

Qawwali as World-System

This Project is a multi-sited investigation of Qawwali performers and audiences in Pakistan, India and the United States. By examining Qawwali, the Sufi “music in context *par excellence*” (Qureshi: 1986) across borders between nations and hemispheres we approach an ethnography of cultures of sound and hearing as altered by processes of global transfer.

I have made preliminary recordings of Qawwali in Ajmer, Delhi and Lahore and am in the process of collecting material on Qawwali in New York City. While conducting archival research on Qawwali at the American Institute of Indian Studies Research Center for Ethnomusicology in Gurgaon, India last summer, I realized that my research requires me to acquire greater proficiency in Urdu and learn more about the theory and performance of Qawwali itself. Lahore, home to some of the world’s greatest Qawwals and the Berkeley Urdu Language Program in Pakistan, is the ideal site to begin my research. My work in Lahore from September 2001 to June 2002 will be a combined training and research project during which I will study advanced Urdu, including specialized language for music such as Qawwali, set up contacts for ethnographic work with Qawwals, and study Qawwali with one or more of them who work as music teachers.

A good way to understand transnationalism, globalization, diaspora and other vital but sometimes inaccurately rendered or unwieldy processes is through the careful documentation of the real, lived experience of the human beings who inhabit them. Qawwali, the ecstatic music at the heart of Sufi-ism, has been travelling the globe for centuries in the mouths, ears, hearts, minds, and, more recently, the cassette players of the South Asian diaspora. Following nine months of training in Qawwali and advanced Urdu, the researcher will live for approximately six months each with Qawwali performers in Ajmer, India; Lahore, Pakistan; and New York City. The study of performers’ daily lives will show how the music of the Sufis (in both sacred and popular forms) has been shaped by, and shapes, the cultural landscape of a world system.

The position of the performer, the Qawwal, is hereditary and involved in processes of religious patronage and capitalism (Qureshi, 1986) Qawwali’s history and traditions are well-documented but subject to constant change. For a view of how this music has changed and been changed by the spread of Islam and the global flow of South Asian culture, the researcher must look at multiple sites. The continuity and difference in Qawwali performance will be assessed across a national/political border (India-Pakistan) and across a divide which changes political and cultural identities, the diasporic community of New York City.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND AIMS

The world system of the Sufi Music called *Qawwali* links local needs and global identities with world-wide flows of capital, imaginings of self and the mystical experience. Within this observation are five salient questions:

1. Is it possible even to speak of a "South Asian" identity while there is tension between India and Pakistan?
2. Are categories such as Sufi, Punjabi and Muslim becoming more salient than nationality?
3. Does the use of *Qawwali* as a global commodity and as a vehicle of spiritual experience suggest the reactivation of a precolonial system of contact between East and West, or is it something new?
4. An analysis of recent trends in "traditional" and "popular" genres of *Qawwali* (Manuel 1993; Qureshi 1986) clearly suggests a two-way flow of cultural production between South Asia and the Diaspora. What flows exist between generations, between different sending and receiving communities, between a modern "diaspora" and the long-term history of the spread of Sufi ideas?
5. How can we use *Qawwali* to chart changes in spiritual and political identity in India, Pakistan, and the South Asian community in North America?

Historically, Sufi brotherhoods have faced more repression from orthodox Islam when Muslims have been in a subordinate social position, e.g. Colonial India. Muslim orthodoxy has tended to view Sufi-ism with an attitude of skeptical tolerance during periods of Muslim hegemony, such as ninth and tenth century Persia. (Al-Azmeh: 1993) In Pakistan, *Qawwali* has been part of the Punjabi majority's cultural assertion in recent years. In India, *Qawwali*'s popularity across polarized religious boundaries suggests Sufi-ism as a binding force. In South Asian communities in North America, there are relatively few Sufis among the middle and upper classes. However, interest in *Qawwali* and other Sufi traditions among these groups is growing, with gatherings of Muslims using recordings of *Qawwalis* when skilled *Qawwals* are unavailable. For many young people who are trying to negotiate an identity which is both American and South Asian, *Qawwali* in remix form is a way of re-appropriating "their" culture. A study of *Qawwali* in several, varied sites will illustrate a connection between mysticism and politics.

