

SECTION THREE

Mediascapes

Sonic Atmospheres in Mauritian Devotional Islam

Sensing Transoceanic Connections in a Creole Society

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Movement constitutes transoceanic spaces such as the Indian Ocean world. Sonic practices as atmospheres make such multilayered movements and connections palpable. The recitation of na't among Mauritian Muslims is an example of how sound and sonic practices can provide somatic evidence for transoceanic links in the Indian Ocean world. As is the case in India and Pakistan, Muslims of Indian background in Mauritius have long engaged in the recitation of Urdu na't, devotional poetry in honor of the Prophet Muhammad. In this chapter, I examine the interplay between this Indian poetic tradition associated with the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at Islamic reformist tradition with the sonic dynamics of vocal performance. In particular, sonic dynamics of vocal performance are responsible for the powerful effects of pious transformation that my interlocutors spoke to me about during my field research. To this end, I draw on a neo-phenomenological analytic of atmospheres taking atmospheres to be emotions poured into space that intermingle with sentient bodies in order to understand how vocal sound can bring about such transformations. The discursive and sonic dimensions of the na't genre are closely interrelated. Nevertheless, by approaching the sonic through the paradigm of atmospheres I treat the sonic as a modality of knowledge and meaning-making that is in principle independent from the discursive aspects of voice. Understanding sonic religious practices such as reciting na't as atmospheres is also useful because it helps one grasp the role of sensory knowledge in the making and sustaining of transoceanic connections.

Ever since the 1980s, recordings of na't, first from India and Pakistan, and since the 1990s also recordings by local na't khwan, have circulated in Mauritius.

They have provided influential models of vocal performance so that recitation of the genre is nowadays thoroughly integrated with media practices. At the same time, the cultivation of this devotional genre inspired by Sufi traditions has long been a focus of sectarian disputes among Muslims in India and Pakistan as well as Muslims of Indian background throughout the Indian Ocean world. Among Muslims of Indian background, such disputes have become part of larger concerns of Islamic authenticity in locations that are well connected to, yet far removed from, the South Asian homelands of their ancestors. At the same time, the mediatic circulation of *na't* raises the question of the technical reproducibility of sonic atmospheres and their transformational effects (Eisenlohr 2018).

For followers of the *Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at* (Sanyal 1996), the artful recitation of *na't* is one of the chief means of bringing about the presence of the Prophet in his role as a mediator between Muslims and God. This is very much in line with this reformist tradition's openness to Sufism, which distinguishes it from the contemporary stances of other, more purist South Asian reformist traditions, such as the schools of Deoband and the *Ahl-e hadith*. The discursive dimensions of the poetry are of great significance; however, the vocal and sonic aspects of the performance are at least as important. The sonic materiality of the performance and its effects on listeners are a decisive dimension of the performance, indispensable for its success as an act of religious mediation and interaction with higher powers. A successful performance provokes profound bodily sensations among those present that many speak of as the feeling of being moved and carried away to a better place. In the discursive framework of this Islamic tradition, with its special emphasis on devotion to the figure of the Prophet, this more desirable place is often identified with Medina, considered to have been the prophet Muhammad's favorite city.

The vocal performance of *na't* is the main part of ritual gatherings known as *mahfil-e mawlud* that are held on important days of the Islamic ritual calendar, such as the Prophet's birthday, the death anniversaries (*'urs*) of major Sufi saints, or auspicious events in people's lives such as weddings, moving into a new house, or the passing of important school exams. The reciting is often collective but is usually led by solo reciters known as *na't khwan* who are known for their voices and skill in reciting this devotional poetry, and regarded as models to be emulated when performing the poetry. The performance of *na't* both expresses and stirs feelings of love and attachment for the Prophet among those present, aiming to turn them into better Muslims in the process. Mauritian Muslims who follow the *Ahl-e Sunnat* tradition are concerned about the perceived authenticity of the poetry. This is first of all related to long-standing sectarian disputes in South Asia and its diasporas about the extent to which the exuberant personal veneration of the Prophet expressed in *na't* poetry is legitimate. Opponents of the *Ahl-e Sunnat*, such as followers of the school of Deoband, manifest in Mauritius above all through the strong presence of the transnational missionizing movement *Tablighi Jama'at* as well as proponents of the *Ahl-e hadith* tend to consider the profuse

