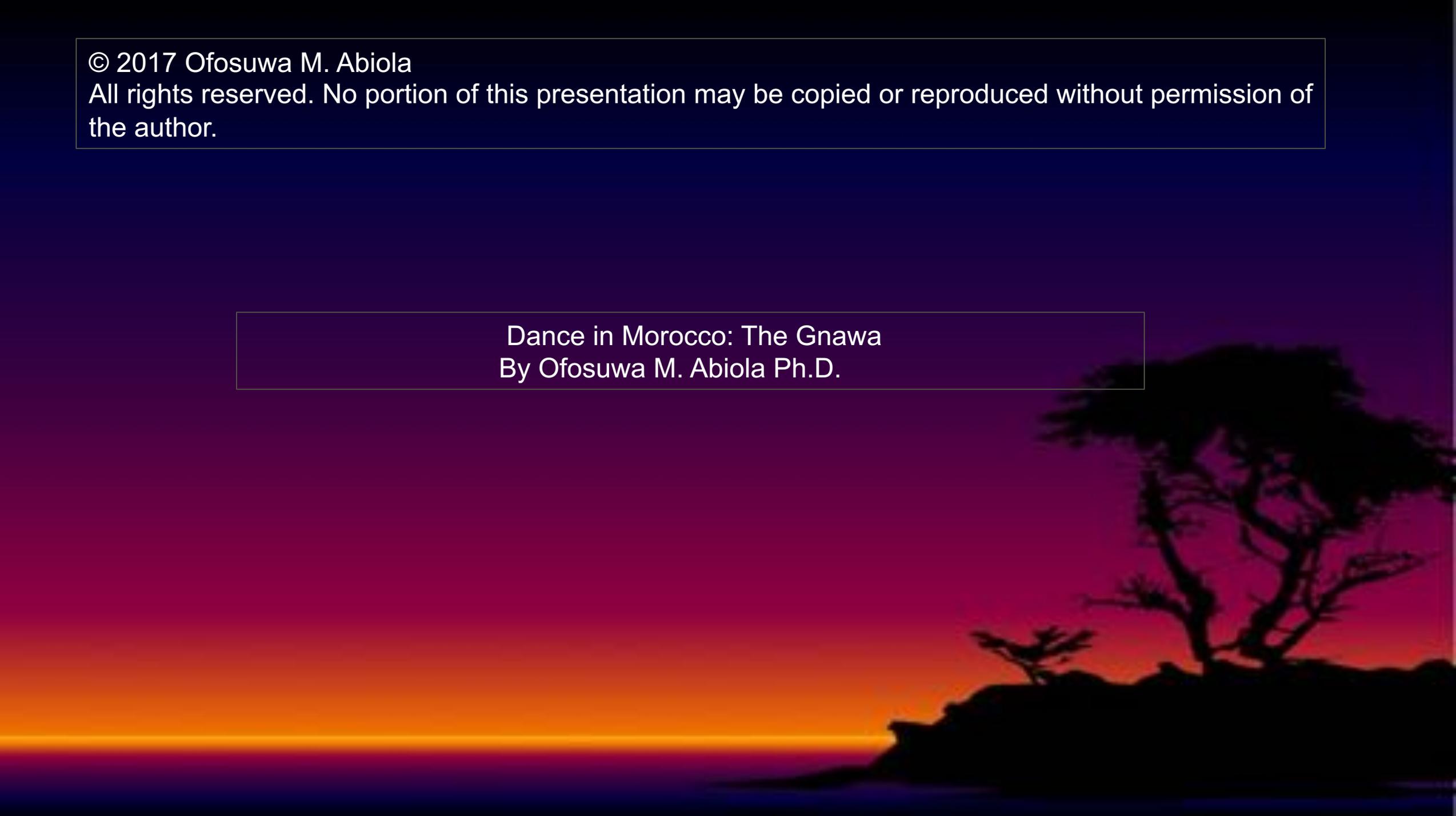


© 2017 Ofosuwa M. Abiola

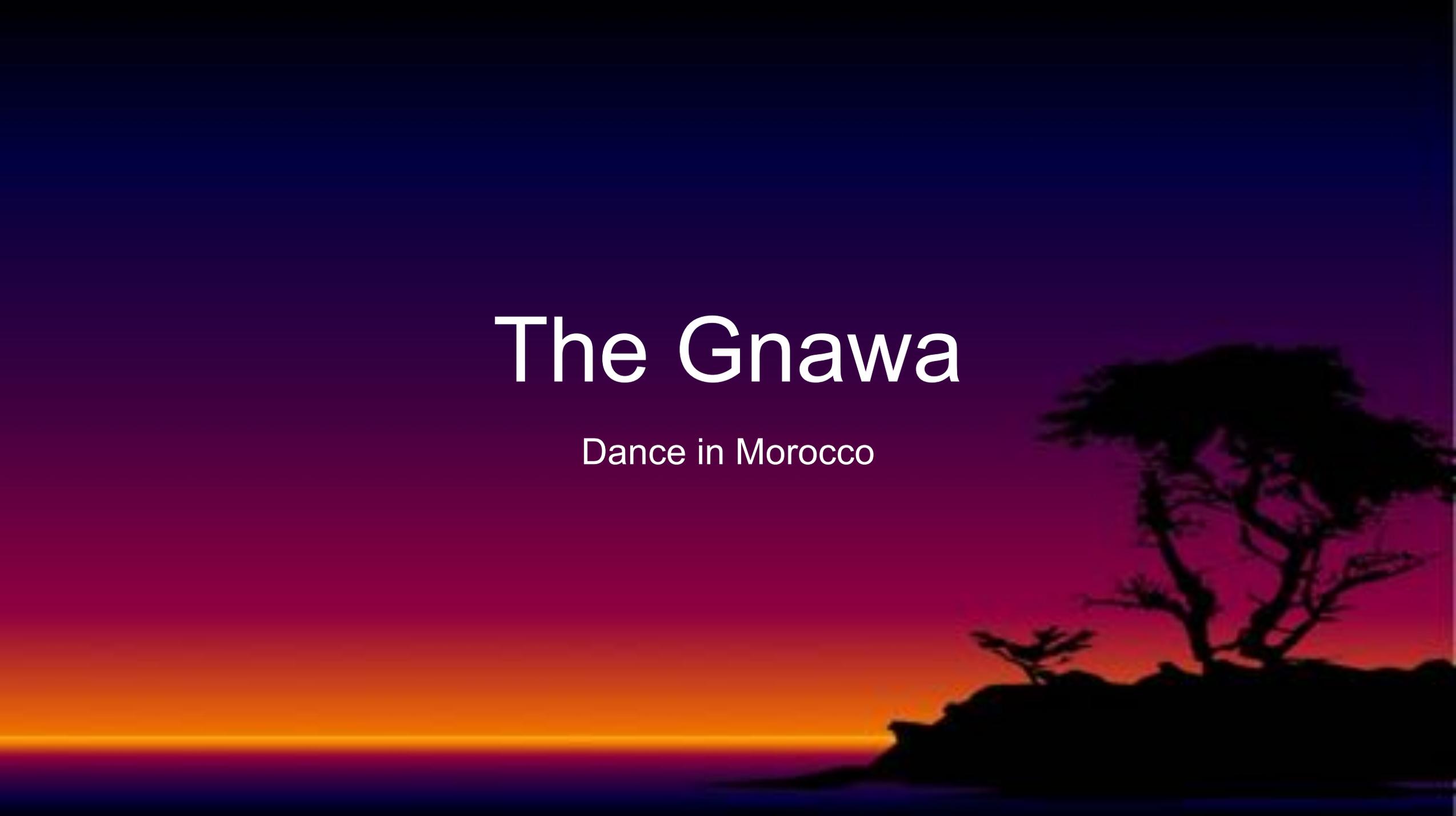
All rights reserved. No portion of this presentation may be copied or reproduced without permission of the author.

Dance in Morocco: The Gnawa  
By Ofosuwa M. Abiola Ph.D.



# The Gnawa

Dance in Morocco



# Who are the Gnawa?



- Gnawa is the name for an ethnic group in Morocco, Northwest, Africa.
- They are originally from the Senegambia region – Mali, Senegal & the Gambia – west Africa.
- In order to understand their dance and culture, we must first discuss the history of how they arrived in Morocco.

# The Spread of Islam

- After Islam emerged in the Middle East in the 600s CE, Muslims invaded north Africa and spread all the way west to Morocco.
- They imposed Islam as the state religions of all the lands they conquered in north Africa – Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia.
- The Arabs attempted to spread south to the Senegambia region to gain control of the large deposits of gold there.