WHAT IS QAWWALI?

Despite the prohibition on music in orthodox Islam, *Qawwali*, spiritual song which transports the mystic toward union with God, thrives as the central ritual of Sufism. For centuries, the Sufi communities of the Indian Subcontinent have sustained the tradition of singing and music as spiritual nourishment in religious centers throughout India and Pakistan. Today, as the South Asian Diaspora increases in size and visibility, *Qawwali* has emerged as a growing emblem of identity, for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. What religious and secular versions of *Qawwali* share, apart from their north Indian roots, are a seemingly universal appeal combined with a striking ability to adapt itself for local needs. As an important ingredient in the spread of Islam, *Qawwali* is suggestive of the mystical, esoteric side of religion which continues to thrive. As an increasing presence on the concert stage and in the pulsating rhythms of nightclub dance mixes, *Qawwali* is a means by which South Asians perform their identity. As such *Qawwali* can

been seen as a cultural production which connects people around the world, a world-system with elements of capitalism, spirituality and the local expression of politics and religion.

"The Qawwali experience continues to have much to teach us about the power of music to connect." -Regula Qureshi

It also says much about the power of music to confront hegemonies, to negotiate resistance and to affect changes in the power structure. The Sufi saints who brought their teaching from the Persian culture area to medieval India found themselves in a cultural milieu based on hereditary social and economic formations such as caste. Unlike European Colonialism, the Muslim empire in South Asia did not seek to convert an entire region to its religion and social structure. Sufism played a role in mediating between the orthodoxy of the Delhi sultanate and indigenous, local practices. (Qureshi (1986))

Regula Qureshi (1986, 1995) has shown how the context in which Qawwali is heard determines its meaning. In Sufi tradition, it is the listener who embodies the spiritual act. The performer, the Qawwal himself, is not considered a religious figure, but a servant under the patronage of the shrine in which he performs. What about the performance of Qawwali as "art," or as an ingredient in dance music favored by South Asian youth? To what degree are Desis in New York City who embrace Qawwali (in whatever form) "looking back" towards a place left behind (*Hijra*) and to what degree are they forging a new path? Qawwali connects across generations, across centuries to the Sufi tradition. How rebellious is a teenage Indian American DJ who makes a noisy form of dance music for his "desi" audience using Qawwali records from his parents' collection?

Sufi practice through Qawwali has affected Muslim identity in South Asia and worldwide. Recent uses of Qawwali in dance clubs and on the international stage are also a part of the South Asian diaspora. How do these performances of identity change the meaning of Sufi music, even of Islam itself? The continuing message of spirituality and tolerance which Sufi traditions such as Qawwali embody runs contrary to the Western (mis)apprehension of Islam. Does the transformation of Qawwali and the expansion of its audience threaten other formations, such as the Nation? Sufi music has always run counter to hegemonies, yet it has adapted and survived. It is ironic that some "fundamentalist" Muslims oppose the Sufi tradition which is so closely linked to the fundamental sources of Islamic religious life: the Qu'ran and the Prophet.

Qawwals in South Asia today support themselves with a combination of Sufi patronage and capital from commercial endeavors such as recording, teaching and private performance. What does this "world system" mean to a family of Qawwals who are not international stars? Ajmer today is the site of a unique combination of an older system of patronage in the Dargah with a simultaneous system of modern capitalism based on the sale of locally recorded commercial cassettes. The same Qawwals who perform a religious function at the shrine of their most revered ancestor record an electronically enhanced popular form of their music in the Shri Cassettes studio just down the road.

