

“From This One Song Alone, I Consider Him to be a Holy Man”: Ecstatic Religion, Musical Affect, and the Global Consumer

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This essay considers why studying ecstatic religious practices that include music as an integral component of trance and possession performance might be productive for sociologists, particularly in the context of globalization. As spirit possession practices become connected with global markets, and as specific musical genres associated with trance are reinterpreted within secular frameworks (Indo-Pakistani Sufi qawwali singing and Afro-Cuban Ocha batá drumming, for example), ecstatic religious contexts, and decreasing emphasis is placed on the culturally specific locales from which these performance practices emerge. Why are self-identified nonbelievers interested in consuming musical genres that have their origins in ecstatic religious practices? What do these commodified and recontextualized ecstatic religious practices provide the people who consume them?

Music, like ecstatic religious experience, can be both transcendent and ephemeral, and can provide listeners with a spiritual connection. Unlike ecstatic religious experience, however, listening to music does not require active participation in a religious community. This seeming discrepancy between religious membership and spiritual experience has long been of interest to sociologists of religion (Hadaway 2001; Marler and Hadaway 2002; Wedem and Warner 1994; Wuthnow 1994). Scholars interested in the growth of religious organizations have tended to argue that popular music provides only a superficial link to spiritual experience (and thus is not likely to be an important factor in religious growth), yet an examination of the historical links between religio-ecstatic musical genres and the religious traditions from which they emerged suggests that the link between music and spiritual experience is, for some people, not only profound, but transcendent—and enduring.

Judith Becker's recent book *Deep Listeners* (2004) outlines clearly the similarities between “deep listeners” (people who experience strong emotional arousal when listening to particular types of secular music) and “trancers” (people who achieve a transcendent ecstatic state during a communal religious event). “Deep listening is a kind of secular trancing, divorced from religious practice but often carrying religious sentiments such as feelings of transcendence or a sense of communion with a power beyond oneself” (2004:2). While Becker's recent fieldwork has focused on Pentecostalist “trancers” and the “deep listeners” who are moved to tears or joy by musical genres that would typically be considered secular (Beethoven's aptly named “Pathétique” sonata, for example; Becker 2004:55), I am focusing on those people who listen to musical traditions that have their origins in ecstatic religious contexts and that have, by the processes of globalization, become disembodied from their performers and recontextualized into secular performance genres.

My hypothesis is that consumers of the music of Indo-Pakistani Sufism and Afro-Cuban Ocha (more commonly known as Santería), to name two of the more popular ecstatic genres, are hoping to gain access to some of the spiritual capital of these religious traditions without investing in the religious practices themselves. Music sometimes serves as a gateway for enamored listeners to cross over from fan to religious neophyte, thus affording self-identified nonbelievers access to a spiritual connection. Although most secular listeners do not take that step, music from these originally ecstatic religious traditions may serve a transcendent function, even in its newly disembodied and secularized form. This essay examines how a self-selected group of these listeners, using the Internet as their virtual community, constructs a link between their own secular

(in most cases) self-positioning, the attraction that popular music with religio-ecstatic roots holds for them, and the spiritual potential that they feel when listening to this music.

In this essay, I discuss two case studies—Indo-Pakistani Sufi *qawwali* (devotional Sufi poetry performed with tabla drums, harmonium, singing, and clapping) and Afro-Cuban Ocha *tambores* (religious drumming ceremonies featuring singing and dancing)—which are two examples of a larger phenomenon. One could include Moroccan Sufi *gnawa* music, Afro-Brazilian *candomblé* music, and other performance traditions that have bridged the sacred-secular divide with the help of global consumerism and international tourism. I focus on *qawwali* and *tambores* because I have particular knowledge of these two traditions, and because the responses nonbelievers have to these performance traditions are especially strong. These strong responses may be activated in part by the musical traditions themselves, which place great emphasis on the power of music to summon the divine through the dynamic interaction between musicians and congregants. Thus, this essay examines the boundaries religious traditions have attempted to maintain between the spiritual and sensual dimensions of music listening, the ways in which this musico-ecstatic performance facilitates a spiritual connection through repetition and rhythm, and how the online commercial marketplace has facilitated the construction of a secularized spiritual experience.

In both *qawwali* performances and Ocha *tambores*, the role of the “ready” or “prepared” listener is crucial. In fact, the theologies of both Indo-Pakistani Sufism and Afro-Cuban Ocha make special reference to the listener as a vehicle for divine presence, if the listener is prepared to receive and recognize this divineness.

