

# GLOBALISM AND MEDITERRANEAN MODAL MUSICS: THE CASE OF THE TUNISIAN ṬUBŪ'

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## Abstract

Modal musics in the Mediterranean have a resilient past and an enduring present for many people. If “the global” is defined as a set of contingent relations across multiple places, then the scalar structure, microtonal variation, and taxonomies of these modes constitute a global coherency for the region. But the performance practices of these modes are unique and challenge that coherency. How do musicians hedge interconnectedness by these practices? What does such nuanced musical interaction say about the makings of a “global history”? The Tunisian modes, called the *ṭubū'*, provide a relevant case study to examine both global coherency and expressions of difference. Understood to derive from Muslim Spain in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the *ṭubū'* are sedimented structures of sound that network histories of Arab-Andalusi migration, the enslavement of Black sub-Saharan peoples, art music legacies of the Ottoman court, and expressive cultures of modern Arab identity. Today, Tunisian musicians in formal music schools qualify in not one but two modal systems: the *ṭubū'* and the Eastern Mediterranean 'maqāmāt'. As they bifurcate, fuse, juxtapose, and overlap the *ṭubū'* and maqāmāt systems on stage and in classrooms, these musicians and pedagogues both promote and circumvent globalism. Based on ethnography in Tunisia (2018-2019) and also Tunisian scholarship, this paper describes and analyzes such nuanced discourses to demonstrate a variety of globalism that is non-Western, proportioned, and richly historical.

## Keywords

Tunisia, Andalusian, Musical modes, Performance practice, Globalism

## INTRODUCTION

Global histories of music must come to terms with what constitutes “the global.” In this paper, I understand “the global” not as a homogenizing and totalizing geography but rather a contingent set of relations across multiple places (Ghosh, 2011). My ethnographic research on the Tunisian musical modes demonstrates that the way people conceptualize and practice the complexity of their modes can become the very means through which they make connections across places. Perhaps this point is not surprising, for music scholars often work across borders and other geographical boundaries when documenting shared musical traditions. But few relate that work to thinking about and scaling ‘the global,’ or to acknowledging non-Western notions of globalism. Analyzing how Tunisian musicians and pedagogues conceptualize and practice their modal tradition gives insight into these aspects. If music theory and practice are mediations that form relations across places, what does such musical interconnectedness say about ‘the global’ and the making of global histories in music studies?

Based on my fieldwork in 2018-2019 as a registered music student at the Higher Institute of Music in Sfax, Tunisia, my analysis will describe how Tunisian musicians and pedagogues transmit their musical modes – called the *ṭubū'* – in relation to another set of musical modes in the Mediterranean – called the maqāmāt.<sup>2</sup> Both of these modal systems have a shared lineage in Arab music history, and Tunisian musicians deeply cultivate aspects of the *ṭubū'* that reveal these connections. However, despite these points of deep connection, the *ṭubū'* have not folded into the maqāmāt over centuries of its transmission. Tunisian musicians conceptualize and practice aspects of the *ṭubū'* that bring

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<sup>2</sup> The Eastern Mediterranean region is often called the “East” or *mashriq* in Arabic, and applies to the nation-states of Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. Arab speakers use *mashriqī* to describe social and cultural phenomena from this region.

distinction and presence difference. In this dialectical way, my collaborators show that modal music is a dynamic and resilient logic of globalism, that is, a means of interconnection across places.

My proposition is that we can observe something about ‘the global’ through how Tunisians cultivate connectedness and transmit distinctiveness in the region. This case study projects musical modes as a potential form of global history – an idea already germinated in Arab and Mediterranean music scholarship, such as with Owen Wright in his comparative study of two 13<sup>th</sup>-century music treatises (1978); with Dwight Reynolds in his book ‘The Musical Heritage of al-Andalus’ (2021); or most recently, with Davis and Oberlander’s edited volume on musical encounters in the Mediterranean region (2022). These and other studies demonstrate that despite the distinctiveness of performance practice, creative practices and how people conceptualize them can function to connect diverse places and peoples across centuries. My intervention is to demonstrate how traditions of musical modes constitute such a coherency of expression in the Mediterranean, and how proportioning this coherency is a crucial aspect of doing global music history.

