Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World

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Patrick Eisenlohr
Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World
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Patrick Eisenlohr's *Sounding Islam* weaves together sound studies and linguistic anthropology through a study in the anthropology of performance, situated within a broader narrative about the globalization of religion and its technologies of sound reproduction. If this sounds like a lot to take in, it is, but consider that these domains emanate from the book's core focus: Mauritian Muslims' performance of a recitational genre called *na't*—"devotional poems recited in praise of Prophet Muhammad and what is often considered his favorite city, Medina" (23)—a genre whose star performers are located in Pakistan and North India.

The book draws on Eisenlohr's longstanding fieldwork in Mauritius, an island nation of 1.3 million inhabitants in the western Indian Ocean. It would be hard to find a more fascinating place to study for a linguist-anthropologist like Eisenlohr, a German scholar who was trained at the University of Chicago and teaches at the University of Göttingen. Uninhabited before the era of European colonialism in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius was home first to Portuguese colonizers and East African (largely Malagasy) slaves and maroons. Its formative years were spent under French and then British colonial rule. During the British period, numerous North Indian indentured laborers were brought to work on sugar plantations, and it is their ancestors who make up the majority of the country's current population. (Mauritius became independent in 1968, and the nation includes a few islands besides the main one.) Mauritius is a country consisting entirely of diasporic groups. The population today is around 70 percent Indo-Mauritian, with 52 percent identifying as Hindus and 17 percent as Muslims. Creoles (25 percent) are Mauritians of East African or mixed–East African ancestry, and there is also a small amount (30,000) of people of Chinese descent. The latter two groups and the small number of Franco-Mauritians are largely Catholic (137). The main language is French-lexifier Mauritian Creole, though the North Indian Bhojpuri language is spoken at home by many Indo-Mauritians. English is used in state administration and education, while French is the language of media and business. Mauritian Muslims may have some fluency in Arabic and Urdu, which are used largely in Islamic devotional contexts. Other Indian languages, like Gujarati and Tamil, are also present. Eisenlohr's first book (2006) focused on the politics of ancestral languages in Mauritius, particularly Indian languages.

Sounding Islam provides a detailed history and ethnography of the Mauritian Muslim community, who trace their ancestry largely to South Asia. They maintain links with their ancestral homelands and to other places in the Indian Ocean region with sizable South Asian Muslim populations, such as South Africa. Eisenlohr uses his ethnography of na't performance in Mauritius to explore such links, particularly through the circulation of na't recordings and religious figures, and his book incorporates the results of fieldwork

in Mumbai. In doing so, *Sounding Islam* situates na't performance within global debates about the (in)appropriateness of certain kinds of sonic worship in Islam. In Mauritius, na't is performed mainly by Muslims belonging to the Ahl-e Sunnat, "one of the movements of Islamic reformism that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in colonial India" (25), founded by the 'alim Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856–1921). Sometimes referred to erroneously as "traditional Islam" on account of its "emphasis on the veneration of saints, its openness to Sufism, and the importance it places on spiritual intercession by saintly figures," the Ahl-e Sunnat actually began as a reform movement that "sought to give the mediatory practices common in South Asian Islam a new legitimacy and scriptural foundation" (25). Kutchi Memons from Gujarat obtained control over the main mosque in Mauritius's capital, Port Louis, in 1908, and they continue to maintain connections to that group and to the Qadriyya Sufi order (*tariqa*), whose founder, 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani, is "addressed and eulogized" by Mauritius's Ahl-e Sunnat members "in numerous devotional poems" (26). The founder of the Ahl-e Sunnat in Mauritius, Abdul 'Alwi Siddiqi, was a follower of Barelwi, and today his grandson, Maulana Shah Muhammad Anas Nurani Siddiqi Qadri Madani, frequently visits Mauritius (39). One thread throughout *Sounding Islam* is that these Mauritian na't performers feel the effects of the global Salafi movement and of the related South Asian Islamic reformist group the Deobandis, particularly through the latter's influence on local rivals the Sunni Surtees (another trading community of Gujarati Muslim descent). Such groups maintain that na't performances are "illicit innovations (*bid'a*)"

(26). Na't performers themselves describe na't as a "laudable practice" that provides an "additional layer of piety" and bestows "additional benefits" (34–35). Eisenlohr's interlocutors state that singing na't is like "walking on the blade of a sword," since it pushes the limits of what is "considered proper Islamic practice on several accounts" (32). Earlier na't performers borrowed melodies from Bollywood film songs, but this practice is now typically (though not always) avoided. Before cassettes and CDs, Mauritian imams kept transcriptions of na't poems in Urdu and also referred to an Urdu-language manual titled *Milad-e akbar* (32). Today, na't recordings of famous reciters (*na't khwan*), such as the Pakistani Qari Fasihuddin (Syed Fasihuddin Soharwardi), provide models for Eisenlohr's interlocutors—"the speed of delivery should always be moderate and not overtly rhythmic, and the performer should guard its recitational qualities." The recordings are often layered with generous amounts of reverb and echo (1–3).

