Urban displacement and transnational migration scatter communities over wider territories, forcing them to adapt their cultural tools to new environments. As planetary gentrification and climate catastrophe produce an increase in displacement everywhere, it is crucial to understand what are the social and political impacts of these spatial transformations. SDD analyzed ethnographically the displacement and diaspora of the Moroccan Gnawa, a religious brotherhood that practices rituals of...
spirit possession through music, performance, and myth. The Gnawa network emerged as a practice of recreating community bonds after the displacement of Western African people brought to Morocco in slavery in the XVI century. Nowadays, while Gnawa music is declared immaterial heritage by the UNESCO, many members of the brotherhood are forced to leave the gentrified old city centers and move to new peripheral neighborhoods; other members migrate to Europe, where they struggle to be recognized as artists or ritual healers. SDD shows how some specific spatial arrangements are crucial for communities such as the Gnawa, and how cultural transformations and the disruption that these communities undergo when they are displaced or migrate can spill over to religion and politics.

Vernacular practices tied to specific spaces or spatial arrangements such as the Gnawa, thus, should be taken into account by contemporary urban planning, to avoid an increase of conflicts and of anti-social behavior and ideologies. The awareness of these structural changes should encourage policymakers to prevent displacement, and to defend the 'right to stay put' for vulnerable sectors of society.

Lavoro eseguito dall’inizio del progetto fino alla fine del periodo coperto dalla relazione e principali risultati finora ottenuti

SDD planned to focus on the cities of Casablanca, Rome, and Barcelona, but was extended with brief research periods with Gnawa in other cities: Tangiers, Larache, Rabat, Ksar Kbir, Essaouira, Marseille, Brussels, Barcelona, New York. The two years of outgoing phase at Harvard University Department of Anthropology allowed training in anthropology, Classical Arabic, Ethics, and access to libraries and media collections unavailable in Europe. The mentoring of Professor Herzfeld, leading scholar on the cultural impact of urban transformations and evictions provided a theoretical basis to analyze the dynamic relationship between place attachment of the Moroccan Gnawa and the institutional ideologies of urban planning. The second year concluded with the organization of a three-day conference at Harvard’s Barker’s Center on research in urban conflicts, inviting activists and experts on displacement from three continents. The conference led to a scholarly article followed by a special issue published in Spring 2021.

The participation to two ritual seasons in Casablanca allowed the acquaintance of approximately 100 members of the brotherhood, complemented with frequent travels to meet Gnawa masters in other cities, providing the first general overview of the brotherhood, inside and outside Morocco. The Casablanca part of the research led to the publication of an article on displacement in Casablanca, and the drafting of an article on the Gnawa which will bear the name of the project. SDD contributed to the creation of a transnational study group on the Gnawa diaspora: among its outcomes, there is a 2018 seminar in France, a 2021 panel for the International Conference on Traditional Music (ICTM) in Tangiers (later conducted online), and the recording of a CD and podcast of Gnawa music in Italy, scheduled for publication at the end of 2021.

Despite the constraints of sheltering-in-place, during the last year the mentoring of Professor Loretta Lees, one of the most important researchers on gentrification worldwide, allowed to frame the first results of the research in a wider understanding of how 'planetary gentrification' modifies culture and society everywhere. Articles and public interventions on displacement and the 'right to stay put' were presented in academic and non-academic milieus, in France, Portugal, Italy, Spain, the US, and virtually in Morocco, through a public presentation viewed by 5,000 users, mostly belonging to the
Gnawa brotherhood (thus allowing return of the research to the community). A video produced within research for SDD about a massive eviction in Casablanca was viewed 167,000 times on Youtube and had a remarkable impact in Moroccan media; it was also shared in the homepage of an important urban studies journal (IJURR).

Progressi oltre lo stato dell’arte e potenziale impatto previsto (incluso l’impatto socioeconomico e le implicazioni sociali più ampie del progetto fino ad ora)

For anthropology, SDD represents an advancement in understanding the urban dimension of spirit possession and the importance of spatial arrangements for vernacular religious practice. For researchers on Morocco, SDD provided the first comprehensive inquiry on the Gnawa brotherhood inside and outside Morocco (previous researchers always focused on a single group). For gentrification studies, SDD opens a field of analysis on the cultural consequences of displacement that moves beyond previous understandings of ‘phenomenological gentrification’, towards an approach focused on the micro-dynamics of relation between space and society. For research on diaspora and migration across the EU border, SDD showed the strict interaction of cultural practices among Moroccan communities across the two shores of the Mediterranean, as a single post-secular and post-colonial cultural environment. For the methodology of research on urban displacement, the Harvard seminar and its outcomes provided a discussion on the intersection of urban activism and scholarship that recognizes intimacy with community and direct involvement in struggles against displacement also as an epistemological tool. The implications of this turn can also serve as guidelines for policy makers concerned by the social consequences of relocations.

In the present time of overlapping crisis, we need to raise attention toward the social impact of policies that impose specific relations with space - from forced displacement to sheltering in place. A more comprehensive understanding of the role of space in cultural dynamics is crucial, and it should be supported with advocacy on a complete stop to forced evictions and displacement, as requested by the former UN special rapporteur on adequate housing, then briefly applied through the Covid-19 moratorium. New paths for urban policies should be created, that consider development-induced displacement as a source of conflict and internal tension in communities. Researchers should contribute to this global aim, by studying carefully the social consequences of forced mobility, with inter-disciplinary approaches such as those that SDD explored.
Poster of Urban Activism seminar held in Harvard in 2019

Poster of conference held by transnational network of researchers on Gnawa in diaspora
Poster of online conference in Italian on gentrification in Rome, Barcelona, Casablanca
Seminar on gentrification in a cycle organized by housing activists in Barcelona

Poster of the closing seminar of the outgoing phase at the partner institution (Harvard University)
Screenshot of online seminar for Moroccan online TV of the Gnawa network

Data della firma CE 17 Marzo 2017
Ultimo aggiornamento: 5 Novembre 2021

Permalink: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/752547/reporting/it

European Union, 2023