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## Singing and Sensing the Unknown: An Embodied History of Hindu Practice in Ghana

Shobana Shankar  
*Stony Brook University (SUNY)*

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## Singing and Sensing the Unknown: An Embodied History of Hindu Practice in Ghana

### Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Stony Brook for a Fellowship in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences that enabled me to undertake research in Ghana in 2019.

## Singing and Sensing the Unknown

### An Embodied History of Hindu Practice in Ghana

Shobana Shankar

Soon after the untimely death of his mother in 1945, Kwesi Essel started what he described as a prayer camp in his hometown of Senya Beraku, a fishing village in southern Ghana.<sup>1</sup> He led a small group in meditation and other practices, although what all their activities were is not clear. To be sure, Essel had felt a strong connection to the religion of his mother, who was renowned for her ability to enter different states and communicate with the spirit world, and worked as a priestess in the court of the local Fante traditional ruler. A Christian presence also existed in Senya Beraku, where the Dutch had built a slave “castle,” Fort Good Hope, in the eighteenth century. What was probably an eclectic prayer camp concerned with spiritualism rather than religion grew into a community of thousands affiliated with the Hindu Monastery of Africa (HMA), headquartered in the Odorkor area of Accra.<sup>2</sup> Essel, who became initiated as the first African Hindu monk, remained the guru or spiritual leader of the HMA’s five branches in Ghana and one in Togo until his death in 2016. The Monastery holds a unique reputation, especially among the Indian diaspora, as a place of Hindu devotional songs (*bhajans*), performed in Indian languages by Africans, many of whom are Christian or Muslim.<sup>3</sup>

It may be surprising that Swami Ghanananda Saraswati, as Essel became known, described his early community as a prayer camp. Such camps now proliferate in Ghana, Nigeria, and other African countries, not as Hindu sites but as Pentecostal Christian outposts. These

ritual facilities, as Asonzeh Ukah describes them, have dramatically altered African urban landscapes, providing renewal and resources that deliberately “assert religious presence and power in the social and cultural ecology of a people.”<sup>4</sup> Lagos and Accra could be remapped to show the locations that are perceived as sites of spiritual power in the minds of city-dwellers and visitors from afar. Yet in Ghana, Pentecostal camps have drawn scrutiny nationally and abroad over their abuse of people with psychosocial disabilities who either came voluntarily or were committed by others claiming to want to cure them of spiritual illnesses.<sup>5</sup> Though nothing like this has come to light in the history of Hinduism in Ghana, Essel’s camp did coalesce for at least one of the same purposes that prayer camps have today—to control the human body and its senses in an effort to reach the unseen world. Of all the senses, sound is perhaps the most important, I argue, for an African Hinduism that represents an embodied experience and religious style more than a belief system.

As Hinduism in West Africa emerged largely outside the agency of Indians, Swami Ghanananda understood that its translatability to a cultural landscape quite different than that of its birthplace would be tested.<sup>6</sup> In the competitive religious environment of Ghana, the HMA and other Hindu movements, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, or Hare Krishna movement) and the Sathya Sai Baba Mission, have been condemned by Pentecostal preachers as “occultists” in the same manner that

white Christian missionaries denounced indigenous African religions in earlier centuries.<sup>7</sup> One strategy that Ghanaian Hindus and their supporters have used is to highlight the universality and historicity of Hinduism as “the original religion of the world” in which all believers can find “fulfillment,” thereby employing a “discourse of antiquity” that highlights Hinduism’s inclusiveness.<sup>8</sup> Another strategy I analyze in this article, using ethnographic and documentary evidence collected over two visits to the Monastery in 2017 and 2019, is the use of Hindu music, mantras, and other sounds, as well as silences, to emphasize the unknown and unknowable in the search to become one with the divine. In other words, African Hindus, especially their leading guru, directed devotion away from understanding through translation of music, words, and sounds in order to promote performance, particularly in public as a participatory experience in which newcomers can join. Swami Ghanananda, chastising the Indian diaspora for not sharing Hinduism with Africans, argued that this belief system contained the means for “harmonizing the efforts of all religions to foster the needed peace for both material and spiritual development.”<sup>9</sup>

This article recasts translation, a central theme in religious studies, especially in African studies. Scholars in this field feel a strong impetus to make African cosmologies comprehensible to non-Africans, usually secular-minded Westerners who see African cultures as oral, vernacular, indigenized, and “different.”<sup>10</sup> Africanist scholars of African religions have emphasized the modern processes out of which African religions have developed, challenging the Eurocentric secularist assumptions that Africans’ religions are

holdovers from tradition. Does Hinduism need to go through the same processes as Christianity or Islam to become an African religion? To be more specific, must Hinduism be vernacularized as the Christian Devil was among the Ewe—through struggles between selfhood and community as part of the conversion process and new kinds of personhood that emerged—as Birgit Meyer argues in *Translating the Devil?*<sup>11</sup>

