

Atmospheric resonance: sonic motion and the question of religious mediation

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Because of its material characteristics, the sonic poses a challenge to the influential paradigm of religion as mediation. This article makes a case for a neo-phenomenological analytic of atmospheres in order to do justice to the sonic in anthropological approaches to religion. Approaching the sonic as atmospheric half-things, I propose a different understanding of religious mediation from the one developed in contexts where images, objects, and technical media dominate. Based on research on the recitation of Urdu devotional poetry among Mauritian Muslims, it is suggested that sonic religion does not function as a stable in-between connecting humans and the divine. Instead, it operates through processes of resonant bundling, intertwining different strands of lived experience, including religious traditions.

Over the past fifteen years, a ‘media turn’ (Engelke 2010) has become influential in the anthropology of religion. This has resulted in much greater attention to the manifold ways in which media practices sustain and reshape religion, while also investigating how religious media practices transform public spheres. The growing interest in the nexus of religion and media is more than an extension of an anthropological interest in media practices to religious contexts. It has also entailed a change in basic understandings of what religion is. As part of a broader trend in the study of religion away from questions of belief, textual and doctrinal content to the material, aesthetic, embodied, and sensual aspects of religion, anthropologists and scholars from neighbouring disciplines have argued for the utility of approaching religion itself as a practice of mediation. Accordingly, religion is taken to be a set of practices, institutions, and sensibilities enabling interaction with a realm of the divine. In this understanding of religion, the realm of the divine with its non- or semi-human actors is removed from the everyday world of human actors and usually imperceptible to them, necessitating particular forms of mediation in order to be accessible. Birgit Meyer has formulated this approach in the following terms:

For me, the intriguing thing about studying religion is that it involves a sense of an unseen reality that is held to exist and yet can only be sensed and rendered present through special techniques. This

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calls scholars to grasp the ways in which such an unseen reality, a professed transcendent, becomes tangible through practices of mediation, the issue being 'how to capture the wow' (Meyer 2020: 9).

Following this line of research, anthropologists and scholars of religion in neighbouring fields have studied how media of various kinds, such as images and objects, as well as modern technical media such as photography, sound reproduction, and audiovisual media, have been deployed in order to interact with the divine (Eisenlohr 2009; Meyer 2004; Meyer & Moors 2006; Morgan 2005; Stolorow 2005). Because the presence of the divine is often taken to be uncertain and considered to be outside the range of everyday perception, various media with their technical and material dimensions help to bridge the gap with deities and other non- or semi-human actors in an otherworld, however conceived. Much of the discussion has focused on the problematization of certain media, the distrust and hopes pinned on them, and the internal debates among religious practitioners about the social and moral consequences of their use or non-use. This surge of interest in the mediatic dimensions of religion against the backdrop of a 'problem of presence' (Engelke 2007; Keane 1997: 51) has largely centred on images, objects, and audiovisual media. Even though the role of sound reproduction in establishing contact with the divine has drawn some attention (Eisenlohr 2006*b*; 2009; Reinhardt 2014), the sonic dimensions of religion have featured less prominently in this new paradigm of religion as mediation.¹ In this article, I argue that the relative lack of exploration of the sonic dimensions of religion from a perspective of religious mediation is not coincidental. It is related to a challenge that the sonic poses for analysing religion as mediation.

The materiality of the media that play a dominant role in this paradigm of religious mediation, such as images, objects, and various technical media, positions such media as an intermediary between humans and the divine, enhancing the connection between them. The materiality of the sonic, however, is not of a kind that would allow for its enduring positioning somewhere in between humans and deities. Its eventful energetic character calls for a different approach, because it is ever-shifting and does not respect the boundaries of objects, things, and human bodies. Indeed, in the act of sonic perception, the sonic as energetic force becomes one with the body of the perceiver, problematizing its in-between status as a mediator of the divine. In other words, the sonic somatically seizes human bodies in a way that things, apparatuses, and objects do not. Instead of remaining in an intermediary position between the divine and humans, it intermingles with human beings, posing a challenge to the very notion of religious mediation. Temporally suspending the distinction between mediators and humans engaged in acts of religious mediation, the sonic as an eventful energetic force points to the necessity to rethink the influential paradigm of religion as mediation.

Drawing on my research on the recitation of *na't* poetry among Mauritian Muslims, I seek to expand an understanding of sonic intermingling with bodies in religious contexts through an analytic of atmospheres. Sonic practices in religious settings often revolve around the generation of emotions and emotive tuning. I try to show how such practices emit sonic atmospheres as forces that pervade settings in a comprehensive way, affecting felt bodies in a holistic manner that far exceeds the sense of hearing. Such atmospheres revolve around suggestions of movement they exert on feeling bodies. These suggestions of movement mediate between different strands of life, such as emotions, memories, and discourse, including religious traditions, as well as learned techniques of the body. The kind of mediation they bring about in the

somatic intermingling of atmospheres and sentient bodies shapes religious practices and sensations, but in a way that is different from how religious mediation has so far been conceived. Militating against the status of a stable in-between connecting the divine and human actors, sonic atmospheres instead perform their work in the sentient body, bringing about resonance between different strands of lived experience. In this way, atmospheres also bridge possible gaps between divine and human actors by stitching together different kinds of human experience in suggested motion.

In an important intervention on religion as mediation, Joel Robbins (2017) has asked why so many people build religious worlds in which divine beings are problematically distant. Only under the presumption of distance can questions of divine presence and absence be virulent enough to motivate deep engagement with and problematization of practices of religious mediation. Robbins writes about humans actively creating such distance between themselves and the divine, such as through sacrifice, drawing attention to the desire for separation from the divine as an important driving force in religious mediation. Robbins's questioning of the givenness of a desire to close the gap between humans and the divine is good to think with when exploring the multiple ways in which people posit different relationships with a religious otherworld through different kinds of mediations, ranging from temporary fusion to marked, enduring separation. The sonic in religious mediation raises the following question: if humans intermingle with the sonic as a religious medium, and thereby eliminate it as an in-between, what does this imply for their relation to the divine?