Many Muslims I have spoken to reject the category of “sacred.” It’s implied contrast with a “secular” world has no utility in describing Islam as a way of life, a God who is present in all things. The Sufi version of the confession of faith, the central pillar of Islam (i.e. “There is no god but God.”) is extended to mean that “nothing exists that is not God.” this is but one example of the tension between orthodox Islam, which often categorizes the Sufis as arrogant or “spiritually impatient” (in the words of Huston Smith). The simultaneously oppositional yet central role of the mystic aspect of Islam, Sufism, makes music and dance (themselves problematic categories) potent sites of investigation into the nature of Islam and modernity. I believe that by taking a broader view of Qawwali which includes the versions adapted for popular entertainment and a narrow set of questions we can find some concrete examples of how a world-system is adapted for the local practice of identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two observations by Regula Qureshi succinctly point out the paradoxical, yet central, position of Qawwali within Islam. First, that Islamic practice transcends local space through aural communication. Recitation of the Qu’ran and Sufi invocational hymns both affect a transcendence of physical space by invoking the omnipresence of the divine and the universality of the Muslim *Umma*. Second, her ethnomusicological data asserts that Qawwali is “music in context *par excellence*.” (Qureshi 1986, 1996) The style and content of a particular performance is subservient to the specific needs of the audience and patrons. How does a wider frame of investigation, which includes contexts of Qawwali production in global media, change the specificity or universality of Qawwali’s meaning to Muslims, South Asians, and other listeners worldwide? These questions will be directly addressed with the simultaneous study of a single cultural production in South Asia and in the diasporic locale of New York City.

Two important works which attempt to characterize the South Asian diaspora in the postcolonial era offer good analytical models for thinking about a “labor diaspora” (in contrast to older, “victim” diasporas, results of persecution or slavery.) However, neither foregrounds Islam as a binding cultural factor among it’s inhabitants. Robin Cohen (1997) finds the distinction between Hindu and Muslim less salient in the diaspora since both groups face similar conditions and since Muslims comprise a minority of workers. Avtar Brah (1996) offers a fine example of how “cartographies of diaspora” become more useful heuristics when fleshed out with ethnographic data. Unfortunately for our purposes, her example subordinates issues of religion to those of gender and class. A multi-sited ethnography of a musical style with a long history of migration and international influence as well as a specific religious function will be of assistance to future studies of modern Islam, diasporas, and world systems.

Arjun Appadurai (1996) has given the social scientist a useful perspective on the deterritorialization of culture, in which cultural signs are released from fixed locations in time and space. The process creates a deep crisis related to identity formation and maintenance as public life and belief systems are undermined by cultural products of global media. It is the delinking of the “location” of culture from the “localness of

culture” (Shanti Kumar 2000, personal communication) that defines the problem of identity. For individuals there is a mental jostling composed of elements not exclusive to any one country, group, or religion. Thus there is no firm separation between the internal (cognitive) world and the external (social) world; between what is “indigenous” and what is “imported.” I suggest that Qawwali, as an agent of Sufi Islam, has throughout its history in South Asia, and in its current manifestations in the media, acted as a bridge across these very borders. The current use of technology to cross borders may be the most recent manifestation of this ability.

“Let me sing till I am nothing but a voice.” - Rumi

Another key area of inquiry in the case of Qawwali is the inherent power of sound to affect meaning and spiritual arousal. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan himself (Sengupta:1996) has noted, with a mixture of awe and amusement, that Western audience members who understand not a word of Qawwali’s Urdu poetry report feeling a sense of spirituality during his performances. As both Qureshi (1995) and Manuel (1993) have observed, the effect of certain sounds in the human ear is believed by Sufis to obliterate the barrier between the creator and human beings.

“We wouldn’t be caught dead buying a ‘world music’ album.” – DJ Rekha, popular New York DJ and host of weekly “Bhangra Basement” events. (Sengupta: 1996)

We must distinguish between the notion of music as a world system and the commercial marketing category of “world music.” In addressing different contexts of Qawwali performance, especially in the diaspora, I will explicitly highlight the differences between audiences who seek spiritual fulfillment, and those who are simply flocking to the novelty of something exotic. Lipsitz (1994) offers some important reminders that violence and racism directed against immigrant groups occur with increasing frequency in the West. He suggests that, for groups such as Asians and West Indians in Britain, finding a cultural voice which the cosmopolitan outsider may brand as “hybrid” or “exotic” is not creating a musical category for the purpose of niche marketing or being “cool,” It may be a matter of building solidarity, a matter of survival.