My research suggests that conversion and translation, arguably concerns of Christianity and Islamic studies, are not the most central questions for African Hindus themselves. As a relatively new religion among Africans, distinct from that of the Indian diaspora that has been the primary focus of research to date, Hinduism represents a popular devotion in which belief is only part of the religious project, and in fact can be a distraction from the goal of earthly detachment. Peter Lambertz, who has studied Japanese-origin spiritualist movements in the Democratic Republic of Congo that came via Brazil, offers a helpful framing for studies of “sense making” that allow us “to overcome the analytical distinction between a phenomenological focus on experience on the one hand, and a mentalistic concentration on the other.”<sup>12</sup> This sense making is precisely my focus in seeking to show how African Hindus cultivate sound in everyday lived experiences in ritual and nonritual encounters at the Monastery.

Sound has been an underdeveloped theme in religious studies, even with the turn to lived experiences and everyday practice.<sup>13</sup> Indian music in Africa, furthermore, has been trapped in scholarly preoccupation with Bollywood music, which has overshadowed other fascinating musical

cross-currents, such as that between India and Senegal in Sufi music.<sup>14</sup> Hinduism in Ghana is also a unique test case for the argument that the religious soundscape is noisy, particularly due to competition and conflict between Christianity and Islam and within these religious communities in Africa.<sup>15</sup> Hinduism also has a “necessary sonic realm built into its structure and substance.”<sup>16</sup> Competition is less its modus operandi in the Hindu Monastery of Africa; rather, controlling sound to calm the mind and body was Ghanananda’s prescription to his listeners. “Gradually all sounds will melt away. In the beginning you can close your ears with cotton, wax or any other substitute for some time to shut out gross sounds which disturb your Japa [mantra repetition] and concentration,” he wrote in *The Secret of True Spiritual Practice*.<sup>17</sup> Hinduism was made for a raucous religious landscape like Ghana’s, and the guru understood how to create the effect of an oasis or refuge for the experimentation with sound control.

I start by exploring Ghanananda’s life, the history of the Hindu Monastery of Africa, and its rootedness in the popular devotion tradition (*bhakti*) of Krishna worship, tied to a North Indian Hindi-language ashram on the Ganges River. Out of his learning there, the African guru developed a set of rituals, a routine of prayer and silence, and an entire corpus of writing to shape the creation of a cultural world within Hindu camps that were visited not just by Africans but also by Indians in West Africa. The second section of the article examines how the untranslated and devotional musical tradition at the HMA has incorporated new practices and expansions of Hinduism, notably in the performance of South Indian *bhajans* in Tamil, Telegu, and Malayalam. African singers’ ability to perform these songs,

without knowing the words, has made a new ritual in the Monastery’s repertoire by adding a regional festival sought by the increasing number of South Indian migrants to Ghana. The third section explores a new layer of Hindu sound that coincided with the visit of a female Indian guru (*swamini*) following the death of Swami Ghanananda. Her gender ambiguity and production of sounds and deities have brought into being popular devotion focused on fertility, a focus that did not exist before in the Ghanaian Hindu context. This new gendered creation of Hindu sound and meaning emerged after the death of the beloved Ghanaian guru, giving the community a renewed sense of identity to carry on.

### **Lost in Strange Sounds**

By the early 1960s, Kwesi Essel had moved his prayer camp from Senya Beraku to Odorkor.<sup>18</sup> Encouraged by an acquaintance who was reportedly high up in the government, he began a correspondence course with the Divine Life Society ashram based in Rishikesh, on the Ganges River in India, with branches throughout the world. The ashram was founded by Swami Sivananda in 1936, after he, too, had founded a kind of prayer camp. A major focus of the Divine Life Society was the dissemination of magazines and other literature in English and Indian languages.<sup>19</sup> Sivananda was deeply invested in using Indian languages, which surely surprised Essel when he went to study at Rishikesh in the late 1960s. The Ghanaian remembered feeling utterly lost and inadequate, ashamed that “the colonial masters had not taught them [the Africans] anything but Christianity, and now at the Ashrama in India he could not understand anything either, the language was foreign and he could understand nothing of all that

was chanted.”<sup>20</sup> So he was advised to “listen to the noise from mouths” of these around him, those whom he did not understand, “and understanding will come.”<sup>21</sup>

After returning to Ghana, Essel led spiritual discourses and *pujas* (worship services) that attracted a growing group of followers, including Africans and some Indians, though others worshipped in a temple started by Sindhis who had fled Pakistan after Partition in 1947. Shortly thereafter, in 1976, Swami Krishnananda Saraswati, a Divine Life guru who had worked with Gandhi in the anticolonial struggle and established the Human Services Trust charitable organization in Mauritius, visited Ghana and laid the foundation of the Hindu Monastery of Africa in Odorkor.<sup>22</sup> He initiated Essel as the first African Hindu monk, renaming him Swami Ghanananda Saraswati and anointing him the head of the Monastery.