## THE TRANSMISSION OF MUSICAL MODES IN SFAQ

I entered the Higher Institute of Music in Sfax (Tunisia) in November 2018 and continued my studies through June 2019. After the closure of most Sufi lodges in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, university music institutes like this one at Sfax became the pre-eminent places for transmitting the *ṭubū’*. When I began, the administration graciously allowed me to attend any classes within their program that I needed for my research. One of my main objectives of studying at the Institute was to learn the traditional Tunisian musical modes; and so I quickly joined two different year groups, which would assure that I studied each mode during my fieldwork year.

But when I scheduled these classes, I realized that the Eastern Mediterranean modes (i.e., the *maqāmāt*) were also transmitted at the Institute. In fact, I soon came to understand that both of these modal systems formed the core of an undergraduate Tunisian musical education, and networked other topics deemed important for students, such as musical transcription, history, rhythm, and instrumental technique. By this educational structure, I learned that competency in the *ṭubū’* and *maqāmāt* were valued at the highest level of formal education in Tunisia – a level that is maintained across the country through university departments that the Ministry of Culture directs.

On day one, as a music student in *ṭubū’* class, one learns that there are 13 traditional (Ar. *taqlidiyya*) modes in Tunisia, as follows:<sup>3</sup>

1. al-Dhīl
2. al-‘Irāq
3. al-Sīkāh
4. al-Ḥsīn
5. al-Raṣd
6. Ramal al-Māyah
7. al-Nawā
8. al-Iṣba‘īn
9. Raṣd al-Dhīl
10. al-Ramal
11. al-Aṣbahān
12. al-Mazmūm
13. al-Māyah

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<sup>3</sup> This arrangement derives from a well-known poem in colloquial Arabic dialect (Ar. *zajal*). The writer is anonymous; but the poem circulates throughout institutes of music education. Tunisian music students often memorize it, and Tunisian music scholars have canonized this particular order (al-Rizqī 1989: 200-238; Mahdi, n.d.; Zouari, 2006).

These 13 modes form the musical basis for the transnational repertoire called *mālūf*.<sup>4</sup> Musicians from eastern Algeria, across Tunisia, and into Western Libya perform this shared repertoire today, although each location performs the tradition with textual, melodic, and rhythmic variations. Moreover, *mālūf* is historically joined to several other musical traditions across North Africa in terms of repertoire and some aspects of performance practice. These musical traditions are said to derive from al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain, from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Some scholars in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century called these and other repertoires across the Mediterranean ‘Andalusian music’ (Shannon 2009) – and Tunisian musicians continue to refer to *mālūf* as an Andalusian repertoire.<sup>5</sup>

“What exactly is the relationship between the *ṭubū’* and the *maqāmāt*?”, I frequently asked. Each conversation generated diverse responses. If I posed the systems as synonymous, Tunisians were offended. They thought of the *ṭubū’* as different and unique. If I posed the systems as disjunct, Tunisians were also offended. They explained that there was too much convergence between these two musical systems that prohibited their separation. From these reactions, I started to think that the way the *ṭubū’* emerged in pedagogical transmission said something about how Tunisians constituted themselves and their place within varying scaled geographies, the most relevant ones being North African, Andalusian, Mediterranean, and Arab.