## The Maghreb

The Western branch of the Muslim invasion in North Africa is called the Maghreb

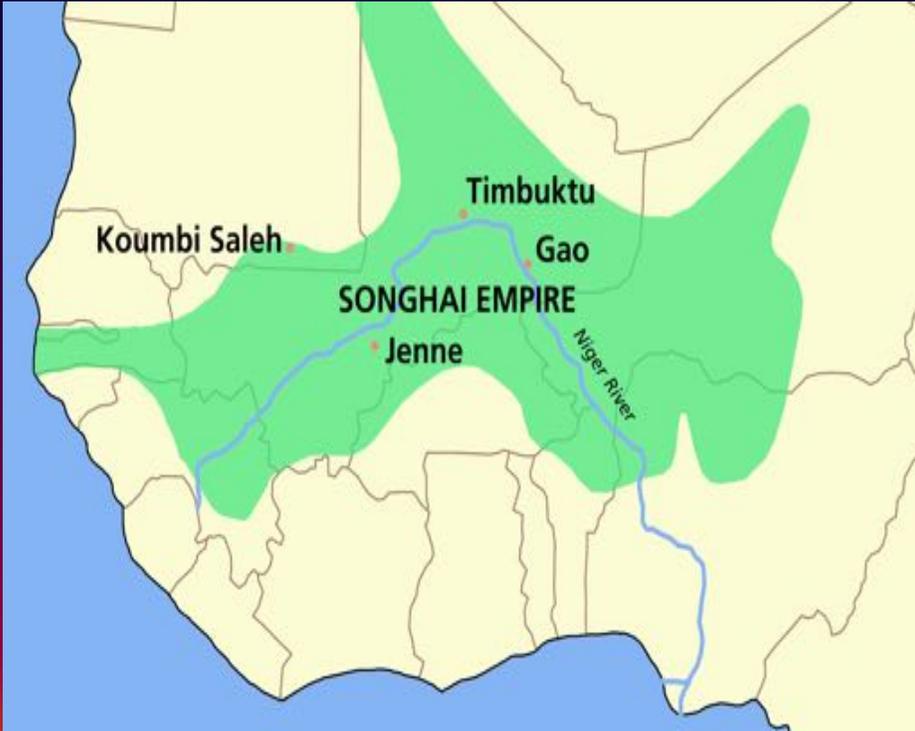


# Mighty Empires Weaken



- However, the empires and kingdoms in the Senegambian region were too strong and the Muslims could not overpower them.
- Such empires as Ghana, Tekrur, Mali, Songhai, Gao and others, were ruled by formidable kings with powerful armies.
- Over time, due to a variety of internal and external factors, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century (1500s CE), these empires began to weaken.

# Al-Mansur Conquers Songhai



- Songhai emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (1400s) after the fall of Mali.
- In 1590, there was civil strife in Songhai, which was the largest and most powerful of the Sub-Saharan empires at the time.
- The Moroccan Sultan, Amhad al-Mansur took advantage of it.
- He invaded Songhai at a time of weakness and was victorious in 1591, but was only able to hold on to control of it for a couple of decades.

# The Bukhari

- In the meantime, many Sub-Saharan prisoners of war were transported to Morocco and enslaved.
- Many enslaved Sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco during al-Mansur's rule, were placed in the military and became one of al-Mansur's personal guards.
- Soon, these personal guards became the Moroccan military.
- They are known as the Black Guard or the Bukhari.



