

Religious Sounds Beyond the Global North



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Religious Sounds Beyond the Global North

Senses, Media and Power

*Edited by
Carola E. Lorea and
Rosalind I.J. Hackett*

Amsterdam University Press

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Acknowledgments

As we write and rewrite book sections over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and social distancing measures have muted and mutated our sonorous lives in dramatic ways. Religious communities have radically transformed their manifestations of togetherness and their very sense of congregation. Sikh *kirtan* singers in the gurdwaras of Singapore perform for the worshipers behind a plexiglass screen that allows them to mediate the divine while protecting the devotees from viral droplets. Elsewhere, Buddhist governments have ordered the monastic body of the nation to chant collectively the sutras that are mobilized in times of epidemics to foster sonic protection. Singing, an important part of many ritual gatherings, has been banned in several countries as a potential viral spreader. Some resisted the prohibition, some started humming sacred hymns from closed lips, behind their face masks. Others went digital, utilizing the technological means at their disposal to record, livestream, and reproduce religious sounds.

In the need for hope and comfort during the long Italian lockdown, quarantined Italians gathered on their balconies with their voices, bodies, and improvised instruments to share a collective experience of socially distant yet healing sound. Indian families erupted on their verandas on the evening of the first Covidian curfew to bang on metal plates, blow into conch shells, and chase away the disease in a much politicized episode of communal noise-making. In the spectral silence of the then Easter Sunday (2020), the moving voice of famed tenor Andrea Bocelli in a hauntingly deserted square of Milan reverberated in the electronic devices of thousands of remote listeners. As I typed on my keyboard, bird sounds appeared to be louder than usual, given the reduced traffic noise during the lockdown. The coronavirus had “quieted” the world and even helped seismographers to calculate tectonic vibrations with greater precision.¹

The conversations on religious sounds that gave birth to this volume are situated in a time of profound transformations of our sonic habits, when the public religious soundscape has gone increasingly silent, and the reproduction of sound is unprecedentedly regimented and digitally mediated. This volume on religious sounds, framed around senses, media and power, can offer timely and relevant reflections on the deeply felt

1 See Wei Hass, *National Geographic*, April 9, 2020. “These charts show how coronavirus has ‘quieted’ the world.” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/coronavirus-is-quieting-the-world-seismic-data-shows>. Accessed May 4, 2021.

human need to gather around shared sonic experiences, and to sonically mediate bridges between human and other-than-human spheres. Having exacerbated social inequalities, the pandemic has also showed us how these mediations are unevenly accessed, interpreted, and distributed.

As this book project came to life in the course of Covidian times, we have exchanged religious sounds and ritual greetings with friends and families through social media and digital technologies. We became familiar with the sound of Zoom meetings, Skype calls, Facetime, and other digital notifications that have punctuated our domestic lives. We have learned to mute and unmute ourselves with the new sonic etiquette of remote working. We have heard the haunting sound of ambulances, the stillness of silent, empty streets in our cities, and in our skies devoid of air traffic. The livelihood of artists in the field of sound, music, and performance has been severely impacted.

Religions have mobilized sounds to sustain their own epistemologies of healing. Singaporean Sufis have developed techniques to perform *zikr* from home, logging into a shared online platform. The Matua religious community, in India and Bangladesh, has recommended daily sessions of *kirtan* singing and dancing to boost the immunity system, using sacred songs as a sonic vaccine.² The amplified voice of several muezzins requested the faithful to stay at home, instead of praying at the mosque.

While coexisting with the leftovers of a global health crisis and witnessing the unequal unfolding of the social return to “normal,” we propose a deep reflection on sounding and listening practices. We hope that this volume will offer useful tools, theories, and empirical evidence from the global South to help understand such dramatic changes and to make sense of the historical transformations and the human production of religious sounds.

This book was made possible by the support offered by Carola Lorea’s Religion and Globalisation research cluster at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore, and by research cluster leader Prof. Kenneth Dean. We are thankful to the directorship and the events team members of ARI for having facilitated the development of this intellectual initiative. ARI has also generously contributed a large part of the fees for open access publication of this volume.

We are thankful to a long list of friends and colleagues who have read parts of this volume, offered feedback, and contributed in various degrees to

2 See Raka Banerjee, Dishani Roy, Carola E. Lorea, Fatema Aarshe, Khaled Bin Oli Bhuiyan. *The Sonic and the Somatic: Matua Healing Practices during COVID-19*, Asia Research Institute, NUS. <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/20331-73/>. Accessed April 1, 2021.

its current shape. We send our appreciation and gratitude to the Global Asia Book Series Editor, Professor Tak-Wing Ngo, for giving a home to this book project. Special thanks to the steering team of the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), the publications team at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Paul van der Velde and Mary Lynn van Dijk, and Saskia Gieling, Inge Klompmakers, Jasmijn Zondervan and Julie Benschop-Plokker at Amsterdam University Press (AUP), for helping in every stage of its preparation. We particularly appreciate that the publisher has taken all the necessary steps to concretize our request to integrate sounds and multimedia samples as part and parcel of the book. Lastly, we thank the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions that have helped us immensely to improve our introduction and chapters.

Carola E. Lorea

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Introduction: The Potential of a Sonic Turn

Toward an Acoustemology of the Post-Secular

Carola E. Lorea

Abstract

A critical attention to religious sounds can respond to the call for a sonic turn in the study of religions, while also contributing to a trajectory for the interdisciplinary study of sound to grow out of its secularist and ethnocentric paradigms. After defining the key concepts and intellectual interventions of the book, this introduction offers a summary of the chapters, elucidating how they contribute to an acoustemology of the post-secular rooted in Asia as method. Then, it presents cross-cutting themes—senses, media, and power—and discusses religious sounds as inextricably connected with synesthetic bodily experiences and with configurations of space, while being always mediated and enmeshed with power structures. The final section links the rich and diverse empirical data of the chapters with broader debates in the study of religion and sound.

Keywords: Global South, Asia as method, sacred music, ocularcentrism, synesthesia

This book explores the understudied interstices between religion and sound. It contributes to a “sonic turn” in religious studies (Hackett 2012; 2018), an approach that a few scholars have invoked. This invocation needs to be advanced with further theoretical refinement, applied to varied methodological avenues, and taken into new directions. Why is a “sonically aware” approach necessary, and which kinds of new questions would that generate? Can a sonic turn challenge conventional modalities of data collection and knowledge production in academia? Can sound be a

decolonizing instrument in scholarship on religion? Moreover, can a focus on the religious provide a new opportunity for sound studies to adopt a post-secular and less ethnocentric standpoint?

The close relationship between sonic and religious spheres has been underresearched by both religion and sound scholars. Various theologies and cosmologies have generated theories of sound and sonic liberation (Beck 1993). At the same time, popular music scenes have been identified as new, postmodern forms of religion (Till 2020). Spirituality has often served as an important source of inspiration for musicians, while aesthetic expressions have been catalysts for the development of new religious movements. We address herein the auditory field of chanting, preaching, mourning, singing, and listening as a site for broader social negotiations, sectarian contestations, and trans-territorial identity formations, ultimately unsettling and multiplying existing discussions on religion, the senses, and the media.

By taking seriously what we hear and by considering sounds as modalities of knowledge and makers of culture in their own right, this volume sets the ground for explorations in a new field, which we might call “acoustemology of the post-secular.” “Acoustemology,” an expression introduced by Steven Feld, combines the terms “acoustic” and “epistemology” in order to refer to a sonic way of knowing and being in the world (Feld 1996). Understanding sounds as co-constitutive of culture, we apply this sonically sensitive approach to the study of the relationship between the human and the more-than-human,¹ including and transcending the institutionalized communities, authorities and practitioners that call themselves “religious.”

For decades, existing literature has equated religious sounds to “sacred music”: the highly complexly arranged sounds developed and/or used within traditional religions (Laack 2015, 235) that communicate with or help experience “transcendence” (Engelhardt and Bohlman 2016). But religious concepts and sensibilities leak outside of the category of sacred music (think

1 In environmental humanities and academic literature on the Anthropocene, terms like non-human, other-than-human, and more-than-human, often used interchangeably (Fenske and Norkunas 2017; Franklin 2017), refer to animals, plants and other ecological beings that interact and relate with the human realm. In the study of religion and spirituality, and in the de-secularized and post-secular writings on the Anthropocene (see Szerszynski 2017; Degnen 2018; Bubandt 2018), these terms may refer to divine entities, natural forces, gurus, spirits, gods and other agentive beings, whether immanent or transcendent, that are enmeshed with human lives. As humans are “never outside a sticky web of connections” (Bennett 2004, 365) with such entities, I use terms like non-human, other-than-human and more-than-human to avoid any essentialized dichotomy between matter (environment) and spirit (religion), and to avoid referring simplistically to supernatural forces (e.g., “God”) that would fail to reflect the richness and diversity of the theologies and onto-cosmologies included in this book.

of American Islamic hip-hop), while music is only one way in which humans organize sound-making practices. Which conceptual framework would then help us to make sense of the auspicious sound of women's ululation during ritual festivals, or the spontaneous syllables of glossolalic prayers?

In this volume, we step beyond the comfort zone of "sacred music" to reflect instead on the relatively unexplored terrain of theoretical and methodological discussions on sound in religious ontologies and practices, as well as on the theological undergirding of the configuration of sound as a semantic container. This requires us to elaborate on why we concentrate on sound, and what we mean by "religious".

In the first part (I) of this introduction we define some key concepts underpinning this book project to outline its main intellectual interventions: Our definition of religious sound, its backdrop in the history of sensory epistemology, our call for a post-secular approach, our use of Asia as method, combined with the global South as practice. In the second part (II) we offer a short summary of the book sections, connecting dots among its sixteen chapters and elucidating how these chapters contribute to an acoustemology of the post-secular rooted in Asia as method. In the third part (III) we dwell on cross-cutting themes—senses, media, and power—and contextualize them in the extant literature. Drawing examples provided by our contributors, we explore how religious sounds are inextricably connected with synesthetic bodily experiences, and with configurations of space, while being always mediated and enmeshed with power structures. This final section is meant to help the readers to link the rich and diverse empirical data of the individual essays with broader debates in the study of religion and sound.

Why sound?

Sound is a polysemous and culturally specific term. In English, it may denote one of the senses, or the physical phenomenon of propagation of continuous and regular vibrations through the air, or another medium. In Italian, my mother tongue, to "hear" and to "feel" are the same verb (*sentire*). In the Indic languages that I work with, sound has many terms: one of them is the same as "word," as well as "revelation" (*śabda*), while one of them means cosmogonic vibration shared by all sentient and non-sentient things (*nāḍ*), making sound a viable path toward soteriological goals.

A focus on the materiality and the politics of sound encompasses the realm of what has been traditionally referred to as music. Music has been

predominantly studied as a “thing,” rather than an event, or as the sum of musical “objects,” rather than the encounters and the actions that constitute the process of “musicking” (Small 1998). The relationship between sound and what is understood as music has radically transformed in the course of time (Solomos 2020). Even within the same culture, different groups of people can understand the same sounds differently: some may describe them as music, some as bad music, some as noise. Even silence, described as a scientifically measurable lack of sound waves (Laack 2015, 234), is culturally and historically contingent. There is hardly any human action taking place in the total absence of sound waves. What we mean by silence and how we interpret low decibel levels goes beyond the physicality of the auditory system; it is something that quantitative measures of loudness can hardly describe, as each biological ear is cultured, attuned, and socialized differently.² A friend from Bangladesh who migrated to Italy in his teens once told me that the most memorable sensation at his arrival was the daunting silence of the central train station of Roma Termini—a place that most Italians, especially from the north, would qualify as unsustainably noisy and chaotic. On the other hand, Italians are often ridiculed for being loud and for accompanying their expressions with exaggerated hand gestures, from the perspective of northern Europeans’ more sober aesthetic regimes.

The articulation of noise in any social setting “is an issue less of tone or decibel than of social temperaments, class background, and cultural desire” (Schwartz 2004, 51), firmly rooted in local hierarchies of class, taste, morality and power positions. While a focus on sacred music has often dominated the study of religious sounds, coalescing them under the aegis of artistic expression and liturgical repertoires, we consider culturally informed choices about sounds and silences as fundamental components of any religious engagement in their own right.³ Concentrating on sound gives us a chance to include but also surpass musicological concerns with structures and aesthetics of organized sound, in order to understand how sounds work, communicate and perform meaning in different socio-cultural ecologies of affect. Engagements and experiences of sounds are socially, culturally,

2 Judith Becker (2004) borrows Bourdieu’s *habitus* idea, and adapts it to processes of listening. In her words, such *habitus* of listening “underlines the interrelatedness of the perception of musical emotion and learned interactions. Our perceptions operate within a set of habits gradually established throughout our lives” (ibid., 71).

3 We are not the first in doing this. For instance, the recent *Hearing Southeast Asia* edited by Nathan Porath (2019) shows the importance of sound for understanding the processual implementation of hierarchy in the construction of the social environment and demonstrates that silence can be as important as sound in terms of the sonic articulation of hierarchy.

and morally informed and motivated and, thus, are essentially political in nature (Chandola 2012). This explains why our volume bears the subtitle “senses, media, and power” as the main areas where the implications of religious sounds resonate.

And yet sounds have often been treated as ephemeral, ornamental or secondary phenomena in the humanities and social sciences. John Chernoff rightly points out that for anthropologists, music is often something like a residue of *more fundamental* cultural concerns, something that enhances structures and functions that are *already there* (Chernoff 2002—my emphasis). In short, music is treated as derivative rather than determinative of culture. This approach signals an epistemological problem for the study of religion. Citing Ruth Illman (2019): “We need to realize that music, and the arts in general, are not just ornaments or illustrations of something more profoundly important to religion, but they are aspects of religious engagement in their own right.” When religion scholars pay attention to music, they often treat it as an “instrument” to reach a state of transcendence, a “vehicle” bringing higher or deeper truths, a “carrier” of more profound meanings, such as trance, prayers, or communication with god(s). Yet sonic mediations, whether they are transmitted via the voice, radio, printed text, internet or other media, are not solely conductors toward soteriological goals; they are also co-constitutive of communities and their values.

One of the main goals of this volume is to address scholars interested in religion broadly defined, irrespective of their specific field- or area-based training, and encourage them to revisit conventional sources, whether archival, literary, or ethnographic, with a sharp and curious ear, tuning their sonic awareness toward new empirical questions. The other principal aim of this volume is to persuade sound studies scholars to integrate into their research questions and methodology the importance of the religious, the non-religious, the spiritual and the secular, as critical components influencing the perception, consumption, and production of sounds in any society.

Why religious?

By focusing on religion, this book explores the role of sound in shaping communities, subjectivities, and sensitivities in their relationship with the nonhuman, the spiritual, and the assumed “secular.” The term post-secular in this introduction is not used in a temporal sense as the epoch of religious resurgence (Habermas 2008) or as the re-enchantment that comes after a

presumedly “secular age” (Taylor 2007). The post-secular approach allows us to recognize that religious authorities, concerns for the sacred, onto-cosmologies and ritual knowledge are all important dimensions that shape the ways people perceive, interpret, play, or forbid sounds. Recognizing that there has never been a totalizing and all-encompassing “secularization” process, we suggest the conceptual filter of the post-secular (as in post-secular literary criticism—see Morrissey 2009, 100 and Mączyńska 2009, 76 in Corrigan 2015) as a renewed engagement with the religious to think beyond the secularist frame of global North modernities. This approach hopes to respond to the gaps of those previous works and sub-fields that have taken secularization for granted. Secularization, predicting a decline in the influence of religious authorities and their separation from other social and political domains, has precise historical and geographical configurations, rooted in post-Enlightenment Europe. Anthropologists and religion scholars have abundantly demonstrated that there are multiple secularisms, and that even presumedly secular societies have never been “disenchanted.” Furthermore, even secularization is not free from religious sensibilities; the secular is not the absence of religion, but rather a particular practice of regulating and containing religious realms while these spill and leak in other social domains. In other words, the post-secular, in our use of the term, is not a fact or a time period, but rather a heuristic sensitivity to trace and to investigate the religious underpinnings that may influence any cultural formation, including sounds, noises and silences.

We understand religion beyond centrally sanctioned organizations, as enmeshed with culture in the way it influences people’s ways of living, consuming, eating, but also feeling, listening, and moving their bodies. Besides institutionalized religious communities and so-called world religions, this volume engages with spiritual, animistic, shamanic, subaltern, and marginalized religious communities, but also with the implicitly religious (Bailey 1983) and the re-enchanted (Maffesoli 1996) in purportedly secularized settings. We move away from the “mentalistic” and “dematerialized” (Meyer 2008) understanding of religion as a system of beliefs and ideas to which believers assented. Instead, echoing Csordas (1990), Asad (1993; 2003), de Vries (2008), Morgan (2009), and others, we understand as “religious” any kind of embodied practice that mobilizes the senses to cultivate relations between people, places, objects, and other-than-human agentive beings—including nature, spirits, ancestors, saints, deities, or energies. These embodied aesthetic practices constitute communities and shape the sensibilities of those who participate.

In short, we cannot discuss religious sounds as extrapolated from their diverse cultural contexts. Nor can we claim that there exists a common

material characteristic of a sound that humans can universally call “religious.” Rather, sounds are felt and represented as religious as a result of an attuned embodied knowledge, a *habitus* of listening (Becker 2004), and a complex aesthetic formation that we owe to our cultural environment, religious practices, and social factors such as class, caste, race, age, gender, and education. This also means that religious sound does not exist in a vacuum of power relations. Political and religious authorities legitimate what people hear (Weiner 2013; Sykes 2019). Wahhabi and Orthodox Jewish authorities have restricted the kinds of sounds that are fit to be heard, banning those that might stimulate dangerous sensual arousal. In colonial Ceylon, the British government issued a number of noise ordinances to regulate the sound of local religious processions. For each context we ought to pose questions of power: Who is allowed to play, record, reproduce or transmit religious sounds? Who is allowed to listen? And who gets to make those decisions?

Sounds materialize into spaces of unequal reception and representation, which are in turn shaped by the bodily perception of sound. Religious sounds function as salient means of community-making, intimately resonating in practitioners’ bodies, reinforcing their sense of unity and belonging. At the same time, they can awaken tensions and conflicts between minorities and dominant communities. This discussion unsettles conventional binaries—private and public, religious and secular, sacredness versus entertainment, inward and outward, material and transcendent, spiritual and technological, spatial and temporal—as they are systematically crossed in the production and reception of religious sounds.

Moreover, our focus on religion can offer a valuable contribution to the fertile and growing field of sound studies. This multidisciplinary field grew out of the work of Canadian researchers, initially concerned with the use of modern technologies and hard sciences to measure, record, preserve, and analyze sounds in relation to space. Arguably, because of its origins, the field has been overly preoccupied with the mediascapes of the global North and with audio technologies. Only very recently, scholars in this field have highlighted that “the establishment of sound studies as a fledgling discipline has largely elided the global South” (Steingo and Sykes 2019, 6). Major works in the modern study of sound have often taken for granted a white, middle-class, Western way of listening as an unmarked and normative universal parameter (Stadler 2015; Robinson 2020). As European and North American scholars, who have dominated this growing field, have a secular formation and primarily explored ostensibly non-religious contexts in so-called secular countries, sound studies literature largely depicts listening as a secular activity.

And yet, scholars of sound have recognized that understandings of aurality are linked to underlying ideologies about the self and the universe, and to theological positions about media (Sterne 2011). For example, the Western categorical division between sound and vision, the former associated with spirit and the latter pertaining to rationality, is indebted to Christian theology and to a “restatement of the longstanding spirit/letter distinction in Christian spiritualism” (Sterne 2003, 16). The “religious” emerged not only as a sub-genre or as a setting of the empirical study of sound, but as part of the process that generates our very definition of sound as a category (see Schmidt 2002). Nevertheless, as Jim Sykes (2019) observed, recent writings in sound studies have avoided religion and the secular altogether; perhaps this is because scholars lacked the specific training that would allow them to question their secularist bias and to recognize the ambiguity of “invisible” (Luckmann 1967) and “implicit” religion (Bailey 1983) in self-defined secular contexts.

Far from being a linear and chronological process from belief to non-belief, multiple modernities coexist, resulting in innumerable ways in which different cultures and societies organize their being secular, religious, or both (Rosati and Stoeckl 2012). The Eurocentrism of much sound studies scholarship has obfuscated these nuances through its secularist bias. By engaging an acoustemology of the post-secular, we propose an approach toward sound that is sensitive toward the religious, non-religious, and spiritual meanings of hearing and listening. Besides documenting and analyzing forms of sonic practices shared among people belonging to particular religious groups, we pay attention to the ways in which communities’ definitions of sound are coproduced by theological assumptions, sensitivities over purity and pollutions, anxieties and concerns about the sacred and the profane. The essays in this book collectively call for the recognition that religious sensibilities shape the ways people hear sounds, define sounds, play music, move their bodies, claim spaces and resist silencing. In doing so, this book takes a post-secular approach to discuss ontologies of sound. In the process, culturally sanctioned regulations of silences, rhythms, reverberations and melodies emerge as a fundamental modality of articulating affect and relationships between human and other-than-human beings.

Methodological deafness: The primacy of the visual

With a focus on the interface of sound and religion we hope to repair a methodological hindrance that has affected the field of religious studies

and produced its “disciplinary deafness” (Weiner 2009, 897). Texts have been given utmost priority as both objects and sources in this field for historical and cultural reasons. In modern Eurocentric epistemologies of the senses, ocularcentrism—the discourse establishing seeing as the highest sense, epistemologically as well as morally—has prevailed (Van Ede 2009, 62). This “hypertrophy of vision” (Ong 1967), went hand in hand with the “scriptist bias” of Western educational systems (Harris 1986, 46)—the tendency to assume that reliable information is written and printed. These are still dominant models in modern academia, posing a serious problem for the study of cultures that work with different epistemologies, including what Boaventura de Sousa Santos called the “epistemologies of the Global South” (2014). These paradigms produced a scholarship sanitized of sound, touch, smells, and that overlooked many forms of religious experiences and expressions.

Observation has been associated in the sciences with the collection of visual data and the quality of objectivity, sustaining claims of valid knowledge. According to R. Murray Schafer,

[in] the West, the ear has given way to the eye as the most important gatherer of environmental information. One of the most evident testaments of this change is the way in which we have come to imagine God. It was not until the Renaissance that [European Catholic Christian] God became portraiture. Previously he had been conceived as sound or vibration. (Schafer 1973)

This interpretation, reinforcing the idea that modernity and modern religious practices are visualist, having silenced and sanitized all sonic matters, is not exempted from sound criticism (Schmidt 2002; Baum 2019). Sound has always played important roles in religion and society. However, in modern Western knowledge systems writing became an “immutable and impersonal mode of discourse” tied to a “notion of objectivity” (Goody 1968, 44). Ocularcentrism and the scriptist bias of this epistemological model have been exported and imposed onto other systems of knowledge through the epistemic violence of colonialism and neoliberal regimes, suppressing, or at best inferiorizing, epistemologies of the global South that might present different sensory hierarchies (de Sousa Santos 2014). In sum, this Eurocentric epistemic paradigm has driven the ways we think about, collect, and represent knowledge, that is attributing primacy to visual, written, and printed sources at the expense of other sensory repositories of knowledge and different ways of sensing the world.

In the past decades, scholars have recovered and re-centered sound in several fields. Studying the acoustic ecology of the Kaluli people of New Guinea, Steven Feld (1982) challenged academic under-representations of sound through a revealing ethnography that established sound as the fundamental way in which people understand and relate to the environment. Sound has started to be taken seriously beyond the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology, entering debates in history and legal history (e.g., Corbin 1998; Weiner 2013), architecture (Howard and Moretti 2010; Ergin 2008), and the anthropology of religion (e.g., Hirschkind 2006; Eisenlohr 2017; 2018). Nevertheless, scholars of religion have been particularly “hard of hearing” and rarely engaged in the “multidisciplinary boom in sound studies” (Hackett 2012).

Beyond the scriptist bias: Sound as decolonizing tool

In the context of Asian religions, the scriptist bias has dominated the study of Hinduism and Buddhism (Coburn 1984), with a thriving scholarship on literary and philological works on ancient texts, anchored in the Orientalist and colonialist predilection for the written word. However, both these religious and textual traditions are hard to consider as separate from their emphasis on sound—not as just a distinct category per se, but rather as inextricably conversing with notions of cosmic vibration (*nāḍ*), oral revelation (*śruti*, literally “that which is heard”), syllabic sounds’ power and ritual efficacy (e.g., *mantra*), oral transmission and bodily techniques (e.g., yogic *āsana*). In the case of Hinduism, Guy Beck argued that even though sound is central to Hindu theology and ritual practice, this reality is missed by Western scholars who tend to emphasize visual components. His work demonstrates that this “sonic theology” (Beck 1993) constitutes an important nexus between otherwise distinct religious communities.

The essays in this volume present diverse configurations of the category of sound itself to usher a more inclusive global history of religious sounds.⁴ With a strong empirical emphasis on Asia as the ethnographic grounding of most contributions in this volume, and with the majority of the contributors being from Asia or based in Asia, this book addresses the interface of religion and sound while provincializing Europe (Chakrabarty 2000) and dislodging

4 We are inspired by Sykes and Steingo’s call for transcending the analysis of “sound in itself” and their commitment to situating sound in and from the South “not as a unified, alternative notion of what sound is but as diverse sonic ontologies, processes, and actions that cumulatively make up core components of the history of sound in global modernity” (Steingo and Sykes 2019, 4).

the global North as the central frame of reference. We do not argue that Asia is the global South, nor do we use the global South as a pretext to elide or omit a discussion of sounds in the places we generally assign to the global North due to their characteristics of socioeconomic and political power. Settings and sonic phenomena from the global North will appear, but only as some alternatives among the many possible ways in which sonic knowledge and practice are enacted, rather than central or normative. With sources and frameworks from multiple communities, rituals and traditions, we address and intentionally avoid the “Protestant bias” (Asad 1993; Pels 2008) of conventional approaches to religion and sound. Protestant presuppositions (Schopen 1991) have contributed to the ingrained perception of religion as a quiet and sober matter, a private business of silent readers of printed objects, with solemn sounds played privately, or confined inside of places of worship, as the only ensoundments of devotion toward a distant, transcendental god. This particular “sonic ideology,” which became coterminous with the making of modern secular soundscapes in the global North (see Weiner 2013; Tamimi Arab 2017), is only one among numerous coexisting and competing understandings of religious sounds and their relation to space, time, gods, and people.

Histories of sound are necessarily entangled with ideologies of race, gender, and empire. Different sensory epistemologies have been portrayed as racialized. During the 19th century, “primitive people” were associated with the “primitive senses.” The early-19th-century German scientist Lorenz Oken hierarchized the human races according to their prevalent sense organ: the white European is thus described as the “eye-man,” the “yellow Asian” as the “ear-man,” and so on, down to the “black African skin-man” at its closure (Oken 1847). This sensorial racism should be kept in mind in any discussion on how to decolonize the study of religion, and academic knowledge production in general (Nye 2018). To decolonize academia necessarily means to question this sensorial hierarchy and recognize it as culture-specific (Lorea 2022) or, as some have framed it, as Enlightenment’s “white mythology” (Jung 2002, 302). Recent works on sound, religious aesthetics and race (Stoever 2016, Crawley 2016) have exposed the problematic whiteness of sound studies and redefined aesthetics and politics of sound and race as mutually constitutive.

What is of central concern for the ethics and practices of knowledge production is to inquire how the visualist hierarchy of epistemological models, sustained by political liberalism and reiterated through Christian missionization, has created prejudices and denigrated not only other senses and other ways of knowing, but also the categories of body, woman, nature, and non-West as ultimate “others” (Jung 2002, 298). The work of scholars like Jung (2002), Classen (2005), Neufeld (2001; 2018), and Devorah (2017), among

others, have persuasively outlined how the hierarchy of the senses in modern European history is entangled with racial and gender discrimination. It is against this backdrop of a *sensist* and sexist epistemology that we propose to integrate sonic ways of knowing and to explore religious sounds beyond the global North as decolonizing tools for scholars and classrooms, toward a multimodal and multisensory future of academic knowledge production.

The majority of the essays in this volume are predominantly grounded in extensive and immersive fieldwork, giving voice to a sonic ethnography—or shall we say an *ethnophony* (Lorea 2022)—of religious communities. A sonic turn, however, does not neatly translate into a turn away from texts. Instead, it offers a sonically aware way to enrich our understanding of texts in their cultural context and performed life.⁵ Some essays combine ethnographic data with the textual study of historical sources, sacred texts, newspaper articles, and media discourses in the Asian languages that are relevant for the case being discussed (see Dean; Sarbadhikary; Henley; Graves).

All the essays in this volume integrate sound recordings and/or audio-visual samples as an inseparable part of their data and their argument. QR codes and external links to uploaded sound samples are inserted within the main text itself, rather than relegated to a footnote. This strategy is a small yet significant step to unsettle the entrenched academic hierarchy that considers text as the only—or the epistemically superior—way of disseminating knowledge. Some of the authors use a sonorous writing style embroidered with onomatopoeic words, integrating sound vignettes to offer sonic data within their prose (see Wartner-Attarzadeh and Weiss; Sarbadhikary). Overall, we hope that not only the concepts and the evidence discussed in these chapters, but also their very form, will contribute toward a future for the post-secular study of culture in which sounds are not considered as merely ancillary or ornamental, but rather part and parcel of academic knowledge production.

Asia as method, beyond the global North: Unbalanced histories of religious sounds

Several traditions rooted in Asia understand sound not only as integral to the cultivation of devotion, but also as a way of sensing and participating in the cosmos. For example, listening to recitations of the Qur'an, attending

5 Some examples of a sonically-aware textual research are Wilke and Moebus (2011) for Sanskrit textual traditions and McMurray (2015) for the Book of Mormon.

public sermons, and engaging in the sonic and kinesthetic techniques of *dhikr* are fundamental aspects of personal practice, as well as public piety for Muslim men (Qureshi 1997; Stille 2020). Tantric understandings of sound as cosmic vibration in premodern South Asia have been crucial in shaping the category of music (Williams 2019) and the development of soteriological techniques of the body that employ sound as path toward liberation (Wulff 1983). These culturally and historically contingent understandings may radically vary from the Western configuration of sound as a separate sense and from the English connotations of the term “sound” as a category to think with. Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes (2019), in their recent *Remapping Sound Studies*, attempt to diversify the voices that constitute the canon of sound studies scholars. They denounce the virtual absence of Asia and Africa in the works and in the bibliographies of sound studies, a field that has largely ignored voices and theories from the global South. There is no equivalent for the laudable *American Religious Sounds Project* (2018) in Asia or about Asia.⁶ Works on sacred music and congregational singing have experienced a resurgence, but they are predominantly set in monotheistic traditions of Western societies.⁷ The recent volume *Hearing Southeast Asia* (Porath 2019) breaks the monotony and offers a unique sound-centered approach to understand the region’s diverse socio-cultural semiotic frames of hierarchy and power.

Our collection of essays underscores the impossibility of conflating Asia with the global South. Indicators of wealth and development of a country like Singapore, where this book was born thanks to the generous funding of the Asia Research Institute, place it firmly within the global North, together with high-income East Asian countries. Within Singapore itself, however, there are several global Souths: socially, economically, or epistemologically marginalized sonic cultures and their practitioners, such as the spirit mediums discussed in Alvin Lim’s chapter and their

6 Directed by Isaac Weiner and Amy DeRogatis, the project started in 2018, funded by the Luce Foundation (see <https://religioussounds.osu.edu/>). Other initiatives intersecting religion and sound studies were equally based in North America; see “Ways of Hearing, Ways of Knowing: Listening for the Sounds of Religion” (2021), at St Louis University (<https://sounds-of-religion.com/>).

7 There is a well-established strand of literature on congregational singing as nurturing community, place and belonging (e.g., Nekola and Wagner 2017, Ingalls et al. 2018), and a Routledge series entirely dedicated to congregational music (preeminently Christian). Jeffrey Summit’s *The Lord’s Song in a Strange Land* (2000) studied the link between Jewish music and identity – spiritual and cultural – in five metropolitan Boston congregations. Monique Ingalls (2018), in *Singing the Congregation*, examines how the widespread adoption of a pop-rock-style congregational music shapes the way evangelical Christians understand worship.

undecipherable dialects. Likewise, this volume resists the neat correspondence between the “West” and the global North. While Italy is thought to be a developed “First World” country, the Roma camp dwellers and their Sufi musical practices analyzed by Marco Coppola do not find space in the modern aesthetic regimes of the global North. Studying religious sounds “beyond the global North” seeks to problematize rather than second any rigid boundary between north and south, west and “rest.” From Kuan-hsing Chen (2010) we borrowed the approach of “Asia as method”: rather than a continent, a geopolitical fact, or a tank for empirical data, Asia is a concept and a method that allows us to depart from methodological nationalism, transcend the focus on one particular post-Cold War “area” (South Asia, Southeast Asia, etc.), and emphasize instead empirical content from Asian sounds and Asian religious communities within and beyond the borders of Asian nation-states in order to mainstream a non-Eurocentric perspective. As a result, religious sounds of the global North appear in this collection as denaturalized, divested of assumptions of universality, and couched in their own localized, historicized and indigenized milieus.

Asia as method is defined by Chen as a procedure “multiply[ing] frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview” (2010, 223) through the unique histories and cultures of Asian societies while acknowledging the West as constitutive of Asian subjectivity. Bringing together in the same volume Sufi chants of Roma minorities, mourning sounds of Shi’a women, and provocative hip movements of young Malay Muslims, we introduce analytical frameworks to understand modes of listening to, engaging with, and perceiving religious sounds from the global South that can be applied to a variety of geographical settings and socio-cultural textures.

Apart from featuring contributions about a plethora of Asian contexts and traditions, some of our contributors base their arguments on theories from Asia, while some ground their empirical data in the ethnography of subcultures, minority sound cultures and subaltern communities. The global South in this book is not found in a fixed cartography of power relationships. Rather, following Sinah Kloß, we use the global South as subversive heuristic practice. Kloß argues that the global South, when not simplistically referred to in terms of geography, has great potential to consolidate and empower “the various social actors that consider themselves to be in subaltern(ized) positionalities of global networks of power” (Kloß 2017, 1). Embracing the global South as process or practice, “new modes of knowledge production are created and learned and more balanced relationships in the global system of knowledge production are achieved” (ibid.).

Instead of considering global North and South as geographies of power, we resist the homogenizing tendency of subsuming cultural environments

under the physical rubric of the Southern or Northern hemisphere. There are global Souths throughout the high-income “First World” countries, as much as there are global Norths interspersed throughout Asia. Building upon the foundations laid by previous scholars (Chen 2010; Kloß 2017; Porath 2019; Steingo and Sykes 2019), our approach is meant to dislodge the empirical and epistemological predominance of the global North in our academic fields, and to move ideologically loaded and Eurocentric understandings of religion *and* sound to the periphery. Ideas of what is constitutive of a religious sound from the global North have been taken as neutral and universal, rather than culturally specific. By showcasing a range of sonic practices and ideologies which are radically different from Protestant-influenced secularist assumptions regarding both religion and sound, we seek to represent a more inclusive and diverse anthro-history of religious sounds.

The focus on the sonic ideologies of Islamic, Indic, Chinese, and Malay worlds in this book, ranging from Singapore to Pakistan and from southern China to the Bay of Bengal, comprises the aesthetics and the politics of a variety of cultural settings. These settings are far from being homogeneously representative of anything quintessentially “Asian.” Our emphasis on Asia is less a spatial focus on a predetermined area, and more a methodological frame that considers “Asian” as already, necessarily “global.” For example, in Rosalind Hackett’s chapter, American electronic music composers reference or integrate Tibetan Buddhist sounds. In Coppola’s chapter, Roma camps in Italy resound with Sufi music and dance that extend into transnational networks in the Balkans, Asia, and the Middle East. Female mourners in private domestic gatherings in Kolkata, in Halder’s chapter, reference the digitized sounds of Pakistani male Shi’a voices. The spaces that we acoustically engage with are not determined by their geopolitical area; rather, they are culturally constructed through religious sounds that offer meanings and values while serving to shape a sense of place and a sense of belonging to transregional networks. Following a critical/post-area studies perspective (Derichs 2014) we adopt the global South as a practice, a springboard that allows us to use Asian experiences and their inter-Asian, global and transnational histories to theorize on broader cultural phenomena. The centrality of Asian scholars and Asia-based case studies in this book is part of our larger commitment to epistemic justice and a contribution, with all its limitations, to the unfinished process of decolonization of knowledge.

This book comprises sixteen chapters organized in five sections. We have organized the chapters in a way that does not reflect area-based divisions, to give emphasis, instead, to inter-Asian and global connections, comparisons,

and resonances in content. We also avoided dividing chapters based on the “religion” that they focus on, because the sounds discussed in these contributions do not necessarily belong to a distinct institutionalized group. Rather, we arranged the content according to what sounds *do* to those who listen, the broader social processes they entail, and the questions they generate. While this means that chapters in the same section discuss similar and related topics, there remain a number of cross-cutting themes that consistently overlap and interconnect chapters across sections. These themes will be discussed and contextualized in Section III.

Section II.

Sounds of tongues and hearts: Semiotic ideologies and devotional bodies

Tongues and hearts represent here embodied metonyms of different dimensions of human sound: the semantic and logocentric aspect of speech on the one hand, and the affective qualities of the voice, often perceived as in tension, on the other. This latent tension paves the way for the analysis of glossolalic, ecstatic utterances of the Singaporean Christian pastors examined by Alvin Lim. In this and virtually all the other essays of this book, dichotomic lines separating language and affect are transgressed. Lim’s essay compares Christian sonic acts of glossolalia—or speaking in tongues, where the tongue acts as a performative gesture of the Holy Spirit—with Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese spirit mediums’ performances as gestures “of the tongue” and “in between tongues,” both requiring a translation to different media in order to be accessible to the devotee. Chinese spirit mediums’ gestures of the tongue include speaking in ancestral dialects that are incomprehensible to many devotees, and piercing the tongue to signal divine presence. In Lim’s essay these sonic acts figure as reproduced and multiplied through digital and social media that expand the temporality of the ritual and also the spatiality of the sacred.

While tongues here represent the complex relationship between body, language, and sonic mediation of divine presence, hearts are seats of remembrance and meditative unity in the yogic, Tantric, and Sufi communities discussed in the essays by Sukanya Sarbadhikary and Marco Romano Coppola. Whether they are Sanskrit mantras or esoteric letters of the Arabic alphabet, connections between sacred phonemes and syllables, loci of the human body, and stages or spheres of the cosmos, are drawn in many Asian traditions. In Coppola’s essay these connections are brought to the surface

through an immersive ethnography of Sufi *dhikr* as it is performed in a Roma camp near Florence, Italy. *Dhikr* performances cultivate presence (*ḥaḍra*) in the heart. Chanting a repetition of sacred syllables enacts a transduction of divine presence, performed together with precise movements of the breath, the body, and accompanying instruments. Phonic, onomatopoeic, pneumatic and sonic dimensions of this complex performance are aimed at establishing a biunivocal correspondence between subject and object of remembrance. Coppola interprets them as an ensoundment of the Sufi philosophical doctrine of synthesis of unity and multiplicity. On the social level, *dhikr* generates social relations through the renewal of bonds and the reaffirmation of the role of the spiritual master, or *shaykh*, while strengthening alliances with members coming from other Western and Eastern orders.

In Sarbadhikary's chapter, a thick web of connections between mantras, parts of the human body, and musical instruments emerges from a study of the conch shell, the flute, and the sacred drum (*khol*) that takes into consideration literary sources from premodern yogic and Tantric texts, as well as ethnographic sources from sonic meditators and craftsmen of musical instruments in contemporary West Bengal (India). Yogic bodies and music instruments are revealed as "mirror-echoes" of each other, with their inner cavities, flows of life-breath, and relations to primordial cosmogonic sound (*nāḍ*). These interwoven correspondences trace the profile of a "Hindu acoustemology," which Sarbadhikary defines as an essentially sonic way of experiencing the sacred in the body.

Gendering religious sounds: Agency, ritual spaces and sonic piety

Scholars interested in the history of the senses did not fail to notice that the senses in modern European history have been gendered—the eye as male and the ear as female, vision as penetrating, hearing as passively receiving, etc. (Schafer 1994, 11–12; Devorah 2017). These representations legitimize visual and written culture as the authoritative male domain, and neglect the ear, associated with the domain of rumor, gossip, fairy-tale, folklore, witchcraft, and the illegitimate knowledge of the oral feminine (see Classen 2005; Neufeld 2001; 2018). In other words, focusing on sound can uncover innovative material to discuss the broader spectrum of religion and gender (Hackett 2018b). Moreover, steering away from authoritative texts and sacred scriptures that are often confined to the male realm of authorized elite priesthood, sonic archives of religious knowledge can provide rich

repositories of evidence to uncover unwritten realms of female ritual agency, religious authority, and expertise (Weiss 2019).

Resounding in public spaces or leaking from the walls and doorways of private homes, religious sounds engender spaces of ritual authority as male, female, or other. They contribute to performing the creation of gender roles and expectations in specific communities. Whereas research on sacred music has often taken for granted male-dominated religious soundscapes as neutral and universal, this section investigates the intersections of sonic agency and authority with gender norms and power relations.

Epsita Halder compares male and female sonic practices during *Muharram* in Kolkata, where Shi'a communities are a double minority. Her chapter is based on a rich ethnography of women's mourning rituals in intimate and private spaces as sites of acoustic citizenship. These sonic practices of Islamic piety do not only entail listening through the ears but rather engulf the whole responsive body. The spatial gender segregation in her study of *Muharram* rituals is reflected in the unequal distribution and access to social media as sites where *Muharram* recitations are posted, shared, and recreated in a transnational Shi'a network. The prohibition to record female mourning voices through digital media in women-only spaces of recitation endows women with the role of gatekeepers who uphold traditional forms. Halder argues that for male mourners the public-private divide can be navigated more fluidly. While it is easier for scholars to notice the public and male-dominated aspects of *Muharram* rituals as territorializing forces making spatial claims (e.g., Werbner 1996; Eisenberg 2015), Halder suggests that private spaces of female mourning are equally powerful sites of sonic contestation and reclamation, although in subtler and oblique ways.

Rosalind Hackett explores the spiritual and religious underpinnings influencing female electronic music composers. Using both Western and Asian case studies, and scrutinizing the use of Asian religious sounds and body techniques by Western experimental composers, Hackett argues that the field of electronic music leads us into new interstitial and intersectional territories that should be grist for the mill of today's gender-aware scholars of religion, notably in the era of less institutionalized forms of religion.

Practitioners of religious sounds (*faqīrs*) in the shrine of the mystic saint Shah Latif, in Pakistan, shared sophisticated narratives on the entanglements between voice and gendered qualities with ethnomusicologist Pei-ling Huang. Huang contextualized these narratives within the practitioners' religiosity, as well as their political identity, to analyze the moral economy of a high-pitched voice that became popular for devotional singing in

the last decades. Like the *dhikr* (Urdu *zikr*) gatherings studied by Marco Romano Coppola, the context of Pei-ling Huang's essay is a ritual of sonic remembrance through techniques of the voice, the body, and the music instrument (the *danbūro*). The musician-devotees perform *hazri* at the shrine of the mystic saint, an act of worship through sitting down to sing for many hours, compared to the performance of *zikr* with both veins of the body and strings of the instrument. Similar to Sarbadhikary's yogic bodies, in this chapter the *faqīrs* and the *danbūro*'s bodies are ethically entwined. The *faqīr*'s voice is interdependent with the physical construction and the spiritual connotations of the *danbūro*'s body. Changes in the technology of the strings resulted into the change of pitch in the *faqīrs*' vocal cords. This new falsetto-sounding voice, interpreted by some as a female voice or as a mourning voice, is entangled with politics of identity, Sindhi nationalism, and the construction of a distinctive Sindhi Sufism. Voice in Huang's chapter is not merely equated with inner agency and identity; vocal pedagogy in religious contexts here navigates intersections of material and metaphorical, individual and sociopolitical.

In the final essay of this section, Talieh Wartner-Attarzadeh and Sarah Weiss compare sonic vignettes from Austria, Iran, and Greece to discuss women's religious sounds in their domestic, secluded and yet never completely "private" ritual spheres of acoustic agency. The authors suggest that church bells and the *adhan* (Islamic call for prayer) remind listeners of the patriarchy embedded in both Christianity and Islam. Such soundscapes are ubiquitous and normalized: just like the male-as-norm in linguistics, these sounds are heard as unmarked and neutral. The cultural domains of women are regulated with more severe restrictions, like the prohibition to consume and engage with secular music, and the taboo that prescribes that female mourning voices should not be heard outside of women-only domestic spaces, or it would hurt male sensibilities. Like Epsita Halder's chapter, Wartner-Attarzadeh and Weiss's sections on *rowzeh* (rituals of mourning in female-only spaces in Iran that combine rhythmic singing with movements of self-flagellation) encompass ritual and analyze *rowzeh* as opportunities for political participation, social mobility and economic independence. As multidimensional performances intersecting power, piety and pleasure, female mourning rituals in Iran can provide occasions to share burdens, forge social connections, increase women's mobility and enhance their ritual agency. More broadly, by applying gender filters to the study of soundscapes, the chapter provides nuanced cultural information to demonstrate how sounds might be gendering space and how gender ideologies can be ensounded.

Traveling sounds—Across boundaries and borderlands

Religious sounds are unlikely to be constituted by fixed repertoires in unchanged and static settings within a particular locale. As much as they are situated, emplaced, and contextually understood, religious sounds are always already traveling archives of religious and embodied knowledge, circulating within inter-Asian and transnational flows of people, items and ideas. Not only do they travel along with the mobility of migrants, refugees, nomadic communities, and diasporas, they also traverse and trespass the imagined boundaries that separate different religious identities within the same locality. Sounds hardly belong to one religion or the other, and often travel unattached from the burden of doctrine to navigate multiple sectarian boundaries. This section explores the meanings and the implications of traveling archives of religious sounds across such borders.

In the first two essays of this section, religious sounds are employed by displaced communities in order to perform their imagination of homeland (Lorea 2017), to consolidate collective memories, but also to heal from marginalization and to assert distinctive cultural identities in their new social settings. Kazi Fahmida Farzana's essay is focused on the Islamic-inflected poetics of sorrowful songs (*tarana*) of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. *Taranas* help Rohingya refugees cope with the fears and insecurity of displaced life, while affirming cultural identity and a sense of dignity. These songs work as archives of social memory, as source of pride, and as building material for resilience and resistance. *Taranas* are also a vehicle to address complaints to Allah. Building on an Islamic vocabulary to express pain and grief, these songs articulate expectations for divine justice and aspirations for social justice in this life.

Tasaw Lu discusses a festival-as-ritual in northern Taiwan where sounds and dances of displaced people from Yunannese borderlands articulate a sense of distinction, dignity and pride. The invented sounding of "exotic borderlands" is staged for the consumption of cultural tourists. Just like the Rohingya refugees discussed in Farzana's essay, the community studied by Lu has lost their territorial homeland. For this immigrant group, annual festival-as-ritual and the rituals within this festival are ways to reconnect with their ancestors, their imaginary homeland, their past and the cultural traditions that they had to leave behind. The chapter is focused on *dage*, literally "singing and dancing together," as recontextualized from the Thai-Myanmar borderlands into Taiwan. *Dage* in this chapter is not only echo of ancestral knowledge transmitted and passed down from the older generations; it is dynamic and skillfully reinvented in eclectic ways. The

Dage Parade within the annual festival performs a shift from the secular to the sacred space, also marked by a shift from recorded music to live music. When Burmese monks start chanting Theravada Buddhist verses, the soundscape is sanctioned as holy and ready for the performance of reinvented ancestral rituals dedicated to elements of nature.

Religious sounds might not belong to one or any particular institutional religion. South Asia has musical and ritual traditions that draw from both Muslim and Hindu heritage, and critique the very idea of a boundary separating Hindus and Muslims. The final essay of this section discusses the potential of religious sounds to penetrate the porosity of religious spheres that have been constructed as mutually “other.” The ensoundment of genres like Baul music, shared across the Indo-Bangladeshi border, are not specific to a particular community but rather constitute an aesthetic ground shared across people affiliated to different religious backgrounds. In Ben Krakauer’s essay, the possibility of a shared religious soundscape entails that Baul songs’ syncretic origins and melodies have the potential to act as a bulwark against the increasing influence of right-wing Hindu nationalist politics. Like in Farzana’s essay, here too sounds have the potential to build resistance. In this case Krakauer suggests that sounded repertoires of Bengali songs might constitute a threat to neocolonialist powers that would replace an inclusive Bengali grassroots tradition with imported forms of Hindu chauvinism and communal intolerance. Baul songs have an anti-sectarian message that operates not only through the semantic meaning conveyed through their song texts. Following Kaur (2016), Krakauer understands listening as an affective practice that can constitute an epistemic site where ethicality is experienced as embodied sensation rather than intellectual reasoning. Baul songs have witnessed a veritable revival, but will their anti-sectarian and egalitarian message be heard and felt in the performative contexts of revivalism? Krakauer’s essay on folk music revival, religion, and politics in West Bengal acts as a bridge to the next section on “Sonic Politics—Hearing Identity,” in which three essays collectively discuss the public interface of religious soundscapes with questions of socio-political power, authority, and identity formations.

Sonic politics—Hearing identity

Why is Jamaican dancehall music problematic but also very popular among young Malay Muslims in Singapore? Whose body is allowed to move in what way, and which music-dance complex is authorized to express a Muslim

body in a cosmopolitan Asian city? Who is authorized to hear the sounds of a sacred *gamelan* in Bali and why is it forbidden to record it? How loud is too loud for the Islamic call for prayer in Indonesia? Who is allowed to complain about religious noise, and who decides if salvific sound is a public nuisance?

As scholars in sound studies have noted, the ear, contrary to the eye, has no eyelid to shut down perception. When sound pervades public space and marks it with its religious connotations, the distinction between sacred sound, noise, art or nuisance is subjected to contested definitions. At the same time, sounds influence the ways in which bodies move, behave, and perceive a space. We may think of the different ways in which we move in a library, on a stage, in a temple, or in the kitchen. Bodily movements and perceptions hinge on religiously shaped sensibilities that influence how one should dance, listen, or avoid listening altogether to certain sounds.

The essays of this section complicate the discourse around religions, soundscapes, and politics of power by providing a detailed analysis of dancehall as ambiguously profane sound among Singaporean Muslims (Woods), ritual performance and the politics of recording in Bali (Aryandari), and the controversies surrounding amplified religious sounds in Indonesia and in the Netherlands (Henley). The essays are knitted together by the underlying threads of sonic identity politics, religious authority, and power.

Orlando Woods's chapter discusses how music and dance styles are globally circulated and consumed, and yet they are never neutral vis-à-vis the sonic ideologies of emplaced ethnoreligious communities. Young Muslims do most of their production and contestations of difference in the world of popular consumer culture. In multicultural and consumerist Singapore, dancehall—with its signature “bumper-grinding” sexually explicit choreography, is perceived as problematically profane sound, irreconcilable with sounds and kinesthetics associated with mainstream Malay Muslims. And yet it provides young Malay Muslims with ways of being different from traditional expectations and normative behaviors.

Citra Aryandari discusses recording as spatially and ritually contingent in the power dynamics of Bali, with its complex performative heritage and sonic-sacred ideologies. In the village community of Tenganan Pegringsingan annual ritual festivals featuring the celestial *gamelan* cannot be captured by any kind of audiovisual recording technology. This prohibition is believed to maintain the ritual space pure and it increases the sacrality of the ritual, as it makes it unique and unrepeatable. Aryandari compares this prohibition with her own recording practices for analytical purpose as an ethnomusicologist, and with the ubiquity of audio and video recordings in other performative contexts of Balinese society, such as the annual Bali Arts Festival. The act of

recording emerges as built upon power relationships and power distribution between insiders and outsiders, and between sacred village spaces and secular stages accessible to cultural tourism. Recording technologies are in their turn understood along pre-existing theological considerations about purity, pollution, and secrecy.

The last chapter of this section is on religious sound and social conflict. Religion is often a key element of ethnicity and other forms of collective identity in Asia, so conflicts and complaints over religious noise can be symptoms and causes of broader tensions within society. David Henley's detailed study of public sound controversies over the use of loudspeakers by Indonesian mosques includes the events which led in 2018 to the imprisonment of a non-Muslim ethnic Chinese woman who had complained about noise from the local mosque. Complaints about the volume of religious sounds, in this case the *adhan* or Islamic call to prayer, are perceived as offending the native majority and threatening its supremacy in the public sphere. The essay suggests that there is a close parallel between reformist approaches to religious sound in Indonesia and secularist approaches to Islamic "noise" in European countries. Both are manifestations of what Henley calls acoustic nativism, inspired by majoritarian identity politics.

Ensoundment and/as embodiment: Notes and noises of ritual performance

Sharing a collective experience of sound blurs boundaries between individual bodies of practitioners and creates a single collective body of devotion (Csordas 1997, 109; Eisenlohr 2018, 117). Underlying structures of sensing the world and communicating with the divine unfold through the ensoundment and/as embodiment of religious sounds. Religious sounds reflect cosmologies and ways of relating emotionally with the divine. The three essays of this concluding section, based on ethnographic and literary sources from East, South and Southeast Asia, discuss the embodiment and the ensoundment of cosmologies, liturgical frameworks, and emotional modalities of devotion. Religious sounds in this section are ensoundments and embodiments of both spiritual and scriptural worlds.

In the first essay of this section, Kenneth Dean guides the reader through the textual-historical sources that help shape conceptions of sound and ritual music in Chinese Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions. Each of these diverse conceptualizations of sound find a place within polyphonic rituals in contemporary Southeast China. Masters of Ceremony ring bells

and play drums to alert the gods, temple committees invite opera troupes, brass bands, karaoke singers and disco dancers, while massive amounts of fireworks are exploded. Polyphonic rituals are characterized by a sonic overload and sonic excess where multitudes of sounds signify a multitude of liturgical frameworks at play.

Nathan Porath elaborates on his concept of ensoundment to communicate the richly phonic way in which indigenous people in Riau (Sumatra) make invisible beings audible and therefore explicit, opening a channel for them to interact with, separate from, and ultimately heal human beings. The chapter is focused on *dikei*, shamanic healing rituals that bring human and ethereal beings together for the purpose of healing and for the reconstruction of boundaries between human and ethereal dimensions. These numinous ensoundments are the acoustic icons of a presence making itself and its wishes known to humans through the vocal cords of the possessed shaman.

In the final essay of this section, Eben Graves contends that the oral-performative sphere can expand and enrich the textual archive. Like the essays by Sarbadhikary and by Dean, this chapter employs textual research (manuscripts and anthologies of Vaishnava *kīrtan* songs) and combines it with ethnography of the embodied and performed musical tradition. Beyond the written canon, embodied knowledge and orally-aurally transmitted practices of the performers include a vast repertoire of “interstitial lyrics” that are inextricably tied to the body of the singer-devotee. The physical body acts as an archive of songs and as a medium for the affective aims of lyrical performance. As interstitial lyrics progress in the song, fingers move upwards on the harmonium keyboard; a rise in melodic pitch and in emotional intensification is joined with an increase in tempo and rhythmic density of the accompanying instruments. In Alvin Lim’s case gestures of the tongue and spirit mediums’ speech needed a translation for the devotee. Performers of interstitial lyrics in Eben Graves’s case also provide acts of translation, making archaic poetic song texts accessible to the contemporary devotee, an act that Graves interprets as sonic equality. Sonic equality is the principle that all listeners are entitled to words of salvation. This equality might not be reflected in socio-political equality, but it is rooted in sound and equal participation in salvific sonic experiences.

The contributors of this volume offer us an acoustemology of the post-secular in the sense that they not only engage in fine-grained analysis of sounds shared by particular religious groups (Gaudiya Vaishnavas in Bengal, Roma Sufis in Florence, Chinese Daoists and so on) but also consider the clashes between religious, secular, and assumedly secular sonic ideologies (e.g., Henley; Wood) and the ways in which ethereal, ultramundane and

Asian sounds are mobilized by secular composers to evoke spiritually charged atmospheres (e.g., Hackett). The affordances of a post-secular approach enabled Tasaw Lu to consider a festival for Taiwanese cultural tourists as ritual, with a distinct temporality and with the use of sounds marking the festival space as sacred in particular phases of its course. Through the filter of the post-secular, our authors work on the acoustemology of communities that may not transmit genres straightforwardly labeled as “sacred music,” and nevertheless share precise ideas of which sounds in their cultural contexts are sanctioned as transgressive and prohibited, and which sounds are appropriate, spiritually powerful, or too noisy.

The authors of this volume engage with Asia not only as a region, but as a methodological choice; siting and citing Asian communities, networks and sounds, they provide data and theories that shift the position of the global North to one of the many possible points of reference. The essays of this volume demonstrate in concrete terms how Asia may feature not only as “object” of research, but as a platform to develop concepts that are useful to theorize religious sounds globally. For example, Wartner-Attarzadeh and Weiss employ women’s ritual sounds in Iran to theorize more broadly about religious sounds as instruments of power that gender particular spaces as male- or female-dominated. Henley analyzes the amplification of the call for prayer in Indonesia and then applies his findings to the context of northern Europe, using “Asian” material to reflect upon the sonic ideology of majoritarian nationalism at large. Hackett’s chapter unsettles the frontiers of Asian religious sound, discussing the global circulation of Asian religiosities and sonic techniques in the work of Western electronic music composers and their biographies.

In this sense, the chapters embody Asia as method as a postcolonial strategy to “release ourselves from an obsession with the West and Western knowledge, theories and epistemologies” and they suggest “a move toward Asia as a possible way of shifting points of reference and breaking away from the East-West binary structure” (Chen 2010, 215–6). The contributors present a range of theories of religious sounds from Asia: the “pipes of heaven” in the early Chinese sources discussed by Kenneth Dean, the primordial vibration, *nād*, that pervades the sonic cosmos and the perforated bodies of humans and instruments discussed by Sarbadhikary, and emic theories of mantras, the powerful linguistic yet asemantic syllables (called *montō* in Porath’s Indonesian context). These theories can dialogue with and enrich the fields of religion and sound studies, moving away from the latently Protestant secularism of their epistemological underpinnings. They do so through new definitions of religious sounds and a diversity of voices

that succeed in “multiplying frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview” (Chen 2010).

Together, these chapters offer a wide array of examples for what it means to study religious sounds beyond the global North. They do so by implementing a post-secular perspective, integrating religion in and for sound studies, and offering case studies that, while grounded in distinct locales, can inspire analytical frameworks that can be abstracted and applied to other global contexts.

In the sections that follow, we contextualize the sonorous empirical data of the volume’s essays within larger debates that are pertinent to a post-secular acoustemology. With particular reference to our main foci—senses, media, and power—we discuss religious sounds in relation to the body sensorium, old and new media, and attention to power structures. These themes resonate throughout the volume and cut across its different sections.

Section III.

A multisensory and synesthetic approach to religious sounds

European modern ideologies of sound “in itself” or sound “as such”—as a separate analytical and cognitive container—have a specifically colonial and Christian heritage (Steingo and Sykes 2019, 23). Whereas several works on music and sound only address the auditory field of perception, one of the premises of this volume is that it is not possible to discuss sound as compartmentalized from other senses and from other locally relevant categories of reality, whether human or beyond human.

Throughout history, social-sacred space has been constructed through sound, smell and touch, a synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk* to be experienced by all senses simultaneously (Ergin 2008). While mostly visual terminology is utilized in architecture to discuss a place’s depth and height, color and light, Nina Ergin argued that an Ottoman mosque in the sixteenth century constituted a spiritual experience based on the auditory and the olfactory as much as on the visual reception of the divine. Sounds relate to tactile experiences, produce the feeling of spaces as warm or cold, friendly or unfriendly, solemn or casual. Archeoacoustical works (Pentcheva 2017) have challenged the priority accorded to ocularist and literary registers in order to direct critical attention to other ways of knowing the cosmos and mediating the divine.

Following a call for a “democracy of senses” (Bull and Back 2003) sound can be considered as interdependent and intimately connected with the broader sensorium. Instead of simplistically juxtaposing sound to vision,

the eye to the ear, the literate to the oral/aural, attention to sound necessarily requires attention to the entire body including proprioceptive and kinesthetic dimensions—ways of perceiving and moving the body in space. Following Ingold's suggestion that people not only hear sounds but "hear *in* sound," Nathan Porath's essay argues that people also see in sound and feel in sound, and therefore he analyzes sonic rituals of shamanic healing (*dikei*) as necessarily intersensorial experiences.

Our perception works in complex and fascinating ways through synesthesia—when perception in one sense triggers sensation in another one, like the warmth of a color, or the sharpness of a sound. When we hear the high-pitch buzzing sound of a mosquito flying close to our ears, for example, our skin becomes hyper-sensitive so that we are able to feel even the most delicate pressure of its legs landing on our body and we can act to protect ourselves from a bite. Different sensory frameworks of being-in-the-world have elaborated the division and the relation among various senses in culturally specific ways. Religions played a central role in developing techniques to sharpen, attune, control, master the senses and regulate their synesthetic interaction.

The materiality of sound and its capacity of being felt within the body puts it in a close relationship with touch, a "special and most personal sense" according to Schafer that is bound to meet with sound "where the lower frequencies of audible sound pass over to tactile vibrations (at about 20 hertz)" persuading him that hearing is "a way of touching at a distance" (Schafer 1994). Touch, the sense that conveys compassion, reciprocity and social obligation, conducts religious sounds through the body and the space, and changes our ways of perceiving both space and selves. Whoever has danced in a club has experienced the feeling of sensing low frequencies as vibrating inside the body. These vibrations can be felt in haptic and somatic ways by hearing-impaired persons—which is to say, sound is not only about "hearing" and calls for a more holistic, multisensory approach.

Marco Romano Coppola's essay exemplifies this approach as it describes *zikr* in Roma camps as pertaining to multiple sensory registers, encompassing sound, breathing, visual, proprioceptive, kinesthetic and imaginative spheres, while generating an all-embracing experience that he terms "hyperaesthesia." In this heightened sensory experience, participants' ordinary modality of attending to the world is altered.

The sonic performances of religious experience discussed in this volume are often accompanied by mutual touch, shaking hands, collective crying, hips moving, twirling in circles, hugging, jumping, burning incense, or reciprocally touching feet. Religious sounds do not only entail the modalities

of perception that are associated with the auditory system, but involve multiple sensory domains. This explains why Epsita Halder's chapter defines the sonic landscape of Muharram *majlises* (ritual mourning) as going beyond what one listens to with the ears, "engulfing" the responsive bodies of the participants. We may term this approach "synesthetic," following Van Ede's call for placing attention on synesthesia and on the ways in which the senses, rather than being separated in vacuum-sealed fields, blur and relate to each other in different interactive manners (2009, 67–68).

Culturally-framed attunements and habits regarding religious sounds shape the ways in which the body is supposed or not supposed to move (see Woods), which emotions are to be felt together with a certain repertoire of songs (see Graves), and which distinct conceptualizations of the body, inner and outer, emerge (Sarbadhikary). The body itself might be considered as extending into the music instrument played for worship (Huang), or as extending into components of audiovisual electronic media such as ear-phones and cameras (Lim). The playing/listening/dancing body of devotees is socialized into religious sounds that expect, forbid, or variously allow for producing movement—clapping hands, moving fingers through musical instruments, standing up versus sitting down, activating the vocal cords, or, on the other hand, restricting mobility, covering up body parts, performing stillness, and maintaining silence. According to Patrick Eisenlohr (2018, 4):

[C]ulturally attuned bodies and selves also ascribe power to sound. ... sounds contain suggestions of movement that bodies perceive. However, in order for sonic suggestions of movement to seize someone in a religious setting ..., they also must pass through bodily attunement and interact with religious and cultural values and ideologies that mediate the power of sound.

Focusing on the sonic dimensions of religion, and on the religious dimensions of sound, the chapters in this volume collectively remind us that sound does not sit in a neatly delimited sphere of sensory activity; culturally-shaped ways of organizing the senses are played out in the performance of religious sounds. At the same time, these synesthetic sensory engagements are not only reflective, but also determinative of religious community values.

Media, sonic mediations and technologies of communication

What are the implications at play when religiously charged sounds, like those of a sacred *gamelan*, get recorded, digitized, and commodified? What

happens to vernacular Shi'a mourning voices when they get recorded and circulated through social media? What is the impact on orally transmitted spiritual songs traditionally taught by a Baul guru, when these are learned through mobile phones or YouTube? Similar questions, addressed in the course of this book, remind us that a concentration on religious sounds necessarily reflects upon the new and changing relationships between religion, technicity and media.

While the phenomenality of sound is often understood as intangible, incorporeal and ephemeral (Cox 2011; Dyson 2009), religious sounds are inseparable from the materiality of their mediated and mediatic representation. Whether they are conveyed by human tongues or by a YouTube channel, religious sounds are mediated even when they are understood as ensouning the immediacy of divine presence. Different media, however, are located in different hierarchical positions of authenticity and authority. Religions often sanction, legitimize or prohibit particular forms of mediation. Discussing religious sounds as mediated by spirit mediums, social media, music instruments, or written corpora, several chapters in this volume address the theme of media, sonic mediations and technologies of communication.

Alvin Lim's chapter brings examples of Chinese spirit mediums and Charismatic preachers uploaded online and shared via social media. Their sounds mark the cyberspace as sacred, while the use of these media creates new audiences and allows devotees to participate without being physically present. Epsita Halder's chapter considers Shi'a mourning techniques performed live during *Muharram* rituals and also their recorded versions available on CD and VCD and on the internet. She argues that Shi'a women are not public actors in digital religion, because it is forbidden to record and share their mourning voices. However, their vocal techniques do not remain indifferent to the trends and styles made popular by the transnational circulation of male mourners' performances on social media. David Henley's chapter on sonic controversies around "religion out loud" (Weiner 2013) in Indonesia and in the Netherlands reveals that debates on the amplification of the call for prayer started as soon as loudspeakers became available. The introduction of this technology of amplification in Indonesian mosques was not taken for granted and it required theological debates. As late as 1977, one major Jakarta mosque still resisted using loudspeakers on the grounds that these "did not exist at the time of the prophet," reminding us that culturally informed and theologically inflected ideas regulate the use of audiovisual media and technologies (Eisenlohr 2009; Campbell 2010).

Religion and media scholars do not only refer to modern mass and social media (radio, television, online interactions etc.) but more broadly to the

older and newer technologies of communication that are inextricably part of all religious traditions as mediations between different planes of existence. Earlier works tended to juxtapose oral/aural and written/visual as two irreconcilable mediascapes pertaining to radically different worlds (Ong 1967). However, in our discussions, bodies of songs, digital soundscapes, and corpora of texts, are all part of a plethora of carriers within the broad assortment of media that religious communities have employed throughout their dynamic history. The influence is bilateral: religion shapes the media while the media change the message.

Sounds, texts and new media appear as constitutive and supportive of religious communities, together with pictorial representations, material icons, shared food items, embodied techniques and plentiful other forms (Meyer 2011). Rather than bifurcating the domains of the sounded and the textual, we establish methodological premises that do not implicitly consider the textual as superior and the sounded as pre-textual, less refined or in any way less authoritative.

At the same time, the sonic turn does not imply a turn away from texts. Several authors in this volume (particularly Sarbadhikary, Dean and Graves) demonstrate that combining textual-historical study of written sources with a sonically-aware ethnography of living religious communities can enrich and expand our understanding of those textual traditions. In Sarbadhikary's essay this mixed methodology provides a bridge between the world of texts, the world of affect, and entextualized bodies in yogic-Tantric traditions of religious sound. In Graves's essay, a focus on the embodied knowledge of *kīrtan* performers and their repertoire of lyrics can enrich the written canon while questioning its politics of selection, edition and omission of song text segments. Kenneth Dean's sophisticated knowledge of sound theories from ancient China, such as the ontogenetic material flows of sound energy in early Daoist discussions of the "pipes of heaven," allows him to draw connections with the multiple layers of ritual sound that animate religious performance in contemporary southern China.