Qawwali music is integral to Indic Sufism, and developed as a means of worshiping specific saints of the Sufi brotherhoods, particularly those of the Chishti (beginning in the early 13th century) and Qadri (beginning in the early 17th century) sects. Although the Muslim empire had extended into the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent by 711 CE, Sufi orders were not established in this area until the late 12th and early 13th centuries CE. The Sufi Chishti order, founded by Delhi resident Mu’*in*uddin Chishti (himself a follower of Sufi theologian Abu Haf*s* Suhrawardi), achieved the Islamization of this part of northwestern India mainly through the preaching and activities of its dervishes, who specialized in the *sama*, the mystical whirling dance and spirited musical accompaniment said to help the listener achieve divine ecstasy (Schimmel 1975: 345–47).

According to theologian Suhrawardi, listening to music would pose a threat only to those who were spiritually unevolved because it would bring out in the listener that which was already there: “He whose inner self is attached to anything else than God is stirred by music to sensual desire, but the one who is inwardly attached to the love of God is moved, by hearing music, to do His will. . . . The common folk listen to music according to nature, and the novices listen with desire and awe, while the listening of the saints brings them a vision of the Divine gifts and graces, and these are the Gnostics to whom listening means contemplation. But finally, there is the listening of the spiritually perfect to whom, through music, God reveals Himself unveiled” (Smith 1994/1950 in Schimmel 1975:182).¹ Regula Qureshi’s recent ethnography on Indic Sufism (1995) defines *sama* as “an assembly for listening,” and notes elsewhere that the musical performance of mystical Sufi poems during *sama* is considered “an essential means of reaching a state of ecstatic communion with God” (1997:282). Interestingly, the musical delivery of these mystical poems is improvised in order to “respond to the listeners’ spiritual needs of the moment” (1997:28).

In secularized *qawwali* concerts, the audience generally claps and sings along with the chorus, thus expressing its own spiritual needs and mimicking the interaction between the musicians and the congregants at a *sama*. In fact, Qureshi has commented that “even on the stage, essentially traditional Sufi musicians, like the Sabri brothers and now Nusrat Fateh Ali [Khan], retain their spiritual repertoire and performance style” (1997:285).²

Ocha *tambores* are similarly designed to be interactive, responsive events, and the visible process of spirit possession begins precisely at the point when the singer(s) and drummers identify

an adherent who may be on the verge of allowing an *oricha* (divine entity) to inhabit his or her being. The musicians then concentrate their efforts on pushing this person over the edge into the realm of *oricha* possession, playing toward and singing onto the person. In Ocha, the person whom this divine entity enters is not necessarily characterized as more spiritually evolved than his or her colleagues, as would seem to be the case in Indic Sufism. Rather, someone who becomes possessed frequently or easily in the context of an Ocha *tambor* is considered a good possession vehicle or “horse,” usually by virtue of many years of experience. Successful and appropriate spirit possession in Ocha is considered a skill, and those who may have a natural inclination toward physically accepting an *oricha*’s presence work hard on fine-tuning the experience. Vélez (2000:14–15) and Hagedorn (2001:75–80, and *passim*) note that most of the liturgical rituals in Ocha involve singing, dancing, and drumming, and that this performance complex acts as a “channel of access to the world of the *orichas*” (Vélez 2000:15). It is the consecrated set of *batá* drums in particular that facilitates this sacred communication between human and divine entities because the three double-headed *batá* drums, through their multi-pitched and polyrhythmic patterns, are said to speak the language of the *orichas*. This “drum talk” persuades the *orichas* to come to earth and possess the body of a devotee (Hagedorn 2006). Marcuzzi (2005:490) suggests that *oricha* possession may constitute a type of divination, which would emphasize not only the clarity of the divine connection, but the uniquely personal dynamic that *oricha* possession facilitates.

Hagedorn (2001:107–12) has noted the occasional phenomenon of “inappropriate” *oricha* possession—that is, when an adept becomes possessed by an *oricha* outside of the sacred context of a *tambor*. Staged performances of Afro-Cuban *oricha* songs at hotels, theatres, or schools are some of the venues where these inappropriate *oricha* possessions have occurred. Audience members at these events, much like the audience members at a *qawwali* concert, participate freely in singing the chorus parts and occasionally clapping along to the *clave* (one of several structural rhythmic backbones of any given *oricha* rhythm). It is precisely this call-and-response dynamic—perceived as a personal communication by the audience—that can eventually lead to *oricha* possession.