Mediation is the processes linking different objects, actors, or social formations across qualitative, spatial, or temporal gaps. Such processes require a medium with material dimensions. If the sonic becomes one with human actors in religious settings, this appears to be a radicalization of a medium's self-erasure that is already part of its normal functioning. In order for a medium to operate, it needs to withdraw from what is being mediated. In the case of technical media, perceptual awareness needs to be focused on the moving images when watching a film, but not on the cinematic screen. Likewise, computer users pay attention to the images and texts on the screen, while the monitor itself and the entire technical apparatus it is part of phenomenologically vanish. Phone users are perceptually aware of the voice transmitted when making a call rather than of the mobile device and the infrastructure connected to it. Only when the medium malfunctions, such as when screens pixellate, the network fails, a computer freezes, or a cellphone call drops, does the materiality of the medium that works as an in-between forcefully reappear into awareness, suspending its ordinary 'aesthetic self-neutralization' (Krämer 2008: 28). Such suspension of the self-erasure of the medium and the redirection of its users' attention to its technical materiality is possible if the medium stably remains in between human actors and what is being mediated, even if it appears as a 'vanishing medium' (Sterne 2003: 218) in the act of operating normally. This is the case for technical media, which oscillate between apparent self-erasure and their reappearance.

The sonic merger with the felt body, however, seems to do away with the mediatic in-between status, with sonic affection and the affectedness of the felt body becoming one and the same.² In other words, the materiality of the sonic as fleeting energetic processes requires a different understanding of religious mediation from the one developed in contexts where images, objects, and technical media dominate. It calls for a shift away from technical intermediaries between humans and the divine to felt bodily affectedness as producing a relationship of resonance between different strands of experience.

These registers of experience include memory, discourse (including the discourses of religious tradition), enculturated emotions, and learned auditory dispositions and other techniques of the body. In particular, sonic atmospheric affection can help to fuse religious tradition and its discourses with memories and discourses not predominantly concerned with this tradition, somatically merging them into a resonant whole through sonic suggestions of motion. The work of mediation that the sonic intermingling with bodies performs then centres on the weaving together of religious traditions with other strands of life, and vice versa, so they become imbued with the same feel.

Religion, materiality, and atmospheric half-things

The growing interest in the materiality of religion and the establishment of an approach to religion as mediation have gone hand in hand. This has made the materiality of objects, things, and images used in religious contexts central to analysing interaction between human actors and the divine (Houtman & Meyer 2012; Plate 2015). Sound and sonic events are indisputably material. However, they are not objects or things; their fleeting and dynamic character calls for a different analytic to do justice to them as a central dimension of material religion. At the same time, getting a better grasp on the materiality of sonic religion can also help us rethink religious mediation. In order to understand the work of sound and sonic events in religion, it is important to distinguish them from things and objects. An analytic of the sonic as atmospheric half-things is an important step in this direction, providing us with the means to investigate what exactly sound and sonic events contribute to religious practice and experience.

Phenomenological approaches to atmospheres have characterized them as 'emotions poured out spatially that move the felt (not the material) body' (Schmitz, Müllan & Slaby 2011: 247; see also Schmitz 1969). According to neo-phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz, atmospheres as emotions are not subjective phenomena, but literally forces out there in the world that fill spaces and seize human bodies. They cannot be reduced to definite sensory impressions, but take hold of felt bodies in a diffuse and holistic way. More than moods, they have a distinctive spatial and energetic character as they envelop and intermingle with felt bodies.³ Also, in contrast to the fundamental moods of existential thrownness that Heidegger referred to as *Stimmungen* or *Befindlichkeit* (2010 [1927]: 130-6), atmospheres are thoroughly situational. For the workings of atmospheres, the phenomenological distinction between the felt body (*Leib*) and the material body (*Körper*) is important, because atmospheres act on the former, which also comprises that which is felt to pertain to the physical body, but may be located outside its boundaries.

Atmospheres, according to Schmitz (2014), are also half-things (*Halbdinge*) that, in contrast to things and objects, are fleeting and can be interrupted, such as the wind, pain, a voice, or musical figures. They are also different from things in that their presence and their effects are one and the same, such as a pain's painfulness or the wind's blowing. In contrast, things can be distinguished as causes from their effects, requiring a causal link to achieve their effects, such as a rock's fall causing an injury. Writing about feelings and emotions as atmospheric half-things, Schmitz argues:

First, [half-things] differ from complete things (*Volldingen*), things in the ordinary sense, in their duration and extent. The duration of things is maximally steady in time, they also move steadily in space. Half-things can interrupt their duration and can shift their location in space in an unsteady fashion. Second, they are different from things in the causality particular to them. Things can be distinguished as causes from their effects. In the case of half-things, cause and effect become one in

immediate causality, while one could not ask, following Hume, for a link between cause and effect. In a related fashion, feelings or emotions (*Gefühle*) can be awakened, for example by individual or collective experiences, attitudes, and fates, can disappear, and reawake again at another time at the same or another place, like a voice that falls intermittently silent. Feelings and emotions can at first only be perceived and can then also take hold of and shift onto the perceiver. Yet even in this case the atmosphere does not cause such seizing of the perceiver through an intervening act of seizure, like the stone causing the smashing or shifting of the object hit through its impact, or the medicine through the injection. Rather, the feeling or emotion turns itself into felt-bodily affectedness (*leiblich-affektives Betroffensein*) without additional action as mediating link (Schmitz 2014: 75).

Drawing on recent work on music, sound, and atmospheres (Abels 2013; 2017; 2018; see also Eisenlohr 2018a; 2018b; Riedel 2015), I suggest that sound and sonic events are highly evocative instances of atmospheric half-things. Like the voices and musical figures mentioned by Schmitz, they come and go, can be interrupted, are dynamic, and cannot be confined to definite positions in space. Unlike things, which exist prior to their effects, sonic events as atmospheric half-things do not pre-exist the felt-bodily affectedness they provoke. In the act of intermingling with bodies, their presence and the felt-bodily affectedness they bring about are one and the same. Such affectedness has a comprehensive, holistic character, because sonic events can be perceived with the entire body, far exceeding the sense of hearing. Since the acoustic is confined to the range of the sonic that can be perceived with the hearing apparatus, it is appropriate to speak of sonic rather than acoustic or auditory atmospheres.⁴ As travelling, vibratory forces, sonic atmospheres can be sensed as suggestions of motion (Schmitz 2014: 85). Writing about the atmospheric dimensions of music Gernot Böhme has similarly argued:

The discovery that music is the fundamental atmospheric art has solved an old, always annoying and yet inescapable problem of musical theory, i.e., the question of what does music's so-called emotional effect actually consist? . . . [T]he Aesthetics of Atmospheres gives a simple answer to the question: music as such is a modification of space as it is experienced by the body (Böhme 2000: 14).