The technicity of religion engenders anxieties and concerns relating to originality and authenticity. Scholars, however, have underlined the inseparability of religious practices from media, including the latter's technical dimensions. Hent de Vries has pointed out that "mediatization and the technology it entails form the condition of possibility for all revelation, for its revealability, so to speak. An element of technicity belongs to the realm of the 'transcendental,' and vice versa" (de Vries 2001, 28). Pei-ling Huang's essay reminds us of this nexus between technicity and religious sound. Her chapter documents a change in the vocal technique of *faqīrs*

who needed to modulate their voice to a higher pitch due to new material for *danbūro* strings that appeared in the markets in the twentieth century. Makers replaced earlier strings made from the softer zinc to the stronger steel, which allowed *faqīrs* to tighten the strings to higher pitches than before.

Whether distributed in the cheap bazar of small, privately-owned studio recordings, sold weekly at the dusty entrance of temples and shrines, played on loudspeakers at pilgrimage sites, or recorded on mobile phones of pious followers, audible media are rarely a single or coherent product, but rather a process that involves the creativity, interests and concerns of diverse parties, enclosing multiple layers of meaning. Religious sounds thus call for attention to the various forms, formats and technologies of communication that mediate and circulate them.

Sound, space, and power: Claiming and contesting the auditory landscape

With the success of Murray Schafer's (1994) concept of the *soundscape*—the totality of sounds perceived by an individual in a given spatial setting—social scientists sharpened their ears to study the cultural significance of sounding, silencing, musicking, as well as noise-making (Porcello et al. 2010). Some have criticized the term soundscape for its static and landscape-like underpinnings (Ingold 2011, 136–141), and the way it borrows from the visual domain, alienating the sensed experience of sound. Others felt uncomfortable with its holistic approach, which might conceal, or flatten, the many underlying contestations and debates that determine which sounds are allowed in the public space, and how their legal status can strengthen or threaten dominant ethics (Sykes 2015). Alain Corbin introduced the idea of the *auditory landscape* in his study of church bells in the French countryside (1998) and the way they shaped people's understandings of time and place. Several essays in this volume adopt the conceptual frameworks of soundscape and auditory landscape to reflect on place-making through sound and sonic contestations in the public sphere.

As Henley declares at the beginning of his chapter, sound “is a very public thing.” Religious sounds in multicultural cities claim territorial sovereignty and reinforce communities while establishing boundaries (Werbner 1996). Urban religious soundscapes also function as exacerbated platforms of intercultural tensions among religious and assumedly secular communities. Clashes around noise and loudness emerge as even more consequential than

doctrinal discord among majoritarian groups and their “others” (Weiner 2013; Tamimi Arab 2017; Henley, this volume).

Shared experiences of sound help migrants and displaced communities to make a place one’s own, turning a new space of dwelling into a place of belonging (Lu’s and Farzana’s chapters). Patrick Eisenlohr critically examined the scholarship on the relationship between religious soundscapes and place-making, which is often based on urban, predominantly Christian, and North Atlantic contexts. This literature has the tendency to neglect lived understandings of sound, or sonic efficacy—what sacred sound actually *does* to the people who are creating, listening to, and interpreting it. Eisenlohr balanced the lacunae inherent in the term “soundscape” by introducing the concept of *sonic atmospheres*, which highlights “somatic intermingling with sound” (2018, 13).

Such “somatic intermingling with sound” together with its intrusive potential of being collectively audible, makes religious sounds simultaneously public and private. The public performance of religious sound is an exceptional arena to interrogate power negotiations in spaces of religious diversity. Jim Sykes has focused on the ban on Tamil ritual drumming during Thaipusam procession in Singapore to discuss the ethical life of so-called secular cities (Sykes 2015). Mariam Goshadze studied the legal and inter-religious implications of the one-month “ban on drumming and noise-making” that every year is supposed to welcome visiting indigenous spirits in Ghana’s capital Accra (Goshadze 2018). The dynamics portrayed by these authors remind us that the ear offers a path into relations of power. Essays in this volume document complex social phenomena at play when religious sounds seep out of the walls of the places of worship where they are supposed to belong and flood into the streets and the public soundscape (see Henley; Wartner-Attarzadeh and Weiss). But they also contribute to the understanding of the fluid relationship between private and public space where sound is concerned, suggesting that private and restricted ritual spaces can be as political and as “territorializing” as public processions (Halder).

Religious sounds mark spaces as sacred not only in the urban context of physical space but also in the inner space of the body and in the cyberspace of the internet. For example, livestreaming and sharing sonic rituals online can turn the computer into a sacred place (Karapanagiotis 2010; Lim). Installing mantras in particular places of the subtle body, Tantric and yogic practitioners make their body divine; in the same traditions ritual music instruments are understood as reproducing the sound of the primordial mantras (Sarbadhikary’s chapter). In Porath’s chapter, the dimensions of sound and space intersect when the shaman mobilizes religious sounds to

bring together the cosmological spaces inhabited by human and by ethereal beings. Building upon and enhancing the literature on sound, space and place-making, the essays in this volume discuss the multiple ways in which religious sounds navigate public and private domains, mark places as sacred, project gendered connotations upon spaces, and claim territorial belonging.

Sonic bonding and belonging: Making community through sound

Steering away from outward soundscapes and investigating more intimate, felt dimensions of religious sounds, scholars have questioned the neutrality of laws regulating religious noise as “public nuisance,” and proposed instead a genuine concern for the respect of “sonic efficacy” (Sykes 2015, 409) as it is felt and interpreted by religious practitioners. Neglecting the emic importance accorded to sonic efficacy, religious sound cultures have been systematically erased through restrictive regulations in colonial and neocolonial contexts.

Oppressive regimes identified the power of drumming, singing, and sharing sonic experiences as a threat, due to their capacities to articulate resistance and to strengthen the sense of *communitas* (Finnegan 2003). Entire genres have been banned, considered obscene or incompatible with new standards of morality during colonial times (Banerjee 1987). Drumming among enslaved and indentured people was systematically banned in plantations (Rath 2000) throughout America and across the shores of the Indian Ocean. Christianizing and colonizing forces often coalesced to criminalize indigenous musical cultures, leading to a musical epistemicide in Africa (Chikowero 2015). These processes are by no means the monopoly of European colonialism. Sufi musical practices in central Asia have been threatened by the pressure of Wahhabi interpretations of music as un-Islamic as well as by the Russian influence of the early Soviet period (During 2005). Research on religion and sound can help to uncover forms of sonic epistemicide and musical torture (Harris 2020), while fostering an academic commitment to epistemic justice (de Sousa Santos 2014). Several essays in this volume explore religious sounds in the context of hegemonic domination and resistance. In Krakauer’s chapter the sonic epistemology of Baul songs has the potential to resist the neocolonial power of right-wing nationalist politics and of religious fundamentalism. As argued by Farzana in her chapter, songs allow Rohingya refugees to indirectly resist the authorities that they cannot openly confront. Hackett’s chapter discusses how the democratization of electronic musical technologies opened the

doors for contemporary women composers and performers to experiment and collaborate with their sounds, bodies, voices and recordings.

Emphasizing the permeability of boundaries between humans and their surroundings, including the environment and also other humans and more-than-human beings, the “felt-body” of people listening to religious sounds has an intrinsically social dimension: it is central to the ability of music to communitize (Eisenlohr 2018, 117). Acoustemology in a post-secular frame can underscore the tremendous potential of religious sounds for communities’ cohesion, resilience, and political mobilization, particularly in the context of marginalized (Farzana’s chapter), diasporic (Lu’s chapter), and minoritarian groups (Shi’a women in Halder’s chapter). At the same time, while religious sounds co-create communities, they also shape processes of exclusion and othering (Henley’s chapter).

Michel Foucault’s most famous diagram of power was the panopticon, but he also cited the confessional as an auditory technology of power. In the confessional, “the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing” (Foucault 1979, 64).⁸ Going beyond the ocularcentric dimensions of surveillance, studies on religious sound contribute to alternative understandings of manifestations of power, resistance, and dissent. For example, in Wartner-Attarzadeh and Weiss’s chapter, mourning rituals in private spaces where women cannot be seen and *overseen* by men are occasions for women to shape their political participation, economic independence, and ritual authority in indirect ways. In Lim’s chapter, the glossolalic and incomprehensible speech acts performed by the tongue of religious specialists are interpreted as acts of resistance to Singapore’s Public Order Act and language policies which established English and Mandarin as hegemonic. Speaking in tongues is an act of dissent that cannot be censored and censored by the authorities of the nation-state.

A large corpus of ethnomusicological literature on displaced and diasporic communities is focused on the community-making aspect of music, its role in shaping and consolidating a sense of belonging, a practice of identity (Mooney 2008; Poole 2004), and a performance of homeland (Lorea 2017). In Paul Gilroy’s idea of a diasporic, transnational and transoceanic black nation that is shared on several shores of the Black Atlantic, the circulation

8 Complementary to this view, I have examined how heterodox subaltern groups of practitioners employ silence (maintaining the esoteric secret) as a device of power to protect themselves from persecution and to awake a sense of authenticity and superiority of the spiritual teaching of low caste gurus (Lorea 2018).

and performance of black music builds *ties of affiliation and affect* (1993, 16). In a similar manner, in the Sikh diaspora, sounding of sacred song (*kīrtan*) in transnational spaces animates affective alliances that enable the building of local and global religious communities (Kaur 2018). In Farzana's chapter, diasporic songs of Islamic piety (*taranas*) are repositories of social memories, of lost pasts and shared visions of the future. In Lu's chapter, religious sounds eclectically borrowed from the Thai-Myanmar borderlands are reappropriated by a displaced group in Taiwan as social tools for recognition and assertion.

Works at the intersection of religion and sound can add to our understanding of communities by exploring the ways in which identities are created, sustained, or renegotiated through sound. Traditional music and dance are not simply transmitted from generation to generation; they are also contested, reinvented, or rejected by young generations. For example, young Malay Muslims in Singapore might prefer Jamaican dancehall to traditional Malay dance in their effort to challenge Islamic modernity in a multicultural, neoliberal urban space (Woods). In Aryandari's and Lu's chapters, cultural identities sustained through traditional music and dance are staged and displayed in festivals consumed by outsiders. With sonic evocations of golden pasts, mythological times and ancestral traditions, these festivals connect the community with a ritual sense of temporality. These out-of-the-ordinary rhythms, along with ensoundments of future aspirations, remind us that religious sounds have the capacity to produce the "time out of time" of a festival (Falassi 1987).

Underlying several contributions to this volume is the notion that subjectivities gather around shared sonic practices as "communities of sound" (Gopinath 2005).⁹ Actors and actions constituting the domain of religious sounds—chanting, preaching, mourning, singing, dancing, and listening—are embedded within broader social negotiations, identity formations, and power dynamics. Unsettling and expanding existing discussions on senses, media, and power, an acoustemology of the post-secular can make sense of religious sounds as productive of subjectivities and collectivities that coalesce around audible aesthetic formations. This volume demonstrates, in short, that religious sounds are not only produced by certain religious traditions, but rather produce religious communities, shaping the ethical self and sensitivity of those who participate.

9 Gayatri Gopinath (2005) discussed the idea of communities of sound in relation to British Asian bands of the 1990s and explains that it is suggestive of ways of organizing collectivity that bypass the realm of the visible, in a context where British Asians are rendered invisible or hypervisible (through racial stereotypes) within the dominant racial landscape in the UK.

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1 Speaking in Tongues in Comparative Contexts and their Digital Soundscapes

Alvin Eng Hui Lim

Abstract

In Singapore, spirit mediums are assisted by a *zhuotou* who receives, translates, and performs instructions from the medium possessed by a deity. In the context of Charismatic Christianity in Singapore, the practice is somewhat paralleled, but the pastor is the source and producer of incomprehensible words. This performative act signals both the pastor addressing God as well as his supposed intimacy with God. This chapter examines and compares the two contexts in terms of performativity, exploring this “sharing of cultural vocabularies” by focusing on the specific bodily gesture of “speaking in tongues” and comparing the practice of spirit dialogue found in localized Chinese popular religions with the megachurches’ practice of speaking in tongues or glossolalia.

Keywords: spirit mediums, charismatic pastors, megachurch, glossolalia, performativity, Singapore

Interpretation and translation are sometimes a feature of spirit mediumship. In the context of popular *tangki* practice in Singapore, spirit mediums are assisted by a *zhuotou* (桌头 in Mandarin or *tou-thau* in Hokkien) who receives direct instructions, words of advice, or divine messages from the medium possessed by a deity. Upon receiving those words, often in a Chinese dialect and sometimes incomprehensible or inaudible to everyone except the assistant, he is then charged with the task of interpreting them and conveying the message to the devotees. In the context of Pentecostal Christianity in Singapore, the practice is somewhat paralleled, but the pastor is the source

and producer of incomprehensible words. This performative act signals both the pastor addressing God as well as his supposed intimacy with God.

This chapter examines and compares the two contexts in terms of performativity. For Terence Chong, Christianity's emergence in Singapore acted as a form of cultural disavowal and arose because new middle-class Christians were seeking new socio-cultural identities that were different from their parents and kin. Often converting from Taoism or other Chinese folk religions to Christianity, Chong describes this conversion as a "class transcendentalism," i.e., from a working-class background to more English-proficient middle-class and a "synchronized act of cultural distancing and sharing of cultural vocabularies" (Chong 2016, 100). This chapter will explore this "synchronized act of cultural distancing and sharing of cultural vocabularies" by focusing on the specific bodily gesture of "speaking in tongues", by proposing the notion of *sound acts*, and comparing the practice of spirit dialogue found in localized Chinese popular religions with the megachurches' practice of speaking in tongues or *glossolalia* (Anderson 2004). Going beyond the logocentrism of "shared vocabularies," I propose to turn towards a sonically sensitive understanding of this common denominator, where parallel sonic practices and their mediatizations play an important role. In both cases, I will demonstrate how the tongue acts as a performative gesture of the spirit—the Holy Spirit in the Christian context and the Chinese deity in *tangki* practice. Often accompanied by music, the act of speaking in tongues involves a deeply encoded practice of listening and affect. This definition is complicated by the prevalence of digital media, when the performative speech performs for the camera and is later uploaded to the internet.

Prologue: A scene of untranslatable tongue

On October 13, 2019, two months after the release from prison of the founder of City Harvest Church (CHC), Pastor Kong Hee, for misusing S\$24 million of church building funds,¹ he returned to the pulpit on the occasion of CHC's celebration of thirty years of ministry. Livestreamed and archived on The CHC APP (the.chc.app), the church's online platform and mobile application, the pastor preached in English and an interpreter translated

1 See Najeer Yusof. 2019. "City Harvest Church founder Kong Hee released from prison." *Today Online*. Accessed January 21, 2020, from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/city-harvest-church-founder-kong-hee-released-prison>

the sermon into Mandarin on stage. During the final prayer to mark the end of the Sunday service, a brief few lines uttered by the pastor were left untranslated: the pastor briefly spoke “in tongues” but the interpreter only translated the legible words of, “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Audiovisual sample 1.1

From the website of City Harvest Church (<https://the.chc.app/word/63ZVTFJTjBb6kLRYZSseek>). A bilingual sermon by Kong Hee, “Seek God’s Glory, Our Delight / 上帝的荣耀、我们的喜乐,” City Harvest Church, 1:04:40, October 13, 2019.

This Sunday service follows a common performance structure of Pentecostal churches in Singapore—bookended by worship songs, the sermon is the penultimate act of the service and it ends with a prayer led by the pastor that often affirms and reiterates the sermon’s message. Without the pastor’s prompting, members of the congregation, several background singers, and the worship team spoke in tongues before the camera and the microphone captured Pastor Kong’s own short utterance. The prayer went on to list different types of cancer, diseases, and ailments, and the utterance of the line, “in the name of Jesus Christ” performatively proclaims the efficacy of the name to cure members of the congregation who might be affected by these conditions, an effect that the church had apparently witnessed before in their thirty-year history. Through prayer, a church member—I am here recounting the older meanings of the word as a body part, organ or limb—is supported, sustained, and pastorally cared for, and the efficacy of the prayer is further emphasized in the form of tongues or *glossolalia*, where members of the church share the ability to perform this glossolalic speech. To hear these utterances, then, is to first and foremost consider them as sounds.

An early linguistics study by Ernest Bryant and Daniel O’Connell (1971), who compared nine samples of glossolalic speech, concluded that:

All the phonemes used in the glossolalic samples are in the normal repertoire of phonemes characteristic of the language of the speaker. The relative frequencies of specific phonemes, however, differ significantly from their occurrence in English. (81)

Although this present study is not analyzing the phonemes of glossolalic speech made by the English and Mandarin speakers of CHC, it is worth pointing out that the glossolalic speech heard across sermons that are archived on CHC’s website is identifiable as such though similar speech

patterns and intonations. Glossolalic speech does not make linguistic sense in the context of CHC's sermons. When uttered during a prayer, it serves to performatively signal the presence of the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is the performativity of the speech as a non-linguistic act that interests this study. In other words, it is precisely because it is untranslatable that one can begin to find meaning in the ways in which the sounds are efficacious in a religious context.

Comparative sounds and soundscapes

The scene described above persists long after the live event in the form of a digital video. This allows me to make several observations about the nature of spiritual utterances—sound acts that interpellate and implicate the Holy Spirit and the spirit medium's deity. I first take my cues from ethnomusicologist Jim Sykes (2015), who, by replacing “‘language’ and ‘linguistic’ with ‘sound’ and ‘sonic’ in these quotations,” argues that “a perspective opens up in which soundscapes are understood as constituted by negotiations between those with differing sonic ideologies” (387). Through the lens of performance studies, I listen with intent to the “sounds” produced during religious practices and the “sonic” environment that moves bodies as they produce meanings at the level of bodily sensations brought about by repetitive physical action; that is, I understand voice production as physical action. Donnalee Dox (2012), citing Michael Winkelman and in reference to drumming, describes how “aural and kinesthetic activity” generates a “‘nonlinguistic channel’ through which the perception of difference dissolves, self-identity dissolves, group cohesion is fostered, and non-linguistic awareness is heightened” (55). In that sense, glossolalic speech may be experienced as sensations which each individual can manifest externally (Dox 2012, 56). For instance, the camera that captured Kong's sermon shows a glimpse of a church member in tears, touched by other members who stood beside her as they prayed for her. The act, accompanied by the instrumental music, Pastor Kong's prayer, and the reverberations of glossolalic speech around her, invites the members into an affective and somatic experience of the sermon, yielding what Dox would describe as “something ineffable” that happen in the process of *hearing* the sounds that surrounded everyone within the confines of the auditorium, transmitted later through the internet and into the headphones or speakers of one's digital device.

This sonic environment suggests a few ways to analyze the performativity of sounds in a religious context. First, this chapter is interested in examining

the intersections between sacred space and digital space in Singapore, and I am borrowing the term “soundscape” from sound studies as a way to account for the “emplaced auditory landscapes and media usage” (Samuels et al. 2010, 336) in urbanized Singapore. For the anthropologists, Samuels et al. (2010), citing Schafer (1977):

Soundscape was somewhat analogous to landscape insofar as it attempted to contain everything to which the ear was exposed in a given sonic setting. Like “landscape,” as well, the term contains the contradictory forces of the natural and the cultural, the fortuitous and the composed, the improvised and the deliberately produced. Similarly, as landscape is constituted by cultural histories, ideologies, and practices of seeing, soundscape implicates *listening as a cultural practice*. (330, emphasis added)

“Soundscape”, however, has its fair share of criticism, particularly from Tim Ingold (2011) who deplores “the fashion for multiplying scapes of every possible kind” (136). Sound is, as Ingold argues, “the medium of our perception... [and] what we hear” (138) and recognizing sound as a medium has profound implications to how I describe my listening alongside my other bodily acts that contribute to my observation. While I acknowledge the problematic use of “scape” and the implied privileging of a single faculty, “soundscape” productively describes the scaping of spaces both physical and digital through sounds. The speeches and sounds I will describe here are produced in multiple soundscapes even as they share the same crowded internet. The act of hearing has to contend with multiple sounds—which does one listen to? In which space does one hear and choose to listen more attentively than others? There are sounds that we can choose to block off just as there are sounds that we cannot avoid when we are immersed in the place of these sounds. In that sense, it is Ingold’s notion of “ensoundment” that interests me as much as the notions of emplacement and embodiment. As Ingold argues, “sound is like the wind, then it will not stay put, nor does it put persons or things in their place” (139). That said, by moving beyond Ingold’s criticism against “soundscape” and emphasis on “immersion”, that is, “as a sense of presence and immediacy”, Stefan Helmreich (2010) offers a different “toolkit for thinking about how space, presence and soundscapes are produced” (10). As Helmreich argues, recalling “a 2004 dive to the ocean floor in the three-person research submersible *Alvin ...*”, the transmutation and conversion of signals across media “when accomplished seamlessly, can

produce a sense of effortless presence” (10). In practice, the “effortless presence” of religious performance is laboriously produced across media. By implicating and privileging “listening” as a scholarly practice, I am attending to specific speech and speech-like acts, or what I would prefer to describe as *sound acts*. Sound acts, I argue, can “call attention to the ways in which listening is space- and place-specific” (Samuels et al. 2010, 336). Yet, these acts are also transmissible through electronic channels and the place-specificity of these channels extends to the place of the internet. In that sense, the act of “listening” shifts across mediums—from speakers in auditoriums to headphones used in one’s private space—and redraws a soundscape through digital mediation.

I turn my focus to private soundscapes—the private temples and shrines in industrial estates in Singapore—that spill onto the public domain through the internet. I also attend to the highly disseminated and mediated church services in Singapore where I “listened” as an outsider and observed a similar crossing of spaces and a resonance between religious sounds, where the “ear” is exposed to particular sound acts in a given sonic setting in order to bring about a spiritual experience. At the same time, religious spaces in Singapore often have to negotiate with, first, spatial constraints because “state land” has to be marked for religious usage and according to a supposed racial quota; and second, religious performances and rituals have to be carefully micromanaged and policed as they spill onto public spaces, such as during street processions and festivals. This process of negotiation is further complicated by the intentional distribution of recordings of religious performances onto online spaces like Facebook, YouTube, and Apple podcasts, some more successful than others in reaching a massive audience.

Sound performs an important role, then, in marking a space, both public or private, functional or symbolic, as sacred. It also bounces off walls, or when loud enough penetrates through them. The sonic setting is immediately created as such by the sounds produced in a spiritual context—when a spirit medium speaks in the voice of his deity; when the pastor speaks in tongues. These are some of the “sound acts” that this chapter discusses.

Sound acts of the spirit or glossolalia in Singapore

For Pentecostal Christianity in Singapore, the speaking in tongues has become a very prevalent and important practice. As Allan Heaton Anderson (2013) explains:

The experience of the Spirit may or may not include speaking in tongues as “initial evidence” of baptism in the Spirit, which for many classical Pentecostals is an essential characteristic. (9)

After watching several sermon recordings of City Harvest Church, I noticed the performance of contemporary glossolalia, identifiable through similar speech patterns.

Audiovisual sample 1.2

From the website of City Harvest Church (<https://the.chc.app/word/aOI5RcswqceQGx-VzqwhMr>). View the first example of speaking in tongues during the prayer segment at the end of the sermon, at 1:09:35. Kong Hee, “Secrets to Powerful Prayer (Part 1),” City Harvest Church, August 23, 2019.

There is also no interpretation involved and as far as I understand, these utterances are not intelligible and not an actual language. As a performance, however, it efficaciously signals the closeness the speaker has to an invisible Holy Spirit. This is especially pronounced when the utterance follows shortly after the conclusion to a sermon (such as on the power of prayer). Spoken alongside the naming of Christ (“In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray”), the combined sounds act as an intermediary between God and the one who prays. This speech and this performed relationship between God and man is furthermore amplified through the microphone for the auditorium, then streamed live to their video livestreaming service on their church website; and now as a recording for us to re-listen.

Audiovisual sample 1.3

From the website of City Harvest Church (<https://the.chc.app/word/oh8o9yLnTqwUj1PwFGf7J>). View the second example of speaking in tongues at 0:55:12. Zhao Ren, “Fruits of the Holy Spirit: Peace,” City Harvest Church, 10 November 2019.

As mentioned in my opening description, captured and conflated in this moment of untranslatable prayer was Kong’s return to the pulpit. This public appearance framed him as being humbled by the ordeal but ready again to lead the church he founded despite his crime and jail sentence. The somatic practice, then, recontextualized the past and cast it as an act of repentance and this was further emphasized by his continued ability to speak in tongues. The utterance legitimized his function as pastor, member, and believer. Moreover, this prayer was a prayer for healing and the gift of miracles. It prophesied healing. This was well within the

“charismatic” belief “that the gifts of the Holy Spirit ... are offered to Christian including the gift of tongues, the gift of interpretation, the gift of healing, the gift of apostleship, the gift of prophecy, as well as the belief in signs, miracles and wonders” (Chong and Goh 2014, 404; see Mendes and Menzies 2000). Through the gesture of glossolalic speech, Kong signaled those gifts and his return to the church he founded was fully realized.

Andrew Singleton’s (2002) work on the practice of speaking in tongues constructively draws on a large body of literature on the significance of narrative and storytelling “in enabling individuals to make sense of their lived experiences” (352). In this context of Pastor Kong’s speaking in tongues, his lived experience as narrative certainly played a part in enabling the congregation to witness the gift of speaking in tongues as a sign of both an “otherworldly experience” as well as a normative experience when a member of the church repents and is restored to the church body (of Christ). As Singleton argues,

... storytelling enables narrators to manage and negotiate the actual and potential audience reaction to hearing about an otherworldly experience Narrators have various rhetorical strategies available to them within the dominant cultural mode of expressing lived experience—narrative—that can position the audience, especially a doubting or skeptical one, to see that an otherworldly experience like tongues is not especially unusual or aberrant, but is actually “normal” and “valuable.” (352)

More than sounds, the speaking of tongues could also be understood as a paradoxical act of narration, a rhetorical strategy of storytelling to reify a given narrative (such as the act of speaking in tongues in the Book of Acts) that can be mapped onto the known tenets and motifs of the Bible while suppressing any denotation of the utterances. More significantly, it is an act that assumes an audience, a hearer, and a believer that can trigger a cacophonous group utterance that follows “a predictable pattern of both suppression and amplification”:

The cacophony produced by groups of people praying together suppresses the audibility of individual speech sounds, opening up private communicative spaces for individuals to engage in focused, intimate, even secret communication with their deity. And their denotationally opaque vocalizations, buffered by noise, suppress role distinctions between

speaker and addressee, “I” and “you,” the prayerful and the deity, creating a disorienting communicative space where it is unclear who is speaking. (Harkness 2017, 477)

It is precisely this ambiguity produced by glossolalia that implicates the hearer and compels a repetition of the speech-like prayer. In that sense, glossolalia, as “strings of syllables, made up of sounds taken from among those that the speaker knows [can] emerge as word-like and sentence-like units because of realistic, language-like rhythm and melody” (Samarin 1972, 228) as well as move beyond speech and language (that is, as a likeness to language) and be understood as a gestural pattern, a performative act that will potentially reach the addressee of the tongue.

Gestures of the tongue and between tongues

In the beginning, I invited you to listen, but inevitably we also use our sight perception, especially when the sounds are captured on camera and remediated for a screen. The Chinese translation of “listening” evokes this combined use of the two senses (Mandarin: 听见 or to hear and to see). Acknowledging that, I argue that it would be more appropriate to describe these speech acts as gestures. I am not suggesting that it is solely a physical act, the murmuring of the tongue, the utterances that make no sense, but I am suggesting that these are embodied and emplaced acts that mark spaces as religious through the acts of the tongue, which includes intelligible speech. This is a concept that heavily borrows from Vilém Flusser, who writes in “The Gesture of Speaking” that:

The person who is speaking does direct his words toward a context, he never talks to nothing, and in this sense his speech is always an address, a pronouncement, that is, dialogic. But the words he formulates build chains ... (29)

Later, he writes:

Speaking is an attempt to bypass the world to reach others but in such a way that the world is absorbed, “spoken” in the move. Speaking is not an attempt to bracket out the world to get at something else but rather to catch it in words, to reach another. (30)

I am informed by Flusser's notion that to speak is "to reach another" and I would like to expand this definition in relation to religious soundscapes and to catch it in *sounds* rather than words. To do so, I would like to compare several religious performances with Pastor Kong Hee's sound act as a way to situate these acts of the tongue in diverse contexts as well as account for the ways in which these sounds share a crowded and collective soundscape that forms across nodes when mediated by digital technology. Because these "sounds" are produced when evoking a spiritual presence, and they are often unintelligible because of this, they seem to point to these acts as physical gestures. They are spoken because the spiritual being does not actually speak, or at least, they cannot speak unless there is an intermediary; a medium that produces the sounds. The one who speaks the spiritual utterances, then, attempts to reach his god and his listeners.

1. First tongue gesture

My next case example is the spirit medium, Lim Tiong Kang. In one of his video posts, he is seen with his tongue pierced through with a long pole weapon (*guandao* or halberd).



Audiovisual sample 1.4

Video clip of Lim possessed by Guan Di Ye. Facebook video, posted by Lim Tiong Kang, 8 October 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/tiongkang.lim/videos/508411643051298/>.

Lim is a spirit medium for Guan Di Ye, the Chinese God of War (see Duara 1988) and the weapon (also known as the Green Dragon Crescent Blade) is the deity's weapon of choice in both the historical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, as well as featured in depictions of the deity as both an effigy and by spirit mediums. Lim takes this depiction further by performing a self-mortification that "signals possession by a god and therefore ritual efficacy" (Sutton 1990, 99).

Lim's pierced tongue, a burden to carry, signaled the possession by a god. This "non-speech act," accompanied by percussion sounds of the bell and the gong and the loud ruckus of an auction occurring at the background, combined with the bright lights, the makeshift shelter, the attire of the medium, the ritualistic behavior that involved the pouring of tea, the presence of the priest, other possessed spirit mediums and assistants to the mediums, and the use of joss paper to performatively signaled an environment that was packed with spiritual

significance. This is not to forget the smell of incense and the burning of joss sticks and the pungent smell of sweaty bodies and blood. A Facebook video is certainly not the ideal medium to engage all our senses, but it gives observers the opportunity to encounter a rich and spiritually charged environment however briefly. At the very least, what I think this video draws our attention to is the tongue's role in signaling possession and perhaps ritual efficacy, though there is also a whole set of other performative gestures that shape the spirit possession and ritual. Not to speak with the tongue suffices as a performative act to externalize the embodiment of a god. Other sound acts, such as when the spirit medium does speak, take over and possess the environment.

2 Second tongue gesture: Translation and reinterpretation

It is a common practice for an assistant who accompanies the spirit medium throughout a possession rite to interpret or translate the speech of the possessed spirit medium. Colloquially known as the *zhuotou* (Chinese: 桌头 or head of the table), the assistant readily stands next to the spirit medium at the table in front of the altar, offering his practice of live translation and interpretation of spiritual utterances. Birgit Meyer conceives of religion “as a practice of mediation between humans and the professed transcendent that necessarily requires specific material media, that is, authorized forms through which the transcendent is being generated and becomes somehow tangible” (2013, 8). In this sense, translation adds another sonic layer between the listeners and the professed divinity, where sounds from the “spirit” realm require translation and amplification. In this respect, digital technologies act as another interpreter, transmitting the mediated sound acts across generations, contexts, audiences, and spaces and making them potentially available for future reiterations.

In my next video example on Facebook, two young assistants beside a spirit medium are able to follow the language and gestures which the spirit medium stutters in short phrases and words of Hokkien; often I find it is the elder who interprets the deity's words but this temple is training the younger generation to take over this role.



Audiovisual sample 1.5

Video clip that archives the act of interpretation of the Emperor God's utterances at 0:09:00. Facebook video, posted by “YewKew Jump Jump Jump”, 25 September 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/templejumpjumpjump/videos/422753391706836/>.

The *zhuotou* interprets the divine speech, acts on it immediately or guides the other devotees to take down notes of the message that the deity has told them through the spirit medium. In this context, the Nine Emperor God possessed the medium as part of the preparation for his birthday celebrations in October 2019. Embodied by the spirit medium, he possessed the spirit medium in order to guide the devotees in their preparations. The almost intelligible language simultaneously acts as a sign of divinity as well as a medium of instruction and communication.

The above scene is in some contrast to the speaking of tongues in the context of CHC. The lack of translation in Pentecostal churches signals that the voice's main function is to act as a vehicle for the Holy Spirit. Without the secondary voice to interpret, the speaker's voice purports to project the inner voice of the spirit, the inner airflow of the lungs, the box and folds of the voice that vibrate as part of this mechanism for the spirit. This is nevertheless a similar process as the possessed spirit medium in the earlier example insofar as sound and voice production are concerned.

The drumming and the beating of the cymbals framed the possession. After a change of costume into a bright yellow garments, the possessed spirit medium (fifth Emperor God of the Nine Emperor Gods) exited to pray to the Jade Emperor and returned to the altar table to prepare the talismans and joss paper that would be used later during the Nine Emperor Gods festival. The Emperor God uttered something incomprehensible, but the young assistant was able to make sense of it and translated it into "go and prepare" in Mandarin. Chants related to the Emperor God soon filled the temple as temple members handed the paper to the Emperor God for him to mark them with his signatures. Combining hand gestures and large movement, the temple quietened each time he delivered his instructions and the assistants listened and interpreted. At the same time, the assistants understood the ritual process and had performed this ceremony numerous times. Not everyone in the temple listened in and fully understood the deity but trusted those closest to the deity to interpret accurately. Interpretation is an act of trust—a trust that the interpretation closely translates the divine speech. When the Emperor God stutters and shudders, the assistant interprets. This relationship sustains the ritual and the possession. It is precisely through those gaps in sounds and the sounds that fill the gaps that the spiritual performance is established. Voices project the utterance and they rise to fill the air as sounds that transform the space into a spiritual one. It is a gradual process as sounds and waves reverberate into a durational performance.

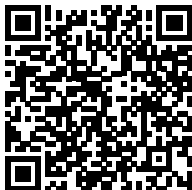
Points of comparison

The sound acts discussed so far are all eventually disseminated online. For me, what these videos highlight is that soundscapes can widen beyond their physical site when sounds are digitized, leading to new audiences to emerge online, or for devotees to participate in the religious activity online without being physically present. My examples include videos of spirit possessions, and recordings of sermons but I would also include podcasts and sermon recordings made by Pentecostal Christians in the US, South Korea, and Australia, as well as the Hillsong videos that now proliferate and inform the Pentecostal church worship around the world. I would also include training videos that teach believers to speak in tongues.



Audiovisual sample 1.6

Example of a training video that demonstrates how to speak in tongues. "How to Speak in Tongues," YouTube video, posted by EncounterTV, 24 May 2016, <https://youtu.be/e9s7ixXCdY>.



Audiovisual sample 1.7

On praying in tongues, one finds sermons delivered by megachurch pastors such as Joseph Prince, founder of New Creation Church, which is another independent megachurch in Singapore. "Why Do We Pray In Tongues? | Joseph Prince," YouTube video, posted by Joseph Prince, 11 June 2020, <https://youtu.be/1DQEUcNnRNY>.

As sounds are being distributed, resonances can form between physical spaces of worship. In the case of videos of spirit possessions, we begin to witness a digital soundscape that reproduces a diverse soundscape of religious practices across the region to an extent. Mediated through the digital videos of religious speakers who act as intermediaries of their gods, each sound act allows the gods to speak again and again. At one level, a connection is made to the spiritual world through the sound act. At another level, a connection is made between geographies, suggesting a shared religious vocabulary and ritual practice within a soundscape readily reproducible for both the physical site and the online reproduction of the soundscape. But this cross-geographical resonance is circumscribed by the live event—the costuming, the speech patterns of each spirit medium, the geographical site of possession, the idiosyncrasies, or even the inability to "hear" the divine speech unless it is mediated either by technology or person.

These contexts are complex to analyze because of it is difficult to differentiate the cultural references that inform the sound acts. For Terence Chong (2016), Christianity in Singapore “was simultaneously different from Taoism or other Chinese folk religions and the same in terms of the pantheon of spirits, demons and cosmic battles” (100) because of what he calls a “complex cultural politics of class transcendentalism—the synchronized act of cultural distancing and sharing of cultural vocabularies” between religions in Singapore. Chong’s work describes the process of newly formed middle-class Chinese Singaporeans from the 1980s who converted from their Chinese religious beliefs to Christianity, most of whom sought to distance themselves from folk traditions as they moved across social class and are now largely English educated. Like Chong, I cannot help but sense that there is a sharing of cultural vocabularies and similar speech acts between the Chinese spirit medium and the Christian pastor at the level of performativity and affect. The tongue that produces the ecstatic utterances necessitates a mediating practice that can translate the sound to a resonance, reinforcing the believer’s sense of unity and belonging. Whether it is the speakers in the auditorium that amplify the utterance or the earphones that deliver the mediated sounds directly to the listener’s ears, the utterance is heard, shaping the religious sensibilities of those who listen. As the internet multiplies the sounds we hear from different contexts, one is led to hear across contexts and conflate them into one’s own experience. This is not to say that cultural vocabularies are reducible to utterances but the utterances (unlike “vocabularies”) described in this study are transmitted online to platforms where secular sounds such as pop music are also produced right into our ears through our headphones and speakers. These “tongues” are now finding their way into our ears, alongside other non-religious sounds.

The utterances described in this study, I argue, exceed the instance of their utterances and depart from their ritualistic contexts while being dependent on the charismatic force of the speaker. The inability to fully comprehend (as text, vocabulary, and language) is what makes them identifiable as acts that interpellate and implicate the divine. Insofar as they can be heard or, rather, be felt (as reverberations) as a “sound bridge”, to borrow the term from film editing, these sounds bring the audience closer to the spiritual. Similarly, Dorothea Schulz’s (2014) study of the act of listening to audio recordings of Sharif Haidara’s sermons in Mali points to the “synesthetic nature of the tactile and the aural as key modes of mediating spiritual authority” (194). Even through digital transmission, this synesthetic nature is sustained, where their mediated reiterations become conventional and citational. The repeatable utterance becomes a convention when enough members

of a congregation participate in speaking tongues. It is citational when the utterance passed on from one speaker to another, spoken in almost similar patterns. A digitized version of this utterance only prolongs its duration and returns as another sound that is not (fully) translated. In the contexts of speaking in tongues and spirit possessions, these utterances aim to signify the speaker as the ordained, chosen, spiritually exclusive, or the recipient of a supposed divine gift. Rather than diluting the authority of the speaker, digitally mediated utterances (of divine speech) can continue to convey religious experience and connection to the community by extending the experience to an online platform. Now, religious sounds can have more reach when they are repeated and rewatched as archived recordings. At the same time, how they are engaged and received depends on a process of negotiation—between those who can speak (on behalf of the divine) and legitimize the use of social media, and those who are drawn to or choose to engage the digital media in the form of subscription, “following” the social media page of a temple or church, or being shown the video through social media algorithms.

For the Hokkien speaker performing and interpreting in Chinese temples referenced in this study, an othering of another kind is established: the spirit medium, as a deity, speaks the other language as a resistance to Singapore’s pervasive language policy and the hegemonic speech of English and Mandarin, the supposed Chinese mother tongue. It resists the hegemony in order to perform the father’s tongue² and assert a spiritual sovereignty over the devotees; but this is nevertheless a contestation against state sovereignty, because as much as the speech is of the spirit, it is contained within the Singaporean Chinese vessel, a citizen, and it is also within the physical site of the temple in Singapore, be it an industrial park or a void deck. To speak, then, would be to meet specific conditions that the state has outlined for religious practitioners in Singapore in its Public Order Act and the online form to apply for a police permit wherever religion is performed in a public sphere. To speak would mean to translate into a voice that performatively brings about a transformation or an efficacious ritual process as well as to circumscribe oneself to the prevalent sounds of one’s linguistic environment. In which case, speaking in tongues within the Singapore context can be understood as being dependent on the

2 Mandarin is the official, obligatory and institutionalised mother tongue in Singapore for those of Chinese ethnicity. As a contrast to Mandarin as the mother tongue, my use of “father tongue” here is a reference to the campaign My Father Tongue, an initiative to promote the use of Chinese dialects in Singapore among the youth. It is also used here as a personal reference to the Hokkien language that my father speaks, given that my family name follows the paternal line, and it is the first language I learned to speak.

English (and Mandarin in Pastor Kong Hee's case) language to make up the "sounds taken from among those that the speaker knows" (Samarin 1972, 228) in order to differentiate from it. After all, the incomprehensive speech is what resists full meaning and thus cannot be objectively censored and censured. It is an utterance of the spirit, sustained through a complex sonic environment produced through sounds that surround as much as they dissipate. After the concert, the ruckus, the noise, devotees return to the familiar sounds of the mundane. While emplaced through media usage, sound acts can immediately mark a space as religious and spiritual as much as demarcate the end of the emplacement. If one were to study sounds, it is equally important to listen to the end of these sound acts and the resumption of everyday languages and the ordinary sounds, overwhelmed and temporarily muted by the spiritual sounds of tongue gestures.

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2 Sonic Ways to Embodied Remembrance

Sufi *dhikr* in an Italian Roma camp

Marco Romano Coppola

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the sonic aspects of *dhikr*, the ritual of “remembrance” of Allah, as performed by a Sufi brotherhood inside a Roma camp in Florence, Italy. The collective act of remembrance involves specific bodily techniques pertaining to different sensory registers (including the sonic, breathing, visual, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, and imaginative spheres), weaving a net of correspondences able to generate an all-embracing aesthetic/synaesthetic coherence, and generating a heightened sensitive experience, or hyperaesthesia. The sonic gestures, simultaneously enacted and perceived, are means to, and instantiations of, the experience of *embodied remembrance*, which is found at the meeting point of corresponding dichotomies: unity and multiplicity, self and other, eternal and contingent, steadiness and movement, repetition and variation, soloist singing and collective chanting.

Keywords: Sufi brotherhood, lived Islam, embodiment, ensoundment, cultural phenomenology, ritual

[...] I heard Dhu ‘l-Nūn say, when I asked him about remembrance: “It means the absence of the one who remembers from his act of remembrance.” He then recited the following [verse]:

I multiply my remembrance of you not because I have forgotten you
Remembrance simply flows from my tongue!

Abu ‘l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) in Knysh (2007, 235)

Introduction¹

The word *dhikr*² and its derivatives frequently appear in the Quran both referring to the prophets' role to "remind" people of their own divinely given reality and to the due "remembrance" and "mentioning" (a further meaning of *dhikr*) of Allah from the side of humans (Chittick 2004, 49). Since the earliest stages of Sufism in 9th-century Baghdad, the recollection and invocation of God was regarded as a main practice carried out in order to cultivate the presence of the heart (*qalb*), intended as the spiritual organ of divine abode inside the human being (Karamustafa 2007, 19–21). The practice soon led to the development of "distinctive prayer rituals in the form of the invocation (*dhikr*) and the audition to poetry and music (*samā'*) that frequently led to rapture or ecstasy (*wajd*)" (*ivi*, 20). In the course of the centuries these practices underwent further elaborations that led to sophisticated understandings of the nature of the spiritual realizations and of the experiential states (*ahwāl*, singular: *hāl*) disclosing, as divine gifts, in the course of *dhikr*, together with a theoretical grounding of the practice based on subtle theological, anthropological, and epistemological tenets (Shamsy 2016, 224). Practices of "audition" (*samā'*) of spiritual concerts and techniques of remembrance (*dhikr*) overlapped in the active search for ecstatic states, resulting in a wide range of repertoires carried out up to contemporary brotherhoods (*uruq*, sing. *ṭarīqa*),³ along with techniques pertaining to different sensory registers including the sonic, breathing, visual, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, and imaginative spheres.

An act of private or congregational worship, *dhikr* can be performed across different brotherhoods as a loud (*jahrī*, sonic) or silent (*khāfī*, hidden) practice, in a standing (*zīkr-i kiyam*, in the Turkish version) or sitting position (*zīkr-i kaiden*); it can involve the execution of certain codified bodily gestures and dance movements (*raqs*) and choreographed group movements

1 I wish to heartfully thank Carola E. Lorea for her commitment to the realization of this chapter, through encouragement and appreciation toward my work, linguistic and formal instructions, precious revisions and bright observations. I also wish to warmly thank Rosalind I.J. Hackett for her appropriate suggestions. My gratitude and esteem also go to Luca Hosseini, the author of the photos presented here, who agreed to their inclusion in this chapter.

2 Unless differently stated, all religious terms are in Arabic.

3 The term *ṭarīqa* ("way" or "path") is rendered here as "order" or as "brotherhood"—the latter being a rendition which nonetheless does not acknowledge the vertical dimension of a Sufi *ṭarīqa* nor its female constituents. *Ṭarīqa* refers both to the spiritual path and to the methods and the systems adopted for its crossing; these methods evolved "from a simple world-renouncing piety to a series of highly sophisticated doctrines that circulated within a formal and highly hierarchical institutional framework known as the *ṭarīqa*" (Knysh 2000, 2) in the 12th century.

in circles (*dawrān*). Certain orders, most notably the *rifā'i*, *sa'di* and some *qādiri* branches, carry out some spiritual exercises of mortification of the flesh—or, better, of its vitalization—as with the practice of *burhān*, a “proof of faith” (Bria 2019, 128) in which the practitioners pierce themselves in one or more parts of the body with a forty-centimeter metal pin blessed by the spiritual leader (*shaykh*).

This article is an attempt to examine the sonic dimensions of the *jahri dhikr* carried out by a *khalwati* brotherhood⁴ centered inside the Poderaccio Roma camp in Florence, Italy, employing the theoretical framework of cultural phenomenology (Csordas 2002).⁵ The ethnographic material I present is drawn from my fieldwork research conducted among Sufi brotherhoods inside Italian Roma communities, which I started in 2018. A “Roma camp”, or “nomad camp”, is a term which indicates different residential solutions provided by the Italian authorities since the mid-eighties, based on the culturalist assumption that all Roma are nomads (even if this is not the case of these Yugoslavian groups), which produced their organized exclusion within a particular chronic temporariness inside demi-urban marginal areas.

The term Roma is an autonym (Rom in Italian language). It is a term of common use, regarded as politically correct—different from the term Gypsy—that nevertheless comprehends groups that would not name themselves as such. The inhabitants of the Italian camps are mostly *xoraxané romá*, a term used to denote Muslim groups from former Yugoslavia. Among the members of Roma families who crossed the Adriatic Sea between the late 1960s and throughout the 1990s, some of them were affiliates of a Sufi order in their homelands, while many took the vows of affiliation into the lineage during their diasporic journeys.

The Poderaccio camp is situated among unauthorized dumping grounds, factories and plots of land, right upon a floodplain used as dumping ground of hospital waste. Established by the municipality in 1988 after numerous arrivals of Roma families, the camp witnessed river floods, deaths of minors, legislative changes, judiciary interventions, and other hazards. Finally, in 2004 the Poderaccio camp was provided with 74 new wooden houses as a

4 The *khalwatiyya* order developed between the 14th and 15th centuries, originating from the eponymous saint 'Umar al-Khalwatī (d. 1397/1398 in Tabriz, Iran). Numerous lineages descended from his successor Seyyid Yahya Shirvani (d. 1457–1458/1464–1465 in Baku, Azerbaijan), spreading in the following centuries across two main trajectories: toward Anatolia, and from there to Southeast Europe; and toward Egypt (where we find the main centers to this day) and further into the Arabic world, in Africa and in Asia (Clayer 1994, 5–7).

5 A previous study of their *dhikr* was carried out by Fabrizio Speziale and Elisabetta Passalacqua (1998).

temporary measure while figuring out a long-term housing solution for the residents. Since its establishment in 1987 the Macedonian *shaykh* Baba Dževat⁶ had recreated the traditional social structure of a Balkan Sufi lodge (*tekiya*, from Turkish), in which the dervishes lead a communal way of life gathering around their spiritual guide (*shaykh*, pl. *shuyūkh*)—a rare to find feature in contemporary Balkans. In August 2020 the camp was definitely dismantled, while its inhabitants found different accommodations, in some cases provided by the municipality; the mosque (*masjid*) is the last building still standing..

The performance of *dhikr*

Audiovisual samples 2.1 & 2.2

I warmly invite the readers to start this section by watching and listening to these audiovisual samples, recorded during my fieldwork at the Poderaccio camp and at the Coltano camp.



First file: *Dhikr*, Coltano camp, June 2019.



Second file: *Dhikr* in occasion of *sultan nevrüz*, Poderaccio camp, March 2019.

On special occasions of gathering, as on the days of *sultan nevrüz*⁷ and ‘*āshūrā*’,⁸ or for the bestowal of a “spiritual station” (*maqām*) to a member of the brotherhood, the communal *dhikr* is performed in all its features

6 It needs to be pointed out here that my interlocutors are well aware that I am using their real names in this chapter, of which they agree to the circulation, seeing it as a means for their reality to come out of the ethnical enclosure in which they are still confined.

7 *Sultan nevrüz* (Bosnian, Albanian, from Persian *nawrūz*) falls on the spring equinox, on the first day of the Persian solar calendar. A number of events of great historic and cosmogonic impact are attached to it, such as imam ‘Alī’s birth, his investiture as *shaykh* and his marriage with Fatima (the Prophet’s daughter). It is also regarded as the day in which Allah gave origin to the world and Muḥammad received the order to carry out his mission (informal communication with Usein Rufat, September 20, 2019).

8 ‘*Āshūrā*’ falls on the 10th day of the month of *Muḥarram*, the first in the Islamic calendar. It is the last of ten days of mourning (*matem*) observed in remembrance of the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī and his 72 companions at the hands of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiya at Karbalā’ (Iraq) in 680 CE.

(*majlis al-dhikr*). In these circumstances, disciples (*murīdīn*, sing. *murīd*) and masters of various orders, coming from different Western and Eastern European countries, gather at the Poderaccio camp for one or more days of reunion characterized by common meals, religious discussions (*sohbet*, Turkish), and singing of *ilahije* (Bosnian, from Arabic *ilāhī*, literally “divine”, hymns).

While the strictly religious activities are mainly—but not only—a concern for men, these gatherings represent for the women of the *ṭarīqa* an occasion to meet and spend time together while passing long hours in the kitchen where they prepare food for the numerous guests, also aided by some men. When women attend to the ritual they do so from an area of the mosque separated from the main hall by a curtain.

I suggest to understand *dhikr* as a ritual performance carried out in order to generate a number of emergencies pertaining both to the sphere of social relations and to the personal and collective experience of the transcendent. Its execution attempts to generate a number of socially relevant outcomes, such as the renewal of bonds between members of the brotherhood, the reaffirmation of the *shaykh*'s status and that of his closest family, the strengthening of alliances within members of Eastern and Western European orders. It is also an occasion to present the brotherhood to newcomers and to reiterate the introjection of norms of conduct and interactional modalities (*edep*, Turkish, from Arabic *ādāb*) which have significant repercussions in the sphere of wider social relations.

The *dhikr* I am going to describe comprises characteristic features of different Sufi brotherhoods due to Baba Dževat's affiliation to multiple orders (*khalwati*, *rifā'i*, *qādiri*, *naqshbandī*) and to the phenomenon of transfer of ritual features and aesthetic codes across brotherhoods. It presents an eminent musical content, following and reinterpreting long-established ritual features of Ottoman origin which are widespread across the Western Balkans. Repertoires of *ilahije* are sung by solo performers in Ottoman Turkish, Romani, Bosnian, and Albanian languages both before, after and during the execution of *dhikr*. A performer singing an *ilahije* may continue in an uninterrupted progression and sing then a *kaside* (Bosnian, from Arabic *qaṣīda*), which in this context refers to a eulogy consisting of melodic and textual improvisation in Arabic language in which Allah, the Prophet and prominent Sufi saints are glorified. Younger performers play the frame drum (*daf*) while singing and often use a microphone.



Figure 2.1 Muksin, a young singer of *ilahije*, playing the *daf* (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

Execution of *dhikr*

A *majlis al-dhikr* usually starts shortly before midnight and might proceed for many hours. To start the ceremony, the *shaykh* calls the dervishes to stand up and a circle (*halqa*) is formed. The first formula to be repeated is *Lā ‘ilāha ‘illā llāh* (no deity but God), the testimony of Oneness (*kalimāt at-tawhīd*), sung on a three-note melody, set on 4/4 time. As everybody starts singing, a tilting movement of the chest is performed following the same beat (*ḍarb*) as the rhythmic articulation of the formula, bending right, coming back to the center, bending left and again to the center. The *shaykh* then claps his hands to set an increase of tempo and shouts: “*Qalbī!*” As a result, the melodic repetition of the formula is replaced by a one-note execution with a clearer rhythmic articulation, united with a breathing technique consisting in an emphasis of inhalation and exhalation. Together with the increase in the intensity of tempo the chest’s movements become wider and someone may add rhythmical movements of the arms extending to the center of the circle and back to the chest. While passing from a melodic rendition of the formula to a mainly rhythmical one, young performers of *ilahije* and *kaside* get authorization from Baba Dževat to sing and beat the *daf*, and someone may start to keep the rhythm by playing a pair of cymbals (*halîle*, Turkish).



Figure 2.2 Baba Dževat whirling in the center of the *halqa* (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

Baba Dževat positions himself inside the circle where he starts walking anti-clockwise facing the participants, bestowing blessings (*barakāt*) to everybody; he then takes position at the center where he starts inviting, one by one, the others to join him. When someone reaches him the two start performing certain dance movements (*raqs*), circling anti-clockwise holding their right hands and lifting the left arm, circling at an increased speed while holding both hands, and also moving them up and down or toward each other. These *raqs* are always performed while keeping eye contact. The *shaykh* might call more than one person at a time to join him in the center, and in that case they execute the same rotatory movements in group. When Dževat is alone in the center, he might move along the perimeter of the circle in side steps or he might start whirling around his own axes in the *mevlevi* fashion.

Then, on the *shaykh*'s initiative, the whole assembly holds hands and forms one or more circles that move anti-clockwise around the hall in crossed-steps (*dawrān*), while the uttered formula shortens to 'illā llāh (in 2/4), and ultimately becomes *Hū Hū*. Someone may also faint in the course of *dhikr*, an eventuality that doesn't often occur; in those cases, the *shaykh* immediately turns to him, holds him, and slowly lifts him up.

The *shaykh* then calls for the end of this part of the ceremony. Everyone comes back to a fixed position in silence, where a series of prayers (*du'ā'*) is recited. Then it is the turn of another *shaykh* or *murīd*, appointed by



Figure 2.3 The final phase of *dhikr* (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

Baba Dževat, to start a new session using a different formula which might comprise God's "name of essence" (*ism al-dhāt*) *Allāh*, one or more of His most beautiful Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*) as well as the names of the Prophet and of his family (*ahl-al Bayt*, the "People of the house").

If the circumstances are considered to be appropriate, the *shaykh* calls for the start of the spiritual exercise of *burhān* in which the dervishes can either pierce themselves, or let the *shaykh* pierce them, in one or more parts of the body—typically the cheek, tongue, throat, earlobe, below the eye, hip, or chest. In the final phase of the ritual a new set of turning in circles is carried out, in which the participants, united by holding each other's hand or the arm, form different circles and spirals, ending in a tight grouping around the *shaykh*, with everybody touching the person in front on the shoulder, jumping up and down and repeating the *Hū Hū* formula out loud. Then the *shaykh* declares the end of the *dhikr* by shouting *Yā Allāh !*. Everyone takes a seat and several prayers follow, concluding with the choral chanting of the *takbīr* (magnification).

Embodied remembrance

I suggest that the *dhikr* described above aims to alter the participants' customary modalities of attending to the human world through the generation

of a hyperaesthesia, intended as a heightened sensitive experience realized by means of intercorporeal practices performed with increasing intensity. The bodily experience takes shape and meaning through the weaving of a net of correspondences linking different sensory registers and generating an all-embracing aesthetic and synaesthetic coherence referring to the object of remembrance, Allah. The enactment of a constant interchanging of corresponding dichotomies—unity and multiplicity, self and other, eternal and contingent, steadiness and movement, repetition and variation, soloist singing and collective chanting—is intended to highlight and overcome the body/self-perception of the subject-object dichotomy. Through the realization of certain “somatic modes of attention”—defined by Thomas J. Csordas as “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (Csordas 2002, 244)—the object of remembrance retrocedes from being something to be grasped in the outer world (through objectification) or in the inner world (through self-objectification) to coincide with the embodied experience itself in an act of *embodied remembrance*.

For the Sufis the experience of *dhikr* intends to supersede the human’s ego (*nafs*) with a quality of presence (*ḥaḍra*) which is ecstatic awareness of God, in a transcendence of identity that is not much an act of inner fusion (*ḥulūl*) or identification (*ittihād*) (During 1987, 22), but rather accounted as God’s overtaking of the human and passing away of self (*fanā’*).

The divine presence is believed to be realized in the heart (*qalb*), which in Islamic mysticism is conceived as the sensitive representation of a transcendental principium, corporeal and spiritual center of the body, locus of faith, understanding and attention (Nasr 2014). Following a traditional understanding, the repetition of *dhikr* and the emission of sweat during the ritual are envisaged by my interlocutors to cleanse one’s own heart from impurities accumulated in the course of time. The heart is the pivot of the movement of the chest, as described by my interlocutors: while repeating *Lā ‘ilāha* (“no deity”), the negative part of the *kalimāt at-tawḥīd*, the movement is performed on the right side, away from the heart, as to deny any ontological subsistence to the customary acknowledged objects of experience. The affirmative part, *‘illā llāh* (“but God”), is instead uttered while moving to the heart side, thus reviving the felt-presence of God’s dwelling in each one’s heart. The synaesthetic association of motoric, rhythmic, sonic, and imaginative techniques fosters a gradual internalization of remembrance coalescing experience and meaning.

While the *dhikr* progresses the formula shortens to comprehend just the affirmative part, *‘illā llāh*, then reducing to the third person masculine



Figure 2.4 Dervishes standing in the circle repeating the formulas of *dhikr* with the *qalbi* emission and performing ritual movements (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

singular pronoun—*Hū* (*Huwa*). This progression leads to/enacts the three changes in experience traditionally acknowledged as occurring during *dhikr*, each one classified under a term rooted in the Arabic verb *wajada*, “to find.” The first stage, *tawājud*, refers to the manifestation of an inner state, the effort to reach the next stage or its imitation in order to reach it. The second stage is *wajd*, in which the “ecstasy” is “found” and experienced. While the third stage, *wujūd*, sometimes rendered as “enstasy,” is the actual “finding” and it is known as the state of permanence and supraexistence in God (During 1988). The term “ecstasy” (in Italian: “estasi”) is employed by my informants both referring to the changes in experience occurring during the ritual and to the actual fainting of a participant during a particularly intense phase of the *dhikr*.

Through the repetition of *Lā ‘ilāha ‘illā llāh* the practitioners put an effort to discern their object of remembrance from every other inner or outer object of experience, which are in turn deprived of any ontological status; with *‘illā llāh* the objects of experience are fully reintegrated in God, the common ground of existence overtaking the single beings; finally, the formula becomes *Hū* (“Him”), drifting into the breath of the participants, overcoming the tension between signifier and signified into the referent (the object of communication or, in this case, of invocation/experience). The *shādhili* Arab mystic Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allah (d. 1309) described the *dhikr* of the pronoun He as the culmination of the practitioner’s spiritual progress. In its

utterance the pronoun stands alone in the generation of meaning without need for a predicate, as “God has become so immediate that no statement can be made about Him beyond the witnessing of His being Him” (El Shamsy 2016, 88–89). In its sonic (*jahrī*) rendition the semantic meaning coincides with the very sound of breath emission (similarly to the articulation of the Name *Ḥayy*, the Living), which is intended, following the *qalbī* technique, as coming from the heart, “locus for the Breath of God” (Nasr 2014, 37).⁹

This makes it a phonetic, onomatopoeic, and sonic performance aimed at establishing a biunivocal correspondence between subject and object of remembrance. As the participants aim at a synthesis of knower (*ālim*), knowledge (*ʿilm*), and known (*maʿlūm*), the same progression is enacted through the “ensounded” (Ingold 2007) experience by overcoming the trialectic of signifier, signified and referent through the media of sound, language, and breath.

Between unity and multiplicity

Throughout the ritual the practitioners are constantly immersed in sound, simultaneously as producers and as listeners. The sonic dynamics enacted during the ritual reproduce the dynamics occurring in the spatial disposition, thus being at the same time means to and instantiations of the embodied experience of remembrance. This experience is realized through the elaboration of a perceptive modality regarded in Sufi literature as *jamʿ al-jamʿ* (the union of union) which is described as “the contemplation of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity” (*mushāhadat al-waḥda fī ʿl-kathra wa ʿl-kathra fī ʿl-waḥda*) (Ventura 2017, 68–69).

According to the Sufis, Allah is the whole of existence not as a totality obtained by the sum of his parts, but as one divine essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhiyya*) from which the multiple modifications of being spring as his manifestations (*maẓāhir*) or modalities (*shuʿūn*) (*ivi*, 24–26). Therefore while the two aspects are interrelated in a way that unity belongs to multiplicity and vice versa, it is to the actual Being only that the ontological status of reality pertains, while the single beings are but determinations of the one essence (Ventura 2016, 69).¹⁰ The stress on the ontological nothingness of creatures together with

9 A comparison could be made between the use of the pronoun *Hū* during *dhikr* and the Sanskrit mantra *soʿham*, where we find again an example of compresence and the overcoming of signifier and signified through the medium of breath (Padoux 1990, 140–41).

10 The concept of Being in some Sufi literature—as in ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jilī (d. 1424) and Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624)—does not directly correspond to the highest Principium, of whom it represents its first determination. Nevertheless, expressions as “total being” (*al-wujūd al-kullī*)

a magnification of Allah's only being is frequently found in the discourses of the Poderaccio *shaykh*.

The circular (*dā'ira*) disposition of the participants generates from a center (representing unity) which develops in a circumference (representing multiplicity).¹¹ The *shaykh*, who occupies the center, stands as the pole (*qutb*) around whom the contingent beings are turning. The principium of unity he represents is then reflected into each one's heart, spiritual locus of self-objectification.

Then the *shaykh* invites each one to join him from the circumference where everyone performs the same movements to the center where a higher freedom of expression is allowed. Here the *murīd* performs the rotatory movements gazing at the *shaykh*'s eyes, perceiving the external circle as moving and himself as fixed, while from the circle's perspective the reverse is happening. As explained by a former member of the brotherhood:

I mean, you are actually fixed, everything turns because you are on the axes, and you realize that the whole world is turning... But everything is made so that you understand through intuition. (interview with former member, July 14, 2019, my translation)

The antithesis between the movement/transience of the phenomenal world (*dunyā*) and the firmness/everlasting of Allah is a recurrent Dževat's theme:

Only Allah is fixed, everything else is moving, everything goes, also the Pope has to go when his time has come! (informal dialogue with Dževat Rufat, July 31, 2020, my translation)

Also, for the one turning in the center the *shaykh*'s glance is the only fixed point, instantiation of divine unity, as in Usein's words, Dževat's son and spiritual heir:

When you have your *shaykh*, your *murshid* in front, he is a mirror for you where you can see something, you can feel something, because during *dhikr*, if you find *dhikr*, if you don't feel anything then you haven't done

and "absolute being" (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) are found to indicate the Reality over its determination as Being (Ventura 2017, 47–49).

11 Metaphysical enquiries into the relation between center and circumference have been developed by the Andalusian mystic, philosopher, and poet Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240) in *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Ventura 2017, 61–66).

dhikr; you're not in it, if you don't feel that freedom, because when you perform *dhikr* it sets you free, you have to get rid of all worldly things, the mundane things as we say. (interview with Usein Rufat, September 7, 2014, my translation)¹²

While the many participants (multiplicity) are united under a set of simultaneous bodily gestures (unity), the *shaykh* (unity) performs codified movements according to his own feeling (multiplicity). Then the single participants experience the progression from the circumference (multiplicity) to the center (unity): here, spinning around holding the *shaykh's* hands, they witness unity in his glance while simultaneously acknowledging the outer circle turning, but it is actually fixed.

Sonic correspondences

The sonic dimension of the ritual synaesthetically enacts the above-mentioned dynamics. The collective chanting unites the assembly in a simultaneous sonorous gesture: the single is lost in the many, while the many becomes a new unitary subject on its own, as in Patrick Eisenlohr's notion of "shared felt-body" (Eisenlohr 2018, 116). With the beginning of the one-note *qalbī* rendition of the formulas, the experience of unity of the group, now united in one single breath, is further increased. The experience of a shared felt-body in this context does not represent a goal on its own: it is one pole of the dialectic between unity and multiplicity, self and other, I-felt and we-felt. Through an incessant fluctuation of the body/self between these modalities of experience I suggest that the endeavor of the practitioners is to perceptively inhabit what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as "the abyss that separates the In Itself from the For Itself" (1968, 136–7). The finding of this liminality, which might be enacted in the liminal state of body/self-surrender of fainting, is a culturally constructed "transformed way of attending to the human world" (Csordas 2002, 49)—hence pre-reflectively meaningful, and deeply emotional—described as "ecstasy" or as being in God's "presence" (*ḥadra*).

The soloist singer then starts performing his repertoires of *ilahije* and *kaside*; his role in the sonic sphere can be related to the role of the *shaykh* in the spatial setting, as he is the only one free to express himself through hierarchies of pitch above the repetition of the formulas carried out by the others. In the

12 Interview by Gabriele Berti and Luca Hosseini.

sonic dimension of experience the contemplation of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity is then given by the compresence of many sound producers united in one sonorous gesture and of one soloist singer expressing himself in hierarchies of pitch. The presence of the soloist singer is regarded by my interlocutors as an aid in the recollection of God, as the dimension of beauty inherent in singing is perceived as an instantiation of God's beauty (*jamal*). This is a long-established Sufi theme: Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988) states in the *Kitāb al-Luma'* ("Book of shafts of light"), a foundational survey on Sufism and on the subject of listening (*samā'*), that "all people of a spiritual disposition (*dhī rūḥ*) find a beautiful voice pleasing because it has qualities of the divine spirit, and it heralds the recollection of this spirit" (Avery 2004, 151).

Employing Eisenlohr's use of Gilbert Simondon's concept of transduction as the emergence of certain bodily sensations and psychic phenomena generating from sonic immersion (Eisenlohr 2018, 9), I suggest that the intangible, ephemeral, invisible yet enjoyable presence of the singing is *transductive* of the perception of divine presence, which is culturally constructed as sharing the same characteristics. We have many examples of the importance attributed to sound as medium of the transcendental experience in Islamic literature, as in epistle 5 of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* ("Epistles of the Brethren of Purity"), from 10th-century Iraq, where it is stated that "most of the percepts of sight are physical, but all the percepts of hearing are spiritual [*rūḥānī*]" (Wright 2010, 167).

Conclusions

When someone asks me: "What does *dhikr* mean?" It is something that only a mother delivering a child can know, in that moment the mother doesn't think of anything else, she thinks only of freeing herself of that child because he's slaughtering her.

(interview with Usein Rufat, September 7, 2014, my translation)

I find this quote truly evocative of the depths of the embodied experience of *dhikr*, as it shows the practitioner's strive to reach the sublimation of subject and object while being enraptured into something which he cannot fully control.

As already acknowledged by Fabrizio Speziale and Elisabetta Passalacqua (1998, 174) the actions performed during the ritual, even in moments of great intensity, are usually not chaotic or left to chance, but always pertinent to the expressive codes of the *dhikr*. The movements of the chest get bigger and the articulations of sounds get louder, while the participants appear enraptured



Figure 2.5 Uusein performing *dhikr* (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

in the performance of actions taking place beyond their control. Nevertheless, the practitioners unfailingly keep on following the beat without mistake, and in case someone loses it, the *shaykh* immediately helps him to get back in it.

