

# Listening to Changing Narratives and Musical Diversity in Moroccan Gnawa Music

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From November of 2010 to August of 2011, I had the opportunity to conduct my dissertation field research in Fez, Morocco. This was my fourth visit to the country and my fifth to North Africa. While there, I completed language study in the Moroccan dialect of Arabic and intensive ethnographic research with musicians from across the spectrum of *musiqa ruhiyya*, loosely translated as spiritual music. I focused on a population of professional musicians and ritual leaders called the Gnawa, though I also spent considerable time working closely with Sufi musicians and other performers. In each case, I questioned how these professional musicians could constantly negotiate the space between “popular” and “religious,” always adapting to the competing economic and spiritual demands of their public positions. These strategies highlight how the concepts of sacred and secular, popular, even entertainment or ritual, escape simple categorization. Furthermore, each of these members



of Fez’s *musiqa ruhiyya* community is firmly a part of the incessant process of defining and redefining how Islam is, and should be, practiced in everyday life. Through the presentation of specific religious practices on stage and the dissemination of these performed ideologies through



the recording industry and festival circuits, they use their artistry, creativity, spirituality, leadership, and practicality to create and support an idea of what a publicly manifested Islam looks like.

My project centered on the Gnawa, once a population of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans forcibly brought to Morocco through the trans-Saharan slave trade. The ritual activity that comprises the focal point of Gnawa practice involves a spirit possession ceremony, an event led by a group of ritual musicians. After years of marginalization as social, economic, and religious outcasts, their music gained the attention of the parade of American and European artists who came to Morocco (especially Tangier) after World War II and during the civil rights movement in search of ‘oriental’ or African inspiration (the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Bryon Gysin, Randy Weston, Ornette Coleman, etc.). Their music, often described in terms of its bluesy grooves, is now featured across the country in major music festivals and on innumerable world music releases.

The research that I prepared while in Fez questions the ways in which the Gnawa perform constructed narratives of their own history while asking where ritual leaders find space for personal creativity. Representations of these different narratives (briefly “We are African” and “We are Sufi”), which are embedded into the music, depend on performative decisions, on musical style. The questions that performers must ask and answer each time they proceed through a ceremony or public performance reify one or another of these imagined ontologies, foregrounding, for example, African instead of Arab elements of the tradition for international audiences or favoring songs that emphasize a timeless African communal history over those that result from more recent individual creativity.

Additionally, while in Fez I accepted an invitation to perform on the violin with a malhun ensemble, a genre of music that straddles this divide between the pious and entertainment, in the Fez Festival of Sacred Music. I contributed coverage and photography on the entire festival for the View From Fez, a prominent English language news blog, as well as Afropop Worldwide. Currently, I am writing my dissertation, teaching courses in American Popular Music, and preparing a study abroad course to Spain and Morocco that will highlight the role of the arts in healing traditions in Europe and the Islamic world, both historically and today.

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