My Tunisian collaborators often emphasized the resemblances between the *ṭubū’* and the *maqāmāt*. Teachers explicitly taught students, for example, that the Tunisian four-note *jins ḥsīn* (D-E<sup>b</sup>-F-G) ‘resembles’ (Tun. Ar. *yshebbah*) the Eastern Mediterranean (or Mashriqī) four-note *jins bayyātī* (D-E<sup>b</sup>-F-G). On another occasion, when students were singing melodies from the Tunisian mode of *al-nawā*, the instructor pointed out that the structure ‘resembled’ the Eastern mode of *al-nahāwand*. Or during another lesson, the base pentachord of the Tunisian mode *raṣd al-dhīl* (C-D-E<sup>b</sup>-F<sup>#</sup>-G) ‘resembled’ the same base pentachord of Mashriqī *nakrīz* (C-D-E<sup>b</sup>-F<sup>#</sup>-G).<sup>6</sup> Again and again, statements such as these caused me to wonder if the differentiation between these two systems was largely semantic.

But exceptions to these resemblances were frequent and not semantic. Referencing the same examples from before, I learned that Tunisian *al-ḥsīn* is like Mashriqī *al-bayyātī* except that the intonation of the *al-ḥsīn* E<sup>b</sup> is played higher than the *al-bayyātī* E<sup>b</sup>. Musicians also said that the structure of Tunisian *al-nawā* can be very similar to Mashriqī *al-nahāwand* except that *al-nawā* melodic phrases omit certain notes of the scale and demonstrate a distinctive musical phrasing that differs from those in *al-nahāwand*. The pentachords of Tunisian *raṣd al-dhīl* and Mashriqī *nakrīz* are alike in note spelling except for the fact that *raṣd al-dhīl* contains two pentachords on the tonic note C. Blending these two pentachords in melodic phrases gives the mode of *raṣd al-dhīl* its characteristic ‘feeling’ (Ar. *iḥsās*). Such a blending of base pentachords is unheard of in the Mashriq, as the *maqāmāt* are organized by a single base group of notes.<sup>7</sup>

These comments reveal that the most substantial similarities between the *ṭubū’* and *maqāmāt* have to do with theoretical structure, in terms of tetrachordal analysis and scalar representation. Tunisians conceptualize each mode through certain sets of 3-5 note groupings called *ajnās* (or *jins* in the singular).<sup>8</sup> Some *ajnās* are more important than others, and musicians learn these hierarchies. With a

<sup>4</sup> The transliteration of *mālūf* aligns to how this word is commonly spoken in the Tunisian and Libyan dialects. The transliteration of *mā’lūf* – with the apostrophe – corresponds to the formalized Arabic language spelling.

<sup>5</sup> I use “Andalusian” to refer to Arabized musical traditions that derive from medieval Muslim al-Andalus and reserve the term “Andalusian” for traditions associated with the modern province of Andalucía in southern Spain.

<sup>6</sup> There are other note spellings of the *raṣd al-dhīl* pentachord that utilize other (“accidental”) signs for the E and F notes. These signs further nuance the intonations. But for the purposes of this paper, I spell *raṣd al-dhīl* and *nakrīz* alike, as some Tunisian music theorists do.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, this organizing principle does not relate how musicians alter modal structure when they modulate between modes. But the principle still holds true, in that there is only one base group of notes that defines the mode. This is not the case with the Tunisian mode of *raṣd al-dhīl* as two base pentachords define the mode.

<sup>8</sup> Tunisian music theorists, musicians, and educators also use ‘*iqd* (sing.) and ‘*uqūd* (pl.) to name these note groupings.

full network of ajnās, Tunisian pedagogues depict each mode as a ‘scale’ (Ar. sullam), a laddered sequence or ‘arrangement of notes’ (Ar. tartīb al-darajāt) in ascending and/or descending order. Additionally, Tunisian musicians describe a defined ‘note range’ (Ar. al-majāl al-ṣawtī) of the mode across 1-2 octaves, and certain ‘pivotal and central notes’ (Ar. al-darajāt al-mahūriyya wa-l-marākiz) that reinforce the tone centers of a mode. This language is analogous to how music theorists describe the maqāmāt.

