bel Hadj Hamadi ben Allal and ensemble, in Segangan.

The instrument here is called a *qsbah*. This name is used in the part of the Rif where the Beni Bouifrou live; variant terms are *aouada* and *chebaba*, but the *aouada* of the Rif is by no means the same as that of the Grand Atlas. It is a transverse flute made from a section of reed about 18 inches long. The *qsbah* is found in the extreme east of Morocco and in the western part of the Algerian Sahara, where four decades ago it was the favorite instrument of the camel drivers. Considering its low register, it has an extraordinary carrying power when played in silent surroundings.

Melodically, the body of the piece is constructed with four principal tones (G, B-flat, C-flat, D-flat) and one incidental tone (A-natural). In the coda, however, D-natural is added, and with telling effect.

4. **Albazaoua** (women's chorus). Sung and played by Maallem Ahmed Gacha and ensemble, in Ait Ourir.

The personnel of this group consisted of 25 female singers and 19 male percussionists. As usual the singers were divided into two sections to facilitate antiphony. The women were fractious throughout the session, constantly demanding to be placed in a

different position with regard to the percussionists and arguing vehemently among themselves between numbers about where they ought to be standing. There were 15 men playing *bendir*, three playing *tbel*, and one pounding the *naqous*, a resonating strip of steel. Payment for the recording was arranged two days beforehand with the *caid*, who stipulated that there would be 32 performers and that each one should receive a sugar loaf weighing four and a half pounds. Accordingly, I arrived in the village with 32 loaves of sugar, only to find that the personnel had been augmented and that there were 44 people to be paid. The *caid* solved the problem by taking all the sugar himself; presumably he distributed it later as he saw fit.

5. **Mouwal**. Sung by Chikha Fatoma bent Kaddour, in Ain Diab.

The *mouwal* is the section in a song where the singer is free to give voice to a series of wordless calls. Thus it is the part most eagerly awaited by listeners: it is where he expresses his personality and exhibits certain technical abilities that possibly would not show in the song itself. The three strophes here were recorded in a tent at an *amara* in Ain Diab on the Atlantic coast. The singer was a *chikha* of the Beni Mguild tribe, from the region of Ain Leuh in the Middle Atlas. *Chikhat* in Morocco are analogous to geishas in Japan: they serve tea, engage in repartee, and sing and dance for their customers, either in their own quarters or at the homes of those who hire them. There is great demand for them as entertainers at rural weddings.

6. **Idihan dial Bou Guemmaz** (men's chorus). Sung and played by Mohammed bel Hassan and ensemble, in Ait Mohammed.

The Ait Bou Guemmaz live 9,000 feet up in the Grand Atlas. Their music is the only Moroccan genre I have found in which each piece consists of three distinct "movements." The sections differ in their choice of thematic material, in meter, and in tempo, very much as in a European composition using sonata form. This section includes the finale of a first "movement," with a few strophes of the section immediately preceding it. At one point the male voices cease being used melodically and become, as it were, instruments of percussion. The wind instrument accompanying the song and dance is a small

metal flute about 10 inches long, which the Ait Bou Guemmaz call the *taaouadit*. The group was made up of professional musicians who for a part of the year become itinerant, going on tour from village to village in the manner of troubadours.

Lowlands—Influent Strains

L64—A

1. **Ounalou Biha Rajao** (male solo with women's chorus). Sung and played by El Ferqa dial Guedra (Bechara), in Goulimine.

This is locally known as *guedra* music, from the name of the large drum which constitutes the only accompaniment to its vocal line. The instrument used here measured 28 inches in diameter. It was placed on the floor, and the women sat around it, as at a table, beating on it. A young man acted as soloist, and it is he who sings the opening phrases. The scale is Mauretanian (E, F-sharp, G, B, C), the language Arabic, and the dance itself totally unlike any other found in Morocco. The dance is done in a kneeling position, and the torso, arms, and neck are the mobile parts. Until the end of the colonial regime in 1956 the girls traditionally performed unclothed to the waist; now government agents are present to forestall such procedure, and the dance is done with fully covered torso. Bechara and her girls have performed in Europe and the United States.

2. **Rhaitas and Tbola**. Played by Sadiq ben Mohammed Laghzaoui Morsan and ensemble, in Einzoren.