Stuart Hall has recommended that we recognize that ethnicities "speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position." (1988b:258) It is ethnography's commitment to the particular, to lived experience, which can shed new light on the world-system of Qawwali. I propose a multi-sited study of Qawwali in its various forms of performance, recording and reception which, as George Marcus suggests, is "sensitive to both the inner lives of subjects and the nature of world historical political economy." (1986: 188) While there has been a great deal of recent work among cultural theorists on South Asian popular music, there has yet to be a simultaneous study of its performance and reception in South Asia and the diaspora.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SITES

The primary goal of this project is to investigate how one vein of international cultural flow can be used by different performers and audiences to serve locally and historically specific needs. The researcher will live for approximately six months each with Qawwals in Lahore, Pakistan and Ajmer, India. Qawwals perform in “parties” which are usually related. For example, “Anwar Sabri and Party” in Ajmer includes Anwar Sabri Qawwal as lead singer and harmonium player. His three brothers sing and play accompanying harmonium and dhol (a two-sided hand drum indigenous to the Punjab.) His two sons are also apprentice singers and drummers. Other performers at various stages of vocal, verse memory, and leadership ability accompany them with voice and handclaps. The position of Qawwal is not one of religious clergy but of a servant under the patronage of a particular Sufi shrine or brotherhood. (Qureshi: 1986) These groups of Qawwals often perform for additional money at parties, on television (especially in Pakistan) and in recording studios.

It is a hereditary occupation. However, many accomplished Qawwals are employed as music instructors. Having had previous training in Western classical and popular music, in addition to six years of combined Hindi and Urdu language training, I hope to enroll as an apprentice to a family of Qawwals for the purpose of learning the theory and aesthetics of Qawwali in more detail. It is not my intention to perform publicly. However, my love for and experience in music performance should provide the opportunity for a fruitful and collaborative relationship with both sets of Qawwals. Establishing myself in a student/teacher relationship will give me ample opportunity to view the everyday life of a family of Qawwals in both Ajmer and Lahore and to conduct more formal interviews on a regular basis. I will pay particular attention to the economic and political situation of the family, their audiences, and their patrons. The type of changes they make in their repertoire and style, especially influences from the diaspora, will be of particular interest.

In addition to recorded interviews, I will conduct a series of high-quality digital audio tape recordings of the Qawwals in various contexts. I have made arrangements to visit the Shri Cassettes recording studio in Ajmer and will hopefully conduct interviews and sound recording there as well. I have substantial experience in professional sound and video recording and will be able to analyze significant differences in operations at all three sites.

I will also interview audience members of various religious backgrounds, ages, and ethnicities. By comparing recorded data with fieldnotes in the three locales, I will show how shifting contexts determines not only the style and content, but the meaning of the Qawwali.

I will spend approximately six months in New York City, my hometown, a place where I have access to South Asian social networks. My work there will largely be in the Indian and Pakistani community of Jackson Heights, Queens. Qawwals are occasionally hired to perform in the homes of South Asian families in Jackson heights, since there is no saint’s tomb in Queens. Those seeking the Sufi experience of Qawwali often have recourse to recordings of Qawwali for religious purposes. But my keenest interest in

Jackson heights will be in the nightclub scene. My cousin, a daughter of an Indian man and an American woman, raised in rural Maharashtra, currently lives there and is part of the "desi" scene. Qawwali in its remix form is an increasingly popular ingredient in the underground. While advocates of cultural purity scoff at this hybrid musical form, I see it as a potentially rich field site. The audiences at these nightclubs are performing a new and rebellious form of political and spiritual identity which may be just as intoxicating and valuable as their counterparts in the Chishti shrines of India and Pakistan. Only careful comparison, recording, interviews, and long term association with the participants can tell. This type of close comparison across widely varied contexts, age groups and locales will show how dreams of stardom, the need for subsistence, the Sufi mystical quest and the search for identity in the diaspora are interrelated.

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