

Performing Arts in Folk Traditions & Popular Culture in the Arab World: An Annotated Syllabus

Course Description:

This syllabus draws on ideas discussed in our course, specifically: authenticity, cultural hierarchies and their relationship to terminology (terms like 'folk,' 'popular,' 'high-brow,' etc.), music and language, nationalism, and nostalgia. It emphasizes perspectives and areas that most directly concern my own interests or work, including comparative methods and an awareness of how genres may be reclassified over time (especially the relationship between folk arts and popular culture, in other words, how art functions before and after mass distribution). The course will address the question of how the multiplicity of Arab folk traditions contribute to societies and cultures in North Africa and the Middle East.

This course is intended for an upper-division undergraduate level, and is based on a fourteen-week semester. The course is interdisciplinary, and could be adapted to meet objectives of a variety of departments, such as: Anthropology, Comparative Literature, Music (ethnomusicology), and Middle Eastern Studies. In addition, students of Arabic could be encouraged and challenged to investigate primary sources in the original Arabic, depending on their language level, in or out of class. Indeed, the course could be conducted in Arabic in a university with strong Arabic Studies, such as The University of Texas at Austin. However, no knowledge of Arabic will be assumed, in the interest of a syllabus that could be applicable to the widest range of university contexts.

I have chosen to begin directly with case studies. For an approach more located in a particular discipline, I could begin with a week on theory or history of this course material in the field. For example, in an anthropology department, I could include readings on the history of folklore, with examples from the United States and around the world. The following is an encyclopedia of folk music artists, enthusiasts, instruments, and genres of North America with short articles that could easily be incorporated for points of comparison: Baggelaar and Milton, *Folk Music: More Than a Song* (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976). The easiest way to include an overview of the field of folklore would be assigning "Scholarship and Approaches" (pages 207-218 of the main text, Reynolds' *Arab Folklore*). For a classic in the field of folklore that includes an audio and video CD (in a week on the field of folklore and its development, for example), I could include: Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000). For performance studies, the following chapter is both brief and useful for understanding performance as a social interaction: Richard Bauman, "The Emergent Quality of Performance," *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1984).

If the course was listed under comparative literature, or if a student asked for suggestions for further literary sources, the following is a very accessible introduction: Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Random House, 1999). It includes chapters that are directly relevant to the course material and could be incorporated if more literary history were desired (Ch. 1 Pagan Poets (500-622) for Oral Poetry, Ch. 2 The Qur'an for Sufi Ritual, Ch. 6 The Lost Kingdoms of the Arabs: Andalusia for *andalusī* music).

Finally, in the case of advanced students of Arabic, the following is an example of an Arabic source that could be recommended: Hāla Kamāl, *Qālat al-rāwiyya: Hikāyāt min wajhat naẓar al-mar'a min waḥī nuṣūṣ sha'biyya 'arabiyya* / The (Female) Narrator Said: Stories from the Woman's Perspective, Inspired by Popular Arabic Texts (Cairo: Women & Memory Forum, 1999). The introduction describes the creative process of meetings in which women gathered regularly for a creative writing workshop that consisted of reading a traditional tale and then writing stories to express the women's own perspectives. The book includes a selection of these original stories, as well as stories from 1001 Nights and other folk tales. For this project, I have included case studies instead of theoretical readings, with the understanding that they could be added depending on the course listing, and that they could be suggested to students according to their individual interests and research projects.

Schedule & Readings:

Week 1

- Background - What this class has to offer: knowledge of Arabic traditions and contemporary theoretical perspectives
- Introductions
- Who Are the Arabs? Brief History: Religion in Ancient Arabia, Arabization of the Middle East, Geography, Colonialism, The Arabic Language

This first class meeting would serve as a general introduction to both the subject matter of the course, as well as the region and Arabic culture more generally. It also provides a chance for students to meet their classmates and introduce themselves, and a chance for me to get a sense of each student's interests.

I. Verbal Arts

Week 2: Oral Poetry Part I

Reynolds, Dwight F. *Arab Folklore: A Handbook*. Westport, CN; London: Greenwood Press, 2007. Pages 29-33.

This overview of oral poetry begins: "No art form is more closely intertwined with Arab culture and identity than poetry." It offers comparisons and contrasts with western cultures that are probably more familiar to students, explaining that the poetry is best understood not as a marginal artistic activity, but as a powerful form of "social action" or "cultural practice." The section offers a brief history of Arabic oral poetry. It also includes a short discussion about Caton's book, but I would opt for assigning a portion of Caton's book instead.

