

“They thus become insensible”: Music, Attention, and Hypnosis in the Nineteenth-Century Performances of the Aissawa Brotherhood

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Combining instrumental and vocal music in a soundscape of screams and burning fires, the mystical self-mutilating practices of the Aissawa brotherhood, founded in fifteenth-century Morocco, shocked many Europeans travelling in colonial Maghreb or visiting the *Expositions universelles* in Paris in 1867 and 1889, justifying to their eyes both the inferiority of the colonized people and the process of colonization. Dr Hyppolite Bernheim described the Aissawa performances in 1891: “To the sounds of the Arabian drum, they prepare themselves by rhythmic movements of the head . . . They thus become insensible, swallow crushed glass, pierce their cheeks with sharp blades, walk on red-hot bars”. Founder of the *École de Nancy*, Dr. Bernheim explained that these performances were made possible by special techniques of attention: by “ecstatic and anesthetic” self-hypnosis. The hypothesis was controversial. Many considered the entire ritual to be a theatrical show, founded on simulation, in which music was a mere accompaniment. Others underlined music’s proverbial influence on the nervous system, or resorted to theories of heredity and race. Those who favored the hypothesis of a trance caused by music qualified the Aissawa as hallucinating “mystical degenerates” (Régis).

In all these accounts, however, the attention of the observers, as well as their absorption in a multisensory experience, is captured by the complex intertwining of auditory, haptic, visual and olfactory sensations. They are torn between the desire to perceive, to fully live and understand, and the crucial need to distract their attention from an unbearable, repulsive spectacle. Music thus reveals its profound imbrication with epistemological interrogations of agency, consciousness, and emotional contagion, challenging narrators’ attention and their confidence in rationality. Though recurrent in debates of the time, the Aissawa’s case has not yet been considered by either music historians or historians of hypnosis (Carroy, Gauld). Moreover, though studied by modern ethnographic scholarship (Rouget), such performances are much detailed, evacuating the question—crucial for nineteenth-century scientists and observers—of music’s physiological effects and of theories of auditory focus.

Focusing on the second half of the French nineteenth century, I will examine a range of new archival findings—medical and scientific writings, general and specialized press, personal narratives—in order to provide a renewed historiographical framework for understanding the importance of musical attention in colonial and medical ideologies. Reconstructing the various modes of attending and describing the Aissawa performances, and focusing more precisely on the place given to hypnosis and other theories of attention in the descriptions of the time, I argue that the Aissawa’s case not only sheds light on nineteenth-century debates concerning music’s hypnotic power, but stages, through a spectacular sonic environment of altered states, the disruption of long-held beliefs in rationality among narrators themselves.