personal praise and exaltation of the Prophet in na‘t poetry as dangerously exaggerated, elevating the Prophet to a God-like position and thereby diluting the unicity of God. Aficionados of na‘t poetry have in turn defended the practice by citing hadith according to which the Prophet himself was fond of the poetry and sanctioned its recitation, and have counterattacked their opponents, accusing them of insufficient respect for the Prophet. As the texts of the poetry are such a delicate issue, Mauritian Muslims who are fond of na‘t often make sure that the poetry is sufficiently authorized, for example, through having been composed by eminent scholar-saints, such as Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi, the founder of the Barelwi tradition (Eisenlohr 2018). Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi was known as a prolific composer of na‘t who wrote na‘t poetry in moments of divine inspiration such as when he felt the presence of the Prophet in front of him (Khan Barelwi n.d.). Another reason for the major concern about the authenticity and legitimacy of the na‘t poetry recited in mahfil-e mawlood stems from the diasporic context of Mauritius, where Muslims are a minority and perceive themselves as being relatively far removed from the center of religious authority in the Muslim world. In contrast to this widespread perception, Mauritian Muslims are in fact closely connected to several centers of Islamic authority, not only in India and Pakistan but also elsewhere. Much of this diasporic anxiety about orthopraxy is related to the dominant multicultural model of Mauritian nation-building, which privileges a group’s ownership of a major religious tradition pointing to origins beyond Mauritius as a chief means for inclusion into the nation. The question of who then stands for authentic Islam also matters for cultural citizenship, as Muslims are one of the officially recognized “communities” of Mauritius.

These sensibilities about textual authenticity notwithstanding, the perceived appropriateness of the vocal style and voice quality in the recitation of na‘t is important for the effectiveness of the performance, as several of my interlocutors told me that they considered the sonic dimensions of the voice even more important than its discursive dimensions. They told me how they found the sound of the voice of a particular na‘t khwan so moving that they felt carried away by it. The stirring of pious emotions and the palpable sense of the spiritual presence of the Prophet that the performance of na‘t poetry aims to bring about thus hinges on vocal sound and its qualities. Nicholas Harkness has called this intertwining of vocal sound and sociocultural values the “phonosonic nexus” (Harkness 2014, 12). Pointing at the expected co-presence among specific qualities of vocal sound, certain social actors, and particular social and cultural values, this notion emphasizes how the sonic dimensions of the voice can, under certain conditions, stand for sociocultural values and actors’ stances to them. For my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors, the recitation of na‘t among Mauritians actively provokes pious emotions and bodily sensations of being carried away to a better place. Even more, vocal sound brings about such sensations and emotions in a way experienced as going beyond one’s agency and intentionality.

An analytic of vocal sound as atmospheres explains not only the co-occurrence of vocal tones and particular sociocultural values but also accounts for its transformative somatic effects on those within its range. Understanding sound as atmospheres draws attention to the ways in which its sonic materiality intermingles with felt-bodies. Such processes of transduction then result in suggestions of movement felt by those exposed to the vocal sound of na't recitation. These suggestions of movement become a key part of the emotional force behind this devotional vocal practice, providing the bodily felt evidence for the promise of salvation that is central to this form of devotional, Sufi-inspired Islam.