In the secularized, commoditized, and personalized realm in which most people listen to music, this spiritual connection is facilitated precisely because music can be easily and quickly objectified and mobilized across temporal and geographical boundaries. Compact discs, i-pods, and other downloadable representations of sound make music infinitely transferable. With this ease of transfer comes ease of reproducibility, which transforms once ephemeral events into endlessly reproducible and repeatable aural phenomena. The act of objectifying and thus capturing an originally ephemeral experience brings to mind Benjamin’s seminal article, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1969/1936), in which Benjamin links the phenomenon of reproducibility and the idea of art designed not for art’s sake, but rather for the sake of reproducibility and profit. One of Benjamin’s observations was that this change in the intent of the production of art inevitably alters the meaning of the “copy” so that it no longer refers directly to the “original.” Similarly, in Baudrillard’s *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard interrogates simulations and simulacra of reality, questioning the will and the ability of the perceiver/consumer to distinguish between the copy and the original, asserting that as the multiple copies of the original cease to refer to the original, and instead refer to themselves, the changed referent transforms the meaning of the copies and the original.

These ideas relate directly to the recontextualized consumption of the musico-ecstatic traditions of *qawwali* and *tambor*, in which nonbelievers are listening to music considered integral to these religious traditions, and yet most of the original religious context (including the specific dances and other bodily movements that the musical gestures might inspire) for these performance traditions has been removed or replaced by the listener’s own circumstances or partial understanding of the music’s original function. One would expect a secular listener not to derive

religious feeling from these musical performances, given their newly secularized and disembodied performance contexts, and yet listeners persist in linking their musical experiences with spiritual transcendence.

Some of the contextual clues listeners may rely upon for deriving meaning from these performance traditions include publicly accessible forms of documentation and commercialization. Each tradition has been documented and recorded by scholars, popular journalists, and recording artists since the 1950s, usually in the form of a book, CD, video recording, or a combination thereof (see Schimmel 1975; Qureshi 1995; Vélez 2000; Hagedorn 2001), which means there is a public record of the religious context of each tradition. These myriad forms of documentation are readily available to the public and, in some cases, hearing trance-related music inspires the listener to find out more about its context. One person who bought Regula Burckhardt Qureshi's *Sufi Music in India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali* (1995) wrote on the Amazon.com webpage devoted to that book that Qureshi's analysis was "unnecessarily complicated [because] the only thing I wanted to get out of the book was the context of Qawwali performances" (April 30, 2000, Philadelphia, PA). Also, each tradition has been popularized—through mass media such as movies and television shows, or through popular music fusions and other musical references—so that consumers who are not necessarily interested in these religious practices *per se* become aware of them outside of their religious contexts. Examples include Pakistani *qawwal* Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's contributions to the film scores of Hollywood blockbusters such as "Dead Man Walking" (1995) and "The Last Temptation of Christ" (1988), as well as his collaborations with Canadian jazz/fusion guitarist and composer Michael Brook. Other examples include composer and sound technician Bill Laswell's "Imaginary Cuba" (1999), a dub-fusion composition of Ocha songs and rhythms, as well as the work of other Cuban-based fusion groups, such as Orichas, Mezcla, Síntesis, and Vocal Sampling.

Another important reason these musical traditions may facilitate an apparently strong spiritual connection in listeners despite their amicable divorce from their religious origins is because each of these traditions features rhythmic repetition and interest. While the structure of the rhythmic patterns used in *qawwali* and *tambores* may remain constant, the improvisational forays based on these rhythmic structures vary enough to maintain a listener's interest, and to take the listener on another kind of journey—from simple rhythms to more complex rhythms, from slow rhythms to fast, and, in most cases, back again. Certainly, Afro-Cuban Ocha and other religious traditions of the West and Central African diaspora, such as Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé, employ complexly articulated polyrhythms that shift the listener's awareness from one metrical framework to another. Indo-Pakistani *qawwali* as well as other ecstatic Sufi performance traditions (such as Moroccan *gnawa* and Turkish *sema*, for example) use rhythmic repetition in conjunction with alterations in rhythmic density, tempo, and dynamics, rather than greater or lesser degrees of rhythmic complexity. In both Sufi *qawwali* and Ocha *tambores*, I would maintain that repetition and variability in rhythmic expression provide a gateway for a spiritual journey.