Caton, Steven. *Peaks of Yemen I Summon: Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1990.

Probably I would assign Chapter 4, "The Bālah: Poem as Play," since it speaks of a certain genre of oral poetry, including excerpts and description of the genre. The objective would be to give students a sense of the art of oral poetry--from the meter and rhyme, to the music and dance that accompany the performance. Alternatively, there are more ethnographic chapters which discuss the role of poetry in society and also more theoretical chapters which discuss functions of oral poetry. I would probably show photos from the book (and perhaps from other sources) in class.

Wagner, Mark. *Like Joseph in Beauty: Yemeni Vernacular Poetry and Arab-Jewish Symbiosis*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

This study of Yemeni dialect poetry (Humayni, also called *malḥūn*) is most helpful for its treatment of the Yemeni Jewish community's involvement in Arabic oral poetry. I would include selections to show examples of poetry on several topics (humor, *qat*, coffee, tobacco, wine) in Yemeni cultural history, as well as sections from Chapter 8: Shabazi in Tel Aviv to show how this aspect of Yemeni folk art has been adapted to modern Israeli culture (a preview for next week, transitioning from folk traditions into popular culture).

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1986.

For this course, I would probably assign Chapter 7, which discusses how young people express emotions such as love through poetry, although such sentiments contrast with the moral code they have been given by their society. For a more advanced course, I would assign Chapter 8, which is more theoretical, and discusses ideologies, politics, and language. In Reynolds' *Arab Folklore*, there is discussion of Algerian women's poetry (pp. 49-52) which could be of interest to students who want to learn about more women's oral poetry.

Week 3 Oral Poetry Part II: Oral Poetry in Pop Culture

I am researching Moroccan *malḥūn* poetry for my dissertation. Studies on this art are almost exclusively limited to Arabic and French. So I would probably present material in class, using images from my own fieldwork, and I might assign a portion of my dissertation to describe one performance context.

Schuyler, Philip D. "Malḥūn: Colloquial Song in Morocco." *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*. Vol. 6 The Middle East. NY: Routledge, 2002.

This article provides an excellent yet brief introduction to *malḥūn*. It opens with a Moroccan's perspective that *malḥūn* is the true classical music of Morocco, thus making a claim of authenticity (whether historical or artistic) that might come up in class discussion.

Slyomovics, Susan. *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

This book incorporates a wide range of genres in its study of human rights and its violations in Morocco. I would only assign the last several pages (199-204) that discuss a certain *malhūn* poem (*al-sham 'a* / The Candle), its incorporation into rock and protest music of the 1960s, and its role in the performance of human rights in the late twentieth century.

Recordings: *al-sham 'a* / The Candle, both a traditional version and the newer version by Jil Jilala, available in audio recordings. One or two other poems could be made available in audio or video format online. Also, I would ask students to glance through some episodes of *Amīr al-shu 'arā'* / Prince of Poets, which is a contest, like an Arabic poetry slam version of *American Idol*, televised from the United Arab Emirates. (link: <http://www.princeofpoets.com/site/video.html>).

II. Folk Narrative

Week 4: Oral Epics

I wrote my M.A. thesis on *Sīrat al-amīra dhāt al-himma* / The Epic of Princess Ambition. So I have enough material to present some information to the class, including visuals.

Reynolds, Dwight F. *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition*. Ithaca; London: Cornell UP, 1995.

This book is split into two sections: "Part One: The Ethnography of a Poetic Tradition," and "Part Two: Textual and Performance Strategies in the Sahara." I would draw selections from the second section so as to demonstrate the interplay of genres and the *sahra* (evening performance context) as social interaction. I could also assign a brief selection from part one to situate the study.

Kruk, Remke. "In the Popular Manner: Sīra-Recitation in Marrakesh Anno 1997." *Edebiyat* 10 (1999): 183-198.

This article provides a very accessible description of an oral epic performance context, and it includes informative photographs. Read alongside Reynolds' *Heroic Poets*, students will grasp how storytellers have continued to recite oral epics throughout the twentieth century, with special attention to performance contexts. Heath (below) offers a more literary critical analysis of an epic.

Heath, Peter. *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah Press, 1996.

I would assign selections from chapters 5-7 (The Heroic Cycle, Use of the Heroic Cycle: Compositional Principles, Compositional Models and Description) because they give a very helpful analysis of narrative techniques in Arabic epics generally, and especially in the epic of 'Antar that is the focus of this book. For a more literary course or final project, I could suggest Chapter 4: Literary Context and Literary History.