SONIC ATMOSPHERES

In order to understand the effects of vocal sound on participants in a mahfil-e mawlud one has to pay attention to its dynamic movements. Especially, the widely circulated recordings of the na't genre in Mauritius demonstrate how an array of obvious sonic parameters is exploited to this effect (Chady 2001, 2003). Na't khwans' voices in these recordings feature a great dynamic along the parameters of loudness, pitch, and timbre. On top of this, another feature of the recordings is the application of a reverb effect throughout. This results in the impression of spatial wideness, this echo-effect citing listeners' experience of the azan, the Islamic call to prayer reverberating in a built environment. In crucial moments of the recitation, the na't khwan's voice displays an intensification along several of these dimensions, not just an increase in loudness and pitch but also a shift of acoustic energy toward the frequency bins of the 3,000–5,000 Hertz range, resembling what Sundberg (1974) has called the "singer's formant" with pronounced vibrato. Vocal sound thus enacts a marked sonic movement, a motion that is a sonic icon of a spiritual movement of the devotees present in this religious context toward Medina and a poetic image of the presence of the Prophet himself. The image of traveling to Medina in order to personally encounter the Prophet is a stock theme discursively elaborated in na't poetry. But a movement that several of my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors described as the experience of being lifted up and taken away to a better place is also quite literally enabled and carried out through the dynamics of vocal sound through the ways such a sonic force affects the felt-bodies of those involved in the practice. The question is how vocal sound can actually function as more than a metaphor for discursive themes of a religious tradition such as the particular South Asian tradition of devotional Islam I am writing about here. Where does its peculiar force come from, which some of my interlocutors in Mauritius spoke about as really overpowering?

I suggest that an analytic of atmospheres can account for the somatic effects of vocal movement my interlocutors described for this ritual setting centered on the recitation of na't poetry. I hereby draw on recent work on sound and music as atmospheres (Abels 2013, 2018, 2022; see also Eisenlohr 2018; Riedel 2019). According

to new approaches in phenomenology, atmospheres are entities emitted by persons, objects, or their constellations. Gernot Böhme refers to them as “ecstasies of the thing” (Böhme 1993, 122). They fill a predimensional space, enveloping and intermingling with felt-bodies who sense atmospheres in a holistic manner that is upstream from definite sensory impressions. The phenomenological distinction between the physical body (*Körper*) and the felt-body (*Leib*) is crucial here, as the felt-body often reaches beyond the boundaries of the physical body, into what is felt to pertain to the body, but being outside its physical boundaries. According to Hermann Schmitz, atmospheres are akin to feelings occupying the predimensional space of the felt-body. “Feelings are atmospheres poured into space and powers that seize the felt-body (*Leib*)” (Schmitz 2014, 30). Atmospheres are not objects or things but fleeting phenomena that come and go, such as pain, the weather, or silence. “Emotions are atmospheres poured out spatially. An atmosphere in the sense intended here is the complete occupation of a surfaceless space in the region of experienced presence. This surfaceless space, apart from emotions, can also be occupied by the weather experienced as enveloping you or by (e.g., festive, pregnant or calm) silence” (Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby 2011, 255). Sound and sonic phenomena such as musical figures enacted by a voice are a very tangible example of atmospheres. They are fleeting and nonpermanent but have an eminently material existence. They cannot just only be sensed by the hearing apparatus but in a much more comprehensive way, by potentially the entire body. This is why it is justified to speak of sonic instead of acoustic atmospheres because the entire range of traveling energetic and vibratory phenomena they compose very often exceed the limits of the human hearing apparatus. Very importantly, atmospheres contain suggestions of motion (*Bewegungssuggestionen*) (Schmitz 2014, 85). According to Böhme, sound and music as atmosphere is a “manipulation of space as it is experienced by the body” (Böhme 2000, 16). The sonic dynamics of vocal sound in na‘t performances that I described thus can be understood as atmospheres, effecting suggestions of motion on the felt-bodies of those participating in a mahfil-e mawlud, or those listening to recordings of na‘t recitals in other contexts.

