

STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE

Christopher Witulski, Morocco, Ethnomusicology/Anthropology

Pious Performances: *Musiqā Ruhiyya* and Islamic Popular Music in Fez, Morocco

Morocco's music percolates from the wealth of sacred and secular traditions extant throughout the region. Its urban, mediated forms contain remnants of meaning derived from diverse spiritual practices, bringing marginalized readings of the Islamic faith into popular culture. The music industry, as a public venue for the presentation of spirituality and both ritual and entertainment, complicates simple distinctions between the sacred and the secular. As artists and listeners congregate around aural poles in debates about musical aesthetics, and therefore how Islam manifests and "sounds," they redefine the goals, meanings, and uses of popular music. Through ethnographic and historical research centered in the city of Fez, I propose to examine the web of musical, artistic, and theological intersections that pervade the loosely defined constellation of mass-marketed and widely performed forms of *musiqā ruhiyya* ("spiritual music"). I will ask how, through artistic production and reception, performing and listening, musicians and audiences simultaneously enact and negotiate their faith daily.

With a Critical Language Enhancement Award and a Fulbright research grant, I propose to conduct twelve months of intensive ethnomusicological field research in Fez, Morocco that will investigate the processes by which artists and listeners utilize *musiqā ruhiyya* as venue for public spiritual practice and debate. This fieldwork will enable me to complete the first ethnographic dissertation that highlights the interactions between Moroccan musicians, competing religious ideologies, and public piety. Working with artists, record producers, religious leaders, journalists, and listeners, I will examine the mechanisms by which artists promote their perspectives on religion through the recording and festival industries, making them a nexus where entertainment, and the meaning of Islam itself, is redefined daily.

Moroccan musicians have been creating a consciously "popular" music since the arrival of European and American artists of the 1940s and 50s and the "hippie orientalism" of the 1960s. Groups like Nass al-Ghiwane and Jil Jilalla followed rock's experimentation, consuming the haze of Western popular culture. Yet they drew upon local sources: joining heavy rhythms of rock were the chants of Sufi brotherhoods and instruments from spirit possession ceremonies. Both groups reinvigorated the previous generation's sung poetry, both through the semi-classical *malhun* and the celebration of the country's myriad strains of Sufism. The ensuing popularity of studio and live recordings from fusion groups and Sufi rituals brought once clandestine sounds to commercial audiences. Embedded into these aural products are both the musical and theological practices of each brotherhood, with the most popular being the *'aïssawa*, *hamadsha*, and *gnawa*. The artists identified with *musiqā ruhiyya*, including *malhun*, each tack their own route through the complex of poetry, piety, and performance in Fez, carving their niche against and alongside each other. So-called popular music creates new space for these performers, who incorporate sounds that are sacred and secular, mainstream and marginalized, Arab and African; they present the complexity that is Islamic practice, history, and faith in Morocco.

My research period will begin with intensive Arabic coursework at the Arabic Language Institute in Fez from September–December. This will include advanced Moroccan Arabic, Islamic Texts, and Media Arabic, building my extensive previous study in both Modern Standard Arabic and the Moroccan dialect. The dialect allows me to engage musicians and listeners while, by studying religious texts, I will be able to better analyze the connotations of poetry and lyrics. Media Arabic gives me access into archival resources, journalism, and scholarship.

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I will spend the spring of 2012 in Fez, a city that, as the “spiritual cradle” of Morocco, is home to constant musical, artistic, and religious activity. I will consult scholars and officials, archives and libraries described below; recording studios including the internationally distributed Fassiphone Records; the directors and archives of the Fez Festival of Sacred Music and the Festival of Sufi Culture; radio stations; and cultural organizations including Khamis Turath and l'Ésprit de Fès. I will also begin the ethnographic work with musicians and listeners in the city.

My methodology centers on five activities: participant-observation, interviews, video and audio documentation, musical transcription, and archival research. While in Fez, I will participate in many musical contexts ranging from lessons and rehearsals to concert and festival performances. My proficiency on violin and Moroccan string instruments lends credence to my position as both a fellow musician and a researcher in the field. My training in music theory gives me the necessary set of skills and tools for learning and analyzing musical activity.

The leaders of four prominent ensembles from different genres generously extended invitations for me to regularly perform with them in both public festivals and private events upon my return to Fez: Mohammed es-Sousi (*malhun*), ‘Adil al-Gushi (*aissawa*), ‘Abd ar-Rahim al-‘Amrani (*hamadsha*), and ‘Abd ar-Rahim ‘Abd ar-Rzaq (*gnawa*). Throughout the summer I will maintain an active schedule, interviewing and performing alongside these leaders and their ensembles. I will travel with them during the summer festival season, investigating the ways in which they adapt their performances for new audiences each successive weekend.