Global capitalism, one of the markers of modern globalization, makes these temporal and territorial journeys possible. An important tool of access to the global marketplace is Amazon.com. Cultural products that cannot be found elsewhere in the globalized economy can often be found here, and with the click of a mouse, desired objects—especially music and books—can be selected, purchased, and delivered to the buyer within days. These buyers are located overwhelmingly in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, where on-line shopping has become the norm for many middle-class consumers. Indeed, if Hesmondhalgh's argument in *The Cultural Industries* (2002) is correct, music is at the forefront of globalization precisely because of the music industry's continuously successful means of mass production and dissemination since the beginning of the 20th century. It may seem crude to bring up Amazon.com in an article devoted to music, religion, and globalization, but this mega-company has become a major player in connecting all three

phenomena. For it is not simply the ability to purchase cultural products that refer directly to, among other things, music and religion that makes this cybernetic marketplace a force to be reckoned with; it is the comments and reviews that people post in response to their purchases that increase the emotional affect—and perhaps political effect—of this global network.

Nowhere are the comments and reviews more impassioned than on pages featuring recordings of the musico-religious practices of Indo-Pakistani Sufism and Afro-Cuban Ocha. Some of these listeners self-identify as being of Indo-Pakistani or Afro-Cuban descent, creating among themselves the “imagined communities” and “mediascapes” predicted by Anderson (1991) and Appadurai (1996), respectively, posting strident comments about “authenticity” and “musical truth.” These listeners, though, comprise less than half of the total number of participants contributing on-line comments and reviews. I am most interested in those listeners who would seem to have no connection—national, religious, or otherwise—to these musico-ecstatic traditions; those who self-identify as nonbelievers or as strong believers in a faith unrelated to Indo-Pakistani Sufism or Afro-Cuban Ocha. In my limited survey of the posted reviews, these listeners seem most likely to imbue their musical experience with a spiritual dimension unrelated to their own religious history or cultural background.

I turn now to the comments of on-line reviewers about CDs from these two performance traditions—those from religious, folkloric, and pop-fusion contexts—as posted on Amazon.com. Internet-based ethnography is a nascent practice, but ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists already recognize its value (Lysloff 2003; Lysloff and Gay 2003; Miller and Slater 2000). These participants are a self-selected group: they are avid consumers of the musico-religious performance tradition in question, and they are, in Becker’s (2004) words, “deep listeners.” They are also motivated, at least partially by their strong responses to these musical traditions, to post public comments about their experiences on the Internet. It is through their public comments that I find support for my hypothesis that music provides a gateway experience for consumers of “world beat”³ to enter into a spiritually transcendent state without actively participating in the religious tradition from whence these musical sounds came, allowing for “spirituality without religion.”⁴

The recordings of internationally famous *qawwal* (singer of *qawwali*) Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan inspire elaborate Internet discussion and ardent responses. An anonymous reviewer from Duluth, Georgia, commenting on “Shahen Shah” ([1988]1993), a compact disc of traditional *qawwali* music, referred to the “deep spirituality that is associated with hearing Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan sing.” This same reviewer went on to say that (s)he had grown up with Led Zeppelin, the Who, and Bruce Springsteen, but that “[i]f God (whoever he is) could choose someone to sing on his behalf, I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that Nusrat would be it” (May 28, 2006). A reviewer from Pennsylvania, who self-identifies as “generally as unenlightened as you can get,” wrote that Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan’s “extraordinary voice [on “Shahen Shah”] really did seem to transcend our world and reach out to the stars, [communicating] hope, longing, joy, sadness, passion and ecstatic rapture, immediate and almost tangible even when you can’t understand a word” (July 21, 2004). An anonymous reviewer writing about the CD “Greatest Hits of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan” (1997) makes clear the link between transcendent spiritual experience and intense musical affect: “The first track on this album ‘Haq Ali Ali’ (which clocks in at 25:00) absolutely had my head and heart spinning the first time I heard it. I think it is the fact that most great music stems from religious inspiration. I’m a Christian, but I think someone of any faith could appreciate the fervor, devotion, sincerity and passion with which these pieces are rendered” (“Prepare to be blown away,” May 31, 1999). Another listener, writing about “Qawwali: Sufi Music from Pakistan” by the Sabri Brothers, writes that “I appreciate the uncompromising genuineness and heart that they put into this work. I have been disappointed in other artists cutting short tracks that don’t get to the hypnotic, trance-like quality of *qawwali*” (J. Brown, San Diego, California, October 26, 2002). One on-line reviewer of “Mustt Mustt” (1990), a “fusion” CD featuring Qawwal Nusrat Fateh Ali

Khan released by rock musician and producer Peter Gabriel and his Real World Studio, notes: "This is a profane song, it's a profane album—Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan usually sings sacred music [but] I personally think this is the closest a love song ever comes to rivaling the most sacred of sacred songs, irrespective of religion of belief system [sic]. . . from this one song alone, I consider him to be a holy man" (P. Thompson, Los Angeles, July 13, 2005).