SOUNDING THE INDIAN OCEAN IN RELIGIOUS NETWORKS

The Indian Ocean has a long history of deep and long-term interconnectedness (Alpers 2014; Bose 2006; Chaudhuri 1985), in fact, some have even seen the Indian Ocean as the “cradle of globalization” (Moorthy and Jamal 2010, 9). Running against many North Atlantic intellectual sensibilities connected to the notion of the cosmopolitan, religious traditions and networks have been among the foremost dimensions of such transoceanic connections in this part of the world. Especially, Islamic traditions and links have played an important role in establishing multilayered routes and connections across the ocean (Eisenlohr 2012; Ho 2006;

Ricci 2011; Sheriff 2010; Simpson 2009), comprising not just the spread of religious knowledge and practices, but also migration, trade, tourism and pilgrimage as well as political alliances, and also musical traditions (Rasmussen 2016). The sonic practices embedded in particular Islamic ritual contexts can undergird these ties by investing them with a particular felt quality. I contend that the production and cultivation of sonic atmospheres like those in na‘t recitals provide a particular kind of somatic evidence for such transoceanic ties that give the links to places of religious authority beyond Mauritius a certain self-evident character beyond words. As is evident from my example of na‘t recitation, such sonic practices build and maintain relationships to several of such places at once. First of all, they are a central component of a larger complex of piety centered on the person of the Prophet Muhammad. The ardent wish to be close to the Prophet that these devotional practices enact from a Sufi-inspired perspective often comes down to the expressed wish to travel to a holy land elsewhere in this Indian Ocean world, in this case Medina. At the same time, the practice of reciting Urdu devotional poetry in Mauritius also points to the predominantly north Indian origins of most Mauritian Muslims, the part of the Indian Ocean world where the genre emerged and from where its practice reached Mauritius.

It would be wrong, however, to imagine the recitation of na‘t as a straightforward kind of cultural baggage that the ancestors of Mauritian Muslims brought with them when they migrated from India to Mauritius in the nineteenth century, most of them from present-day Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. They were in a large majority impoverished indentured laborers brought to Mauritius to work on the sugar plantations, replacing the slave workforce after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834 until the end of the indenture system during World War I (Carter 1995). Their ritual practices were more influenced by caste affiliation and the regional and rural background they shared with their fellow indentured laborers who later identified as Hindus than by any clear-cut religious boundaries. The waves of religious reformism that brought about the emergence of a Hindu “religion” and new modern forms of reformist Islam from the middle of the nineteenth century onward had not yet touched the rural peripheries from which the ancestors of Mauritians with Indian background departed for Mauritius. In other words, for the vast majority of Indian migrants to Mauritius, the sociocultural worlds they left behind in northern India were not yet influenced by the modern religious reformist movements that dominate the field today and that caused the emergence of hard religious boundaries between Hindus and Muslims, as well as in the case of Muslims, strong boundaries between followers of various reformist sectarian traditions. These modern Indian reform movements only made their presence felt in Mauritius after 1910, when Hindu activists of the Arya Samaj started working in Mauritius, soon to be followed by their competitors from the Sanatan Dharm tradition. Among Muslims, the *Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama‘at* movement established itself in Mauritius through Muslim Gujarati trader networks in

the 1920s. This reformist tradition, characterized by a synthesis of ‘ulema-based Islam and Sufism then quickly became the dominant form of Sunni Islam in Mauritius. Much of the emphasis in this tradition is on a complex of piety around the figure of the Prophet. The recitation of *na‘t* is in turn one of the hallmarks of this Sufi-influenced veneration of the Prophet what the *Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama‘at* stands for. In fact, the founder of this tradition, Ahmad Raza Khan Bareilwi (1856–1921), was known to be a prolific composer of the genre. That is, the recitation of *na‘t* is a practice that only became established through modern Islamic reformism, after migration from India to Mauritius had already ended. Recitation of *na‘t* thus enacts a transoceanic connection that is properly diasporic insofar as it only emerged long after migration. It is the product of a new orientation to a place of origin and the religious authority connected to it.

A cosmopolitan set of Indian Ocean “mobile societies” (Ho 2017), in this case Gujarati trader communities, has long played a crucial role in the deep religious transformations that have taken place among Mauritian Muslims since the period of migration from India. The Islamic networks through which various kinds of reformism reached Mauritius from India were for a long time almost exclusively in the hands of the Gujarati trader communities, who spread around the Indian Ocean region in the nineteenth century in the wake of Empire (Markovits 1999) and had entered Mauritius as free immigrants with their own capital, continuously maintaining dense networks of kinship, trade, and religion with India. These endogamous and highly mobile groups with their long-distance networks in the Indian Ocean world became the exponents of an Islamic cosmopolitanism that many Mauritian Muslims who are descendants of working-class indentured laborers from north India have more recently sought to emulate (Eisenlohr 2012).