The Black Guard, Morocco,  
1946



Black Guard,  
1880



Modern Day  
Black Guard

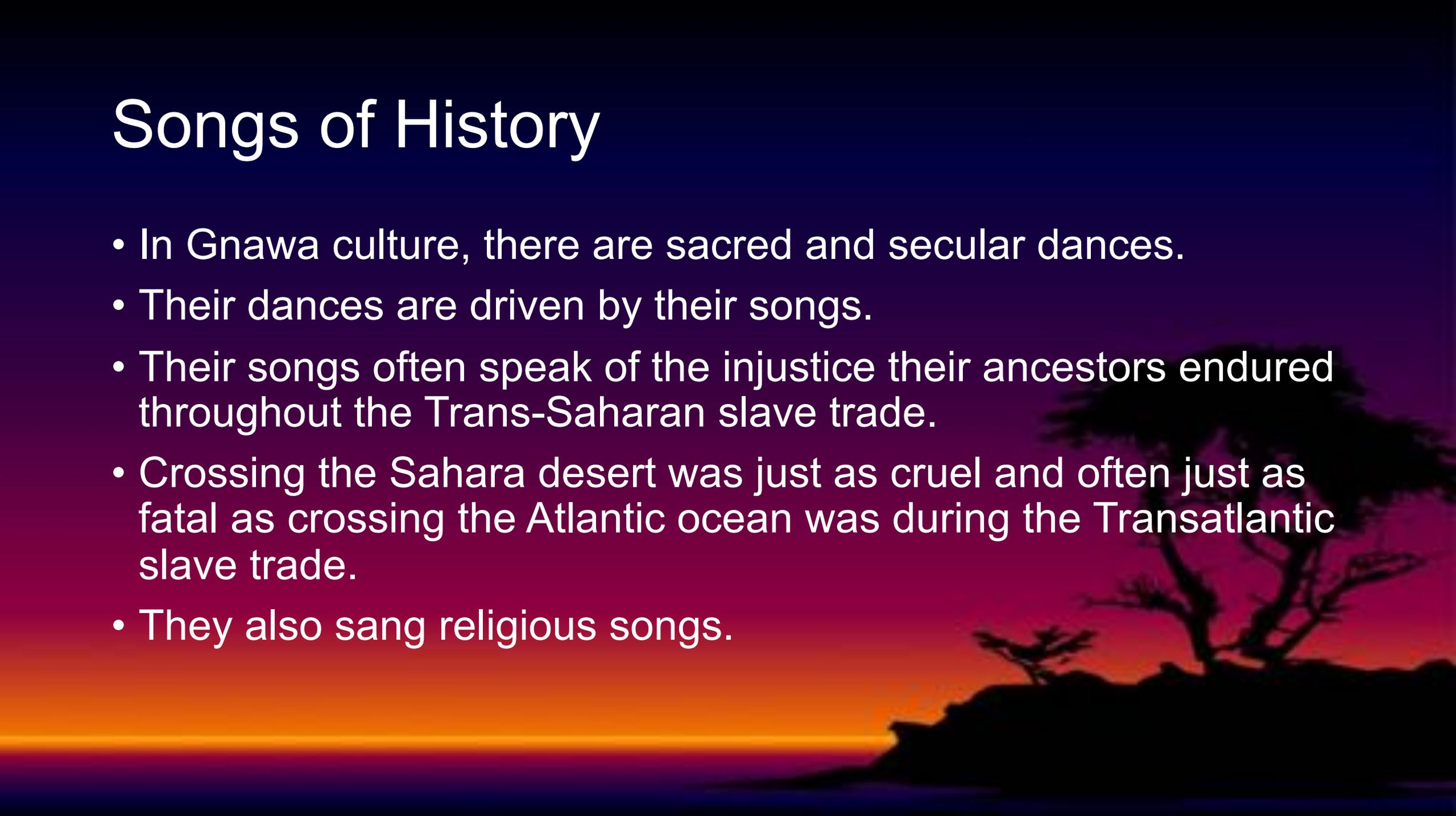


# The Gnawa Ethnic Group

- The military was not the only place in Moroccan society where Sub-Saharan Africans were put to work.
- As a result of large numbers of Senegambians in Morocco, a subculture formed.
- The progenitors of this subculture were/are called Gnawa.
- The Gnawa is composed of the Fulani, Mandinka, Bambara, and Soninke ethnic groups.

# Songs of History

- In Gnawa culture, there are sacred and secular dances.
- Their dances are driven by their songs.
- Their songs often speak of the injustice their ancestors endured throughout the Trans-Saharan slave trade.
- Crossing the Sahara desert was just as cruel and often just as fatal as crossing the Atlantic ocean was during the Transatlantic slave trade.
- They also sang religious songs.





A Gnawa singer in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
(1907-8)

Notice how the clothing evolves in pictures closer  
to modern day.