Jayyusi, Lena. *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan: An Arab Folk Epic*. Cairo: American U in Cairo Press, 1999.

This is a beautiful translation of a relatively short epic. I would assign the brief introduction (pages ix-xvii) and one of the chapters (for example, chapter 1 is pages 1-13), the choice of chapter depending on my sense of what might interest students most in this class. I admit that including primary sources makes more sense in a literature course than in social studies, but I think students will find the experience of reading a short piece of fiction enjoyable, more informative than reading a descriptive essay, and hopefully stimulating for discussion.

Melanie Magidow, "Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himma" *Medieval Feminist Forum Subsidia Series* no. 9, Medieval Texts in Translation 6 (2019). Available online open-source: https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol54/iss3/1/?fbclid=IwAR3jmi3gaPOS0ti9_Yz4_5hMRTiuIuPpGHMKcZvQmU_vNRWGfK3WtjF7xrY

A short, accessible excerpt from the epic, with scholarly introduction. Designed for undergraduate students.

Week 5: Folk Tales and *1001 Nights*

Reynolds *Arab Folklore* pages 74-76: An Arab Christian Ballad of St. George and pages 88-102:

Palestine: Female Heroines in Women's Folktales

Morocco: Jewish Arab Tales

Syria: Christian and Muslim Tales from Aleppo

These selections, perhaps obviously, reflect my commitment to including aspects of the Arab world's diversity (whether religious, ethnic, cultural, or gendered). Also, I think that students will enjoy these stories, and expect that they will stimulate discussion, especially since students will likely know of similar items for comparison (whether religious stories, fairy tales, or films that they have seen).

(Note: I would also check with my colleague Cassandra Chambliss who is working on popular narratives, hagiographies, and religious festivals among both Muslims and Christians in Egypt to see if she would like to come give a presentation from her years of fieldwork.)

One Thousand and One Nights - Introduction (pages 1-8) from: N.J. Dawood, *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* (London: Penguin, 1954). One story from Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights* (NY: Norton, 1990), either "Prologue" story (pages 1-19), or "The Story of the Hunchback" (pages 205-228), or "The Story of Jullanar of the Sea" (pages 383-396 or 383-428).

The flexibility in story selections here allows flexibility in the format of the class. For example, students could choose one story to read, and then discuss the stories in groups composed of one person for each story. Then we would conclude with a class discussion of *1001 Nights* based on the introduction, stories, and their thoughts.

Week 6 Conversational Genres: Proverbs, Riddles, Jokes, Curses

Reynolds *Arab Folklore* pages 110-116 Bedouin and Druze village proverbs,
120-125 Juha Jokes
127-129 forms of address and the art of the greeting

Jayussi, Salma Khadra, ed. *Tales of Juha: Classic Arab Folk Humor*. Northampton, Mass.: Interlink, 2007.

Although I could suggest further readings on all these subjects, Moroccan Juha jokes are the topic of my undergraduate honors thesis, so I have plenty of information for presentation in class or suggested further reading. Probably I would add a description of at least one performance context from my own research, and assign "The Unforgettable Juha" (pages 1-8 of Jayyusi's book), as well as selections from the anecdotes in Jayyusi's book. This would allow students to get a good sense of the jokes, and some idea of Arabic greetings and proverbs. This being about mid-way through the semester, I thought the lighter reading would allow students to work on their final projects, and I would require appointments from those who had not yet discussed their final projects with me, and might request updates from those who had.

If it did not make sense logistically to leave this week's reading light, then I could add selections from the following book:

Yaqub, Nadia. *Pens, Swords, and the Springs of Art: The Oral Poetry Dueling of Palestinian Weddings in the Galilee*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

This book includes transcriptions, and I could assign part of the description of the main performance context. The greatest benefit of this book is the opportunity it provides to discuss ideas. Yaqub explains on page 6 her main argument: "Indeed, I will be arguing in the present study that one of the reasons for the persistence of the Arabic poetry duel across centuries of literary history is its productive nature as a compositional device. Poetry dueling is both a conservative and a productive force lying at the intersection of tradition and inspiration." Her argument clearly relates to discussions of authenticity, folk heritage, and popular culture. The poetry she examines also provides an interesting case study for genres may function socially, as demonstrated on page 7: "To perform the *bālah* and the *zāmil* is at least in part to perform rituals of violence, the containment of violence, and mediation in cases where violence cannot be wholly contained but must be brought to an end." A secondary benefit of this book is the fact that it considers a form of men's poetry (since the syllabus already contains examples of women's poetry). The main reason why I would not prioritize this book for this syllabus is that it is a little more technical (both linguistically and theoretically) than what I am aiming for. I think the other sources are more accessible.