Through their actions the dervishes build up an elaborated topography/phonography of sacred in which dichotomies are constantly interchanging and merging into each other. An overwhelming hyper/syn/aesthetic experience forcefully reabsorbs reflective thinking into the pre-objective (“you have to get rid of all worldly things”) to coalesce embodied perception and imaginative processes at the meeting point of corresponding dichotomies. It is an effort to reach that “hinge”, “solid, unshakeable, ... irremediably hidden” between “the auditory experience of my own voice and that of other voices” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 148). The experience of Allah taking hold of the individual is then a strictly embodied experience, “existential ground of culture and self” (Csordas 2002, 4), and of self-dissolution (*fanā*).

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3 Aural Auras of Inner Sounds

Conch Shells, Ritual Instruments, and Devotional Bodies

Sukanya Sarbadhikary

Abstract

Situated at the interface of anthropological fieldwork and philosophical scrutiny, this chapter explores relations among sounds, bodies, and texts through the prism of an internal sonic physiognomy. Analyzing texts of Indian philosophy and ritual, and descriptions of lived experiences of religious sounds by sonic meditators, instrument craftsmen, and players, the chapter describes complex methods of constructing and experiencing the body. The body emerges as an auditory vessel, its inner space of breath paths and listening acumen embodying a distinctive religious capacity: to mirror and indeed become the devotional instrument. The author explores rare discourses of cultivation of the sound-perfect, meditative, tantric/yogic body and its relations to three instruments of substantial importance: the flute, the clay drum, and the conch.

Keywords: affect, religion, materiality, Tantra, Yoga, Bengal

This chapter studies discursive constructions and affective experiences of yogic bodies and musical instruments, as mirror echoes of one another, and as reflecting the primordial buzz of macrocosmic creation. Ethnographically situated among instrument craftsmen, musicians, and sacred sound meditators in Bengal, this essay analyzes the relationship between religion and sound, through the relatively unexplored prisms of bodily interiority and Hindu devotional instruments, thus highlighting connections between the inner experience of sounds and divinity.

The essay makes three theoretical contributions to the analyses of religious sounds in the book. Beyond questions of sacred music, it thinks about the domain of the sheer materiality of instrumental sounds and the

effects they have on the religiously cultivated body. Through this, it tries to understand Hindu “acoustemology” (Feld 1996)—an essentially sonic means of conceptualizing sacred existence, and inhabiting the body and the world. The essay moves beyond external soundscapes to empathetically encounter the insides of devotional viscera of bodies and instruments.

The essay addresses the book’s central understanding about sounds as bridges between the human and other-than-human, material and spiritual spheres, by demonstrating sympathetic relations between artefact acoustics and the inner body. Such an acoustemology has been present in Bengal for several centuries, encoded both in religious texts and practiced traditions; and hence my ethnography is constituted by the interlacing of text and experience.

Sounds, bodies, and texts are analyzed here as nodes of an “internal sonic physiognomy” (Beck 1995). Guy Beck’s (1995) work has been influential in advancing these conceptual possibilities for South Asian religiosity. Analyzing texts of Indian philosophy and narratives of lived experiences of religious sounds, I describe complex methods of constructing the body itself as an auditory instrument, its inner space embodying breath paths which transform to divine sounds. I understand “aura” as the ambience of a breathing, vibrating continuum of body-vessels, both human and instrumental, and analyze the effect of texts and experiences in manifesting the continuum.

Sonic sacrality has been recognized as critical to Hinduism. But musical instruments and their theological import have not been adequately understood. However, Bengal’s devotional groups have strong esoteric traditions of acoustic metaphysics, in which, alongside uttered *mantras*, instrumental sounds are significant (Sarbadhikary 2015, 205–13). Beck claimed that the relation between what musicians play externally and hear internally—the link between instrumental sounds and sonic meditation—has not been addressed (1995, 110). Thus, I explore rare discourses of cultivation of the tuned, meditative, tantric-yogic body and its relations to three instruments: the flute (*bamshi*), clay drum (*khol*), and conch (*shankh*). Based on fieldwork conducted among artefact collectors, instrument craftsmen, players, sound meditators, and other local specialists of religious sound, spread across multiple villages in West Bengal’s districts, I discuss claims about practitioners’ cultivation of the body and instruments as mirror echoes. Their exegeses suggest that the conch, flute, and *khol* become devotional bodies, and the devotee’s entire vibrational skin interiority, in turn, becomes the instrument. The aura of aural vibration, however, affects both individual meditative realizations and deep sonic communities and textual traditions.

I give texts utmost importance as both sources and objects of the field. Complex textual understandings about embodied sound have percolated to

people's everyday lives, and were ethnographically available in the form of metaphors, myths, poetry, songs, etymologies, diagrams, and even specific material practices of making and playing instruments, and sounding their rhythms. Many practitioners have undergone several years of training in both their music as well as yogic, tantric, and devotional (sonic) philosophies, from gurus, in their hometowns or other significant pilgrimage places. Devotees also have defined contexts of text discussions: during public musical recitals (*kirtans*) when singers provide explanations of esoteric songs, and regular exegetical discussions by gurus in temples. People's contemporary exegesis, sonic meditation practices, and even the production of material instrumental sounds, are thus mediated by cultural texts, and I intend both the explicitly textual/philosophical narratives and people's voiced experiences to be understood as simultaneous ethnographic practices of sonic devotion in Bengal.

Influenced by Hirschkind's (2006) understanding of aural aesthetics as a deeply affective visceral conditioning that engages with the world and time through both fit and excess, I argue that inner sounds and corporeal devotion resist discursive bracketings into specific timeframes like the pre-modern or the historical secular. Although contextually shaped, and never outside of history and politics, these sounds and their onto-cosmology have longstanding affective endurance. They represent post-secular remainders of religiosity in their devotional existence through bodies and texts.

The "interiority" of devotional bodies needs qualification. While influenced by literature which suggests the intrinsic interiorizing potential of sound experience, and its penetrating and thereby most emotionally intimate and ecstatic quality compared to other bodily senses (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 468; Gell 1995, 235; Ingold 2000, 155–6, 268; Rodaway 1994, 95), I also suggest that the sounds analyzed here are not devoid of conditioning by the external world. The instrumental acoustics are produced in the outer world and communicated among listening communities who gather for collective religious musical sessions, or during regular evenings of domestic togetherness; whence these sounds are internalized by the devotional listener/player, and also meditated upon to be simultaneously generated from within the body.

The sounds thus have the peculiar characteristic of belonging to both outer and inner worlds of aural perception. Further, these sounds are informed by highly perceptive abilities of sound creators/listeners and yogic meditators, and also a rich world of texts—in the separate yet overlapping literary traditions of Tantra, yogic treatises, and *bhakti* poetics—which sensitively theorize the religious sounds practitioners hear in their attuned

bodies. It is impossible to discern temporal priority—whether the inner material sound experiences propelled the world of texts and external instrumental creations or the external sounds and textual descriptions impacted sensory meditation. Sounds supersede text-practice, word-experience, and literacy-orality/aurality binaries. Finally, these sounds, while generated in the body's interstices, are considered as simultaneous mirrors of the transcendental cosmos.

Thus, instrumental sounds are literally inhabited by the body's habitual matrix: at the junctures of centuries-old religious texts, sedimented practice of yogic methods learned from gurus through generations, and sheer sensory realizations. This devotional sonic ability is thus "poised between ... the rational and the affective, the discursive and the embodied" (Erlmann 2004, 13). Such an *extimate* relation, in between the intimate and external worlds, is a "mimetic archive" that perpetuates the residues of sacred aural excesses in the "concrete history of the senses, and in the habits of our shared environment" (see Mazzarella 2017, 8).

These sounds are however entangled with socially regulated affect in ways that escape the conventional archives of historians and philologists. Affect, although discursive, involves non-linguistic, pre-verbal, powerfully reactive sensory states, which, like lightning flashes, apprehend sensations which the subject cannot always grasp cognitively. They are intense ineffable excesses, running across the viscera like instantaneous gushes. While definitely influenced by the world of texts, affect thus also retains a supra-historical ontological "autonomy" from language and time (Massumi 2002).

The sonic dimensions of the material body discussed in this chapter, while particularly about inner levels of skin, are simultaneously situated beyond the inside-outside dyad, impacting all levels of the habitual body. While arising within corporeal interiors, these sounds overflow and merge with the resonance of physical instruments. Informed by tantric sonic ideologies, they embody acoustic cosmic wholes which include different pulsating vessels—human and instrumental bodies, and macrocosmic aural expressions of sounds and speech—generated by the same vibrating divine potential. I argue that the world of (instrumental) devotional sounds has endured through generations, in written words, in the hands of makers and players, and as inner hums and beats of meditators.

Methodologically, I contend, therefore, that the question of religious sounds finds some very potent answers in the analysis of affective dimensions, since they explain the century-long persistence of practices and the texts they influence and are impacted by. In line with the book's general temperament, I argue that studies of religion, when addressed through the

filter of sound, better apprehend notions of the embodied, sensory divine. And studies of sound, when sensitive to religiosity, can conceptualize specific cultural constructions of acoustic experience: in this case, as manifesting divinity in the insides of the cultivated body, and more generally, South Asian religions' rich aural traditions embodied by practices of aesthetic devotion.

Textual representations of instrumental bodies

The phenomenological basis of the relationship between external and internal sounds, or instruments and bodies, is established in Indian philosophical discussions on corporeal cavities, breath routines or *pranayama*, and sonic meditation techniques. These discussions claim, for instance, that yogis with perfected breathing hear sounds of the ocean, conch, gong, drums, flute, bells, humming bees, anklets, thunder, stringed instruments like the *veena*, etc., as arising from their bodily contours. Critical Yoga texts such as the *Hathayoga Pradipika* (15th century) and *Nada-Bindu Upanishad* (17th century), mention these sounds as ringing in the hollows of ears, chest, and back of the head (see Muktibodhananda 1993, 508, 561–81; Aiyar n.d.). Some of my interlocutors, musicians acutely aware of sound meditation practices, similarly explained that controlled breath transforms to bass percussion sounds at lower body-levels, and subtle flute melodies with breath-dependent lightness, in the spacious cranium.

The key embodied factor connecting the human body with sacred instruments is the presence of resonating interiors: their holes with carefully crafted air/breath-passages acting as sound media. The *Kaushitaki Upanishad* (1000–500 BC) posits breath (*pran*) and sound/speech (*vak*) as reflections: in silent breath, speech/sound lurks as potentiality, and vice versa (see Srimad Anirban 1992, 23–41, 96–127). Further, in tantric/yogic *naad* (divine sound vibration) traditions, the body's journey from still breath to sound/speech vibrations is a passage through four openings: anus, navel, heart, and tongue; and practitioners may also hear in those cavities, mantric syllables, and natural sounds fusing into instrument acoustics (see Briggs 1989, 258–83, 322–47; Gold 1999, Hess 2009; Padoux 1992, 133–44, 166–222; Sarbadhikary 2015). The classical poetics text *Natyashastra* considers the human skin as essentially toned, and the yogic body as the first stretched and stringed vessel, *veena*, which transforms into the wooden *veena*, which in turn impacts imaginations of the harmonic drum, and all instruments are said to subsequently emanate therefrom (Bandopadhyay 1995: 164–5). Taken together, these texts relate the perforated, spacious, and melodious human

body with sacred musical instruments, connected through their breathing and vibrating lives of rhythm and tune. In making or playing musical instruments, one is therefore extending one's own body-sonics through an intuitive ear-mind-hand aesthetic. The *Natyashastra* also describes how a sage intently hears drops of rainwater on lotus leaves, to then instruct how to craft a percussion which reproduces those acoustics (Pande 1996, 302). This too exemplifies the innate translations among natural sounds, cognitive intuition, embodied mimesis, and finally, instrumental sounds. The yogic body and sound instrument are thus mirror-echoes: the body itself, as instrument, resounds interiorly, and the instrument is a yogic body too.

Breath/air and their mediation of sound connects bodies and instruments. The *Yoga Vashishtha* (9th century) understands *akash* (ether, or empty space) as a conscious agent (Bhaduri 1975), capable of uniting vessels through their spacious/breathing virtues. The *Chandogya Upanishad* (1000–500 BC) further views the heart space itself as *akash*, with sound as its ether's main feature (Olivelle 1998). The *Mahabharata* (1st century) mentions two further properties of such *akash*/sound: “unstruckness” and presence in the body's apertures (Sinha 1987, 793). In textual (and lived) *naad* traditions, sonic vibration is indeed life's first tremor, uncaused and unstruck. It is indistinguishable from the first cosmic moment of divine male-female union. This primordial *akash*/sound constitutes an eternal “unstruck” buzz in the body: *anahata naad*, which when struck by vibrating breath, produces speech. The same *naad* also gives life to instrument sounds through human hands. The discursive sound world of South Asian auditory cultures thus preempts connections among universal sound, the body buzz, speech, and instruments. The textual web, spanning centuries, forms an insistent ideational presence, and its insights are interlaced with affective ethnographic practices.

Sensate instruments and audible anatomies

1. Drum and flute

Vaishnavas, a devotional sect of Bengal, worship the deities Krishna, his consort Radha, and the medieval saint, Chaitanya. Collective singing of the deities' names and pastimes (*kirtan*) is a major devotional practice of Bengal-Vaishnavas. The *khol* (clay drum) and *kartaal* (cymbals) accompany the ecstatic singing. However, rather than being an accompaniment only, the

khol is itself also propitiated as a deity (with a yogic body), and worshipped on the altar by musicians before *kirtan* sessions begin.¹

I have worked with senior percussionists, many of whom are also trained in meditating on percussion sounds, in Kolkata, Nadia, Murshidabad, Bankura, and Birbhum districts of Bengal, for over a decade. *Khol* making techniques, players' knowledge about rhythms, and meditators' detailed diagrammatic understandings of body-*khol* similitudes— all materialize abstract textual knowledge concerning body-sonic divinity. They played these rhythms, sang esoteric songs, narrated orally transmitted poems from memory, alluded to several popular myths and legends, and referred to both classical philosophical texts and vernacular ones with simplified discourses, to explain difficult theological concepts to me. Practitioners explain that *khol-kartaal*'s material sounds embody Radha-Krishna's sacred erotics, and their sincere audition is a musician's supreme religious practice. They stress further that a practitioner knows methods of realizing his own body too as a *khol*: the inner skin echoing subtle rhythms of divine eros in its breathing cavities.

The making and playing of *kholes* are complex processes, and their sophisticated acoustic theology a domain of greater expertise. This theology comes down as oral explanations to generations of musician-meditators. *Kholes* are asymmetrical membranophones, made of mud and covered with cowskin; their tuning is dependent on stretching 32 leather straps over the body-surface. A small hole is finally punched on an edge, and sounds are produced by the inner air space. Practitioners associate the 32 strings with 32 uttered syllables of Radha-Krishna's names.

Eben Graves identified the *khol*'s "affecting presence" in Bengal's devotional life, and argued that religious discourses and material sonic efficacy together constitute its significance (2009a, 105; 2009b, 4). In various isomorphic imaginations, the *khol*'s material sounds are associated with the yogic body's aurality. Advanced meditators explained that the body-as-instrument needs ultimate awakening, such that one cultivates processes of tuning intently to minute *khol* rhythms arising from inside one's own body, while listening to the physical instrument, and indeed even after it stops playing.

During musical sessions, *khol-kartaal* sounds bang loudly in the chest. A renowned female *kirtan* singer offered a unique explanation of this phenomenon. She said that the body's *chakras* (secret energy centers) have hidden phonemes, which identify with *khol*'s rhythms, and get excited.

1 For detailed discussion see Sarbadhikary (2015, 179–213) and (2019).

These homophonic/syllabic identities between instrument rhythm sounds and bodily energy acoustics constitute their similitude. I realized further that the chest center is literally known as the *anahata* (unstruck/uncaused) *chakra*, which she meant is struck when the *khol* plays.

In Vaishnava understandings, Radha and Krishna reincarnated as a united physical form in Chaitanya's body. Since Krishna's flute and Radha's anklet bells are imagined to sound together during their love encounters, they are believed to have incarnated as drums and cymbals for Chaitanya's *kirtan* music. Krishna's flute is a divine embodiment of seductive charm: its sound considered to be the exact counterpart of penetrative eros. Innumerable poems also compare the devotee's body to the flute body, both characterized by air/breath channels and orifices. They describe Krishna's exhalation into the flute pores as a sensation akin to the devotee's receiving his warm breath in the body's interstices.

As passionate flute sounds become attuned to the breathing body, breath turns to melody. An elderly Nadia villager once discussed that one of Krishna's flutes has nine openings, just like our bodies: a pair of eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, genitals, and anus. Through *pranayama*, as breath is withheld, yogic balance ensues, just as a most beautiful tone (*panchama*) flows from the flute when all its pores are shut and (Krishna's) breath exhaled, drawing his lovers erotically close (see also Saraswati 1975, 430–41).

In the *Bhaktirasamrta Sindhu*, the 16th-century Bengal-Vaishnava theological-aesthetic treatise by Rupa Gosvami, the links of the breathing body and flute metaphysics, which the elderly practitioner intuitively invoked, are subtly analyzed. The text mentions Krishna's three flutes: the *venu* with six holes (corresponding to the body's six *chakras*: in the anus, genitals, navel, chest, throat, and center of eyebrows); *murali*, with five (corresponding to the senses), and *vamsika*, with nine (the body's "nine doors", or openings) (see Haberman 2003, 217). These varied discursive and affective traditions essentially correlate the breathing bodily interstices and throbbing flute melodies, with the understanding that inner corporeal aurality and instrumental acoustics are mirroring echoes.

Just as mythically, the flute reincarnated as the sacred drum, in practicing ontological traditions too, yogic breath and the flute are related to the *khol*: air and sound fusing with calculated rhythms. In this, significant yogic schedules bridge external and internal soundscapes. In a yoga meditative posture called *bhramar* (honeybee) *asana* (posture), one introjects breath, shuts body openings, and simultaneously generates inside the reverberation of the adenoidal vibrating sound with which the cosmic hum, AUM, tapers. Krishna's flute sound (*panchama*) also produces the same nasal tone (Beck 1995, 81–91). In *nada-yoga*

traditions, “the word nada signifies the reverberating tone of vocal sound, especially the buzzing nasal sound with which the word AUM fades away” (Beck 1995, 82). This humming tone, considered as indistinct from the primeval universal drone, then interiorizes from the mouth cavity towards the chest cavity. A practitioner explained, “When the honeybee hums, this is the same nagging sound. Krishna, as honeybee, savors the interior space of the tantric body-lotus Krishna breathes into the body, and it sounds the flute/*khol*”

It is noteworthy that the body’s nasal phonetics, such as the prolonged *n* and *m* sounds, are also reproduced in the vocabulary of *khol* rhythms (*bols*), which have nasal acoustic tones with syllabic representations such as: *jhna, jhni, najhi, nako, jhini*, etc. This oozing sense of the buzz, practitioners explain, emanates from the primordial AUM or *anahata naad*, flows through the yogic body, fuses with its breath, stills in the central nerve along the spine, and translates into nasal drum rhythm sounds which the percussionist plays. The buzz also affects the musician’s hands, and after sustained drumming, he thus senses a tingling, granular, lazy feel in his palms. The sensation has a nasal name itself: *jh(n)ijh(n)i*, and is understood by musicians as a sonic-tactile yogic blessing.

Practitioners also discuss conceptualizations about the instrument’s essential corporeality: just as there is an instrumentality/musicality to the body, there is also a body-in-the-*khol*. It is figured as a precise counterpart of the *khol*-in-the-body. For example, a percussionist interlocutor explained that like we breathe, the instrument breathes through a small hole punched on its edge. Similarly, our navel maintains bodily balance, while the *khol*’s middle portion maintains sonic balance.

The *khol*’s acoustic figuration also has mythical representations. Musicians say that the black patch on *khol*’s right side is Krishna, the white left patch, Radha; when the player strikes on both sides together, Radha-Krishna enter in erotic vibration, causing the cosmic tremor which produces the primordial AUM sound. The instrument’s affective body-space then *becomes* the primeval echo of the yogic body, which, in the corresponding *chakra* imagination, navel downwards embodies feminine vitality (Radha), and upwards, masculine energy (Krishna), together resonating *anahata naad* or AUM (Beck 1995, 101).

Further, practitioners divide the instrument’s body into *chakras* too, aligned below and above the middle portion. When the practitioner pulls up yogic breath via the body’s central nerve, the lotus-like-*chakras* blossom with corresponding unfurling of secret sounds nestled in them. Musicians explained that they can play the equivalent alphabet combinations on the *khol*’s *chakras*, and the same cosmic vibration then reverberates as aural auras inside the body and instrument.

2. Conch

Like the flute and *khol*, the conch (*shankh*) sound also has deep connections with corporeal metaphysics.

The esoteric connection of the body and conch is discursively established through the tantric imagery of *kundalini*, the coiled serpentine feminine force lying dormant at the spinal base. Practitioners sang songs to describe the difficult terrains through which Radha crosses to meet her lover, Krishna, at the banks of the Yamuna river; as the direct analogy of the *kundalini*, rising with yogic breath, through the six *chakras*, to meet her lover, the masculine energy, at the cranial center. In the cranium, the erotic concentrate of Radha-Krishna's love, the flute, is then said to be heard. Similarly, the twirled conch is compared to the sleeping, coiled *kundalini*, aroused through perfected breathing, to sound the primordial *anahata naad* (AUM), the first buzz accompanying divine male-female union.

The *shankh* is imagined to carry inside it the primordial AUM sound, an acoustic similar to the deep oceanic murmur. Visually, the conch has distinct twists twirling inside, forming a secured interior cocoon, while its audition loosens towards the outside when it is blown upon. This particular rhetoric is also evident in corporeal phenomenology, with the body's tantric serpent essence at the bottom of the spine, either remaining coiled interiorly or spaciouly swelling its breathing capacity towards the yogic, expansive cranium; hissing up with its primordial murmur to unite with her transcendental lover, situated in the uppermost *chakra* (Silburn 1988, 124–33).

An analysis of the etymology of the term *shankha* also tells a similar story of contradictory energies nestled within it: *sham* (implying interior peace) + *kha* (signifying emptiness). So, the *shankha*, its name, and twirled folds embody a life of both interiority and infinity, which correlates with the *kundalini*'s coiled location in the body's spine and subsequent full-breath expansiveness in its upward journey to the cranium's yogic eternity.

Ananda Coomaraswamy (1934) explains that “kha” is *akash* or space/void/cavity. While this void represents a hole or zero, it simultaneously also implies potentiality, spiraling its way to fullness (ibid., 490, 493). *Kha* also correlates with *nabhi*, or the human navel (ibid., 487). As discussed earlier, in yogic/tantric traditions the body, with its various apertures, holds the key to *akash*: its breathing hollows throbbing with vibrations of the first, unstruck *anahata naad*, generated from the *kundalini*. So, the conch, as a metaphorical extension of the human body, alludes to an expansive spatiality which sounds fully through the serpentine energy swelling its force through bodily interiority.

The Bengali lower caste community who collect conches from the sea, clean them, craft conch products utilizing significant parts of the object, and sell conches and conch-derived products, are known as *shankharis*. There are prominent *shankhari* settlements in Bengal's Barrackpore and Bishnupur towns, and I have worked with them, focusing on complex phases of conch-related activities, and popular mythical lore concerning the artefact. These myths relate the conch to the tantric deity consort, Shiva and Parvati, and Shiva's ascetic devotee, Agastya, who *shankharis* worship as their caste ancestor. *Shankharis* consistently allude to stories about Shiva-Parvati's sacred/sexual union, symbolized both in the conch's original vibration and in Shiva's gift of conch bangles to Parvati; and explain how therefore all Hindu Bengali women adorn these bangles as signs of a procreative marriage. Beyond these everyday narratives, they also invoke the conch's esoteric tantricity, and these discourses are tied to ways in which they craft the object.

The conch's inside is sacralized by both *shankharis* and those procuring them. As a metonym of the sea, it is understood as bestowing fertility, peace, and cooling virtues. The conch's parts are thus variously used in astrology, Ayurveda, and as fertile food for fish, cattle, etc. However, the conch's univocally important role is sonic, and most Bengali Hindus blow on the conch every dusk, at home, since they believe that the primordial sound regenerates domestic goodness. *Shankharis* explained further that sounding the conch reunites the conch-body with the body-conch: that is, through inhaling-exhaling rhythms, the mouth, breath cavity, and body-interior become extensions of the twirled conch. Sounding the conch is thus considered therapeutic, since it involves a sophisticated process of breath control. These isomorphic continuums stem from notions of interior depth, and especially hinge on craftsmen's discourses about twists inside the conch. The terms they use for the conch twirls which become evident when they scoop and clean the conches are *pyanch/g(n)it/guli/gnyara*, meaning coil/knot. They refer to the conch navel literally as *pran* (life breath). Herein too, corporeal metaphorization is evident, since the human navel, coiled similarly, is a significant body *chakra*—*manipura*—a carrier of essential breath and a potent symbol of empty space (*kha*) breathing with *naad*.

Most *shankharis* agree that there are $3\frac{1}{2}$ conch-folds. This numerical approximation is especially telling, since in the tantric discourse, critical formations have $3\frac{1}{2}$ spirals. They are: the conch, the cosmic sonic congealment (AUM), and the *kundalini*. Once again, the body cosmos, sonic universe, and a material instrument are drawn together as geometrical and ontological extensions.

The much-regarded 11th-century text, *Kubjika Tantra*, says, “*Nadacchaiva Samutpanna Ardhavindurmaheshwari, Sardhatritayvindubhyo bhujangi kulakundali*” (Das 2018, 11), meaning, “The nasal buzz after AUM emanated with AUM itself [A+U+M+half-sound]. It is the concentrate of divine power. AUM remains coiled 3½ times, as a serpentine force, the *kundalini*.”

Other texts refer to the *kundalini* simply as *shankhini* or the female conch (Silburn 1988, 28, 124, 129). Since childhood, as part of my own empathetic, immersive listening habitus, I have heard Bengali women blow on the conch, three times, the number three being considered auspicious. Beyond this however, there is also always a nasal echo which resonates the three sounds with an extra, like the buzz after AUM sound, also replicated in *khol* rhythms, and experienced on musicians’ tingling hands. This hum emanates from and fuses the cavities of the navel, chest, throat, ears, and head. This blending is imagined precisely as connected cavities of the *kundalini*’s twirls.

Another verse, from the *Guru Gita* (part of *Viswasara Tantra*) text, referring to the power of *kundalini*, says:

She dances in the yogi’s heart. Her form engulfing all creation, she manifests like the flash of a lightning. She remains coiled around Shiva like a beautiful serpent, resembling and becoming the coils of the conch. As Shiva’s energy, she is the source of all knowledge and mantras. She is subtler than the subtle, enlightened like the moon When aroused, her breath enlivens all sounds, and the entire cosmos is constructed. (Omkarnathdev 2012, 60; translation by the author)

As per the yogic regimen, the practitioner’s breath travels through the body’s subtle middle path (*shushumna*), the dozing serpent (feminine energy, *kundalini*) is then aroused, uncoils, travels up the spine to the cranium (to unite with the male principle), while throughout the body senses the vibration of primordial male-female union, the hum of *anahata naad* (AUM). Subsequently, this cosmic breath finds new life as lettered and unlettered sounds, through the body’s openings. The body’s subterranean *anahata naad*, the nasal drone, then gives life breath to other sounds, including *khol* rhythm alphabets, and the conch’s droning pulsation.

Conclusion

This chapter has brought together discursive and affective inner lifeworlds of instruments and human bodies of the Bengali devotional context. It has

discussed both tantric and yogic texts of Indian sonic metaphysics, as well as ethnographic voices of crafters and sounders of sacred instruments, notably the flute, percussion, and conch. I argue that textual and living traditions together demonstrate how the abstract interior spaces of the human body and musical instruments become homologous divine reflections through the experience of breath and sound. The body becomes the conch, any one of Krishna's perforated flutes, or the beating *khol*. These instruments not only have an effect *on the body*, but indeed are yogic bodies in their own right. Bodies, texts, and instruments together constitute aural auras, critical to the experience of sonic devotion. This essay has hopefully demonstrated that the "sonic turn" does not always need to turn *away* from texts towards bodies. We have rather dealt here with thoroughly embodied texts and entextualized bodies (Flood 2006). What is sensed here is an intense acoustemology involving the deep visceral habitus of auditory communities, located at the interface of perduring cultural texts of Indian philosophy, attuned sensibilities, and affective interiors of adept listeners.

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4 Sounding Pain

Public-Private Aspects of Shi'a Women's Sonic Practices in Muharram

Epsita Halder

Abstract

This chapter listens to the sonic landscape of Muharram *majlises* (ritual mourning) as an interpretive tool to understand the formation of collective and individual agency within the Shi'i community, a double minority community in the Indian context. The chapter focuses on the interiority of the sound, performed by the community women in the closed cloisters of the *imambaras*. While male mourning rituals are brought to the social exterior by microphones and phone cameras, women's laments and chest-beating remain exclusively private sonic practices. Is the interiority of female sonic landscapes of mourning susceptible to the larger socio-religious context that the community negotiates with? I reflect on how the sonic offers an understanding of the trans-/multilocal connections that the community inherits and develops.

Keywords: ritual mourning, Indian Shi'a, Muharram, sonic piety, Shi'i women

On Thursday afternoons, groups of Shi'i women, some in black *burqa*, some in their usual saris with their heads and torsos veiled, gather for a lament ritual in the *imambaras* of Kolkata. After they leave, the men arrive to do the same. The imambara is the congregational site to mourn the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who died in the battle of Karbala (680 CE). The Muharram ritual is scheduled from the 3rd Muharram month in the Islamic calendar culminating in the final day—Ashura, the 10th—when in public processions Imam Husayn's martyrdom is commemorated through the chanting of *nawha* (elegy) with

vigorous rhythmic chest-beating and self-flagellation. The private mourning sessions by Shi'a men and women continue inside the *imambaras* during the Muharram days and on Thursdays throughout the year. In a multi-aural, heterogeneous, and postcolonial city like Kolkata, such sacred sounds in public *ashura* processions navigate and negotiate the multiple dimensions of public space in both symbolic and physical ways.

Auditory enactments like reading of the *nawha* and crying “Haye Hasan Haye Husayn” transcend the community’s physical locational boundaries to become a part of the sensory physicality of the city. To understand such auditory enactments Steven Feld (1982) introduced the term *acoustemology*, a sonic way of knowing and being in the world. It remains a central interpretive key to understand the auditory multiplicity of Islamic sonic phenomena as sites of contestation and reclamation of the public sphere (Eisenberg 2009; Eisenlohr 2018). By exploring the “ethical listening” of the mediated sound, these studies have brought out the possibility of the presence of religious counterpublics within an authoritarian state (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008). They have also explored the spatial politics enacted through the performance of religious sound in a contested public space where Muslims are the minority (Eisenlohr 2019). Patrick Eisenlohr has initiated a reading of Muharram as a contested sonic site of Shi'a *acoustemological* citizenship in Mumbai and analyzed the publicity of the Shi'i embodied sound in connection to the Hindu-Muslim communal factors and the intra-religious rivalry between Sunnis and Shi'as (Eisenlohr 2019). My essay takes cues from Eisenlohr's analytical framework to engage with the private sonic rituals performed by Shi'i women inside the *imambaras* to study: 1) how these private and intimate acts of sounding in the relative spatial autonomy of the interior spaces exemplify the contestations of the Shi'as as a double minority community in the Hindu-majority urbanism of Kolkata; 2) how the sonic values of women's ritual performances articulate the regional community's tryst with various transnational and multi-local Shi'i networks.

Women take part in the gender-segregated lament ritual, called *majlis*, in the exclusive interiority of the *imambaras*. The male *majlis* has direct interface with the public in terms of the use of the *imambara* courtyard as the extension of the interior ritual, the use of microphones and sometimes video recordings and, in more recent years, the ubiquitous cell phone cameras. Male mourners record, edit, and post stills or small audiovisual clips of the sermon and mourning sessions on social media. Through such movements between the *sanctum sanctorum*—where the replica of Imam Husayn's *rowza* (mausoleum) is kept—and the open streets, between the transcendental and technological mediation, the private-public divide becomes more fluid for the

male mourners than for women. Although *majlis* sessions take place inside the *imambaras*, these events can be understood as directly corresponding to the contests and negotiations in the public sphere of urban Kolkata and responding to the virtual network that reconfigures a Shi'a public online. But the complete interiority of women's sounding practices with prohibition on the use of cell phone cameras or any other recording device during the mourning ritual and complete reliance upon the traditional local *nawhas* make it more challenging for the researcher to consider these women's sonic practices as a site of acoustemological citizenship.

By exploring a private set of sound practices performed by Shi'i women, which are imperceptible to outsiders, as they are enacted in the interiority of the *imambaras* and publicly inaudible for not being amplified, I suggest that even Muslim gendered privacy is integrally connected to everyday urban contestations,¹ and that women's sonic practices show dimensions of acoustemological citizenship. Crucial methodological issues are raised by the scholars of the sonic dimension of Islam by invoking the experience of transduction—that is movement of sound across media—and sonic atmosphere, and the perception of the “felt-body” (Helmreich 2015; Eisenlohr 2018; 2019). In these theorizations, embodied voice, rather than voice in the metaphoric sense, becomes a crucial mediator in forging connections with the divine, while also contextualizing sonic practices in a specific socio-religious milieu that makes such soundings possible (Eisenlohr 2018, 3–4). While the public sounding practices of Muharram have been widely discussed, my research addresses the spatially private dimensions of Muharram sonic events and posits them in connection to the multiple transformations in the public sphere. Eisenlohr resolves the binary between the sonic in itself and culturally attuned bodies and selves that perceive and perform sound in specific ways. The notion of embodied voice here, as Eisenlohr explicates, is built upon the socio-cultural context where the sounding practices are enacted and where linguistic elements embody religious emotion. It also focuses on the affective turn that sound brings to effect, articulating and suggesting movements. What Eisenlohr proposes is a critical engagement with transduction and historically specific sonic atmosphere, prompting a study of religion as performance,

1 In the study of urban religion, the ritual has been observed as a set of public practices that represents forms of aspiration, competition, and negotiations of the community in a religiously diverse urban space. Following Peter van der Veer it can be commented that a religious ritual is a “construction of self” that integrates the practitioners as a community and posits a symbolic boundary between them and the “outsiders” (Van der Veer 1994, 11). My essay, by reading women's intimate sounding practices inside the *imambaras* as possible sites of urban contestation, intervenes into the public-private dichotomy in the understanding of religion as a site of urban contestation.

with public embodied practices (Asad 1993; 2003; de Vries 2008) based on the sensational use of the media (Meyer 2005; 2009; Hirschkind 2006).

The intrinsic link between the propagation of sound and space makes space a very important category in sound studies. Sound emanating from private sonic practices by men and women cannot be imagined outside that space; the site of the *imambaras* where sound gets produced and the route that sound traverses qualify auditory experiences as both of sound and of the social. The sonic gestures remain space-specific for simulating “the position of sound sources in the environment and the volume of the space in which a listener is located” (Clarke 2013, 94). When the female sermon preacher (*zakira*) speaks in *majlis*, the position of the seat of the sermon preacher, from where the sound emanates, is fixed; and the logic of the architecture impacts her sounding which entails the use of the microphone if needed. But the sonic gestures and circulation are not always based on the visibility of the spatial arrangement. The listener-participant of *majlis* reading starts by looking intently at the preacher and following her gesticulations, visual and sonic. But, as the affective climax is anticipated, no one requires visual cues, rather closed eyes and a lowered head signal a more attentive listening to engage with the “pure” sound emanating from the speaker’s mouth. The whole effort is geared towards the de-spatialization of sound (Eisenberg 2015) to make direct and unmediated connection with the transcendental value of sonic piety.

Shi’i mourning, in its ecstasy of pain, brings out sound from the textuality of the sermon and *nawha*, positing it as de-spatialized and pure. The transcendental values of sound are affirmed through the mediation of the sonic gestures of women reciting the *nawha*, the sound of rhythmic chest-beating along with recitation/chanting, and the voice of the preacher, her accents heightening speech beyond everyday materiality.

A listening of Shi’i sonic attributes

Shi’i sonic attributes can offer an epistemological shift from the traditional elements that constitute private-public dimensions of religious experiences. Scholars have discussed various Muslim sounding practices, especially the *adhaan* and public sermons in multi-aural heterogeneous urban space, but their focus has remained solely on Sunni practices (Hirschkind 2006; El Guindi 2008; Eisenberg 2013). A study of Shi’i private sounds can be a corrective to the “deafness” of academia towards the “unheard” sounds of Shi’i private mourning which does not have the same “territorializing force” that the public sounding of Islam possesses (Eisenberg 2015, 200).

The Shi'i experience can neither be identified solely as Muslim experience, nor exhausted or subsumed in the logic of mosque-based sonic experiences of the majoritarian sounding practices of the Sunnis. In this context, the place-making (Desplat 2012) and sounding practices that are part of Shi'i ritualistic performances can open up theoretical possibilities to understand Shi'i identity-formations in the urban post-coloniality of Kolkata. I study how the Shi'as in diverse regional and historical ways "imagine, experience and inhabit" (Desplat 2012, 10) the sacred space to endow it with the value of a sacred sound. This approach calls for a multilayered understanding of the socioeconomic dimensions of the city space as marked with the religious identity of multiple communities.

The battle of Karbala marks the first sectarian schism in Islam, dividing the *ummah* of the Prophet into two sects—the Sunnis and the Shi'as. Shi'i intercessory piety for Imamate has triggered the protracted spiritual and political rivalry between the sects. The sensory auditory-physical forms of mourning in Muharram are considered the threatening alternatives to the Sunni interpretation of prophetic inheritance and the ecstasy of mourning is not sanctioned by the Sunni scriptures in general, because of its sensory modes of embodying intercessory piety. An attempt to read the Shi'i sonic as such offers an alternative framework to the Sunni validation of sound. In the Sunni worldview, the pure sound of Qur'an recitations connects the ephemeral with the ethereal for which Prophet Muhammad's ideal sounding/praying and Muhammad as the "beautiful model" (Surah 33, 21) should be emulated (Schimmel 1985, 16–48; Faizer 2011). The emblematic sounding practice of the Shi'as is based not on the reading of the Qur'an, but on the recitation of elegies and lamenting chants. Shi'i acoustemology relies upon an affective structure of pure pain as the core of mediation with the transcendental which is achieved through the preparation of the body—including voice—as the pure medium to witness that pain. And in the process, the materiality of the auditory experience, the orchestrated body, the voice, the textuality of the sermons and elegies, and the technologies to produce sound are invested with the agency of mediation to create a "transcendental plane of meaning" (Van de Port 2011, 163).

The privacy of male Shi'i acoustemology: New media and mediation

The quality and features of sound and performance took on new shapes with the advent of new media technologies, internet, and social media practices (Hirschkind 2006; Campbell 2005; 2010; 2012). New authors (elegy writers and

performers/*nawhkhans*) emerged in the Indian vernacular Shi'i landscape by emulating transnational sounding practices (mainly the new media practices in Pakistan) to forge a new transnational communitarian sense by placing the private acoustemological field in a transnational network. The most productive mediations of new sounding practices can be discerned in the use of CDs, DVDs, and social media.

The CDs and DVDs produced in Pakistan and imported to different Shi'a quarters in northern and eastern India brought in sweeping changes in the private and public listening schedules, patterns of listening-viewing and affective-textual response to these digital artifacts.² As a response to the transnational flow of digital *nawha*, new sounding cultures evolved as audiovisual recordings of the *nawhas* performed by the local *nawhakhans* started to be produced and distributed in the local digital networks in the first decade of this century. These local responses to the transnational digital devotional network significantly changed the textuality and sonic practices, as well as the orchestration of the body and tonality of the local Shi'i landscape. The studio of the videographer emerged as the new arena of mourning where the *nawha* was now read and recorded. The *nawhas* became ringtones and caller tunes and appeared on individual playlists that could be accessed outside the specific mourning time.

Through social media, the male *majlis* of mourning inside the *imambaras*, which used to follow the rigid norms of privacy, started to reformulate themselves in the matrix of the transterritorial online sound affect. That response created a virtual public sphere through the recordings of private rituals being posted on social media. Social media users, mostly men, especially through their Facebook accounts, became part of a virtual network where they established their Shi'i identity through their religious participation online. The whole new set of experiences changed the perception of sound and (offline) sounding practices in the interiority of the *imambaras* that had been designated for men.

From my ethnographic study across different Shi'i quarters of Kolkata since 2010, I could see that to date neither individual Shi'i women nor the women's quarters in Kolkata in general have become public actors in digital religion.

Even as the CD/DVD culture made a quick and silent disappearance with the proliferation of the internet, cheap data packs and smartphones in the mid-2010s, women did not become the protagonists of online sonic experiences and productions immediately. Women's responsiveness has continued exclusively offline where any kind of recordings, following the

2 For more details, see Halder (2016).

traditional template of gendered privacy of religion, is not encouraged. Here, inaccessibility of cell phones or internet connections in general is not the cause for such disinterest from women. The invisibility is not a fallout of any absolute exclusionary mechanism of the community; in effect, Shi'i women are quite visible in other social spaces across class tiers and actively contribute to the economic growth of the family. Such gender segregation of recording or digitization can be said to be needed to secure the gendered privacy of religion as it were. When new media captured the imagination regarding new religious forms in the male private sector, the women's quarters were kept secure without any digital interference so as to uphold traditional forms. Needless to say, there was no such formal notification on this and the new public-private orientation took shape along the changing forms of male rituals and their online presence.

But the absence of female actors on digital and online religious platforms does not confirm a monolithic spatial and experiential sonic privacy of women's *majlises*; rather, women's sonic practices unfold and multiply through their connections with external social forces. I introduce here the sonic actions performed by three *zakiras* at three *imambaras* and explore the affective dimension of their sonic phenomena. These women do not have direct online presence. However, the patterns of their elocution and sonic rhetoric clearly show the influence of the online performances of male preachers. Even if women are rarely active online, their varied access to online resources recalibrates their sound gestures. Thus, *majlises* attest to the dynamic processes of the women's sonic-religious subject formation, individually and collectively, even if they are not public agents of religious change and sonic ritual in the virtual realm.

The private dimensions of Shi'i commemorative ritual

Majlis sessions inside the *imambaras* follow a certain structure. The *zakira* induces the pain of the unjust deaths of Imam Husayn and his companions by narrating episodes from the battle of Karbala with the commentary endowing the narration with interpretive values. Once this affective speech reaches a dramatic emotional climax it culminates in the audiences' response—*matam* or rhythmic chants of elegies and chest-beating to transform the body into a medium and witness of the pain of Imam Husayn and the other martyrs.

Between 2016 and 2019, I attended the *majlis* sessions presided by three *zakiras*, Hashmat Fatima, Rana Meerza and Nuzhat Zahra, at three



Figure 4.1 Preaching by the *zakira* Hashmat Fatima and attentive listening at Haji Lane imambara, 2018. (Photo by the author)

imambaras—Haji Lane Imambara (Haji Lane), Mehfil e-Haidari (Metcalf Lane), and House Imambara (11, Pemantle Street) in central Kolkata. These imambaras sustain a cultural tradition of women's *majlises* initiated by the preaching of a *zakira*. House Imambara hosts the descendants of Shi'i Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the last independent ruler of Shi'i Awadh in North India, who was exiled to the southern fringes of Calcutta when his kingdom Lucknow was felled and his state annexed by the East India Company in 1856. With the Nawab came the Awadhi tradition of public mourning practices and a culture of private imambaras at the royal households continued.

Preaching sessions become participatory communicative practices as the listeners engage in the sonic expressions of the *zakira*. Audition that is the sensory modality of sound entails here not only listening, but the perception of their felt-body (Steingo & Sykes 2019, 17). As the act of listening engulfs their responsive bodies, listening, as a set of habitual bodily techniques, induces bodily responses that may stem from the domain of linguistic signification that is the rhetorical narrative on the battle of Karbala, but also embodies an affect not fully exhausted into language (Eisenlohr 2018). It is a two-way communication, and not a one-way impact of the oration of the battle sequences to create the perception of the felt-body. Rather, the particular volitional responsiveness of the listener deepens the capacity of an individual to hear in this particular manner (Hirschkind 2001, 24) and



Figure 4.2 *Nawha*-reading by the listeners after the preaching session at Haji Lane imambara, 2018. (Photo by the author)

to finally engage in a particular set of sounding, both through the body and the voice, as sermons are delivered and a *nawha* is recited.

Even the fully autonomous private mourning of women soundings within the imambaras cannot be reduced to their essential psychosomatic interiority. Rather, contingent links between the specific forms of ethical life as such lament gatherings, the individual and collective memory of listening, and public discourses on identity of the Shi'as as a double minority community need to be mapped and scrutinized to engage with these sonic practices.

In the male *majlises*, the practitioners are seen to have restructured the ritual patterns and aligned Shi'i regional identity along transnational lines by responding to the flow of digital artifacts and social media posts. Male preaching sessions have increased in number at the imambaras with preachers from Lucknow, the North Indian center for Shi'i religiosity, with their perfect Urdu and a specific transnational style of sounding, coming in to endow the regional religious network with standardized versions. At the same time, social media activities have enhanced the capacity of listening of the Shi'i men by exposing them to an eclectic collection of preaching and *nawha*-reading in Iran, Pakistan, and elsewhere. It can be said that such exposure to the transnational Shi'i experiences necessitated more structured offline lament rituals redefining the performative sonic attributes of the community. Though women, except for a scanty few, are yet to explore the ever-expanding cyberspace, they listen to the sermons being performed in

the imambaras or online by the prolific *zakiras*. Until the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the new media experience, by bringing audiovisual validation of a transterritorial belongingness to the community so far living in physical cloisters of a double minority, had reinvigorated the community's interest in religious activities such as gathering at the imambaras, listening to the sermons and endowing the space with specific values. Ripples of enthusiasm touched the lives of young men as well. They could enact their transterritorial Shi'i identity through their social media activities or simply visit the imambaras.

All three *zakiras*, Hashmat Fatima, Rana Meerza, and Nuzhat Zahra, coming from three different generations, have developed their own styles of delivery over the years by listening to the male preaching sessions and the occasional female preachers visiting Kolkata from Lucknow and other places in Uttar Pradesh, a populous North Indian state. Rana Meerza, now in her mid-40s, originally from Murshidabad district in West Bengal, began preaching when she was still in high school by reading from printed books of sermons in Urdu. Later she improvised her own style by listening to a specific *zakira* named Sayed Rizvi who migrated from Uttar Pradesh to settle as a school teacher in Murshidabad. On a visit to Kolkata, Rana Meerza was invited to read a sermon at another House Imambara, at 12, Pemantle Street, and soon after that she was invited to deliver the sermons during the ritual days of Muharram at Mehfil e-Haidari, an exclusive space for women's mourning sessions.

Hashmat Fatima, a woman in her early 60s, the most sought-after *zakira* at the two House Imambaras on Pemantle Street and one public imambara at Haji Lane, meant exclusively for women, shares the similar sonic network of listening, a translocal flow of sonic gestures from North India emulated by the local male sonic actors.

At Haji Lane imambara, a small one-story house on the land donated by a pious lady of the locality, Hashmat Fatima was the sole *zakira* for a long time. When she fell ill in 2018, two consecutive years went without the usual elaborate sermon session at Haji Lane imambara. But at 11, Pemantle Street, the daughter-in-law of the house, Nuzhat Zahra, who had started leading the reading sessions (about the glory of Imam Husayn, different from sermons) after her marriage, gradually took up the position of the *zakira*. She was even invited as the sermon reader at the *majlis* of Hashmat Fatima's house when the latter was too ailing to do the honors. Hashmat Fatima resumed her sermon at Haji Lane imambara in 2019 after getting better, but at 11, Pemantle Street, she stopped her oratory sessions as most sermons were now led by Nuzhat, now in her late 30s.

These three women stylize and creatively improvise the acoustic materiality needed to articulate pain. Aesthetic sensations of the audience depend on how the *zakiras* present their sermons through voice modulations, changing tempos of narration, silence, vocal dynamism, intonation, pitch, and accent.

Nuzhat started reading the praise lyrics about Imam Husayn where she did not invest in dramatic modulation. Her voice never left the flat note. Compared to Hashmat's melodious and sonorous voice, Nuzhat did not sound musical. But irrespective of the different sonic attributes of these two women, a comparative reading of Nuzhat's own speech patterns from 2014 to 2019 reveals the processes of her own sonic capacity building and empowerment as a sonic religious subject. She has grown from a young daughter-in-law in jeans and headscarf organizing the ritual paraphernalia at the *sanctum sanctorum* when I first met her in 2012 to a pious sermon preacher in black *burqa*, leading and channeling the affect of mourning. She became a sonic agent and ideal mediator of the transcendental sound. Now, all three women make their discursive speeches based on a basic template of vocality to induce pain in a call-response manner integral to the *majlis*. But their soundings expose different memories of listening and separate socialities of pain, making any autonomous pre-discursive value of the voice impossible.

Hashmat's sonic experience of the older-generation male *zakirs* provides her a template. However, she also uses dialogue with the audience. The feminine persuasive capacity inherent in her voice and discourse has carved out an intimate interiority of speech where the audience is notionally included as the narrative co-creator. Through the dialogic persuasive segment when the audience is ready to respond to the final climax, Hashmat's voice touches the upper octave and breaks into assonances at the end of chosen words, taking sound, through melodious reverberations, to a flight beyond its literary ambit.



Audio sample 4.1

Zakira Hashmat Fatima. Haji Lane Imbarara, 2013. Source: recording by the author.

But, if one studies the speech of both Rana and Nuzhat, while it is the matter of responsiveness from the audience that makes sermons possible as a speech act, a dialogicity with the audience is absent in the level of the

literary speech and persuasion takes up a more direct and compellingly instructive shape. When Rana's speech attains its climax, her voice breaks at every alternate syllable, choosing upper octave notes and touching very subtly and quickly the middle and lower octave notes. She uses the sound of her own breathing in a sonic prowess and thumps her right knee with her right palm at climactic moments. In the dramatic and hypnotic production of pain where the audience can only surrender through their attentive listening, Rana's sonic gestures are clearly inspired by those used by the male *zakirs*. Rana even uses the denominator used in the male quarters—*O azizo*—‘oh my friends’, an address never used to signify female friends.



Audio sample 4.2

Zakira Rana Meerza. Mehfil e-Haidari, 2019. Source: recording by the author.

Nuzhat tells me that there are many sonic references one can readily consult, especially on YouTube, which was not the case for Hashmat who belongs to the previous generation and read a lot before creating her own sonic discourse and style, as Nuzhat informed me admiringly. The style and discourse of Hashmat and Rana were created before the advent of social media, but Hashmat does not seem much affected by the sonic gestures of the male *zakirs* which Rana emulates. Nuzhat confesses that though she does not get much free time after teaching Urdu at a college and attending to her children and in-laws at home, she prepares her discourses like a “seminar paper”, focusing especially on young women as her implied audience to make them realize the ethics of Islam (she did not refer to Shi’ism here), which they might not get at home. Nuzhat’s speech, like Rana’s, uses forceful assonance at the end of words, equivalent to the thrust that men exude while beating their chests during mourning sessions, causing her to lose the natural timbre of her voice.



Audio sample 4.3

Zakira Nuzhat Zahra, in 2014. 11, Pemantle Street. Source: recording by the author.



Audio sample 4.4

Nuzhat Zahra, in 2019. 11, Pemantle Street. Source: recording by the author.

The affirmation of the quality and features of pure sound makes it evident that the emergence of this new actor, Nuzhat, was not because of the essential sonorous quality of her voice or her persuasive enunciation alone. For Nuzhat, her marriage to the direct descendent of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah has made her the ideal candidate to carry on the family legacy. At the same time, along with that marital connection, a degree in Urdu and a teaching job at a college have turned her into an eligible sound actor in the new acoustemological environment. In this new transnational network the local might feel a need for a female role model of piety for the young women of the Shi'i community and Nuzhat readily satisfies the criterion. Nuzhat is among the few Shi'i women with a Facebook account. Though women's *majlises* have so far not been structurally affected by the online and physical ritual practices of men, and Nuzhat's Facebook activity is limited to sharing and liking only her husband's posts, she becomes a mediator between transterritorial and local sets of sonic practices and the regional need felt in the gendered domain.

Conclusion

Shi'i auditory practices invite a set of different analytical and affective contexts to discuss how the felt-body of mourning registers sound by the "commingling" (Eisenlohr 2019) with the sonic phenomena. I placed the sonic phenomena outside the pure phenomenological dimensions within a context where several personal and collective reasons and memories condition the sonic gestures of the Shi'i *zakiras*. My methodology has contextualized the individual sonic memories, attributes, and gestures of the *zakiras* to place these exclusively private female mourning rituals beyond the binary of public and private religious acoustemology, embedding them in the unequal power structures of the post-colonial cityscape.

It should be noted that, though Shi'i women did not become active sonic contributors in the making of religious sounds online, the younger generation does not shy from getting references from the online reservoir of *nawhas*



Figure 4.3 Haji Lane Imambara, 2019. (Photo by the author)

and consulting them. Girls in high school and colleges who own cell phones freely receive and forward *nawha* videos on WhatsApp. As these girls do not have public social media accounts to date where they are engaged as part of an online network, such private acts of sharing on WhatsApp do not unsettle the interiority of religious activity. At the same time such exchanges make them potential agents in the circulation of these new digital artifacts. At Haji Lane Imambara, the ailing Hashmat's absence has created a major affective and functional vacuum, but the women of the Imambara have not yet found a permanent replacement for Hashmat's sermons. Before the onset of the pandemic, till the last Muharram in 2019, it was unclear whether Nuzhat would read the sermon in a larger community network because of her family affiliation. But during the *nawha* reading session in 2019, a teenage schoolgirl (in tenth standard) was asked to come forward in Haji Lane Imambara, marking a moment of generational change in an interior space where only seniors had so far led the reading of the *nawha*. "A good voice she has," I heard an elderly lady murmur at the gathering. The girl took out a cell phone from her sling bag and switched on her mobile data to read out a *nawha* whose lyrics were available online. Her choice of new *nawhas* in a place where always traditional *nawhas* are read from old handwritten copies torn at the edges with decades of regular tactility transforms the private sonic space into a possible domain of new actors with their new deliberations. Once this happens, new kinds of listening will need to be deployed to understand such deliberations as instances of gendered empowerment and subject formation within Shi'i religiosity and sonic citizenship.

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5 Sounds Electronic

New Sonic Mediations of Gender and Spiritual Empowerment

Rosalind I.J. Hackett

Abstract

The world of electronic music has been dominated by male composers and artists from its origins in the 1930s up until relatively recently. Thanks to improved scholarship, media coverage, and activism by women's electronic music networks, the rapidly growing contributions of women now enjoy greater recognition. What remains underresearched is what creators and consumers believe about the capacity of new sound and music technologies to mediate the perceived other- or inner-worldly, and to do spiritual in addition to cultural and political work. Drawing on a selection of pioneering women artists, influenced by Asian religiosities, I argue that the field of avant-garde electronic music leads us into new territories that are significant for today's religion scholars.

Keywords: electronic music, women pioneers, technologized body, (para) spirituality, vocality, listening

In this chapter, I argue that the field of experimental electronic music leads us into new interstitial territories that could or should be grist for the mill of today's gender-aware scholar of religion, notably in the era of less institutionalized and more secularized forms of religion.¹ I explore, from a gendered perspective, the ambiguous realm of contemporary electronic music, and the perceived spiritual, inner- or other-worldly inflections therein for both artists and audiences. While my essay contributes to the book's goal of privileging sounds and embodied

¹ I wish to thank Ben Krakauer, Abby Fisher, Eric Retterer, and Carola Lorea for their valuable feedback on my chapter.

practices in interrogating the relationship between sounds, religion, and power, I do not focus on specific ritual spaces and sacred music as such. Rather, I ask how women's (electronic) sound worlds resonate with, or indeed generate, their religious and spiritual worlds, however explicitly or implicitly the latter might be manifested in secular performance or recording spaces. We may also learn from how women electronic composers and performers articulate the affinity between their lived experiences and this genre of experimental music.

Thanks to improved scholarship, media coverage, and activism by women's electronic music networks, the burgeoning (and recovered) contributions of women who use(d) sound as a medium now enjoy greater recognition.² New collaborations between sound studies and gender studies attend to the relationship between embodied technology and the technologized body. For example, Lucie Vágnerová (2015) investigates how late-twentieth-century female composers of "electro-bodily music" unsettled prevailing paradigms, such as the feminization of the voice in musical discourse, with their performative interventions and work with sound technologies. Relatedly, the concept of mediation has been revisited by scholars asking how the immediacy of live performance is influenced by sound technologies and how bodies and technologies mediate the experience of auditory perception (Birdsall and Enns 2008). What remains underresearched, however, is what creators and consumers believe about the capacity of new sound and music technologies (whether in the form of *musique concrète*, drone, feedback, sonic beds, drum machines, the theremin, the synthesizer, or the computer) to mediate and make "present" in material and experiential ways the perceived other- or inner-worldly (see Meyer 2012), and to do spiritual in addition to cultural and political work.³ Moreover, how might new electronic music and sound worlds trouble *both* the gendered binaries of music *and* the binaries of the secular and sacred in critical ways? Similarly, how might the women electronic music trailblazers that are the subject of this exploratory study inspire religion scholars to push the boundaries beyond classical, liturgical, popular, folk, and indigenous musics as areas of study, not least in relation to gender and power?⁴

2 See, e.g., www.pinknoises.com, Her Noise Archive (hernoise.org), Gender, Bodies & Technology (GBT) Initiative (Virginia Tech), the work of Liz Dobson on "all-women and feminist sound/music tech collectives, co-ops, non-profits"; <https://drlizdobson.com/2018/02/18/feministsoundcollectives/> accessed February 21, 2020.

3 Arya's overview, "Spirituality and Contemporary Art," especially the sections on "Recovering the Spiritual" and "Refiguring the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," provides an insightful and cognate comparison (see Arya 2016).

4 There are extensive resources on religion and popular music, e.g., Partridge and Moberg (2017). On electronic dance music and culture (EDMC), see St John (2007).

Studying the gendered and spiritual intermediacy of new sound and music technologies

I pursue the questions adumbrated above using a threefold interdisciplinary methodology: 1) *historical*, using (auto)biographical and other historical sources to discern the possible social and religious influences on the trajectories of artists' lives; 2) *discursive*, examining current discourses of artists and the ways in which they articulate and interpret their music; and 3) *interpretive*, exploring the interpretations, feedback, understandings, and lived experiences of others, whether peers, music critics, audiences, or fans. Needless to say, there are methodological challenges: religious and spiritual influences may be downplayed, if not hidden or excluded, in publicity or official accounts. Moreover, as will be discussed, women have battled exclusion and marginalization in the (electronic) music scene over several decades.

There are also the taxonomic challenges in terms of delimiting the field of research, given the diverse and ever-changing forms of electronic music composition and performance.⁵ For example, Joanna Demers, in her book on the aesthetics of experimental electronic music (2010), addresses the challenges of discussing the qualities of electronic sound, particularly synthesized sound, due to the lack of a universally recognized vocabulary for musicians (*ibid.*, 47). She identifies two types of approach: the first strategy for talking about constructed sound material relies on descriptions of the equipment and methods used to produce sound. The second strategy, which informs the present study, relies on "its associations with extramusical subject matter" (*ibid.*, 48).

A major source of inspiration for this chapter is musician, philosopher, and auditory culture professor Marcel Cobussen's book, *Thresholds: Rethinking Spirituality Through Music* (2008). While I am considering a different genre of music, namely experimental electronic music, compared to Cobussen's

5 See Dies (2013, 315–35); Emerson (2007) defines electroacoustic music as "a music heard through loudspeakers or sound made with the help of electronic means" (xiii) and extended to include "amplified acoustic music where the amplification changes, in essence, the experience of the sound and is integral to the performance" (*ibid.*). Noting the "live" and "studio-created" ambiguity of this type of music (xvi), he further distinguishes its "high art form" from its popular club versions (81). Joanna Demers discusses the different genres and metagenres of what she terms "experimental electronic music" (2010). Most of my case studies would fall under her rubric of "institutional electroacoustic music" (167), whose growth she links to the "democratization of the medium" (*ibid.*). Tara Rodgers uses the general descriptor of "electronic music and sound cultures" (2010). See also Gottschalk (2016).

point of departure—which is the contemporary classical music known as New Spiritual Music⁶—his concept of the “threshold” as a liminal space in which spirituality can be associated with music serves my analytical purposes. Cobussen asks how music might represent and present itself as this threshold, at the “juncture between the here and the there” (2008, 3). He rightly maintains that there are no “intrinsic qualities” to spiritual sounds or music; the focus is on the relationship between the sound producer and the sound receiver, with the listener interpreting the act of hearing as “spiritual” (ibid., 127). In terms of how to describe this interstitial realm, Cobussen prefers the anti-essentialist term “para-spirituality,” because it captures how listening to this type of music can induce, but not contain or delimit, feelings and traces of otherness. It also reorients us to a concept of the spiritual that is more material and corporeal.

These discourses on “in-betweenness” relate well to my gendered approach that draws on the work of feminist musicologists, such as Ellen Koskoff (2014), who has written extensively on the relations between gender, power, and music. As she states, “[m]usic sound, like *women* and *power* ..., also carries the implication of intermediacy, in that it is used virtually everywhere to communicate with other humans, with nature, and with the supernatural” (ibid., 83; author’s emphasis). Along similar lines, in her chapter on “Both In and Between,” she states, “if both women *and* music were conceptualized as intermediate—that is, in between binaries—they share[d] a powerful symbolic ambiguity (ibid., 45, author’s emphasis).⁷ While I am not focusing on ritual contexts as such, as does Koskoff in many of her writings, her conceptual framework can extend to the sonic creativity and performance contexts under consideration here. Electronic music, with its technologically enhanced and mysterious powers for some, arguably exemplifies the “symbolic ambiguity” of which she speaks, with its perceived capacity “to manipulate emotions, to challenge or protest various social arrangements, or to effect changes in one’s physical or psychological state” (ibid., 83). Significantly, Koskoff adds that music or ritual specialists who manipulate the sound “often take on some of the essence of this power” (ibid.). Along similar lines, we here explore the “empowerment” of women musicians and scholars whose work centers on contemporary electronic music and their use of modern music technologies (in the form of “sound reproduction” and “sound synthesis” [Rodgers 2010, 326]). This sense of

6 See Cobussen’s discussion of the heterogeneity of the movement (Cobussen 2008, 32, 9–10).

7 Anthropologists have long studied how women navigate social marginality and perceived ambiguous loyalties (see e.g., Strathern 1971).

empowerment serves to both interrogate and transgress binary oppositions and essentialisms (Green 1997, 129) and can lead into the realm of feminist technological worldbuilding (Rodgers 2010, Introduction, *passim*). In the apposite words of feminist musicologist Sally Macarthur, “new” music is about “new becomings” (2010, 156f).

Feminist technological and spiritual worlding

Based on the premise of this volume, and the fact that my research comprises both the founding and subsequent generations of women electronic and experimental composers and artists (see e.g., Kelly 2013), I opted to work with select case studies. Examining the lives and careers of these groundbreaking women in their respective historical and cultural contexts brings a fresh appreciation of how they experimented with evolving sound technologies and their own bodies to develop new techniques of self-transformation. It reveals the “soundlines” so to speak between the various artists, as well as some of the intimacies of their creative and performative processes.⁸ Moreover, Tara Rodgers’s book, *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound* (2010) serves as both model and resource in terms of artist interviews, along with her activist media project, *pinknoises.org*.⁹ While several of the trailblazers are primarily European and North American, I complicate this with a discussion of their predilections for Eastern philosophies and spiritual practices, at times resulting in borrowing Asian ritual sounds and actively participating in Asian religious and ritual traditions. Similarly, my selection of Asian composers and performers demonstrates how active they are in the increasingly global and cross-genre electronic arts community. I also discuss the various discourses and media they developed (or were developed by their followers) to perpetuate (and globalize) their “bodies” of ideas and work.

We begin with Daphne Oram (1925–2003) who was one of the central figures in the development of British experimental electronic music. She was one of the first British sound engineers and composers to produce electronic

8 See for example “Meredith Monk” in Kelly (2013, 181).

9 *Pink Noises* (2000–) is defined as “a feminist media project that promotes work by women who are DJs, electronic musicians and sound artists, makes information on music production more accessible, and encourages critical consciousness through creative and exploratory uses of sound and audio technologies. The title embraces “pink” for its gendered connotations, “noise” as a metaphor for disturbance, and “pink noise” as an “audio-technical term describing equal distributions of power across the frequency spectrum” (Rodgers 2010, 19).

sound. She had been able to join the BBC during World War II, when women were able to gain access to professions traditionally associated with men. She also pioneered *musique concrète* (experimental electroacoustic music that uses recorded sounds, such as tape, as raw material) in Britain. Oram was a co-founder of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop in 1958,¹⁰ and creator of the Oramics technique for creating electronic sounds using drawn sound (converting visual data into audio). Oram talked about Oramics (which she divided into “Commercial Oramics” and “Mystical Oramics”) as the study of sound and how it related to life. She was the first woman to design and build a completely new sound recording medium, the Oramics machine (Hutton 2003, 55). In her analysis of Oram’s impact as composer and musician, Jo Hutton argues that the “ethereal quality” and “intuitive approach” that characterized Oram’s music stemmed in part from her critique of the “masculinist” approach to electronic music at the time (*ibid.*, 52).

In her introduction to Oram’s book, *An Individual Note: of Music, Sound and Electronics* (2016 [1972]), Sarah Angliss notes that Oram was a woman with a “firm belief in ‘the beyond’” (2016, 13) and who had a “lifelong curiosity in worlds outside everyday existence” (*ibid.*, 11). As Oram claimed in her opening chapter, “[w]e will be entering a strange world where composers will be mingling with capacitors, computers will be controlling crotchets and, maybe, memory, music and magnetism will lead us towards metaphysics” (*ibid.*, 17). As noted by Hutton, Oram was drawn to what lies “between and beyond the notes” and “between and beyond the boundaries of art and science” (2003, 52). Many esoteric themes such as megalithic vibrations and body electricity appear in the book. She was continuing a family tradition of open-minded enquiry into the paranormal and archaeological research. Seeking more freedom to compose, Oram left the BBC in 1959 and moved to Tower Folly, a converted oast-house in Kent. Interestingly, she referred to it as a “Sound-House,” based on a quotation from Francis Bacon’s 1626 utopian novel, *New Atlantis*:

Wee have also Sound-Houses, wher wee practise and demonstrate all Sounds, and their Generation. Wee have Harmonies which you have not, of Quarter-Sounds and lesser Slides of Sounds.

Several years later, in 2014, the duo Walls released an album entitled “Sound House” that drew on and reworked material from Daphne Oram’s sound

10 A unit created in 1958 that became known for its experimental and pioneering work in electronic music and music technology.

archive (The Quietus 2014). In an interview, Sam Willis (from the duo) described working with her music as a “spiritual séance” and as feeling her presence within the recordings. The Daphne Oram Trust plays a major role in promoting her life, work, and legacy and keeping her music “alive” via the @daphneoram Twitter feed.¹¹



Audio sample 5.1

A short extract from *Oramics* by Daphne Oram, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvU-RaSi418>.

Of the same generation of pioneering women as Oram, but operating on the other side of the Atlantic, Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016) is widely recognized as one of the sonic pioneers of the 20th century. As noted on her website, “[t]hrough improvisation, electronic music, ritual, teaching, and meditation she has created a body of work with such breadth of vision that it profoundly affects those who experience it” (Center for Deep Listening, n.d. [b]). Music critic John Rockwell captures the complexity of her composition and performance, “On some level, music, sound consciousness, and religion are all one, and she would seem to be very close to that level” (ibid.).