The diffuse meaningfulness of such bodily suggestions of motion is difficult to pin down by discursive means, lending a feel to the contexts and situations in which atmospheres occur that is nevertheless hard to specify through language.

Such an analytic of atmospheres poses a challenge to understanding sound and sonic events as mediators of the divine. As atmospheres spread in spaces, intermingle, and become one with bodies, they cannot, strictly speaking, be described as functioning as an in-between bridging the gap separating humans and the divine. If, in a given religious context, the sonic is taken to be an emanation of the divine, its seizure of felt bodies is an instance of oneness with the divine rather than an act of mediation between separate entities. In this respect, the sonic seizure of and intermingling with bodies is similar to spirit possession, such as in Pentecostal Christianity, where the separation between human actors and the divine temporarily collapses (Robbins 2017).

Understanding religious sound and sonic events as atmospheric is also in potential tension with established approaches to religious listening as auditory cultures, acoustemologies, and learned techniques of the body (Erlmann 2004; Feld 1996; Feld, Fox, Porcello & Samuels 2004; Weinrich 2020). It evokes a difference between the facticity and agency of the sonic as an energetic force that is powerful in itself, and the notion, current among anthropologists and historians, that humans invest sound with power, especially in religious settings. If the sonic can be analysed as atmospheric half-things whose presence and the felt-bodily affectedness it brings about are one and the

same, where does this leave cultural analysis with its focus on a diversity of discourses and habituses related to sound?

Taking up the question whether the sonic is powerful in itself or whether human actors invest sound with power, I suggest that both positions are correct; it is just that they refer to different levels of sonic meaningfulness. Auditory cultures and acoustemologies, including those related to religious traditions, revolve around more qualified forms of sonic meaning, such as when they embed sonic meaningfulness within discourses of religious traditions.⁵ Sonic atmospheres, however, comprise the less qualified ‘internally diffuse meaningfulness’ (Schmitz 2014: 53) of bodily felt suggestions of motion, and work through creating resonances between different strands of life. Through the ‘bridging qualities’ (Schmitz 2009: 33) at work in suggestions of motion, sonic atmospheres mediate between strands of lived experience such as memory, enculturated emotions, discourses (including religious traditions), learned auditory dispositions, and other techniques of the body, bringing them together into a resonant whole with an overarching feel. In short, in religious settings, sonic atmospheres take on a mediating role, but not as an in-between that connects human actors and the divine, but by bridging disparate lines of lived experience as atmospheres intermingle with bodies. Analysing Palauan *ruk* dance, cultural musicologist Birgit Abels has recently explored music and dance as atmospheric practices that enact an already motion-laden body. Drawing on Tim Ingold’s understanding of lived experience as a meshwork of lines, ‘interwoven trails rather than a network of intersecting routes’ held together by ‘knot[s] tied from multiple and interlaced strands of movement and growth’ (Ingold 2007: 75, cited in Abels 2020: 166), Abels argues that music and dance

actualize the human body in movement, allowing it to continually transform in sound while recomposing along historical, social and cultural configurations. When musical movement acts on bodily movement in this way, music and dance create resonances between the divergent registers from which lived experience emerges. Among these resonating registers are affect, emotion, discourse and memory ... The resonances themselves are atmospheric (2020: 166).

In a related way, I suggest that the atmospheric suggestions of movement that naït recitation contains make multiple lines of experience – such as religious discourse, auditory dispositions, emotions, and memories – resonate, resulting in a feel pervading all these modalities of experience that is difficult to translate into language. In such a way, sonic motion can enter into relation with more qualified strands of meaningfulness, such as the discourse of religious traditions, acting as somatic evidence for the latter.

Bruno Reinhardt has recently suggested that Charismatic Christian entanglements of prayer and media in Ghana should not be taken as instances of mediation, the reason being ‘the atmospheric quality of Christian charismatic faith and presence, which persistently dissolves the boundaries of discernible – organic and mechanical – mediators into the fluidity of the ecological medium’ (Reinhardt 2020: 1527). Yet, from a neo-phenomenological perspective, atmospheres are more than a union with the ecological medium; they also contain particular mechanisms, suggestions of motion and bridging qualities, that, when acting on felt bodies, make commensurable otherwise distinct modes of lived experience. In making, for example, religious discourse, desires for spiritual travel, and bodily motion resonate with each other (Eisenlohr 2018a), they act as mediators in a particular way. Atmospheres dissolve the boundaries of the entities they intermingle with, but not in an enduring fashion. The differences between the strands of life that atmospheric resonance bundles together reappear when the fleeting

atmospheric half-thing is gone, although an atmosphere may have a lasting impact on what such difference means to those having undergone seizure by an atmosphere.

Atmospheric resonance's simultaneous blurring of boundaries and mediating power also account for its social force. The work of mediation performed by sonic atmospheres is by no means confined to singular subjects and bodies. The suggestions of motion through which sonic atmospheres act on felt bodies can be perceived by several actors and even groups collectively. The fact that the sonic does not respect boundaries of bodies or the boundaries between them, coupled with awareness of being part of a collective experiencing the same sonic movement, enables sonic atmospheres to do their work of mediation across bodies. In fact, one of the powers of atmospheres, especially related to the sonic, is that they can bring about a temporary merger of several bodies into a joint supra-felt body, a process that Schmitz has called 'solidary incorporation' (2014: 59; see also Abels 2017: 14; Eisenlohr 2018a: 116-19). Far from being focused on solitary subjects, such a phenomenological approach to atmospheres is thoroughly social, because it emphasizes the openness and permeable boundaries of feeling bodies that the sonic exploits, often across a multitude of bodies.