The reasons for the spread and popularity of performative vocal practices that signal affiliation with a major Indian Islamic reformist tradition cannot be reduced to the impact of religious activism from India channeled to Mauritius by the well-connected and often wealthy Gujarati trader families found not just in Mauritius but throughout the Indian Ocean region. The internal dynamics of a post-plantation Creole society also played a crucial role in the process of religious reformism and purification that turned Indo-Mauritians into either Hindus or Muslims in the course of the twentieth century. As a former sugar colony with no precolonial population whose inhabitants all have origins elsewhere, this Creole society has been profoundly shaped by the experience of slavery and indentured labor. As in other Creole worlds in the Caribbean with which Mauritius shares a fair range of historical commonalities, race played a supreme role in the archipelago’s social and economic structure. With a Franco-Mauritian community historically in control of most of the land and the sugar industry, slaves, indentured laborers, and other migrants from around the Indian Ocean world became part of Mauritian society through processes of racialization that simultaneously assigned them particular economic and social roles in a plantation colony. In Creole societies such as in

Mauritius and the Caribbean, groups tend to be demarcated and set in hierarchical relationships by race. In colonial Mauritius, “Indian” was not a neutral designation of origin but referred to a rather inferior racial category. The existence of a small group of well-to-do Indians did not fundamentally change this reality. Members of the economically and at the time also politically dominant white and colored (*gens de couleur*) elite often looked down on Indians as racial others and because of what they considered their questionable non-Christian ritual practices. The twentieth-century process of “religionization” that both Muslims and Hindus engaged in also has to be understood in this colonial Creole context where the claiming of a recognized major religious tradition such as Hinduism or Islam offered an escape route from racialization (Eisenlohr 2022). The modern Indian reformist movements thereby provided sought-after resources for Mauritians of Indian background to elevate their standing from inferior racial others to proponents of the respectable major “world religions,” Hinduism and Islam. Transoceanic religious networks, initially almost entirely controlled by Gujarati trader families, provided the impetus for turning Indo-Mauritians with specific caste-based and rural ritual practices into followers of modern Hinduism and Islam. However, the conditions of a Creole society in which race ruled supreme also played its part. Finally, the lasting transformations of Mauritian society through religionization came about through the official recognition and privileging of religious difference as a main mode of demarcating groups in Mauritian society. An important part of this was the institutionalization and teaching of so-called ancestral languages tied to religion, among them Urdu, in schools. This policy started after World War II in the final decades of colonial rule and was completed by the postcolonial Hindu-dominated governments after independence in 1968. Accompanying this shift was the enshrinement of religion as a major category for distinguishing groups in Mauritius in the census, the constitution, the political system, and through the extension of state subsidies and state recognition to non-Christian religions such as Hinduism and Islam. All in all this signaled a momentous shift from a plantation society built on racialization to the present model of Mauritian nation-building, religion-based multiculturalism. The shift from racialization to religionization was empowering for Mauritians of Indian origin because it asserted the autonomy and respectability of Hinduism and Islam and the full recognition of their followers as a community. Nineteenth-century indentured migrants were not yet able to assert this claim and had to undergo the inferiorizing regime of racialization instead. In short, modern reformist religious movements from India enabled Mauritians of Indian origin to greatly improve their standing in the Creole society of Mauritius and to leave behind racial stigma. This is the Mauritian background informing Islamic devotional practices such as the recitation of *na‘t*. Taken at face value, the practice appears to be a cultural import from north India, falling within what the Mauritian state officially labels as “ancestral culture.” However, reciting *na‘t* and the long-distance connections that can be felt in it is part of the drama of a

Creole society, where newcomers from different parts of the Indian Ocean world struggled to establish themselves, seeking to improve the terms of their incorporation in Mauritian society.