After initially working with tape recorders and tape-delay processes, Oliveros started to experiment in the 1960s with electronic sounds, especially long drone sounds on her accordion. After a period of intense introspection occasioned by America’s political chaos, she developed a series of sound texts or exercises that she termed “Sonic Meditations” (Oliveros 1971). These emanated from sound and body experiments with the ♀Ensemble, a women-only group of lesbians and non-lesbians, where male domination of the Western world of music was questioned. Kerry O’Brien, who writes extensively about Oliveros’s life and work, highlights one particular score, “Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears,” as an early indication of her “body-centered politics” and a case for “listening as a form of activism” (O’Brien 2016). O’Brien contends that these “Sonic Meditations” are arguably unique in the history of musical experimentalism, for, in these works, “experiments were not conducted on the music; the music was an experiment on the self” (ibid.). Oliveros clearly intended for them to be “transformational, even therapeutic, enacting lasting changes on the body

11 <https://www.daphneoram.org/trust/> (Accessed January 8, 2021).

and mind" (ibid.). It is noteworthy that during this period, Oliveros came under the influence of the Human Potential Movement that was popular on the West Coast at the time. She also studied tai chi at an Esalen center in Santa Fe and Kinetic Awareness in New York (ibid.). The intertwining of sounding, listening, and bodywork became her hallmark. I was fortunate to experience this personally when Oliveros conducted such a workshop at the first Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, Tennessee in 2009.¹² Opportunities for sound-walking and meditation have been continued by her followers at subsequent festivals.

In wanting to extend her listening techniques to a broader audience, Oliveros began teaching "deep-listening" retreats for "ear-minded people" in the 1990s (ibid.). She described the practice of Deep Listening®, as "a way of listening in every possible way to everything possible, to hear no matter what you are doing" (Center for Deep Listening, n.d. [a]). Importantly, she believed that "Deep Listening takes us below the surface of our consciousness and helps to change or dissolve limiting boundaries" (ibid.). She eventually founded the Deep Listening Institute, now the Center For Deep Listening at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY.¹³ These initiatives, together with her many recordings, interviews, publications, and followers, are destined to perpetuate her message about ever-deeper listening following her death in 2016.



Audio sample 5.2

"Tuning Meditation" by Pauline Oliveros (in 3D binaural audio),
<https://youtu.be/uaLHfhJSFK8>.

French electronic music pioneer Eliane Radigue (b. 1932) began working with the most basic sonic elements, hearing the electronic source (ARP 2500 modular synthesizer) as having its own kind of physical life (Lovely Music Ltd., n.d.). Eventually, she gave up the "meditative" potential of the synthesizer in the 2000s for instrumental music (Wyse 2011). Radigue converted to Buddhism in the early 1970s, at the instigation of the mystic minimalist, Terry Riley. In fact, she ceased composing for several years and devoted herself to spiritual studies. In 1986, Radigue created "Jetsun Mila,"

12 <https://bigearsfestival.org/> (Accessed June 14, 2021).

13 <http://deeplisting.org/> (Accessed June 14, 2021).

an 84-minute composition that was inspired by the life of the 11th-century Tibetan yogi and poet Jetsun Milarepa. The nine interconnected sections signify stages of life, death, and rebirth in the Tibetan tradition (Ratliff 2015).

However, in an interview with Radigue, Kate Molleson notes that the composer does not discuss her religion, but does acknowledge its impact on her work (Molleson 2017). Radigue is reluctant to acknowledge any direct spiritual expression in her music, other than to state that “[m]eaning comes from the life in the sound” (ibid.). According to Molleson, she talks about meditation and slowness, and the “sounds within the sound,” but does not like her music referred to as drone music (ibid.). She refers to the “mysterious power of the infinitesimal” in her work (ibid.). In his article on Radigue, “Eliane Radigue, Mining Wisdom from 11th-Century Buddhism,” Ben Ratliff tellingly states that the piece, *Jetsun Mila*, provides “an *expanded sense of the present* ... You may find yourself drawn to what’s behind it rather than its surfaces” (Ratliff 2015, my emphasis).



Audio sample 5.3

Eliane Radigue’s “Songs of Milarepa”, with the voice of the Tibetan Lama Kunga Rinpoche, <https://youtu.be/xErtRAMXDvM?t=184>.

The influential American composer, singer, director/choreographer and creator of new opera, music-theater works, films and installations, Meredith Monk, is known for her groundbreaking exploration of the voice as an instrument, as an eloquent language in and of itself. She is considered a pioneer in what is now called “extended vocal technique” and “interdisciplinary performance” (Monk, n.d.). Her 2008 Grammy-nominated “impermanence” is a non-narrative musical meditation on the themes of death, loss, and the fragility of human life. In the booklet note, Monk writes: “In a way, making a piece ‘about’ Impermanence is an impossible task One can only brush upon aspects of it; conjure up the sensation that everything is in flux, everything constantly changes, we can’t hold onto anything ...” (ECM Records, n.d.). She is very explicit about linking her creativity to her Tibetan Buddhist practice, as in:

The parallels between dharma and making art are many. As the years go on, I realize more and more that there is no separation between the two: making art is a bodhisattva activity. The inner transformation and

growth that results from dharma practice flow into the work, and the work in turn becomes an offering. (Monk 2010)

Monk's latest work, "On Behalf of Nature" (2016), is described as a "plea for biodiversity" with the "graceful use of diverse sonic phenomena" (Walls 2016). The reviewer is also explicit about the spiritual impact of the music, "[t]hen Monk's voice enters, creating a sense of shamanistic ritual. Her notes could be talismans against danger, or the first melody after a cataclysmic event" (ibid.).



Audio sample 5.4

"On Behalf of Nature," by Meredith Monk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-Qyed8WYzg>.

Lyra Pramuk is an American vocalist based in Berlin and a prime example of the newer generation of female sonic explorers. According to her website biography, Pramuk fuses "classical vocalism, pop sensibilities, performance practices and contemporary club culture in what can best be described as futurist folk music" (Pramuk, n.d.). Using recorded work, as well as performance in a process of sampling and synthesis, she cross-pollinates and extends genres. In numerous interviews, she provides informative commentary on her performance, her spirituality, and her transsexuality.

In a 2020 interview for *Pitchfork* magazine, entitled "Lyra Pramuk's Surreal Songs of the Self," she discusses how she "expands the limits of the human voice through vocal processing software, a method she compares to symbiosis" (Torres 2020). In her search for self-discovery, she has used her voice in a hyper-feminine way, but now she finds it interesting "to put the full range of my voice everywhere and treat it as a nongendered or nonbinary instrument." She also talks about how hours of euphoric solo dancing or "ritualistic experiences with techno" helped shape her musical ideas and fantasies. In the interview, Pramuk reminisces about her pre-pandemic performances on stage: "It's like devotion to the unknown, to the universe, to the cosmos, to the shifting tectonic plates and all species of life" (ibid.).

During her shows, she dresses in fashionable gowns and seeks to enter a trance state while improvising looped vocals between the various songs. She claims that the nature of her performance serves as a type of purging energy. Pramuk is strongly influenced by Eris Drew's theory of musicians

and DJs as “ecstatic healers” acting in service to the community (RA, n.d.), as well as by the famous Pakistani singer, Abida Parveen, renowned for her declaration, “I’m not a man or a woman; I’m a vehicle for passion” (Iqbal 2013).

Pramuk describes her performances as bringing together an “ecosystem of vibrations—body, movement, voice, effects, speakers, into the ears and bodies of the audience” (Fischer 2017).¹⁴ In response to perceptive comments from a journalist about how her vocal energy “creates a spherical, spiritual almost sacred space,” she responds in telling fashion:

I’m a spiritual person and I don’t take that lightly. I don’t ascribe to any particular religion or teaching, it’s more just a sense of nature, connection with other life, and appreciation for what my senses offer me. ... Musical space, or the organizing of sound into space, is its own spiritual realm for me. (ibid.)



Audiovisual sample 5.5

“Scrytch,” by Lyra Pramukh, https://soundcloud.com/lyra_songs/scrytch.

Labeled the “Queen of Tech-topia,” Holly Herndon is an American experimental and electronic musician and composer, and sound artist based in Berlin, Germany (Beaumont-Thomas 2015). Her work is characterized by a quest for new modes of expression relevant to contemporary and future worlds, particularly the future of human interaction in an increasingly digitalized world (Forecast, n.d. [a]). She describes her music as “a rupture, a paradisiacal gesture” (ibid.).

Herndon began her musical career with live laptop music, having been influenced by Berlin’s minimal techno scene. Now, she focuses on augmentations of the voice through digital processing and emergent debates on ownership of the voice. She also has an academic side, having recently earned a PhD from Stanford University’s Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics. She claims she is not a religious person, but, because of her church and folklore background, she “grew up in religious ecstasy, and this feeling of public ecstasy is something that I feel music can provide that

¹⁴ In this connection, see https://www.instagram.com/p/BUgOvPlgHi/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=embed_video_watch_again (Accessed June 18, 2021).

a lot of other fields can't" (Stubbs 2019). She and her partner Mat Dryhurst have birthed an AI "baby" or recording system, known as Spawn, which features on her latest album, *Proto*. Since 2014, they have been interested in decentralized technologies and collaborations, and have announced the creation of "Holly+"—a digital twin of the original Holly (Howard 2021). It is worth noting that Herndon has worked with Lyra Pramuk and mentors the Korean electronic artist, MIIIN (Forecast, n.d. [b]).



Audiovisual sample 5.6

"Eternal," by Holly Herndon, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4sROgbaeOs>.

Some would argue that music has always traveled, but the explosion of social media has facilitated sharing and collaborating on an unprecedented scale. New, experimental, and contemporary music has been picked up by mainstream media and is now streamed worldwide.¹⁵ Podcasts, online journalism, archives, websites, lectures, conferences, and festivals supply information and interactive possibilities for both performers and followers.¹⁶ With the new attention to diversity, inclusion, and diasporic cultures by Western festivals and media outlets, along with the popularity of the "world music" paradigm, cross-cultural woman/non-binary/trans-generated experimental music can be located at every turn. Not surprisingly, several Asian women have already made their mark in exploring the affinities between their gender, electronic music, spirituality, and cultural heritage and in contributing to multilateral, transnational flows of electronic music creation.

A case in point is Aïsha Devi, the Swiss-born, Nepalese-Tibetan electronic producer and musician, who has developed a reputation for pushing the boundaries of music and sound. On the appropriately titled website, *Gender Amplified*,¹⁷ we read about the links between her "spirituality and electronic

15 See, e.g., Echoes <https://echoes.org/> and BBC Radio 3's New Music Show <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00040cx> (Accessed June 17, 2021).

16 See, e.g., <https://www.resonantbodiesfestival.org/>; <https://hcmf.co.uk>; <https://internationales-musikinstitut.de/en/ferienkurse/ueber/info>; <https://bigearsfestival.org>; <https://www.niefnorf.org> (Accessed June 17, 2021).

17 They list as one of their goals, "Gender Amplified endeavors to give voice to a subculture of women who are using music technology to create their own music and perpetuate their unique identities" (Gender Amplified, n.d. [a]).

music production” (Gender Amplified n.d. [b.]). For her 2015 album, *Of Matter and Spirit*, she reconnects with her Tibetan roots, notably meditation. In particular, the second track, “Mazda,” which is accompanied by a music video, directed by Chinese artist Tianzhou Chen, is described as “bizarre, overwhelming, and flooded with spiritual symbols and motifs” (ibid.). Devi claims that her voice and machines are the “vibrations of my soul, mind, and body and out of body explorations. Both meditation sessions and music production merged into one same ritual” (last.fm, n.d.). In her live sessions, “she incorporates the overtone and guttural chanting techniques she learned, as a healing method through frequencies” (ibid.). In an interview on the 2018 release of her second album, *DNA Feelings*, Devi is more explicit about the metaphysical intentions of her music (Bremond 2018). Through the use of non-Western harmonies, and resisting capitalist logic, she sets out to create subliminal music that can generate altered states of consciousness and healing through resonance. Her closing remarks are highly germane to this essay: “Shamans were always musicians, but I think that this society failed to produce modern ritual music with the exception of the actual electronic music scene. I think the revolution will be *frequencial* and we could be these modern shamans” (ibid., my emphasis).



Audio sample 5.7

Aisha Devi, *Of Matter and Spirit*. Album trailer, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5m-mhzMX7w>.

Miya Masaoka is an American composer-performer of Japanese ancestry who has collaborated with Pauline Oliveros. Masaoka’s body of work encompasses notated composition, hybrid acoustic/electronic performance and improvisation on Japanese string instruments such as the *koto* and *ichigenkin* (Masaoka, n.d.). She has studied in Japan and South Korea. Masaoka is a sound artist who has done pioneering interactive work using the biological response of plants.¹⁸ She considers her work to have gender, race, and social implications. She describes collaboration—whether it is with “insects or plants or people or musicians or the earth’s environmental sounds,” as “thinking about a sound world and how to enter somewhat of

¹⁸ See <https://torontobiennial.org/programs/miya-masaoka-sonifying-the-plants/> (Accessed June 18, 2021).

a psychological and sonic space. And a spiritual place you could even say, like with Pauline Oliveros" (Oteri 2014).

Sainkho Namtchylak is a Tuvan throat singer who has challenged male domination of this singing tradition. In addition to her solo work,¹⁹ she has collaborated with international improvisers and sound artists.²⁰ Reviews of her recordings and performances emphasize her ability to combine elements of her Siberian background and its rich, multicultural folklore, with local shamanic and Buddhist traditions.²¹ For example, in a review of her 2016 release, "Like a Bird or Spirit, Not a Face," where she collaborates with Malian desert blues musicians, she is described as "the best-known female exponent of that eerie and compelling regional speciality, throat-singing, in which a performer creates both droning notes and harmonic resonances at the same time. To this she adds a seven-octave range and a quirky, experimental approach" (Denselow 2016). Early on in her career, Sainkho began to work with creative improvising musicians in the Soviet Union, trying to blend traditional ethnic elements with the sound of avant-garde and jazz music. As her international career grew, she became known as a "wanderer between the worlds" and as an experimental vocalist and musician who took audiences with her to the "frontiers of reality" (Virtual WOMEX, n.d.).

Indian artist and composer Samita Sinha creates multidisciplinary performance works that explore the origins of voice. In particular, her website specifies her interest in "the quantum entanglement of listening and sounding, how voice emerges from the body and consciousness, and how voice can be claimed and rescued from voicelessness" (Sinha, n.d. [a]). She synthesizes Indian vocal traditions (Hindustani classical and Bengali Baul folk) with "embodied energetic practices to create a decolonized, bodily, multivalent language of vibration and transformation" (ibid.). While Sinha is not explicit about the religious dimensions of her life and work, several of the reviews of her performances highlight its spiritual and soul-searching power (Sinha, n.d. [b]). Finally, we mention Midori Takada, a longstanding composer and percussionist in Japan, renowned for her ambient and minimalist music. Some consider her to be a deep thinker on sound, with some of her sonic explanations verging on the mystical (Dayal 2017). Tellingly, she claims that "[e]verything that exists on this earth has a sound" (ibid.).²² Her

19 See <https://youtu.be/CSlncJqJrQ4> (Accessed June 18, 2021).

20 <http://cargocollective.com/sainkho/News> (Accessed June 18, 2021). See e.g., <https://youtu.be/kxaEP-320No> (Accessed July 22, 2022).

21 See also the film made of her career, *Sainkho* (2002), which addresses concerns about declining cultural traditions.

22 See also Spice (2019) for more recent sonic (feminist) initiatives.

latest release (June 2022), *You Who Are Leaving to Nirvana*, features Takada providing a sonic backdrop to Buddhist liturgical chants. It was recorded with the Samgha group of the Shingon school of Koya-san (Rugoff 2022).

Reflection

While composing this chapter, the groundbreaking documentary, “Sisters with Transistors,” appeared on the scene, seemingly validating my choice of topic.²³ Directed by Lisa Rovner, the film is billed as “the remarkable untold story of electronic music’s female pioneers, composers who embraced machines and their liberating technologies to utterly transform how we produce and listen to music today.” Reviewers praise its historical corrective and transgressive, if not revolutionary, qualities.²⁴ Narrated by the legendary American avant-garde artist, musician, composer, and film director Laurie Anderson, the film contains archival footage of some of the (Western) founding mothers of electronic music, as well as the newer generation of experimental musicians and sound artists, several of which feature in the present chapter.²⁵

Just as this film sought to bring to public attention the contributions made by these “sisters” in expanding electronic sound worlds and reshaping how we listen, this essay has argued for the critical salience of spiritual and religious factors in the lives of these avant-garde artists, as well as in the perceptions of their followers. In that respect, the Asian “sisters” discussed above, even though they may follow their Western sisters in the chronology of women gaining access to electronic music technologies, their sonic practices and ideologies are more explicitly “religious” or “spiritual,” as compared to those of their more apparently “secular” or implicitly “spiritual” Western counterparts. This is in large part due to the former’s cultural heritage, whether it is shamanic, Hindu, or Buddhist. Moreover, the decolonizing, “Asia as method” thrust of this volume (see Lorea, Introduction) impels us to

23 See <https://sisterswithtransistors.com/> (Accessed January 8, 2021). Vanessa Ague’s recent *Bandcamp* article helpfully relates the film to the notable contributions by women to the genre of drone composition more generally (Ague 2021).

24 Cf. the criticisms of media representations that fetishize the earlier sonic explorers as loners and outsiders: Morgan (2017), Richter (2013), and Bliss (2013), who considers that the realms of electronic and experimental music falsely “present themselves as somehow post-gender” when first-hand accounts of sexism state otherwise.

25 A 2021 review of the film, tellingly titled, “The Secret History of Women in Electronic Music is Just Beginning to be Told,” is critical of the lack of non-Western content (Herrera 2021).

note that several of the Western artists have drawn on and recontextualized Asian spiritual discourses and practices. Meditation stands out, as do drone, vibration, and inner transformation. There is also a common refrain about the importance of not just exploring and experimenting with sound, but also *experiencing* it. This echoes Eliane Radigue's claim that "[m]eaning comes from the life in the sound" (Molleson 2017). So, too, does freedom, as evidenced by the cultural work of both the Asian and Western composers and musicians featured in this chapter to challenge the prevailing boundaries of voices, bodies, identities, technology, spaces, and geographies of power through their immersive and transgressive sound-making.²⁶

Finally, being attentive to the transcendent/immanent imaginaries that empower the working practices of the women artists discussed in this chapter is integral to the larger case being made for more holistic, non-essentialized, and comparative studies of women's aesthetic agency in electronic music and the sonic arts (see e.g., Devorah 2017). Scholars of religion are finally making progress in studying the sonic dimensions of religious worldmaking, as the present book exemplifies. In conjunction with the growing body of literature on (post)secular spirituality, posthumanism, and implicit or secular forms of religion in contemporary, inter-/transcultural contexts, the globalizing sonic mediations discussed in this chapter have much to contribute.

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26 If Sasha Geffen's influential work (2020) on how pop music is breaking the binaries relating to race, gender, and sexuality is anything to go by, then the realm of experimental electronic music lends itself to such trends.

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6 Sounding Remembrance, Voicing Mourning

Material, Ethical, and Gendered Productions of a New
“Voice” in Shah Jo Rāg

Pei-ling Huang

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the material aesthetics and ethical understandings of a changing vocal technique in Shah Jo Rāg, a devotional singing tradition in Sindh, Pakistan. Over the last century, a new high-pitched voicing technique has emerged and gained currency within the *rāgī faqīr* devotee community, coproduced through material and symbolic intertwining of the faqīr’s body and their accompanying instrument. Within the discursive circuits of an expanding listening public, a minority of faqīrs came to interpret the intense high vocal sounding as the wailing of women at the Battle of Karbala, which encodes their practice as a way to express Shi’i piety.

Keywords: voice, affect, Shi’i piety, Sindh

Introduction: The “voice” in gendered interpretations of Shah Latif’s legacy

Singing devotees who call themselves *rāgī faqīrs* perform the musico-poetic repertoire of Shah Jo Rāg (SJR or Rāg) at the shrine of eighteenth-century poet-mystic Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689–1752), one of the most venerated Sufi saints in contemporary Sindh, Pakistan. This singing tradition emerged from Islamic conventions of *samā’* (audition) for spiritual elevation at Shah Latif’s commune (Baloch 1973). After the saint’s passing, generations of *rāgī faqīrs* continued orally transmitting the knowledge for performing

his poetry. Accompanied by the *danbūro*, a five-stringed long-necked lute, they sing chapters of verses in front of Latif's mausoleum in the town of Bhit Shah, as services of devotion for their spiritual guide.

A celebrated aspect of Shah Latif's verses in Sindh today is his depiction of female protagonists. The corpus of poetry that *rāgī* faqīrs sing are organized into 31 chapters called Surs. Each Sur contains verses that share a thematic content and is set to a unique melodic formula. Among these Surs more than a third are based on stories drawn from popular folk romances. The verses are often composed from the heroine's perspective, grammatically declined to indicate the speaker's female gender, and describe their actions in the face of hardships while separated from their beloved. Scholars of Islam interpret the figure of heroines as mystical symbolism of the "woman-soul" that strives toward Allah (Schimmel 1997; Asani 2003). This draws on the Indic convention of *virahīṇī*, a woman who "awaits her beloved or is involved in a long and arduous quest for him" (Asani 2003, 637).

Sindhi intellectuals and activists in the twentieth century engaged with these women-centered verses in a variety of ways. Since the 1850s, a new class of English-educated Sindhis under colonial rule built their identity on an essentialized idea of "Sindhi Sufism" (Boivin 2020; Levesque 2016). Elaborating on this ideology in the mid-twentieth century, G.M. Syed, a pioneer of Sindhi nationalism, interpreted Latif's heroines as representatives of patriotism and self-determination. Since the 1960s, female Sindhi writers turned toward highlighting how Shah Latif had great respect for women and expressed their positive characteristics through these verses (Channa 1960). Subsequently, an increasing number of female scholars interpreted these heroines as models of Sindhi women defying norms in a male-dominated society (Sayed 1988; Hussain 2001).

Social realist stances on the literary voices of these heroines sit somewhat in tension with the fact that SJR is a tradition outwardly exercised by men, in line with patrilineal norms practiced in agrarian Sindh. One point of fascination for urban listeners, however, is the distinctive high pitch that many *rāgī* faqīrs sing in, with the timbral quality resembling a falsetto voice. Many scholars and literati hear this as the male faqīrs "creating or impersonating a female voice" when they sing Latif's poetry (Abbas 2002, xxi, 32). This was an enticing narrative that drew me to focus on questions of "voice" in *Rāg* performance. However, I realized after lessons and interviews with *rāgī* faqīrs that, immediately equating the figure of the female voice as a poetic device with that of a sonic signifier, risks naturalizing ideologies of gender and collapsing processes of change. The *rāgī* faqīrs' lived practices reveal historically contingent changes in the techniques and understandings of their devotional performance.

In this chapter, I complicate the narrative of “male faqīrs singing in female voice” by tracing a history of changing vocal practice in SJR. This draws on and contributes to a growing body of literature that engage with the analytical framework of “voice.” Scholars have drawn attention to the generative powers of embodied voicing and vocal pedagogy in religious contexts that mediate divine presence and shape ethical selves (Eisenlohr 2018; Rahaim 2021; Reissnour 2018). Discussions of voice highlight its significance as a nexus for exploring the intersections of material and metaphorical, individual and sociopolitical, in sounding cultural life (Harkness 2014; Kunreuther 2014; Weidman 2014). Examining vocal action necessitates focus on relational, non-unitary, and border conditions through transdisciplinary and reflexive methods (Eidsheim and Meizel 2019; Feldman 2015). I align with these studies in the aim of deconstructing a singular notion of voice equated with an essential inner agency or identity.

Beneath the faqīrs’ descriptions about the high-pitched voicing technique bubble ambivalences and debates about its usage and meaning, after it emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. I am inspired by Katherine Meizel to examine the faqīrs’ changing and multiple “vocalities” as a border zone of “meaning-making social interaction” (Meizel 2020, 16),¹ which generates understandings that draw from and influence the faqīrs’ devotional lives. This chapter argues that an intertwining of material and ethical processes gave rise to the faqīrs’ new high-pitched voicing technique and varying perceptions of its sounded qualities. The gendering of this new voice is a minority discourse within the rāgī faqīr community, a more recent phenomenon that developed in relation to listeners outside this community and often deployed by Shi’i faqīrs in connection with their mourning practices of piety. Due to the above-mentioned popular engagements with Latif’s heroines, the gendered narrative of voice has a particular potency in Sindh today, which additionally opened up new possibilities for women’s visibility in the SJR tradition.

Faqīr narratives of voice

Talking about techniques for different kinds of *āvāz*—voice—emerged as a main subject in lessons with my teacher Manthar Faqir Junejo in 2017 and

1 Meizel uses the term “vocality” to encapsulate “all of the physiological, psychoacoustic, and sociopolitical dynamics” that impact the experiences of the speaker, singer, and listener in vocalizations (2011, 267).

2018.² The standard narrative faqīrs tell is that they use two voices in Rāg: the lower voice, *girām*, and the high voice, most often called *sanhī āvāz* (thin or shrill voice) or *kalī* (flower bud), and less frequently, *mādī āvāz* (female or feminine voice).



Audiovisual Sample 6.1

Excerpt from Sur Mazūrī, performed at the shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai in Bhit Shah, Sindh, Pakistan. Recorded by the author on January 2, 2015.

As I talked with more faqīrs in interviews, some started to tell me that faqīrs in the past only sang in one kind of voice called *las*, which was lower than the current high voice. They attribute the emergence of higher voicing to new materials for danbūro strings that appeared in the markets around the turn of the twentieth century. Makers replaced earlier strings made from the softer zinc or pewter (*jist*) to the stronger steel (*ruk*), which allowed faqīrs to tighten the strings to higher pitches than before. Most faqīrs agree that it was Ibrahim Faqir Khaskheli who started employing a new “thin voice” to sing at this increasingly higher pitch to preserve energy. He was legendary in his ability to sing as high and loud as the train whistle that sounded over the railway tracks. Ibrahim Faqir revolutionized protocols for singing. Following his innovation, unison singing in one voice gave way to new, elaborate rules for faqīrs to alternate high and low voices in the group. Yet, technological change alone does not fully explain why the faqīrs strove to sing as high as their instrument allowed. To do so, I propose, requires examining how the faqīrs’ and danbūro’s bodies are ethically entwined in the process of Rāg performance. Rāgī faqīrs “become” a faqīr through learning to habituate an ethical bodily disposition, which can be sonically manifested through their singing voice.³ Their voice, moreover, is interdependent with the physical construction and spiritual connotations of the danbūro’s body.

2 The Sindhi/Urdu/Hindi term *āvāz* can translate as “voice, sound, or noise.” See Kunreuther (2014, 4) and Rahaim (2021, 42) for various contextual usages of this word elsewhere in South Asia.

3 I use the phrase “ethical bodily disposition” in reference to anthropological work that draw on Aristotelian virtue ethics (e.g., Hirschkind 2006; Laidlaw 2014; Mahmood 2005), sharing similar theoretical lineage with Matthew Rahaim’s more detailed conceptualization of ethical “vocal disposition” (2021, 24–31).

Sounding ethical bodies

Similar to other devotional communities in South Asia, *rāgī* faqīrs enter their practice through love for Shah Latif and the divine. They define themselves through performing regular *ḥaẓrī* (presence) at the shrine, following a weekly schedule to sing *Rāg* at various time slots. *Ḥaẓrī* is an act of worship (*‘ibādat*) that necessitates sacrifice, embodied in the act of sitting down to sing for long periods of time. Regular *ḥaẓrī* can come in other forms. Cleaning the shrine, distributing water and food, and attending shrine rituals are all ways to offer energy in devotion for their spiritual guide (*murshid*). Singing *Rāg* is an offering that requires bodily restraint and internal passion, expressed sonorously through spiritual and bodily techniques learned materially from the *danbūro*.

Many faqīrs invoke the following verse by Shah Latif to explain how the *danbūro* embodies his teachings for devotional discipline:

tan tasbīḥ, man maṇīo, dil danbūro jan
tandūn je ṭalab jūn, vaḥadat sur vajān
“vaḥadahu lā sharīka lahu,” iho rāg raḡān
se sutā’ī sūnhan, nīnḍ ‘ibādat un jī

Body rosary, mind beads, heart is their *danbūro*
 Their strings of passion resound with unity
 “He is one and peerless”, their veins resonate
 Awake in sleep, their very sleep is prayers

from Sur Asa⁴

In this verse, Latif likens the throbbing of veins in one’s body to the incessant strumming of strings on the *danbūro*, constantly chanting *ẓikr*—a Sufi ritual of remembrance through repeating phrases professing the unity of Allah.⁵ In the practice of *Rāg* too, faqīrs consider the sounds (*āwāz*) emitted by both the strings of the *danbūro* and their vocal cords as *ẓikr*. Faqīrs agree that the sounds made by *danbūro* strings sing “tun, tun, tun,” which when played in various combinations, say words including “Allah,” “tūn Allah,”

4 Translation by Mushtaq Ali Shah (‘Abd al-Laṭīf 2012).

5 The symbolism of instrument strings as “veins in the body” is widely shared in conventions of Sufi poetry. For more examples of the musical instrument as devotional body see Sukanya Sarbadhikary’s chapter in this volume.

or “Allah hu hu.”⁶ The sound of the strumming strings possesses power to attract and cleanse the heart of the listener.

Techniques of *zikr* are embedded in every section of the performing sequence. *Faqīrs* perform *Rāg* following a set sequence of *Surs* in a group, individually strumming their own *danbūros*. During the sequence, each *Sur* is a unit of performance, starting from instrumental preludes *tand* and *jhaṛ* on the *danbūro*, followed by solo rounds of *bait* (verse) singing by each *faqīr* turn by turn. After a few solo rounds, the leader signals to conclude with *vāī*, a group chorus with refrain.



Audiovisual Sample 6.2

Tand and *jhaṛ* in *Sur Husainī*. Recorded by the author on January 12, 2015.

A single *faqīr* plays *tand* alone to start the *Sur*. At the end of the introductory melody is a phrase similar in all *tands* called “*tūn hī tūn*,” a partly onomatopoetic phrase that means “you, only you.” Upon hearing this, the other *faqīrs* join in to play the *jhaṛ* section together. The section contains five different combinations for strumming the strings called the five *tasbiḥs* (rosary). This brings to mind *Latif*’s comparison of body with rosary in the verse above and implies that playing these combinations is similar to the repeated chanting of phrases on a *tasbiḥ* in praise of Allah.

Zikr continues in the vocal recitation. Each *faqīr* individually starts their turn in singing a *bait* with a melodic phrase called the *saḍ* (to call), which is unique for each *Sur*. The *saḍ* of every *Sur* are invocations to Allah, with phrases like “Oh *Miān* [Oh Lord],” or “Oh Allah.”⁷ Each *faqīr* ends the *bait* with a melodic phrase called the *hūṅgāro*, which is also unique to each *Sur* and directs attention back to Allah with phrases such as “Alo *miān* oh *tūn* Allah.” In the last section of *vāī*, many of the compositions include the phrase “Oh *Miān*” inserted between the half-lines. Thus, the remembrance of Allah, an important spiritual practice in the Sufi path, is resounded throughout *Rāg* performance.

Faqīrs follow the teaching that their bodies should be “empty” like the hollow *danbūros*. Practically, this involves singing *Rāg* on an empty stomach.

6 Meaning “You, Allah” and “Allah, just Allah.”

7 The *saḍ* of *Sur Ma’zuri* in Audiovisual Sample 6.1 is “Oh *Mian*, Alo, Oh *Mian*.” Its *hūṅgāro* is “*Bhalam* Alo Allah” followed by the last rhyming half-line of the verse.



Figure 6.1 Manthar Faqir crafting an unfinished danbūro at home (note its hollow neck and body). Photo taken by author on October 22, 2017, in Bhit Shah.

Philosophically, emptiness resonates with the concept of *faqr* (poverty) from which the term faqir originates. Abstaining from food and other desires was practiced by earlier faqirs at Latif's commune for controlling the *naqs* (the lower self), an important step in Sufi orders for cultivating the *rūh* (soul). Through these teachings, the body of the danbūro becomes an exemplar for the faqirs to emulate through their own bodies and voices.

Finally, the *danbūro* is the basis for singing techniques. Faqīrs conceptualize their singing voice in relation to the various “places” (*jāḡah*, *manzal*) corresponding to string pitches on the *danbūro*. The five strings—*ghor*, two *jārīyun*, *ṭip*, and *zabān*—are tuned to relative pitch heights corresponding to the first and fifth scale degrees.⁸ A common way faqīrs instruct students to sing in tune to the open strings is the expression: “You have to attach your voice to *ṭip*,” or “let your voice meet *zabān*.” When I asked faqīrs why they sang so high, the predominant answer was usually: “Because that’s the place of the highest string *ṭip*, so we have to attach our voices there.” The names of the strings are the sole vocabulary that most faqīrs use to describe the melodic rules for singing. The abstract melodic formulas, as well as the faqīrs’ vocal production, are materially grounded in the musical instrument.

A multitude of names

The most common name faqīrs use for referring to the high voice, *sanhī āvāz*, corroborates the account that this new technique emerged out of physical necessity: to save strength for reaching the new *ṭip* string pitch. Faqīrs are not in the habit of talking about the mechanics of vocal production. Good voices are given by the grace of Shah Latif and Allah, either at birth or as a result of their dedication. Manthar Faqir’s *sanhī āvāz* rings beautifully, although this took him years to master, and not all faqīrs can or desire to sing like him. In Western terminology, he produces this high voice by allowing his vocalis muscle to relax and the ligamentous edges to vibrate (Vennard 1968, 67), letting the sound resonate brightly in the front area of his head.

In faqīr circles, *sanhī* and *thulī*, thin and thick, are adjectives I hear often when they contrast the high and low voices, and when my teacher instructs his students to sing in tune to the high *ṭip* string. Students usually let their entire vocal cord vibrate when singing in the lower range, and struggle to sing beyond their modal voice register. Manthar Faqir would tell them: “Your voice is thick, now make it thinner.” “Making it thinner” could be a way to refer to the muscular transition from modal voice to techniques closer to falsetto, to sing in this new frequency range.

Faqīrs use the word *kalī* interchangeably with *sanhī* as another name for the thin voice. Although they don’t immediately associate *kalī* with its dictionary meaning, that of “a bud, unblown flower, a gill (of fish), or gusset,”

8 Further bolstering the body metaphor, *zabān* literally means “tongue.” Relatedly, some faqīrs refer to the *danbūro* as a “wooden person” (Chang 2001, 43).

I suspect that this name also emerged as a metaphor for the “thinning” technique. In colloquial usage, *kalī* can refer to the plastic wrapper that covers an object. Both dictionary and colloquial meanings suggest delicate, light, or thin material. Light and heavy are also adjectives *faqīrs* use to describe their high and low voices. Furthermore, while *faqīrs* praise the sweetness (*miṭhī*) or openness (*khulī*) of another’s voice, they try to avoid voices that are *ghārī*, which translates as “a space in a cloth where one or more threads are deficient.” These descriptors suggest a tactile iconicity, linking the sound and felt sensations of singing to thick or thin, light or heavy fabrics, or other material objects. The two names *sanhī* and *kalī* foreground the materiality of the voice.

Other names suggest relational interactions. It was senior *faqīrs* at the shrine of Shah Karim, 80 miles south of Bhit Shah, who first told me this story of vocal change.⁹ In contrast, many *faqīrs* in Bhit Shah did not readily remember this history until I asked them. The *faqīrs* at Shah Karim recall their grandfathers tell the story of when Ibrahim Faqir started singing in the new thin voice. This had incurred anger at Bhit Shah and he was prohibited from singing for several years. In the southern areas of Sindh including the abode of Shah Karim and extending to Kachchh, *rāgī* *faqīrs* call this vocal technique *baccī āvāz* (girl’s voice).¹⁰

Mādī āvāz (female or feminine voice) is a name that evokes ambivalence among *faqīrs* in Bhit Shah. Although I had previously read reports of this usage (Abbas 2002; Hemani 2012), I found that few *faqīrs* used the name proactively and some had never heard of it before. A number of *faqīrs* reject the gender association—that singing high and shrill is somehow “female”—by pointing out the technical reasons for singing this way. Faqir Juman Lanjwani tellingly contradicted himself in the middle of his response when I posed the question: “Some call this *mādī āvāz*...?” After a quick negative reply, he paused and said, chuckling: “Yes ... it’s women’s voice ... men’s voices *are* *girām* ... what is happening now in this world, so let it happen....” During interviews, it was mostly *faqīrs* from the Lanjwani family who advocated for singing in the *girām* chest voice, citing the reason that the high voice obscured the words of the poetry that they were supposed to recite with clarity.

The few *faqīrs* who participate in a discourse on the female voice are either connected to families who have historically lived close to the shrine, or

9 Shah Karim was a forefather of Shah Latif. According to oral history, Shah Latif used to visit this shrine with his followers, cultivating *rāgī* *faqīrs* here. The *faqīrs* at these two shrines remain in frequent contact, as do the hereditary custodians who belong to the same family.

10 See Bond (2020) for the history of *rāgī* *faqīrs* and their practice in Kachchh, India.

elucidated *mādi āvāz* through reference to the queries of non-*rāgi* listeners. I suspect that the *faqīrs*' discourse on *mādi āvāz* arose out of interactions with other musical genres and encounters with listeners outside Bhit Shah after SJR performance expanded to larger publics in the later twentieth century.

There is an inclination for contrasting high and low sounds on an instrument as female and male in a number of musical genres in this region. For example, inside the shrine compounds sits a pair of *naghāra* drums sent as gifts by the Raja of Jaisalmer. When the current player Dargahi *Faqīr* showed me those drums, he explained that the two sides of the drums are called *mādi* and *mard* (female and male) due to their contrasting tones. He told me: "It's like the scream in *Rāg*, the drums also have two voices, thin and thick." Likewise, the *murli* and *alghozo* are Sindhi wind instruments with two pipes that sound high and low pitches, with the higher sounding pipe named *mādi* (Baloch 1966). It could be due to knowledge of these, and other genres such as Hindustani vocal music performed by visiting maestros and courtesans living near the shrine, that the *faqīrs* residing in the vicinity of the cosmopolitan shrine, and those who traveled outside to perform, were more inclined toward explaining *sanhi āvāz* as a female voice when they encountered questions about its sound from outside listeners.

The multitude of names for this high voice supports the story of its relative newness. The lower, full-chested voice is called *girām* among all *faqīr* groups, while different lineages of *faqīrs* are familiar with different names for the high voice, from *baccī*, *sanhi*, *kalī*, to *mādi āvāz*. *Girām* (or *grām*) in the Sindhi dictionary means simply: "voice, sound."¹¹ From these names, I speculate that when the new falsetto-like vocal technique emerged out of the default chest voice (*girām*), it was more readily accepted by some than others, and given varying descriptors in different circles. Even as the high and low voices settled as a dichotomy, the multiple names given to the high voice resist a simple binary between these two voicing techniques.

Gendering the new voice

Even though the majority of *faqīrs* use names that do not gender the high voice, the few who spoke about the meaning of *mādi āvāz* shared similar narratives. They deployed this female-like voice to emphasize their *Shi'i* identity, and some extended this to validate their views on what they consider as

11 Or "the manner or measure of sounds/voices in music/singing," *Jāma' Sindhi Lughat*, edited by N.A. Baloch (Jamshoro: Sindhi Adabi Board, 2007).

women's rights in rural Sindh. Faqīr Qadir Bakhsh told me: "There was a *malang* [mendicant] I met at the shrine fifty years ago. He said that *sanhī āvāz* belongs to ladies. When I asked him why, he told me that this was Latif Sein's 'codeword' for Bibi Zaynab and the women imprisoned at Yazid's court." He was referring to how mourning for the events of Karbala began.

Ritualized mourning for Imam Husayn's sacrifice at the battle of Karbala is a central practice in Shi'i Islam. Shah Latif did not explicitly profess a sectarian identity. In the Bhit Shah area, the majority of local elites and *rāgī* faqīrs came to affirm their identity as Twelver Shi'ah (*asnā'asharīyya*) in the last three generations, shortly after the high voice emerged. Most of the faqīrs who expounded on the female voice emphasized this Shi'i narrative: the high-pitched, crying-like sounds faqīrs produce were "coded" by Shah Latif as a form of intense mourning, just as the female relatives of Husayn did after Karbala.

While Shi'ahs are a minority in contemporary Sindh, practices they consider central to their tradition are widespread in the region. Beginning in the tenth century, Ismaili missionaries from the Fatimid empire introduced Shi'i concepts through vernacular vocabulary (Nanji 1978). This instilled in the Sindhi populace a strong reverence for the Panjtan Pāk, the five holy members of the Prophet's family (Khan 1980). In the mid-eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, the Shi'i Talpur dynasty encouraged mourning practices during Muharram (Pathan 2017). Communities regardless of religious affiliation established spaces called *pīrh* for engaging in Muharram rituals including 'azādārī.¹² Inhabitants of Bhit Shah date the oldest *pīrh* in town to about 200 years old; many more were built during the British rule. Like many others in Sindh, communities continued their Sunni-style prayers in the mosque while embracing a "Husaini ethics" (Ruffle 2011) through 'azādārī during Muharram.

In the 1930s, the hereditary custodian (*sajjāda nashīn*) of Shah Latif's shrine married a lady from a prominent Shi'i family of Hyderabad, Sindh. She popularized 'azādārī and pilgrimage to Karbala at unprecedented levels in Bhit Shah. The custodian's family, as elites of the area, started to organize Shi'i *majlis* (assembly) in the shrine compounds and install Shi'i clerics at the small mosque beside Latif's mausoleum, encouraging other families in the vicinity to actively identify as Shi'ah. The majority of *rāgī* faqīrs in the Bhit Shah area today hail from such families.

One strand of the faqīr narrative on the "crying-like" high voice alludes to women being *mazlūm* (oppressed), a Shi'i model of piety exemplified by

12 'Azādārī refers to mourning congregations that express grief in memory of Imam Husayn.

Husayn and his family. Gulan Faqīr explained to me: “*Sanhī āvāz* reveals the oppressed (*sanhe āvāz men, mazlūm zāhir hoti hai*).” He went on to tell me the story of Suhni, a heroine from Latif’s poetry, how her family wronged her by not seeking her consent in marriage. Sur Suhni is a chapter in Latif’s repertoire based on the famous story in which Suhni, married against her wishes, swims across the river every night to meet her true love Mehar. Expounding on this, Manthar Faqir said that: “Shah Latif noted how women were oppressed in his times, that’s why he composed so many verses on heroines.” He further told me and his daughters when we were learning together that: “Suhni ... brought on a revolution. She was demanding for her rights ... and Shah Latif was compelled to raise her story in song.” Syed Juman Shah, leader of the most respected Thursday night group, explained about *mādī āvāz* that: “Just as in our society women are oppressed, Shah Latif’s verses are also for the oppressed That’s why he changed this voice, to tell the whole world that women can also learn and sing Rāg.”

This interpretation of “female voice” thus functions in dual avenues. On the one hand, it evokes the rich web of symbolism associated with the events of Karbala, commemorating through acts of mourning ideals of ethical action including revolution against forces of oppression. The sound of women’s voices becomes an apt medium for practicing unrestrained grief in the context of affirming the narrator’s beliefs. On the other hand, it opens up new possibilities for women’s visibility in the SJR tradition.¹³

By connecting Suhni and other heroines’ stories in Rāg with oppression and defiance, these faqīrs subtly staked their opinions on women’s rights in marriage, education, and performing Shah Jo Rāg. Since the 1980s, female members of the left-wing political party Sindh Awami Tehrik founded the Sindhiani Tehrik to address issues particular to women in peasantry and upwardly mobile rural classes, including campaigning against forced marriages, honor killings, and advocating for female literacy (Mumtaz 1991). Notably, they used symbols of women’s defiance in Sindhi songs and Shah Latif’s poetry for mobilization (Saigol 2016). Although this movement was not directly active in Bhit Shah, these were similar issues the faqīrs touched on in connection to *mādī āvāz*. Furthermore, they invoked this as

13 That SJR is a predominantly male practice is primarily due to masculine-marked spaces of its transmission and performance, which is more difficult for women to access. Women have learned, performed, or possessed knowledge of Rāg in the past, yet they were not widely publicized. Manthar Faqir taught his school-aged daughters and son Rāg at home, which encouraged me to learn with them. I further explore issues related to women performing Rāg in my PhD dissertation.

a legacy of Shah Latif, thereby sanctifying the sonic presence of women in this male-dominated tradition.

While still framing the issues within patrilineal limits of honor, this was a departure from other *faqīrs*' understandings of Shah Latif's heroines. For example, some believe that they were spiritually powerful women who will bless the devotees that sing their stories. Others follow Sufi understandings of the hierarchical relationship between the Sufi adept and Allah, set up in the patriarchal framework of hierarchy between woman and man. Many South Asian religious communities do performatively subvert the ideology of hierarchical heterosexuality through metaphors of love and figures of heroines, to signal surrender to a spiritual authority, or to realize antinomian ontological ideals (Kugle 2010; Lorea 2018). However, the *rāgī faqīrs*' narrative here suggests another hierarchy: the mediation of the Panjtan Pāk between humans and Allah. Rather than becoming heroines enduring the pain of separation from the beloved, this idea of women's voice encodes an embodiment of Husaini ethics through Rāg as mournful commemoration.

Conclusion

Tracing the emergence of a new high voice and its multiplicity of names, this chapter demonstrated how the *rāgī faqīrs* orient their ethics via bodily practices of voicing and discursive gendering of the voice. As a devotional practice for sounding remembrance, Shah Jo Rāg is an ethical exercise intertwining the body, voice, and *danbūro*. The ethics and changing material conditions for this tradition contributed to new voicing techniques. Tactile names of the thin voice hint at the multi-sensory phenomenology of voicing and its power for intercorporeal affecting, which scholars have explored as "sonorous touching" (Csordas 2008) and "transduction" (Eisenlohr 2018).

The *rāgī faqīrs*' body and *danbūro* move in the practice of remembrance, which entails feeling the pain of separation from the beloved. An increasing number of *faqīrs* today embrace a particular modality of pain—that of mourning—localized bodily through Muharram practices. In this modality, some found in the new high voice a gendered interpretation connecting the Husaini ethics of Karbala to the women symbolism in Shah Latif's poetry. Some *faqīrs* who identify as Shi'ah discursively intersect the affect of mourning with conventions of listening that naturalize high and low sounds in a gendered binary. In this narrative, their figure of the "female voice" both bolsters the exemplary ideals of Husaini ethics and works to justify actual women's voices in SJR performance.

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About the author

Pei-ling Huang is an assistant professor at the Center for General Education, National Taiwan University. She holds a PhD in ethnomusicology from Harvard University. Her current project explores the institutional production of knowledge on "Sindhi music" and how it intersects with changing contexts of Shah Jo Rāg performance. This chapter draws on material from her PhD dissertation "Ways of Love: Self-making and Repertoire Formation through the Musical Legacy of Shah Abdul Latif" (2021).

7 Sonic Gendering of Ritual Spaces

Talieh Wartner-Attarzadeh & Sarah Weiss

Abstract

Both the sound of bells from churches and the *adhan* from mosques call their communities to gather and punctuate the day at regular intervals. They also gender public spaces as male, addressing the (mostly) men who serve as leaders in the religion, as well as the men whose lives are described in scriptures—words that were predominantly recorded by men. Drawing on comparative case studies from Asia and Europe, we argue that through performance, in particular at mourning rituals, women sonically gender spaces, temporarily as female. In claiming those spaces, women performers create opportunities for articulating commentary and opinion about their lives and their community.

Keywords: religious sound, Rowzeh, Shi'a, Iran, Graz, women's performance

Sound Vignette 1: Early evening in Surakarta, Central Java

The shadows get longer as the sun suddenly melts into the horizon in late-afternoon Surakarta, Central Java. Shaking off the heavy heat of the afternoon, the city's alleyways and streets begin once again to stir. Children call to one another; flip-flops flap; hens peck and poke desultorily; birds in cages coo and fluff their wings as their human "servants" murmur and click lovingly, offering fruit or rice for an evening snack. In this heavily populated *kampung* neighborhood—in which inside and outside merge sonically over the tops of disattached walls—the scrape of a plastic bucket against cement is followed immediately by the spatter of water coursing onto the ground as people *mandi* (or bathe), repeatedly scooping up water and dousing themselves to wash away the dust and heat of the day as they prepare for evening activities. From the direction of the local mosque, a sharp electric pop echoes through the neighborhood, louder than any other single

sound. Amplified scuffling of book pages brushing near the microphone as they are turned and a rough, but productive, clearing of a throat signify the beginning of *sholat magrib* (*salat maghrib*), the evening prayer that marks the setting of the sun and the beginning of the next Muslim day. A lone male voice intones a few low syllables before his supple voice arches upward, sounding the *azan* (*adhan*) or call to prayer. Lasting for at least a minute, usually longer, one man's pious voice dominates the soundscape in the *kampung*. It is only one part of a euphonic but disconnected chorus of like voices. Myriad *azans* sound out, their melodic pathways intersecting and separating, one from each neighborhood mosque as far as the ear can hear, until their final tones are reached and the hum and buzz of amplified voices gradually dissipates and daily life resounds once again—the snatch of a syllable spoken to another man heard just as the microphone is switched off.¹

Sound Vignette 2: Early evening in Graz, Austria

The whoosh of bikes whisking past, ridden by happily chatting friends ignoring the repetitive creak of a pedal and the fluttering of a fender; the surprisingly loud, slow-down hum of an electric car pausing abruptly at a zebra crossing; the roar and clatter of a skateboard and cranky honks from small trucks, sounds layering on top of one another, suddenly obliterated by an insistent, tonal, pam-pomming of emergency vehicles tearing through the rush hour traffic and dopplering into the distance. As they close for the night, café owners zip wires through the legs and arms of their outside tables and chairs, a rough scrape of metal against cobblestone as one chair resists. A quiet clanging from a church begins, first one stroke, then another at the same pitch, seemingly distant, struck on the other side of the bell. More bells of different tones join, increasing in volume, cascades of sound rolling out of the tower nearby; sonic patterns shifting and morphing, eventually inverting as bells of different sizes swing at different rates. Billowing up, filling the space, leaving no room for the sounds of the rush-hour street. Other bells in other towers in the neighborhood take up the call, each with its own series of tones and patterns, some louder than others, some voluptuously bronzy, others thinner and tinnier. Depending on the wind, the Mur valley echoes the clangs and bongs of church bells from both sides, delayed pingsings sounding off the rocky edifice of Schlossberg. Gradually the bells in the

1 David Henley (2019) explores the political and cultural ramifications of the sonic competition between different mosques in Indonesia.

towers finish their rounds, a few faint bongs recall the clangorously rich cascades of a few minutes ago. The last strike, a sound halo quietly floating away, audible to those at a short distance from the tower but not those at the base. A tire squeals as a confident driver rounds the corner on the cobbled street and the roar of rush hour is once again brimming up.

Sonic gendering of public spaces

For people living in either Surakarta or Graz, the sonic experiences described above are quotidian. Such familiarity can render them almost unnoticeable. For some in each city, however, the sounds are comforting reminders of hours passed in a day, signaling a moment to stop and pray, to remember one's place in the world and one's religious duty. For others, the sounds simply signal the end of the day or they are an irritating interruption that renders conversation, in person or electronic, temporarily inaudible. Perhaps for those visiting, the sounds may be wondrously exotic and confirming of some kind of "authentic" experience not available in one's hometown. It is likely that most who hear these iconic local manifestations of ritual sonic expression do not experience them as gendering the soundscape male. But such gendering surely happens in both locations. The sound of the *azan* in Indonesia and the church bells in Austria serve to remind the listener, at least one who chooses to hear with an awareness of gender, of the patriarchy embedded in both Islam and Christianity. The male authority that structures each religion and organizes the practice of worship down to the daily reminders to bend and pray and think of God are all implied in those everyday sounds, sounds that are also heard simply as a part of a particular local soundscape.

That we do not regularly think about the ways in which the Surakartan *azan* and the bells of Graz gender the soundscape is surely due, in part, to the fact that each happens multiple times in a day, seven days a week with a few extra soundings added on specific days of worship. But our lack of attention to them has also to do with the "male-as-norm" phenomenon. Although this idea arose originally in linguistics, feminist scholars have found the concept to be a useful analogy for understanding the structuring of society in various contexts around the world.² We find a similar pattern

2 Many feminist scholars have analyzed this tendency including de Beauvoir (1949); Irigaray (1985); Lerner (1986); Spender (1998); Fletcher (2013), among others. We should also note that histories of the actions of men are often told as the history of a place or time in general, and

when it comes to the gendering of soundscapes: those that are, in fact, gendered male are perceived more usually as neutral or unmarked and those that are female tend to be marked. In addition to creating and marking the space in which they are heard, the sounds of religious activities temporarily gender public spaces in ways that can both confirm and contest public norms, simply by their sounding. In this essay we explore the ways in which gender is implicated and contested in sonic constructions of sacred-spatial creations of place, configurations that are always mediated by and enmeshed with power structures of the locale. One brief example of a temporarily “gendered as female” public soundscape—from mid-twentieth-century, rural Greece—will suffice to set the scene for our primary case study located in Khorramshahr, southern Iran. Our study of the gendering of public spaces as female in Iran is based on a ritual called *rowzeh*. *Rowzeh* is a women’s gathering in which professional female lamenters, known as *mollāyeh*, guide their female co-participants through a series of song texts commemorating the death of Imam Husayn³, the martyr whose death is integral to the identity of Shi’a Muslims in the greater Islamic world. In each of the following contexts, the gendering of the spaces as female differentiates them from the unmarked, male-as-norm, quotidian soundscape. Our essay contributes to the foregrounding of understudied connections between bodies, media, and sounds in the private and public life of religions beyond the global North.

Sound Vignette 3: Lamentation in Potamia, Greece (mid-twentieth century)

A dry raspy wind sighs through the dry leaves, more audible than the tentative downward-arcing melodies; dispersed voices in heterophonic, out-of-time togetherness, finding one another on the same pitch at the bottom of each arc. Growing stronger, more women join the lament as they recognize various texts. Sniffs, gentle throat clearings, the occasional sob escapes to punctuate the murmuring chorus. One voice utters a few words, and a sigh escapes from somewhere deep within her torso, rasping through her throat. Beginning again, with resignation, she lines out the text and others catch the melody, expertly tracking her melismas. Wept

interpreted as universal. Hence the historical constructions of maleness and masculinity at particular places and times remain nearly invisible (Louie 2002, 5).

3 Imam Ḥossein ibn ‘Alī (transliterated in this book as Husayn.), was the third Imam in Shi’a Islam. Husayn was killed by the troops of the second Umayyad Caliph, Yazid ibn Mu‘āwiya at the desert of Karbala in 680 CE. Shi’a Muslims around the world believe that Husayn, as the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, should have become the next caliph. His death can be considered as the culmination of historical events in the world of Shi’a Islam.

statements dissolve into sobs, quickly smothered by comforting shushings and admonitions to stay calm and not lose control. Unaware, small birds chirp and argue with one another in a nearby bush, cheerful punctuations interrupting the otherwise mournful soundscape; the clear, high voice of a lone male priest resonates mellifluously in the distance, detached.⁴

In the rural Greek funerals of Potamia in the mid-1970s,⁵ the professional lamenters wail and weep on behalf of others, sonically leading the bereaved, shifting the burden of appropriately lamenting the dead to themselves. Whether quiet murmuring as described above or loud and heartrending, their utterances are always controlled, even while those on whose behalf they mourn may be weeping uncontrollably. The lamenters may choose to speak directly to the dead, asking them, through poetry, to return or they may intone the voices of the dead, singing poetic lines through which the dead indicate that they cannot return, they must continue moving away from their loved ones, while the lamenters decry the cruel world that has brought such sorrow. These “conversations” actively gender the spaces in which lamentation can be heard as temporarily female.

Public lamentation—both the singing of the sound and the hearing it articulated by others—helps to separate the grief from the singers and listeners as well as the other mourners. Sung out into the world, grief is externalized. It is moved beyond those who suffer; the emotional burden is shifted, however momentarily, to the shoulders of the community members who can hear the lament. (Weiss 2019, 34)

The sound of embodied grief performed out loud by a group cannot be unheard or ignored. It dominates a soundscape when present, as in the description above.⁶ As suggested by the insistence that griever remain in control, public expressions of grief always contain the possibility of spinning out of control, disrupting ordered society, represented in our Sound Vignette 3 by the lonely, unacknowledged chanting of the male priest. In her analysis of lamentation in ancient Greece, Gail Holst-Warhaft notes that in Aeschylus's tragedy *The Persians*, women lament what, in their view, was the unnecessary death of their husbands, lovers, and sons. They close the

4 This description is based on recordings made by Loring Danforth in the mid-1970s in Potamia, Greece. He shared with us his recordings and gave us permission to describe them.

5 As documented by Loring Danforth (1982) and reanalyzed by Weiss (2019, 27–45).

6 See Alexiou (1974) and Holst-Warhaft (1992) for a discussion of the ways in which the female soundscape of lamentation in Greece is considered endangering to society.

last scene of the play with their defiant lamentation, sharply critiquing the hubris of the Persian king (Holst-Warhaft 1992, 129, 133, 161). Lamentation was, and remains, a potent sonic tool for women in Greece.

Sound Vignette 4: Muḥarram rowzeh in Khorramshahr, Iran (early twenty-first century)

The pedestrian path sizzles from the heat of the afternoon in the crowded city center of Khorramshahr. In a few hours at sunset, the cooler streets will be full of women, men, and children who gather to mourn Husayn's death together. Suddenly, the pathway is blocked by numerous women flocking around the doorway of a house, their black *chadors* rustling and flapping gently as they walk. The wall next to the door is festooned with a large black flag on the wall announcing that a *rowzeh* is currently being hosted. On the other side of the street, men prepare their market stands for the flood of people that will course through the street later during those evening rituals of Muḥarram. While preparing, the men slurp watermelon and spit the seeds. They pop the tops off soft-drink bottles and play the songs of Koweitipour⁷ through their huge speakers, very loudly. The door of the house gapes open momentarily. Only women are allowed to enter the house. No man even looks inside, though they persistently pass by. Despite the rush of hot blood in the ears of those enduring the high temperatures on the street, when the door opens, the voice of a woman flows out into the street, weeping and at the same time singing a sad song. Other women can be heard crying and saying loudly *yā imamā!* (oh, our Imam!), *yā Hosseinā!* (oh, our Husayn!), as the first voice asks them to join in and sing along with her, all accompanied by muffled, rhythmic thumpings. This sonic glimpse is heard for a few seconds each time the door is opened for additional guests. The passionate crying is an important characteristic of the mourning rituals of southern Iranian women, an important feature to be distinguished from men's rituals. Religious singing, in combination with flagellations, is of course an integral part of men's rituals, but a large part of their ceremonies consists of readings or sermons that exclude crying.

Everyone near the doorway, the men setting up their stands across the street as well as the women entering the house, can hear those muffled sounds of sung commemorative mourning and collective grief. Whereas the public streets in Iran are always gendered male, the sounds that waft out as the door is opened to allow more female guests to enter instantly remind

7 Gholam-Ali Koweitipour is a famous religious singer (Persian: *maddāh*) from Khorramshahr.

the outside world of the “hidden”—yet well known—women’s activities that are taking place inside.

Inside the house, it is a comfortable temperature, thanks to air conditioning. Ritual hosts offer the women inside a delicious cold lemonade. Not everyone cries out loud. Some pray quietly for their loved ones who have passed away. Young teenagers show each other something on their glowing cellphones, giggling. Older women look for young, beautiful and devout women who would be suitable marriage candidates for their sons. The woman heard to be crying from outside is not crying, in that she does not actually weep with tears. She is the *mollāyeh* and leader of this ritual. She summons a crying voice from deep within her chest, in order to affect her audience emotionally. Her usually petite, conversational voice now sounds astonishingly rough, almost as if a man were singing. This deep vocal timbre is highly desired by her audience. It ensounds the pain, suffering, and torture that Imam Husayn and his companions experienced, maybe even the pain that she and her audience have experienced over a lifetime.

Iranian women and rowzeh in religious and historical context

In many West Asian countries where Islam is the official religion of the state, the cultural activities of women often encounter severe restrictions in both their religious and secular activities. Those restrictions manifest in several ways and can affect the cultural lives of women from all social classes, albeit differently. In what follows, we examine the sonic aspects of the religious and cultural practice of *rowzeh*, a private event in which Iranian women must negotiate the social limitations regarding gathering outside of family groups and musical practices even within a religious context.

Islamic law in Iran, which has been written, developed, interpreted, and performed by men, has caused not only the marginalization of women’s role in general, it has resulted in the near-absolute separation of their religious and secular musical activities. Although many Iranian women from the upper or upper-middle classes have access to the practice and consumption of secular music, for a significant number of women from the lower, middle, or even religious upper classes access to this kind of music is prohibited. It should be noted that many of these limitations are recognized, and even imposed, by religious women themselves who consider the consumption of music or playing musical instruments as a sin, and a form of impureness. Suzanne Cusick notes that “history and culture shape the gender ideology of the present” (Cusick 1999, 485). Perhaps this might explain why pious,

Iranian women continue to constrict the boundaries of their own freedom in society as they raise new generations of children.

It should be mentioned that, generally, religious people in Iran have no problem with practicing music as long as the music has no “dangerous” effects. John Baily refers to these “dangerous” effects as “negative powers.” These negative powers can lead the people to neglect their prayers at the proper time and be over-involved in music in ways that would compromise their wider duties as good Muslims (Baily 1988, 146). In contradiction to restrictions surrounding the performance and appreciation of secular music, perspectives and rules about women’s religious vocal practices have developed differently in contemporary Iran. Singing is especially appreciated when women perform mourning chants for the holy personalities of Islam, as long as these activities take place in a domestic and women-only space. This “loophole” has allowed for the development and persistence of a wide variety of women’s religious rituals full of sonic expression in Iran and in many other Islamic countries such as Iraq, Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia. While performing an Islamic practice and performing their religious duties, the obstacles to gathering and “sounding together” that women would normally be required to navigate are less stringent. In what follows we argue that the ritual of *rowzeh* provides women unprecedented opportunities for political participation in subtle ways, not only by fulfilling their religious duties, but also through increasing their social mobility and economic independence.

No matter what age, religion, political opinion, or education these women have, there are two shared experiences of their religious gatherings. First, they have to deal with the restrictions on women and women’s movement through space as determined by men in their male-dominated society. Second, they create and exist in a sonic environment that is heard only by women. In this kind of space, women can enjoy comparatively more freedom than when they are in public, socialize with other women, and engage in their religious activities in a “safe” manner⁸.

Rowzeh rituals take place on days commemorating the deaths of the holy personalities of Islam and, in particular, every day during the Arabic sacred mourning month of Muḥarram, during which the martyrdom of Imam Husayn is commemorated. There is no sonic sign such as the prayer call *adhan* or church bells to inform women about the upcoming *rowzeh* or the correct gathering time. Everything related to attending a *rowzeh* proceeds more subtly. Perhaps a phone call between friends or a coincidental encounter between women in the city at the daily market—these are the

8 In and around the place of performance there should be no men (*nāmaḥram*).

means through which women become aware of the news and exact dates/time of the *rowzeh* (and other women-only) rituals. Simply due to their lived experiences, almost all women in Khorramshahr who belong to the women's religious network know where and when a *rowzeh* will take place. The *rowzeh* participants belong to diverse social classes. They live in Khorramshahr or in small villages near the city. Attending a single *rowzeh* are women without any standardized education, women with some years of basic schooling, and some with high-school diplomas. Women with university or professional degrees less frequently attend *rowzeh* ceremonies but such women cannot be excluded from the list. Despite this educational diversity, the majority of the *rowzeh* participants in Khorramshahr consist of middle-aged women from the middle class.

A Muḥarram *rowzeh* can be hosted by ritual organizers at any time during the day from early morning through early evening. Once the organizers have secured the attendance of one or more *mollāyeh*, the news about the time and location begins to circulate. Participating women make an appointment with their acquaintances to attend the *rowzeh* together. Once they meet up at the first *rowzeh* of their day, they often continue on with their friends visiting other *rowzeh* taking place on the same day. Traveling together, they will likely join different groups of women at each event. Due to the strict regulations governing women's activities outside their homes in Iran, religious events such as *rowzeh* are considered to be an optimal opportunity for women to communicate with one another, simultaneously expanding the reach of their social circles and their familiarity with the city, staying out long past the hour when they would normally return home.⁹ Pious women of Khorramshahr organize the *rowzeh* as a free, private event for all the women from the city.

The mourning rituals of *rowzeh* are sorrowful, combining rhythmic singing, often accompanied by self-flagellation—on faces, chests, or poem books—and sad songs. Each *rowzeh* consists of eight parts that include, variously, narration, metrical, and non-metrical singing. Many religious Iranians associate the flagellation with purifying body and soul. They believe that having pain in their own body and experiencing a sense of suffering similar to that which Husayn endured can reward them (*tawāb*) for their future life, especially for the Last Judgment (*ruz-e jiyāmat*). *Rowzeh*s are performed in a dark space called *hosseiniyeh*, a space that is usually a large

9 Historically, women who participate and perform in these lamentation rituals have been referred to in the literature as wailers or (professional) mourners (Arabic: *nawāih*, sg *nāiḥa*) (Hickmann 1970, 45).

living room in the home of the host, temporarily dedicated to Imam Husayn, hence the label *ḥosseiniyeh*. The walls of a *ḥosseiniyeh* are covered with black cloth. Ritual attendees are supposed to wear black clothes as well, for black is the color of mourning. Although it is forbidden for men to join the ritual, women still need to cover their hair. Some believe that the soul of the deceased Imam is present at the ritual and so they must cover their heads as a form of modesty. Before the arrival of ritual attendants, ritual hosts make sure the *ḥosseiniyeh* is clean and orderly. The air should be fragrant with rose water. There should be enough drinks and snacks, because before and after each ritual women consume food together. The hosts are supposed to invite one or more *mollāyeh*. Many ritual attendants choose to participate in a particular *rowzeh* because their favorite *mollāyeh* will officiate. Their attitudes towards a *mollāyeh* can resemble audience excitement on seeing, or maybe even meeting, a famous conductor in an after-show party at a classical music concert. The *mollāyeh* performs as the primary vocal leader of the ritual, guiding and structuring the whole ceremony through the various stages of the ritual, along with giving instructions to the participants on how to behave during the ceremony. As soon as the *mollāyeh* enters a *rowzeh*, all women are supposed to follow her orders.

Even though *rowzehs* are held in an enclosed space, and the *ḥosseiniyeh* is usually deep inside the host's house, women try to be careful so that no man might hear their voices and the sounds of their rhythmic striking of books and chests from outside. That said, sounds generated from the *rowzeh* can be heard beyond those safe female boundaries. As described in the sound vignette above, due to the acoustics of Khorramshahri houses, it is possible to hear a blurred and muffled version of the chanting, not only when the door to the house is opened but also through the walls, depending on the size of the house. Given the number of women singing, the identification of particular voices is next to impossible. Nevertheless, for many men, it is a near "tragedy" to hear those women's mourning sounds, even though they are filled with religious commitment. One ritual host recounted to Wartner-Attarzadeh that her father once brought her a complaint from the men in the neighborhood. "They kindly said that people can hear the voice of the *mollāyeh* from outside and that it is a sin to hear that voice. It is nice when women show their honor to the Imam Husayn. However, it must be considered more carefully that their voices should not be heard from outside."¹⁰

In response to the men's objections about accidentally hearing the sounds of women engaging in their *rowzeh*, ritual hosts defend themselves by

10 Ritual organizer Shirin Attarzadeh, personal communication, September 2019.

explaining that women have a right, even a duty, to practice the ritual and commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. In the end, men are generally satisfied with the arguments of the hosts. Nevertheless, this sanctioned religious activity is understood by some men as a mere time-wasting pastime for housewives who love to gossip. During her research, Wartner-Attarzadeh was informed by one male interlocutor that, “It is not worthy to research *rowzeh*. It’s just a scene for the gossipers who want to dance and have fun.”¹¹ Those who hold these kinds of opinions are even more outraged when they stumble accidentally into the temporarily gendered-as-female soundscape caused by the seepage of the sound outside and around the doorway to the home in which a *rowzeh* is occurring. The fact that the sound from these so-called private rituals can often be heard outside the houses in which they are hosted suggests that we must also understand *rowzeh* to be public events.