Na't recitation in Mauritius

In my research on the recitation of na't, a genre of Urdu poetry in honour of the Prophet Muhammad among Mauritian Muslims, I have investigated the interplay between suggestions of movement in sonic atmospheres of vocal performance, auditory culture, and a reformist South Asian tradition of Islam. Mauritius is a post-plantation creole society in which more than two-thirds of the population are of Indian background. Although Indians, including Indian Muslims, were already present under French rule (1715-1810), the great majority of Mauritians of Indian origin are the descendants of indentured labourers who between 1834 and the First World War migrated to Mauritius under British rule in order to replace the slave workforce in the sugar industry after the abolition of slavery. Roughly 50 per cent of the Mauritian population of approximately 1.3 million are Hindus, while 17 per cent are Muslims, who, like Hindus, are of Indian background. The remainder of the population, mostly Creoles of mixed and predominantly African background, as well as small Franco-Mauritian and Sino-Mauritian communities, is largely Christian, and overwhelmingly Catholic. Postcolonial Mauritius, where Hindus dominate in government and the state apparatus, has adopted a multicultural nation-building strategy in which religious and ethnic communities are officially delineated and recognized. In this policy, the state promotes and celebrates communities' 'ancestral culture' with diasporic connections. The latter in turn largely centre on religious traditions, above all various strands of Hinduism and Islam.

The recitation of na't is widespread among Mauritian Muslims of a certain sectarian background, and its popularity greatly surged when cassette recordings of the genre began to circulate in the 1980s and 1990s, to be supplanted by recordings on audio CDs and MP3 files later on. The poetry extols the Prophet Muhammad's wonderful qualities, and expresses deep feelings of affection for and attachment to him. In many na't, Medina, often described as the Prophet's favourite city, features as a metaphor for the presence of the Prophet. Accordingly, the desire to travel to Medina expressed in the poetic texts is equivalent to the desire to encounter the Prophet personally.

This longing for the Prophet as a revered gateway to the divine aligns with the doctrine of *hazir-o nazir* (present and observant) popular among followers of the Ahl-e

Sunnat wa Jama'at. The Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at is a reformist Islamic tradition that emerged in late nineteenth-century India as a synthesis of Sufi traditions and 'ulema-based Islam (Sanyal 1996). It became extremely popular, with a very large constituency in India and Pakistan. Among followers of this tradition, who became a majority among Mauritian Muslims in the twentieth century, the recitation of na't in devotional events known as *mehfil-e mawlud* is common. These events are held at major dates in the Islamic ritual calendar as well as on auspicious events in the life of families, such as the birth of a child, a wedding, or the passing of school exams. They are part of a complex of piety centred on the figure of the Prophet that is typical for this tradition.

The intense piety centred on the figure of the Prophet, which also involves the recitation of na't, has long been the subject of sectarian critique. According to more purist proponents of the school of Deoband or Salafis, the exuberant praise and adoration of the Prophet expressed in the poetry runs the danger of elevating the prophet to a God-like figure, thereby compromising the unicity of God. Followers of the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at have in turn defended the recitation of na't as a practice reportedly approved by the Prophet himself, and have accused their sectarian opponents of a lack of respect for the Prophet. For them, following the doctrine of *hazir-o nazir*, the Prophet Muhammad was no ordinary human being but remains spiritually present and perceptive long after his death. Expressing one's love for the Prophet through the artful recitation of na't can bring about the presence of the Prophet, who will then emerge among his devotees, listening and observing. The longing for such a personal encounter with the Prophet features in the poetic text as the wish to travel to Medina. The sonic dimensions of vocal performance comprise somatically palpable suggestions of movement that align with and reinforce the doctrinal and textual emphasis on spiritual travel in order to encounter the Prophet that is proper to this Islamic tradition. The atmospheric half-things that the sonic performance emits thereby provide somatic attestation for such religiously charged journeys and encounters.

Certainly, the great attention my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors paid to the sonic aspects of na't recitation is not entirely surprising, given the great importance accorded to the voice in the interaction with the divine in Islamic traditions (Gade 2006). Following a Qur'anic paradigm, vocal recitation is the place where God reveals himself in this world, pointing to the importance of auditory culture embedded in this religious tradition. But my interlocutors also expressed their experiences of vocal sound in language and metaphors beyond Islamic traditions. Several of them told me that in the case of a good na't khwan (an accomplished reciter of the genre), the sound of the voice would literally touch them – it even 'grips you powerfully', in the words of one interlocutor – and transport them to a better place. One of my interlocutors, using French-lexifier Mauritian Creole, the predominant vernacular language of Mauritius, compared this auditory experience with 'getting on a bus' (*mont dan bis*). Another spoke of a collectively experienced 'physical transformation' (*transformasyon fisik*) that the voice of a na't khwan brought about as it, as another interlocutor put it, 'causes this assembly to vibrate' (*fer virbe sa lassamble-la*). As Fareed⁶ described the effects of the voice of a good na't khwan:

I listen and think that I am carried away. It is like someone takes you on a journey when his [the na't khwan's] voice is full of energy. He needs to be able to pronounce the Urdu words in the right way, which many here cannot do. If the Urdu is not good, it is all worthless. But when he pronounces the Urdu the right way and his voice is good, it has an effect. It touches you and makes everyone vibrate.

Fareed emphasized that an interplay between the discursive and sonic aspects of the recitation is necessary for the performance to succeed. But he and other interlocutors also used metaphors of physical contact, motion, and transportation when speaking about the sound of a good na't khwan's voice. These were very important in my interlocutors' descriptions of the sensations that the sounds of the vocal recitation provoked for them. These metaphors in turn evoke the terminology of phenomenological approaches to atmospheres. Detailed spectrographic analysis of na't recitations also provided evidence of the marked sonic movements that na't khwans' voices carry out. These centre on moments of intensification of pitch and loudness combined with a shift of the acoustic energy to higher frequency ranges, followed by decreases on all these parameters. This kind of vocal recitation revolves around vocal enacting of alternating intensification and relaxation, emitting the sensation of motion enveloping and intermingling with the felt bodies of those exposed to them. Such motion does not just align with the textual and doctrinal emphasis on spiritual travel to Medina in order to encounter the Prophet. It also mediates between the different strands of life coming together in the recitation of na't as a devotional activity. These are the discourse of a religious tradition, its learned auditory sensibilities and other techniques of the body, cultural and religiously conceptualized emotions such as affection for the Prophet Muhammad, and memories of previous devotional performances. Such atmospheric suggestions of motion enacted by vocal sound bring all these registers together, provoking a diffuse and holistic sensation that, among other things, serves as somatic authentication for the religious tradition in general, and the motif of encountering the Prophet in particular.