In following this structuring of a mode, I present a diagram of the Tunisian mode of al-aṣbahān below, based on my ethnographic notes from transmission events in classrooms at the Institute and a number of secondary sources:

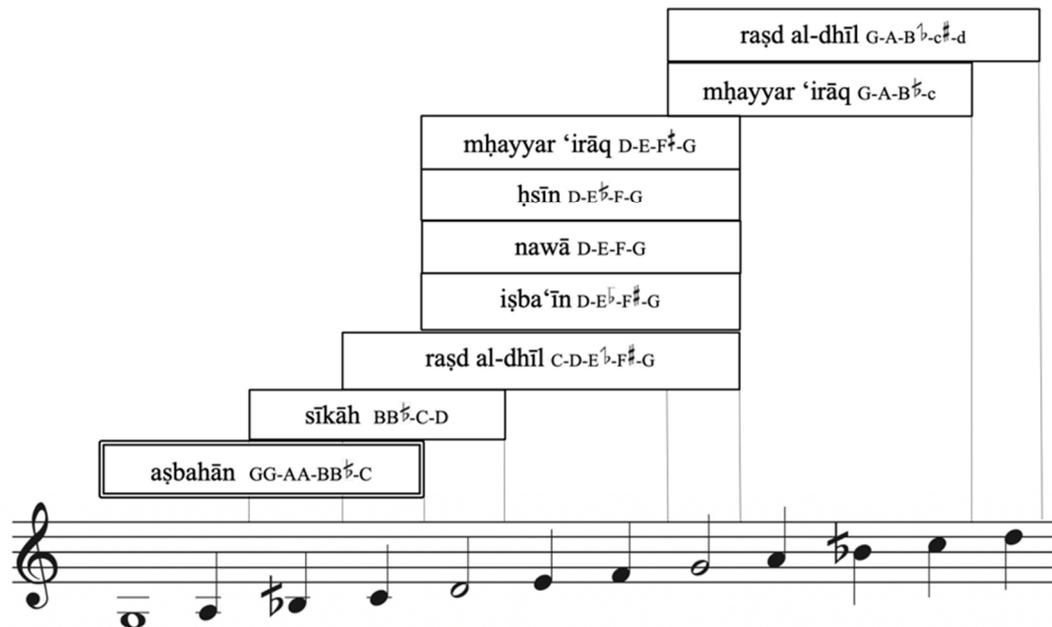


Figure 1: The mode of al-aṣbahān<sup>9</sup>. (Transcription and scheme by the author based on fieldnotes and analyses of D’Erlanger, 1949, Figure 169; Mahdi, 1972: 47; Guettat, 2000: 367; Zouari, 2006:178-88).

The ṭubū’ just like the maqāmāt are structured today in comparable ways utilizing similar terminology. This type of scalar representation of a mode intensified throughout the Arab world in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some Tunisian music theorists, such as Lasaad Zouari (2006), consider such structure to be the result of a number of international gatherings on Arab music that occurred first in Cairo in 1932, and later in Baghdad (1964), Fez, Morocco (1966), and again in Cairo (1969).<sup>10</sup> Tetrachordal theory and scalar structure continue to be the main ways that Arab musicians interpret melodic movement in the maqāmāt and the ṭubū’. This type of structure has provided a sort of ‘lingua franca’ for participants across the Mediterranean region.

Yet as stated earlier, the ṭubū’ have not folded into the maqāmāt despite these similarities. Tunisians also cultivate a disconnectedness from the maqāmāt through certain performance practices of the ṭubū’; and in doing so, they presence their difference. These differentiated practices manifest in the

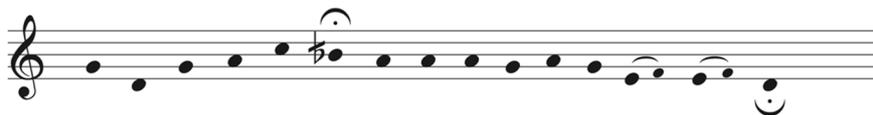
<sup>9</sup> My Tunisian collaborators used Western staff notation to represent their modes, and I follow suit. When modes are represented as a laddered scale, Tunisian music theorists sometimes give just the ascent, or the ascent and descent. I represent aṣbahān with an ascending scale. The boxes demonstrate the network of ajnās commonly played in this mode, and the doubled box indicates the most important base jins of aṣbahān through which the mode gets its name. The tonic on low G is represented as a whole note, whereas the pivotal notes of D and G are half notes. The single-slashed flat signs on the E and B notes designate a half-flat intonation. Other unconventional signs, such as in jins mḥayyar ‘irāq and jins raṣd al-dhīl, designate nuanced intonations that Tunisians often use in their transcriptions.