SENSING TRANSOCEANIC CONNECTIONS

So far, I have introduced the recitation of *na't* among Mauritian Muslims as an atmospheric practice that exerts somatically felt suggestions of movement on those taking part in it. In the context of a devotional tradition centered on the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad, such visceral invitations to movement merge with the discursive call to travel to Medina to personally encounter the Prophet, a leitmotiv of *na't* poetry. On the other hand, I have discussed the recitation of *na't* as part of a much larger process of establishing modern reformist religious networks between Mauritius and India that only set in years after migration from India to Mauritius had finally ended. This process involved the extension to Mauritius of the deep processes of religious transformation in colonial India that produced modern Hinduism and the modern reformist schools of Islam in South Asia, channeled through cosmopolitan and mobile Gujarati trader communities that had spread throughout the Indian Ocean world in the wake of Empire. However, the political-economic and social setup of colonial Mauritius also played a crucial role. Ultimately, the dynamics of Mauritius as a Creole society built on the logics of racialization made alignment with the new, standardized version of major religious traditions from India irresistibly attractive for Mauritians of Indian origin who inhabited an inferior position in the racial hierarchy of a colonial plantation society. It propelled a shift from race to religion as the chief group-making discourse in Mauritius, becoming the single most important criteria of marking communal boundaries in the final decades of colonial rule, culminating in the enshrinement of religious difference in the census, constitution, and the political system after independence, along with state recognition and promotion of presumed “ancestral languages” with chiefly religious significance, among them Urdu. These dynamics of religionization proved highly empowering for Mauritians of Indian origin, and in combination with their numbers, their rising dominance in politics and their economic ascent enabled them to leave behind racial stigma.

The Indian Ocean as a cosmopolitan and highly interconnected space that long predates colonial networks has often been considered the distinctive characteristic of this part of the world from a global perspective (Chaudhuri 1985; Alpers 2014). Historians have pointed out how the Indian Ocean has been a zone of movement and interconnections that fly in the face of modern methodological nationalism and the received boundaries of area studies that have conventionally divided the Indian Ocean world into Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, while Australia as a European settler state always fell out of the frame of the Indian Ocean’s non-Western “regions.” In a salutary intellectual operation, historians and

members of other scholarly disciplines have pointed to the inadequacy of these North Atlantic political and academic demarcations of “areas” in the Indian Ocean world that has always been defied by long-standing histories of movements of people, religious traditions, political forms of authority, goods, and ideas across such boundaries. Mauritius and the Mascarenes present a rather extreme scenario in this regard, because as an archipelago in the southwest Indian Ocean uninhabited before colonialism it never belonged to any established land-based “area,” becoming the home of Creole societies exclusively composed of people with origins elsewhere. As such, there are few places where the theme of multilayered transoceanic links is more pertinent, as is also evident in Mauritian musical traditions (Servan-Schreiber 2010).

Recent approaches to transregional spaces, including transoceanic spaces like the world of the Indian Ocean, have emphasized the role of movement in creating these spaces. Far from being preexisting grids or containers, such spaces come into existence through human routes, connections, and links that are built, sustained, and transformed through the travel of people, capital, goods and other material objects, ideas, as well as practices and institutions like religion. Such crisscrossing connections also constitute the Indian Ocean as an “aesthetic space” (Verne and Verne 2017). The recitation of *na‘t* is a small example of these much larger and multifaceted ties. It can, however, help us understand a key dimension of such transoceanic links, its felt and atmospheric qualities that often evade discursive rendering. As discussed earlier, atmospheres exert their power through somatically palpable suggestions of movement. Sonic practices such as the recitation of *na‘t* are a particularly evocative example of atmospheres, because the sonic as traveling energetic flows transgresses boundaries, including bodily boundaries, in obvious ways. Those exposed to the power of sound and the sonic will feel the passing of sonic energy through them as suggestions of motion, pointing at the processes of transduction that are central to the perception of sound, whether through the hearing apparatus or other parts of the body.