Let us consider the following example from a Mauritian na't recording circulated on CD released in 2001 (Chady 2001) that became very popular. The na't centres on the Medina theme, or the desire of the na't khwan to travel to Medina to be close to the Prophet. In this excerpt of the recitation of the poetic refrain *main madine chala* ('I am to go to Medina'), the reciter's voice enacts a movement of being carried away that coincides with the textual and poetic intensification of the ardent wish to go to Medina.

In the spectrogram of this excerpt of 15 seconds (Fig. 1), the first iteration of the refrain *main madine chala* is followed, after a brief break, by a second and third repetition of the phrase that features an abruptly and dramatically 'rising' voice. The reverb effect introduced in the recording can be clearly discerned in the decaying repetitions of acoustic events that fade into the approximately 0.8 second-long break before the intensified resumption: that is, the second and third iterations of the phrase *main madine chala*. The resumption not only shows suddenly increased loudness, and a rise in fundamental frequency (pitch), but after the brief break the timbre also features a greater concentration of sonic energy in the 'singer's formant' (Sundberg 1974) range between 3,000 and 5,000 Hz, above the ninth harmonic. This shift of the acoustic energy in the reciter's voice towards higher-frequency ranges shows how the voice intensifies, not just in terms of pitch, but above all in the spectral distribution of acoustic energy within the complex sounds that make up the timbre of the na't khwan's voice.⁷

This diagram with its visual representation of the dynamics of vocal sound is not the same as the suggestions of motion that a felt body senses in non-dimensional space. Nevertheless, the spectrographic analysis helps us to see how suggestions of movement can be carried out through vocal sound. Sound, in particular musical sound, has a number of obvious parameters for suggestions of motion such as loudness,

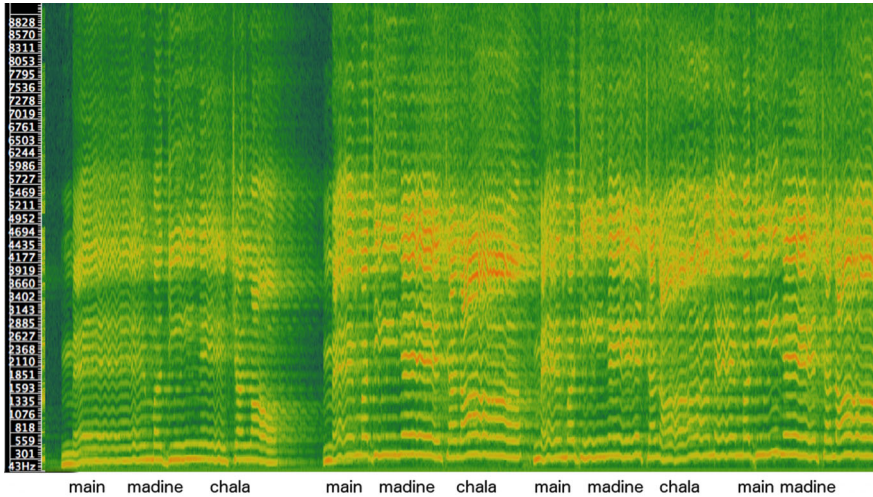


Figure 1. Spectrogram of *main madine chala*. (© Patrick Eisenlohr.)

pitch, rhythm, and the distribution and build-up of sonic energy across a spectrum of frequencies we call timbre.

In the religious setting I am discussing here, such suggestions of motion are not only musically compelling in its acting on the felt bodies of listeners, but also highly meaningful, because in the context of the performance the movement suggests enraptured travel to a desired destination, Medina. Medina in turn, given its close association with the Prophet Muhammad, is a metaphor for the presence of the Prophet himself. When I attended a *mehfil-e mawlud* on the occasion of a wedding at the home of the bride's family in a village in the north of Mauritius two years after this particular CD was released, this very popular na't was also among those performed by a young aspiring na't khwan. Seated among the male participants of the *mahfil* (the women were in another adjacent room of the house), I could feel how after the first iteration of the phrase *main madine chala*, expressing the ardent wish to travel to Medina to encounter the Prophet personally, the second, much intensified rendition of this phrase produced a minor and instantaneous jolt among the men, who joined the na't khwan in reciting the phrase for a second and third time, swaying in unison ever so lightly.

This example shows the alignment of sonic movement, the text of the recited poetry, and the discourse of a particular Islamic tradition focused on the search for a personal encounter with the Prophet Muhammad. Such alignment is a process of bundling in which the lesser-qualified meaningfulness of sonic motion resonates with the meaningfulness of the poetic text and religious discourse, which in the case above is centred on devotion to the figure of the Prophet. It is important to realize that sonic movement is by no means non-representational. It does not contain linguistic signs, but that does not mean it is bereft of semiotic value. Its materiality comprises indices and icons, such as when the shifts of acoustic energy that make up the dynamics of vocal sound structurally resemble the spiritual journeys suggested in the text. The meaningfulness of such sonic motion is, however, typically less qualified and more diffuse than the discourse of a religious tradition, such as the poetic text of na't poetry with its references to the Prophet Muhammad and Medina. Nevertheless, in my

example, discourses of religious tradition and the somatically felt meaningfulness of sonic movement not only align, but are also part of a process in which the atmospheric acts as a bracket bundling religious traditions and religious discourse with other strands of life.