Recordings of Cuban Ocha music generate similarly impassioned responses, which refer specifically to transcendental experiences associated with listening to this music. Reviewing "Olorun" (1994), a compact disc featuring the late Afro-Cuban legend Lázaro Ros singing chants to the *orichas*, listener M. Colón writes: "Turn the lights off, light a seven colored candle, and make sure to wear white clothing. You are about to enter the world of the Orisha! Lazaro's voice will put you in a trance, like you have never felt before [sic]" (Lowell, Massachusetts, April 28, 2000). An anonymous reviewer of "Olorun" wrote that Lázaro Ros is "a gifted man with a pure connection to beauty and truth" ("Spiritually Guided Work," March 18, 2000). "Sacred Rhythms of Santería" (1995) is a compilation of field recordings of Ocha ceremonies made in Havana during the early 1980s, and inspired one reviewer to write: "If you are working with a specific Orisha in front of your Altar put this CD on and chant with the sacred drummers. This CD can aid worshipers in asking the spirits to come down. It is like a Gospel record for a Baptist" ("Music for Ritual Use," November 17, 2000).⁵

What is surprising about these comments is that they suggest that these listeners are reinvesting these objectified, commodified, recontextualized aural experiences with sacred meaning, which would seem to contradict both Benjamin's and Baudrillard's dire predictions of infinitely reproducible, commoditized, repeatable art losing its original meaning and distancing the perceiver from the original phenomenon. These self-selected "deep listeners" seem protective of the sacred origins of these musical traditions, and claim to experience a form of transcendence very similar to the transcendent states described by religious believers from those two ecstatic traditions. More specifically, these listeners seem to seek a spiritual connection from this music. To cast an optimistic light on the admittedly exploitative music industry, and specifically on those of us who consume the products of this industry, perhaps consumption does not inevitably lead to alienation and isolation. Perhaps the consumption of these musico-ecstatic traditions, even in their secularized, objectified states, helps the listener transcend despair, fulfilling (in an admittedly limited way) one of the purported goals of organized religion.

NOTES

1. See also Rouget's (1985:255–314) discussion of the differences between *sama*, *dhikr*, *fakir*, and *tarab*, based in part on 12th-century theologian Al-Ghazzali's *Book of the Revivifying of the Sciences of the Faith*, written as a defense of Sufi ecstatic practices in the early 1100s. Al-Ghazzali's philosophy regarding *sama* differs somewhat from Suhrawardi's, in that Al-Ghazzali maintains that the music and dancing of the *sama* can bring out or reveal in the participant the divine potential that initially seemed lacking.
2. Unfortunately, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan died soon after Qureshi's 1997 article was published.
3. Goodwin and Gore (1990) have made a compelling argument for the primarily financially motivated category of "world beat" (which, to performers of what is classified as "world beat," has scant musical meaning), and have pointed out the exploitation involved in consuming a community's cultural patrimony with no knowledge of cultural context and, worse, little or no financial compensation of this community's performers.
4. This phrase has been used by critics to describe Buddhism's appeal to Christians (see, for example, Jody Veenker, "Buddhism: Spirituality Without Religion," *Christianity Today*, November 1999, <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/1999/novemberweb-only/21.0c.html>), but it seems to me that this phrase is equally descriptive of the spiritual connection people feel when listening to highly affective music originally associated with ecstatic religious practices. See also Marler and Hadaway (2002), in which they consider whether "spirituality" and "religion" are mutually exclusive phenomena.
5. It should be noted that a few consumers have posted wholly negative responses to this music. For example, one reviewer of "Qawwali: Sufi Music of Pakistan," by the Sabri Brothers, wrote that "Sabri Brothers lack piety, sweetness, and peace in their music. It sounds rather evil and profit-hungry: trying to ape Nusret [sic] Fateh Ali Khan. Real Sufi music does not sound evil. It sounds sweet, mellow, and peaceful" ("This is not real Sufi music" March 20, 2001). Regarding

“Sacred Rhythms of Cuban Santería,” one reviewer wrote simply: “It is a horrible CD! Never get it!” (S. Anderson, Florida, April 15, 2000).

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