# The Other Diaspora

- Like people of African descent in America and the Caribbean, the Gnawa feel they are part of the African Diaspora.
- Although they are from the same continent, Africa, they believe since they were transported against their wills via the Trans-Saharan slave trade, and dispersed to another part of Africa, that they form an African Diaspora.



# Africanized Islam



- Islam was imposed on the Gnawa, but they practice a form of Islam that allows for African rituals.
- This is sometimes referred to as Africanized Islam.
- The sect of Islam that is most receptive to African indigenous rituals is called the Sufi sect or Sufism.
- Sufism is regarded a form of Islam that recognizes and practices mysticism as part of its normal practices.

# Gnawa Dance

- Gnawa traditional dance and music are part of their culture and was brought into the practice of Sufism.
- However, the same movement vocabulary and phrases are witnessed in Gnawa secular dance as well.
- With Gnawa traditional music, although the rhythms and tunes may change, the use of traditional instruments and attire are constant in sacred and secular ceremonies and events.

# Krakebs



Krakebs are iron  
castanets

## Guembri



Guembris are 3 string guitar-like instruments with a bass sound. The musical phrases played in Gnawa music are similar to those in African American Jazz music



MOROCCO EXPLORERS  
JOURNEYS OF DISCOVERY



[www.morocco-explorers.com](http://www.morocco-explorers.com)

# Tbel

A Tbel is a Gnawa drum



The Gnawa perform a sacred dance done with only tbels and krakebs for instruments



# Guembri & Other Instruments

- Pictured are a guembri, krakebs, and tbels.
- Notice that the straps to the tbels are decorated with cowrie shells.





# Gnawa Attire

- Gnawa traditional dress is very distinct from Arab or Berber Moroccan dress.
- We already discussed that the Arabs invaded North Africa, but the Berbers are indigenous to the area.
- Gnawa traditional dress can be identified by the long sashes with sewn on cowrie shells that they place over their garments and sometimes surround their fezes with.
- A fez is a round tall hat that certain sects of Muslims wear.

## Gnawa Attire



Although white is worn often, it is not the only color Gnawas wear



# Cowrie Shells

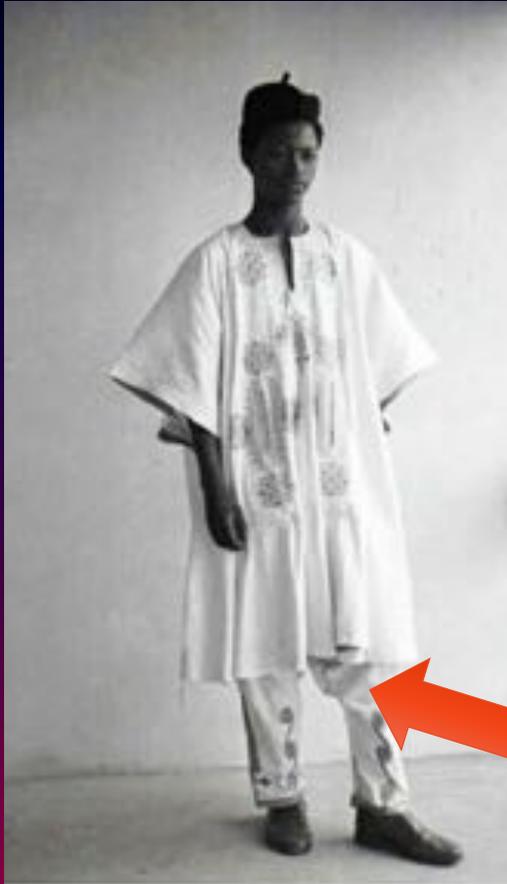


- The cowrie shells reveal the origin of the Gnawa.
- Not only are cowrie shells not indigenous to Morocco, but they were brought by Senegambians during the Trans-Saharan slave trade.
- Cowrie shells are abundant in west Africa and in diverse areas in central and east Africa.
- They were once used as a form of currency in various places in Sub-Saharan Africa.

# Sokoto Pants

- Gnawas also wore a type of traditional pants that originated in west Africa under their Islamic robes.
- The west African pants are called different things in different places in west Africa, but the most popular name is sokoto pants or they are sometimes called drummer pants.
- These were most likely brought to Morocco by Fulanis since the Fulas – as they are also called – are known in west Africa for their long exaggerated sokotos.

# Sokoto Pants



Notice that part of the crotch hangs under the tunic top