That said, not everyone is equally receptive to the effects of sonic atmospheres such as those exuded by the vocal rendering of *main madine chala* described above. Sonic atmospheres can be described as tangible and objective events. However, the persons whom atmospheres encounter are social beings and subject to different degrees of attunement to specific sonic events, such as na't performances. This shows that the perception of atmospheres also evokes the theme of somatic tuning and histories of bodily discipline as addressed by anthropologists working on sound (cf. Feld *et al.* 2004: 341; Hirschkind 2006: 74-84). The consequences of the encounter with sonic events, including their atmospheric dimensions, are therefore not self-evident.⁸ They are mediated by histories of sensitizing bodies for particular acoustic phenomena such as aspects of the vocal rendering of a na't performance described above, as is common among those committed to the Ahl-e Sunnat tradition and its veneration of the Prophet. Conversely, among their sectarian opponents, such as Salafis, there are those who would appreciate the beauty of a voice, but would be insensitive to, if not resist, the suggestions of movement towards Medina for a personal encounter with the Prophet enacted by the na't khwan's voice. Moreover, not only are the bodies of those perceiving na't as sonic events social, the recitation and listening is usually also a social event, with those present being aware that others are listening to the same vocal renderings of devotional poetry acting on their bodies in a socially shared experience, which is at the same time a mode of intercorporeality (Csordas 2008). This points to the basic premise of the performance that the travel to Medina to personally encounter the Prophet is not a uniquely individual experience, but an act carried out within the framework of a community of Muslims, and thus a shared aspiration, to be followed with others.

The upshot of this is that auditory cultures and related techniques of the body need to be part of the resonating whole that atmospheric mediation creates. Such dispositions and inclinations need to be included within the process of bundling that sonic atmospheres can achieve in order to be effective in their religious setting. It is important to distinguish between the facticity of sonic atmospheres and the kinds of resonance they can bring about as a mediating force. Likewise, Schmitz has distinguished between atmospheres as feelings that seize someone, and atmospheres that are merely observed (2014: 86-7). A Salafi can observe and even appreciate the sonic atmosphere generated by the vocal performance of a skilled na't khwan, but is unlikely to be somatically seized by it. This is because of a lack of dispositions involving techniques of the body and doctrinal inclinations that need to be part of the bundling process for the performance to succeed for him or her.

Atmospheric bundling, migration, and memory

Such bundling of different registers of lived experience through atmospheric suggestions of motion can also include memories and experiences that are not easily classifiable as religious. For example, Mauritian Muslims are part of a wider Indian Ocean world through ancestry, migration, trade, and tourism, along with transoceanic religious networks and pilgrimage (Eisenlohr 2012). The recitation of Urdu na't directly evokes such connections. This is because it is a key practice associated with a specific Islamic tradition linking Mauritius with South Asia, and because of the status of Urdu as

an officially recognized ancestral language, pointing to the Indian origins of Mauritian Muslims. Movement and routes constitute transoceanic space, and sonic practices with their atmospheric dimensions can make such spaces and the linkages across them palpable (cf. Feld 2012; Sykes & Byl 2020). The atmospheric suggestions of motion in the recitation of na't can therefore also resonate with the embeddedness of its Mauritian Muslim practitioners in a wider Indian Ocean world, investing the latter with a particular felt quality. In the process, such religious and other ties across the ocean can be fused into a feeling of belonging and connectedness undergirded by the somatic confirmation of sonic suggestions of motion.

Na't recitation as a sonic practice establishes links to places of religious authority beyond Mauritius in multiple ways. On one hand, it eulogizes Medina and other sites connected to the life of the Prophet Muhammad, expressing the wish for pilgrimage and spiritual travel to these sites in search of a personal encounter with the Prophet, in a holy land across the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the sonic performance also re-creates a link with North India, the part of the Indian Ocean world to which the great majority of Mauritian Muslims trace their origins, and which is also the region where the genre of Urdu na't emerged.

These origins are the subject of contested memories among Mauritian Muslims, crystallizing in the problem of ancestral language. The Mauritian state recognizes and supports such ancestral languages with ethnic and religious connotations claimed by Mauritians of Indian origin, who, taken together, as noted above, constitute more than two-thirds of the Mauritian population. These are Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and Arabic. These modern, standardized languages were rarely known by Indians migrating to Mauritius in the nineteenth century, and were only claimed and taught in schools from the 1940s onward, after migration from India had already ended. Thus, the ancestral qualities of all these languages are tenuous in the Mauritian context, and entirely fictitious in the case of Arabic. Nevertheless, cultivating these languages has played an important role in religious and ethnic realignment among Mauritians of Indian background, resulting in the creation of new religious and ethnic communities among the population of Indian background long after their ancestors settled in Mauritius.

The Mauritian state pursues a multicultural strategy of nation-building that privileges support and performance of diasporic links to origins outside Mauritius, especially through religious networks and affiliations. The demands for teaching and recognizing ancestral languages were part of major political and religious mobilizations among Mauritians of Indian background that began in the first half of the twentieth century and that also revolved around linguistic ideologies of ancestral language (Eisenlohr 2006a). Muslims are unique in Mauritius as a community with two recognized ancestral languages taught in schools, Urdu and Arabic. Muslim parents need to make a choice between them, which is often done on sectarian grounds. Followers of the Ahl-e Sunnat va Jama'at, who tend to have a more positive image of India as a land of origin, usually opt for Urdu. The followers of the more purist Deoband-affiliated Tablighi Jama'at as well as Salafis have a far more sceptical perspective on the Indian origins of Mauritian Muslims. They are suspicious of India as a site of Islamic authenticity, viewing the devotional practices of the adherents of the Ahl-e Sunnat va Jama'at as contaminated by Indian, and ultimately Hindu, cultural elements. This also informs their usual choice of Arabic over Urdu as ancestral language, taking the former to be more connected to the original sources of Islam. The proponents

of Urdu in turn argue that Arabic is very difficult to learn so that, in contrast to Urdu, most Mauritian Muslims would never gain any meaningful command of the language, while the introduction of Arabic would also lead to a decline of Urdu. Some of them also say that they consider Urdu important for maintaining Muslim cultural traditions in support of Islam, drawing on the role of Urdu as a major language of Indo-Muslim identity and tradition. In the words of Imran, a civil servant who has hosted *mehfil-e mawlud* functions in his house:

Arabic is the language of Islam, and we normally speak Creole but books and sermons in Urdu have kept Islam in Mauritius alive. Celebrating *mawlud* and reading na't in Urdu is part of our culture. We do this not just on the birthday of the Prophet but also on special occasions in family life, such as before weddings. It is because of this culture from India that Islam has continued to flourish in Mauritius.