The Divine Life Society and the discipleship with Swami Krishnananda laid certain foundations for the Ghanaian guru, but it is clear that he interpreted these through his experience of losing himself in foreign sounds. While Sivananda’s Divine Life Society made yoga the major “export” of his Hindu message to others, particularly in the West,<sup>23</sup> Ghanananda felt that sound was more fundamental, even in yoga. “The soul is of God, not of the physical body. To verify this truth, we must resort to yoga which includes meditation and ‘Japa,’ the repetition of the holy names of God.”<sup>24</sup> At the HMA today, there is a notable absence of yoga, especially among its most ardent Hindus; yoga is almost understood as a Western fad that misses Hinduism’s essence. Another example of Ghanananda’s autonomous vision is in the Ghanaian guru’s veneration of Krishna, avatar of

Vishnu. Ghanananda’s Indian guru, Swami Krishnananda, focused on Krishna worship, and he urged his Ghanaian disciple to promote it because of the simplicity of the popular devotion around Krishna. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness also had a following in Ghana for decades, creating the possibility of a larger community.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the rich artwork associated with the Indian epic tradition had inspired an older fascination with Hindu images. Essel’s own journey began when he started to collect pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses from catalogue advertisements for Indian astrologers and talismans, such as rings.<sup>26</sup> Krishna, a god who was so dark that he was shown in blue, was pictured with snakes and dancing women, which tapped into a deep vein of West African art and worship of Mami Wata, a water deity of African and African diasporic communities.<sup>27</sup> Yet, in apparent defiance of his teacher, Ghanananda wanted to go beyond the visual appeal of the blue god and explore more esoteric visual representations of the lingam, the aniconic symbol of generativity associated with Shiva, the destroyer god. Beyond that, he sought to create a more holistic Hindu cultural repertoire, forgoing image for a focus on sound as sacred. Swami Ghanananda did not want to focus on a single deity, set of images, or tradition of worship, but rather on a sensorial universe.

Thus, the theme of words spoken at specific auspicious occasions runs throughout his many writings. In one of his instructional works, titled *Vedic Sacrifice and Prayers*, Swami Ghanananda outlined major *yajna* (*hawan*, or ritual sacrifices, typically done by creating a fire) and accompanying mantras and verses. He explained the significance of the word *OM*

as the opening to recognize and awaken God, and the ending, *Svaha*, as the closure of the act of sacrifice. He quoted the *Bhagavad Gita* to instruct his disciples how they could give of their bodies to the divine: “Other aspirants offer the sense of the eyes, ears, and organs and of the ingoing (prana) and outgoing (apana) breath in the fire of yoga of self-restraint kindled by knowledge (Gita 4: 27).”<sup>28</sup>

Along with numerous mantras and hymns, Swami Ghanananda encouraged the chanting of the Gayatri Mantra, which is considered the “mother of the vedas” and revered as the first mantra taught to a boy of the higher castes when he is initiated.

Om Bhur Bhuvaḥ Swaḥ  
Tat-savitur Vareṇyaṃ  
Bhargo Devasya Dheemahi  
Dhiyo Yonaḥ Prachodayāt

General meaning: We meditate on that most adored Supreme Lord, the creator, whose effulgence (divine light) illumines all realms (physical, mental, and spiritual). May this divine light illumine our intellect.

As an ancient verse from the *Rig Veda*, the Gayatri Mantra has been repurposed many times over, and Swami Ghanananda classified it as a universal poem sung aloud to “purify the atmosphere.”<sup>29</sup> This is a distinct departure from its former reservation for high-caste initiates, which had already been eroded by Hindus of the Vedanta school like Sivananda. They mainstreamed the mantra as a “widespread core practice of Hinduism,” chanted either as part of a *sadhana* or as a regular practice.<sup>30</sup> Swami Sivananda told his audiences that the “common book for Hindus is the Gita and the common mantra is Gayatri” and recommended the following ten-day practice, for Christmas or *puja* holidays:

“Get up at 4 A.M. Start the japa of Mantra or Gayatri . . . take some milk or fruits.”<sup>31</sup>

Given its globalization and popularization, it is not surprising that the performance of the Gayatri Mantra at the HMA has been contextual and communicative of elements not found in the words themselves. In the classical Indian dance Bharatanatyam, for example, the aura of devotional prayer has been invoked in the Gayatri Mantra through bodily movements that mimic the movement and brightness of light and the fanning of the lotus flower. In Accra, the Gayatri Mantra is performed communally in the mornings as fires are lit in the central courtyard. Participation in the Gayatri mantra is open to all present, not just self-identified Hindus. This echoes the point made by Katherine Zubko, citing the performance of mantra in dance. Non-Hindu audiences can participate in “secularized *bhakti*” (devotion) and “de-personalized *rasa*” (aesthetic mood) “that [move] across circumscribed religious traditions” to sustain meanings in different religions.<sup>32</sup>

Accompanying the Sanskrit verses in the HMA repertoire are numerous Hindi-language *bhajans* for Krishna.