An early focus of *Sounding Islam* is the fascinating ways that changes in language and the incorporation of particular phrases (entextualization)[1] and their repetition function in na't performances in Mauritius, which typically begin with a recitation in Arabic, followed by an exegesis in Mauritian Creole and sung poetry in Urdu. But at its core, *Sounding Islam* is about the power of sound on human bodies and the ways in which circulating media seemingly vanish when they are used, providing the perception of authentic and unmediated voices that create a felt intimacy with the divine, the Prophet, and Medina. Certain poems generate a feeling of traveling to Medina for listeners (118); Eisenlohr provides the voices of interlocutors describing the sounds' effects

in their bodies, including their bones. The book's later chapters provide spectrograms and waveforms to visualize the relation between moments in a recited text, volume, reverberation, pitch, and sonic density (118), allowing for a greater understanding of what Eisenlohr terms the "intensity" of na't performances.

Sounding Islam has much to offer readers in its theoretical depth and ingenuity. Perhaps its greatest theoretical contribution is to analyze na't performance through the German philosopher Gernot Böhme's (b. 1934) work on atmospheres and French philosopher Gilbert Simondon's (1924–1989) notion of transduction. In acoustics, "transduction" refers to the changing of sound from one energy state to another, such as when movements in air molecules vibrate the ear's tympanum and convert mechanical energy to electrical signals, or when sound is encoded on the grooves of a record or as zeros and ones in a computer. Transduction has become a central "keyword" in sound studies, largely through its elaboration by Jonathan Sterne in his book *The Audible Past*.[2] Eisenlohr defines transduction in a subtly unique way, as "the sonic ways in which the boundaries between humans and their environments blur" (13). He finds inspiration in Simondon's "ontological" notion of transduction, which previously was known mainly for its influence on Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of becoming. Eisenlohr describes Simondon's definition of transduction as "a process of 'individuation,' in which new entities, such as objects, organisms, or psychic phenomena, emerge from an inchoate, 'pre-individual' milieu." Transduction thus mediates "between disparate energies in a domain," "cutting across older distinctions between 'nature' and 'culture,' as well as between the human

and nonhuman" (8), a process Eisenlohr likens to the growth of crystals.

> Sound's passing through the body creates emotions and other phenomena at the interface of the psychological and physiological—in my ethnographic account specifically the experience of the divine. In contrast to soundscape, transduction as sonic atmospheres thus highlights somatic intermingling with sound. (13)

Eisenlohr believes "soundscape" is an overly static term that creates a perception of a gap between subject and sound, since an enclosed subject is theorized as being placed in a soundscape. Böhme's notion of atmospheres is useful for Eisenlohr here: Böhme defines atmospheres not as "subjective moods" but as "quasi-objective phenomena that exude from objects, persons, and events" (cited in Eisenlohr, 89). Because sound waves are transduced by the body, Eisenlohr argues that "they provide concrete instances of objective phenomena emanating from persons and objects" (89): "the perception of sound always involves modifications of felt space by the body" (92). Böhme describes the voice as an atmospheric presence (89). Drawing on Hermann Schmitz's work on atmospheres, Eisenlohr argues that feelings and emotions, such as those produced by voices, are (and here he cites Schmitz) "atmospheres poured out spatially" (91).

While this argument is straightforward enough, it is just one of many strewn throughout *Sounding Islam*. At best, these theoretical passages (which fill up much of each chapter) will influence scholars to pick up one of these threads and write their own books; at worst, the dense theoretical discussions occasionally threaten to overwhelm the rich ethnographic material.

Over the course of the book, Eisenlohr puts recent writings on the anthropology of the voice into dialogue with Peircian semiotics; Böhme's writings on "atmospheres" are positioned as critiquing Brian Massumi's writings on affect; Briggs and Bauman's concept of entextualization is put into dialogue with the German psychologist and linguist Karl Bühler; and the entire book encases several discussions on the interrelations between religion, media, and globalization. *Sounding Islam* is worth consulting for its bibliography alone, though some pruning would have made the text clearer. All of these sources are marshaled to consider a quite standard ethnomusicological problem: how to understand the physical effects of sound on particular bodies in particular spaces. Luckily, the sum of the book is well worth these theoretical excursions. Eisenlohr takes us on an exciting, useful, and virtuosic tour of theorists from across sound studies, media studies, religious studies, linguistic anthropology, and ethnomusicology, including several German theorists probably unknown to readers unable to read that language. His genius in *Sounding Islam* lies precisely in the ways he lets scholars from certain academic fields resonate where their voices had not previously been heard—another type of transduction, if you will.

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NOTES

1   Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 59–88.

2   David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).