The cultivation of Urdu in the context of Mauritius where French-lexifier Mauritian Creole is the main vernacular language implies an affirmative attitude to the Indian origins of Mauritian Muslims that has become the subject of internal controversy and sceptical assessment. Against the background of these differences over the place of Mauritian Muslims in the world, the recitation of na't involves eulogizing Medina and expresses the wish to travel there, but also reaffirms the memory of India among Mauritian Muslims, reinforcing routes and links across the Indian Ocean. The devotional sonic practice simultaneously enacts links to several places of religious authority, and blends them into a broader sense of belonging in an Indian Ocean world, and a memory of travel and migration within it that includes, but also goes beyond, religious practices and affiliations. Atmospheric suggestions of motion in the sonic dimensions of na't recitation mediate between different strands of lived experience, bridging the religious and the non-religious while turning them into a resonating bundle. They provide the holistic bridging qualities that make commensurable the discourse of religious tradition, learned techniques of the body such as religious listening, as well as memories of travel, pilgrimage, and migration in a wider Indian Ocean world. The result is a somatically felt unity that provides a sense of unquestionable facticity of the strands of life being bundled, the evidence being that it can be felt in the flesh.

Conclusion

The paradigm of religious mediation has been shaped by certain assumptions about the materiality of the media that make interaction with the divine possible. Recent approaches to religion as mediation bear the imprint of the materiality of images, things, and objects as relatively stable mediators between human actors and the divine. In this article, I have argued for rethinking religious mediation, pointing to the importance of atmospheric half-things as found in the sonic. An analytic of atmospheres does not just offer an enhanced approach to the sonic dimension of religion. It also draws attention to the limitations of established accounts of religious mediation and results in a different understanding of religion as mediation. I have suggested that this recasting of religious mediation involves a shift away from religious mediation as concerned with things, images, and technical apparatuses that can be located in between humans and the divine, to the felt body as the site where atmospheric suggestions of motion intertwine different lines of lived experience, including aspects of religious traditions.

By way of conclusion, it might be productive to reflect on what the analysis of na't recitation implies for the relationship of the atmospheric and the sonic with the religious.⁹ Do the sonic and the atmospheric entertain a privileged relationship with religion? My focus on atmospheres should not be taken as an argument for the existence of a particular class of religious atmospheres. As I hope my discussion has made clear, atmospheres bundle different and at times even disparate strands of life through suggestions of motion, imbuing them with a diffuse and overarching feel. In their role as bridging qualities, they escape any categorization as religious. By intertwining religious traditions, emotions, and discourses with other facets of lived experience, atmospheres may, however, be a prime force in the creation of what Matthew Engelke (2012) has called 'ambient' religion that challenges normative distinctions between public and private as well as religious and non-religious. The salience of religious discourse and traditions in such bundling may qualify the overall atmosphere as 'religious', as is certainly the case in na't recitation. There, the diffuse meaningfulness of sonic motion interacts with the more distinct kinds of discursive meanings in the poetry. The latter is proper to the particular Islamic tradition of which the poetic discourse is part. That is, an atmosphere may certainly be qualified as religious, but there is nothing specifically religious about atmospheres in their basic manifestations as suggestions of motion and bridging qualities. This goes against what Schmitz suggests about the religiosity of atmospheres. He traces atmospheres to Homeric notions of divine rage and erotic love that the gods of ancient Greece sent down to seize and take control of humans. He also writes about biblical renderings of divine love or rage as key moments in a genealogy of atmospheres (Schmitz 2014: 45-7). However, contrary to what Schmitz implies, there is no original relationship between religious traditions and atmospheres. Like in na't recitation, atmospheric resonance is particularly good at blurring the boundaries of the religious. This is because the processes of bundling it involves temporarily bring about a suspension of the distinctions between the different registers of experience it interweaves, including religious tradition and discourse.

With respect to sonic atmospheres, my understanding, drawing on Abels (2020), of atmospheres as resonant bundling is also a departure from long-standing intellectual traditions that consider the sonic, especially music, as having a privileged role in making the cosmic and the otherworldly accessible. Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche believed that music is capable of doing so. According to them, music makes perceivable what Schopenhauer called the 'world as will' and Nietzsche the 'Dionysian', which Nietzsche would later recast in a non-dualistic way as the 'will to power', the churning, inchoate cosmic oneness inaccessible to analytic language and conceptual thought (Nietzsche 2003; Schopenhauer 1969 [1819]). This tradition continues, via the work of Deleuze,¹⁰ to inform contemporary perspectives in sound studies about the sonic as a 'primal flux' (Cox 2018: 31). Accordingly, the ultimate cosmic oneness that comprises and pervades all, and causes the emergence of all entities, can only be heard, or sensed as vibratory motion, but not seen or thought. Such ideas about the supreme role of sound and music in making the divine and cosmic perceivable were anticipated by Indian scholars who developed the notion of *Nada-Brahman*, or the Sonic Absolute, centuries earlier, most notably by the musicologist Sharngadeva (1175-1247) (Wilke 2017: 325-9). This sonic metaphysics first formulated by Indian theorists of music, and that Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Deleuze took up much later in European philosophy, also influenced Rudolf Otto's speculations about the intimate link between

music and the sphere of the numinous (Lehrich 2014). Otto took the latter to be the kernel of religion (Otto 2014 [1917]).

The elective affinities between atmospheric resonance and a sonic metaphysics of the all-encompassing absolute, whether in the guise of Sharngadeva's *Nada-Brahman*, Nietzsche's will to power, or Deleuze's ontology of virtual multiplicity, are hard to overlook. Nevertheless, it is, in my view, impossible to commit to such a universalist sonic metaphysics when engaging in anthropology as a comparative venture. Certainly, my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors would find the notion of an all-encompassing sonic oneness either incomprehensible or a heresy against their resolutely dualist ontology, an attack against the unicity of God. Moreover, my investigation of na't recitation also shows that sonic atmospheres are not inextricably intertwined with the divine or a religious domain. Their important role in religion and in making sensible the divine results from the inclusion of religious traditions and discourse within a broader process of atmospheric bundling through the power of resonance. The suggestions of motion that enable felt bodies to perceive such resonance then imbue all registers of experience such resonance intertwines with a shared feel, including those related to religious traditions. As a result, the feeling, the feeling body, memories, learned bodily dispositions, and discourse blur into each other. Suspending distinctions between subject and object, the feeler and the feeling, as well as the different strands of life interlaced in resonance, they momentarily become one in resonant motion. The resulting resonant oneness may seem to militate against the notion of mediation, because it apparently constitutes immediacy as such. However, atmospheric resonance brings together different strands of life into a felt oneness only temporarily. Atmospheres are thoroughly situational and do not permanently erase the distinctions and disparities between different lines of experiences. They do not reverse the individuation of entities (Simondon 1992 [1964]), making them slide back into a virtual domain. Therefore, atmospheric resonant motion does not do away with religious mediation. It instead engenders a shift away from mediation as an enduring intermediary between humans and the divine, towards mediation as a bundling of different, at times even disparate, strands of life through the suggestions of motion intermingling with felt bodies.