Why *rowzeh*?

Why is this lamentation ritual so popular in Khorramshahr, especially considering the time and money spent to host them, and the problems a host and her guests may encounter moving to and from the events? Our ethnography has revealed that many women associate their life events, their own sad experiences and personal problems with the poems and the sounding of the sadness in the *rowzeh*.¹² Losing a father, brother, or son are important reasons why women cry in the ritual and why some *mollāyeh* perform the ritual. “I have a deep wound in my soul, in the deepest of my heart. I will never forget that as if it was yesterday. I will never forgive them” (*Mollāyeh* Māmān Marziyeh, personal communication, September 2019). These are the words of a *mollāyeh*, whose young son died some years ago in a hospital because of the carelessness of the hospital’s staff. “They thought he was dead. But he was alive when they put him in the morgue cooler, said the pathologist when it was too late. My son was frozen to death. He became a martyr,” she explained. She mourns the death of her son and does self-flagellation by beating her breasts or forehead when she hears the name of Husayn and when she herself performs the *rowzeh*.

11 Anonymous, personal communication, June 2015. It should be noted that in Persian one sarcastic term for dancing in general refers to the body movements involved in ritualized self-flagellation.

12 See research from Isabelle Clark-Decès (2005) for a discussion of a similar elision of mourning agendas among Tamil Dalits.

The *mollāyeh* are skillful in using dynamic and timbral changes when they recite the sorrowful religious chants. These chants and the whole experience of collective mourning provide moments for the processing and commemoration of private tragedies through the contemplation of the tragedy and grief of Husayn's death. The sorrows endured by women in their own lives are both sharpened and relieved through these collective acts.

Based on her professional experiences, a *mollāyeh* knows already which words will touch her audience most dramatically. She emphasizes words such as children, women, loneliness, tent, night, tears, etc. by sustaining the syllables, applying different ornaments, or changing her vocal register moving most often into higher tones—a sonic range that is associated with raised emotions and also the keening of people in mourning. All of this is enhanced by the fact that *mollāyeh* prefer to use deep, chest-voice singing in their ritual performances, believing that this sound quality comforts the hearts of their audience. One can find the same kind of women's lamentation in funerals of the region as well. However, the question of how *mollāyeh* achieve a vocal timbre that sounds so deep and masculine cannot be answered at this stage of research. It is a fact that amateur *mollāyeh* practice for many years to produce this timbre from their professional *mollāyeh* teachers.¹³

In addition to the relief that comes from sharing the burden of tragedy, many women admit that *rowzeh* provide opportunities for them to meet other women and to communicate with them. In general, Islamic rituals are considered to be meeting places where women can connect through a common effort or in this case through the preparation for, and listening to or presenting, the performance. Azam Torab writes:

The women meet ... not only because of the social support and freedom of expression these settings provide in the absence of men, but also because of the immense enjoyment they derive from a sense of self-esteem, competency and moral and social worth conferred by attendance at the gatherings and by becoming more pious. (Torab 1996, 236)

Attending a *rowzeh* has benefits for its participants. It helps to promote their mental health and social life as well as enhancing their quality of life. Participation in *rowzeh* allows for the cultivation of respect for one another as hosts and donors. Participants get the opportunity to meet famous

13 Wartner-Attarzadeh is currently doing research on the aesthetics and training of singing as a *mollāyeh*.

performers. The host gains prestige by procuring renowned performers for her event. Many women donate food and other materials to help with preparations for the *rowzeh*, while others bring donations of money. These donations are understood to be for religious purposes as they help ensure that the event takes place successfully. Contributing to such events reveals the generosity and piousness as well as the relative financial wealth of the women who donate. Donation is a highly respected act among many pious Iranians. Through these acts, women create (consciously or unconsciously) an advantageous position for themselves in their community. Hosting and contributing to *rowzeh* performances reinforces ties of solidarity, respectful obligation, and reciprocity, among the women of the community.

Far more than a simple ritual commemorating the martyrs of Shi'a Islam, a *rowzeh* is a place where social, economic, and hidden political connections and power are formed and demonstrated. The men whose wives host these events also gain in less explicit ways by "allowing" the events to take place under their roofs. The husbands of participants who find themselves in the same room with famous *mollāyeh* performers will retell those stories to their friends, even if they comment on the impropriety of hearing women's voices sounding out through the doorways. The families of *mollāyeh* benefit financially from the fees they receive for performing and earn higher status thanks to the pious performers within their communities. As irritated as some men may be when they accidentally walk into those temporarily gendered-as-female public soundscapes, the muffled voices of women floating near the doorways and walls of the hosts' houses signal much more than a breach of propriety.

Conclusion

The everyday gendering as male of the public spaces in our first two sound vignettes—church bells in Graz and the call to prayer in Surakarta—is unmarked, and often unnoticed. The gendering of the public space as female through public lamentation in Potamia or near a house hosting a *rowzeh* in Khorramshahr, on the other hand, is marked, noticed and, if not visible, decidedly audible in the public soundscape. We argue that thinking about gender in the context of the analysis of soundscapes provides nuanced cultural information that might otherwise remain unheard and unknown. For instance, mourning in Greece can signal resistance to societal norms and possibilities for disorder. Mourning in Iran can signal power, piety, and pleasures; it provides an occasion to share burdens, forge social

connections, and enhance women's mobility and ritual agency. If women are not usually as "audible" in public soundscapes as men, they are often the public voices of collective mourning. Whether this is because women allow themselves to be so or are constructed as more emotional is not a question we can answer with the ethnographic data available. Nevertheless, the raw, unrestrained sounds of collective female mourning cut deep into the everyday sounds of a community, envoicing women and conveying much more than grief.

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8 Sounding Resilience and Resistance

Tarana Songs of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

Kazi Fahmida Farzana, Peter Sammonds & Bayes Ahmed

Abstract

The Rohingya ethnic minority from the Rakhine state of Myanmar has been forced to become a stateless community currently living in some countries in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. They are regarded as a persecuted community that has encountered structural inequality and systematic violence in Myanmar for decades due to their religious and ethnic identity. The painful experiences and collective memories remain alive in their diasporic life in the form of verbal arts, poems, and songs (*tarana*). Rohingyas in Malaysia often take refuge in the *taranas* for mental peace, for the construction of a political identity, and to envision a better future.

Keywords: Rohingya, forced migration, diaspora, survival strategies, Malaysia

Malaysia is hosting a significant proportion of the Rohingya population. Of the total 177,800 refugees and asylum seekers registered with the UNHCR Malaysia 101,280 are Rohingyas from Myanmar (April 2020). Additionally, an estimated 30,000–40,000 Rohingyas live undocumented. However, since Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, there is no official framework to deal with the refugees in Malaysia. Unlike many other countries, Malaysia does not confine the refugees into camp settlements; it rather allows them to remain among the local population in urban and rural settings. This policy allows the refugees to remain scattered and invisible.

Among the refugee groups, the Rohingyas are arguably the most vulnerable, marginalized, and underprivileged. This essay suggests that religious sounds and particularly a traditional genre of songs called *taranas* represent a strategic way to cope with their life in exile in Malaysia. While the existing

literature on the Rohingya mostly focuses on Myanmar and Bangladesh (e.g., Ahmed 2010; Chaudhury & Samaddar 2018), the Rohingya's exile life in Malaysia is an under-explored area. A few valuable studies have been conducted from the perspectives of mental health and psychology (e.g., Low et al. 2018; Tay et al. 2019) but these are mostly on Myanmar refugees in general, therefore they do not add to our understanding of how Rohingya refugees employ strategies of resilience and resistance drawing upon sonic practices from their cultural and religious traditions. Other works on Rohingya refugees are overly concerned with national security, children's education, and human rights issues (Letchamanan 2013; Nadarajan 2018). The cultural aspects that shape the different ways refugees relate to the notion of home and identity have been largely ignored. This chapter sheds light on the resilience and resistance of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia by analyzing songs composed and performed by the refugees in their displaced lives. We argue that these sonic and religious practices help displaced people to maintain their dignity and identity against all odds.

Methodology

Data for this socio-ethnographic research come from fieldwork conducted in Malaysia (March 2019–June 2020) as part of a larger study on Rohingya journeys of violence and resilience.¹⁴ This field study was conducted in four different states—Selangor, Kedah, Perlis, and Penang. We conducted a total of 60 in-depth interviews and several group discussions with the refugee population to record their narratives and oral histories in Malaysia (Figures 8.1 and 8.2).

The particular type of field data that this research is built upon is related to the refugees' cultural and religious life. This is characterized by music, symbols, and ritual activity. These data go beyond logocentric and ocularcentric interviews and are enormously helpful to understand the refugees' strategies of adaptation and resilience in the Malaysian context. While refugee studies research tends to underestimate cultural, religious, and performance traditions, in the course of our research we realized more and more that understanding these 'non-conventional' aspects in the study of refugee life was extremely important.

14 This work was funded by the British Academy as part of the project, "Rohingya Journeys of Violence and Resilience in Bangladesh and its Neighbours: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives" (Award Reference: SDP2\100094), supported under the UK Government's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).



Figure 8.1 Interview with a Rohingya refugee at a tea shop in Kedah, in 2019. He works as a cleaner at the local wet market. In this photo, he is showing us his refugee card. Source: Kazi Fahmida Farzana's personal collection.

As this community maintains a strong oral tradition, their history is kept alive in their common social memory expressed through various aesthetic means such as poems and songs known as *tarana*. These constitute the main focus of this essay. *Taranas* are amateur compositions, often composed orally and transmitted, as well as preserved, through oral tradition. Many of the composers might be illiterate but their compositions are later recorded in written form or, more recently, in electronic devices. Additionally, even though *taranas* are basically patriotic songs—nostalgic songs about a lost homeland—these are also inspired by religious sentiments and some are directly based on religious beliefs and themes.

We applied three methods in collecting the aforementioned data. Firstly, we collected copies of written available *taranas*; secondly, we listened to some *taranas* verbatim and transcribed the texts; and thirdly, we collected some that were pre-recorded by the community in audiovisual devices such as mobile phones. We translated some of those *taranas* into English but ensured accuracy through follow-up discussions with the community members. With the help of informed participants, we further discussed the meaning of the songs and their contextual explanations. Furthermore, while collecting these songs we also paid keen attention to the participants' body language, facial expression,



Figure 8.2 Focus group discussion with Rohingya women at a community-based organization in Kuala Lumpur in 2019. *Source:* Kazi Fahmida Farzana's personal collection.

long sighs and silences as expressions of their inner feelings. We argue that these aesthetic formations constitute a valuable archive of a marginalized group's experiences in the form of sonic productions of social resistance.

The context of exiled Rohingya in Malaysia

The Rohingya came to Malaysia in waves, with the highest number of arrivals in the 1980s, 1990–1994, 2000–2004, 2012–2015, and 2017. According to the narratives of the refugees, they arrived in Malaysia either by boat or via land routes (Map 1). When they took their desperate sea journey by rickety boats, they were unsure of their destination, sometimes ending up in neighboring Bangladesh and other times on the shores of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. They were relatively unknown to Malaysian society due to the invisibility imposed on them by the authorities until recently, when the Southeast Asian “boat people crisis”¹⁵ and the discovery of 139 mass graves of Rohingya victims in 28 suspected human-trafficking camps on the Malaysia-Thailand border were reported in 2015 (Maier-Knapp, 2017).

15 The “boat people crisis” traditionally referred to the Vietnamese refugees who took to the sea to find refuge in other Southeast Asian countries. However, the term also was used for the Rohingya refugees at least since 2015 when thousands of them were found stranded at sea in Southeast Asia after being abandoned by smugglers.

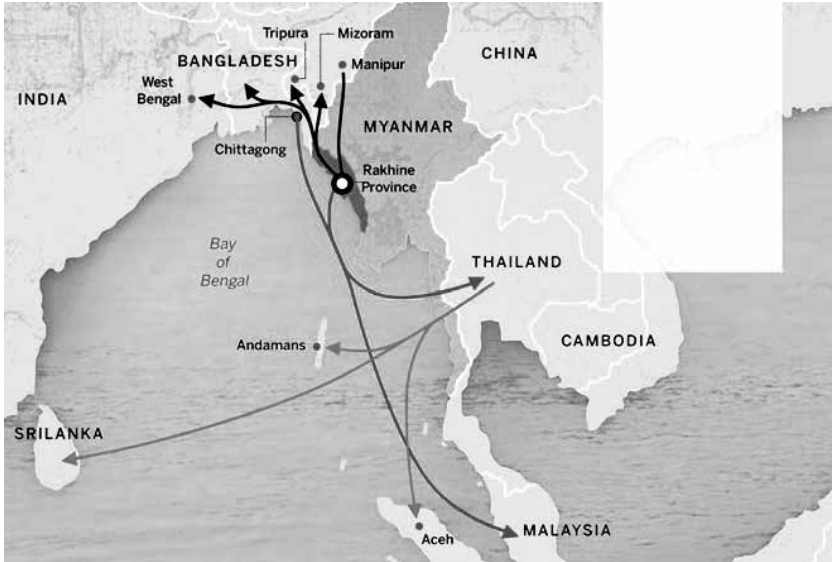


Figure 8.3 Rohingya's Forced Migration: Sea Routes to Malaysia. *Source:* adapted from kathakata.com/the-rohingya-in-regional-politics. (Accessed February 5, 2021)

While the majority of Rohingyas obtain UNHCR cards, there are an estimated 30,000-40,000 Rohingyas who carry no official documentation. However, with or without the UNHCR cards, most of the refugees are scattered all over Malaysia, especially on the outskirts of the capital and other main cities, working in the cleaning and construction sectors. Being non-recognized by the states as refugees, they are effectively deprived of any social, economic, health, or educational benefits from the Malaysian government. Such vulnerabilities are further compounded by some unscrupulous and corrupt law-enforcing agents and exploitative rent-seeking practices that impose extra burdens on the Rohingyas. Add to that the fact that they are considered illegal migrants rather than refugees; while the government is highly tolerant to them on humanitarian grounds based on compassion towards fellow Muslims (Hoffstaedter, 2017), this does not ensure their social survival or security, nor does it provide any lasting future prospects in Malaysia.

In face of such economic difficulties and other livelihood challenges, the refugees turn to cultural activities such as singing and composing traditional songs (*tarana*), while becoming more devotional in their religious life to develop a closer spiritual relationship with God in the hopes of attaining mental solace. These aesthetic formations, articulated through the religious vocabulary of Islam, constitute sonic productions that reinforce a sense of identity and belonging while sounding social resistance.

Tarana and religious practices: Tools for resilience and resistance

As a displaced community, the Rohingyas maintain everyday religious practices that signal attachment to various religious sounds. These sounds include paying attention to the call for prayer or *azan*, recitation of the Quran and heeding its meaning, and listening to Islamic sermons known as *waj/waz* from social media and internet sources.¹⁶ The Rohingyas follow such rituals as the profession of faith (*shahada*), prayer (*salat*), and fasting (*sawm*). Although some of them need to work several jobs at different times of the day, whenever they have time, our respondents reported that they try not to miss their five daily prayers. They also make sure to attend the Friday noon prayer (*jummah*) and read the Quran.

As expressed by a Rohingya refugee named Muhammad Siddik, 52: “When I recite Quran, particularly a chapter like Al-Alaq, I find inner peace. I know that one day we [the Rohingya] will get justice.” The chapter Al-Alaq in the Quran, particularly verses 9-15, reads, “Did you see the tyrant preventing my servant from praying? ... Doesn’t he know that I am watching? If he doesn’t stop, he will be punished.” Here, by “tyrant” the text refers to Abu Jahal, one of the leaders of Mecca who led the persecution of the early Muslims. The recitation of the Quran serves to soothe the hearts of the refugees as they put their trust in a divine higher power that is just and merciful; it works for them as “a source of emotional, spiritual and socio-political empowerment” (El-Aswad, 2010, 59).

Attachment to God plays an important role in Rohingya refugees’ cultural life as part of their coping strategies in Malaysia. Being able to pray, going to the mosque or reciting the Quran, activities that they could not do freely in their country of origin, provides moral strength, also in the form of informal resistance to oppression and injustice, strengthening resilience and the trust that divine justice will be ultimately provided. This perspective is important as existing studies of Rohingya refugees have largely overlooked religious practices as tools of identity-making and social empowerment.

The spiritual life of the Rohingyas is also reflected in their production of songs called *taranas*. *Taranas* can be understood as sounds of displacement that share memories of the past and maintain such memories in their oral tradition to keep their history alive in the present. They might exchange songs when they occasionally gather in their *rumah kecil*—a small house, shared among fellow Rohingya to reduce living costs (those who are factory

16 A number of Rohingya Waz are available on the YouTube. The most popular one appears to be the one by Mv Masood (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNvj7QNqOu4>).

workers, mostly male and single, often live with other Rohingya sharing the small space provided at the factory site). While sharing their feelings they might start to sing aloud a *tarana* that connects them as a community. This act of singing reflects their memories of the past, creates bonds with their fellow refugees, and makes sense of the present.¹⁷ The themes of the *taranas* often revolve around devotion to religion, claiming belonging and territorial authority. Although these *taranas* are not composed in order to overtly subvert the power of the authorities, if we pay attention to such texts, it is not difficult to understand that they represent the voice of the oppressed, expressing their resistance. The songs can be understood as inducing refugees/listeners to take control of their spiritual life through developing a stronger spiritual and emotional relationship with God as an ultimate shelter in life.

When asked, “Why do you compose a *tarana*?” Nizamuddin, 35, shop-keeper and single father of two from the Langkawi Island of Kedah, stated: “I compose a *tarana* based on what I see, what I have seen and of course I hope it is inspirational [...] *Tarana* liberates me. When I compose a *tarana*, all those nights of terror and fear in Borma [Myanmar] I am leaving behind when I compose my *tarana*.”

Arkani original	English translation
<i>Korbollar Moidan</i>	<i>The Battlefield of Karbala</i>
Arkan re banai feler Korbollar Moidan, Hajar hajar shohid hoi jai Rohingya Musolman. Nijer Jaigot nijere gulam banay shorkare, Gujuri gujri kande Rohingya Musolman. Deshor manush bideshot jai ghorer ayashi, Arkan deshot manush marar Aung Sun Suu kyi. Arkan re banai feler Korbollar Moidan, Hajar hajar shohid hoi jai Rohingya Musolman. Hare jaiyum hone aara Rohingya Musolman, Gujri gujri kande Rohingya bukot loy Quran.	Arkan has turned into the battlefield of Karbala Thousands of Rohingya Muslim are martyred. Enslaved in their own country Thousands of Rohingya Muslims wail. People leave their own country for a shelter Aung Sun Suu Kyi is killing people in Arkan. Arkan is turning into the battlefield of Karbala Thousands of Rohingya Muslim are martyred. Where shall we, the Rohingya Muslims go? They wail holding the holy Quran on their chest.

The above song was composed by Nizamuddin. The context of this song is Arakan, or the Rakhine state in Myanmar. In this song, he is comparing the condition of Arakan with the famous battlefield of Karbala in Iraq,

17 These activities have been restricted at factory sites during the COVID-19 pandemic as restrictions on movement and socialization had been implemented.

where Imam Husayn was brutally killed in 680 CE (10 Muharram 61 AH of the Islamic calendar). Many of his relatives and companions were killed in this battle and the surviving family members were taken as prisoners. Nizamuddin refers to Karbala to indicate Husayn’s suffering and death as a symbol of sacrifice in the struggle for right against wrong, and for justice and truth against injustice and falsehood. By comparing the situation in Arakan with the battlefield of Karbala he provides a sense of heroism for those who died in Arakan, framing them as martyrs.

Moreover, the song articulated resentment against the Myanmar authorities and leadership that allowed and participated in such heinous killing, challenging the oppressors whom they cannot confront directly. The last portion of the song indicates the inability to find a safe place to live in their own country, and that is why they had to spend a life crying in a foreign land “keeping the holy Quran on their chest.” In songs like this *tarana*, drawing upon religious imaginaries and vocabularies, this refugee finds comfort and relief.

The next *tarana* was composed by Shumaila Akhtar, 37, resettled in Kuala Lumpur. Her family is better off than other Rohingya in the community as she and her husband both are currently working in informal sectors. They can afford to send their seven-year-old son to the nearest private elementary school. This song was shared with the researchers on a day when Shumaila had a day off from her work. We met her at her aunt’s house where she and some of her relatives were invited for lunch. Shumaila started singing this *tarana*, then her relatives slowly joined her in chorus.o

<i>Julum</i>	<i>Persecution</i>
Arar Arkan deshor opor shorkare julum gorer	The government is inflicting pain on the
Rohingya hon bichar noghorer!	people of Arakan
Mojid madrasor pore dorjad tala mare, ja	The Rohingya people do not get any justice!
dehile choker pani jore re...Allah	They seal off all mosques and madrasahs
Arar Arkan deshor opor shorkare julum gorer	My tears keep rolling when I see these...
Rohingya hon bichar noghorer!	O Allah, the government is inflicting pain on
Porton no dey elem shikkha,	the people of Arakan
Gorot no dey hater bidda,	The Rohingya people do not get any justice!
Bepscha gorle rasta gate, hai pele hari.	They don't allow us the light of education,
No pay kono dushi, kola hoi hoi mare ghushi	We can't learn livelihood skills at home,
re	If we run roadside businesses, they beat us
Dhukkho hare bujaitam Allah...	even without any fault
Arar Arkan deshor opor shorkare julum	O Allah, who will understand our torments...
gorer, Rohingya hon bichar noghorer!	The government is inflicting pain on the
	people of Arakan, The Rohingya people do
	not get any justice!

It is not a *tarana* that they themselves composed but they mentioned that they remember the lyrics as it reflects their experiences. The community depends heavily on social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube to share and circulate their *taranas* that connect the displaced groups of Rohingya.¹⁸

This *tarana* has highlighted different forms of injustice and persecution (*julum/zulm*) in Myanmar in the form of inflicting violence and hurting religious feelings by closing down mosques and madrasahs, depriving of education and the right to work. It ends with a line that says “the Rohingya people do not get any justice.” Such indicators of discrimination also refer to their powerlessness and subordinate position in society. Furthermore, refugees often defined their life in Myanmar as “prison” and mentioned various forms of religious persecution. They were not allowed to perform the ritual prayer (*namaz*), call for prayer (*azan*), or display religious symbols on their bodies. Another Rohingya in this group discussion, Abu Ahmed, 45, a religious teacher to young Rohingya children, said: “Religious freedom was one of the reasons why I chose Malaysia as opposed to Thailand as my destination. Here, at least I can hear *azan* and go to the mosque without fear.” Other females from this group also appreciated the religious freedom that they enjoy in Malaysia. Shumaila’s aunt said: “If I die here [in Malaysia], at least I will get a proper *janazah* [Muslim funeral prayer] before entering the grave.” This song and its context tell us how Rohingya refugees establish connections through sound between people, places, and identities.

Sounds and memories of displacement

The next two *taranas* were shared by Hashimullah, 50, a day laborer and caretaker for a local *surau* (a prayer room)¹⁹ in Sintok, Kedah. When the *imam* (a person who leads prayer) of the *surau* is not available, Hashimullah calls the *azan* himself, with a beautiful, passionate voice. The researchers met him several times on different occasions. We noticed that his recitation of the Quran is truly melodious and it creates a spiritually elated calm atmosphere. Probably that is why the locals accepted him as a caretaker for

18 Some links of online platforms: YouTube, “Rohingya Vision” (also known as RVision); YouTube, “Arakane Rohingya Muslims,” Facebook, “The Arakan Times,” website “The Arakan Times” (www.arakantimes.org).

19 *Surau*, a prayer room for Muslims, is a very small version of a mosque in the local community where assembly for worship, religious instruction, and festive prayers takes place. It is common in the region of Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia.

the *surau*. Moreover, he does not demand any payment for his job, and he is very grateful to the Malaysian society for accepting and providing him refuge. It has been more than a decade since Hashimullah came to Malaysia. He earns very little as a day laborer, as work is not available every day, and he depends on the mercy and kindness of the local community.

Hashimullah lives alone in Malaysia. Some of his family members are refugees in Bangladesh, and others are at home, in Myanmar. In all these years of exile life, he never had a chance to visit those in Bangladesh or go back to his family in Myanmar. Now at the age of 50, the loneliness and the fear of death sometimes paralyze him, and he wants to return to his family, although he knows that this will probably never be possible.

From this anguish, he composes *taranas* that he shares with his community on different occasions. While singing these songs for the researchers, the intensity of his facial expressions and emotional involvement was incredible. He was crying throughout the time of his singing. When asked how he felt while singing the song, Hashimullah wiped his tears and said:

When I sing I embrace the *tarana*. Momentarily, I did not exist here. I felt the wind in my country as if I am breathing the air again. Every time I close my eyes, the image of my homeland, my village, my relatives still haunt me.



Audio sample 8.1

A Rohingya song by Hashimullah, Kedah, Malaysia, 2019.
Source: recording by the author.

<i>Azadi</i>	<i>Freedom</i>
Desh chari bidesh ailam, boro beshi vul korlam, Ma bap vai bon charidi, ailam bideshe choli Ghor bari fele di jalai, moghe maredde lorai Hode jaile payum shanti, O Allah, jodi hoino pari	Came abroad leaving the country, made a big mistake We left for a foreign land, leaving behind our parents and siblings (Because) They burnt our houses (that) we built with sweat and love They beat us, killed our kiths and kins.
O Allah, jodi korile raham, kori diba azadi Desh chari bidesh ailam, boro beshi vul korlam.	O Allah, I wish I knew where is a little peace for me

O Allah, tui amare desh milaide,
Ase beggun tor kase, O Allah hat tui
maiggum tui bade,
Ara hoilam tor goittor, arar to nai bari ghor.
Roilam re deshe bideshe, porer ghorer
haishe haishe,

Jodi porer ghorer haishetton nia laile,
Allah iman poyda kori de,
Allah iman poyda kori de.

O Allah, would you be kind and grant us
freedom
Came abroad leaving the country, made a
big mistake

O Allah, give us our country back
You are the owner of all sovereignty, the
lord of absolute ruling power
We are your servants, we lost our shelters
We live at the mercy of others

If we are to die in other people's country
O Allah, let *iman* grow in my heart
O Allah, let *iman* grow in my heart

The song indicates a passionate belonging to the homeland that was built “with sweat and love.” It provides the reasons why they had to leave their home and now have to “die in other people’s country” where they encounter multiple challenges and marginalization. This is also indicative of the host country that remains as a “foreign land” to the refugees despite living there for many years. Another important dimension of this song is that it sounds almost like a prayer as Hashimullah, the singer, is making an emotional and sincere request to God (“O Allah, give us our country back”) who he believes has the ultimate power, and asks for faith (*iman*) before embracing death. Expressing loss and grief through religious sounds, the song helps to articulate resistance through the vocabulary of devotion. It allows the singer to complain about injustice, remember a traumatic past, and invoke divine help for a better future.

The song *My Homeland* highlights how major Muslim festivals such as Eid-al-Fitr and Eid-al-Adha do not feel like a celebration for Hashimullah anymore in his exile life. Through this *tarana*, he mourns for the loss of his homeland where his heart belongs.

Nijor Desh

Eid kurban jaygo khushi chara,
kobe deikkhum puji aindo chiara
Eid kurban jaygo khushi chara,
nijer deshot jai na pari ara.

Eid er kotha mone tulle,
jaygo dui cokher pani.
Hode deikkhum pajjar chiara,
nijer deshot jai na pari ara.

My Homeland

The Eid of Sacrifice goes by without
celebration,
when will we see our joyous faces?
The Eid of Sacrifice goes by without
celebration,
because we can't go to our own country.

My tears flow down when I think of Eid
I do not know when I can see the faces of
my family
(As) I can't go to my homeland...

kotte deikkhum dekhum desher chiara,	How will I see my homeland?
kotte dekhum puji aindo chiara, nijer deshot	How will I see the faces of my darling wife
jai na pari ara.	and kids?
	(As) I can't go to my homeland...

The remoteness of “home” caused sharp pain as the memory of home feels so alive and near, and so distant and unreachable at the same time. This separation intensifies during the religious festivals of Eid, a time when friends and relatives gather to celebrate. By expressing the transient and uncertain status of the refugee stuck in between memories of home and forced displacement to a different land, the song counters both Myanmar’s official version of “stateless” identity for the Rohingya and Malaysia’s official version of “illegal Burmese immigrant” identity for the refugees.

Relying upon religious sounds, Rohingya refugees in Malaysia maintain an approach to life that helps them to adjust to the current circumstances. This resilient people identify their roots in Myanmar (their country of origin), while recognizing their marginalized situation in Malaysia. Their approach to life has been nurtured with patience and tolerance that comes from their spiritual attachment to God. Islamic piety, largely transmitted and lived through sonic practices, ultimately helps them to find calm and comfort, offering an ethical model in terms of attitude and action.

Some expressed their sense of guilt for breaking the law by coming to the shores of Malaysia without official permission. Others who participated in a group discussion in Kuala Lumpur said:

When a new Rohingya comes and joins our community, we remind him that this is a foreign land, we must prepare for the reality that waits for us, we must behave well when facing the police, do not run, be humble, and be submissive. We often discuss and remind each other—how to submit, how to not resist when confronted by authorities—while we are in Malaysia. Yet misfortune never leaves us alone.

Devotion and submission to Allah, underlying practices of listening, composing, reciting, and singing, are not simply a spiritual aspect of refugee life, but also provide the pulse of their resilience. The constant remembrance of God in the form of listening, praying, and singing sustains them. The songs or *taranas*, constituting a verbal and sonic form of remembrance, are vitally important as they open up a door to communicate with God, not only to express devotion, but also to advocate rights, addressing claims and complaints. Songs allow the refugees to indirectly resist those authorities, whom they cannot confront. Through songs, imposed identities

are questioned—the categories of “stateless”, “illegal immigrants”, and “refugees”—while multiple marginalities are interrogated, in the form of complaints addressed to God. *Taranas* help to ventilate frustration and release pain and grief, while building a relationship with Allah and with the community of fellow refugee singers/listeners. The feeling that they are not alone in this journey of life empowers them at the spiritual level and helps them to find hope within hopelessness and despair. *Taranas* are sounding instruments of resilience and resistance, providing meaning and hope even when life appears “subhuman” (Uddin 2020).

Conclusion

Refugee life is always inherently painful, full of despair and uncertainty. Even though refugee status may open up new opportunities in new lands, it is highly circumstantial; if displacement from home is not recognized as refugeehood in the first place, then opportunities shrink. It is in such situations that Rohingya refugees take shelter in cultural and religious practices to maintain their identity and to experience relief from distress and helplessness.

Rohingya refugees are living embodiments of a painful history of Myanmar who are trying their best to live a meaningful and dignified life within adversity and marginalization in Malaysia. While they struggle for survival they maintain an eager desire to return to their place of origin. Adding to previous studies on religion and displacement (AbdAleati et al. 2016; Ai et al. 2003; McLellan 2015; Shaw 2019), this contribution focused on religious sounds and *tarana* songs to understand how the Rohingyas in Malaysia draw on cultural and religious traditions as sources of identity, inspiration, and comfort. Careful examination of *taranas* revealed that they play a significant role in their displaced lives. This oral transmission of emotionally charged songs constitutes an effective means of expressing resistance in a situation in which they cannot directly confront their oppressors. While music and performance traditions are often understudied aspects of refugees’ lives, *taranas* emerge as precious resources for the marginalized community.

Religious engagement in terms of sounding practices not only conveys the refugees’ profound devotional feelings but also functions as a non-conventional form of resistance towards the authorities that destroyed their way of life, forcing them to migrate. Such religious attachment offers ethical models of self-making and empowers them to resist adversity and shape their vision for a better future. Religious songs help to give voice to the refugees’ sense of expecting divine justice and seeking help. Studies on religion and migration

often focus on radicalization and religion has often been associated by many as a source of violence for the refugees or oppressed minorities (Murphy 2015; Mavelli and Wilson 2016; Wike et al. 2016; Antúnez 2019). However, in the case of the Rohingya refugees, seeking a deeper attachment to religion is perceived as a source of peace and relief, serving to build resilience and resistance through the language and sounds of Islamic practices. It can be argued that the persecuted Rohingya community finds refuge in religious sounds and employs the sonic instruments of Islamic piety to maintain cultural identity, construct the ethical self, and articulate aspirations for social justice.

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9 Festival as Ritual and Ritual in Festival

Sounding “Exotic Borderlands” in Northern Taiwan

Tasaw Hsin-chun Lu

Abstract

This chapter looks at the ways in which a diverse Yunnan community in Northern Taiwan tactically uses music, dance, and rituals to embody a cross-border culture and boost local tourism. This group comprises people of different ethnicities, cultures, religions, and linguistic traditions from the Thai-Myanmar borderlands who have come into contact at the political, economic, social, and cultural margins. In recent years, they have drawn from peculiar religious components from the Thai-Myanmar borderlands in order to turn their marginality to advantage. Using artistically and technologically creative devices, they have successfully developed a spectacular commercial zone named “Enchanted Golden Triangle” (*meili ginsanjiao*). It has also been termed an “exotic borderland” (*yiyu*) and has become a sought-after destination for cultural tourism.

Keywords: Yunnan community, cultural tourism, Golden Triangle, transformativity of sound, Lost Army

The Rice Noodles Festival of Taoyuan in Northern Taiwan reshapes and reproduces ritual sounds and dance traditions in order to perform notions of ethnicity, identity, and heritage. It can be considered as ritual because such tourist festivals are sites where important cultural symbolism is displayed and performed. Symbolically they represent the natural environment, the surroundings, and beliefs of special significance to a group (Cooley 1999, 31–32). In this sense, the festival can be treated as “religious” events, as widely defined in the introduction of this book—as they embody relationships among people, places, and non-human forces. These relationships are particularly significant for a diasporic group living in new ethnopolitical

and cultural surroundings: migrants perform festivals as annual rites to (re)define these relationships. Such festivals, like rituals, work as regular events to mark boundaries, shape identities, and sketch a past that ought to be remembered (Brown 1997, Wong 2004).

Tourist festivals and rituals are also alike because they are both sites where transformation, or efficacy, happens (Cooley 1999, 31). The crucial quality of this transformation is “liminality.” Drawing from Van Gennep, Victor Turner (1969, 94) elaborated the idea of liminality in his widely-cited study of rituals. The key attribute of liminality is transitional and entails the possibility of transformation to take place within all kinds of liminal spaces. Whether premodern carnivals or modern public festivals, regulations could be temporarily lifted (Bakhtin 1984), social hierarchies could be reversed (Bennett and Woodward 2014), and the ritual could become dynamically performative (Cannadine 1983). Notably, the ways of articulating the transformativity amongst immigrant groups appear to be highly experimental and innovative.

This chapter explores the two aforementioned aspects of “festivals as rituals” exemplified in the modern-day East Asian festival context. In the first focus, it discusses how an immigrant community reinvents ritual music and dance to represent themselves to other peoples during a process of social cohesion in a tourism building project. Certain characteristics from their ancestors’ musical traditions have been commodified into cultural products for tourists to experience in order to reinforce the self-representation. In the second focus, this study examines the ritual efficacy of sound, body, and movement. It looks into how sounds and dance movements are designed in this tourist festival to embody a ritual that could be experienced, sensed, and culturally perceived, as well as how it is powerfully transformative. Apart from “festivals as rituals,” the (re)invention of rituals *in* festivals is also explored to shed light on the community members’ creativity in re-enacting rituals drawn from traditions.

The Rice Noodles Festival was launched in 2011 in Longgang, a small town in Taoyuan city. Given the significant support from both the city government and local merchants, this festival has emerged as a much sought-after tourist destination for the exhibition of its exotic delicacies and rich minority cultures. Its cultural peculiarity derives from a group of KMT (Kuomintang, or Nationalist) veterans, composed of Han Yunnanese and ethnic highlanders who fled from the Thai-Myanmar borderlands in the 1950s. Drawing on an ethnographic study conducted from 2016 to 2019, this chapter will demonstrate that a musical genre, the *dage* 打歌, has been chosen as a primary sonic and visual marker to perform a festive culture as

representative for this group. Literally “singing and dancing together,” *dage* is originally a popular musical form transnationally diffused in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands. By no means monotypic, it presents an enormous variety of music styles, dance movements, costumes, rituals, and linguistic traditions, with each form offering an insight into the culture of its ethnic origins. Yet *dage*, in its recontextualization into Taiwan, has now emerged as a cross-ethnic symbol of this group. The cross-ethnic nature was drawn on the group’s effort in representing the community as *one* to the outsiders. With homogenization of *dage*, it can now stand as representative for a large group of Han Yunannese plus ethnic highlander people in Taiwan. Different modes of *dage* are devised in a spatial and temporal framework of the festivals as a means of boosting its social solidarity, tourist commodification, and ritual efficacy.

The present study examines this creative invention. The invention is a collective endeavor to forge through musicscape and visual imaginary a perceivable tradition that is more commodifiable and captivating than an obsolete, distant ceremony. This creative process helps sounding and choreographing the “exotic borderlands” (*yi-yu*) represented in the festival. As a result, this event has succeeded in attracting numerous visitors from all over Taiwan: it has become a popular annual tourist and leisure site in the area, inviting many bus tours and engaging various tourist packages. These visitors are mostly urban residents who seek novel cultural experiences.

In the process of *dage* invention, how are different musical sounds, body movements, and related spatiotemporal concepts that have originated in distinctive ethnic traditions programmed in a new ritual performance? How do multiple cultural and sociopolitical factors—including a post-frontier status, the demand for identity construction, and the hybridity of different ethnocultural values—shape the process of recontextualization? These are the main questions that I will address.

Background: *Gujun* (the Lost Army) and its frontier history

Commonly known in Taiwan as the Lost Army (*gujun*), this group was brought from an area generally known as the Golden Triangle. As with many cross-border ethnic groups in that region—such as the Tai, Lisu, and Jingpo, each with complex subgroups of their own—these highlanders never really fit under a rigid ethnocultural label. They hold varying traditions and perform their cultures in different ways. Scholars specializing in that region often find these ways of cultural performance strategic relative to



Figure 9.1 Ethnic groups in the Golden Triangle region in the 1950s (Created by the author).

these groups' social, political, and economic motives (Fairfield 2019, McKinnon 2003). Therefore, "culture is not just a 'way of life' but also something 'consciously cultivated and performed'" (McKinnon 2003, 81).

The community that I worked with formed in response to China's turbulent political history along its frontier. This group refers to KMT troops who lost to the Communist Red Army during the Chinese Civil War in 1949. While most Nationalist soldiers fled east to Taiwan in the face of Communist advances, the KMT's 93rd Division commanded by General Li Mi retreated west from the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan into Myanmar. They hoped to stage forays into China one day. At the outset, this battalion was primarily composed of Han Chinese. When traveling alongside the borderlands, this group recruited a good number of Han Chinese living in Kokang region in Myanmar, thus recognized as Kokang Han. A diversity of ethnic highlanders also joined due to troop reorganization, outpost-shifting, and inter-ethnic marriages.

This military plot never succeeded. But its once strong power had created tensions on the borders. Under UNESCO's negotiation, the KMT government operated three withdrawals to Taiwan during the 1950s and 1970s. Totalling more than seven thousand, the early Lost Army veterans and their descendants were resettled into Military Dependents' Housing in Longgang

in Taoyuan. This housing not only accommodated several thousands of Han veterans, but also dozens of ethnic Bai, Lisu, Akha, Tai, and Jingpo people, who were mostly the wives of these soldiers (Hsieh 1993). Such intercultural ties have brought a sense of hybridity and diversity into this community, particularly through the vitality of cultural traditions of their ethnically diverse women members.

However, prior to 2000, the community's interculturality was not featured in the public discourse by the community. Instead, to raise social awareness about these soldiers and their descendants who still lived in the Golden Triangle region, the community in Longgang (Taiwan) chose to adopt a cultural image of themselves based on the undesirable aspects of their frontier life: drug abuse, statelessness, refugee status far from their homes, and resource-poor conditions. Moreover, in the entertaining industry, the reputed novel *Yiyu* ("Exotic Borderlands," 1961) by Bo Yang (1920–2008) and the film version of *Yiyu* with the same Chinese title (English: "A Home Too Far," 1990) by Chu Yen-Ping also helped form this public image of this group. In addition, the KMT-controlled territories in the Golden Triangle region were one of the world's largest opium cultivation and drug trafficking areas throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Therefore, local Taiwanese have been fascinated by this group due to their perception of it as a mysterious, drug lord-governed society. Their marginalized socioeconomic status became the overarching trope.

A turning point: *Dage* becomes a cross-ethnic cultural marker

The 2000s saw a drastic turn for the *gujun* community. Under the state's city development program, their veteran housing was demolished and replaced with a private, upscale apartment complex, which none of the veterans could afford, so they all had to move out. Losing their community dwellings soon triggered a cultural crisis. They began to represent themselves to outsiders in a new way. In addition to showcasing the distressing aspects of their lives, they found some uplifting and entertaining characteristics of their ethnocultural diversity worth preserving. These have emerged into a hybridized culture defined by a variety of ethnic cuisines, festivals, music, and dance. The Rice Noodles Festival and *dage* are the most noteworthy characteristics.

The annual Rice Noodles Festival (Migan Jie) has proved very successful. It features a type of wide, flat noodle made of rice known as *migan*, which is a staple food cross-ethnically in Yunnan. Not a longstanding tradition, the

festival was launched in 2011 to promote this local food delicacy. Soon after, what started as a single-day community event has blossomed into a vibrant festival scheduled on two successive weekends in April. Each weekend is designed with specific themes drawn from different festival traditions: the first weekend's theme is the Water Splash and the following weekend's is the Fire Dance, which features Tai people's Water Festival and Yi people's Torch Festival, respectively. For the festival's transformation to take effect in forging a perceivable tradition for the community and the visitors, a set of *dage* repertory pieces have been created as an indispensable visual and sonic thread throughout.

However, what looks like a fully-fledged dance style today in Longgang is, in fact, the result of a very recent revival. Back in the 1990s, *dage* started dying out since the first Lost Army generation no longer practiced it. Yet in the 2000s, the aforementioned crisis of cultural awareness prompted the *dage* revival. It has gained traction as an aesthetic, political, and ritual practice after a decade of inactivity. This revival entails what the local community has perceived as the two *dage* traditions: one is Kokang *dage*, led by the descendants of Kokang Han veterans. They have striven to preserve several traditional types, each associated with specific musical modes, dance steps, and melodic patterns accompanied by flute (*dizi*), mouth organ (*sheng*), and three-string fiddle (*sanxuan*) played live (Hsia 2012). The other revival was steered by a group of highlander women, mostly Lisu, Jingpo, and Tai. What they have promoted is composed of various *dage* styles from these ethnic origins, all accompanied by commercial sound recordings of neotraditional music the women brought from their hometowns in Yunnan. Compared to the Kokang *dage*, these dance forms are generally livelier with uplifting rhythms and more hand gestures.

The ways *dage* have been incorporated into the festival offer us a window to investigate the intersection of sound, public space, and ritualization. Four types of *dage* sonic experiences—such as the sounds played live, the sounds played mediated, the dance that is seen, and the dance that incorporates the audience—create a unique music-scape upon which the festival can enact transformations in the participants.

***Dage* sounds as ambient**

The layout of the festival space can be divided into two sections based on the analysis of this study (see Figure 9.2): one is secular space, where commercial activities and sensory pleasures such as dining take place; the

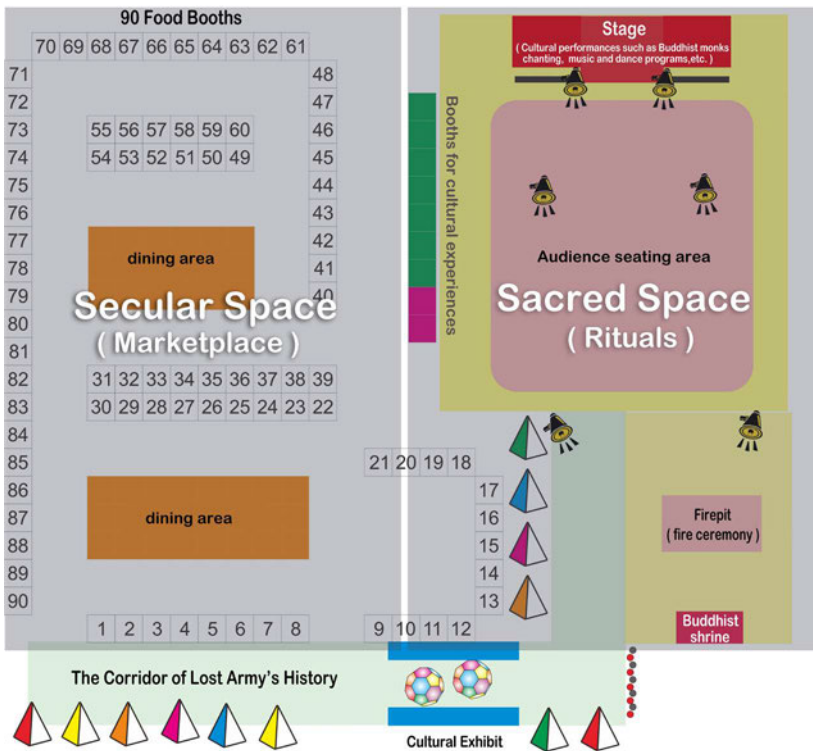


Figure 9.2 Layout of the Rice Noodles Festival in 2019 (Created by the author).

other is sacred space where a Theravada Buddhist shrine and a ceremonial firepit are set up and all rituals take place. Theravada Buddhists from the local community often come to the shrine for worship, offering fruits and flowers. These religious acts make this space explicitly sacred.

When there are no events on the program, visitors are free to shop for food or enjoy any cultural experiences that each booth offers in the marketplace. During that time, a sound recording amplified by multiple speakers serves as background music across the adjacent sacred space. As noted in Jonathan Sterne's study, while the programmed music, or the muzak, of the commercial space is not meant for "contemplative listening," it is also not always heard in an entirely passive fashion—"rather, it tends to pass in and out of the foreground of a listener's consciousness" (1997, 25). In the Rice Noodles Festival, what appears to be an ambiguous use of sound during these time slots is actually explicit in two aspects.

First, despite its main design as backdrop, the background music is loud enough to be heard. The recordings that the organizers deliberately chose

for each day are culturally defined—often the music is performed by a typical ensemble from the Golden Triangle region comprising the gourd mouth organ, bronze gongs, cymbals, and elephant-foot drum.



Audiovisual sample 9.1

Recorded by Luting Hsia in Longgang Grand Sports Field during the Rice Noodles Festival, April 29, 2018. Used with permission by the Yunnanese Dage Association.

However, this music is not recognizable to Taiwanese visitors in terms of which specific ethnic group and which ensemble the music belongs to. The boisterous sounds, together with the pungent smell of the spices and the ethnic scene filled with people dressed in ethnic costumes, set an exotic and cheerful tone for the festival's overall ambiance of the secular space and time.

Second, the programmed music (pre-recorded in a sequence and played from speakers as background music) is comprised of two to three songs from the Golden Triangle's generic ensembles played in the same sequence over and over again. The goal of this design is to familiarize the visitors with the sounds, so that they can dance *dage* to the same music in the afternoon when invited. This is the ambiguity of listening as the sound passes in and out of the foreground of a listener's consciousness that makes it possible for the listener to cultivate an understanding of the sounds as essential to the exotic borderland.

“Dage Parade” as a transitional event from the secular to the sacred

The Dage Parade is scheduled to take place prior to any sacred ceremonies, either before the Buddhist chanting of the Water Festival or before the Torch Festival's flame lighting ceremony. It denotes a transitional act to move the festival spectators from the secular space and time into the sacred. One way the Dage Parade transits, also the most effective way, is to shift the sonic-spatial structural levels from the back to the fore. Once the Dage Parade begins, the background music stops. It is replaced by music performed live, whether acoustic or amplified. In this shift of sonic structural level, the liveliness created by the *dage* music transforms the festival's public

soundscape from the background to the foreground. The sounds are now sharper and clearer. Take the Tai's Water Festival as an example. Not until the acoustic sounds of an incessant clang and a deep yet penetrating drone begin, does the music come to the foreground and become the focus of potential listeners.



Audiovisual sample 9.2

Videotaped by Luting Hsia in Longgang Grand Sports Field during the Rice Noodles Festival, April 20, 2019. Used with permission by the Yunnanese Dage Association.

Meanwhile, this transition can also be experienced in a more bodily fashion. Regardless of whether listeners are far or near, the sound draws their attention while calling for assembly. The parade then leads the audience from the secular marketplace to the sacred stage where the ceremony or worship takes place (Figure 9.3). Participants follow a specially designed pathway—named “The Corridor of the Lost Army’s History.” Joining the procession through the corridor, teeming with displays of historical photos, maps, and narration about the life of Lost Army on the Thai-Myanmar border, the audience symbolically transit from the present time and space to the era of the Lost Army (Figure 9.4).



Figure 9.3 The parade leads the audience into the secular marketplace (Used with permission by the Yunnanese Dage Association, 2019).



Figure 9.4 Left: “The Corridor of the Lost Army’s History”; Right: Deer Dance and Kinnari Dance in the Dage Parade (Photographs by the author, 2019).

In order to effect the transition, modifications are applied in how *dage* is performed. The typical circle that *dage* forms is transformed into lines. This allows the crowds to move physically from one place to another. Also, to mark *dage* as a cultural label for this Lost Army group, the Dage Parade is designed to be held throughout the two weekends of the festival despite the fact that *dage* is never part of the Water Festival tradition. It is presented in a form where *dage* dancers perform in a procession with the Deer Dance and Kinnari Dance, two quintessential folk-dance items of the Water Festival celebration for Tai people. Most intriguing is that this form of *dage* signals ideas of hybridity, exemplified in the integration of a flexible set of Water Festival hand gestures, such as Flower Blossom, into typical *dage* footwork.

Normally midway through the Dage Parade, the live performance will be replaced with a series of *dage* dances accompanied by sound recordings. At this time the visitors are welcome to join the parade dancing. “Stomping” and “Jumping with feet” are frequently used *dage* items. The Dage Parade does not end until the visitors are brought to the sacred site where the ritual is about to begin. Until that point, the soundscape had not been transformed into a holy one. Once the administrative official, normally the city mayor, appears to join the leader of the ceremony by dancing the *dage* piece “Golden snake dance” as a symbolic gesture to inaugurate the worship, the festival scene will come to a climax with a sonic change. For example, the sacred sound of the Water Festival is the Theravada Buddhist chanting led by Burmese monks who reside in Taiwan. A stark contrast to the exuberant and festive Dage Parade, the Buddhist mantra is meditative and less melismatic in melody. In an act of spiritual participation, Theravada Buddhist devotees often recite with the monks while posing the *pranamasana* hand gesture toward the divine.

The “Dage Parade” in this festival is used as an interim act enabling visitors to transit from the secular to the sacred through the aural, visual, and bodily

changeover. In that, the aural shift from the mediated sonic background to the acoustic foreground particularly works as a soundmark. It holds great allure to assemble the visitors and takes them across the threshold of the Lost Army's history to ultimately enter the "exotic borderland." Then the ritual sound commences.

This celebrative parade is flexible, allowing dance components from different highlanders of the Golden Triangle region to intermingle in a playful fashion. This playful way of hybridizing and displaying culture is crafted to fulfill the visitors' stereotypes held about minorities from Yunnan Province as multiethnic, carefree, and ebullient people. On the one hand, the ritualization of this tourist festival reinforces the pre-existing stereotypes in the mainstream Taiwanese society. On the other hand, the Yunnanese community has proudly appropriated these cultural stereotypes and integrated them into innovative music and dance performances as tools for recognition and assertion.

Dage as a ritual performance

In the ritual contexts, *dage* captures the imagination of Taiwanese visitors. It also facilitates the formulation of "exotic borderlands" as mysterious yet captivating. This is achieved by certain performative archetypes associated with the festival that aestheticize the culture of exotic borderlands through structured ritualistic *dage* acts. This structure is firmly plotted into a ritual sequence, of which all components, including music and dance, appear to be fixed, performing what tourists perceive as an ancient and animistic rite. This differs from the dance movements used in the Dage Parade, which are flexible and playful.

What is deemed as tradition based on Yi's Fire God rite, however, is a new construction. The dance choreography and the related program of rituals were all freshly created when launched. On the Torch Festival night, the two items "Bonfire Dance" and "Fire God Worship Dance" have been coined as the essential ritual acts since the festival's launch in 2014 (Figure 9.5). They are designed to be intrinsic to the flame-lighting ceremony and the Fire God worship, respectively. Their performance tends to remain the same until today in order to reinforce the perception of a timeless and unaltered tradition.

This rite denotes the festival's climax, with a procession of dancers in circles to ignite the bonfire. Once the fire is lit, the dazzling performances of the "Bonfire Dance" and "Fire God Worship Dance" are introduced to



Figure 9.5 “Fire God Worship Dance” (Photograph by the author, 2016).

the visitors, one after the other, with a narrative depicting the dances as an ancient folk tradition. For example, when the visitors are guided to pray to the supernatural being for blessings, the “Bonfire Dance” is performed as the embodiment of an animistic rite. The dance movements, composed of numerous heavy stomps and jumps with swift twists and turns, are all executed while dancers circle the bonfire at a fast pace. The music that accompanies this *dage* has an underlying rhythmic ostinato created by drumming and clapping throughout.



Audiovisual sample 9.3

Videotaped by the author in Yunnanese Cultural Park during the Rice Noodles Festival, 14 April 2017. Used with permission by the Yunnanese Dage Association.

The reverberating sound, along with the rotating dancers in action, is meant to reinforce the ritual power. The tale of Yi’s fire god and the god’s power in the announcer’s narration advance the level of the sacredness of the event, the space, and the related *dage* dance items. Furthermore, according to the choreographer Huang Zhi-wen, second-generation descendant of the Lost Army, “Bonfire Dance” is formulated into more elaborate dance

steps than other *dage* items in order to produce greater artistic effect in the ritual setting.

The earsplitting and penetrating sounds of drumming and mouth organ played from the speakers all evoke our spirits. We dance with hand summons and body jumps as prayers to respond. These ritualistic items have been maintained unchanged every year since 2014 to make it feel like a tradition. (Huang 2019)

Notwithstanding an invention, this tradition is articulated through the annual body performance, through which the sonic, visual, and the narrative displays of the culture, with the backdrop of the dark night, have all contributed to what visitors often perceive as mysterious. Visitors find such display culturally distant, yet captivating and welcoming. One can say this performance of culture steers the visitors' imagination toward an exotic place, or "exotic borderlands."

"Dage Funfest" as a bodily experienced ritual

Dage Funfest is designed to allow all visitors to join *dage* and experience the culture. This activity is scheduled every night throughout the festival period as the final event taking place right after a one-hour gala show. The program and timeline have been kept consistent over the past few years, making the events predictable for the visitors. Furthermore, this activity aims to create a high level of cultural intensity as a transformative experience for the visitors. One crucial transformative capability of this *dage* experience is to shift the visitors' position from audience members to ritual performers. This transformation is carried out when one practices *dage* for an extended amount of time in a circle, creating collective bodily unison, further empowered by cultural contextualization offered by the announcer.

Kokang style, the *dage* form used in this event, sets up a tone for the ritual performance. It starts with a few male elders who perform Kokang *dage* live onstage. They dance while playing music accompanied by a vocalist singing melodies. Without a doubt, the live, unsophisticated ensemble music and voice contrast with the commercially recorded music that accompanies the dazzling gala shows onstage right before this finale. The stark contrast illustrates a return to the archetypes. The archetypes of festival, music, and dance are exemplified in the senior figure, simplicity, and low-tech delivery in this *dage* performance. Soon after, the staged performance is shifted to

the ground when they leave the stage. Then all dancers and other Lost Army community members begin to join in line, while visitors are encouraged to participate. Together with dancing, the locals also sing along. The syllabic Kokang *dage* style, manifested in concurrent singing, instrumental playing, and footwork, intends to lead all participants to form a circle (“*yuan*” 圓 in Chinese). The rotating crowd, as explained by the announcer, embodies the festival’s satisfying finale (“*yuan man*” 圓滿 in Chinese).



Audiovisual sample 9.4

Videotaped by Luting Hsia in Longgang Grand Sports Field during the Rice Noodles Festival, 23 April 2017. Used with permission by the Yunnanese Dage Association.

This circle represents not only the perfect completion of the festival’s grand finale; when people get closer to form a circle through *dage*, they are all closer together to pray for the god’s blessing, peace, happiness, and all the best in the future. The embodiment of praying in dance is (re)confirmed through the body moving round and round. By listening closely to the simple and steady music, all participants become worshippers and, slowly but surely, attain a certain level of contentment. On several tourists’ travel blogs, “Dage Funfest” was described as a memorable experience. In the words of Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, in an “experience economy,” “experience” can orchestrate memorable events for the customers, and that memory itself becomes the product. The memory indicates a mixture of remembering the bodily experiences, the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction, and most unforgettably, the fun of dancing together with the locals.

Given the multiethnic nature of this community, such a cultural show tends to stress a culture as homogenized and hybrid instead of elucidating ethnic particularities. No specific ethnic markers are identified in the narratives other than a generic term, “Yunnanese.” Yet, as confirmed by the organizers, this place of Yunnan, as portrayed in the festival, is used as an umbrella term to encapsulate various distinctive ethnic groups across the Yunnan–Thai–Myanmar border.

“Our Yunnan is not the Yunnan referred as the one in mainland China, but an ‘exotic borderland’ of Western Yunnan”, said one organizer of the festival, Wang Lu-fei, in 2017. She emigrated to Taiwan when she was six with her Lost Army father from Mae Salong in Northern Thailand. This illustrates that the imaginary of this place created through the *dage* performances is also embodied amongst the new generations of the Lost Army. Most of them are

now second- and third-generation descendants who have not yet returned to the borderlands where their ancestors temporarily stayed in the 1950s. This imaginary, through recalling and appropriating a past, is performed through the *dage* bodily practices to construct an imagined nostalgia that tends to even out the differences of ethnic diversity, between old and new, past and present. The imaginary has helped them forge a new sense of “exotic borderlands,” presently known as the “enchanted Golden Triangle” (*meili jinsanjiao*) in Taiwan that the Lost Army community may carry on. This sense of homeland echoes what Carola Lorea calls “performance of homeland” in her study of Bengali refugees in the Andaman Islands: a homeland almost nobody has actually visited, but that nevertheless exists in the performance of songs in the diasporic context of borderland people (Lorea 2017). This homeland is not tied to a specific, fixed geopolitical place, but rather existed as “a shared sense of utopian, historical and territorial origins” (ibid.) constantly reconstructed through performance.

In this ongoing process, the sonic and visual image of a specific *dage* culture becomes reified as an intrinsic cultural label. It has been an indispensable highlight of tourist events, cultural shows, and also routine weekly community practice sessions. With a new music repertory drawn from a blending of what older generations have passed down and the current have created, the *dage* practice forms a new paradigm of musical culture for new generations to retain as their heritage.

Conclusion: Sounding “exotic borderlands”

This essay has demonstrated how *dage* plays a central role in the way the Lost Army group defines its relations with other peoples, places, and the larger socio-cultural environment by constructing heritage in a tourist festival. In the construction, (mediated) sounds, bodily movements, and spatial configurations dynamically constitute a ritual as tradition that can be multisensorially experienced by both tourists and Lost Army members. Different *dage* forms have not only been employed to mediate a new sense of place, but also to culturally assert a multiethnic immigrant group in Northern Taiwan and to sustain the cultural beliefs, values, and sounds that this group deems important.

As an umbrella musical form culturally shared by most Lost Army descendants, *dage* is represented as a cross-ethnic label. This results from informal cultural ties and mutual influences amongst their ancestors who once lived on the Thai-Myanmar border. Today, performing a cross-ethnic

social and cultural identity by de-emphasizing ethnic particularities becomes key in their efforts to unite and achieve recognition. As in the tourist venture, diverse sounds, social imaginaries, and the body movements of performing *dage* from different ethnic origins have been integrated into a ritualistic setting and become the festival's core framework through which the visitors are able to undergo a transformative experience. Neither the Lost Army group nor visitors seek the "untainted original and humankind's relationships with the natural environment" as promoted in China's prevailing notion of *yuanshengtai* (original ecology) (Kendall 2017; 2019). Apart from that, they do not quest for cultural authenticity in ethnic origin. The general understanding is that the historical and geocultural inaccessibility of this Lost Army group to their frontier's past makes it hard to seek authenticity. As a result, with little questioning, the Dage Parade and Dage Funfest are newly constructed as two essential programs each day of the festival.

For this immigrant group, annual festivals as rituals—and rituals *in* festivals—are ways to reconnect to their ancestors, homelands, pasts, and cultural traditions that they had to leave behind. Annual festivals also define their relationships with their new surroundings, new peoples (mostly Hokkien and Hakka Han peoples living in Northern Taiwan), new sociopolitical arenas, and new cultural contexts. Thus, *dage* has forged the nostalgia for the ancestors' shared past in the Golden Triangle borderlands, through which they articulate their cultural and social identities in the present. As described by Brown, "annual institutions performed over the course of changing time, festivals work as boundary stones, marking territory, staking claims, and declaring meanings, and as historical events, cobbled from traces of the past" (1997, xix).

The group's self-interpretations of their frontier history—as well as of the ritual and the prayers—dynamically generates a transformative efficacy. Moving away from the tragic aspects of their lives, which were previously associated with drug use, refugee status, and marginalization, these representations emphasize ethnic unity, cultural heritage, and a collective past. As written by the organizer from the community on the festival's official Facebook webpage:

Farewell to the exotic borderlands of the Golden Triangle! Now we are rooted in Taiwan's new Golden Triangle. The heritage from our frontier past has been creatively transformed into new styles; and we have woven our torments of warfare into mesmerizing memories. The fusion of multiethnic cultures has grown with splendid sparks, and evolved into cutting-edge forms over time. (2016)

Borrowing from Timothy Cooley, I argue that *dage* is an enactment of heritage created in performance by a group “that has recourse to the past (preservation) and creates a new cultural production in the present (invention)” (Cooley 1999, 40). Through the cyclical repetition of these events, displayed to tourists and locals, “one can observe the circular nature of heritage. Performed tradition becomes the tradition; the representation becomes the actuality. Heritage begins to reference heritage” (ibid.). This dynamic balance between preservation and invention is key to understand the modern creation of rituals as “performative acts with the intention of preserving a memory, a belief system, a way of life...” (ibid.).

Today, the Rice Noodles Festival has become a sought-after destination for visitors to experience a foreign culture while allowing the local community members to express aspects of their cultural legacy drawn from their frontier’s past. In short, the creative reinvention of sounding and choreographing *dage* has not only facilitated local tourism, but has also transformed their community-making narratives, from a grim past into a soundful cultural spectacle that symbolizes the arrival of a bright, new day.

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10 Music as Epistemic Bulwark in West Bengal

Ben Krakauer

Abstract

Colonial powers have often sought to establish their moral authority and political legitimacy by replacing local religious traditions with their own state-sanctioned worldviews and value systems. Chikowero (2015) characterizes attacks on musical tradition as epistemicide, and celebrates the innovations of subaltern populations in resisting such efforts. Contemporary West Bengal is under the crosshairs of right-wing Hindu nationalism, which seeks to stamp out traditions of tolerance and interreligious harmony. This chapter explores whether music in West Bengal can act as a bulwark against imposed ideologies. West Bengal has musical and religious traditions that draw from both Muslim and Hindu worldviews. Krakauer considers how the practice of music and dance can serve as an affective defense, an epistemological inoculation against anti-Muslim bigotry.

Keywords: epistemicide, affect, artistic expression, Hindutva, Muslim minority

Preface: Music and the joyful dissolution of social divisions

When I attended Baul-Fakir musical gatherings in West Bengal between 2009–2014, other participants often assumed that I was there to learn more about myself. In the words of Lalon Shah: “āpan gharer khabar hoy nā, bānchhā kori parke chenā” (Before understanding your own house, how could you possibly understand someone else?).¹ The song’s composer had

¹ From *āmār ghorkhānā ke birāj kore* by Lalon Shah, as sung by Mallika Akar of Jalangi, Murshidabad, West Bengal in February 2013.

wisdom for me, melodiously conveyed one evening by the singer Mallika Akar at her family's ashram in Murshidabad district. I was to receive this message through the mercurial medium of my own body, perhaps while bobbing an ankle or swaying my shoulders, according to my own state and the state of the other listeners present. If I imbibed the composer's words, I'd learn to recognize the divine as a palpable material presence in myself, and thereby recognize the divine in all others, as well. This was a radical proposition, because it demanded casting away socioeconomic biases and embracing the preciousness of all other human beings as "one's own" (*āpan*, a dear one or family member). The message was in direct contrast to the subtle and divisive messages I and the other participants were bombarded with in our daily lives, whether in the United States or South Asia. But this message made a particular impact when experienced through an emotionally immersive shared musical experience. And the message held additional power for other participants who had grown up hearing these words while surrounded by loved ones in their community.

Introduction

Colonial powers have often sought to establish political authority and moral legitimacy by replacing local value systems and worldviews with their own. This dynamic applies not only to colonies of the imperial past, but also to contemporary neocolonial settings. In a country as religiously, linguistically, and ethnically diverse as India, both state and non-governmental authorities reproduce the strategies of colonial administrations in order to maintain control over a heterogeneous population.² Since the nineteenth century, Hindu and Muslim political elites in India have sought to replace local religious practices with hegemonic, centrally sanctioned forms of religion.³ These campaigns have accelerated in recent years, facilitated in part by the ubiquity of online social media networks, where public sentiment is easily

2 Contemporary politicians strategically reify "Hindu" and "Muslim" as essentialized and diametrically opposed categories, building on the divide-and-conquer strategies of the British Raj. See also Sen (2017).

3 I refer specifically in this essay to the spectrum of local religious practices in Bengal variously labeled as *Baul* and *Fakir*. Like most religious practices, these draw from a variety of sources. Baul-Fakir religion probably began to resemble its contemporary form around the sixteenth-century Bhakti movement, with the intermingling of Sahajiya Buddhist, Sufi, and various Hindu beliefs and practices (Urban 2001; Haq 1975; Lorea 2016). For the political tensions between local and "localized" (3) Islam in South Asia, see Mohammad (2013).

engineered, inflamed, and strategically directed. Particularly striking are the recent gains of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party under the leadership of Narendra Modi, which has scapegoated Muslims and manufactured popular support for a militantly chauvinistic brand of Hinduism. In addition to targeting local religion head-on, colonial and neocolonial regimes have also aimed to weaken local worldviews through attacks on musical practice. Both colonizers and colonized have recognized music and dance as epistemic bulwarks, which strengthen and sustain ways of understanding and experiencing the world. In his 2015 study of colonial Rhodesia, Mhoze Chikowero characterizes certain attacks on musical tradition as *epistemicide*,⁴ and describes the innovations of subaltern populations in resisting such efforts. Contemporary West Bengal is in the crosshairs of right-wing Hindu nationalism, which seeks to stamp out traditions of tolerance and interreligious harmony in Bengali Hinduism, and to direct Bengali Hindu sentiment against Bengali Muslims. In this chapter, I explore whether music in West Bengal can act as it has in resistance movements elsewhere, as a bulwark against imposed ideologies and worldviews. West Bengal has many musical and religious traditions that draw from both Muslim and Hindu heritage, and which critique the very idea of a boundary separating Hindus and Muslims. I consider how embodied musical practices across socioeconomic divides in West Bengal can serve as an affective defense, an epistemic inoculation against anti-Muslim bigotry.