Interviews will involve both multi-session intensive work and shorter interviews with musicians, festival and government officials, and audiences from throughout the social spectrum. I will ask for all participants’ interpretations of specific songs and poems, artists’ reflections on the aesthetic incorporation of specific Sufi traditions, audiences’ perspectives on selecting and listening to *musiqā ruhiyya* in its diverse forms, and, more generally, how songs, artists or genres speak to Islamic society. I will use video and audio recordings to engage individuals in critical reflection of specific elements of musical performance, extending my research beyond vague responses. My own musical transcriptions will serve as tools, illuminating detailed aural connections between popular music and traditional musical (and ritual) practices. The transcriptions will both inform my interview questions and provide a concrete space for musicians and listeners to guide my readings of the music itself.

In the fall, I will focus on compiling historical data on the rise of and responses to *musiqā ruhiyya* genres since the 1940s through archival research. I will identify significant historical debates regarding the music as they appear in print. Dar Mahrez and The Centre Ibn Rochd des Etudes et Communication have generously offered their affiliations. I will also visit the Conservatoire de Musique, Conservatoire National de Musique et Danse, Ecole de Musique Andalouse, Dar Gnawa, and the American Legation Institute, examining each’s collection of images, journalism, and commentary on relevant aspects of Morocco’s musical traditions.

By recognizing the intersection of *musiqā ruhiyya*, self-representation, and public piety in Fez, this dissertation will bring to light the methods by which individual artistic voices contest and support public narratives. It will also assess the importance of creative artistic activities in Morocco, demonstrating the complexity of social life and presenting ways in which groups and individuals navigate and understand their experiences, aesthetic decisions, and spiritual lives.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Christopher Witulski, Morocco, Ethnomusicology/Anthropology

Pious Performances: *Musiqā Ruhiyya* and Islamic Popular Music in Fez, Morocco

Since first arriving in Marrakech in 2004, on an excursion from a semester abroad in Cairo, Egypt, I have been taken with the breadth of ways Moroccans practice their faith. As a professional classical and popular musician, I took note of the importance of music as it appeared throughout the varied rituals that coalesce into what Dale Eickelman described as “Moroccan Islam.” Since 2004, I have spent one and 3/4 years in North and West Africa (five in Egypt, fifteen in Morocco over four research and language study trips, and one in Ghana, Mali, and Senegal). This time included masters thesis and pre-dissertation fieldwork and intensive language coursework at the American University in Cairo and the Arabic Language Institute in Fez (ALIF), funded by the University of Florida’s Alumni Grant Fellowship and the Center for African Studies, a Department of Education Title VI Center.

Throughout my PhD work in ethnomusicology, I have been researching and teaching undergraduate courses on topics pertaining to popular music in America, Africa, and the Middle East at the University of Florida. I am currently preparing to teach a study abroad course entitled “The Arts and Healing in Europe and Morocco” in Cordoba, Spain and Fez, Morocco. I am also creating an online undergraduate course on American popular music for the spring of 2012. As a musician, I perform regularly with professional orchestras throughout Florida and Georgia, playing violin and viola. I have also been a part of smaller groups playing music ranging from funk and rock to bluegrass and Afropop. In 2011, I renewed my interest in Arabic classical music, something I studied as a side project during my time in Cairo in 2004, by creating a student-run Arabic music ensemble at the University of Florida, locating funding for instruments and guest artists (\$6,500), and organizing a successful concert. My experience as versatile musician proved essential in the past, easing my entrance into social and professional circles in Morocco, and I believe that my training in both ethnomusicology and music theory gives me a set of invaluable tools in learning and analyzing musical activity and content.

From November 2010 to August 2011, I completed five months of language study in Moroccan Arabic at ALIF in Fez and carried out four months of pre-dissertation research on *musiqā ruhiyya*. I performed with a *malhun* ensemble at the Festival of Sacred Music in July 2011 and was invited to continue with the group when I return. I am currently writing articles based on this research that will interrogate, first, the relationships between the Gnawa’s musical content and extra-musical sacred implications in the possession ceremony and, second, the implications in performance practice of historical narratives of Gnawa history and ontology. Recently, I was invited to contribute an entry on Middle Eastern music to an upcoming encyclopedia on music in American culture.

Following the proposed research, I will complete my dissertation for the School of Music at the University of Florida. I intend to use resulting document as the basis for publishing an ethnography of Fez’s commercially mediated *musiqā ruhiyya*, providing a useful case study for musicology, anthropology, and Middle Eastern and African area studies. It will also inform a future study on the wider social history of popular music in Morocco. My dissertation committee at UF has given me constant and enthusiastic support, as have scholars and institutions in Morocco. I look forward to the opportunity to return to the country and explore the diversity of acknowledged and unacknowledged ways in which people practice and reference their religious and social values through the arts and popular culture.