Ganga Yamuna Nirmal Pani  
Sheeta Hot Shareer – Chalo Mana  
The waters of the Ganges and  
Yamuna are pure  
They cool the body – let us go

These are followed by more stanzas evoking the mythic places of Krishna stories.

Meela Ke Prabhi Giridhar Nagar  
Charan Kanwal Parseer –  
Chalo Mana

Meera says “O Lord Giridhar Nagar,  
put my head at the lotus feet  
Let us go [to the banks of the Ganges  
and Yamuna]

These *bhajans* evoke Rishikesh, another name for Lord Vishnu, which is central in Krishna stories and in the HMA founder's spiritual path. Thus, the authority of the Vedas and Indian vernacular devotion are both evoked in the assemblage of songs that Swami Ghanananda taught to African Hindus.

The HMA repertoire has had a regular schedule of sacrifices performed daily, early in the morning, followed by *bhajans*, with *kirtan* (communal singing) in the evenings on weekdays and on Sundays early in the morning for an extended time. Gatherings of devotees (*satsang*) also convene to discuss topics related to Hindu beliefs and practices. Songbooks are available with lyrics in Latin script, allowing visitors to join. The doors to the sanctums housing idols (*murti*) of Krishna, Shiva, and Durga are kept open only during certain times when the deities are awakened by bells, dressed and adorned with fresh flowers, fed with milk and fruit, sacrificed to with fire, and called with prayers and songs. Even during the *kirtan*, it is not possible to see the idols unless one enters their individual houses within the Monastery complex. At other times, the doors are closed. Thus, devotional music like *bhajans* (Hindu hymns) and mantra chanting during *pujas* and other rituals envelope the silent idols and draw focus to sound, away from potential controversy over idolatry that Wuaku and Atiemo have written about in relation to Hinduism in West Africa. Sound in no way replaces the visual, as seeing and being seen by the divine are highly significant and regularized experiences known as *darshan* to Hindus in India, who keep household shrines and visit temples for this very purpose. Swami Ghanananda used the words of the Divine Life founder, Swami Sivananda, to construct a different order of pleasures, with sound enhanced over sight to "please the mind" and lead a person to purity and clarity.<sup>33</sup>

### Primal Sound and Songs for Potency

The disciples and other regular visitors to the Hindu Monastery of Africa include well-educated professionals and also working people who are comfortable and mobile.<sup>34</sup> The earliest members of Swami Ghanananda's community included university science professors, musicians, and civil servants, many of whom were women. Traders and other businesspeople who had connections to Indians, particularly the Sindhi shop owners, as well as aficionados of Indian cinema were also attracted to Hinduism, though less to the Monastery than to the more youth-oriented ISKCON movement. Unlike Christianity, which has a strong prosperity gospel that attracts poorer segments of society along with the well-to-do, Hinduism seems to attract the already relatively prosperous who are spiritually curious about non-Western and non-Abrahamic cosmologies and even culturally nationalistic about indigenous knowledge.<sup>35</sup> As Elom Dovo insightfully notes, Swami Ghanananda's preaching is as much about the unknown as it is about "knowing."<sup>36</sup>

It is perhaps this appeal of mysticism and the esoteric, then, that accounts for Monastery disciples' disinterest in the translation of Hindu music and prayers into Ghanaian languages like Fante or Twi. In this regard, African Hinduism sharply diverges from Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam. Swami Ghanananda's explanations of the work of sound in the body and mind appear to be one reason for this disinterest in the Indian languages of Hinduism. (It should be made clear that he told Hindu epics and folktales in English and Twi, but never translated songs.) Another reason for keeping music "faithful" may be that Hindu music has commonalities in its instruments with African music, whereas

foreign Christian missionaries fought hard to separate African music from European music until African Christians took matters into their own hands. About “bells, cymbals and drums,” the Hindu Monastery leadership wrote: “these are used to drive away evil spirits and they also invite good spirits into the Temple. They provide an auspicious atmosphere for worship. By playing the small drum the holy sound of OM is produced. OM stands for Brahman [the Creator] or the Almighty God. It is the mother or primal sound. All other sounds emanate from OM.”<sup>37</sup>