Sonic practices are especially important in this context, because the subtle sensation of movement central to the atmospheric articulates with the larger theme of movement as producing transoceanic worlds. The atmospheric provides a particular register for experiencing movement, in this case movement that makes the Indian Ocean region a lived transoceanic space. It does so by enabling the somatic registration of aspects of such movements as bodily present, and therefore as self-evident.¹ It makes possible the feeling of such movements beyond words, but also in a diffuse multilayered way that cannot be reduced to single sensory impressions, exceeding them in a holistic way instead. In other words, the recitation of *na‘t* is, alongside its more obvious character as a practice of spiritual intercession in a Sufi-inspired tradition, also a means of providing seemingly irrefutable somatic evidence of transoceanic connections. This is not just a matter of parallelism between atmospherically induced suggestions of movement exerted on felt-bodies

and the various forms of ties through movement that constitute a transoceanic space. The recitation of this devotional poetry makes the truth of these connections felt in the flesh.

Provoking suggestions of movement through the sonic in the recitation of Urdu na‘t is, however, no automatic process that yields the same results for everyone and in any setting. The processes of transduction that result in somatically felt suggestions of motion in participants of a mahfil-e mawluḍ are central to the power of na‘t to generate atmospheres. Such suggestions of movement also intersect with body memories. These are not just aural but are properly sonic “archives” of the felt-body, because they comprise the traces of felt movement beyond the acoustically perceivable. It does not need to be pointed out that these “archives” are not the same for everyone. Such body memories of movement are the outcome of long processes of socialization. In the case of na‘t recitation, the sectarian differences and antagonisms the practice has long become embroiled in play a crucial role in the formation of such sonic archives in the flesh. Many Salafis would appreciate the beauty of a na‘t khwan’s voice, but would not be atmospherically moved by the performance. This recalls the observation by Hermann Schmitz that atmospheres can also be merely observed, and that a spreading atmosphere does not necessarily seize everyone in the same way. From a Salafi perspective the notion of making the Prophet appear in person through sonic practices in order to gain his intercession with God is blasphemous. For someone committed to that tradition, the sound of na‘t poetry would not be associated with the vivid experience of traveling to Medina to be in the presence of the Prophet, as it would not be part of that person’s body memory. Atmospheric suggestions of movement generated by sonic practices therefore need to intersect with such body memories of movement, including those contained in sonic “archives,” for their power to unfold.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have introduced the recitation of na‘t poetry among Mauritian Muslims as an atmospheric practice that generates sonic and somatic knowledge of transoceanic connections in the Indian Ocean world. Na‘t recital is not a kind of cultural “baggage” that ancestors of present-day Mauritian Muslims brought from India when they migrated to Mauritius. It is a key devotional practice common among followers of a major Islamic reformist movement, the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama‘at that only emerged in India at a time when migration to Mauritius was already in full swing, and that only reached Mauritius in the 1920s, quickly establishing itself as the locally dominant form of Sunni Islam. The recitation of na‘t is therefore a sonic religious practice that points to links between Mauritius and India that emerged only after migration from India had already ended. The popularity of the practice was due to the expansion and missionary efforts of a modern Islamic piety movement. However, its spread was also driven by the internal

dynamics of a Creole society in which people of Indian origin, together almost 70 percent of the population, aimed at empowerment through replacing race with religion as the main principle of making and demarcating “communities” in a post-plantation society.

I have argued that an approach to the sonic as atmosphere is particularly suited to gain a better understanding of why sonic practices, including music, can be such powerful modes of knowledge of long-distance connections, including trans-regional and transoceanic ties. The theme of motion is central in this respect, connecting the kinds of movements that constitute a particular space, including the transoceanic world that is the focus of this volume, and movement as experienced by the felt-body. The recitation of na‘t is one way to make the truth and import of such Indian Ocean ties palpable. It therefore constitutes a kind of sonic knowledge of its own, irreducible to discourse, providing somatic evidence for the transoceanic connections that play a major role in the lives of Mauritian Muslims.

NOTE

1. See Kabir (2021) for a different approach to the role of movement and motion in the felt aspects of transoceanic links in the Goan mando song-and-dance genre whose practice summons body memories that link the Indian Ocean with the Atlantic world.

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