Musical Arts

Week 7: Tarab

Reynolds *Arab Folklore* "Introduction to Arab Music: Basic Concepts" and "Folk musical instruments of the Arab World"

These pages in the main text for this course will help provide an introduction to Arab music production. I could also replace or supplement these brief pages by presenting an introduction in class with visual and audio aides.

Racy, Ali Jihad. *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*. Cambridge; NY: Cambridge UP, 2003.

I would assign Chapter 3 Performance for the great descriptions this book offers of performance contexts. This book's many examples, read alongside Shannon's book (below) will convey to students what is meant by *tarab* (musical ecstasy) and how it can be reached through performance.

Shannon, Jonathan. *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2006.

This book is beautifully written and easy to read, and it provides a close look at the performance of music in Syria. I would have to choose selections from multiple chapters, including: the introduction for background on Shannon's project, a section on the construction of musical authenticity: history, cultural memory, emotion for an exploration of how music and emotion contribute to cultural memory and history, and finally a section on Tarab, sentiment, and authenticity, for a discussion of how the effective expression of emotion contributes to a sense of musical authenticity.

Week 8: The Voice of Egypt

Danielson, Virginia. *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Songs, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1997.

I would assign Chapter 5 "The Golden Age of Umm Kulthūm" to give a sense of the social significance of this singing. It would be helpful and simple to supplement this reading with video clips in or out of class to show the singer's popularity. It might also be helpful in some renditions of this course to read selections from Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The emergence of cultural hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988) to think through the populist music argument the author is making. I would also assign Chapter 6 "'The Voice of Egypt': The Artists' Work and Shared Aesthetics," or at least selections, to help convey a sense of the art and aesthetics that make her music beautiful. In some renditions of this course, this would also be a time to talk about pan-Arab nationalism.

Recordings: Audio and video made available online.

Week 9: *Andalusī* Music

Reynolds, Dwight F. "Music." *The Literature of al-Andalus*. The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. NY: Cambridge UP, 2000.

The objective in reading this article is to distinguish between four branches of Andalusī music: 1) Iberian, 2) Post-Iberian, 3) Modern, and 4) Hybrid. The first category was in Andalusia, and included the vernacular poetic forms *muwashshah* and *zajal*. The second category refers to the movement of music from Andalusia to cities around the Mediterranean Sea, especially with the expulsions of Muslims and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries. The third category, Modern Andalusī music, employs a style associated with Andalusia, and is usually performed in the Levant (especially the "andalusiyyāt" of Feirouz in Lebanon and *Yā shādī al-alhān* by Egyptian Sayyid Darwish). As for the fourth category, it consists of the fusion of music from Andalusia with local folk traditions (in Algeria and Aleppo, as well as in Morocco). The Andalusī influence is considered more classical, for historical and linguistic reasons, while the local tradition is considered more popular. The result is a number of "derived traditions...understood to be Andalusian in inspiration and style, but local in origin and language" (Reynolds 62).

Guettat, Mahmoud. "The Andalusian Musical Heritage." *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*. Vol. 6 The Middle East. NY: Routledge, 2002.

This article provides a helpful context and history through which to understand *andalusi* music in its variety. I could supplement the readings with a presentation of material in class. As for issues to discuss, I think that viewing and listening to examples of *andalusi* from a number of national contexts will demonstrate different notions and priorities of authenticity, and will help students to make comparisons. The music of Feirouz can be compared with that of Umm Kulthūm and may be understood within a discussion of nationalisms and nostalgia. The music Amina Alaoui, on the other hand, has become closer to "world music," and offers an example for discussion of globalization and the music industry. All of this is excellent preparation for the following week's discussion of *rai* music.

Recordings - Videos of Moroccan *andalusi*, music of Amina Alaoui, Feirouz's *andalusiyyaat*

Week 10: Rai Music

Schade-Poulsen, Marc. *Men and Popular Music in Algeria*. Austin: UT Press, 1999.