It is useful to contrast this Hindu view of indigenous cultural forms with Christian history. In his history of Christian gospels, religious studies scholar Abamfo Atiemo shows how the localization and diversification of forms of Christian music have long been a priority for local believers in Ghana.<sup>38</sup> Christianity has, of course, been a Ghanaian religion for many centuries. Indigenous agency and independence in the church, undergirding “conflicts and compromises between the custodians of the Western missionary heritage and African Christian groups and individuals,” is a factor that has touched virtually every sphere of religious ideology and practice, from theological interpretation to marriage, dress, and music.<sup>39</sup> While gospel music’s popularity can be dated to the 1980s, Atiemo identifies an older continuum of musical forms in which to situate newer entrants like gospel music. By the late nineteenth century, African singing bands used local dialects and tunes to create African Christian musical forms that were distinguished from the European ones that were understood as “normal” within the church. There were also Ghanaians who composed church music that was deemed more “European.” These

compositions were largely excluded from the repertoire of singing bands that used African songs, which foreign missionaries accepted as long as no percussion instruments were used. African Initiated Churches, known as *Sunsum Sore* or spiritual churches, rejected this prohibition and combined wholly African tunes with drums of different kinds, hand bells, hand clapping, and tambourines to feature songs that had “healing as a major theme.”<sup>40</sup> Musicologist J. H. Nketia’s observation of the African ideal of the worship occasion as recreation supports Atiemo’s assertion that Ghanaians’ love of gospel is part of an impetus for self-expression as communal healing that required a radical reorientation of Christianity away from control by white missionaries.

Hindu music at the Monastery, on the other hand, has always featured hand bells or cowbells, other percussion, harmonium, and various instruments used in precisely the same way—for healing and, most important, cleaning the atmosphere—as Swami Ghanananda described the Gayatri Mantra’s daily importance. Rather than view this healing drum only as part of the aforementioned “discourse of antiquity” that authenticates Hinduism in Ghana, I would suggest that it is a popular devotion in which trust is in the divine and in the guru as a teacher. Moreover, Swami Ghanananda’s silence on translation acknowledges his own lack of knowing and cultivates pluralistic spirituality at the Monastery, where discovery is more central than dogma. As he liked to tell visitors, “I am not God . . . I am only a teacher. I only help you identify the path to salvation. Everything else depends on you.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Swami Ghanananda did not claim to understand Hinduism better

than others but rather emphasized his journey to Rishikesh as one undertaken for learning; indeed, his trip was sponsored and sanctioned by a group of Ghanaians seeking to have more access to Hindu knowledge. It is possible, therefore, that the reluctance to translate songs may result from an apprehension of translating holy texts, which is not unique to Hinduism or to cross-cultural transplantations of religious ideas.<sup>42</sup> Hindu music retains its holiness according to “how people use it and the status they give it” in immediate uses, which still remain uncommon, esoteric, and embodied in communal performance.<sup>43</sup> This centrality of music seems, therefore, to be an indigenization suited to the music history and interreligious context of Ghana instead of to the full-body yoga promoted by the Divine Life Society, although the different approaches had a similar purpose: “unification . . . making it clear that shared action was more important for creating community than belief.”<sup>44</sup>

The loss of ego, of the “consciousness of being an individual,” is a central aspect of the ascetic orientation of the Monastery.<sup>45</sup> This loss even translates to a waning of the particularistic and ethnocentric identities of Indian Hindus who come to pay respects to the Ghanaian guru and see the deities at the temple. While Swami Ghanananda studied in a Hindi-focused Vaishnavite school, in recent years, he has honored requests for the Monastery to host *bhajans* for the other deities. The most significant of such occasions is Makaravilakku, a month-long festival celebrating Rama’s acceptance of the ritual sacrifices of a common tribal woman devotee, Sabari, and his meeting of the deity Sasta, also known as Ayyappa. The stories of Ayyappa do not come from the Vedas but rather from folklore of Kerala and Coorg in

South India. These devotees honor Ayyappa, a celibate god known for great strength, who is the son of two men, Shiva and Lord Vishnu – the latter disguised as the woman Mohini during their coupling. The South Indians also venerate the god Murugan, also known as Karthikeya, the bachelor god of war who was the son of Shiva. The worship of Karthikeya for Tamils overlaps with the worship of Ayyappa. The songs urge pilgrims to make the annual arduous journey at Sabarimala to reach the Ayyappa shrine on a mountaintop, and to attend the Thaipusam festival for Murugan, during which his devotees are said to carry their heavy debts to discard. The Monastery thus becomes host to overlapping deities and festivals clustering around the winter solstice, celebrated mainly in South India and its diaspora – including Tamils, Telugus, and Malayalis – in Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and elsewhere. The Ayyappa ritual is unique for bringing together Hindus from different castes, as well as Muslims and Christians. As it has grown to millions of pilgrims, it has become a scene of intense protest, particularly over the banning of women of child-bearing age from entering the Ayyappa temple. This ban is also a means of high-caste domination, as the lower castes recognize women’s power more directly.<sup>46</sup>