<sup>10</sup> Arab music historians have noted that the tetrachordal theory adopted by Arab musicians and theorists in 1932 gradually changed over the 20<sup>th</sup> century to accommodate pedagogical practices in the region (Marcus, 1989).

transcribed and orally transmitted repertoire. But in the classroom, educators conceptualize these practices further by teaching a ‘melodic path’ (Ar. al-masār al-laḥnī) for each mode. Melodic paths are improvisatory exercises. Tunisian students learn how to elicit a particular mode by expressing melodic movement through a certain network of ajnās. Even though musicians are free to improvise widely in a mode’s pathway, certain movements in a path are well-delineated and expected, and Tunisian music students learn to perform them.

My Tunisian collaborators in and outside the Institute use many words to describe one of these expected melodic movements: ‘phrase’ (Ar. jumla), ‘cliché’ (Fr. cliché), ‘formula’ (Fr. formule; Ar. ṣīgha), and also ‘unit’ or ‘cell’ (Ar. khalīya). These words all describe musical phrases that have both a specific melodic and rhythmic constitution. These characteristic melodic-rhythmic phrases reoccur in performance practice and form the backbone of a distinct practice of modes. Musicians elicit a mode exactly through these sets of known musical phrases, and listeners – with varying levels of recognition – expect them. Musicians may ornament and embellish the phrase idiosyncratically; but personal style does not prevent listeners from perceiving these phrases in a routine way. They are cliché – in the best sense of that word, in that the melodic-rhythmic unit reoccurs to a point of deep familiarity.

In the figure below, I present an unmetred cliché in the mode of al-aṣbahān. My transcription is based on my ethnographic notes from my classes at the Institute, as well as interviews with Tunisian master musicians (Gharbi & Holton, 2019; Zghonda & Holton, 2019).



**Figure 2: A characteristic cliché of al-aṣbahān. (Transcription by the author).**

Even though the tonic note of this mode is G (Ar. yakāh, in the lower octave; see Figure 1), this melodic-rhythmic phrase begins on G one octave higher and cadences on the note D – a notable feature of al-aṣbahān. There are other unique qualities of this formulaic phrase, such as: the intervallic leap between notes G and D; a sustained hold on the B $\flat$ ; the mostly stepwise descent from the A to D with an initial omission of the note F; and the quick, rhythmic tremor between the notes E and F, performed with an accent on the note E. Sometimes Tunisian musicians continue this cliché by descending to the low G tonic with a pause on B $\flat$  in the lower octave. These melodic and rhythmic characteristics are together important for establishing the ‘flavor’ (Ar. madhāq) of al-aṣbahān.<sup>11</sup>

Characteristic melodic-rhythmic clichés like this one pervade the Tunisian ṭubū‘. Each mode contains familiar and formulaic melodies that elicit the mode for a listener, and many Tunisian musicians and pedagogues transmit these modes with a strong awareness of these clichés. When differentiating between the ṭubū‘ from the maqāmāt, Tunisian musicians mark these distinctive phrases as their own. These reoccurring clichés also function to differentiate one Tunisian mode from another one, especially when modes share the same tonic and base note grouping.<sup>12</sup>

To summarize, Tunisians transmit the ṭubū‘ throughout the conservatory and state-mandated university music programs via a logic of comparison that relates the ṭubū‘ to the maqāmāt – the modal system of the Eastern Mediterranean. This connection across place matters to the Tunisians so much that the maqāmāt are inscribed in their core national curriculum. Interestingly, in this act of bifurcating modal systems of music, the ṭubū‘ are not folded into the maqāmāt – a profound sociological and cultural point to observe. Despite the lingua franca of tetrachordal theory that has

<sup>11</sup> To see how the cliché of Figure 2 manifests within some archival transcriptions, (TMH vol. 6: 19 and vol. 7: 92).