Epistemicide

Discussing colonialism in the global South, Boaventura de Sousa Santos writes that “dominant epistemologies have resulted in a massive waste of social experience and, particularly, in the massive destruction of ways of knowing that did not fit the dominant epistemological canon. This destruction I call *epistemicide*” (2014, 238). Elsewhere he asserts: “The destruction of knowledge is not an epistemological artifact without consequences. It involves the destruction of the social practices and the disqualification of the social agents that operate according to such knowledges” (153). This destruction of “social practices” and “disqualification of the social agents” is very much the aim of epistemicide; through such work, it enables colonial authorities to import new practices, worldviews, and legitimized political structures.

4 See Santos (2010) and Santos (2014).

Ramón Grosfoguel cites various examples of epistemicide from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with “the rise of ‘modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal’ power structures” (85). In particular, he notes the burning alive of

millions of women ... accused of being witches in the Early Modern period. Given their authority and leadership, the attack against these women was a strategy to consolidate Christian-centric patriarchy and to destroy autonomous communal forms of land ownership. The Inquisition was at the forefront of this offensive. The accusation was an attack to thousands of women whose autonomy, leadership and knowledge threatened Christian theology, Church authority and the power of the aristocracy that turned into a capitalist class transnationally in the colonies as well as in European agriculture (85–86).⁵

Similarly, Chikowero writes about musical practices in Rhodesia in the 1960s, when “African families that held onto their *chivanhu*—indigenous knowledges, cosmologies, and ways of being still endured continuing epistemicidal missionary crusades, campaigns to exterminate or subvert such knowledges and ways of being” (2015, 1). Colonial missionaries specifically targeted certain musical practices, recognizing that “in Madzimbabwe and related cultures, the musical context encapsulates the people’s shared cognitive forms and societal values, and their associated behaviors and underlying moral codes and concepts (Ngugi 1997, 11)” (Chikowero). Furthermore, certain Madzimbabwe musical forms facilitated communication with the ancestors and thereby provided a special fount of spiritual and social fortitude.

It is therefore not surprising that music became deeply involved in the battle of cultures that characterized the colonial encounter, with the colonists seeking to conquer indigenous knowledge in order to disarm a people who had deployed their cultures not only to resist evangelization, but also to fight the imposed alien political order (1–2).

The colonial Rhodesian authorities were not unique in recognizing musical practice as a site of resistance. Instances abound of religious and political

5 Grosfoguel also writes that “epistemic privilege and epistemic inferiority are two sides of the same coin” (2013, 74–75). He illustrates this with the example of the Western academy: “In Westernized universities, the knowledge produced by other epistemologies, cosmologies, and world views arising from other world-regions with diverse time/space dimensions and characterized by different geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge are considered ‘inferior’ in relation to the ‘superior’ knowledge produced [by canonic Western intellectual authorities]” (75).

authorities targeting music as part of larger epistemicidal campaigns. Examples include the suppression of music by the Khmer Rouge, the Taliban, and Boko Haram, as well as by slave codes in the United States.⁶

Music and epistemic fortitude

Music is a potent force for preserving cultural values, ethics, and worldviews. Inderjit Kaur theorizes the ways that listening to Sikh devotional music is “a multidimensional composite experience of sound, memory, affect, aesthetics, and ethics” (2016b, 89), “an epistemic site where ethicality is experienced as embodied sensation rather than as mentalist reasoning” (2016a, 1). Kaur states that “sabad kīrtan [Sikh devotional music] listening and participatory singing ... are multisensorial, synaesthetic, affective, cognitive and somatic all at once, and they are engendered in an intersubjective setting” (18). Quoting Thomas Csordas (1993), she writes that *sabad kīrtan* listening and singing “are ‘about cultural patterning of bodily experience, and also about the intersubjective constitution of meaning through that experience’” (19).

In conveying the power of *sabad kīrtan*, Kaur cites Charles Hirschkind’s 2006 scholarship on Islamic sermon audition in Cairo: “The ‘relaxed attentiveness of this auditory practice invests the body with affective intensities’ (82) that draw from the ethical themes in sermons such as humility, awe, regret and fear. These ethical affects get sedimented in the body as ‘latent tendencies of ethical response’ (82), as a ‘substrate of affective orientations that undergird right reasoning’ (125). Thus, ‘[A]nimated or “played” by the rhythms, lyrical intensities, sound figures, echoes, and resonances of the recorded performances, the sensorium acquires a moral orientation’” (Kaur 24–25). Embodied listening then, according to Kaur’s reading of Hirschkind, is “a process whereby affective intensities accumulate in the body Listening thus engenders dispositions and also action tendencies at visceral levels that are not necessarily tied to deliberate thought” (20).

There are similarities and historical connections between the Sikh devotional music that Kaur describes and Bengali Baul-Fakir music. Both grew from the intermingling of Muslim, Hindu, and other local religious traditions that characterized the Bhakti movement of medieval South Asia. Both involve musical settings of religious poems that advocate a radically

6 Attempts to impose religious views have also taken softer tacks, as in Christian missionaries’ adoption of regional musical practices to appeal to local participants (in Bengal one can hear popular forms of Christian kīrtan called *Jishu Kirtan*).

inclusive form of humanism, egalitarianism, and spiritual devotion. Indeed, in both traditions, the songs form the core of the religious canon, and the experience of these texts through musical audition and participation informs their meaning and interpretation. In both traditions, participants engage with the music not only in explicitly religious settings but also in mundane daily environments. The latter form of listening fosters “inattention to ethical values caused by immersion in everyday mundane concerns, and [serves as a] re-sounding of divine moral virtues” (Kaur 23).⁷ Kaur notes that “singing (*gāvīai*), listening (*sunīai*) and repetition (*japna*) are believed to be the most effective means for divine worship” (3) in Sikhism. While many Baul-Fakir gurus assert the primacy of other embodied forms of spiritual practice, the influential twentieth-century Baul-Fakir guru Bhaba Pagla famously stated: “*gān-i sarbaśreṣṭha sādhanā*” (song/music is the highest form of spiritual practice).⁸ In any case, it is widely held in the Baul-Fakir community that music is a valuable avenue for expressing and experiencing divine communion, as well as for disseminating canonic teachings. And in both Baul-Fakir and Sikh traditions, “the major emphasis [of musical performance] is on affective immersion of congregants. For listening to be effective, it is considered important that the heart be engaged. Listening must be practiced with feeling, particularly love, affection and regard” (Kaur 2016a, 21).

One notable difference between Sikh and Baul-Fakir musical traditions concerns the etiquette surrounding comportment and restraint while experiencing music. Kaur writes: “In accordance with the guideline in sabads of serenity and equipoise ... clapping or dancing to sabad kīrtan, as well as large movements of possession and trance, are not considered appropriate, though the clapping of kartāl ... is typical in the more participatory genres” (2016a, 7). While some Baul-Fakir communities practice a similar constraint, in keeping with certain Sufi traditions with which they overlap, others famously practice ecstatic abandon through music.⁹ Despite these differences, music is important in both Sikh and Baul-Fakir settings as “a multidimensional composite experience of sound, memory, affect, aesthetics, and ethics,” (Kaur 2016b, 89), experienced simultaneously within individual bodies and together as a shared communal experience (Kaur 2016a, 23). A

7 Prahlad Tipanya Singh expresses a similar observation about North Indian Kabir bhajans in Shabnam Virmani’s 2008 film *Chalo Hamara Des*.

8 See Lorea (2016, 49).

9 There is a broad spectrum of cultural practice encapsulated within the term “Baul-Fakir,” and much of it is informed by the local society within which Baul-Fakir communities exist.

final notable similarity between Sikh and Baul-Fakir tradition concerns the importance of “[enacting] divine virtues in this world, the social world” (25). Kaur states that “Sikhism rejects asceticism (and celibacy, for the clergy as well), recommends a householder’s life and full participation in the socio-economic arena” (25). Although much popular literature on Baul-Fakir tradition describes Baul-Fakirs as renunciants, this is largely a romanticized mischaracterization. Most Baul-Fakirs exist within the larger social world while striving towards the social/spiritual mandate of serving other humans (*mānuṣke bhajan karā*).

I draw these parallels to assert that Kaur’s theory of Sikh music as “multisensorial, synaesthetic, affective, cognitive and somatic all at once, and ... engendered in an intersubjective setting” (2016a, 18) applies to Baul-Fakir music as well. Accordingly, I argue that Baul-Fakir music is a powerful force in maintaining social values, spiritual worldview, and communal memories in “affective, cognitive and somatic” (18) ways. As such, Baul-Fakir music presents a threat to neocolonialist powers that would replace an inclusive Bengali grassroots tradition with imported forms of Hindu chauvinism and communal intolerance.¹⁰

Baul-Fakir tradition as resistance

The Baul-Fakir tradition has a long history of resistance to religious and social hegemony. For centuries, Baul-Fakirs faced persecution by orthodox Hindus, who objected to Baul-Fakirs’ explicit critiques of caste, scripture, and religious authority, and who stigmatized Baul-Fakirs for their ostensibly perverted forms of embodied practice. With the rise of Muslim nationalism in Bengal in the late nineteenth century, Islamic reformists also turned against Baul-Fakirs.

Rafiuddin Ahmed writes that until the late nineteenth century, there was no sense of Muslims as a unified class of people in Bengal, and hence little sense of Hindus and Muslims as two distinct and opposing groups (2001, 5). Ahmed writes: “In the late nineteenth century, improved means of communication, modern education, the printing press, a powerful program

¹⁰ While the majority of Baul-Fakir composers have promoted a radically inclusive outlook, it is also important to note some exceptions. Lorea (2018) writes how in the face of 19th-century persecution, some Baul-Fakir composers employed sectarian language to differentiate themselves from upper caste Hindus, orthodox Vaishnavas, and Shariyat theologians. Lorea (2016) also notes that in the wake of geopolitical shifts some institutional followers of Bhaba Pagla have reconstructed his message within the context of a “neo-Hindu reformist landscape” (180).

of Islamization launched by the Islamic revivalists, colonial reforms, and increased political tension between Hindus and Muslims gradually broke the isolation of the villages and brought about a certain degree of rapport between the 'high born' and the 'low born' [Muslims], and induced the mullah to aggressively articulate a sense of common identity" (6). According to Shaktinath Jha, this sense of urgency in constructing a consolidated Islamic identity was reinforced by pre-independence fears regarding the future safety of Muslims in a Hindu-majority India (2001, 23).

Unfortunately for rank-and-file Bengali Muslims, the campaign to establish a unified Muslim identity asserted that Bengali culture, language, and traditions were un-Islamic (Ahmed 2001, 9), and demanded "absolute conformity with an Arab-oriented Islam" (15). Ahmed observes that there is "an astonishing similarity between the uncompromising attitude of the nineteenth-century 'revivalists' and the ideology of the Islamic 'fundamentalists' of our time insofar as they both promote the concept of an idealized Islamic community distinct from others and they both define the community in extraterritorial terms, rejecting all local variations of Islam" (15). Sufia Uddin attributes this rejection of local Islam to "constant and increasing flow of Bangladeshi pilgrims to Mecca for the hajj" (2006, 176); Ahmed attributes it also to the influence of funding from Saudi and Pakistani governments and "fundamentalist groups" (2001, 22).

In any case, around 1918, there was a coordinated effort to stamp out heterodox Islamic practice in Bengal, and several fatwas were published by influential authors (Jha 2001, 22). These writers argued that Baul-Fakir doctrine posed a threat to Islam and must be destroyed. The aim of these fatwas, however, was not to expel Baul-Fakirs from Muslim society; rather, it was designed to pressure them to assimilate to a reformist mainstream (23). In order to inflame conservatives' anger and disgust towards Baul-Fakirs, these publications gave explicit, exaggerated, and sensationalized accounts of Baul-Fakir's esoteric ritual practices. The ultimate goal of this persecution was not to eradicate heterodox practices, but to consolidate religious and political authority (24).

Shaktinath Jha documents the ways that the persecution campaign continued throughout the twentieth century. Seeking to intimidate and humiliate Baul-Fakirs, their assailants would call them to public meetings and force them to renounce their views and practices (28). If they refused, they would be boycotted in trade, commerce, and social life. They would also be refused access to public wells and burial sites, and not allowed to walk across others' land (30, 35). In many instances, this essentially resulted in house arrest, and entire families were forced to abandon their villages

in search of new homes. Some Baul-Fakirs would publicly renounce their views, assuming normative worship in public, but would secretly continue their esoteric practices. Others weren't given a chance to renounce, but instead were beaten, had their instruments smashed, had their hair and beards forcibly cut, or were forced to eat beef (29). On those occasions where the police intervened, assailants were typically released after signing a statement that they would not persecute Baul-Fakirs in the future (32, 63). Jha notes that persecution was concentrated in areas where Baul-Fakirs formed a minority, living in poverty in isolated corners of rural society. Where Baul-Fakirs formed a majority, or where they enjoyed the support of powerful leaders, they were left alone (29). Furthermore, assailants targeted Baul-Fakir practitioners and singers whose songs and messages directly contradicted orthodox teachings; they largely ignored those singers who adhered to a less critical repertoire of songs (35).

Despite these efforts to destroy Baul-Fakir practice and to force Baul-Fakirs to conform to beliefs and practices of the reformist religious right, these attempts were mostly unsuccessful. Jha writes that the majority of the Muslim populace held tolerant views (35), and valued Baul-Fakirs as singers, spiritual experts, and healers (52). Although right-wing religious leaders might sway some core followers, their message didn't resonate with the broader rural populace (35). On the futility of trying to turn the public against Baul-Fakirs or music, Jha writes: "Having heard that music is forbidden, the next minute everyone listens to it on the radio, watches it on TV" (35).¹¹ The protection offered by sympathetic neighbors in the face of persecution had many precedents in Bengal; as Jha has written, the history of Baul-Fakirs is a history of persecuted esoteric sects banding together and finding refuge among sympathetic pockets of the rural populace (1999, 122). Throughout this history, music served as a salve and guide star for Baul-Fakirs, and helped to attract the love and support of neighboring communities, while also influencing their social ethic and spiritual outlook.

Revival and resistance

In contemporary West Bengal, Baul-Fakir music is widely celebrated as Bengali heritage and occupies a central role in the cultural tourism industry. Many visitors record and post YouTube videos of Baul-Fakir musicians performing at tourist events.

11 My translation from the Bengali original.



Audiovisual sample 10.1

In this video, by the Folkpick channel, Lakhan Das Baul performs at the Saturday market near the cultural tourism center of Santiniketan, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrCLs8VtLbs>.



Audiovisual sample 10.2

In this clip posted by Purohitmoshay Shibshankar on YouTube, Sumanta Das Baul performs at Jaydev Mela, a large religious festival attended by pilgrims, music lovers, and entrepreneurs, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCXSDzSNt5I>.

Elsewhere, I theorize this embrace of Baul-Fakir music as part of a revival movement, in which the middle and upper classes romanticize and appropriate aspects of a subaltern artistic tradition (Krakauer 2015). This revival has a variety of effects on Baul-Fakirs; it affords professional opportunities to some, but elevates the romantic ideal of Baul-Fakir identity to such heights that individual Baul-Fakirs are often met with scorn and skepticism.

The celebration of Baul-Fakir music encompasses not only musical style and repertoire, but also the broadly humanist aspects of the songs. This fascination with Baul-Fakir spirituality by the affluent classes is part of a long tradition inaugurated by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore over a century ago. In response to the 1905 partition of Bengal, Tagore published Baul-Fakirs songs, presenting Baul-Fakirs as an emblem of Hindu-Muslim communal harmony in Bengali culture.

Indeed, the songs do derive from both Hindu and Muslim traditions and are sung by Baul-Fakirs from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds. And the songs do explicitly criticize religious distinction, social hierarchy, and various forms of social and religious intolerance.¹² It is noteworthy, then, that even as the Hindu chauvinist BJP party makes dramatic gains in West Bengal, Baul-Fakir music maintains its position of mainstream popularity. What to make of this? Is this cause for hope that even as communal intolerance

12 One popular anti-sectarian song is “Jat gelo jat gelo bole,” commonly attributed to Lalon Shah (in a 2013 email, the playwright Sudipto Chatterjee told me that some Baul-Fakirs question whether Lalon actually wrote this song). The lyrics note that whatever our caste, we all purify ourselves in the same water, and that none of us will be spared our common death. For more examples of anti-sectarian Baul-Fakir songs attributed to Lalon Shah, see Carol Salomon’s posthumous book *City of Mirrors* (2017), edited by Keith E. Cantú and Saymon Zakaria.

surges in West Bengal, Baul-Fakir songs will serve as a moral reminder for the public? Will hearing these songs discourage conservative Hindu voters from supporting anti-Muslim policies? Given the songs' directive to respect and revere the other (*par*) as one's own (*āpan*, a dear one or family member), will hearing these songs remind listeners to work towards an inclusive society, recognizing religious minorities as *āpan*?

The answer depends on the nature of the Baul-Fakir revival. Following Kaur, one can view Baul-Fakir music as “a multidimensional composite experience of sound, memory, affect, aesthetics, and ethics” (2016b, 89). But does such a description apply to Baul-Fakir music within a revival context? Kaur is careful to note that “musical sound does not have any objective ability to invest certain affective intensities in listening. Rather it is the overall contextual setting in which these musical genres do their work which is crucial: the processes at play are contextual, cultural and subjective” (2016a, 28). Kaur emphasizes that *sabad kīrtan* is “effective in deepening affective sensations” specifically when it occurs within what she calls “a Sikh affective ecology” (28).

There are parallels between the intra-community settings where Sikh devotion music and Baul-Fakir music take place. Discussing Sikh congregational settings, Kaur notes the centrality of keeping “virtuous company (*sādh sangat*),” which is

a necessary condition for realizing the divine and divine virtues, and recommended as a fundamental component of a Sikh way of life. It is the context for worship and *kīrtan* [devotional singing] in particular. The divine is itself believed to be revealed in virtuous company, since it is in the company of the virtuous that the love for the divine is seen to intensify ... the intersubjective and ecological potential of virtuous company is considered powerful enough to support one through terrifyingly challenging times, and even turn around those immersed in vices (29).

Similarly, the *sādhusaṅga* (gathering of the saints) is a typical intra-community context for Baul-Fakirs music in the villages.¹³

¹³ I describe *sādhusaṅgas* as “intra-community” events, but I do not mean to suggest they are closed off to outside visitors. Indeed, one striking feature of many *sādhusaṅgas* is the extent to which they welcome uninitiated participants. Attending is a great opportunity to learn from spiritual and musical adepts, and to experience the ways that Baul-Fakir practitioners deconstruct the boundaries of sectarian and class identity. When I began attending these events, I was surprised when some people addressed and referred to me as “*sadhu*”; I soon learned that



Audiovisual sample 10.3

In this clip posted by Soumik Dee on YouTube, the esteemed song specialist Ranojit Gosain sings at a *sādhusaṅga* at his home in Nadia district, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cC4Af-lcmGQ>.

At these events, participants sing and play music, and discuss the esoteric meaning of the songs. This is the setting in which the songs accrue the densest layers of affective, somatic, and semiotic meanings over time, as the community of practitioners revisits the songs again and again, excavating them through a variety of experiential, intellectual, and intersubjective means.¹⁴

Historically, Baul-Fakir songs have helped sustain these communities through long periods of oppression. As Hindu chauvinism grows in West Bengal, surely the songs will remain a source of resistance and fortitude within the communities where *sādhusaṅgas* thrive. As Kaur theorizes within the parallel example of Sikh devotional music, the songs empower not only through the surface value of their words and sounds, but also through activating deeply ingrained affective and somatic pathways, by engaging embodied ways of knowing and ethical orientations.

But will the songs retain their power within revival settings? How much of their multidimensional resonance is lost when the songs are performed in commercial settings, for listeners who enjoy the sounds and exoteric messages, but who haven't been immersed in the social and spiritual culture surrounding the songs?¹⁵

As a non-Bengali with under two years of field research experience in Bengal, I am limited in answering this latter question. It is clear that revival audiences engage with Baul-Fakir music in multisensory ways, variously listening, singing, clapping along, playing instruments, dancing, debating, and reading about the music and spiritual tradition. And indeed,

they applied this term broadly to anyone striving to live with a pure heart, without jealousy, pride, and violence—whether or not that person had taken formal initiation.

14 I am aware that some recent neuroscientific findings question the extent to which we can distinguish between the affective, somatic, and semiotic (Feldman Barrett 2017). By using these terms, I do not mean to reify clear distinctions between them, but instead to convey my point about the impact of music on multiple levels of human experience.

15 Baul-Fakir songs contain both esoteric and exoteric messages; while adepts wrestle with the former, uninitiated audiences engage primarily with the latter. Throughout the long history of Baul-Fakir performance practice, both groups have remained target audiences.

even prior to the current revival movement, Baul-Fakir music has always been performed for non-Baul-Fakir audiences, who have appreciated both aesthetic and textual aspects even without accessing some of the songs' veiled esoteric meanings.

The question, then, is to what extent does Baul-Fakir music convey the social and spiritual values of the songs, through multimodal forms of experience, to revival audiences? Anyone listening to a song that critiques caste will receive that message on an intellectual level, but what are the deeper levels on which revival audiences experience that message? Is their listening an "affective practice that also constitutes an epistemic site where ethicality is experienced as embodied sensation rather than as mentalist reasoning" (Kaur 2016a, 1)? It is on this level that the music would presumably function most powerfully to engender resistance to politicized right-wing ideologies.

Despite the explicitly anti-sectarian messages of the songs, many Hindu revival audiences today nevertheless think of "Baul" music as an expression of Bengali Vaishnavism.¹⁶ Through embracing it as such, there is a danger of appropriating it as an art form while rejecting its spiritual and social teachings. Processed in such a way, "revived" Baul-Fakir music—or at least certain Baul-Fakir songs—could be adapted within the larger right-wing Hindutva movement. It is highly conceivable that revival audiences would embrace the music in this way while simultaneously supporting the persecution of the Muslim communities in which many Baul-Fakirs live.

Of course, agency in the Baul-Fakir revival setting does not lie entirely with the revival audience, despite the gap of economic and political privilege that separates them from the performers. Just as Baul-Fakir performers have always presented their spirituality and worldview in selective ways to non-Baul-Fakir audiences, they continue to do so in navigating the varied expectations and conflicting ideals of revival settings (see Krakauer 2015).¹⁷ Through their

16 Some Baul-Fakir performers encourage this conflation of "Vaishnava" and "Baul" as identity markers. During a visit to a *mahotsab* (commemorative concert) with some Baul-Fakir performers, two musicians told me in hushed tones that some of the other musicians in attendance were not really Vaishnavas. This comment reflected an assumption that my research as a "Baul scholar" would be limited to Vaishnava Bauls. Indeed, many scholars of Baul-Fakir music and religion in West Bengal have maintained a primary focus on Vaishnava Bauls. In her 2018 book, Kristin Hanssen uses the terms *Vaishnava* and *Baul* interchangeably, following the example of her primary interlocutors. Carola Lorea (2016) presents a counternarrative by emphasizing the importance of Shakta theory and practice in many Baul-Fakir communities.

17 For related discussions of strategic assimilation, see also Chikowero (2015) and Qureshi (2000). Whereas Chikowero discusses socio-political resistance of Madzimbabwean performers within Western styles of music, Qureshi discusses adjustments made by contemporary sarangi players to carve a niche for themselves within the classical music market.

strategic adeptness as performers, they find ways to deliver both their music and their message to revival audiences, fulfilling dual projects of plying a trade and serving other human beings (*mānuṣke bhajan karā*). While some revival audiences do not treat individual Baul-Fakir performers with a great deal of respect, they are nevertheless captivated by Baul-Fakir performance, and as such are susceptible to the performers' influence. And although Baul-Fakir ideology is distinct from the values of the larger Bengali society, it significantly overlaps with longstanding ideals of communal tolerance and harmony. As right-wing Hindu sentiment rises in West Bengal, Baul-Fakir performers in revival settings may indeed play a strategic role in touching the hearts and minds of their listeners, activating deeply embodied knowledge bases of tolerance, love, and communal unity. And perhaps this spiritual and artistic labor will have a meaningful impact on public action and policy.

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11 The Power and the Politics of Embodying Dancehall

Reconciling Sonic Affect and the Religious Self in Singapore

Orlando Woods

Abstract

This chapter argues that the embodiment of dancehall culture in Singapore can lead to emancipation from, and tensions within, the religious self. Dancehall, a cultural movement that emerged in Jamaica in the late 1970s, encapsulates a distinct style of music, dance, dress, and attitude that has become known for hyper-sexualized representations of the gendered body. The embodiment of dancehall culture in Singapore found particular appeal amongst Malay-Muslim youths. For them, the sonic affectiveness of dancehall provides a performative channel through which they can engage with their bodies in ways that subvert the conservative prescriptions of their ethno-religious community. It enables them to realize gendered and sexual freedoms which must, however, be negotiated within the broader context of community surveillance.

Keywords: bodies, performance, Malay-Muslim youth, sexuality, Singapore

Introduction

In Singapore, understandings of multiculturalism are informed by the dominant ethnic and religious groups that delineate and define the resident population. The relative success in creating a harmonious environment in which the Chinese, Malay, Indian and other ethnic groups, and the Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious groups, can live alongside each other has meant that multiculturalism is often understood in structural terms. It is understood to be an outcome of fundamental social difference

and the need to proactively manage them in ways that prevent factionalism and promote harmony. These differences are most pronounced within the Malay-Muslim population, amongst whom the interlinking of ethnicity and religion is strongest, and most conservative. I aim to complicate this understanding of multiculturalism through an exploration of new types of “banal multiculturalism” taking root in Singapore. Banal multiculturalism refers to the inflections of popular cultural forms on traditional categories of identity and belonging, and how these inflections can in turn give way to new understandings of the self, and new ways of being in the world (after Beck 2004). As a result of these inflections, an understanding of banal multiculturalism can therefore provide insight into the ways in which individuals encounter, and respond to, cultural diversity, splintering and complexity in their everyday lives. By taking the idea that “difference is not fixed but rather emerges from encounters ... encounters *make* difference” (Wilson 2017, 455, original emphasis) as a point of departure, I therefore highlight some of the challenges of Islamic modernity in contemporary Singapore.

I do this through an empirical examination of the practice of dancehall amongst Malay-Muslim youths. Dancehall music among Singaporean Muslims is certainly not interpreted as religious sounds; in fact, if anything, it is a problematically profane sound due to the erotic potential of its embodied manifestations. To some, it might even be *irreconcilable* with the sonic and dance practices of mainstream Malay Muslims. Dancehall emerged in Kingston, Jamaica in the late 1970s and has since come to represent a distinct and idiosyncratic style of music, dance, fashion, and attitude that encourages, through its performative dimensions, individuals to “asser[t] a new sense of self, a sense of freedom” (Stanley-Niaah 2009, 759). Its performative elements are gendered and hyper-sexualized, meaning in Singapore—and amongst Malay-Muslim youths in particular—dancehall occupies a surprising, and sometimes provocative cultural niche (see Woods 2020a, 5–6 for a review of Singapore’s dancehall scene). Thus, while terms like “Malayness” and “Muslimness” are still used in Singapore to foreground a sense of “continuous cohesion and credibility” by “describ[ing] imagined and idealised performative concepts which appropriate a normative and ontological force, despite being unstable and shifting constructs” (Goh 2014, 603), the practice of dancehall undermines the prescriptions of Malay-Muslim conservatism. In doing so, it offers youths a performative channel through which they can explore the embodied potential of themselves, and thus begin to forge new forms of belonging. While recent work has tended to focus on the management of Islam in Singapore’s public sphere (Kong 2005; Kadir 2011;

Azeez 2016; Osman 2018; Pasuni 2018), this chapter contributes to a much smaller tranche of work that explores the polyvalent nature of Islamic modernity and how it intersects with the forging of individual (youth) identities (Musalib 2006; Yip 2008; Goh 2014; Teo 2019).

“Banal” multiculturalism in the contemporary world

Multiculturalism has provided a dominant trope through which issues of difference and socio-cultural complexity are examined and understood. Often, these issues have been explored in response to migration and the resultant demographic shifts that have come to both destabilize and define the contemporary world. Yet, as much as discourses of multiculturalism draw attention to demarcations of difference, so too have they been criticized for “depict[ing] clear distinctions of social identity and categorization” (Wilson 2017, 454). They are less able to account for the possibilities of difference being found within sameness, or sameness within difference, that are a more accurate reflection of the complexity of contemporary socio-cultural lives (Kong and Woods 2019). In light of this, my notion of banal multiculturalism recognizes and embraces the fact that we are all located at the intersection of multiple, diverse, and sometimes contradictory webs of cultural influence. We initially acquire these webs through our parents, friends, and environments, but so too do we nurture them through the realization of our own interests, choices and desires. Banal multiculturalism is indexed to the influence of popular cultural forms on our lives. Notwithstanding the importance and pervasiveness of such influences, they remain underappreciated in discourses of multiculturalism. As Harris (2009, 194) laments:

It is in the world of popular consumer culture, as well as in the everyday encounters facilitated by the mundane realities of eating, dressing and recreating, that young people do most of their production and contestation of difference. Typically, popular and everyday culture has been regarded as trivialising multiculturalism and providing only weak forms of cosmopolitanism. For example, attention to culturally-specific food, dance, popular media and clothing is frequently pilloried as the most banal or vacuous form of multiculturalism.

Far from “trivialising” multiculturalism, like Harris, I contend that popular cultural forms can complicate and disrupt normative categories of social and cultural belonging (Beck 2004). Specifically, I suggest that popular cultural

forms tend to engage individuals on a more affective level and thus have the potential to embrace and realize alternative visions of the self. Affect can be understood as an “active outcome of an encounter, [which] takes the form of an increase or decrease in the ability of the body and mind alike to act” (Thrift 2007, 178). When individuals encounter the products of popular culture, they can be moved to embrace these new ways of being. For the purposes of this research, music in particular is known for its affective qualities; it “move[s] as an affect” (Henriques 2003, 459) and can in turn trigger an “affective process that can open a person up to new forms of ... becoming” (Woods 2019, 187). In more conceptual terms, the affectiveness of sound is often indexed to the affectiveness of the spaces that sound creates; the sonic space that emerges as a result is “inside you as well as you being inside it” (Henriques 2003, 459), which suggests not just an embodied but an all-encompassing experience. In turn, this can “problematise the experience of self as separate and individualised; sound passes through and into the body, making personal boundaries porous and emphasising the sociality of the self” (Wood et al. 2007, 873). Dance can be an outcome of such experience, which, when aligned with the lyrical and rhythmic cues of musical accompaniment, can augment the affective experience of sound.

The affective experience of banal multiculturalism does not, however, occur in isolation; rather, it intersects with, is informed by, and in some cases, it disrupts individuals’ everyday lives. As Saldanha (2005, 707) reminds us, music “changes people and circumstances, and it changes different people in different ways, according to differences in race, gender and class.” In Singapore, for example, the practice of dancehall invariably comes into contact and conflict with the cultural normativities and expectations of Malay-Muslim identification. As a form of banal multiculturalism, dancehall can therefore help to “interrogate and deconstruct unquestioned normativities which have taken on a force of ‘naturalness’” and thus provide “constructive alternatives” (Goh 2014, 600) for Malay-Muslim youths. In contributing to the emergence of these alternatives, banal multiculturalisms can provide insight into the new forms of lived religion that are manifesting in Singapore and beyond. These are encapsulated in Goh’s (2014, 608) understanding of lived religion, which “blurs the boundaries between what is superior, valid, doctrinal and official, and what is inferior, illegitimate, pietistic and personal in religious practices.... Lived religion confounds imposed polarities between what is perceived as sacred and profane, and rejects religious categorical fixities.” The effects of banal multiculturalism on lived religion are potentially wide-ranging and provide insight into the tensions embroiled in the realization of new forms of Islamic modernity. I

return to these ideas in the conclusion. Before that, however, I explore in more detail dancehall as a form of banal multiculturalism and consider the power and politics associated with its embodied practice.

The power and politics of embodying dancehall

Dancehall is unique in that it is both an embodied and an empowering cultural form. Originating in the urban ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica in the late 1970s, it has since “travers[ed] boundaries of the street, the area or community, the nation and the Jamaican Diaspora ... to occupy global sound and dance scapes” (Stanley-Niaah 2004, 123). Both the sounds and the movements have an infectious, affective quality to them, and foreground its embodied appeal. As Henriques (2010, 57) explains, the fast, syncopated nature of dancehall music “pulsate[s] with heartbeat and kinetic dance rhythms,” and therefore have an elevated capacity to affect. The sonic affectiveness of dancehall is manifested through the body, with the movements of dancehall reflecting its gendered, and hyper-sexualized, performative dimensions. These movements focus on the pelvis, with defining movements including “wining” (the gyration of the hips), “twerking” (thrusting the hips back and forth in a sexually provocative way) and, in its most extreme form, “dagging” (the simulation of sexual acts between male and female dancers). As a result, the music of dancehall provides the rhythmic and lyrical cues that inform the dance of dancehall, which Henriques (2008, 227) describes as being “literally bottom-up with its signature ‘bumper-grinding’ sexually explicit choreography, where the bass note is struck by the body itself—displaying its fecundity and celebrating its fertility.”¹

Through these performative dimensions, dancehall can be understood as both a uniquely empowering and often provocative cultural practice. Even in Jamaica, middle-class sensibilities have traditionally condemned dancehall culture as being “crude, debased, unrefined, vulgar, and even animal” (Henriques 2008, 227) with dancehall spaces becoming, in turn, codified with “nihilistic scenes of unabashed thrill-seeking, risk-taking sexual displays and competing gender politics” (Frank 2007, 172). In part, these characteristics help to explain its appeal; it provides a performative method through which “hegemonic attitudes are destabilized” (Pinnock 2007, 48) and a new sense of self can be asserted. This is particularly true for female practitioners. Cooper (2004, 126) suggests that the role of women in

1 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulxv2dTbZ7w> for examples.

dancehall “can be theorized as an act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person.” These “assertions” are acutely felt in Singapore, where the Malay-Muslim dancehall community must constantly negotiate the performative sense of empowerment that comes with the practice of dancehall within a context of enduring community conservatism.² This is especially true for Muslim females. Indeed, Singapore’s dancehall is small, but growing; it appeals most to youths aged 18–25, and is especially popular within the Malay-Muslim community. With this in mind, I now explore the ways in which Malay-Muslim dancehall practitioners reconcile sonic affect and the religious self in Singapore.

Reconciling sonic affect and the religious self in Singapore

The data presented below are a subset of a more expansive dataset from a project conducted in late 2018 on dancehall culture in Singapore. These data are derived from eight interviews that represent the perspectives of Malay-Muslim (and one Malay-Filipino Muslim) dancehall practitioners only; the more expansive dataset comprised nineteen interviews spanning Chinese and Eurasian dancers as well. While the more expansive dataset included dancehall teachers *and* dancers, the Malay-Muslim cohort comprised dancers only. This cohort would most commonly perform in dance studios, at home, and occasionally in public, at competitions. Singapore’s dancehall community now comprises approximately 50–80 regular dancers, which reflects various degrees of identification with dancehall culture (see Woods 2020a, 5–6). All Malay-Muslim participants were polytechnic students; nearly all of them were in their late teens or early-to-mid-twenties.

1. Sonic affects, performative bodies

Dancehall is unique in that its musical and performative manifestations are so clearly aligned. The music of dancehall is meant to be danced to and the dance of dancehall reflects the syncopated tempo and rhythm of the music. The music does, in other words, create a unique sonic landscape within which dancehall can be performed. Aisha,³ for example, explained that “the

2 Conservatism is, to varying degrees, prevalent in all religious communities in Singapore, although is arguably most pronounced amongst Malay-Muslims. Islamic conservatism is (also arguably) as much a reflection of cultural prescriptions as it is Islamic theology.

3 All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

beat is very upbeat, and it's just really fun. It really invites everyone to come dance together." Tariq offered further insight into the inter-connections between the music and the dance of dancehall, and how these connections combined to trigger an affective response within himself:

The music makes you feel different. I don't know how to explain. The words they use. I may not be able to understand the language, but the music sounds nice. Dancing is one more thing, but I think as I learn about the culture, it opened up to me as I'm able to ... I don't know. Dancehall has allowed me to open myself to not only the dance world, but the whole world.

This idea of openness can be understood as an emotional response to the sonic affectiveness and embodied performativity of dancehall, which enables practitioners to "reach back sensually to grasp the tacit, embodied foundations of ourselves" (Katz 1999, 7). This sentiment was reiterated by all interviewees. Specifically, the "openness" of dancehall reflected the ways in which the body was used to perform dancehall. Aisha, for example, explained how "you tend to use different parts of your body that you never knew you could ... you tend to explore more within yourself," while Tariq explained in more detail the idea of embodied difference: "your body feels different when you dance ... it's something foreign. When you dance, your body is different from the normal things you do ... it [dancehall] is something that makes us different from the rest." The last point here raises the idea that Malay-Muslims who practice dancehall engage with their bodies in ways that are different—and implicitly more open—than "the rest." While "the rest" is not explicitly stated, we can expect it to mean Singapore society in general and the Malay-Muslim community in particular. Ahmad, for example, observed how "I feel ... we're too in ourselves, right? We're too shy to open up because that's how we were when we grow up." Even though this sense of closure is culturally prescribed, it finds specific meaning and application in the practice of Malay dance. Many of my interviewees were exposed to Malay cultural dance when they were younger, which provides a point of contrast to dancehall. Aisha, for example, explained how:

Malay dance is very restricting. It's very structured.... Whenever you go to a normal Malay dance class, you always learn the same thing. It'll always come back to the same basics, same storyline, same concept, everything.... I mean, I enjoyed the techniques and everything, and it brings out the grace of the Malay females, but I wanted something more. I wanted to try more stuff. I can do more things with my body.

For dancehall practitioners, engaging with, and exploring, their bodies through dancehall proved to be a channel of empowerment through which they could experiment with new ways of being in the world. Aisha went on to explain how “dancehall gives us the chance to be anything you want to be. It allowed us to bring out the inner ... I don’t know, like someone else that we wouldn’t want to be in our daily life.” Whereas Aisha explains here a process of introspection, of realizing an innate sense of who she is as a person, others spoke of the empowerment that comes with mimesis. Nur, for example, claimed that “I just like how they [Jamaicans] do it, I envy that, and I try to be like them in a sense.” These experimentations, whether through introspection or mimicry, serve a similar purpose in that they empower the self, while setting it apart from normative socio-cultural expectations of movement, attitude, and behavior. As a result, “some people find it distasteful and stuff, [but] that’s one thing I kind of like about dancehall in Singapore, it’s that we don’t really care.” While Nur describes here an attitude of rejecting mainstream opinion, the fact remains that dancehall is limited to the specific space-times of performance; in Singapore, it is separate from, not integrated into, everyday life. Accordingly, there is an ongoing need to reconcile the performative self within the structural parameters of living as a Muslim in Singapore.

2. Reconciling the performative self in/and society

As much as dancehall provides a channel of empowerment, so too can it fuel negative stereotypes surrounding its practitioners. This dynamic was pronounced in Singapore, where enduring socio-cultural conservatism means that “a lot of people are closed-minded in Singapore, so they’ll just look at it as a way or excuse to be very sexual.” Nur went on to explain how such judgments encouraged her to embrace dancehall more aggressively, but also to draw a distinction between her performative self and her “real-life” self. In her words, “in real life I’m super chill, I’m very shy and quiet. But when I’m doing dancehall, I can be somebody that’s super, like, woah, I’m confident, intimidating, you should be scared of me... I like dancehall because I can be whoever I want to be.” This sense of distinction was a strategy used to balance the empowerment of the individual with the expectations of community. Often, and most commonly, this involved managing the expectations of surveillant parents and other family members. In response, dancers struggled to persuade their parents (in particular) to see the value of their performative practices. Rafi explained this dynamic by drawing on the example of Malay dance:

In our religion, we can't really do all this, because it's very provocative and so on. So, they set limits, they say, "You want to dance? You can dance, but don't go overboard".... Because, traditionally we have Malay dance. So, I also did Malay dance. In Malay dance, we are taught how to communicate in a sense that it's polite.... So, when I did Malay dance, they didn't say much, but when I was introduced to ... dancehall, they would question me, like, "I see that you have improved in a sense that you have gained more vocabulary in dance, but try not to do that in front [i.e., public], or post online" and so on.... Along the way, they begin to understand me. These limits that they're trying to set begin to fade.

While Rafi could to a certain extent influence his parents' perceptions of non-normative behavior, others found their parents to be more problematic. Ahmad, for example, lamented the fact that "the hardest thing is to make them understand that this is a platform that makes us feel good about ourselves," while Rafi explained the problems he faced trying to find acceptance within his family: "Some people just don't understand. I have a few cousins who don't understand why I'm doing this. Every time we have gatherings, they'll ask me, 'Why are you doing this? Why can't you be a normal person?'" In this case, being "normal" means cohering with the closures and restrictions associated with the public expression of Malay-Muslim identity. This tension between the public expression of the Malay-Muslim identity and the private performance of dancehall manifested in various ways. In particular, digital media provide opportunities for both self-realization and surveillance. Khai, for example, explained an occasion when he posted a video of him performing dancehall on Facebook, and his parents "watched and they're like 'cannot like this', and I was like 'I understand mum, but it's just a professional kind of purpose video' and then they were like 'what if other people see? What if our reputation drops?' So, it goes back to reputation."

3. Splintered belongings

As we can begin to see, Malay-Muslim dancehall practitioners in Singapore must constantly negotiate the tensions between personal empowerment and community judgment. Through these negotiations, they develop an expanded sense of self; one that draws upon multiple senses of belonging, and switches between them throughout daily life. Splintered belongings, then, are an outcome of individuals' attempts to compartmentalize and manage disaggregated socio-cultural lives. Through these splinterings,

we can see how individuals become “less coherent agent[s] and ... more decentred site[s] of difference” (Rise 1997, 314). Dancehall practitioners cannot reject the socio-cultural community to which they belong; instead, they must manage their self-representations in a way that minimizes conflict and maximizes the potential for self-exploration and self-expansion. Imran explained that “by right, Muslims are discouraged to dance. I think at this point of time and age, I’m at this exploring myself stage and trying to know who I am better,” while Ahmad expanded on these ideas by explaining that “if we were to start putting religion inside this kind of stuff, then we might as well not dance in the first place.” Both of these excerpts highlight the tension between religion and dancehall—or traditional culture and *banal* culture—and the importance of not conflating these two forms of belonging.

Disaggregation like this often resulted in the splintering of the self. One version is a resolutely private, yet expanded, version of the self; the other the public, and prescribed version of the self that accords with Muslim sensibilities. Explaining this splintering, Tariq first remarked how “I still carry out my religion, but what I dance, I try not to mix it with the way I behave as a Muslim” before going on to explain in more detail how dancehall “requires me to move differently and behave differently.... It’s like I’m technically a different person when I dance. My daily life, when I go to the mosque, I can’t be thinking about dancing.... I need to be able to switch.” Disaggregation therefore enabled Tariq to balance these two, irreconcilable, parts of his life. Rafi reiterated this sentiment, rationalizing that “sometimes it’s good to have split personalities, you know?” Having “split personalities” enabled Rafi to mediate between expressive self and community, and to maximize the benefits of belonging to each. Even though sentiment like this was echoed by all interviews, it was most pronounced amongst young women. Khai explained that “I come from a family that is very pious, I understand where they come from.... But actually, the tension is more towards girls, the Muslim girls.” For women, the (especially sexual) prescriptions of Islam are relatively stricter, thus causing the division between private and public performances of the self to be starker. Nur explained how:

It’s really funny, because not a lot of people know this, but I’m actually quite religious. I’m the type that will pray five times a day. I will go to the mosque, that kind of thing. It’s just that when they see me dance, they will be like, “Are you sure you go to the mosque?” Because it’s really suggestive, but that’s why I like dancehall, because I can be that person, but I don’t have to be that person in real life.

Whilst Aisha explained in a more specific sense the need for division:

They [her parents] ask me, like, "What's your plan? When do you intend to put on the headscarf and everything?" And I said, like, "Most probably after I graduate and maybe after I start working and have a stable mind and everything".... But I do have friends who have their headscarf on and are still dancing, doing dancehall. But, I mean, it's still very ... it's just not nice.

Here we can see both the justification for performing dancehall (as a form of self-exploration before her mind becomes "stable") and the problems of conflating dancehall and her religion ("it's just not nice" to wear the headscarf while dancing). This tension is enduring, and reveals the distinction between the embodied/expressive and the imposed/expected. For young women in particular, then, they must constantly negotiate a splintered sense of belonging; one which speaks to the freedoms and escapism enshrined within banal multiculturalism, the other which speaks to the expectations and prescriptions of the ethno-religious community to which they belong. While dancehall is one, particularly provocative, trigger for such negotiations, there are many more that pose a challenge to religious modernity in Singapore and beyond. How religious groups recognize and respond to these challenges remains a question that needs to be addressed in order to develop a holistic and robust understanding of Singapore's evolving landscape of religious identity, community and self-realization.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the practice of banal multiculturalism in Singapore and its implications for lived religion. It raises questions about the modernization of Islam in Singapore, the emergence of post-secular tensions between performative bodies, and the prescriptive expectations of Malay-Muslim society. To navigate and manage these tensions, practitioners of dancehall manifest splintered belongings; that is, they live segmented existences that seek to avoid the conflation of dancehall and Islam (Woods 2020b). This reveals the negotiations that emerge when Islamic norms and expectations are challenged by the banal incursions of modernity into the everyday lives of Muslims. Greater theoretical and empirical insight is needed to fully understand the implications of this tension for individuals and communities in Singapore and beyond. Specifically, research needs to

engage more directly with how Islam as a “lived”—and therefore negotiated—form of religious identity, might be strategically asserted in response to the prescriptions imparted by religious leaders, parents, and community (Hopkins 2009; Dunn and Hopkins 2016). Doing so will offer insight into the disambiguation of structural categories that are currently used to define and demarcate difference in the contemporary world, and thus pave the way for more nuanced understandings of socio-cultural complexity instead. These nuances are often rooted in the realization of individual tastes and interests, but so too can they be a reflection of more affective triggers. As a tool of empowerment, how affect in general—and sonic affect in particular—enables the realization of embodied forms of selfhood provides an underexplored, yet resoundingly fertile, avenue for further research.

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12 Performing vs. Recording: The Sound of Modern Bali

Citra Aryandari

Abstract

This chapter explores the connection between religious sounds and recordings in Bali. It describes the practices of a secluded village community that emphasizes the continuity of tradition. The music of a sacred gamelan ensemble cannot be recorded in accordance with local cultural prohibitions. In contrast, recordings of a yearly incantation of Javanese epic narratives are permitted. Looking at several Balinese sonic/performative practices reveals a textured landscape that factors in the history and politics of specific technologies and people. Foreign scholars have influenced the ways the world “listens” to Bali and how Balinese artists understand their traditions at the confluence of competing histories, technologies, and musical epistemologies.

Keywords: Bali, *gamelan*, religious sounds, recording, prohibition, tradition

This essay will discuss my ethnographic research with a Balinese village community named Tenganan Pegringsingan. I was very impressed with their ability to maintain performative traditions dating back to the 11th century. The village was filled with beautiful sounds during the ritual occasions, but I was not allowed to record them because it is considered inappropriate to record sacred rites. Even so, outsiders and participants can always enjoy the live sound during the ritual ceremony, which is then recorded in our memory.

Interestingly, while modern Balinese music has been recorded since 1928 by the record company Odeon and Beka, Balinese people seem to prefer live performances held in the villages. In 1945, with the emergence of RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia), Balinese people began to get used to sound



Figure 12.1 Pura Puseh, the oldest temple in Tenganan Pegringsingan village. June 2022. (Photo by the author)

recordings. Many music competitions are held in Bali and the growth of visual technology had an impact on the uniformity of musical production.

These developments provoke salient questions. How did Balinese people respond to modernity through sound recordings, while maintaining traditional sonic ideologies? How can a community maintain ritual traditions by rejecting recording technologies, if recordings are present as the extended life of the culture itself? Why does the recording, built upon a power relationship, produce a different experience if it is compared to the live cultural performance? Moreover, these questions interrogate and reconfigure interactions in the fields of ethnomusicology, performance studies, and religious practice.

Introduction

Ten years ago, I conducted research in a traditional village called Tenganan Pegringsingan, in Bali. I was very impressed by the continuity of traditions that date back to the 11th century and are still beautifully performed. As an ethnomusicologist, I am interested in exploring the performativity of the daily lives of the people of the village, using the conceptual lens of performance studies. Tenganan Pegringsingan is famous for its *Gamelan Sêlonding*, which is believed to be divine in origin and is still considered

sacred. Gamelan Sêlonding is used in every ritual performance. It is an invitation to the gods to celebrate the event, and, when the music starts to play, the *truna* (a young man from the village) always reminds the audience not to record the event.

Following Jaap Kunst's *Music in Java*, ethnomusicology can be understood as the study of the form, function, organology, notation, and playing techniques of a musical practice (Becker 1975). However, this approach cannot be applied to the instruments constituting the Gamelan Sêlonding, since the latter is deemed sacred in Tenganan Pegringsingan and therefore is off limits for regular research methods. Besides the prohibitions on recording its sounds, the Gamelan Sêlonding is located in Balai Banjar, a space of gathering for residents, which I am forbidden from entering, as only locals (*krama desa*) are allowed inside. I can only hear without seeing, touching, or making recordings. Not infrequently, the audience or other researchers who are amazed by the beauty of the Gamelan Sêlonding have made clandestine recordings and I have been a witness to such events. However, I have chosen to honor the community's rules and instead I imagine what the performance must look like.

According to local oral history, the Gamelan Sêlonding in Tenganan Pegringsingan descended from the sky (*piturun*). The locals believe this to be a true story, which imbues the Sêlonding instruments with a sacred celestial character, and makes them fit for ritual ceremonies. The gamelan functions as a holy symbol which is reflected in the honorific title by which it is known (i.e., *Bagus Sêlonding*; Yamamoto 1995). A gamelan ensemble consists mostly of metallophones made of iron blades. Older people in Tenganan Pegringsingan recount that three of the iron blades (out of forty) used in the Gamelan Sêlonding instruments fell from the sky with three loud roars over the village. The first landed in Bungaya, to the northeast of Tenganan Pegringsingan. The next landed at Tenganan. The three blades, now in Tenganan Pegringsingan, were said to be very pure. For this reason, the Gamelan Sêlonding is only played for ritual activities (Widiana 2019).

Mangku Widia, in an interview in June 2011, reiterated that this gamelan was inherited from ancient times. In gamelan instruments, the iron blades are placed on a wooden structure called *têlawah*, which serves as a resonance box and is made of jackfruit wood. The blades are held in place by leather straps called *jangat*. In total, there are forty iron blades in the Gamelan Sêlonding.

The pieces performed by Gamelan Sêlonding can be categorized into three groups, namely *gënding Gëguron*, *gënding Pamiyos*, and *gënding Pëngiring Tari*. *Gënding Gëguron* is sacred, because this piece is played when the

rituals begin as an invitation to the deities (Yamamoto 1995). The song is relatively slow and the pattern is easy to remember.

When tracing the history of the Gamelan Sêlonding, it becomes evident that its use has never been separated from the religious activities of the Hindu community, as described by Collin McPhee in his book *Music in Bali* (1966). McPhee described the Gamelan Sêlonding in Tenganan as having the most sacred place in religious ceremonies. It is made of iron and is rectangular in shape and flat. The gamelan's size is unknown because only selected residents may touch it, and observe it up close, but it appears that it is not much different from other Gamelan Sêlonding outside this village. Only the size of the *kempul* gong is slightly smaller compared to Gamelan Sêlonding ensembles in other villages, such as Timbrah and Seraya (McPhee 1966).

From these notes, I feel somewhat relieved because it appears that even McPhee only witnessed the Gamelan Sêlonding from a distance, as I did, and he described the gamelan in uncertain terms and not in great detail. Nevertheless, McPhee's book became an essential reference in the development of ethnomusicology in general. How can we deal with this matter as ethnomusicologists? How can a traditional society maintain its sonic-sacred ideology by rejecting recording, while in other contexts of the same society recordings enjoy wide popularity and the act of recording is considered as an extension of the life of the culture itself?

The context of Tenganan Pegringsingan

Tenganan is a unique community in Bali, known as the Island of the Gods. The Balinese usually call the people of Tenganan the *Bali Aga*, which means that their ancestry can be traced back to the indigenous Balinese who settled on the island before the invasion of Javanese migrants. Therefore, it is assumed that their tradition is quite ancient, with written evidence going back ten centuries. The atmosphere and the environment of Tenganan vary from those in other villages in Bali. The differences, among others, are that they do not practice *ngaben* (cremation), they have no caste system, and men and women have equal social standing (Aryandari 2013).

The ancestors of Tenganan Pegringsingan have been successful in transmitting traditions, as life in present-day Tenganan has preserved aspects that the community perceives as ancient. Faithful adherence to the traditional rules of the village has served as a strong buttress against



Figure 12.2 Village atmosphere of Tenganan Pegringsingan. June 2022. (Photo by the author)



Figure 12.3 Daha (the young, unmarried women) prepare the offerings for Pura Puseh temple. June 2011. (Photo by the author)

the influence of other cultures, particularly of the majoritarian group in Bali, called Bali Majapahit.

Myths developed in Tenganan Pegringsingan are held to be powerful. The worship of Dewa Indra is based on a story that is unique to the Tenganan

community. According to this myth, Tenganan Pegringsingan came to be when Dewa Indra defeated Mayadenawa. To commemorate his victory, he sacrificed a horse named Oncesrawa. The horse had previously run away and the Paneges from the Bedahulu kingdoms (the ancestors of the present-day Tenganan community) were told to look for it. The horse was found dead and Indra bequeathed the Paneges a piece of land as vast as the odor of the dead horse.

The smell of the horse's carcass acts as an imaginary marker of space. This sign is likened to a fortress that represents Dewa Indra's power. Myths are associated with a series of ritual reactivations to bring meaning and inspire behavior, thoughts, and actions in the souls and minds of every Tenganan citizen. The assumption is that myths have meanings and they inspire behaviors that are vital for life (Bowles 1989; Lévi-Strauss 1978). Eliade states that activating myths in the form of rituals is the same as enabling meanings or behaviors that are useful for life, either concerning the higher forces of nature or relationships with other humans (Eliade 2012; Studstill 2000).

The Dewa Indra myth is kept alive in Tenganan, where some people define it as purely imaginary, but others understand it as a living entity that communicates valuable teachings. In the daily life of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community, inhabitants describe their actions by referencing several narratives that indicate Indra's power. Everyday and work-related activities can always be understood in relation to the myth. For example, when villagers participate in the *pandan war*—a yearly, ritual combat held in Tenganan—almost all residents stated that this was a way to worship Dewa Indra, as a figure who had made a sacrifice for the sake of all humanity.



Audiovisual sample 12.1

Bertarung Untuk Dewa (Fight for God), a short documentary (6:28) on ritual life in Tenganan. Directed by Citra Aryandari, 2009, http://www.citraaryandari.com/?page_id=41.

As can be observed in the *pandan war*, Dewa Indra is highly revered by the society of Tenganan Pegringsingan. This is due to the position Dewa Indra holds as the origin of the rules and the source of the power of the Tenganan Pegringsingan community over generations. As a primordial image, Dewa Indra has the potential to compel the inhabitants of Tenganan Pegringsingan to carry out rituals and religious practices. The *pandan war* ritual is understood by the community of Tenganan Pegringsingan as the

symbol of the struggle between *dharma* and *adharma*, where *dharma* stands for goodness and moral order, whereas *adharma* is the opposite, or lack of *dharma*.

The experience of seeing and recording

Once a year, in the morning at the end of the largest ritual festival, Tenganan Pegringsingan holds the *nyajah* ceremony, where the whole village is filled with smoke that carries the appetizing aroma of satay and roast pork. Throughout the village, youths prepare the food, as many guests will be present in the village for the closing of the month-long ritual festival. The guests of honor look different from the Tenganan community and indeed from most Balinese inhabitants. These guests come from the village of Budakeling, which is located approximately 4.5 miles from Tenganan Pegringsingan. Budakeling is a village in Bali where the population consists of Hindus from the Brahmin caste who practice a local form of Hinduism heavily influenced by Buddhism and who are historically related to Tenganan Pegringsingan. When the guests arrive and sit for their meal, the elders of Tenganan Pegringsingan begin the event. The most important part of the morning banquet is the reading of the ancient *prasi* (palm leaves manuscripts). Even though the Gamelan Sêlonding is not present, those of us familiar with the cultural prohibitions of Tenganan Pegringsingan do not dare to record this beautiful moment. I prefer to come back every year to just hear the recitation.

I once asked Ida Bagus Buda, a Brahmin from the village of Budakeling in charge of reading the *prasi*, which story he chose to chant, and he told me he had selected to sing from the Book of Sotasoma, together with Wayan Mudhita, a ninety-year-old Tenganan Pegringsingan resident. There was no specific reason why that fragment had been chosen. He said the *prasi* is still intact and well maintained in Tenganan Pegringsingan (see also Santoso 1974; Zoetmulder 1971). The Book of Sotasoma contains a Buddhist theme and it depicts a conflict between a just prince and a man-eating king. As seen above, the mythical origin of Tenganan Pegringsingan recounts how the unjust King Mayadenawa was defeated by Dewa Indra, and this has parallels with Sotasoma's narrative. This narrative also links Tenganan Pegringsingan to Budakeling, as well as to the story of Mpu Kuturan, who united all sects in Bali to turn towards the Hindu religion.

Reading the Sutasoma Book written in *prasi* is an interesting event to study. The presence of guests to close the ritual celebration of Dewa Indra

ended with the reading of a book that narrated a story similar to their central myth. The presence of others and outsiders can signify that the ritual has ended; it also means that the Tenganan Pegringsingan community is back to being part of the wider society. The Gamelan Sélonding no longer played in this celebration; on that closing day, instead, it was the chanting of the Sotasoma Book, originally from Java, that sounded solemn.

My interest in the *prasi* readings led me to return every year. Finally, at one meeting, I asked Ida Bagus Buda for permission to record the recitations and this request was granted. On the morning of July 3, 2019, at the residence of Ida Bagus Buda in Budakeling Karangasem, I recorded him chanting songs from the books, including the Book of Sotasoma, the Song of Tantri and the Story of the Prophet (*Hikayat Nabi*).



Audio sample 12.2

Prasi recitation of Ida Bagus Buda, 2019, https://youtu.be/yR4_shxXSGk.

The Sotasoma Book owned by Ida Bagus Buda is in a different format than the one at Tenganan Pegringsingan. His copies of the Book of Sotasoma and Song of Tantri are printed on paper and only the Story of the Prophet is still in *prasi*. During the recording process, I asked Ida Bagus Buda to repeat his chants several times until I was able to record what I wanted in terms of sound quality and clarity. Although I obtained what I had hoped for, I realized when playing back the recording that it evoked a different feeling from the performance I witnessed in Tenganan Pegringsingan. The complexity of the performance in Tenganan Pegringsingan is etched into my memory and it has gradually accrued meaning over time for me, as I have experienced it over many years. However, the recording I made on a cell phone might become necessary data later, when I will need to note down or analyze the recording.

In the process of recording, I did not feel awkward approaching a local cultural expert, perhaps because we are both Indonesians. Even though we have different cultures and languages, we can communicate easily through the national language. Ethnomusicologist Jaap Kunst reportedly played an instrument before asking in exchange to a group of locals to play music for his recordings. When making a recording in Kampung Jopu Flores on July 5, 1930, Kunst first played the violin and sang Dutch folk songs before

asking a music group from Jopu to play for him (Kunst 1949). After the musicians from Jopu played their music, they finally agreed to be recorded and compensated with cigarettes, snacks, necklaces, pigs, and goats. This anecdote highlights that there is nothing “natural” about a recording process, as it always entails negotiations and power relationships.

While traveling in Eastern Indonesia, including Bali, compatriots assume that they can take recordings without requesting explicit permission during village events. However, recordings outside of these events require a different approach. When seeking permission to make a recording outside of village ceremonies, it is customary to offer local palm wine (*tuak*) and tobacco to establish rapport with people that one is not acquainted with. Often, this is accompanied by an invitation to share a meal. It can be said that when strangers come and share a meal as a family, a conducive relationship has been established.

When musicians in a community, who usually play for village events, get paid to play as an independent group, this undoubtedly becomes a very different kind of performance. When playing for village ceremonies and rituals, there is a shared sense of the communal value of the performance. This is compromised by the introduction of financial compensation, which indicates a different type of power relations.

Comparing performances

Around June or July every year, Bali holds the Bali Arts Festival (*Pesta Kesenian Bali*, PKB), which began in 1979. Every year while visiting Tenganan Pegringsingan, I take some time to witness a variety of events at PKB. In 2008, I first saw the opening parade of the festival, which was very lively. Streets in the business district of Bali’s capital Denpasar looked busy and crowded. I followed several PKB events at the Denpasar Art Centre. One afternoon I watched an *arja* dance-drama performance and then saw a *baleganjur* competition on a large indoor stage. *Baleganjur* is a Balinese gamelan ensemble played by an itinerant group to accompany traditional ceremonies. I was impressed by this performance at PKB since it was different from what I usually saw on the streets.

This *baleganjur*, which was presented as a competition on a large stage, looked different because it was clearly well-rehearsed, as could be seen from the costumes and lighting, as well as the inclusion of storylines. The creativity of the players was tested through a series of playing styles that are interesting for the audience. However, the following year my impression

changed. I saw a lot of repetition, which I had not expected as a spectator. I was looking forward to a different arrangement from the previous year. In many performances, I noticed similarities and a lack of creativity. I then tried to understand my own dissatisfaction—why did I feel this way about this performance, but not about the Tenganan Pegringsingan recitation which is the same every year? When one is a spectator in a commodified cultural performance, one seeks newness, but this is not the case in a ritual, where innovation is deemed to reduce the meaning of the ritual itself.

On a different occasion, I had conversations with another cultural expert in Bali, Made Sidia. I asked him about the development of Balinese artists' creativity, in relation to my thoughts on the *baleganjur* competitions at the Denpasar Art Centre, which, according to my observations, had not developed over time. A world-renowned *dhalang* (puppet master) from Gianyar, Made Sidia, told me that in each *baleganjur* competition, some rules must be observed by the participants; for example, the duration and the way the instruments are used. Besides these rules, he also noted how technological devices, which enable audiovisual recording, create references for future music groups that will seek to imitate these recordings. The winning *baleganjur* performance thus became a reference with its musical and visual elements now copied by others. During the competitions, both the organizers and the audience record the performances with professional equipment, as well as with cell phones. The recordings are then distributed via YouTube, enabling wide exposure and imitation.

The 1928 Bali Archives (Herbst 2019) include records of Balinese art competitions. In 1928, Bali—now in the Republic of Indonesia—was part of the Dutch East Indies, as the Balinese kingdoms had been conquered entirely in 1908. The system of traditional rule had collapsed. The practice of *puputan*—mass ritual suicides—signaled the collapse of an empire, and provided the royalty with a noble way to liberate their souls (Adams 1992).

Adrian Vickers quotes Schulte Nordholt, who in turns quotes from the Dutch East Indies commander (Vickers 1987):

[T]he Dutch diverted the center of their power to Denpasar. One morning on September 20, the King and his family, with thousands of fully armed followers, dressed in white and ready to die in battle, marched, marched, and prepared to confront the Dutch invaders. One by one, the warlords raged to the front lines, lunging at the enemy as if his body was immune to enemy bullets. The Dutch fired their weapons at “women who take up arms, spears or krisses while carrying their children,” which then “surrender fearlessly advancing towards the opposing forces and face

death”.... Surrender is not an option: “When we were trying to disarm them, the number of victims on our side has actually increased. Those who survived were forced to surrender but to no avail.” The King and his family and his followers continued to move forward, never to retreat, to kill themselves while to crush the Dutch troops that were within their reach. Later the Dutch tried to cover the number of fatalities, while the number of casualties on the Dutch side was reasonably mild; the death toll from the Balinese reached more than 1000 people.

Some experts suspect that the Balinese art explosion occurred after the fall of the Bali kingdoms. The rise of creative enterprises in the arts at that time was a way of healing the traumatic wounds opened by social upheaval and colonial occupation. The collapse of royal power and wealth led to the decentralization of art, away from royal centers and into local social units known as *banjar*. *Puput* means “end” but also a new beginning.

The year 1920 was a crucial time for the development of gamelan and singing in Bali because, at that time, there was a renewal in the arts, marked by the emergence of *kebyar* as a dominant new style in Balinese gamelan and dance. The gamelan groups demanded that the bronze-smiths, or *krawang pandé*, smelted the old gamelan instruments into new forms. The intense and ongoing competition between villages and regions stimulated young composers to develop a variety of innovative works and impressive techniques. Even in the early 1930s, McPhee quoted a composer, I Wayan Lotring: “Ké-Wěh! It’s hard to compose! Sometimes I can’t sleep well for days thinking about new work. That was mind-boggling. To the point of entering into a dream. Thin hair, I think about it” (McPhee 1966).

The intense competition gave rise to a desire not to lose. This triggered a common, but secret, practice of changing the work of one’s rivals and making it one’s own. In the early days of *kebyar*—possibly since the early 1900s—groups even sent spies to climb trees around the training grounds of rivals in the hope of “stealing” their work, so they could know their latest creations before they entered a contest. Intense competition also took place between long-established rivals, as happened in the neighboring villages of Kedaton and Bengkel, where artistic feuds spilled into the realm of politics, beauty, and even the use of sorcery. Although competition ignites the spirit of creativity, Bali’s art world has also developed as a result of close collaborations between artists from different villages and regions.

The explosion of artistic creativity in Bali at that time garnered international attention, and representatives from the German record companies Odeon and Beka visited Bali in August 1928 to expand the scope of their

recordings. They recorded traditional Balinese music in the hope that these records could be consumed by the local community. The LP labels were printed in Malay and some were even written in the Balinese script. The ambitious plan to develop the local market ultimately failed due to the limited interest of the Balinese people in the new and expensive technology, mainly because they could easily witness various performances first-hand, as they were performed every day in thousands of temples and houses throughout the island (McPhee 1966).

Due to this failure, one third of the Odeon and Beka recordings made their way to Europe and the United States. The famous music expert Erich M. von Hornbostel included five of the 98 phonograph records in his 1979 collection *Music of the Orient*. This collection introduced Indonesian music for the first time globally, both to the general public and to ethnomusicologists (Heins 1982).

Wayan Dibia, an internationally renowned professor at the Indonesian School of the Arts in Denpasar (ISI Denpasar), told me how music recording developed in Bali after colonisation. The presence of the national radio station RRI in the 1950s made the Balinese people aware of a range of arts that were recorded and broadcast. Nearly all of the RRI programs in Bali broadcast cultural performances, which was part of the government's anti-Western campaign at that time. Although radio is the leading source of entertainment for the Balinese people, daily performances are still full of visitors. But people still claim that the live performances are better than what is heard on the radio. Wayan Dibia said that some performing arts were lost because the artists were unable to meet the community's demands for greater creativity. In that case, the Balinese will prefer to listen to radio when live performances do not provide innovation or novelty.