It is remarkable to find the Makaravilakku in practice in Ghana, as the festival is not well documented among the Indian diasporas in Africa. In South Africa, the Indians descended from indentured workers – largely Tamil and Telugu – tended to marry within their linguistic enclaves, and the Hindi-speaking “passenger Indians” who came as businesspeople also arranged their unions apart from other Indians. This endogamy meant their rituals remained

distinct as well, although the South Indian groups have had more crossover in worship and marriage.<sup>47</sup> The Sindhis in Accra have their temple, but, strikingly, the South Indian community did not approach them. Some in the newer Indian diasporas in Africa present a uniquely different kind of religious identity, one that rejects high-caste control and its gender conformity and embraces social intercourse with Africans. It is not clear for how many years the HMA has hosted these South Indians to perform the Makaravilakku at their temple, but it has been long enough that Ghanaians join Indians in venerating Lord Ayyappa in *bhajans* in Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam that are performed only once a year in Accra. Swami Ghanananda's nonconformity to the strict Brahmin (upper-caste) interpretation of the Divine Life Society is striking and a testament to an African sensibility about the sacredness of sound as a means of transforming Hinduism.<sup>48</sup>

On the night of January 12, 2019, the HMA hosted the annual Ayyappa *bhajan* performance. The lengthy performance by a single male Indian singer, with responses in Tamil from the Ghanaian and Indian audience, contained the following lyrics:

Vel is the trident weapon in the  
hands of Lord Murugan

The trident-holding Murugan  
residing in the great Pazhani  
[Palani] hill

(Stanzas above are repeated by the  
audience.)

These are the other names of  
Murugan

The one with a kind and  
compassionate heart

(Stanzas repeated by the audience)

The one who protects those who  
surrender unto his feet

(Stanzas repeated by the audience)

Subramanya the one who killed the  
Demon Soora

The one who was born of Karthigai  
women and makes his consorts Valli  
and Devayani delighted

(Stanzas repeated by the audience)

The song, like the occasion, itself reveals the complicated genealogy of Hindu cosmology. In the South Indian Hindu pantheon, the god Karthikeya, or Murugan, has no mother but was born of the semen of Shiva, which in some birth stories was swallowed by the god of fire, Agni, and cast into the Ganges River or into river reeds. He has no natural mother but instead many adopted mothers; one of his consorts is a tribal woman who, in some folk stories, clashed with the other, a royal woman. But the stories in these songs remained in the realm of very ecstatic performances—including men singing and beating their chests, as hitherto the Ayyappa pilgrimage has been a performance of masculine potential—until a new guru appeared in the fold of the HMA in 2017. Ironically, this happened only after the Ayyappa festivals began and Ghanaian Hindus' interest in unknown gurus was piqued, leading them to initiate new relationships to South Indian Hindus.

### **Fertility in a Female Swami's Calling**

Swami Ghanananda passed away (in the Hindu view, attained *mahasamadhi*—the great and final leaving of one's body) on January 18, 2016. Thereafter, his Ghanaian initiate Swami Satyananda became head of

the HMA until 2019. To mark the one-year anniversary of Ghanananda's death, some Ghanaians invited an Indian female guru or teacher, Swami Jayanthi Kumaraswami, based in Chennai, India, to conduct the funerary rituals. Swami Ghanananda had taught his disciples about Hindu death rituals, though he adopted the Ghanaian preference for burial over cremation. More important, Hindu rituals—such as the Sanskrit invocation of the divine to distribute “all the components of the body into the five elements of the earth” and to offer favorite foods of the deceased to ancestor-spirits in animal forms—were entirely familiar to Ghanaians.<sup>49</sup> What is striking is the African initiative in the invitation of a South Indian woman swami, which fits into a longer history in West African religious outreach to Indians, in Hinduism, Islam, and Mami Wata worship.<sup>50</sup> The stories about how Swami Jayanthi came to Ghana include dreams, social media contacts, and prophecies of a new guru.

Swami Jayanthi, with ashrams and charitable organizations in Chennai and Trinidad, was able to explain the South Indian Hindu devotions in relation both to North Indian worship and to African diasporic folk traditions from the Caribbean. Ghanaians, with a long history of Pan-Africanism and Hindu spiritualism and other mystical new age religions that connect African-Americans and Africans, were eager for this kind of worldview.<sup>51</sup> The swami's discourses on Dravidian *sangams*, or oral epics about the great floods and lost land bridge between India and Africa, were captivating for Ghanaian listeners. She also introduced entirely new spiritual experiences, shaped in large part through her use of chanting and singing in public

rituals and private *darshan* (seeing a holy person).