The *rhaita*, a form of oboe which can still be found in parts of rural Spain under the name of *gaita*, is the ideal outdoor instrument for a country like Morocco, where music is meant to be heard across great distances. It is used in wedding and circumcision processions, as an accompaniment to ecstatic dancing by the Aissaoua brotherhood, and during the nights of the month of Ramadan, as an adjunct to the voice of the muezzin in the minarets of the mosques. In the last instance the *rhaita* serves as a solo instrument, but for all other purposes it is played to the accompaniment of side drums beaten with sticks (*tbola*). Here there are two men playing *rhaitas* and two playing *tbola*.

3. **Mellaliya** (song for male voice). Sung and played by Embarek ben Mohammed, in Marrakech.

An example of the sort of hybridization which occurs among the Larobia—the inhabitants of the wider river valleys and the Atlantic coastal plain—this could be called a kind of *chaabiya*. The performer, whom I found singing seated on the ground in a Marrakech street, was a specialist in *qsidas* on religious subjects. The *guinbri*, which he uses to accompany himself, is a rustic lute with a sounding box generally made of wood on the bottom and skin on top. Sometimes in place of wood a large tortoise shell is used.

4. **Taqtoqa Jabaliya**. Sung and played by Maallem Mohammed Rhiata and ensemble, from the region of Taounate; recorded in Fez.

The Djebala are Arabic-speaking Berbers. The melodic line of their music is generally recognizable as being of Arab origin. Tradition, however, has stylized the performance in such a way as to give a Berber flavor to it, much as a Spanish melody is transformed by Mexican Indians.

In the winter of 1947-48 I used to go each Friday evening to Dar el Batha in Fez to listen to this particular group of musicians. By 1959, when they recorded this selection for me, they were all between 65 and 70 years old. When I inquired if any young men were being trained in the tradition, they replied in the negative. There were 10 performers, eight of whom played three forms of *guinbri*: the *hajouj*, the *frakh*, and the *souissane*. The remaining two men played the *tchnatchn* (finger cymbals) and the *darbouka* (ceramic hand drum). A *taqtoqa* consists of a song for chorus followed by an instrumental dance, the players improvising for a given number of measures over an organ point on each successive tone of the scale used by the song. Only the chorus is given here.

5. **Gnaoua Chorus**. Sung and played by an unidentified ensemble, in Essaouira.

The Gnaoua form one of the several powerful religious confraternities in Morocco, others being the Aissaoua, the Jilala, the Hamatcha, the Derqoua and the now-forbidden Haddaoua. The cult owes its name, its music, and many of its practices to Islam-

ized blacks who brought it to Morocco from West Africa. Although a Gnaoui is etymologically a man from Guinea, there is no evidence of the cult's having originated any further south than the region of the Niger River in southwestern Mali. Its adepts are considered to be experts in the treatment of scorpion stings and psychic disorders. Therapy for the latter can include ecstatic dancing and the ingestion of large quantities of raw flesh and fresh blood. The Gnaoua are also hired to perform purification ceremonies in new or renovated houses. For their dancing they use very large stick-beaten side drums and *qarqaba*, double hand cymbals of sheet iron like gigantic metal castanets. For their seated music the voices are accompanied only by the *gogo* (a Sudanese plectrum instrument akin to the *guinbri*), the *qarqaba*, and handclapping.

6. **Gnaoui Solo Song**. Sung and played by Si Mohammed Bel Hassan Soudani, in Marrakech.

This is Gnaoua seated music; the only accompaniment is the *gogo*, which looks rather like a shoebox made of hide, with a long handle attached to one end. The single gut runs the length of the neck and resonating chamber. Two further features distinguish it from other plectrum instruments found in Morocco. There is a vibrator in the form of a steel feather (*soursal*) which fits over the end of the neck and adds a loud rattle to each note as it is plucked; and the resonating chamber is so constructed as to give a sharp percussive sound when hit by the knuckles. The latter peculiarity caused no trouble, but the *soursal* made each recording sound defective. Although it was detachable, the performer, being used to its tintinnabulation, was loath to remove it. This is one of the two songs he recorded with the *soursal* taken off and lying on the floor beside him. The language is Bambara.

7. **Soula el Couida** (mixed chorus). Sung and played by Maallem Taieb ben Mbarek and chikhats, in Marrakech.

This genre is called *haouziya*, from the plain El Haouz, in which the city of Marrakech is situated. There are five men and three women; the instrumentation consisted of two *kamenjas* (violins played in the manner of the viola da gamba), two *tarijas* (small ceramic hand drums), and one *mqahs* (a pair of

leather-worker's shears with the points truncated). In addition, two of the women held very small hand drums and one a set of three tiny brass finger cymbals. The women served primarily as vocalists, while one man—designated by the *maalle*m as having the best singing voice because it was indistinguishable from a woman's—sang along with them. An idiosyncrasy of the performance is that no drum is struck twice in succession. The pattern is broken in such a way that its notes can be played in rotation by whatever number of drummers the ensemble happens to have.