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NOTES

¹ Exceptions include Blanton (2015), Eisenlohr (2018a; 2018b), and Kapchan (2007), but not all of these authors explicitly frame their inquiry in terms of religion as mediation. Probably the best-known study is

Charles Hirschkind's compelling (2006) analysis of the ethical dimensions of cassette sermons in Cairo. Hirschkind (2011), however, does not see his focus on the cultivation of an ethical self and sensorium as compatible with the paradigm of religion as mediation. Most studies of Islamic sounds do not concern religion as mediation, but instead focus on public spheres and urban soundscapes, addressing questions of belonging, recognition, and citizenship (Tamimi Arab 2017; Weiner 2014).

² A similar case of radicalization of a medium's self-erasure are practices of 'drinking the Qur'an', where the bodies of human actors and the medium of the divine become one (El-Tom 1985).

³ Building on precursors such as Binswanger's (1933) work on 'tuned spaces' and Tellenbach (1968), in the 1960s Schmitz (1969; see also 2014) began a tradition of theorizing atmospheres as phenomena in their own right, later extended by Gernot Böhme (2017) as an aesthetic theory of atmospheres to the fields of architecture and design. I draw on this tradition rather than on more recent uses of the notion of atmosphere to designate dimensions of affect, such as in Kathleen Stewart's characterization of atmospheres as 'lived affect' (2011: 452). (For a critique of assimilating atmospheres to affect, see Eisenlohr 2018a: 124-8.) Schmitz's work is of major importance for the argument advanced here, not only because he likely is, along with Böhme, the foremost theorist of atmospheres, but especially because his understanding of atmospheres as suggestions of movement that intermingle with felt bodies aligns very closely with the workings of the sonic, such as in the religious setting I discuss in this article. At the same time, his characterization of atmospheres as dynamic half-things that refuse to play the role of relatively stable in-betweens in acts of religious mediation is useful for drawing attention to the particularities of the sonic in contrast to the things and images that dominate in discussions of material religion. Schmitz's notion of atmospheres as bridging qualities is in turn helpful for understanding the situational bundling of different registers of life that atmospheric resonance brings about as an alternative form of religious mediation.

⁴ Needless to say, atmospheres are comprehensive phenomena that can also involve sight, smell, and taste. Because the sonic is already multimodal, involving hearing, touch, and kinaesthetics, it appeals to the holistic character of atmospheres to a greater extent than an investigation of atmospheres solely focused on lighting and vision would. If, following Schmitz (1969; 2014: 85), suggestions of motion are a central working mechanism of atmospheres, the sonic as travelling kinetic energy that also activates touch and kinaesthetics entertains a privileged relationship with atmospheres.

⁵ Al-Ghazali's theology of listening, whose influence on Islamic engagements with music continues (Weinrich 2020), is a prime example. Al-Ghazali's approach is not a sonic metaphysics, but a practical account of the ethical implications of listening to music for the relationship between Muslims and God.

⁶ Pseudonyms are used throughout.

⁷ In a previous publication, I described in detail how my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors took the appropriate production of vocal sound not just to be a matter of learned techniques that make up the interplay of sonic intensifications and relaxations described here and that my interlocutors felt was coming from the na't khwan's 'heart' and touched them profoundly, generating particular sensations of motion. Some of them also stressed that a good na't khwan had to lead a pious lifestyle and display all the relevant signs of lawful and proper Islamic conduct with sincerity. Their descriptions kept coming back to the tension between preoccupations with ultimately unknowable sincere piety and much more materialist accounts of what kind of sensations the voice of a good na't khwan provoked among listeners (Eisenlohr 2018a: 86-9).

⁸ This is an important qualification of the very widespread notion that types or modes of music and their emotional effects are intrinsically and invariably linked, which can be found in traditions as diverse as Indian raga music (Jairazbhoy 1971), the *Affektenlehre* in European Baroque music (Großmann 2014: 192-4) and, in Islamic traditions, in al-Farabi's *Great book of music* (Shaw 2019: 44).

⁹ The recent rise of interest in phenomenological approaches to atmospheres also extends to atmospheres of the religious; see Gregersen (2021) and Radermacher (2021).

¹⁰ Deleuze distinguished between actual, individuated phenomena and the virtual forces of difference and multiplicity behind them that generate the actual. At times he suggests that music plays a special role in rendering the virtual sensible as the pre-individual totality that provides the ground of emergence for all entities: '[M]usic must render nonsonorous forces sonorous' (Deleuze 2005 [1981]: 40). Elsewhere he connects the virtual and the sonic in the following terms: 'One can also conceive of a continuous acoustic flow ... that traverses the world and that even encompasses silence. A musician is someone who appropriates something from this flow' (Deleuze 1998 [1980]: 78, cited in Cox 2011: 155).

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Résonance atmosphérique : le mouvement sonore et la question de la médiation religieuse

Résumé

En raison de ses caractéristiques matérielles, l'acoustique présente un défi à l'influent paradigme de la religion comme médiation. Cet article fait valoir l'intérêt, pour les approches anthropologiques de la religion, d'une analyse néo-phénoménologique des atmosphères qui rend justice à la dimension sonore du religieux. Abordant l'acoustique comme des demi-choses atmosphériques, l'auteur propose une compréhension de la médiation religieuse différente de celle développée dans des contextes où les images, les objets et les supports techniques prédominent. Sur la base de recherches menées sur la récitation de la poésie pieuse ourdoue chez les musulmans de l'île Maurice, l'auteur avance que la religion sonore ne fonctionne pas comme un intermédiaire stable reliant les humains au divin. Elle opère plutôt au travers de processus de regroupements de résonance, entretenant différentes strates d'expériences vécues, notamment les traditions religieuses.

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