Visiting gurus had come to Ghana from time to time, but Swami Jayanthi appears to be the first female Hindu spiritual leader among these visitors. *Swaminis* are not, in and of themselves, unique, as Ruth Vanita shows. She suggests that great women gurus with millions of followers are venerated locally and that, in social terms, the status of swamihood offers “safety for women and men from all classes and castes who do not wish to marry, procreate, or pursue a profession.”<sup>52</sup> The creative potential of a singular powerful entity, moreover, is celebrated in Hindu folk narratives that reveal the possibility of fertility and reproduction within the singular body. Vanita gives the example of the South Indian god Karthikeya or Murugan, mentioned above, who has no mother but was born of Shiva's semen. Deities are both male and female and ultimately neither, she argues. Of course, deities can also be both.

This insight is critical for Swami Jayanthi, who uses aural and oral in shaping a layered spiritual authority that combines male and female powers in ways that are different from male Hindu sainthood, which has been the norm in India, Ghana, and around the world. She is a vessel for Ghanaians' beloved Swami Ghanananda and, during two visits, has conveyed his messages and information about HMA history, previously unwritten and untold, to his devotees. She, like him, also belongs to no singular tradition of learning, instead being a *svayambhu* or self-manifested saint. Unlike many swamis, including Swami Ghanananda, Swami Jayanthi never studied Hindu scriptures with any gurus or teachers but rather is understood to be self-arisen. *Svayambhu*, born in form as Brahma, or the

Hindu god of creation, split into heaven and earth, man and woman.<sup>53</sup> The spontaneity of self-creation or noncreation has made *svayambhu* a particularly important concept in Buddhism, which envisions creation without birth as possible. Swami Jayanthi's presence in Ghana after the death of Swami Ghanananda suggested to local Hindus that gurus may appear to them, as their first one did, not as heirs to any singular religious tradition but rather as teachers for their particular times. Her appearance answered a powerful need felt by Hindus in Ghana and also fit into a trajectory of relative nonconformity to the past—toward South Indian popular Hindu devotion that centered on sexually, and therefore reproductively ambiguous, power and possibility.

One of the most important manifestations of this kind of spontaneous creation came in January 2019, when Swami Jayanthi introduced the South Indian—especially Tamil—harvest festival, Thai Pongal, to the Hindu Monastery community. The importance of this holiday, centered on cooking rice with raw sugar until it boils over (the literal meaning of *pongal* in Tamil), is attested by its maintenance in the Tamil diaspora from South Africa to Sri Lanka and Singapore. When the rice boils over, all present shout “Pongalo pongal” to harken abundance for the coming year. Before doing this, Swami Jayanthi recited mantras from early morning while constructing a new *murtis*, or idol, out of clay in the figure of Ganesha, the elephant god who is the son of Shiva and one of the most beloved deities in South India. Ganesha is to be one of the first who is presented with *pongal*, but the HMA did not have an idol. Thus, Swami Jayanthi made one and literally breathed life into it with mantras and song over a ceremonial

fire lit in a special hearth she also had built for the occasion.

Some of the Pongal songs she taught those assembled at the HMA have female and male call and response. She performed both, embodying the double gender of the Hindu deity.

Thai pongalum vandhadhu  
 Paalum pongudhu  
 Paattu solladiyo  
 Vanna mangaiyar aadidum  
 Mahaanadhiyai potri solladiyo  
 Indha Ponni enbaval  
     thennaattavarkku  
 Anbin annaiyadi  
 Ival thanneer endroru aadai  
     kattidum  
 Dheiva mangaiyadi

Pongal came  
 Milk boiling over  
 Sing songs  
 Beautiful ladies are dancing  
 Tell me about the big river  
 This girl Ponni is for people  
     in the South  
 She is like a mother  
 She is wearing water like a dress  
 She is a goddess

The elements of this song have, of course, a resonance with fertility, a concept that neither Swami Ghanananda nor his successor had previously emphasized. Moreover, the cooking and eating of food were not part of the Monastery's rituals until Swami Jayanthi's visit, although before her arrival, hard candies were occasionally distributed as a *prasadam* (offering). Yet food is intrinsic to Vedic religion, and in this song, the priest as cook and sacrificer of food, in performing the Pongal rite, is “associated with birth,” from ingestion to gestation and delivery.<sup>54</sup> Milk is the semen of the fire god Agni, and the transformation of it through fire represents a developing fetus.