Configuring the journey

The story fragments and fieldwork notes providing the basis for what I have written are but subjective reflections that open up many interesting issues. Bali, which has a very complex cultural life, is a reference on how modernity is present in a society that is attached to rituals perceived as sacred. Balinese society recognizes three concepts of performance based on their sacredness and spatiality. A performance known as *wali* is considered sacred if it is part of the rites and held in the center of the temple; another type of performance that accompanies the rituals is called *bebali* and it is often referred to as semi-ritual or semi-sacred. There are also entertaining

performances for the public outside the temple called *bali-balian*. Tenganan Pegringsingan as a space given by Dewa Indra can be considered as a sacred space parallel to the main center of the temple, hence as a *wali*, where the myth of Dewa Indra's power comes from storytellers driven by the flames of Tenganan Pegringsingan's fantasies. Dewa Indra's strength acts as a fortress preserving spiritual life in Tenganan Pegringsingan. Daily actions reiterate the power of the myth. Conversely, the myth allows people to explore meaning in daily actions and provides them a more expansive view of life as connected to a larger cosmos.

In the broader contemporary realm, performance becomes a medium for spreading myths. Myths are not only present as narratives but they are also explored in other forms. It is not only cultural custodians who carry out the transformation, but the audience also participates in the reproduction of the myths. This reproduction comes in several forms, which continue and contest the meaning of the myths. This dynamic keeps the myths alive and in constant transformation. In Tenganan Pegringsingan, myths act like guardians who are unable to penetrate the waves of modernity marked by new technologies.

The rituals preserved in Tenganan Pegringsingan produce religious sounds that are recorded unconsciously in collective memory. This memory forms archetypes that shape sound and visual images. These images, in turn, encourage specific actions that are guided by myths. The chanting of *prasi* at the *nyajah* ceremony is not considered a sacred activity even though it is held in Tenganan Pegringsingan. The presence of others—the guests from Budakeling village—is considered a sign that the sacred rites have ended. However, with a respectful attitude towards the ritual space, I chose not to record the events with digital technological media; rather, I relied on recurring memories of experiences that could be recalled at any time. At a later point, I managed to collect a recording of *prasi* recitation in the village of Budakeling for ethnomusicological purposes, and outside of ritual contexts, as my predecessors did. Likewise, in PKB, the recording is done for documentation purposes, which can be used as a reference in the creative process, although it does not always lead to the production of new work. The stage of PKB is considered a secular space and everybody is allowed to make recordings.

Performances in Bali are tied to the concept of space. The Tenganan community is concerned with maintaining the purity of the village space by forbidding recording of the ritual event. The prohibition to record also preserves the ritual's purported sacrality in the face of Bali's massive tourism. Is this evidence that the human-divine relationship does not

need technological mediation? Or is this evidence that divine mediations lose efficacy if captured and reproduced by technological devices? Does it mean that digital technologies for sound recording are understood along pre-existing theological considerations about purity and pollution? Or is it implied that by prohibiting recordings the ritual space becomes even more sacred, with a jealously protected element of secrecy and irreproducibility? More research in the complex performative heritage and sonic ideologies of the multilayered Balinese society will help unravel such questions.

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13 Amplified Waves

The Politics of Religious Sound in Indonesia and Beyond

David Henley

Abstract

This chapter explores the nexus of religious sound and social conflict in multiethnic Indonesia. It analyzes recent controversy over mosque loudspeakers, including the case of a non-Muslim woman who was imprisoned in 2018 for “religious defamation” after complaining about noise from her local mosque. This event was bound up with a broader contest between groups favoring a greater role for Islam in the public domain, and groups upholding the principle of religious neutrality on which Indonesia’s quasi-secular state is based. The essay articulates a close parallel between popular hostility to *critics* of Islamic noise in Indonesia, and popular hostility to *makers* of Islamic noise in Western countries, both of which can be understood as expressions of nativistic, majoritarian identity politics.

Keywords: mosque, *adhan*, social conflict, Islam, noise, identity politics

Sound is a very public thing. It carries over long distances and around corners, and is perceived via organs which, unlike eyes, cannot be closed or averted to avoid it. Sonic space is hard to privatize: generally speaking, either everybody hears a given sound within a given radius of its origin, or nobody does. Partly because it is so public, sound has a special role in religious practice. The idea that religious truth must be *heard*, and that religious faith is the response of believers to a *call*, is important in both Islam and Christianity. But for those who do not wish to hear it, sound is noise, an intrusion from which there is no easy escape. Not everybody is Muslim or Christian, and nobody is both, and even among Muslims and Christians, opinions vary as to what the texts or principles of their respective

traditions have to say about the appropriate volume, duration, and type of religious sound. The boundary between religious sound and religious noise is therefore an intrinsically sensitive issue, prone to cause controversy and conflict. And because religion is often a key element of ethnicity and other forms of collective identity, conflicts over religious noise can be both symptoms and causes of broader conflicts within society.

This chapter explores the nexus of religious sound and social conflict in the multiethnic nation of Indonesia. It analyzes recent controversy over the use of loudspeakers by Indonesian mosques, including the events which led in 2018 to the imprisonment for “religious defamation” of a non-Muslim ethnic Chinese woman who had complained about noise from her local mosque. These events were bound up with a broad contest at national level between groups that would see Islam play a more central role in the public and political domain, and groups upholding the principle of religious inclusivity and neutrality on which Indonesia’s quasi-secular state is based. In their bid for hegemony, the Islamizing forces have whipped up righteous indignation at critics of mosque noise, whom they portray as enemies of Islam. To understand the paradoxical combination of aggression and defensiveness that underlies this impulse, it is important to appreciate both the extreme tolerance of loud sounds that most Indonesians display daily, and the fact that since 2012, mosque noise has been the target of a campaign of criticism in government circles which itself has unmistakably political overtones. The essay concludes by suggesting that there is a close parallel between popular hostility to *critics* of Islamic noise in Indonesia, and popular hostility to *makers* of Islamic noise in Western countries. Both are forms of “acoustic nativism” inspired by majoritarian identity politics.

Noisy piety and quiet resentment: Amplifying religion, 1960–2012

Amplified religious sound has quite a long history in Southeast Asia. As early as 1930, one mosque in Surakarta (Solo) was already equipped with an internal microphone and speakers for use by the *khatib* during Friday services (Pijper 1977, 28–29). In 1936, what was apparently the world’s first experiment with electrical amplification of the call to prayer (*azan*) took place on Indonesia’s doorstep in Singapore, where the custodians of the Sultan Mosque, having concluded that “the noises of a modern city demand an accompanying increase in the power of the muezzin’s voice,” installed a General Electric Company sound system featuring external as

well as internal loudspeakers. Mounted 27 meters above the ground on two of the mosque's minarets, the external speakers could be heard 400 meters away across the city streets (*Straits Times* 1936). Within Indonesia, however, amplification of the *azan* does not seem to have begun until much later, partly because the technology involved remained costly. In Jakarta it grew common only in the 1960s when more affordable equipment became available, principally from the Japanese manufacturer TOA (Hendaru Tri Hanggoro 2018). Thanks to burgeoning demand from mosques, Indonesia quickly became a key market for the TOA Corporation, which established its first overseas production facility in Jakarta in 1975 (TOA n.d.). Today, the name of this brand is still widely used by Indonesians as a generic term for loudspeakers.

In addition to the cost factor, conservative attitudes on the part of mosque officials and congregations also played a role in the slow initial spread of electronic amplification. In Singapore, the original 1936 experiment with loudspeakers reportedly met with opposition from some worshippers who found it "incongruous with the romantic conception of the holy cities of the East, where the sonorous tones of the muezzin ... are as old as recorded history" (*Straits Times* 1936). In the 1950s, the introduction of loudspeakers to announce the *azan* to pilgrims in Saudi Arabia sparked serious debate across the Muslim world as to whether this innovation violated the letter or spirit of the scriptures; many *ulama* were long critical of it (Khan 2011, 573–7). As late as 1977, one major Jakarta mosque still resisted using loudspeakers on the grounds that these "did not exist at the time of the prophet" (Hendaru Tri Hanggoro 2018).

Secular authorities, meanwhile, became concerned about the possible negative impact of amplified Islamic sound on members of the general public, and in particular on non-Muslims. Beginning in 1974, as part of a broader noise abatement campaign, sound systems in newly built Singaporean mosques were restricted to internal use, while existing mosques were required to reduce the volume of their external speakers (Lee 1999, 89–91). In 1978 the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs also issued a set of guidelines for the use of loudspeakers by mosques, the text of which included a general consideration of the potential disbenefits of the practice.

Negative consequences of the use of external loudspeakers by mosques and prayer houses include the disturbance that may be caused to people who are resting, or praying, in their own homes This is particularly apparent in large towns where members of the public no longer have

similar working hours The diversity of urban populations also means that those living in the vicinity of mosques often include adherents of other religions, and even citizens of other countries All this obliges the Islamic community to seek a wise balance between proclaiming the greatness of Islam, and keeping up good neighborly relations¹

The rules prescribed to safeguard such “good neighborly relations” in this ordinance were quite restrictive: external loudspeakers were only to be used for the call to prayer (*azan*) five times each day, and for Quran readings lasting at most fifteen minutes immediately preceding each dawn (*subuh*) call to prayer, and five minutes preceding the other *azan*.

The 1978 regulation, however, was never widely complied with and in subsequent years became mostly a dead letter, to the point that by the twenty-first century its existence was almost forgotten (Republika Online 2015). One reason for this was that as a directive of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, it carried no legal sanctions. A more important factor, however, was the great change that took place in the late twentieth century in the spirit of Indonesian Islam, and in its relations with other religions and with the state. In the 1970s, Islam, despite its commanding demographic position (then as now, close to 90 percent of the population called itself Muslim), was in general culturally unassertive, politically weak, and to some extent distrusted by government. In the 1980s, influenced by parallel developments elsewhere in the Muslim world, it underwent a resurgence, Islamic awareness and observance intensifying markedly across the country (Ricklefs 2012, 204–21). Beginning in 1990, this process received official sanction as the Suharto regime cautiously began to embrace the Islamic revival (Vatikiotis 1998, 131–7). If the visible signature of Islam’s new assertiveness was the increasing popularity among women of the *jilbab* or head covering, its audible signature, “the voice of aggressive orthodoxy,” was the unrestrained blare of religious sound (Beatty 2009, 293). In the 1970s, amplified Islamic sound had been a matter of public debate, on which critical letters were published in newspapers (Hendaru Tri Hanggoro 2018). But by the first decade of the twenty-first century it had become a taboo subject, with non-Muslims in particular reluctant to make any comment on it.

1 “Lampiran instruksi Direktorat Jenderal Bimbingan Masyarakat Islam, nomor: Kep/D/101/1978, tanggal: 17 juli 1978, tentang tuntunan penggunaan pengeras suara di masjid, langgar dan mushalla,” 123–4, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB4lc74PFDHGHTUILOHVwTTdpCWm/edit> (accessed June 16, 2020).



Figure 13.1 The dome and loudspeakers of Al Furqon Mosque in Boyolali, Central Java. May 26, 2022. Photographed by Cahyady HP. Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/boyolali-central-java-indonesiamay-26-2022-2162738083>

Out in the open: A national debate, 2012–2016

Against this background of religious cacophony and critical silence, it came as a surprise to many when in April 2012, Indonesia's then vice president, Boediono, rose to the challenge implicit in the noise. In a speech to a national congress of the Council of Indonesian Mosques (Dewan Masjid Indonesia, DMI), Boediono, himself a Muslim, made a tactful but unambiguous request for the volume to be turned down.

The Council ... might also discuss ... regulating the use of loudspeakers by mosques. Now we all fully understand that the call to prayer is a sacred call upon the Islamic community to fulfill its duty to pray. Nevertheless, there are perhaps others besides myself who feel that the sound of the *azan* touches our hearts more deeply when it is heard softly in the distance than when it is too loud, too jolting, and too close to our ears.²

I have described elsewhere the intense and protracted public discussion which this comment by Boediono set loose (Henley 2019, 238–46). Proponents of moderation or regulation, suddenly more numerous than their previous

2 From the text of the full speech reproduced in detikNews (2012).

silence had suggested, cited passages from the Quran itself supporting quietness in religious observance. They also called for understanding and compassion toward others, and pointed out that intrusive Islamic noise is at odds with the peaceful image which Indonesian Muslims are usually concerned to project. Defenders of the unmoderated status quo, for their part, expressed a conviction that to admonish people to piety and prayerfulness is good for them whether they like the loudness of the message or not. Some also insisted that Quranic recitations in particular convey direct supernatural benefits, in the form of *pahala* or divine merit, on all those who hear them. Most of all, however, defenders of the status quo warned of the *danger* which any attempt to restrict Islamic noise would pose to the harmony and unity of Indonesian society. Whereas in the 1970s there had been a concern in official quarters that noise from mosques might annoy their non-Muslim neighbors, 40 years later there was much more fear of alienating the forces of Islamic resurgence than of offending minority sensibilities.

Not surprisingly, this fear of awakening dangerous passions in the orthodox Islamic community was particularly acute among non-Muslims. Christians, Hindus, and other religious minorities therefore continued to stay largely outside the public debate, much of which was conducted on the basis of Islamic sensibilities and doctrine. Non-Muslim criticism of Islamic noise was restricted to the private sphere. Elsewhere, the vast majority of non-Muslims maintained a very studied silence on the topic. The year 2016 was to bring a dramatic demonstration of why it was prudent for them to do so.

Things get ugly: Blame and blasphemy, 2016–2020

On July 22, 2016, in the small port town of Tanjung Balai in North Sumatra, a non-Muslim ethnic Chinese woman named Meliana (also written: Meiliana) asked her neighbor Kasini, a street trader whose father was a member of the managing committee of the mosque across the road from Meliana's home, to point out to her father that the volume of the mosque's loudspeakers was uncomfortably loud, and to request that it be turned down. On July 29, Kasini's father and other mosque officials made a visit to Meliana and her family during which Meliana allegedly talked in a disdainful way about the *azan*. Despite attempts at clarification and apology by Meliana and her husband later the same day, a rumor immediately spread through the town that "the Chinese" were attempting to "forbid the call to prayer" in Tanjung Balai. The result was a night of violent rioting (July 29–30, 2016) in which

14 Chinese temples and Buddhist religious buildings, as well as Meliana's home and many motor vehicles, were damaged or destroyed (Mulyartono et al. 2017; Suryadinata 2019).

This incident was not quite the first in which arguments over religious noise had resulted in open conflict. In 2010, an American homestay owner on the island of Lombok had been sentenced to five months in jail after disconnecting the loudspeaker of a nearby mosque during a prayer reading (Sigit Purnomo 2010). Angry villagers reported him to the police who charged him with the crime of "religious defamation," of which more below (Amnesty International 2014, 37). In December 2012, an elderly inhabitant of Banda Aceh, capital of the famously religious Sumatran province of Aceh, lodged a legal complaint against local mosque officials and municipal leaders for disturbing him before dawn with pre-recorded religious sermons and Quran readings (Sumaterakita 2014). Having recently suffered a heart attack, he was under medical advice to get plenty of sleep, and the basis of the lawsuit appears to have been personal injury (LamuriOnline 2013; Kusumasari 2012; Tri Jata Ayu Pramesti 2014). A wave of public anger and intimidation, including death threats, quickly forced him to withdraw his case, although subsequently the volume of the loudspeakers in question was apparently turned down (Winarno 2013). In July 2015, finally, the use of loudspeakers by Muslims celebrating the feast of Idul Fitri in the vicinity of an international Christian meeting was one factor involved in an outbreak of intercommunal violence, leaving one dead and many injured, in the district of Tolikara in Indonesian Papua (IPAC 2016, 9–10).

The Tanjung Balai riot of 2016, however, was to have a greater national impact than any of these previous incidents, thrusting the issue of religious noise into the heart of a national upsurge in identity politics. Accused by witnesses of "insulting, denigrating, and expressing hatred toward the practice of Islamic worship," Meliana was detained and in June 2017 her case was brought to a provincial court (Beranda Apa Berita 2018). Ultimately, on August 21, 2018, she was found guilty under Article 156 of the Indonesian criminal code of *penistaan agama* or religious defamation, often translated in English as "blasphemy," and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, a verdict subsequently upheld on appeal by the national Supreme Court (BBC Indonesia 2019). This was a harsher punishment than those received by any of the rioters, just eight of whom had been given prison sentences of between one and three months (Billiocta 2017).

In the almost two years it took to reach its final outcome, the Meliana case attracted massive national publicity and was commented on at the highest levels, often in surprisingly critical vein. Although president Joko

Widodo (Jokowi) retained a careful neutrality, vice president Jusuf Kalla made clear his view that to request that the volume of a very loud *azan* be reduced is a normal and legitimate thing to do, and Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Saifuddin even offered to act as an “expert witness” in Meliana’s defense (VOA 2018). A spokesman for Indonesia’s largest single Muslim (and religious) organization, Nahdatul Ulama (NU), agreed that such a request could not be regarded as blasphemous or insulting to Islam (Sigit Pinardi 2018). With the support of the Council of Indonesian Mosques (DMI), the Ministry of Religious Affairs used its network of provincial and district offices to draw the attention of mosque officials and other Muslim leaders to the existing mosque and prayer house noise restrictions from 1978 (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia 2018; Republika Online 2018). An online public petition to “Free Meliana!” immediately following her initial conviction attracted more than 50,000 signatures within a day of its launch (Mardiastuti 2018). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch identified Meliana as a prisoner of conscience, calling upon the Indonesian government to release her and revoke the law under which she had been convicted (Amnesty International 2018; Harsono 2018).

Within Indonesia, however, plenty of voices were also raised in support of the multiple decisions against Meliana, and not only out of a desire to respect due legal process. The national MUI (Council of Islamic Scholars), for instance, appealed for public understanding of the verdict, insisting that she had been found guilty not because she complained about the volume of the *azan*, but because she did so “using sarcastic sentences and words, and in a mocking tone” (Bimo Wiwoho 2018a). The parliamentary leader of the Islamist political party Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS, Prosperous Justice Party) went further by suggesting that Meliana had in fact insulted Islam simply by broaching the subject of the call to prayer in a critical way at all, given its importance in the Islamic tradition (Parastiti Kharisma Putri 2018). In digital fora, reactions were stronger still. One author opened his online polemic on the topic with the *hadith* (authoritative Islamic tradition) that records the Prophet Muhammad as saying: “When the *azan* is pronounced, Satan takes to his heels and farts during his flight in order not to hear it” (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 608).

By quoting this *hadith* I do not actually mean to say that Meliana ... is a devil No, that woman of Chinese descent and Buddhist religion is just a human being whose selfishness at that moment was such that she forgot herself, amid the social climate that has been building up in the last ten or twenty years. It is as if people born on the soil of Indonesia,

with its hundreds of millions of Muslim inhabitants, are struck with amnesia ... that they suddenly feel so disturbed by the cadences of the *azan*. (Imam Prasetyo 2018)

Meliana, Ahok, and Indonesia's new politics of intolerance

The explicit reference here to Chinese ethnicity as well as non-Muslim religion signals a break with public debates over religious sound in the period before 2016, which non-Muslims had by and large managed to stay out of. The early years of democratization following the fall of the Suharto regime (1998) had broadly speaking been a time of improvement in the historically fraught relations between indigenous (*pribumi*) Indonesians and the country's ethnic Chinese minority, most of which is both non-Muslim, and economically better off than the national average (Hoon 2008; Reid 2009). From 2016, however, Sino-*pribumi* relations tended to deteriorate once more in a process of politicization of which the Meliana affair became part.

Meilana's long-drawn out prosecution ran parallel to a controversial electoral and legal campaign, drawing openly on divisive ethnic and religious sentiments, which was fought in the same period against incumbent Jakarta governor Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama). An ethnic Chinese Christian, Ahok had been elected as deputy governor alongside Jokowi in 2012, becoming governor himself when Jokowi was chosen as president in 2014. Always unpopular with a part of the Jakarta electorate, Ahok was accused of blasphemy in October 2016 over a comment he had made about a passage in the Quran. In April 2017, at least partly because of that accusation, he failed in his bid to be re-elected as governor, and in the following month he was convicted of religious defamation by a state court and sentenced to two years in prison (Madinier 2018). There is strong evidence that Meliana's prosecution was inspired and influenced by the campaign against Ahok (Mulyartono et al. 2017, 15; Suryadinata 2019, 5–6). Both were victims of democratic Indonesia's resurgent identity politics, sentenced under a religious defamation law which, although dating from 1965, was seldom applied until after the fall of Suharto, when it began to be invoked more and more often in connection with election campaigns of various kinds (Garnesia 2018).

The extreme degree to which the issue of religious sound had become politicized was underlined in April 2018 when Sukmawati Sukarnoputri, a daughter of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, was reported to the police for blasphemy simply for reading, at (of all things) a fashion event, a

nationalistic poem she had written, critical of Islamic cultural influences, in which the sound of Javanese *kidung* poetry was described as “sweeter than the tones of your *azan*” (CNN Indonesia 2018). Sukmawati’s sister Megawati leads the establishment political party PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) to which Jokowi and Ahok also belong, and her accusers were members of Islamist opposition groups (Peterson 2018).

Understanding acoustic aggression: Piety embattled

Alongside the obvious element of political opportunism and manipulation, there is no doubt that today, even more than before 2016, any criticism of amplified Islamic sound also generates genuine popular indignation and resentment in Indonesia. Despite the ascendancy which “orthodox” forms of Islam have enjoyed in the religious life of the country since the 1990s, reactions to such criticism in orthodox circles still recall sociologist W.F. Wertheim’s classic twentieth-century characterization of Indonesian Muslims as a “majority with minority mentality” (Wertheim 1980). A commentary on the Tanjung Balai riot, posted after the arrest of some of the rioters, but before the indictment of Meliana, illustrates this sentiment of collective victimization.

The latest news is that a Chinese, Meliana, objects to the *azan*. An attempt is made to mediate in a friendly way, but she persists. Unrest breaks out. She, ironically, remains free, treated only as a witness, while 19 suspects are arrested, all Muslims. ... The way the law is applied smells of double standards, reflecting the injustice with which Indonesian Muslims are treated. (Konfrontasi 2016)

In the same spirit, the renewed attempt made by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2018 to “socialize” the 1978 mosque noise regulation was met in some quarters with indignation at the fact that the guidelines applied only to Islamic institutions, and not to all religious sound, including that of churches and temples (Tempo 2018). It also gave rise to inflammatory rumors that the true intention was to ban the call to prayer altogether (Bimo Wiwoho 2018b).

As in the past, some of the reasons for the sensitivity of the issue are directly rooted in doctrine and faith. “May God forgive me, sir,” wrote one indignant commentator in response to a social media posting by a Muslim

politician questioning whether it was right to disturb sleeping babies and sick people with pre-dawn broadcasts during Ramadan, “but the sounds coming from those mosque loudspeakers are admonitions from GOD—glory be to Him—to do the right thing in the fasting month by taking breakfast before beginning the fast!!!”³ In this mindset the supremacy of religious noise in the human world mirrors the inescapable power of God himself, which is not something to be questioned or complained about. But there are other factors here which have to do specifically with the contemporary Indonesian social and political context, and which are worth enumerating in order to better understand the emotions which the issue of Islamic noise arouses in many Muslim Indonesians.

A first important thing to note is that in Indonesia, a loud sonic environment is a normal and accepted fact of most people’s lives. Indonesian towns and cities are already extremely noisy even without amplified religious sound, and their inhabitants display what often strikes outsiders as an amazing indifference to the permanent din of traffic noise, pop music, street vendors, and construction work. While not all such sounds are actually enjoyed, there is a culturally engrained tendency to tolerate and even appreciate an acoustic backdrop which contributes to an atmosphere that is *ramai*, “lively.” Anthropologist Freek Colombijn, in a pioneering 2007 survey of the soundscape of Indonesian cities, went so far as to conclude that noise “is not merely tolerated as an inevitable fact of life, it really is not perceived as an issue at all” (2007, 268).

Of course, this tolerance is not just a cultural given; it varies from individual to individual and on average has probably grown, in step with urban noise itself, since the 1970s. And by citing Colombijn’s observation here, I do not mean to deny that individuals like Meliana experience ear-splitting mosque loudspeaker broadcasts as a real problem. Nevertheless, the ubiquity and normalization of noise in urban Indonesia, and in the lives of urban Indonesians from cradle to grave, do mean that complaints about it, whether private or public, are rare. This in turn has the inevitable consequence that objectors to specifically *religious* noise are readily suspected of ulterior motives. And indeed, as far as recent public statements critical of excessive Islamic noise are concerned, there is strong circumstantial evidence that some ulterior motives really are involved.

Amplified religious sound, as we saw in the introductory part of this essay, is by no means a new phenomenon in Indonesia, and neither is private resentment of it. But for decades a powerful taboo rested in the public sphere

3 Tweet by “Farhanbehann,” May 24, 2018, reproduced in BBC Indonesia (2018).

on the issue of Islamic noise, and critics kept their feelings to themselves. To my knowledge there were no public discussions about mosque noise, and indeed no high-profile noise complaints by individual Indonesians, until Boediono broached the subject in April 2012. It is significant that when it came, the debate was initiated not from the grassroots by NGOs, journalists, or bloggers, but from the top down by a government supportive of cultural pluralism and “moderate” establishment Islam.

The sudden prominence of the Islamic noise issue after 2012 must be understood in the context of a long struggle between those political forces which would have Islam play a more encompassing role in government as well as society, and those which would prefer to halt that trend. In the democratic era since 1998, the elected governments—including those of double-term presidents Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) and Joko Widodo (since 2014)—have clearly stood on the pluralist or “nationalist” side (a reference to the pluralistic founding principles of the Indonesian republic) of this great ideological divide. Jokowi in particular has been wary of Islamist opposition, and it is no coincidence that 2015 saw the launch, with presidential support, of the controversial concept of *Islam Nusantara*—loosely translated, “Islam with Indonesian characteristics”—as a formal alternative to the so-called *Islam Arab* or “Arab Islam” which many pluralists see as driving the orthodox advance (Affan 2015).

The current balance of the struggle is that despite the defeat and criminalization of Ahok in Jakarta, broadly speaking the pluralists are winning. Jokowi’s strategy has been to ally himself ever more closely with the moderate Islamic establishment represented by Nahdlatul Ulama, taming some of its more doctrinaire tendencies in the process, while increasingly treating oppositional Islamic organizations, including nonviolent ones, as enemies of the state (Aspinall and Mietzner 2019; IPAC 2019). Small wonder, then, that his government’s impulse to restrict religious noise is understood by some not as a defense of individual and minority rights, but as a form of intolerance and an abuse of political power. Certainly it does not form part of any broader official campaign to tackle the general problem of noise pollution, awareness of which, as we have seen, is very limited in Indonesia (Wan Ulfa Nur Zuhra 2017).

Strange parallels: Acoustic nativism in the Netherlands

Aspects of the ongoing controversy over Islamic noise in Indonesia can be illuminated by a brief comparison with the equivalent controversy in the

Netherlands. The specifically religious aspect of the Indonesian debate, in terms of a struggle between puritan and liberal interpretations of the same religious tradition, has no real parallel in any contemporary Western country. But two other underlying forces in that debate, majoritarianism and nativism, are all too familiar from a European perspective. Although only a minority of Indonesian Muslims are zealous defenders of Islamic noise, they are convinced that they speak for that group as a whole, and for the large national majority which it represents, in opposition to minorities which are partly of foreign (Chinese) origin, and which are supported by treacherous multiculturalists among indigenous Muslims. In the Netherlands, conversely, it is those opposing Islamic noise who appeal to majoritarian and nativistic sentiments, sentiments which color the thinking of established elites as well as radical populists.

Fewer than one in ten Dutch mosques amplify the call to prayer, and never in the early morning or late evening (Tamimi Arab 2017, 9). This is not because they are not allowed to; their right to do so is constitutionally protected. But they are aware of the hostile reaction it evokes among non-Muslim Dutch people, and so most of them practice self-censorship in order to avoid trouble. In the words of a scholar at the Islamic University of Rotterdam, speaking in 2012:

We must not force people to recognize us. That will cause pain and resistance. ... We could base ourselves on the law and demand our legal rights, but there is at the same time a social reality, the fact that people are not used to the *azan*. One must take this into account and behave pragmatically. (Quoted in Tamimi Arab 2017, 39)

The first Amsterdam mosque to amplify the call to prayer—just once a week for three minutes—did so only in November 2019; and not before the mayor of the city had criticized the initiative as “unnecessary and outdated,” the majority of city councilors agreed with her, and the first attempt to broadcast the *azan* had been sabotaged by vandals who cut the loudspeaker cable (Van Poppe 2019; Bontjes 2019).

I have lamented the lack of discussion of civic rights in the Indonesian debate. It would be gratifying to think that public opposition to Islamic “noise” in the Netherlands, although clearly not respectful of legally guaranteed freedoms, is at least inspired by some other kind of civic virtue: for instance, by a conviction that makers of religious noise are unjustly imposing their own beliefs on others, or infringing a universal right to peace and quiet. This explanation is called into question, however, by the

fact that certain other types of religious noise are not only tolerated, but celebrated, by secular public opinion.

When in 2019 an expatriate living in Amsterdam complained to the municipality that the bells of the Westertoren, a historic church tower, were keeping him awake at night, there was indignation not only among other Amsterdam residents who were fond of the quarter-hourly bell sounds, but also in media and intellectual circles. “How dare he? Those bells have rung out since the Golden Age,” bristled historian René Cuperus. “This new Amsterdammer needs to move somewhere else fast, and his residence status should be reconsidered in the light of his lack of respect for his host country” (quoted in Van de Crommert 2019). Journalist Patrick Meershoek, writing in the Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool*, was equally indignant, suggesting sarcastically that newcomers should be required to take a “crash course on Amsterdam for beginners: in this city ... we listen to the clock that has told us for centuries what time it is” (Meershoek 2019).

People who complain about the bells of the Westertoren are not sent to prison; there is a difference between an integration course and a blasphemy charge. Nevertheless, the anger that such complaints evoke has the same roots as the anger of some Indonesian Muslims against people who complain about the volume of the *azan*. The real basis for the sentiments heard in Europe in relation to Islamic sounds is not civic but ethnocultural, or nativistic. If we understand the Indonesian conflict over mosque noise as the expression of an ethnocultural tension too, then the difference in causality between the Dutch hostility to Islamic noise and the Indonesian hostility to *opponents* of Islamic noise disappears. In Indonesia, where noise is the norm, it is the critics of Islamic noise who are perceived as offending the values of the indigenous majority. In the Netherlands, where a selective quietness is the norm, it is the *makers* of Islamic noise who are perceived as offending the native majority and threatening its supremacy in the public sphere.

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14 A Theory of Ritual Polyphony in Chinese Religious Performances

Kenneth Dean

Abstract

This chapter articulates a theory of ritual polyphony in Chinese religions. The first and second sections explore the role of sound and embodiment in early Chinese discussions of music and dance and the rhythmic movements of the cosmos. The third section introduces Chinese medieval Daoist discussions of the cosmic whistling of Daoist recluses, and the role of cosmogenic sonic energies embedded within Sanskrit syllables and spells within Daoist scriptures and liturgy. The final section opens up a larger perspective on sonic forces in contemporary local communal ritual events in Southeast China and Southeast Asia, in which both Daoist and earlier conceptions of the role of music and dance play a role.

Keywords: Daoism, music in Chinese religions, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Lingbao

Introduction

This essay outlines a textual-historical background and a theory of ritual polyphony within contemporary local communal ritual events of Southeast China. The first section introduces the idea of ontogenetic material flows of sound energy found in Daoist discussions of the “pipes of heaven” in the *Zhuangzi* (late 4th century BCE). The second section turns to Confucian thinker Xunzi’s (c. 310–235 BCE) ideas on the role of music as unifying the participants while at the same time key aspects of the ritual differentiate people in terms of rank and power. The third section explores Buddhist ideas of Indian origin on the cosmogenic role of sonic energies embedded within Sanskrit syllables and spells found in the Lingbao (“Supernatural Treasure”) Daoist scriptures and liturgies of the 4th century CE. The final

section explores how Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist conceptions of the role of sound all enter into forms of ritual polyphony within current ritual events in Southeast China.

Early Daoist theories of the ontogenetic powers of sound

You hear the pipes of men, don't you, but not yet the pipes of Earth; the pipes of Earth, but not yet the pipes of Heaven."

"I venture to ask the secret of it."

"That hugest of clumps of soil [the earth] blows out breath, by name the 'wind'. Better if it were never to start up, for whenever it does ten thousand hollow places burst out howling, and don't tell me you have never heard how the hubbub swells! The recesses in mountain forests, the hollows that pit great trees a hundred spans round, are like nostrils, like mouths, like ears, like sockets, like bowls, like mortars, like pools, like puddles. Hooting, hissing, sniffing, sucking, mumbling, moaning, whistling, wailing, the winds ahead sing out AAAH!, the winds behind answer EEEH!. Breezes strike up a tiny chorus, the whirlwind a mighty chorus. Then the gale has passed, all the hollows empty, and don't tell me you have never seen how the quivering slows and settles!

"The pipes of Earth, these are the various hollows; the pipes of men, these are rows of [bamboo] tubes. Let me ask about the pipes of Heaven?"

"Who is it that puffs out the myriad which are never the same, who in their self-ending is sealing them up, in the self-choosing is impelling the force into them."

Chuang-tzu, The Inner Chapters, Ch. 2: Qiwulun (The sorting which evens things out) (translated in Graham 1982)

Zhuangzi's idea of the pipes of heaven is similar to the concept of sonic flux developed by Cox (2018). Cox builds on theories of sound and musical creativity in Nietzsche and Deleuze, to generate a materialist theory of sound. He defines sonic flux as "a notion of sound as an immemorial material flow to which human expressions contribute but that precedes and exceeds those expressions" (Cox 2018, 2). Deleuze commented that music has the capacity to "render non-sonorous forces sonorous." He also wrote that "one can conceive of a continuous acoustic flow that traverses the world and that even encompasses silence. A musician is someone who samples (*prélève*) something from this flow." (quoted in Cox 2018, 12). Cox (2018, 20) concludes that "sound is immanent, differential, and ever in flux, and the forces and

intensities it presents are themselves the results of contingent historical processes.” The concept of sonic flux underlies the discussion below of ritual rhythm, tempo, and polyphony in the local communal ritual events of Southeast China.

Passages from the chapters on music and ritual in the *Xunzi* (3rd century BCE)

Music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition. So, people cannot be without music; if they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape in movement. The way of human beings is such that changes in the motions of their nature are completely contained in these sounds and movements. So, people cannot be without joy, and their joy cannot be without shape, but if it takes shape and does not accord with the Way, then there will inevitably be chaos.... Sounds and music enter into people deeply and transform people quickly. Therefore, the former kings carefully made for these things a proper pattern.... *Music unites, and ritual differentiates. Together the combination of ritual and music governs the human heart....* To penetrate to the root and encompass all change—this is the essential disposition of music.

Xunzi, Ch. 20 on *Music* (translated in Hutton 2015, 218–21, with modifications and emphasized passages)

Confucian thinker Xunzi (c. 310–235 BCE) suggests that music is an inexorable expression of joyous feelings, but that the expression of these feelings was carefully channeled by the sage kings into ritual forms to prevent chaos and depravity. In his chapter on *Ritual*, Xunzi states:

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and yi in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking.... Thus, ritual is a means of nurture. The gentleman not only obtains its nurturing, but also loves its differentiations. What is meant by “differentiations”? I say: It is for noble and lowly to

have their proper ranking, for elder and youth to have their proper distance, and for poor and rich, humble and eminent each to have their proper weights.

Xunzi, Ch. 19, *Ritual* (in Hutton 2015, 201)

Here ritual is designed to intervene at a very basic level, regulating needs and desires, and circulating limited goods in a nurturing, controlled process of exchange. This exchange produces value, as seen in hierarchical status, and in the status of the sage:

Ritual takes resources and goods as its implements. It takes noble and lowly as its patterns. It takes abundance and scarcity as its differentiations. It takes elevating some and lowering others as its essentials. When patterning and order are made bountiful, and the dispositions and implements are limited, this is the most elevated state of ritual.... And so, being generous is due to the accumulated richness of ritual. Being great is due to the vastness of ritual. Being lofty is due to the elevated nature of ritual. Being enlightened is due to the exhaustive nature of ritual.

Xunzi, *Ritual* (in Hutton 2015, 202)

One can find here a general theory of ritual that can be analyzed in terms of Gilles Deleuze's three syntheses. Deleuze (1990) outlined three syntheses underlying the formation of the perceiving subject within a pre-existing field of forces, namely the connective, disjunctive, and conjunctive syntheses. This is a reworking of Kantian syntheses without calling for a transcendental principle of apperception to link them all into a subjective unity. Deleuze first applied the syntheses to the process of a child learning a language, first stringing together sounds (mama, dada), then contracting and inventing words, and then linking these words in series—all before learning to speak. In his work with Guattari, Deleuze expanded the application of the three syntheses—applying them to a wide range of processes of becoming and desiring production (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Smith et al. 2018). Thomas Lamarre (2018) interprets the three syntheses broadly as follows: the connective synthesis is the production of production; the disjunctive synthesis is the production of distribution; the conjunctive synthesis is the production of consumption.

This reading enables us to apply the syntheses to the analysis of ritual processes outlined by Xunzi. These processes consist of:

- 1) a connective synthesis—a bringing together of bodies, resources and goods—the implements of ritual—the production of production;

2) a disjunctive synthesis—the selective distribution of scarce or abundant, noble or lowly goods and statuses in a process of differentiating and patterning—the production of distribution; and

3) a conjunctive synthesis in the establishment of value within hierarchical status through the lowering or elevating of individuals within the ritual through the graded consumption of goods and resources, thereby generating prestige and confirming sagely enlightenment—a production of consumption.

Three levels of ritual are outlined, each working these syntheses in different ways. The sage works across all three levels, as the moving center of the gathering and distribution of goods, ranks, and values. His generosity is based in the “accumulated richness of ritual” (its excess of goods, which he distributes). His greatness is due to the vastness of ritual. The elevated and exhaustive nature of ritual is the source of his lofty enlightenment. Ritual is the reworking of individual needs and social ordering in the production of hierarchical value and the elevation of the sage to “a regulating centre (the Dao), abstracted from the ritual function of the Ruler” (Palmer 2019). Xunzi reminds us that music and dance are embodiments of ritual process, and that ritual process is modeled on and actualizes cosmic processes.

The generation of value in the ritual process is a theme explored by David Graeber in his re-analysis of Mauss’s famous essay on the gift (Graeber 2001). However, here one needs to be cautious not to take Xunzi at face value. Insightful as Xunzi’s theories of ritual, music, and dance may be, we need to recall that he is presenting an idealized image of a sage king designing ritual and music that reflects, produces, and imposes cosmic order—“a model of and model for” the cosmos in Geertz’s (1987) terminology, and one that calls for the kind of historical examination of embodied power relations within symbols proposed by Asad (2009). Cosmo-political social order and the centrality of the sage are the key values, and these can only be achieved by the sage situated at the center, redistributing the goods and resources gathered into the ritual event. Xunzi’s writings need to be seen in historical context, and in the context of an evolving political system, where elements of earlier ritual practices tied to local sacred places and seasonal fertility rites were being overwritten with rituals centered on the rising power of feudal lords, regional kings, and emerging hegemonies. The former village-based ritual orders imply different sets of core values—fertility, health, prosperity—generative series that are not necessarily constrained within a system of give and take (or giving away in order to attain value, fame, centrality) leading to hierarchical rankings. The rise of a unified empire

would fundamentally transform ritual forms, and indeed all social relations, by adding in everywhere an overriding principle of political hierarchical relations linked to an imperial power center.

Buddho-Daoist theories of Brahmanic sound energy and cosmogenesis: Elements of sonic theology within Daoist ritual practices

The “Most Excellent and Mysterious Book of the Supernatural Treasure that Saves Innumerable Human Beings” (*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing*, c. 400) is the very first scripture included in the Daoist Canon. The *Book of Salvation* (as it is commonly called) is divided into three parts. The first section tells of the manifestation of the key elements of the scripture as the universe was forming. It was bestowed on the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Commencement (*Yuanshi tianzun*). He then recited the scripture ten times, causing the entire pantheon of the gods and saints of the Ten Directions (the eight points of the compass, the zenith and the nadir), and all living beings, to gather before him. At that moment, the Heavenly Worthy suspended a pearl, the size of a small grain, in the void. All the myriad gods and beings entered into it, and the earth turned flat (symbolizing peace and equality). The recitation of the revelations returns the universe to its original and pure state. All living beings are saved, as are all their ancestors. The universe is started anew, and all evils are eliminated.

What he recited is provided in part two, namely the “secretly rhyming sounds of the hidden names of the great gods of the Thirty-two Heavens and of all other divine beings.” The recitation of these secret names activates this entire pantheon, including the Demon Kings and other celestial guardians. The third part of the scripture reveals that these secret names are formed from the “Innumerable Sounds of the Secret Language of the Great Brahman (energy) of the Heavens.” These Sanskrit sound vibrations generate the cosmos. The scripture then provides stanzas on the creation of the universe, named the Marvelous Writings of the Primordial Beginning.

The scripture provides some instructions on its use: the scripture is transmitted to “me”—that is to the Dao and to the followers of the Dao—and it should be recited in a Daoist oratory after the Daoist ritual master has “Opened the Incense Burner.” This refers to a technique for summoning the gods within the microcosmic body of the Daoist master to ascend into the heavens to contact their counterparts in the macrocosm. This procedure

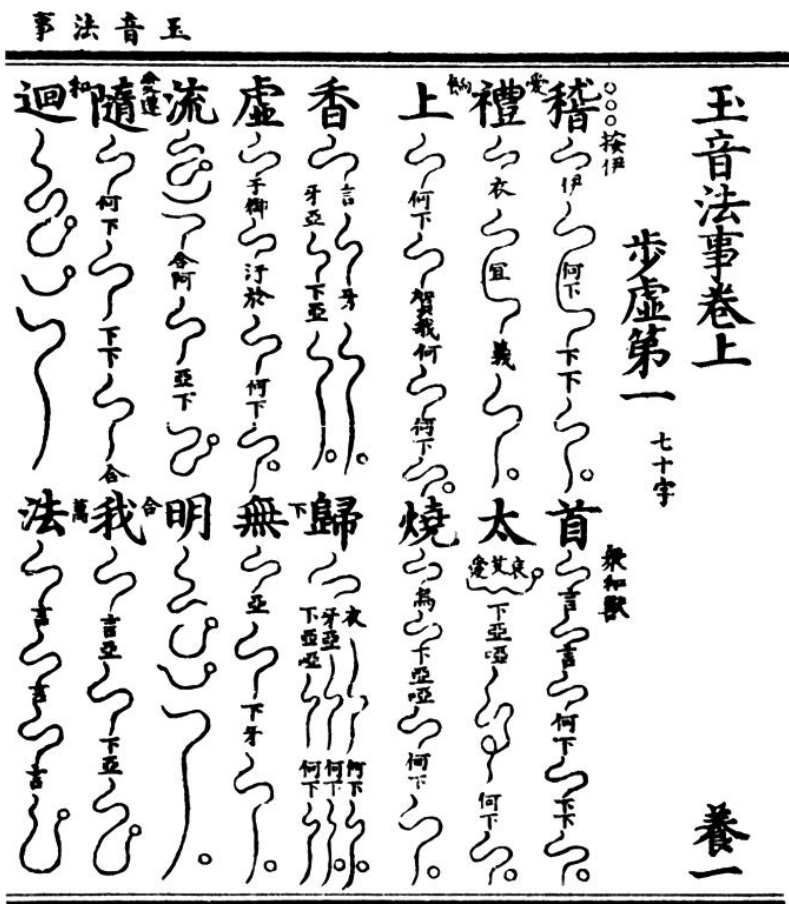


Figure 14.1 Neumatic musical score for Daoist hymns composed by Emperor Song Huizong (1082–1135 CE) from the *Yuyin Fashi* (*Precious Tones of Liturgy*, TT607) by Schipper and Verellen (2004). Source: Digital archive Kanseki Repository (kanripo.org/edition/ZTDZ/KR5b0312/001#txt).

dates back to the early Heavenly Master movement in Sichuan (144–200 CE) that marked the founding of religious Daoism. Thus this scripture combines elements of early Daoism with Indian inspired theories of the origins of the cosmos in Sanskrit Brahman energy vibrations or frequencies. These frequencies are reworked into secret names and cosmogonic hymns, whose recitation restarts the universe.

The Lingbao scriptures developed the fundamental liturgical framework of Daoism by combining this visual tour and dynamic model of the gods within the body with Buddhist chanting, the intoning of mantras and the singing of hymns:

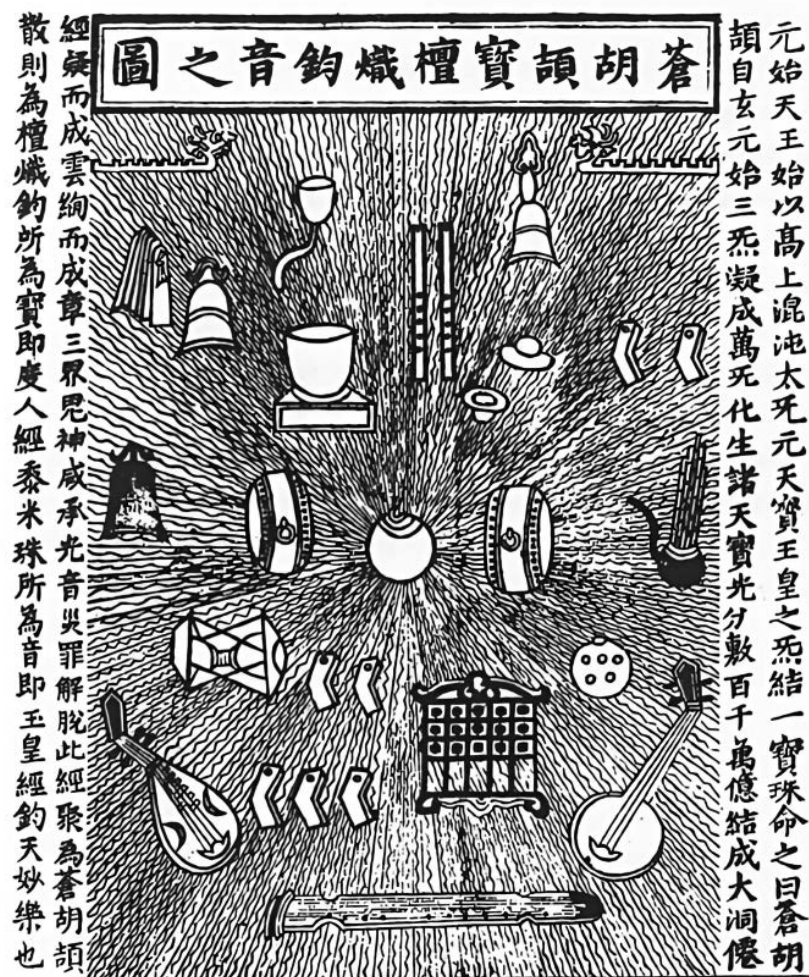


Figure 14.2 Instruments for Heavenly Music, from the *Commentary on the Great Cavern Scripture* according to *Wenchang*, TT 103, 1.22b, by Wei Qi (1309), reproduced in Schipper and Verellen (2004, 709). Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The *Duren jing* has been immensely important in Taoist liturgy. It borrows from Buddhism not only many elements of form, vocabulary, and style, but also its very function as a text to be recited repeatedly for salvific ends, a function taken from the practice of Indian sutra-reading and mantra-recitation. The prescribed tenfold psalmody has provided the framework for innumerable ritual performances. The esoteric aspect of the “sacred sounds and hidden names” has, moreover, inspired a great many mystical elaborations. (Schipper and Verellen 2004, 79)

The intoning of Sanskrit syllables and the singing of cosmogenic hymns remained a central feature of Daoist liturgy up to the present day. Both medieval Chinese Buddhist and Daoist ritual elaborated procedures involving the incantation of spells (Strickmann 2002; Copp 2014). Spells were recited during the writing of talismans and during the performance of rites of sacrifice and of exorcism. Daoist liturgy continued to evolve over the next 1500 years. Nevertheless, central aspects of Daoist ritual process outlined above remain unchanged up to the current day in many parts of China and in the Chinese diaspora. At its most basic structural level, the Daoist ritual process is a matter of sending out the master's microcosmic body gods to invite their counterparts, the macrocosmic deities, back to the altar: to host them and entertain them with music and operas, to announce the merit achieved, and then to send them off again.

Some of the earliest Chinese musical scores still extant are Emperor Song Huizong's (1082–1135 CE) neumatic scores of Daoist hymns that he composed included in the Daoist Canon. The *Wenchang Datongjing* (*The Great Cavern Scripture of Wenchang*) from 1309 provides a discussion of Daoist music and instrumentation. Other texts from this period return to the theory of Sanskrit frequencies that created the universe in elaborate commentaries to the *Book of Salvation*.

Contemporary Chinese local communal ritual events and the role of Daoist liturgy, complex soundscapes, and processes of embodiment

In the remaining part of this chapter, I would like to elaborate on some themes I have developed elsewhere in my account of local communal religion in Fujian, China. In these earlier essays,¹ I build upon my research in the Putian, Quanzhou and Zhangzhou region from 1984 to 2008 and I describe the ritual events of these communities as a “total social fact,” in the terms of Marcel Mauss.

In light of the dynamic contrasts between centralizing imperial or post-secular state power centers and local village ritual expression, we are clearly dealing with a long-lasting dialectic within Chinese culture. The reach of the state differed tremendously at various points in the imperial past, but it has extended into the villages in the 20th and 21st centuries, in the form of locally elected village leaders who are pre-confirmed by the

1 See Dean (1993; 1998); Dean and Zheng (2010).

CCP. Schools, postal services, clinics, and police forces are much closer to village life than in the past. The current party state is ideologically secular but maintains the imperial mandate of determining the orthodox from the heterodox “evil cults.” Burdened by Western categories of “official religion” (the five official patriotic religious associations are Buddhist, Daoist, Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant), the great majority of village ritual activity falls into a gray zone of unofficial but not necessarily heterodox behavior. As I will show, the central role of spirit mediums within village ritual in many parts of rural China remains highly problematic for this reason to the State. Despite mass campaigns to eradicate “the four olds” including local communal religion and lineage formations, in many parts of China these have survived and in some areas they have undergone a resurgence and a process of reinvention in response to current conditions. I have outlined the ways in which village ritual events negotiate the forces of modernity, the state and capitalism in a series of essays written with Thomas Lamarre (2003, 2007) and in a documentary film, *Bored in Heaven*, about ritual sensation during the Lantern Festival in Putian, Fujian, China (Dean 2010). Together with Zheng Zhenman, I fully documented the extent of village ritual and its religious infrastructure (2500 temples in 720 villages) in a 180 sq mi alluvial irrigated plain just beyond the limits of Putian city (Dean and Zheng 2010).

My research in this region over four decades has led me to see Daoist rites as just one element of a broader ritual sphere of activities, which were structured by multiple liturgical frameworks. For example, in addition to the Daoist liturgical framework, one finds the *Lisheng* (Master of Ritual) framework embodied in the work of temple specialists who instruct villagers on the correct selection of sacrificial objects (primarily different forms and denominations of spirit money) and specific food offerings for different categories of non-human spirits including gods, ghosts and ancestors. This framework is more individualistic (or family-oriented), featuring more direct and contractual relations to the gods (as pointed out by Hymes 2002), but it is nonetheless mediated by the ritual knowledge of the *Lisheng* or *Yanshi* (ritual banquet masters, as they are called in Putian).

In Putian, I have observed several large-scale ritual events in which Daoist ritual masters performed alongside and in parallel with Buddhist monks and/or Three in One Scripture Masters. The latter is a religious movement founded in the late Ming by Lin Zhao'en, combining Confucianism with Daoist inner alchemy and Buddhist meditation techniques, which later developed into a parallel and supplementary ritual tradition, borrowing from the liturgies of both Daoist and Buddhist ritual traditions (Dean 1998). The simultaneous parallel performance of very similar rites (such as the



Figure 14.3 Daoist masters dancing and singing during a ritual in Fujian, 1985. Author's image.

presentation of a memorial to the Heavens) complicates most theories of ritual process and presents a challenge to theories that presume one single overarching liturgical framework underlying an entire ritual event.

Each of these liturgical frameworks comes with its musical accompaniment. The Daoists, Buddhist and Three in One Scripture Masters all engage troupes of musicians, proficient in their distinctive liturgical musical traditions. The masters of ceremony ring bells and beat drums to welcome visiting delegations, or to alert the gods to a personal offering on the altar table. The temple committee hires opera troupes, brass bands, traditional *nanyin* (Southern Ballads) musical troupes, marionettists, puppet troupes, disco-dancing troupes, karaoke singers, and other acts to fill the temple courtyard with a multitude of sounds. This complex density of sound is proudly proclaimed to be very hot and noisy (*renao*). This is a variable soundscape pulling the attention of visitors and participants in many different directions at once. Loudspeaker systems attempt to cut through the noise, which can rise repeatedly to crescendo after crescendo.

Another issue that drew my attention was the role of spirit mediums within the unfolding, and multiple, ritual processes. At any point in the ritual event, a spirit medium may become possessed, and charge into the temple, speaking in the voice of a god, gesticulating and pointing with his sword, and dragging an entourage behind him. The medium may also accompany the gods who have been moved from the altar and placed on a sedan chair to be taken on a tour of every household in the village. This moving of the god's statue performs a phase shift in the virtual energetics contained within the

deity. The gods move from a metastable state into a vector of transformative energy, spreading blessing, prosperity, and progeny through the village. They also move into the body of the medium as an outside that forms a deeper interiority within the medium's body than that of the self itself.

The courtly, controlled movements and visualizations of the Daoist master contrast with the spasmodic jerky movements of the spirit medium. I think of them as being entangled in a magnetic bipolar field of forces, attracting flows of energy toward one or the other. These are also sonic fluxes, as different soundscapes clash and intermingle (Dean and Lamarre 2003; 2007).

I have referred to such ritual events as the in-folding of a virtual and continuously transforming syncretic ritual sphere (Dean 1998). In the case of Fujian, this syncretic ritual sphere has absorbed elements from Buddhist ritual, Daoist liturgy, Confucian sacrificial rituals, and spirit medium possession. The relative centrality and the consistency of the mix between these ritual traditions changes over time as their underlying institutions: Buddhist monasteries, popular god temples, ancestral halls, and local cult temples rise and fall in power. Each ritual event is thus a site in which one can find traces of all these ritual traditions merged into unique actualizations of the broader virtual syncretic ritual sphere.

This idea is based on Gilles Deleuze's account of the actualization of the virtual in his philosophy of becoming (Deleuze 1990; 1994). Kapferer (2005; 2010) takes up elements of Deleuze's account of the powers of the virtual in his essay on ritual dynamics. He points to ritual as a space for the slowing down of temporality that allows for ritual actions to affect the cosmos and re-empower, re-energize the virtual.

The virtual reality of ritual is a slowing down of the tempo of everyday life and a holding in abeyance or suspension some of the vital qualities of lived reality. This is what Deleuze and Guattari point to as the descent into reality of the virtual, as they employ the concept. I suggest that this is a critical quality of the virtuality of rite.... The virtual of rite is a means for engaging immediately with the very ontological ground of being. Indeed, I suggest (it engages) mechanically within the habitus so as to reconstruct, restore, or introduce radical new elements into the dynamic structurings of its possibility. The aesthetics, repetitions, careful detailing, slowing of tempo, shifting position of participants, recontextualizations, etc., are major means for readjusting the processes within life that, among many other things, permit life as it is lived to regain its uninterrupted flow. (Kapferer 2005, 84)

In Daoist ritual, time is slowed down and reversed in the visualization of the return to the undifferentiated by the principal Daoist Master. Then, time is accelerated as the immortal embryo is conceived through visualization, goes

through gestation within the body of the master, and then ascends into the Heavens as a pure realized being who reports on the community's sacrifices and aspirations and prayers for blessings. The entire universe is meanwhile being recreated through the slow rhythmic singing of the hymns of creation and the intoning of the Brahmic sonic energy of the secret names of the Thirty-two Heavens by the chief cantor. Simultaneously, completely different temporalities are realized by the spirit medium, who may jump from one dynasty to another out of historical sequence. The possession of a medium by (for example) the deity Guan Gong, who lived in the 3rd century CE, also shatters temporality and insists on the presence of the god in the here and now. Rituals have a rhythm and a tempo and are always accompanied by music: a drum sets the beat and the music rises to a crescendo in time with the sequence of the rites, embodying the process of carrying out the Dao on behalf of Heaven.

Multitude of sounds, multitude of liturgical frames: Polyphonic rites

These kinds of local communal religious performances can be described as forms of ritual polyphony. These celebrations juxtapose different sonic conceptions, from ontogenetic Daoist sonic flux to Confucian ideas of unity and order to Buddhist conceptions of powerful incantations, into a polyphonic performance. These ritual events draw villagers to the temple to celebrate the birthday of the local god, along with neighboring villagers eager to watch the musical and opera performances presented to the gods and to the villagers. They form complex soundscapes made up of multiple nodes of attraction. The ritual event captures all kinds of energies and powers, from the cosmological and ontogenetic forces described above, to the sonic mingling of brass marching bands, traditional performance troupes, marionette stages with live orchestras, opera stages with even larger orchestras, disco music and groups of women performing aerobic exercises, and stages from which everything from karaoke to Taiwanese ballads are belted out. Massive amounts of fireworks are exploded. The wall of sound (sonic flux) is overpowering and awe-inspiring.



Audiovisual sample 14.1

A procession returns to the courtyard filled with multiple musical troupes before a temple in Jiangkou Putian during Lantern Festival (first full moon of the Chinese calendar). Excerpt from Kenneth Dean, *Bored in Heaven: A Film about Ritual Sensation*, 2010.

The audiovisual sample included with this chapter provides an instance of this kind of sonic overload. The film clip from *Bored in Heaven* (Dean 2010) shows a group of gods, seated on sedan chairs (palanquins) carried by devotees, rushing into a crowded courtyard in front of a temple in Jiangkou, Putian, Fujian. Traditional all-female drum and cymbal ensembles and modern Western marching bands greet the gods who are also welcomed back by Puxian opera singers. Huge strings of firecrackers explode as the gods re-enter their temple.

During the Lantern Festival to mark the first full moon of the Chinese New Year, the gods of all 2500 temples of the irrigated alluvial Putian plain are carried around their neighborhoods. Their progress is marked by explosions of fireworks set off in front of household altars piled high with offerings and incense and placed in front of every home and shop in town. One can follow the progress of the gods around the Putian plain for several weeks by listening for exploding firecrackers and the many sounds of ritual celebratory music. These processions create musical refrains that sonically mark out territory (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Ch. 11).

Even larger processions of up to 90 villages converge at the highest order temple of the Jiangkou area, the Dongueguan (Temple of the Eastern Peak). During the procession, there is a grand Assembly of the Daoist Masters in this temple, made up of members of all five troupes of active Daoist ritual masters working in Jiangkou. They perform elaborate oratorios, including singing, instrumental music featuring *sona* (an oboe-like instrument), drumming, and dancing during Daoist Communal Offering rituals inside the temple and at times in the courtyard or on opera stage set facing the temple. Opera is performed night and day during these processions. We need to develop new theoretical tools to respond to the key role of the sonic overload in these complex events that include multiple liturgical frameworks. Polyphonic rituals draw in a diversity of people, food, and money, while redistributing values, statuses, and cosmic powers.

The three Deleuzian syntheses mentioned above can be applied to an analysis of contemporary ritual events as well as to Xun Zi's abstract account of ritual and music:

- 1) The connective synthesis underlies the gathering together of all the people and the gods, and multiple goods and resources, into the space of transformations—this is the production of production of the ritual event.
- 2) The disjunctive synthesis—the production of distribution—is found in the assignment of exclusive roles within the ritual—be they the community households, the temple committee, the visiting delegations, the Daoist master and his entourage, or the spirit mediums. The disjunctive

synthesis works through the distribution of the affective force of the powers unleashed by the Daoist priest, the spirit-medium, and the dephasing of the metastable powers of the gods. The distribution of powers is variable across the entire ritual event space, with some feeling overwhelming force (such as the medium and those he—sometimes she—impact directly) while others attempt to control and channel the flow of forces and transformations (of offerings and aspirations)—such as the Daoist or Buddhist or Three in One ritual masters. The onset of possession is a good place to explore the affective power of drumming and chanting, as discussed by Friedson (1996) and Kapferer (2005). But for most village participants, the distributive force of the event will depend on their specific needs, aspirations and affective states—they are praying for children or grandchildren, for good health or a cure from a mortal disease, for general prosperity and good luck, or seeking a directive about an imminent investment.

3) The conjunctive synthesis—the production of consumption—is the collective consumption of the event as it unfolds by all the participants. This is an idea of ritual for itself, in itself, expressing and consuming itself, even as it continuously differs from itself. This can be understood as generating, as a key value, processes of continuous collective experimentation, and group and individual self-differentiation.²

This interpretation contrasts sharply to Xunzi's vision of a sage at the empty center regulating the flow of goods and honors, creating cosmic order through the elaboration of modes of hierarchical encompassment. The co-existence of multiple liturgical frameworks instead creates a kind of polyphonic generation of multiple centers and values, which do not converge but continuously diverge into different series.³

This approach helps to consider the multiple dimensions of embodied and ensounded rituals. It recognizes that ritual events bring together a large number of participants, listeners, and onlookers, negotiating the forces of the state and the forces of capital. The forces of the ritual event are produced within

2 See the discussion of ritual elaboration and the formation of new ritual communities and individual ethical subjectivities in Dean (1998).

3 On divergent polyphony see *The Fold* (Deleuze 1992) and his comments on Bakhtin. This concept arises from my analysis of the interplay of multiple liturgical frameworks within ritual events of local Chinese communal religion (Dean 1998; Dean and Lamarre 2003, 2007), centering here on the role of sound within the sensorium of ritual experience. See Carrithers (2000) on a related concept of ritual polytropy. "I coined the word from the Greek poly, 'many', and tropos, 'turning', to capture the sense in which people turn toward many sources for their spiritual sustenance, hope, relief, or defence" (834). Chau (2011a; 2011b) argues that in Chinese ritual events the underlying motivation is to enhance efficacy by incorporating multiple ritual traditions.

the multiple liturgical frameworks of the coded acts of the ritual specialists and the spontaneous possession of the spirit medium. Energies and powers of the event are distributed unevenly across the range of participants, and the consumption of the event in its own performance has a transformative effect on the participants. Central to this polyphonic diversity is the sonic excess of these ritual events, generating endlessly divergent worlds.

Especially in China, where the scale and timing of every ritual has to be negotiated with the state, and every successfully completed ritual is a cause for celebration of local communal power, but even in Singapore, where rituals organized by local temples also have to negotiate with state regulatory agencies and respond to forces of capital and commercialization, the success of each ritual can only be determined by the range of affective qualities experienced by the participants. Whether deemed successful or failing to meet expectations, ritual events feed back into the virtual realm from which they unfold, re-energizing and reshaping the virtual. In Daoist thought, this is referred to as the contrast between *Xiantian* (Prior Heaven) and *Houtian* (Latter Heaven)—the primordial metastable virtual realm of pure power, and the endless and varied actualizations of it in reality. Only both realms are real, and inextricably entangled, each generating the other.

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15 The Ensoundments of the Materially Ethereal in Indigenous Riau (Sumatra)

Nathan Porath

Abstract

This chapter is focused on sounds associated with ethereal matter (*semanget*) and its embodied manifestation that vitalizes human, animal, and material physicality. I discuss the therapeutic sounds which are humanly generated to mobilize the materially ethereal to “repair bodies” in the Sakai shamanic healing rituals called *dikei*. The Orang Sakai lived on the edge of the Malay kingdom of Siak. Most Sakais are animist. *Dikei* is an ensounded performative event bringing ethereal beings and humans together for the purpose of healing and the reconstruction of boundaries between the human and ethereal dimensions. I suggest to explore this material in relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of double “turning away of face.”

Keywords: animism, shamanic healing, magic, performance, Orang Batin/Orang Suku Sakai

As sounds are produced from the clash of two objects against each other (Connor 2004), then movement is fundamental to the production of sounds. When the movement of things has an audible effect the movements are ensounded. Religious sounds are the ensoundments of movements associated with religion. Which sounds are defined as religious depends on how we define religion. I will contend, for the sake of this chapter, that religious phenomena have to involve an ontology that posits willfully ethereal beings, essences, and forces that are immanent but might also be transcendental. These ethereal beings are experienced as having or constituting powers that effect the physical and human world. Religious sounds are the ensoundments of these numinous beings and forces. Further, humanly produced

ensoundments of knowledge conceptually related in some way to an original numinous ensoundment are also religious sounds. A mantra produced at any given moment is powerful because it is the sound of the numinous being which produced it. These sounds physicalize an ethereally interreacting other or construct semiotic frames that are associated with ethereal or numinous realities.

Conceptually, sounds share a lot with religious or numinous phenomena. Sounds are like the wind on which numinous phenomena are imagined to travel and they are also evanescently boundless (Bull 2013). Sounds move into and bounce off of obstacles and seep through walls and other solids, liquids, and gases (Tausig 2019). As sound has a conceptually dual-natured physicality, which on the one hand is ephemeral and intangible and on the other sensually physical, it seems to be a phenomenon existing between a non-physical numinous and physical reality. Hence sounds tend to have a crucial communicative role to play in religious activity and experience. Numinous beings and objects are physicalized through communicative sounds. Their ethereal being and powers are brought forth, revealed, and actualized by communicative ensoundments. Religious sounds can penetrate deep into the visceral level of a person's being and can be intersensorially experienced from emotional depths. Although it is generally the case that humans hear sounds with the ears, Ingold has argued that it would be more accurate to say that people do not hear sounds but "hear in sound" (Ingold 2000). To say that people "hear in sound" allows us to extend the sensorial experience of sound beyond the conventional "five sense" understanding of perceptual experience. If people hear in sound, we can also say that people can "see" and "feel" in sound. Intersensorial experiences (Merriam 1964; Classen 1990; Feld 1996; Porath 2008; Porath 2019) of seeing and feeling in sound are an important contributor to the sense of numinous presences and religious experience (Craffert 2017; Freund 2009). The exceptional perceptual quality of sounds also has the power to move people to carry out acts within ritual frames (and outside of them) that would otherwise be avoided, such as mutilation and self-flagellation (Bautista 2019). The ontology of these ensoundments induces these acts. The religious values legitimate them. The ontologies of numinous beings do not have to be spiritually transcendent. They can be materially non-physical, yet present. Invisible beings, which are translated into English as spirits, are usually of this type. In animist traditions, such beings are immanent; they are not worshipped and neither are they necessarily a focus of devotion. How people conceive of the numinous and ethereal beings determines how they conceive their ensoundments (Porath 2008). Some sounds are heard acousmatically,

providing an anomalous experience that might need to be interpreted in religious and numinous terms (Tuzin 1984). These include, for example, the creaking sound of sudden movement; the strange out-of-place chirping of a bird; and even the atmospheric-breaking “t t t” sound of a gecko indicating inauspiciousness. An ethereal being (person) moves with the winds through the trees. The rustling leaves are the ensoundment of its moving presence. Bird and other animal sounds can be indicative of numinous communication (Remme 2016, 144; Duile 2019). Spirits ensound their presence through animals by momentarily possessing their physical bodies. Similarly, within a spirit-possession ritual framework, a spirit ensounds itself by taking over the human medium's body and uses it to express movements characteristically peculiar to the spirit's being (Ellen 2019). In these instances, numinous ensoundments are acoustic icons of a presence making itself and its wishes known though the vocal cords of the possessed.