<sup>12</sup> Eight of the 13 traditional Tunisian modes correspond to three modal groups in this manner: one C-based group, and two D-based groups. Modes within each group share the tonic note and a semblance of the base jins, in terms of note spelling, but are still distinct modes. This is a uniqueness of the ṭubū‘. Such an organization does not exist for the maqāmāt.

shaped the transmission of modal music in the Mediterranean for nearly a century, and despite the Tunisians' embrace of this coherence at the national level, Tunisians retain the *ṭubū'* as a distinct performance practice by transmitting characteristic melodic-rhythmic clichés. These formulas preserve their difference – their distinctiveness – in the region.

## GLOBALISM AND MUSIC HISTORY

My Tunisian collaborators teach me that 'the global' – the interaction across places around a set of contingent relations – is a method for conceptualizing and practicing their musical modes. As they compare and contrast their modes to those in the Eastern Mediterranean, Tunisian musicians and pedagogues manifest the *ṭubū'* as dynamic musical objects that connect and differentiate self and place.

The global story I relate in this paper is a modern one, emerging from musical interactions mainly across the Mediterranean during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In that sense, the story is both historical and ethnographic, and the methodologies of both are necessary to understand and proportion the global. Despite the connotation of the word 'global' to totalize or homogenize the entire globe, scholars of globalism today who are interested in analyzing the social and cultural convergences that occur across place focus on proportioning the scope of 'global' (Nederveen Pieterse 2020:236). For Tunisian participants of the musical modes, these convergences are resolutely contemporary and connected to nation-state formations; but they also relate more broadly to histories of medieval al-Andalus and Arab music lineages.

Ethnography, on the other hand, probes these historical aspects during the dynamic moments of transmission where one can observe differences that may challenge those narratives. As Martin Stokes writes in the introduction to the volume on *Global Music Histories* edited by Reinhard Strohm, ethnography attends to the performativity of events and validates the "irreducible multiplicity" of expressive culture within those performances (2018:8-9). I ground this 'irreducible multiplicity' to ontological difference in the material world; and difference cannot ultimately be folded into larger flows of coherency between people and places (Deleuze 1968/1994). Without attending to ethnographic moments that parse historical events, global narratives tend to lack proportion and risk the erasure of social and cultural particularities.

In the case of the Tunisian modes, globalism is not the totalizing of worlds but the productive interpretation of coherency across places, based on how Tunisians themselves conceptualize such coherency within their social, cultural, and natural environments. Anthropologist Anna Tsing calls such global projects 'coherent bundles of ideas and practices as realized in particular times and places' (2000: 85). In allowing the ethnographic present to punctuate the making of history, globalism is sized up and scaled down, able to demonstrate connectedness and difference in the same story.

One version of a coherent global story of musical modes in the Mediterranean relates how Tunisian musicians utilize performance practice and music theory to situate themselves in place. Their logic of globalism most specifically relates Tunisians to those in the Eastern Mediterranean; but with more historical and ethnographic work, such a narrative might also include other non-Arab peoples across North Africa, or the Ottoman-Turks, as well as Byzantine communities, and Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE). In a way, my ethnographic experiences at the Higher Institute of Music in Sfax proved dependent on these broader histories. But within this type of coherent global story, the glorious irreducibility of social and cultural difference emerges and proportions that story around the contingent relations of modal music: how people structure and perform them. The *ṭubū'* with their distinct melodic-rhythmic clichés depend on the global story of modal Mediterranean musics, and Tunisians transmit this dynamism in their musical pedagogy. Global music history is important because it is so for Tunisians.

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