This study, which we read in class this semester, offers a very detailed and informative introduction to Algerian *rai*. I would assign Chapter 3: The Raï Performance and Studio Recording for context (of culture, performance, recording, distribution) and Chapter 4: Young Men in the City for social context (and important information about audience reception). The latter chapter provides profiles of each informant, explaining his relationship to *rai* music. For

discussion, we could look at song lyrics and compare *rai* with the love poetry in Abu-Lughod's study *Veiled Sentiments* that we read earlier. We could also discuss issues of authenticity, and folk genres becoming pop music, probably in comparison with the *malhūn* music that we heard and discussed earlier.

Recordings: Songs made available in audio and/or video online.

Week 11: Ritual and Chant

Kapchan, Deborah. "Music in Performance: Following the Entranced Ones--*Gnāwa* Performances and Trance in Rabat, Morocco." *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*. Vol. 6 The Middle East. NY: Routledge, 2002.

This article provides an overview of *Gnāwa*, a type of trance that is in Arabic, but is also heavily influenced by sub-Saharan cultures. I would like to supplement the article with selections from Deborah Kapchan, *Traveling spirit masters: Moroccan Gnawa trance and music in the global marketplace* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2007). The selections would generally come from Chapter 10 "Possessing Gnawa Culture: Displaying Sound, Creating History in Dar Gnawa" in order to provide a context for discussion of topics such as cultural heritage and distribution or marketing. Kapchan's work lends itself to discussions of what happens when folk traditions become global. Indeed, this seems to be the direction that she has begun pursuing in her own work (as demonstrated in her article "Sonic Translation").

Recordings: Gnawa music made available online. Also, several tracks from the CD that accompanies the following book.

Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999.

These recordings are particularly important since they offer examples from countries throughout the Muslim world of sonic ritual and chant. The focus on *gnawa* during this week is not meant to detract from other traditions, especially since it is rather more limited in geographical presence. Rather, I have chosen to focus on readings that seem amenable to discussion.

Week 12: Television Drama and Nationhood

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2005.

Following discussion of Kapchan's work and folk music becoming global, this book offers an anthropological way of looking at a different medium and its role in Egyptian culture and society. I would assign selections from Part One: Anthropology and National Media to give background on the methodology. From Part Three: The Eroding Hegemony of Developmentalism, I would include sections 5 and 6: "Modern Subjects? Egyptian Melodrama

and Postcolonial Difference" and "'The Ambivalence of Authenticity: National Culture in a Global World.'" Thus discussions could include issues of authenticity, nation, and subjectivities.

Videos: Carefully selected episodes of some Arab television dramas would be included online. Those with subtitles could be watched in full, and those without could just be glanced at briefly. I might include scenes from non-Egyptian television shows (for example, Turkish shows dubbed into Syrian Arabic have become very popular in some countries, and may provide interesting examples for complicating concepts of nationhood, belonging, or subjectivities).

Week 13:

Reynolds, *Arab Folklore* 160-166 Arabic lullabies from Tunisia, Kuwait, Yemen, and Iraq

Hoffman, Katherine E. "Generational Change in Berber Women's Song of the Anti-Atlas Mountains, Morocco." *Ethnomusicology* 46.4 (2002): 510-540.

Taken together, these few pages from the course's main text and Hoffman's article provide an example of song that may lead to discussions of culture, nation, gender, and changing generations. Hoffman's article moves the course material beyond Arabic language and culture, consistent with my attempt to include as much diversity as possible in the course material. Since I know the author, I would invite her to come speak in person if possible to add to the class discussion.

Reynolds, *Arab Folklore* "Contexts" (pages 219-226)

Finally, the last chapter from the main text does a fine job of showing how Arab folklore has moved among a variety of contexts: oral and written, medieval literature, and modern literature and cinema. I think this very brief chapter offers a good conclusion, filled with suggestions for further reading and study. The section on lullabies and Hoffman's article may be discussed in light of earlier topics (for example, in comparison with the study *Veiled Sentiments*). Any remaining class time would be used for students' short presentations of their final projects (the topics of their research, and the questions they are thinking about). The final class would be devoted to the remaining presentations (and probably evaluations, as well).

Recordings: Some songs sung in *tashelhit* (a Berber language) by Fatima Tabamarant (of Morocco).

Week 14

Presentations of Final Projects

Assignments & Grading Policy:

- Attendance and Participation (20%)
- Two written responses to the readings and class discussions, preferably spaced out through the semester (40%)
- Final paper project investigating an Arabic folk tradition, whether or not it was discussed in class. Topics must be discussed with professor in individual meetings to be scheduled as soon as possible. (40%)