In other spirit-focused ritual contexts, such as shamanic healing rituals, shamans see these people with their inner eye in a shifted state of awareness and travel with them. These people's ethereal presence is actualized by the construction of poetic verbal portraits of them. These poetic portraits are not the voices of the spirit ensounding itself through a physical being (the medium) but are the ensoundments of knowledge of how to actualize their silent presence. They are representations of the ethereals and their movements in an unseen dimension. The ensounded portraits are artfully constructed through songs or prayer. These word-sound extemporizations align the listener's imagination with the presence of the numinous actualized in the performance of the ritual.

In the rest of this essay I will focus on some of the ensoundments of Sakai shamanic healing rituals called *dikei*. The Orang Sakai (formally called Orang Batin) lived on the edge of the Malay kingdom of Siak. Since the 1960s many have converted to Islam, while a minority converted to Christianity. Most Sakais are animist. Central to their ontology of ethereal beings is a ritual during which shamans conduct healing sessions for those afflicted with illness. The aim of the ritual is to call on these people called ‘*antu de'o*’ to provide medicine and aid in healing. These ‘*antu de'o*’ help to maintain boundaries which were violated by a lesser ethereal person's mischief or by human misconduct which violated a prohibition that broke the boundaries between the ethereal beings' and the human physical realm.

During *dikei* the shaman sings and dances to the beat of a drum. The drumming is said to be the path by which the *kemantat* (shaman) travels to the spirit dimension. The songs call on the ethereal people to provide medicine and aid in healing. *Dikei* is an ensounded performative event

bringing ethereal beings and humans together for the purpose of healing and the reconstruction of boundaries between the human and ethereal dimensions.

The two dimensions of this world

In recent years there has been a novel working out of the classic concept of animism. In what is now called by some the New Animism, spirits and souls form part of a complex ontology which is characterized by subject-to-subject relational awareness (Bird-David 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Ingold 2000; Tsintjilonis 2004; Descola 2013; Århem and Sprenger 2016). The environment is, within this ontology, regarded as teeming with life—full animated subjects, human and non-human, which can engage each other's subjectivities or interiorities (Descola 2006; 2013). In this ontology, illnesses can be caused by interiorities merging.

Within Sakai animist ontology there are two dimensions or realities immanent in this world. These are the human physical dimension (*alap manusio*) which encompasses the realm of animals, and *alap lain* (the other dimension) or *alap 'antu* (spirit ethereal dimension). Sakais attribute personhood to the inhabitants of the invisible dimension who, although intangible, are also owners of consumer goods, which exist in their realm as ethereal objects. Their ethereal dimension is also silent. Theirs is a dimension of refined substances in contrast to the human dimension which is substantially coarse. However, even in the human physical dimension, all things have an element of ethereal interiority to a greater or lesser degree called *semanget*.¹ In humans *semanget* is not only the vital principle in the coarse body but the conditioner of a person's conscious awareness. As part of the human body it is tied down to its coarseness but is of the same ethereal substance that makes up spirits. It is easily manipulated or dislodged by ethereal people who engage humans through it. Embodied *semanget* is also conceived of as having a desire to be free from the body. Humans dream and what they see in their dreams are the experiences of their *semanget* gaining a measure of freedom and traveling (*semanget jalan*). Because *semanget* is partly prone to wander it is vulnerable and can be approached by an ethereal being. Outside of ritual such interactions are dangerous and are the cause of illness, madness, and even death. Hence, ethereal people

1 For detailed discussions see Skeat (1900), Cuisinier (1956), Endicott (1970), Leertrouwer (1977), Benjamin (1979), Gulam-Sarwar (1991), and Porath (2015).

are not people one wants to meet. In fact, unless one is a shaman, one tries to keep away from them. But *semanget* can innocently find it difficult to keep away as substance-type is attracted to substance-type.

Sounds that manipulate embodied *semanget*

Embodied *semanget* exists between the human and spirit dimension. It balances between the two. But parts of it long for the spirit dimension and can be attracted to it. *Semanget* is discussed with the metaphor of a timid bird that has taken flight. Just like a bird takes flight at any sudden movement, *semanget* can take flight from the body, leaving it weak or altering its mode of ordinary awareness. People can fall into trance and delirious states and lose awareness of their physical surroundings.

Because of *semanget*'s timidity and skittishness, sounds can make it fly, leaving the person unconscious for a while.² The startle sound is an ensoundment producing an unexpected external stimulus intruding on the body's habituated conscious mode. The startle sound is hard, coarse, and violating like a rude and dangerous adversary or intruder (*misuh*). The way Sakais respond to the startle sound suggests it is an ensoundment of a sudden situational antagonism which threatens embodied *semanget* (*semanget tekojit*). It is feared that by being shocked it can take flight (*semanget to'bak*), leaving the person's body unconscious. Older Sakais jump back in fright and exclaim "I fear that my *semanget* will take flight" (*takui semanget to'bak*). Young able-bodied men who have knowledge of martial arts (*ponca silat*, Mal. *Panca Silat*) respond to the startle sound through a martial art movement. On being startled, such men immediately raise an arm and a leg in a martial art style of defense and let out a sudden shout. However, healers also use startle sounds as a sound therapy to re-embody *semanget*. When a person is in a trance-like or delirious empty state, healers might yell at them or hold the person's head and command their entranced *semanget* to return (*semenget balik*). Sometimes when a shaman ends a ritual but is still in a dazed state of consciousness, the drummer walks to him and circles the drum over his head, and then bangs it first next to one ear and then next to the other. The shaman jumps back and reassures everyone that he (his *semanget*) has "already returned" (*olah balik*).

In all these instances parts of *semanget* have departed from the body but are still close to it. The symptoms are a dazed consciousness or an empty

2 See also Roseman (1993) for the Temiars of Malaysia.

entrancement. The danger is that in this situation *semanget* hovers on the threshold of the ethereal dimension and the physical one and is vulnerable to an ethereal person engaging it and leading it. Sounds are therefore a tool to frighten timid *semanget* back into the body and the individual back to consciousness and awareness.

Manipulating the ethereal realm with power-imbued word-sounds

Ethereal force can cause an effect in the physical dimension through its own ethereal unseen realities. This power is activated through the recitations of certain words called *monto* (Mal. Mantra/spells). Tambiah (1968) referred to this as the “magical power of words.” Some authors have argued that word-sounds do not have power in themselves but only if they are imbricated with an extra-physicality drawn from numinous realities and for which they serve as a conduit of symbolic action (Mauss 1972; Ellen 1993, 9–10, Schefold 2001; Buijs 2016, Porath 2007). The magical power of words lies in that they are verbal sounds imbricated with an original source of power drawn from the ethereal dimension and these can move and activate “essences.” Among Sakais, this power is called *ilmu batin* (inner knowledge)³ which is efficacious knowledge that emanates from the liver-heart. *Ilmu* (magical knowledge) is a form of medicine which works through *semanget*. It is a power obtained through a period of apprenticeship to another medicine (wo)man. During this time the novice learns by heart the *monto* which the human teacher gives to him or her. As this memorized recitation is occurring the ethereal teacher appears to the disciple in dreams in the form of an old man, a young woman (*gadih*), and other archetypal images and gives him/her gifts such as a special objects or food. The *ilmu* inheres in the images of gifts given. The word-sounds of *monto* allow the practitioner to call up the power for its intended effect in the non-physical dimension. Not only does *ilmu* affect one’s own embodied *semanget* as well as that of others, but it is also used to ward off the willfulness of ethereal beings or to persuade them into action. It also can give the reciter the power to manage ethereal forces in the unseen dimension which emanate from powerful locations in the environment. The word-sounds are supposed to recall and ensound the power of *ilmu batin* from the spell-caster’s inner being. *Monto* word-sounds

3 Batin (the term, not the content) is the same word used to refer to esoteric and gnostic Islam (from the Arabic *bāṭin*); *dikei* is a word adopted from the Sufi ceremony of *zikir* or *dhikr*. These adoptions might have occurred during the 20th century.

are recited during *dikei* to maintain boundaries between *semanget* and ethereal people and essences.

Dikei ensoundments of healing

Functionally, religious sounds construct the ritual framework for the ensoundment of a cosmological system through music, chanting and prayer (Mabbett 1993; Harris and Norton 2002, 2). The acoustic scaffoldings of ritual also aid in dissolving people into a larger social body generating intimate relationships and upholding a phatic communion between humans and between humans and the numinous (Duile 2019; Ellen 2019). Rituals bring people together through structured actions and usually actualize the presences of ethereal beings through an interplay of sounds and silences, inducing inter-sensorial changes and altered state of awareness in participants (Remme 2018).

Dikei is a shamanic healing ritual which lasts for approximately two hours. In its short healing version it is performed after sunset for a principal patient, usually someone from the immediate settlement. When a *dikei* is performed in its “complete form,” it is a celebratory event and can cover two nights. In its completed form it is called *kelonkap*. The ritual event is held in either the patient’s house or the shaman’s house. The word *dikei* refers to the ritual event as well as the act of trancing, dancing and healing. It is an ensounded event and ritual technique bringing the two dimensions to face each other. Specific ethereal people (who could take any form) are invited to come down and help the shaman in healing with the aim to keep the dimensions apart.

A *dikei* healing ritual starts with a steady singular drumbeat of ting ting and gradually transforms into ken-ting ken-ting (the Sakai onomatopoeic expression for the rhythmic sound of the drum). The drummer plays the drum throughout the ritual, changing the rhythms of ken-ting ken-ting according to the song and the flow of events. The H-shaped rectangular house where the ritual takes place, and which symbolically becomes a physical manifestation of the cosmos, is filled with the ongoing sounds of the drum. It modulates people’s body rhythms in relationship to the event in the house. The ken-ting ken-ting rhythm of the drum vibrates through the entire house and seeps through the slats of the bark walls. All the other sounds such as the shaman singing and the sounds of his body moving, the rattler, his feet scraping the floor, and even the sounds of puffed rice hitting the floor after he throws them in a direction to honor the ethereal person, harmonize with the loud drumming forming an ongoing acoustic totality that enframes and embraces everybody present.



Figure 15.1 A *kemantat* (the late Bah Amir Tigo) in full dress with rattle made of pieces of scrap metal, Penaso (Riau) 1997. (Photo by Nathan Porath)



Audio sample 15.1

Amidst loud drumming a *kemantat* at Libo Jaya, in 1996, shakes his rattle as he calls on the ethereal Ajo Mudo Bumain Sedan/Young Raja-driving-a-Sedan, to give medicine.

Source: recording by the author.

The *kemantat* calls on the spirits through a stock of songs. Some shamans sing out loudly while others start by singing the first verse loudly but then their voice descends into a mumble. Those who do sing loudly utilize stock verse which poetically portrays the ethereal person and its movements in a locale and attach parts of well-known quatrains to them.



Audio sample 15.2

The late *kemantat* Bah Sehari opening his *dikei* by calling on the ethereal *de'o* Anak Ajo/Child of the Raja to aid in healing. Pinggir, Riau, 1996.

Source: recording by the author.



Figure 15.2 Drummer and drum, in Pinggir (Riau), 1997. (Photo by Nathan Porath)

These *de'o* spirits take the form of a bird or another animal, of objects such as a boat, or they might take a human form. The songs are extemporized word-sounds, which also utilize various onomatopoeia and other phonic devices. The extemporized word-sounds provide a moving picture of an ethereal and soundless reality. Their extemporization ensounds the presence of these beings in an ethereal environment on the other side of the dimensional divide which the shaman has a glimpse of.

The shaman then asks the ethereal people appearing before his inner eye for medicine. They provide this medicine by spitting in the healer's direction. Some *kemantat*, although not all, perform the reception of the medicinal saliva by leaping forward and landing on the spot where the medicine is assumed to have touched the floor. The thump of the shaman's falling step is accompanied with a loud dramatic yell: "Aaaaarh!" After ensounding the reception of the medicinal spit the shaman mimes its transfer to the patient's *semanget* through various silent hand gestures.

One main healing technique is the search for the patient's *semanget* (*munca'i semanget*). The shaman performs searching for the *semanget* bird as the patient sits at the center of the room and is usually covered by a cloth. Unable to see what is happening the patient acoustically hears the performance conducted around him or her. In the background there is rapid drumming as the *kemantat* monotonously dances in a circle of eight

behind the patient. A woman in the audience will shout out to the *kemantat* to bring the *semanget* back to the patient.



Audio sample 15.3

The voice of Mak Chiri, is heard piercing through ordering *kemantat* Bah Sehari to bring the *semanget* back to the patient, Pinggir, 1997. Source: recording by the author.

At a moment when the drumming is fast the shaman suddenly leaps forward, gives a shout, “Aaarh!” and lands beside the patient and the altar. The scenario gives the impression that the *kemantat* has *lept* out of a path, which the drumbeat represents. The shaman mimes capturing the *semanget* bird. At this point there is a lot of commotion and assistants help him to wrap the bird in his cloth. The healer then starts dancing in a figure of eight again in the opposite direction holding the “bird” close to his chest carefully to prevent it from escaping again. After a while he motions to stop the drumming. Then there is a momentary quiet. The momentary cessation of the drumming produces a silence that can be heard. Voices sound very low and out of place in the atmosphere. The shaman instructs the assistants to take the cloth off the patient for the next procedure and then sits in front of the patient holding the “bird” wrapped in the bundle in his arm. The drumming resumes with a slower rhythm.

In the meanwhile, a woman in the audience (a mother or classificatory mother) puts her hand to her mouth and makes bird-like squeaking sounds. The sound is to maternally comfort the *semanget* bird as it is being restored to the patient’s body. The shaman puts his hand in the cloth-bundle and makes a kissing sound as he mimes pulling something out from it. He then targets the patient’s forehead. He makes the kissing sound again as he mimes pulling some more *semanget* from the bundle and targets the chest, and then again focusing on the thumbs, followed by the abdomen and the toes. When finished the shaman might raise the bundle to his right and then left ear and shake it to hear if there is any content. Satisfied the shaman gets up and circles the bundle over the patient’s head ending by raising and lowering it just above the fontanelle. Through sound, dance, and gesture the *kemantat* brings back the wandering air-borne *semanget* from the ethereal dimension and restores it to the patient.



Figure 15.3 Having just captured the *semanget* bird assistants help the shaman Bah Sehari to bundle it. Pinggir (Riau), 1996. (Photo by Nathan Porath)

Such healing is usually not present in a *kelonkap* event. A *kelonkap* is a celebratory event in which spectacular gifts made out of palm leaf are transferred to the *kemantat*'s tutelary ethereal guide as payment for healing aid. In some events a small gong might even be played accompanying the drumming to announce the event.



Audio sample 15.4

A gong accompanying the drumming is being hit on the first night of a *kelonkap* event in Pinggir, 1997.

Source: recording by the author.

A *kelonkap* usually covers two nights. During the first evening the ethereal beings are notified that a *kelonkap* event will be held and the *kemantat*'s tutelary is asked what gifts it would like to receive. The event (at least the early part of it before people start getting tired), is filled with sounds of joy and laughter. At certain moments during the earlier part of the event younger people and children cry out in joy, “ay ya ya ya ya eh hh.”



Audio sample 15.5

The jubilatory sounds of a *kelonkap* *Penaso*, 1997.

Source: recording by the author.

One means in which a *kelonkap* extends into the early hours of the morning, if not till sunrise is through the performance of comedy. Shamans and assistants engage in comedic scenarios. By having one foot in the human dimension and the other in the ethereal one, shamans act out comedic scenarios that entail banter and lewd teasing as well as the occasional trans-gendered scenario.



Audio Sample 15.6

Male *kemantat*, Bah Teba, performing the flirtatious female ethereal Nuk Dudy, swaying his hips from side to side in exaggeration and being teased by the women in the audience who suggest to him how he should walk and sometimes try to pinch his bottom to which he responds in exaggerated shock.

Source: recording by the author.

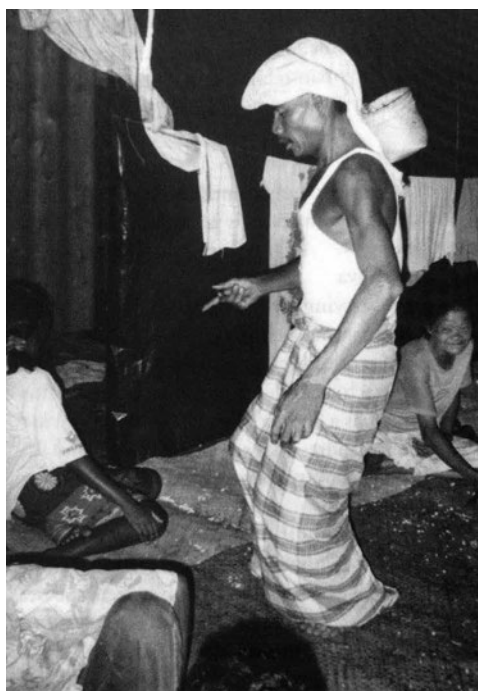


Figure 15.4 Comedic, transgendered scenario. (Pinggir) Riau, 1996. The late Pak Tabe performing the flirtatious Nuk Dudy. The headdress is how women wear their cloth when working in the fields with an “ago” (large basket) on their back. The little basket in the scenario is a tobacco pouch which this shaman always used for comedic effect to signify the basket. (Photo by Nathan Porath)



Figure 15.5 Women preparing to shake the leaves with the group of men holding the wooden poles behind them. The woman holding the leaf on the far, inner right subsequently “entered” a trance state and then danced *dikei*. The expression on her face reveals her disposition to *dikei*. Pinggir (Riau), 1997. (Photo by Nathan Porath)

Sometime during the evening of the first session seven women take hold of palm leaf fronds and sit in a circle in the center of the room. They hold the palm fronds upright and begin to shake them hard, so they rustle as loud as possible—“shhhshhhshh.” Seven men take two pieces of soft wood each, one long and the other short. They follow the shaman and jog clockwise around the women. The shaman twirls, and then turns and jogs counter-clockwise while the train of men follow him.

The drumbeat is fast. The shaking leaves swish loudly and footsteps reverberate through the floor. As this is going on, one or two of the women, who are shamanically predisposed, start shaking the leaves frantically. They fall out of synchrony with the others. In the male outer ring one or two men, similarly predisposed, suddenly leap away from the train of men and run away. At this point there is a commotion. The women who are not affected yank the leaves from their entranced companions, who continue shaking with empty hands. As their female companions release the entranced women from their monotonous gestures, the entranced women begin to ecstatically bob up and down to the rhythm of the drum. Their eyes are glassed over and their arms waving above their heads. The men chase and catch the entranced men to prevent them from running out of the house. The entranced are pulled down to the floor with a thump and are held as their



Figure 15.6 Mak Limi, a Kemantat Betino (Woman Shaman) in a shifted mode of awareness wields the staff. In the background is the *kelonkap* gift to the ethereal being of a boat made of palm leaf. Pinggir (Riau), 1997. (Photo taken by Nathan Porath)

bodies writhe under them. If the individuals concerned have previously said that they want to *dikei*, the assistants immediately pull a sarong over the entranced individuals' heads and down to their waists, at which point their movements become graceful and fall in line with the controlled movements of *dikei*. If not, they throw drops of cold water on their faces and shout loudly at them—"Aaaarh!"—to gradually bring them back to consciousness. The whole scenario—the loud drumming, the circle of women rustling the leaves as though they were being blown by some force, the men circling the women like birds around a bush or tree, the sudden entrancement of two or more people and the commotion that ensues; all of this provides an ensounded image of a numinous force descending and shooting through the center of the house. The *kementat*, meanwhile, simply hovers on the side in his shifted state of awareness, seemingly oblivious to all the commotion. Later the ethereal person notifies the shaman what gifts it would like to receive in a dream. The gift is made the following day and is offered to the shaman's tutelary for helping in healing amidst loud drumming, continuous dancing performed by many attending shamans, and playful celebratory

scenarios. In one important *kelonkap* scenario, the ethereal essence of the house's frame, symbolic of the community's boundaries, is strengthened. Amidst the heavy drumming the *kemantat* wields a staff and slams it into the four crossbeams of the house. The *kemantat* then mimes hammering nails into the beams. In this manner the shaman recreates and redefines the ethereal boundaries of the house and the people of the settlement in relation to the ethereal forces endangering it. A *kelonkap* event, which invites many people, both human and non-human, to attend, ultimately ensounds the successful separation of the two dimensions.

Conclusion

In their schematic exposition of Hebraic biblical sacrifice, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of "the double turning away of face" (1987). This concept is worth exploring in relation to sounds and ensoundments. What they mean is a situation when two parties come towards each other (in confronting lines) and then engage in activities with the purpose of making a U-turn, a "double turning away of face." The notion is useful for understanding human-spirit relations in many animistic societies. In this context, I suggest that the ensoundments of magical rites and shamanic healing rituals such as *dikei*, conducted to separate non-physical beings from the human realm, are sonorous frames of "double turning away of face."

The "double turning away of face" is a turning away from a relation between interiorities which, on the physical level or the plane of multiple exteriorities, would entail illness, madness, and/or death. The sounds of shamanic rituals (even as they call upon certain spirits to help) are also fundamentally aimed at a "double turning away of face" so that the boundaries between the human and spirit realms can be restored. Although animistic ontologies are relational, those who live within them maintain their practical daily existence by keeping their faces "half turned" away from the spirits, through prohibitions, spells, and offerings, in the hope that the spirits will do likewise. Sounds are paramount in making the U-turn and healing rituals are fundamentally ensoundments of disentangling entangled realms.

The performances in Sakai healing are not just performances. They are ontological actualizations of processes occurring in the world. These processes are ensounded for the purpose of bringing the two dimensions together in order to engender "double U-turns" and ultimately keep the ethereal and the human dimensions apart.

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16 Bodies with Songs

The Sounds and Politics of Interstitial Lyrics in Bengali Devotional Performance

Eben Graves

Abstract

Recent research on devotional song in South Asia has noted how the “oral-performative” sphere is a space of live interaction between singing and listening bodies, where dynamic transformation calls into question the ontology of the written text itself. This chapter concerns a type of devotional song in Bengal, *padābalī kīrtan*, where there exists a large repertoire of lyrics that are only sounded and actualized in performance. These interstitial lines expand on the images and affective import of each song text, and further advance the theological, didactic, and aesthetic aims of the repertoire. The absence of these lyrics in the published archive of *padābalī kīrtan* raises questions about the politics that define the relationship between written texts and the oral-performative sphere.

Keywords: devotional song, Bengal, orality, *kīrtan*

To think about the sounds of oral performance asks one to consider the body. As Linda Hess has suggested, the phenomenological contours of oral performance are “embodied, with givers and receivers physically present in the same place and time” (2015, 1). The idea of orality, though, might be further augmented by including the act of hearing in the time-space of an *oral-aural* context of communication. This formation underscores not only the singular voice that speaks or sings—through reference to the oral—but also focuses on the listener, the act of aurality, and the various extra-semantic sonic modes that accompany the performance of song texts. One way of studying the oral-aural mode in the context of South Asian devotional song is presented as the “oral-performative” sphere, a

setting of dynamic live interaction between singing and listening bodies that Hess finds in the context of devotional sung poetry in North India (Hess 2015, 9). Such research on the oral-performative sphere has brought attention to the complicated relationships that exist between written song texts and sounded lyrics, noting not only the way that a textual archive is transformed in live performance, but also the manner that performance can transform the textual record itself (Doniger 1995, 56–64; Hess 2015, 6; Orsini and Schofield 2015, 1–27). Apart from transformation, though, what can be gleaned from performance contexts that do not draw from a pre-existing written body of song? In this case, how might the physical body serve as both an archive of song and medium for the affective aims of lyrical performance? The answers offered to these questions in the following discussion present ways to reconsider the interrelationships between religious sounds, print media, and the meanings found in song texts. The implications of this analysis involve the politics of ocularcentrism that has prioritized an archive of printed song texts in South Asia, a blind spot that has neglected a body of sounded lyrics that have been foundational to connecting religious communities through sound.

The following discussion turns to *padābali kīrtan*, a genre of devotional sung poetry in South Asia, to study the intersections of the body, musical sound, and the mediality of song.¹ *Padābali kīrtan* is integral to the sphere of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology and practice that followed in the wake of the all-important mystic in Bengal, Chaitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1533). Devotional song in Bengal is also linked with a larger sphere of public and private modes of *bhakti* (often translated as “devotion”) in South Asia, a domain sometimes characterized as a “heart religion” that includes associations with “participation, community, enthusiasm, song and often personal challenge” (Hawley 2015, 2). In the domain of *padābali kīrtan*—or simply *kīrtan*, as it is often known—there is an additional focus on emotion and affect, and the genre’s lyrical repertoire works to invite the singer or listener to enter an emotional world inhabited by various divine personalities to share in this religion of the heart. Much of the sung poetry depicts the amorous acts of the well-known deities of Radha and Krishna, while other poetry focuses on the Bengali figure of Chaitanya. This song repertoire exists in two forms. The first is a large written archive that has passed from manuscripts to published anthologies over the past several centuries. The second repertoire of lyrics are only presented in performance, when singers insert segments of vernacular

1 Media and mediality, according to Patrick Eisenlohr, “refer to objects and processes that connect people, concepts, or social formations standing in relations of difference” (2015, 294).

text in between the lines of an original song. This second archive of song is thus only sounded; in performance, these relatively short lyrical interjections further expand on the images and affective import of the original song. They might be considered as liminal texts that are not found in the genre's written archive yet remain crucial to the sonic experience of *kīrtan*.

Singing and sounding these *interstitial lines*, as I call them, advances two aims in the contexts presented in this chapter.² In the first case, these lyrics translate older literary dialects into a more colloquial idiom, a process similar to what Christian Novetzke refers to as vernacularization, when linguistic registers, “expressive idioms ... and all other spheres of affect” are located in new social spheres (2017, 6). These sounds, then, are fundamental to organizing communities through their mediality and the manner they impart religious messages through a shared linguistic register. A second feature of these sounded and interstitial lyrics is found in their links to evoking an embodied and affective response in singers and listeners. Though the written archive of song texts is linked with aesthetic theory from the sphere of Sanskrit theater and poetics, interstitial lyrics amplify and elaborate on these connections, often presenting new meanings not found in the original texts. One example discussed in this chapter is found in a specific segment of interstitial lyrics known as the *mātan*.³ A cursory translation of this word is “absorption,” but the term simultaneously refers to a particular fragment of song text, a rhythm played on the accompanying percussion instruments, a specific melodic structure, and an embodied response from audience members. The *mātan* mode of performance is most conspicuous in what is known as a *līlā kīrtan*—a multi-hour combination of song and storytelling that focuses on a “divine play” (*līlā*) of Radha, Krishna, or Chaitanya.

The general absence of interstitial lyrics in the written and published archive of *padābalī kīrtan* raises questions about a politics that inheres between the written and oral-performative sphere in Bengal. Because most of these lyrics are learned and passed on through forms of oral-aural transmission, they remain missing from the textual archive, and thus hint at the role of embodied knowledge as an archive for devotional song—bodies with songs. But more significantly, the omission of these interstitial lyrics from the published archive of *padābalī kīrtan* song points to the manner

2 Of course, the practice of interjecting additional lines of text such as praise verse or forms of vernacular lyric to add semantic, narrative, and affective resonance to a performance is found in a number of musical styles, such as Qawwalī (Qureshi 1986), Marathi *kīrtan* (Novetzke 2015), and Baul *gān* (Lorea 2016).

3 See Chakraborty (1995, 195) for more information on *mātan* and its role in *padābalī kīrtan*. Alternate spellings for this term include *mātān*.

they are entangled with forms of what Novetzke refers to as “sonic equality,” a “conviction ... that all people are equally entitled to hear words of salvation in their own everyday language” (2019, 91). Indeed, there was a shift during the second millennium in South Asia where vast amounts of ritual and devotional texts were translated in vernacular languages (Pollock 2006), thus making this knowledge accessible equally (or more equally) throughout the subcontinent. However, there is another implication found in the concept of sonic equality, Novetzke notes, as this mode does not immediately involve the transformation of a social structure to afford equality to all. As such, sonic equality refers to an equality that is rooted in sound, yet for some time might remain there, or perhaps only echo in the oral-performative frame without transforming the domain of unequal social structures. The implications of this line of thought in regard to padābali kīrtan are twofold. On the one hand, it suggests considering how interstitial lyrics present devotional messages in the vernacular, thus entailing a form of (mostly) equal distribution throughout sound and social contexts. On the other hand, however, the spread and potency of this sounded mode has not been comprehensive, as these lyrics remain omitted from the written archive of padābali kīrtan and thus highlight a politics that presents the written as the “authentic” form of the song repertoire.

The chapter focuses on two contexts where we find a specific type of interstitial line known as the *ākhar*, a three-part lyrical phrase that is interjected between song couplets. The first setting considers how modes of embodied instruction remain the locus for learning the repertoire of interstitial lines that is central to padābali kīrtan by focusing on my studies with the kīrtan singer Kankana Mitra. A second context is a live *līlā* kīrtan performance by the singer Dyuti Chakraborty in 2012, where both the *ākhar* lyrics and the context of the performance reveal a range of meanings and affective modes that expand on the original song, known as the *pad*. The theme of the body remains a key part of both the written and sounded padābali kīrtan song texts throughout this chapter. Not only do these lyrics require the body for performance and transmission; they also focus on how devotion and its aftermath affect the bodies of Radha, Krishna, and Chaitanya—three characters central to the devotional sphere of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava thought and practice.

Unwritten literature and embodied sounds

Reading research about interstitial lyrics might lead one to think that these lines enjoy a type of absolute ubiquity. Indeed, as the scholarship of Donna

Wulff notes, the communicative role of these additional lines in performance has led to the ākhar “becom[ing] virtually all pervasive, penetrating all styles of kīrtan from the most classical to the most popular” (1996, 76). An important caveat to this claim is that the pervasiveness of these lyrics is most evident in contexts of live performance, and their presence is missing in much of the written and sound recording archive of the genre. This point became apparent to me as I began dissertation research on the genre from the United States in 2011, eagerly accruing a variety of written and recorded padābalī kīrtan song forms. One set of lyrics that captured my attention was the song “*chum̐yo nā chum̐yo nā bandhu*” (Oh Friend, do not touch me!), a staple of the padābalī kīrtan repertoire found across a number of media forms recorded in the twentieth century (Example 16.1). A specific performance that fascinated me was a version of the song featured in the Bengali film *Chandidas* (1932), a release that offered a depiction of the life story of the eponymously named composer (of this song and others) who was active in the fifteenth century. Produced by the Kolkata-based New Theatres Ltd., *Chandidas* featured the singer Krishnachandra De (1894–1962), a popular singer-actor in the conjoined spheres of Bengali theater, film, and commercial recording in the early twentieth century.⁴

The lyrics for “*chum̐yo nā chum̐yo nā bandhu*” in De’s rendition voice the perspective of Radha as a directive to Krishna: “Oh Friend, do not touch me! Keep away!” In a full-length līlā kīrtan performance this song depicts an episode when Radha has waited the entire evening for a prearranged tryst with Krishna in the forest. However, when he finally arrives, Radha sees signs on his body that he has been with another lover. From the smeared eye makeup to disheveled hair, the song’s first couplet and refrain present a further question as Radha asks Krishna why he did not take the time to look in a mirror before their meeting. As I studied various recorded forms of this song in 2011,⁵ the ākhar lyrics that would typically accompany this song in a live context were missing. One reason for this was kīrtan musicians such as De were adapting songs to the shortened forms of media production at the time, and not able to sing all the interstitial lines during the time frame of the sound recording. Therefore, my ability to be able to hear those lyrics would require face-to-face lessons with musicians in West Bengal.

4 For more information on Krishnachandra De, see *Krishnachandra*, edited by Bandopadhyay (2012).

5 De recorded at least two different versions of this song. One was recorded for the film’s soundtrack in 1932, and a second was commissioned by HMV Records in 1933 to be released as a seven-inch commercial record. See the discography in Bandopadhyay (2012).

<i>chum̃yo nā chum̃yo nā bandhu oikhāne thāka/</i>	Oh friend, do not touch me! Keep away!
<i>mukura lai yā cār̃da mukha khāni dekha//</i>	Look at your moon-like face in the mirror.
<i>nayanera kājara bayāne legeche kālora upare kālo/</i>	The collyrium of your eyes has stained your face; it appears as black on black.
<i>prabhāte uṭhiyā o mukha dekhinu dina jābe āja bhālo//</i>	Rising in the morning and seeing that face, [I thought] this day will be good.
<i>adharera tāmbula bayāne legeche ghume ḍhulu ḍhulu āmkhi/</i>	Chewed betel leaf from your mouth has stuck to your face, and your eyes are half closed with drowsiness.
<i>āmā pāne cāo phiriyā dār̃ḍāo nayana bhariyā dekhi//</i>	Look at me! Stand in front of me! Let me see you with my open eyes.
<i>cār̃ncara keṣera cikana cūḍā se kena bukerā mājhe/</i>	Why is the glossy, curly hair of your topknot now on your chest?
<i>sindurera dāga āche sarbagāye morā hale mari lāje//</i>	Your whole body is stained with the marks of vermilion. If this happened to me, I might die of shame.
<i>nīla kamala jhāmaru hayeche malina hayeche deha/</i>	The blue lotus [Krishna] has become faded; his body has lost its glow.
<i>kon rasabatī pāya sudhānidhi niṃḍi layeche seha//</i>	Which rasabatī [gopī] has squeezed all the nectar from that ocean?
<i>kuṭīla nayane kahiche sundarī adhika kariyā toṛā /</i>	The beautiful one [Radha] offers an excessive rebuke with a wink.
<i>kahe caṇḍidāsa āpana svabhāba chāḍite nā pāre corā//</i>	Caṇḍidāsa says that thief [Krishna] cannot change his nature.

Example 16.1 “*chum̃yo nā chum̃yo nā bandhu*” (Oh friend, do not touch me!)⁶

I first learned the interstitial lines to songs such as “*chum̃yo nā chum̃yo nā bandhu*” during extended periods of fieldwork and study living in Kolkata, when I would visit the Rabindra Bharati University professor and singer Dr. Kankana Mitra at her south Kolkata home each Sunday morning. It was during one of these visits in 2012 when she taught me one version of the interstitial lyrics used to accompany the song “*chum̃yo nā chum̃yo nā bandhu*.” If these interstitial lyrics were missing from published anthologies and sound recordings, one place where they could be found is in Kankana Mitra’s notebooks, where she had documented her many years of padābalī kīrtan study. Using these notebook representations as mnemonics to unlock

6 Both y-phola and anthastha-ya are transliterated as “y” in this chapter.

the embodied knowledge of song, she taught me the following ākhar that would be inserted at the end of the first verse of the song. In this ākhar, Radha continues the theme of the mirror from the first verse, questioning how Krishna could think that she would be so naïve as to not notice his appearance:

pad: *chuñyo nā chuñyo nā bandhu oikhāne thāka*
mukura laiyā cām̐da mukha khāni dekha

Oh, friend, do not touch me! Keep away!
 Look at your moon-like face in the mirror

ākhar: *bali mukur sethāy chilo nā ki śyām*
naile kemone orupe ele
tabe yethāy badankhāni dekha

Oh Krishna, there was no mirror there?
 How can you come [here] looking as you do?
 Did you see your face there?

There is clearly a more colloquial and, one might say, even an angry voice in these interstitial lines. One form of mediation found in these lyrics is translation, as much of the original repertoire of kīrtan songs, such as the one just discussed, was written in various linguistic registers of pre- and early-modern Bengal. For example, Caṇḍīdāsa's "*chuñyo nā chuñyo nā bandhu*," like many songs in the repertoire, was composed in Middle Bengali, a linguistic predecessor of the contemporary spoken language of Bangla that was prominent between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Thompson 2012, 3). Because Middle Bengali is not readily understood by contemporary audiences, interstitial lines of song such as the one above translate an older idiom into a linguistic form understood by contemporary audiences, a process that some trace to the late nineteenth century.⁷

These sounded lines do more than simply translate text, though. As Donna Wulff notes, these interstitial lines of text are also "internal interpretations [that] shape ... and mediate the poem, allowing the audience to participate emotionally in the drama being sung and enacted" (1996, 76). When discussing the place of ākhar lyrics, Kankana Mitra described how these lines engage in a process of expansion, using the Bangla-language term *bistār*. The ākhar lines, Mitra suggested, reveal the "inner meaning" of the song,

7 See Chakraborty (1995, 179).

noting that “ākhar means bistār” and “the spread of the inner meaning of the verses.”⁸ One way this interpretation occurs in the ākhar lines above is through the manner that the singer chooses to focus on a particular theme in the original pad. In the ākhar above the elaborative work of the interstitial line presents Radha’s indignation that Krishna could appear before her with little regard for his bodily appearance. The singer presents the words of an incredulous Radha who wonders how Krishna did not take the time to see his face—“there was no mirror there?” The body of Krishna, moreover, is an index of his infidelity, a point of aesthetic and theological import that becomes evident through the singing body of a kīrtan musician.

The textual work of the ākhar lyrics represents only one of the ways their sounds act. As I sat with Kankana Mitra learning these lyrics during a lesson in 2012, she taught me the ākhar lyrics that are interjected between the song’s second couplet.

pad: *nayanera kājara bayāne legeche kālara upare kāla/
prabhāte uṭhīyā o mukha dekhinu dina jābe āja bhāla//*

The collyrium from your eyes has stained your face; it appears
as black on black./

Rising in the morning and seeing that face, [I thought] this day
will be good.//

ākhar: *(sakhi) āj āmār ki bhāgya
prabhāte cānder dekhā pelām
tāya tāte kalaṅkara dāg*

Oh friend, [I thought] how fortunate I am today
In the morning I saw the moon (Krishna)
[but] now there is only a scandalous stain [on that moon]

After singing the song’s couplet, which expresses Radha’s dejection on seeing another woman’s mascara on Krishna’s face, the ākhar presents the Middle Bengali text again in a colloquial register. Yet there is more at work in the melodic motion that animates this group of interstitial lyrics. Kankana Mitra taught me this ākhar section while seated behind her harmonium, accompanying her own vocal performance. The first line of the ākhar section immediately began to circle around a pitch range that was higher than what

8 Personal communication, December 1, 2012.

was used to accompany the original *pad*, as Kankana Mitra's lyrics voiced Radha's concerns and humiliation to her friend. The second part of the ākhar section continued this melodic approach, as the line *prabhāte cāṁder dekhā pelām* was accompanied with a rising melodic structure when Kankana Mitra's fingers moved upwards on the harmonium's keyboard. The melodic motion of an upward swell matched Radha's remembrance of how her day began with her auspicious vision of Krishna, only to have her hopes dashed. This gradual melodic movement is a convention of the ākhar section that links the rise in pitch to the emotional intensification that occurs through the progression of the lyrics, illustrating the connection between musical sound and these interstitial lines. Though it was not demonstrated in the pedagogical context of my lessons with Kankana Mitra, this rising melodic movement is also joined with an increase in tempo and rhythmic density of the accompanying instruments when such an ākhar section is performed with a full ensemble (see Audio sample 16.1 below).

The metaphorical work of comparing Krishna's disheveled face to the moon hints at one reason why ākhar lyrics are referred to as forms of "unwritten literature" (*alikhita sāhitya*) (Chakraborty 1995, 179). Because interstitial lines are not found in the manuscript archive, Mriganka Chakraborty's attempt to define these lines as forms of unwritten literature underscores a connection with the devices found in the sphere of literature, such as the common metaphorical link between Krishna's face and the moon. The ākhar examples discussed here belong to the first of two categories of ākhar lyrics. These examples are interstitial lines that a singer has learned from her guru and can trace back one or more generations in a lineage of kīrtan transmission. Kankana Mitra learned the two ākhar sections mentioned above for the song "*chumyo nā chumyo nā bandhu*" from another prominent kīrtan guru in the Kolkata area, a former professor at Rabindra Bharati University, the late Manoranjan Bhattacharya, who likely learned them from one of his teachers. Often these types of lyrics are defined as a form of "traditional ākhar,"⁹ a category that applies to all the lyrics discussed in this chapter. A second and less common form of ākhar lyrics is considered improvisatory. In this case, the singer will create lyrics during performance that elaborate on the text and meaning of the original song, a practice that is not without a certain amount of controversy as some question the value of this practice (see Wulff 2009). Despite the central place that interstitial lines of song enjoy in padābali kīrtan performance, the category of traditional

9 This category was defined in this way by the kīrtan musician Rahul Das. Personal communication, August 24, 2017.

ākhars are not found in the written body of published song anthologies, a fact that points to a gap that exists between the written and oral-performative spheres in Bengali devotional song. What are the implications for these unwritten lyrics?

When surveying publications of Vaiṣṇava padābalī song anthologies, the omission of the interstitial lines of song might be one of the most obvious features. One reason for this is that many song anthologies published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were based on longstanding manuscript collections. The most pertinent example of this was the largest and most comprehensive manuscript collection known as the *Śrī Śrī Pada-Kalpataru*, or the “Wish-fulfilling Tree of Lyrics,” a manuscript of Vaiṣṇava padābalī that likely reached its final manuscript form in the mid-eighteenth century. In its printed iteration, this five-volume anthology, which contained over three thousand songs, was published over the course of sixteen years (see Das and Roy 1322–1338 BS [1915–1931]), and the omission of interstitial lines in its pages seems to reflect the fact that these lyrics were not part of this earlier manuscript archive. Nevertheless, there were several manuscript collections compiled in the twentieth century¹⁰—when the practice of singing interstitial lines was surely extant—that chose to omit these interstitial lyrics.¹¹

1. <i>pūrva-rāga</i> Infatuation	2. <i>māna</i> Pique	3. <i>prema-vaicittya</i> Separation in the presence of the beloved	4. <i>pravāsa</i> Separation based on a distant journey
5. <i>sañkṣipta-sambhoga</i> Brief union	6. <i>sañkirṇa-sambhoga</i> Union mixed with contrary feelings	7. <i>sampanna-sambhoga</i> Developed union	8. <i>saṃdḍhimat-sambhoga</i> Complete and excessive union

Example 16.2 Eight Categories of the Amorous Mood

Instead of working to include forms of interstitial lyrics, song anthology editors seemed more interested in linking songs with a paradigmatic theoretical structure comprised of eight forms of the amorous or erotic mood (Example 16.2), which is known in the Gauḍīyā Vaiṣṇava fold as *ujjvala rasa* and based

10 The publication of padābalī kīrtan song anthologies became central to a larger recovery of Gauḍīyā Vaiṣṇava knowledge and practices in the late nineteenth century. For more on the bhadrālok recovery of features of Gauḍīyā Vaiṣṇava thought and practice, see Bhatia (2017).

11 See, for example, Mukhopadhyay (2010).

on the work of the prominent Gauḍīya theorist Rūpa Gosvāmī and his sixteenth-century treatise, *Ujġvalanilamani*.¹² In short, padābali kīrtan songs work to capture one of these eight forms of the amorous mood that Radha and Krishna experience in their līlās, with the further qualification that the devout singer or listener can also experience this emotion as well. The first four categories—from pūrva-rāga to pravāsa—are considered indicative of the mood of separation. Similarly, there are four subcategories of the mood of devotion when two lovers are united, each of these increasing in intensity from a brief (saṅkṣipta-sambhoga) to a longer duration (samrddhimāna-sambhoga). The song “*chuṇyo nā chuṇyo nā bandhu*” would often be linked with the category of *māna* (pique) in published anthologies, as it embodies the sphere of separation that Radha felt because Krishna failed to meet for their rendezvous.

One example of this is found in the twentieth-century anthology collection known as *Śrī Padāmṛta-mādhurī* (The Sweet Elixir of Verse), edited by Nabadwipchandra Brajabashi and Khagendranath Mitra. The thousands of songs in this multi-volume anthology reveal a detailed process where songs were listed with minute attention to the eight-fold structure mentioned and further levels of analytical rigor (see Graves 2017, 18–20). Yet despite all the effort directed at this endeavor, there appeared to be little attention paid to the huge repertoire of interstitial lyrics that both of these editors clearly knew, sang, and taught. We might speculate that the omission of these interstitial lines from the written record underscores a politics of exclusion that often views forms of oral-aural expression as “lower” than the written (Kaviraj 2003, 525), and further hints at the unequal dimensions of sonic equality. In one final example, the next section studies a performance and song with clear connections to the eight-fold structure just mentioned, yet also highlights the ways that the embodied and sounded forms of interstitial lyrics expand on the meanings and categorical ontologies of the original pads.

Absorbed in songs of union

The song “*gaurāṅga cāṁder mane ki bhāb uṭhila*” (What feeling arose in the mind of the moon-like Chaitanya?) illustrates the second four-part grouping of amorous union discussed above (Example 16.3). Belonging to a sub-repertoire of Vaiṣṇava padābali known as Gaura-candrikā, the song focuses on the Dān Līlā, an episode where Krishna adopts the role of a

12 For more on the *Ujġvalanilamani* (The Blazing Sapphire), see Delmonico (1990).

road-tax collector to meet with Radha and her friends away from Radha's family home. In a twist, however, this song presents the fifteenth-century figure of Chaitanya as the road-tax collector as a form of identity transposition that is meant to synchronize his identity with Krishna, a technique widespread in the Gaura-candrikā body of songs. In published anthologies, songs such as this that focus on the Dān Līlā are grouped together with lyrics that depict a number of episodes meant to evoke *saṅkīrṇa-sambhoga* (Union Mixed with Contrary Feelings), one of the eightfold divisions of the amorous mood.¹³ The work of grouping song texts in this aesthetic category is another example of how editors linked the genre's lyrical repertoire with the body of Sanskrit aesthetics, thus mediating the experience of these published volumes.

<i>gaurāṅga cāmder mane ki bhāba uṭhila/</i>	What feeling arose in the mind of the moon-like Chaitanya?/
<i>nadiyāra mājhe gorā dāna sirajila//</i>	In Nadiya, Chaitanya began the Dān (tax episode).
<i>āre moro āre moro āmār gorā dvijamañi/</i>	Oh, my, our Chaitanya [Gorā], the gem of the twice born.
<i>betra diyā āguliyā rākhaye taruṇi//</i>	With sticks he kept the young women from proceeding.
<i>dān deho dān deho bali gorā ḍāke/</i>	"Give me the tax, give me the tax," shouted Chaitanya.
<i>nadiyā nāgarī saba paṛila bipāke//</i>	All the young girls of Nadiya fell into distress.
<i>kṛṣṇa abatāre āmi sādhiyāchi dān/</i>	As Krishna I played this fee-taking role before.
<i>se bhāba paṛila mane [āmār] bāsughoṣe gān//</i>	My mind fell into that feeling, sings Basu Ghosa.

Example 16.3 *gaurāṅga cāmder mane ki bhāb uṭhila* (What feeling arose in the mind of the moon-like Chaitanya?)

One version of ākhar lyrics for this song emerges during a larger mix of song and storytelling in a multi-hour līlā kīrtan by Dyuti Chakraborty I attended in 2012. The setting for this līlā kīrtan performance was the village of Kanthi in West Bengal, where Dyuti Chakraborty and her kīrtan ensemble had set up in the middle of the central shopping district of the town. A tent had

13 See *SSPK*, Vol. II (1325 BS), 357. For example, other song themes that are related to Union mixed with contrary feelings found in this volume of the *SSPK* include, Krishna's Mahārāsa (305), and Naukā-bilāsa (375). These songs are also followed by lyrics that are used to depict several līlās that are associated with the division of the amorous mood that follows *saṅkīrṇa-sambhoga*, namely *sampanna-sambhoga* (Developed union), such as Hari Līlā (386) and Jhulan-Yātrā (441).

been provided by a local group that organizes kīrtan events and hundreds of people from the area had assembled for an evening performance. After a series of invocatory songs and chanted verses, Dyuti Chakraborty reached the song “*gaurāṅga cāndera mane ki bhāb uṭhila*.” As is common, the progression of this song was interrupted not only by the inclusion of interstitial lyrics, but also by the insertion of lengthy storytelling segments. One example of this occurred after the third couplet of this song—“*dān deho dān deho*” (Example 16.3)—which, as mentioned, presents the image of the fifteenth-century Chaitanya adopting the tax-collection role of the mythical Krishna. Instead of focusing solely on this image, Dyuti Chakraborty presented a lengthy story from a body of Puranic literature in South Asia to describe the various groups approaching the demigod Brahmā for advice. The bridge between this storytelling episode and the song is made by term *dān*. In the context of Dyuti Chakraborty’s *līlā* kīrtan performance this term simultaneously referred to a “tax,” and thus Krishna’s role as the road-tax collector, and a form of “ritual offering,” another common meaning for the word.

The storytelling interlude began when two groups asked for the advice of Brahmā—the “grandfather” of the gods (*pitāmaha*). The first group was composed of the supernatural demigods (*debatās*), who, upon asking Brahmā for advice, received only the cryptic syllable “da” in response to their inquiry. This enigmatic syllable, Dyuti Chakraborty explained, was to be interpreted phonetically, as the demigods took this sound as an instruction for them to restrain (*ḍaman karte*) their desires for sensual enjoyment. The second group to come before Brahmā were the so-called demons (*asura*), another supernatural category of beings known for being disruptive and challenging the demigods in Puranic stories. The demons also received the enigmatic syllable “da” in response to their inquiry, but, unlike the demigods, they associated this phonetic correlation with the Bangla word “*dayā*” (kindness or mercy), which they interpreted as an instruction to show compassion to others.

In Dyuti Chakraborty’s narrative, the final group to approach Brahmā were the humans, who, after hearing the syllable “da,” took this as an instruction meant to inspire them in acts of ritual giving (*dān*). Dyuti Chakraborty thus voiced the reply from the humans:

Oh Brahmā, we are humans, and we have the tendency to constantly place demands before Chaitanya to fulfill our sensual demands. Give us this; give us that; give us wealth; give us knowledge; give us fame. Give, give, give—give us everything. But we never say, “Chaitanya, you take!” Brahmā said, “You are humans. What do you possess that you can give?”

This storytelling section then flowed into the ākhar section, which was spoken from the perspective of Chaitanya, suggesting what humans might offer:

ākhar:	1) [<i>āmār</i>] <i>dān deho deho dān</i>	“Give an offering, give an offering.
	2) <i>yākicchu āche karo tomāy</i>	Whatever you have, give that to me.
	3) <i>tomāder jībana yaubana kulaśīlamāna</i>	[Give] your life, youth, and familial prestige.” [mātan]

The theme of the body emerged here in the final line of the ākhar section with the directive to offer one’s “life, youth, and familial prestige” to Chaitanya. If one meaning of the phrase *dān deho* suggests a plea to make a ritual gift (*dān*=ritual gift, offering; *deho*=give), a second way to interpret this short ākhar line would be to note another meaning for *deho* as “body.” Reading the interstitial line of *dān deho* as the act of “offering your body” presents another way to interpret the lyrical material that follows. In particular, the third ākhar line describes how one might offer one’s “life, youth, and familial prestige”—three qualities that are of course linked to the body. This second perspective on the interstitial lyrics thus highlights the creativity of these sounded lines, as they present two simultaneous meetings: a focus on the theme of a road tax *and* the way that the devotee’s body might be considered as a form of ritual offering.

The didactic conclusion offered in the third ākhar line was further reinforced through features of musical sound and emphasized through forms of embodied assent from the audience.



Audio sample 16.1

A recording of the original couplet, followed by the ākhar section under discussion.

Source: recording by the author.

Like the earlier example, the ākhar section here contained three short lyrical fragments that gradually implemented a rise in the pitch range as the singer progressed through each section. Two added elements in this example included an acceleration in tempo and an increase in the rhythmic density

in the accompanying percussion instruments. The third line of the ākhar section is known as the *mātan*, a term that refers to these musical elements and the state of absorption that the lyrical and musical components are meant to evoke. The musical and semantic motion here was to move the audience toward a state of absorption in the singer's message, which was activated through the ākhar lyrics and musical accompaniment. And in this performance, the audience responded with enthusiasm. When Dyuti Chakrabarty traced a circle above her head upon reaching the *mātan*, audience members raised their arms in the air and shouted “gaur hari-bol” (Chant [the names of] Chaitanya and Krishna!), a form of embodied approval of the singer's didactic message. Through upraised arms and loud voices, they affirmed the singer's conclusion that one should indeed offer one's body in service.

Conclusion

The presence of the body permeates the imaginal and material sphere of *padābali* kīrtan lyrics. Bodies are transformed in the repertoire of song texts through the acts of infidelity, during emotions of pique, and in the midst of meditation and remembrance, to name a few themes discussed in this chapter. Yet this affective and transformative work also relies on bodies during acts of transmission and performance. Though virtually absent from the written record, interstitial lyrics mediate the experience of songs as they translate an older linguistic register into a more colloquial idiom, and thus work to enact a type of sonic equality as they translate devotional messages into a linguistic register understood by many. But more than simply offering translations, these ākhar lines further expand upon the structural wellspring of Sanskrit aesthetic theory that is given prominence in published anthologies. When singing the unwritten literature of ākhar lines, performers expand on themes found in the original song as they present new meanings from the text. The features of musical sound that animate sections of ākhar performance, such as the *mātan*, suggest that there is something integral to the sounded repertoire of lyrics that cannot be completely reduced to their original word forms. As Sudipta Kaviraj notes in relation to this repertoire, these “texts contain a possibility of meaning, but this meaning often waits on something that exists even before meaning begins—the sensuous, pre-semantic attractiveness of the aural or the musical” (2003, 525).

Musical and other performative conventions are part of the way that the sounds expand beyond their original written forms. At the same time, however, the omission of these interstitial lines of song from the written

record underscores part of the politics of exclusion that often views forms of oral-aural expression as “lower” than the written (Kaviraj 2003, 525). Despite the actualization of vernacular lines in performance, the other part of the idea of sonic equality asks us to consider how this sonic dispersal “does not necessarily require everyday social order to change” (Novetzke 2019, 91). The implications of this in the history of padābali kīrtan lyrics, then, is found in their curious and continued omission from the written record. This exclusion is even more surprising on account of the fact that these interstitial lines, such as the ākhar, express and embody a set of profound meanings and affective messages for singers and audience members. In the present, then, these lyrics sound and exist only in the oral-performative sphere, as they remain tied to bodies with songs.

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Afterword: Sonic Materiality, Religion, and Non-Religion

Patrick Eisenlohr

Abstract

The afterword centers on the following question: If it is the case that the forms of territoriality and belonging such as those discussed in the contributions to this volume are already constituted and well-known through discourse, why should one pay attention to the sonic? It is argued that the particular entanglement of the sonic with embodiment enables religious sounds to provide somatic evidence for religious ritual outcomes, experiences, cosmologies, and aspirations. Sonic materiality with its inbuilt multimodality also affords the bundling of the forms of territoriality and belonging that feature prominently in the book's contributions with religious traditions and practices, suffusing them with the same felt qualities at the level of felt-bodily motion and perception.

Keywords: sonic religion, embodiment, atmospheres, religion and media, semiotic mediation, material religion

The case for the sonic: Beyond Eurocentrism

Ranging from Roma camps in Italy across Iran, Sindh, Bengal, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia to Taiwan, this volume's geographical spread of religious sounds beyond the global North is striking. The contributors to this volume do not just make a case for the crucial role of sound in religious practices across several traditions. They also show how thinking about and theorizing the sonic has long been pivotal to several religious traditions outside the North Atlantic world. The decentering away of theorizing the sonic from what used to be known as the West (see also Steingo and Sykes 2019) that the contributors join in is not just evident in the sheer range of

places and settings in Asia that contributors engage with. Such decentering, also highlighted in the introduction to this volume, is at the heart of contributors' foregrounding of long traditions of sonic theologies, philosophies, and cosmologies from, for example, India and China, in addition to European intellectual traditions. Sonic cosmologies developed in India and China many centuries ago conceived the sonic as a churning cosmic oneness out of which the world of actual entities emerges and is renewed, as contributors to this volume show, assisted by musical and ritual performance, ritual speech, and bodily discipline. The fact that such sonic thinking long anticipated certain traditions of theorizing the sonic in modern European philosophy has gained surprisingly little attention. In modern European philosophy there is a kindred line of thought on the sonic as providing privileged access to a cosmic oneness out of which everything emerges but that cannot be grasped through discourse and conceptual thought. This line stretches from Schopenhauer via Nietzsche to Deleuze and takes the sonic to be an all-pervading "sonic flux" (Cox 2018) in proximity to the virtual (e.g., Deleuze 1998 [1980]: 78), the forces of difference and multiplicity that generate the actual. One possible reason for this omission in modern philosophy and sound studies may be that in European academic categories such ancient Indic and Chinese theorizing of the sonic has been framed as "religious" and mythological rather than philosophical. The perspective taken by the contributors to this volume who show how sonic practices and experiences bundle the religious with the non-religious not only overcomes this opposition between religion and ostensibly secular theorizing. Writing from outside the global North, the authors also demonstrate how the omission from sound studies and sonically inclined philosophy of entire non-European traditions of thinking the sonic can be corrected.

The engagements with religious sounds in this volume do not just feature an impressive spread across geography and religious traditions. They also showcase a striking diversity of themes that sonic practices in religious settings have come to be intermeshed with. Two main threads running through the chapters are a concern with spatiality and territoriality on one hand, and social and political identifications and forms of belonging on the other. These are fields that are often known and transacted through discourse, including religious discourse, as well as legal discourse in the case of political identifications and territorialities. One might therefore ask: If it is the case that the forms of territoriality and belonging such as those discussed in the contributions to this volume are already constituted and well-known through discourse, why should one pay attention to the sonic? The overwhelmingly discursive dominance in scholarly approaches

to territoriality and belonging raises the question of what makes the sonic in religious contexts powerful in articulating spatiality and territoriality as well as forms of belonging. What can the sonic meaningfully add to the discursive constructions of spatiality and belonging that tend to dominate attention among scholars in the humanities and social sciences who work on gender or political boundaries and identifications? Is it because they function as mere symbols of particular kinds of spatiality and belonging, that is, only as arbitrary signs in the sense of representing something through social convention? Several of the contributors to this volume suggest otherwise when they show how religious sounds act out belonging and spatiality or territoriality in and through the body and bodily sensations. In other words, this line of analysis suggests that the sonic, as traveling kinetic energy that comprises but also exceeds the range of the sonic that is audible or acoustic, contributes to the felt dimensions of belonging and spatiality in a particularly salient way. Sonic practices and movements are significant because they coproduce and at the same time provide somatic evidence for the kinds of spatial and political organization and dynamics the contributors to this volume address.

Felt bodies, embodiment, and the sonic materiality of the religious

The intermingling of sonic materiality and felt bodies appears to be at the heart of such felt aspects of belonging and spatiality. The coupling of sonic materiality and embodiment already comes with an inbuilt relationship to the spatial. This is because it often revolves around suggestions of motion, modifications of the body's felt spatial economy that its interaction with the sonic as dynamic events, kinetic energy propagating through space, including bodily space, bring about. Such modifications of the body's spatial economy through dynamic sonic materiality can be extended and made relevant for the very broad array of themes surrounding belonging and territoriality that the contributors analyze. One way to do this is to understand sonic modifications of the body's spatial economy as a bundling of different lines of experience by creating resonances between them (Abels 2020, 166), including those related to religious traditions.

Sonic materiality is crucial for such bundling of otherwise disparate strands of life, which in the studies this volume brings together include forms of belonging such as gender and political identifications, the spatial experience of borders and sonic territories, all synaesthetically acted out in and through the body. Finally, this bundling also extends to religious

traditions along with acoustemologies and bodily attunements that need to be part of this bundling process. Sonic practices make all these distinct lines of experience commensurable, temporally weakening the distinctions between them, by investing them with the same, overarching feel through modulating felt bodies' spatiality. Such a bundling of different lines of lived experience through sonic intermingling with bodies in religious settings can also include dimensions and aspects of life that are not *prima facie* classifiable as religious. While sonic practices as those analyzed in this volume often reinforce religious sensations, and religious traditions more broadly, their bundling of different strands of life through bringing forth resonances between them may also blur the boundaries between religion and non-religion. This recalls instances of "ambient" religion (Engelke 2012).

An approach that pays attention to how the sonic unites, as the contributions to this volume exemplify, all these disparate strands of life by making them resonate with each other cuts across enduring divisions that have structured the study of the sonic, including sonic religion, for some time. Among these is, first, the distinction between sonic, non-linguistic materiality, and discourse. As several of the contributors demonstrate, the sonic materiality of religious discourse, such as in poetic and ritual song and recitation, is highly consequential for its success as a religious performance precisely because it plays a crucial role in the generation of religious sensations. Religious discourse not only has obvious material dimensions, the latter also play a key role in such discourse's performative efficacy. More broadly, the division between sonic, non-linguistic materiality and discourse also points to different methods in the study of sound, including religious sounds. One can explore religious sound by studying discourse about sound, such as the discourse on sound that is part of a religious tradition and through ethnographic studies of what religious practitioners, listeners, and musicians have to say about religious sound. This approach to religious sound so richly brought to the fore by many of the volume's contributors is indispensable for understanding the deeply meaningful role that sound plays in the discourse of religious traditions, culminating in the complex sonic theologies and cosmologies that several contributors lay out in their chapters. However, such deep engagement with discourse about sound also needs to be complemented by an investigation of sonic materiality beyond the latter's discursive renderings. Understanding the sonic as effecting a bundling of otherwise distinct strands of life, including religious traditions and discourse, is a way to overcome such bifurcation between discourse and sonic materiality in the study of religious sounds.

Taking the sonic as an atmospheric force that bundles a diversity of lines of experience also overcomes a second, related opposition in the study of the sonic in the social sciences and the humanities, including in religious contexts. This is the distinction between the sonic as a force that is powerful in itself versus sound as socio-culturally authorized to be powerful, for example, through religious discourse or traditions of bodily attunement. The contributions to this volume suggest that both of these dimensions need to be joined in order to do justice to the central role of the sonic in religious settings. The sonic in religious settings is both powerful in itself as well as subject to authorization as powerful. The two perspectives only point to different ends of a continuum of meaningfulness along which religious sounds operate. The sonic as a force that is powerful in itself comprises the diffuse, underqualified meaningfulness of sonic motion as traveling kinetic energy with, in Peircean terms, the iconicity (relationships of qualitative likeness) and indexicality (relationships of causality and contiguity) that are part of its materiality. But sonic events also include the more qualified dimensions of meaningfulness that construct it as powerful through discourse and forms of bodily attunement that are part of religious traditions. To return to the figure of the sonic as bundling otherwise disparate strands of life, including religious traditions, both the diffuse sonic meaningfulness that inheres in its material dynamics and their discursive and habitus-related qualifications need to be part of the bundle for it to be effective in religious settings. That is, modes of bodily attunement and religious discourse need to be included in this process of imbuing all the strands of life that are brought together through sonic performance and intermingling, giving it the same feel through the modulation and modification of felt space, making them resonate with each other. In such ways, the modes of territoriality and belonging entangled with the religious that this book is about can be felt through the sonic in ways that evade and exceed discourse.

Sonic materiality as medium of the divine?

Understanding the sonic as making disparate strands of life resonate with each other, bundling the religious with the non-religious in the process, also opens up a new perspective on religion as a form of mediation between human actors and the divine. A perspective that stresses the materiality of the religious, which is also emphasized in the introduction to this volume, and an interest in media and mediation has often gone hand in hand. Following a “media turn” in the study of religion (Engelke 2010), much recent

work on material religion has treated objects, images, and technical media as mediators that enable interaction between humans and divine worlds, however conceived. From the perspective of such media-oriented investigation of material religion, it would seem that religious sound and sonic materiality are an additional dimension of religion as media. Nevertheless, the eventful and fleeting materiality of the sonic offers another, distinct angle on the influential paradigm of religion as mediation (Eisenlohr 2022). Unlike objects, images, and the material infrastructures and apparatuses of technical media, the sonic is no stable in-between connecting humans and the divine. This is because it does not respect the boundaries of bodies and their environments, or between bodies, intermingling with and passing through them. In particular, the dynamic merger of the sonic with felt bodies, which is the ground for religious sounds' emotive power, is dramatically at odds with conventional notions of mediation. These are based on the existence of a stable in-between, a clearly demarcated third that is distinct from two entities or domains it is supposed to connect by bridging spatial, temporal, or qualitative gaps between them. While the merger of the sonic with felt bodies appears to go against any notion of mediation, evoking a kind of immediacy instead, the sonic does not permanently erase the distinctions between the strands of life they bundle by making the felt body, learned bodily dispositions, discourse, and forms of belonging resonate with each other. Instead, sonic motion acts as a mediator between otherwise different, sometimes even disparate strands of life, including those related to religious traditions, by prompting them to temporarily blur into each other and imbuing them with a shared feel. In this way, the centrality of the body, or more precisely the felt body, is vindicated, as several contributors to this volume make clear, when it becomes the prime site in which such mediation between humans and the divine unfolds through sonic motion. In other words, the sonic makes different or even disparate lines of experience commensurable through motion sensed by the felt body.

The propensity of the sonic to pass through and blur the boundaries between bodies is also responsible for its social and collective force. As the contributors' studies in this volume testify, this is also very much in evidence in religious settings. The potential of the sonic to bring about a temporary merger of bodies, taking hold of them simultaneously by investing them with shared feelings greatly contributes to the formation of religious community. This creation of community through somatic connection can simultaneously extend into the felt aspects of other forms of sociality such as the political identifications and territorialities that feature prominently in several of the book's chapters. Theorist of atmospheres Hermann Schmitz

has called such a merger of felt bodies by atmospheric forces like the sonic “solidary encorporation” (2014, 59). The somatic evidence provided by such solidary encorporation made possible by felt bodies’ openness and permeable boundaries that the sonic acts upon supports the forms of religious and political community that play such a prominent role in the studies this book brings together. Together with the awareness among those present that others are immersed in the same sonic event, such coupling across a multitude of bodies can act as a powerful force of sociality and enables the sonic to play such central roles in religious contexts.

Sonic aesthetics and political projects

The centrality of embodiment in the sonic enactment of gender, borders, and political belonging through religious sounds also points to the complex relationship of the aesthetic on one hand, and the ethical and the political on the other. In fact, in several of the contributions, ethical and political stances feature, along with the generation of religious community, as perhaps the most significant performative outcome of the religious sounds studied. Given that there is at best only a loose coupling of aesthetics and ethics as well of aesthetics and politics, how can ethical and political projects be propelled by the sonic, including religious sounds? The link is highly variable and far from self-evident. The same or similar aesthetics, such as the sonic experiences and sensations in the chapters of this volume, can, in principle, be linked to very different ethical and political positions. Here also, looking for the power of the sonic in its bundling of different strands of life, including religious traditions as well as ethical and political aspirations, makes it possible to better understand the role of the sonic in such ethical and political projects. Making such different registers of lived experience commensurable by temporarily blurring distinctions between them in sonic motion, the aesthetics of religious sounds becomes tied to particular ethical or political aspirations. Sonic intermingling with felt bodies make contingent connections between aesthetics, ethics, and politics seem self-evident through somatic evidence, felt in the flesh. Not only does the loose coupling between aesthetics and politics make an ethnographic encounter with the sonic, including religious sounds, rewarding, because of the need to account for how such coupling could even appear unquestionable in moments of sonic intermingling and immersion. More broadly, only the irreducibility of the sonic, including religious sounds, to political and ethical projects, makes studying the sonic worthwhile in itself. Sonic performances

and experiences produce an excess that resists full capture by political and ethical projects, opening up the possibility of feeding into new spatial politics, social hierarchies, and modes of belonging.

As the explorations of religious sound in this volume show, sonic practices and experiences play a unique and also a profoundly multimodal role in constituting the felt aspects of the religious, activating audition, touch and kinesthetics simultaneously. Reconceptualizing religion through the sonic, the contributors engage with several key dimensions at once that have dominated scholarship on religion in recent years. The workings of the sonic are central to material religion, to religion as medium between humans and the non-human divine, as discursive tradition, as embodied forms of discipline, as well as an institution of belonging. With its stress on the sonic generation of non-discursive bodily knowledge (Lorea 2022), the study of religious sounds can account for the bundling of the non-religious with the religious and vice versa, highlighting such sounds' bridging qualities that are a main mode of how bodies intermingle with the world.

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