L64-B

1. **Ya Souki Hakim** (secular sephardic song). Sung by Hazan Isaac Ouanounou and members of the Hevrat Gezekel, in Meknes.

This is a secular song on a religious subject, sung by members of the Hevrat Gezekel at the Synagogue Benamara in Meknes. As the *hazan*, or cantor, of the congregation explained, such songs have nothing to do with the religious services, being sung purely for the pleasure of singing them. Since no musical instruments of any kind are allowed in the synagogue, the singers often imitate the sound of bowed and plectrum instruments behind the voices carrying the melody. Lacking a melodic repertory of their own, the Jews take their music "a little bit from everywhere," as Hazan Isaac Ouanounou put it. "Everywhere" turns out to be Egyptian film music on occasion; most of the melodies, however, are from the Andaluz repertory of the Moroccan Moslems, as is this song. The text here is in Hebrew, although the men did not hesitate to sing selections in Maghribi Arabic. It is noteworthy that the *hazan* was only 20 years old; several others in the group were even younger.

2. **Qsida Midh**. Sung and played by Maalle

Andaluz, the so-called classical music of Morocco, is a vast corpus of musical settings of medieval Arabic poetry. The genre originated in southern Spain during the seven centuries of Moroccan occupation. Because the texts were in classical Arabic, the art was appreciated principally by the relatively

well-educated city dwellers. The general public invented its own Andaluz in the form of the *qsida*, simpler in form and with texts in a vulgar dialect called Melhoun which was intelligible to everyone. Whereas the Andaluz repertory is fixed, the repertory in Melhoun has received constant additions over the centuries since the expulsion of the Moroccans from Spain. Each year on the occasion of the Festival of the Throne new *qsidas* are composed in honor of the King.

The *qsida* whose first section is given here is an unusually clear example of hybridization. The instrumental prelude is Arab music; then the rhythmical accompaniment begins, with its Berber insistence on continual drum beats. The purely diatonic vocal line is neither Arab nor Berber, drawing its inspiration instead from medieval European folk music. The ensemble consisted of two *kamenjas*, two lutes (*ouds*), *guinbri*, *tenibar* (a banjo-like plectrum instrument), *tarija*, and *tar* (tambourine). The vocal soloist was the *tenibar* player; he announced that the *qsida* was in honor of the Prophet Mohammed, and that the lyrics were by Sidi ben Ali.

3. **El Hgaz el Mcharqi** (Andaluz chorus). Played by Abdelkrim Rais and ensemble, in Fez.

Andaluz musical literature consists of 11 *noubas*, nearly all of which were in existence long before the Moroccans were ejected from Spain at the end of the 15th century. Each *nouba* is supposed to correspond to a particular bodily humor and is composed in a mode deemed suitable to a specific time of day. The Moslem preoccupation with the number five is exemplified in the arbitrary division of each *nouba* into five *misanes*. The *misane* is subdivided into an indeterminate number of parts, each of which is a complete piece in itself. There is, however, a sense of continuity and progression in the pieces if they are performed in sequence. Since the duration of one *nouba* is 10 or 11 hours, nothing longer than a *misane* is ever played, and nowadays even that is considered too much. Only once have I heard an entire *misane* performed, 40 years ago in Fez.

The composition of the ensemble was four *kamenjas*, two *ouds*, *rebab*, *darbouka*, and *tar*. Arranging the recording was an extremely complicated procedure. There were long conversations by telephone with governmental advisers in Rabat, who on principle were opposed to allowing an American to record any of the Andaluz repertory. Eventually a

special adviser was sent from the capital. It was he who set the prices, the hours, the place, and the conditions for taping. He also specified that each time the name of the director of the group,

Abdelkrim Rais, was mentioned in print, the following words must be added: "Through the courtesy of the Services des Monuments Historiques, des Arts et du Folklore, Conservatoire de Fès."

Publications and Documentary Recordings Relating to the Music of Morocco

The following reference list of books, articles, and phonodiscs does not pretend to completeness, but it can serve to guide the interested listener to further materials on Moroccan music. Special thanks go to Lois Ann Anderson, University of Wisconsin, for supplying many of these references.

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