The swamini's power in the Monastery is altogether different from the experiences of Swami Ghanananda's devotees and newcomers with male gurus, though not because they were unfamiliar with the meaning embedded in her actions. Most Indian Hindus themselves do not experience their rituals with complete awareness. Rather, the collective observation and participation of the birth of Pongal reveal Swami Jayanthi's procreative power and fertility.

Swami Jayanthi's production of sounds and objects has contributed to audible capital accruing to a new spiritual personage in West Africa and in India, where her devotees have relished her reception abroad.<sup>55</sup> Devotional sounds manifest bodily power, which for Hindu male *sadhus* (sages or ascetics) traditionally was seen to reside in semen.<sup>56</sup> Antoinette DeNapoli argues that women and lower castes could scarcely attain the dominant Sanskritic textual representation of the Hindu male ascetic path to religious sanctification defined by celibacy, solitude, detachment, peripateticism, austerities like fasting, and other renunciations, along with knowledge requirements. Instead, these "other" devotees have practiced forms of asceticism dependent on relationality and reciprocity, of the kind found in performances—oral and ritual. DeNapoli also discusses cases in which female renunciates express power (*shakti*) by singing strongly over others in public; not to sing powerfully would lead to questions about their bona fides.<sup>57</sup> Female ascetics, priests, and experts do not have to follow male scripts, but they do sometimes adapt scripts that allow them to garner acceptance and authority to perform important religious functions, thereby effectively assuming

"male" forms.<sup>58</sup> Significantly, ISKCON and other nonconformist Hindu organizations have adapted rituals like the sacred thread initiation (a rite of passage for high-caste boys) to confer sacerdotal power on women. It is perhaps for such reasons that ISKCON has maintained a strong presence in places like Ghana, where the impetus for different kinds of self-making has led to the emergence of such personalities as Swami Ghanananda and non-Ghanaians like Swami Jayanthi. Swami Jayanthi also revealed herself to seekers in personal *darshans*, episodic encounters with individuals or small groups of supplicants who require her help with problems related to domestic life, jobs, health, or spiritual sickness. These meetings included the private chanting and teaching of mantras, special prayers, and the investiture of amulets spontaneously created for individual use.

Yet Swami Jayanthi's making of a persona in Ghana has not been purely through her own actions but also through Ghanaians' embedment of her into local narratives. Hindu devotees arranged for her to pay her respects and perform before the Asantehene, the ruler of the traditional kingdom of Asante with its capital in Kumasi, first in 2017 and then in 2019. The Asantehene rechristened her as Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen Mother of Edweso, an Asante principality, who helped lead her people against the British colonialists in their last war to conquer the kingdom. After the British defeated the Asante, she was exiled to the Seychelles, where she died. Yaa Asantewaa has been commemorated in Ghana and abroad in many ways—visually, in writing, and in verse.<sup>59</sup> To rechristen an Indian religious figure with the name of an Asante queen is to bestow a place

of power for the Hindu swamini. As Yaa Asantewaa is the mother of the Ghanaian nation, naming Swami Jayanthi after her is to recognize her as the creator of new life in a new place.

In the afternoons, the Hindu Monastery of Africa is silent. No one makes any sound until a bell is rung to awaken the gods for the evening *puja*. No strictures have been placed on Hindu noise, as had been imposed against born-again Christian churches in Accra from 1998 to 2002.<sup>60</sup> The Christians had violated a time-honored ban on drumming, clapping, and other noise making by the Ga traditional authorities of Accra. An annual month-long silence was “meant to give the local deities the peace to look after the growth of the ritually sown corn before it is harvested and prepared into a ceremonial dish to ‘hoot at hunger’ during the harvest festival.”<sup>61</sup> The interruption of the silence could have disturbed the festival in a number of ways, from angering the local deities to disorienting ancestral spirits who answer to their individual tunes. Hindus, on the other hand, are known for their attention to ritual, especially the proper ordering of silence and sound.

To return to the beginning, prayer communities must share space not only with each other but also with spirits, being ever mindful that sensory experiences in the human body are connected to the unseen realm. Devotional music, mantras, and other kinds of sound have made possible Hinduism’s growth in Ghana—at times over the last half century without Indians, converts, or even comprehension in the intellectual sense. In many ways, it can be a devotional repertoire adaptable to embodied experiences that do not require teachers, texts, or other trappings more commonly associated with Hinduism in India and even beyond. African Hinduism’s soundscape reveals unique features that, perhaps most surprisingly, have even begun to change the Indian diaspora. This includes Indian migrants who have come to Ghana to work and choose to worship in the Monastery, like Veena Sharma, a Kenyan Indian scholar of Akan religion, as well as traveling gurus like Swami Jayanthi and others, who recognize an undisguised devotion in African Hindu disciples. Swami Ghanananda, like other sages, understood that the Hindu soundscape would outlast his life and reverberate in new registers to sustain the Monastery he founded.

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## NOTES

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