

## Sound as Affect?

### *Encorporation and Movement in Vocal Performance*

The discursive and sonic dimensions of na't poetry complement each other. Although they operate in distinct modes, in na't recitals they frequently work in mutually reinforcing ways. Mahfils are social events, and the sonic dimensions of the performances have particular affordances for creating shared, intersubjective experiences that are distinct from the processes of semiotic mediation I analyzed earlier. One of these shared, intersubjective experiences is encorporation through sonic atmospheres. Encorporation is a key modality of producing shared religious sensations. Such encorporation through vocal sound shows how voices not only move and touch persons in nonmetaphorical ways but also, in the process, bring about a temporary merger of their felt-bodies.

In the previous chapter I analyzed how the vocal recitation of na't poetry emits sonic atmospheres. I showed how such atmospheres effect processes of transduction. Sonic atmospheres encounter and mingle with felt-bodies, enacting suggestions of movement on them. Combining my analyses in the previous two chapters, I suggest ways in which the discursive dimensions of devotional recitation as evident in entextualization and the reconfiguration of participant roles can be fruitfully brought together with an analytic of atmospheres. My aim is to provide, based on my analysis of the vocal recitation of na't among Mauritian Muslims, a richer account of voice in religion that takes the sonic seriously as a dimension of meaning-making in bodily registers.

In the previous chapter's examples of na't recitation, it was apparent that the suggestions of movement contained in sonic atmospheres often align with the discursive dimensions of poetry. This was especially the case when the recitation of na't evoked the major theme of travel to Madina in order to personally encounter

the Prophet Muhammad. At the same time, my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors stressed the interdependence of vocal sound and the pious conditioning of both reciters and listeners. My respondents identified such piety with sincerity or with demonstrable pious practices such as regularly performing the mandatory daily prayers and displaying bodily markers of piety, such as beards. In this chapter I return to both of these points, the alignment of sonic atmospheres with the discursive dimensions of poetry and the relationship of vocal sound and pious conditioning. I do so in order to propose an understanding of the voice that combines the analysis of social semiotics that has so far dominated recent anthropological approaches to the voice with an analytic of atmospheres centered on a neophenomenological account of sensation. I suggest a new direction in the recent sensual and material turn in the study of religion that pays greater attention to its sonic dimensions.

In my analysis of the discursive dimensions of *na't* performances in chapter 4, I focused on the role of deictic particles in language as they facilitate the merging of the participant roles of composer and animator. This merger brings about a polyvalent "I" in discourse. It enables the reciters of the poetry to align themselves with the authority vested in the saint-poets who are regarded as the authors of the poetry and to take personal responsibility for the words uttered. This recalculation of the values of the deictics—such as personal, temporal, and spatial markers—along with other grammatical devices, such as use of the vocative case, locutives, and evidentials, makes such realignments between performers, authoritative saint-poets, and the Prophet possible. It turns the performance of *na't* into a meritorious act. I also mentioned that vocal qualities play a key role in the success of the performance of *na't*, because they indicate stances of emotive piety that listening to the poetry is supposed to bring about. Partly as a result of this sensibility to the voice, sound production technology has come to play an important role in guiding performances of devotional poetry. Sound reproduction has thereby also become an inseparable part of processes of entextualization that enable particular *na't* to travel from one performative context to another, so they remain the "same" not only in matters of textual accuracy but also in their vocal rendering.

However, the analysis of entextualization and participant roles alone is unable to account for precisely how the voice features in the process of religious mediation that the recitation of *na't* brings about. This requires a closer examination of the sonic dimensions of the performance. Islamically inflected media ideologies and the key importance ascribed to sonic qualities of the voice turn out to be closely interrelated. Among my Mauritian Muslim interlocutors, the deep concern for the *qualia* of vocal sound and their effects on those exposed to them, and the prevalent notion that uses of sound reproduction technology greatly support the reliable transmission of such qualities in future performances, were mutually reinforcing.

Following the discussion of sonic atmospheres in the previous chapter, we can now see how the sonic dimensions of the recitation add to the felt authenticity and authority of the poetry in performance. I have described sonic atmospheres

as perceptible phenomena that exude from persons and objects while enveloping felt-bodies. I have also sought to account for them in terms of the suggestions of movements they contain. My main conclusion was that the suggestions of movement in the recitation of the *na't* I analyzed feature a movement of transcending the self while simultaneously being lifted up and carried away. For my interlocutors such bodily felt movement aligned with the key theme of traveling to Madina in order to personally encounter the Prophet. Sonic and musical parameters provide obvious resources for such suggestions of movement. Sonic atmospheres generated by the reciting voice affect felt-bodies, evoking suggestions of movements in them. As my analysis showed, my Mauritian interlocutors described the impact of the voice as diffuse feelings that are difficult to render into discourse. They considered them to be quasi-contagious forces, spreading from one person to the next, enveloping those present at recitals in a shared mood. But the discussion also showed that such atmospheric effects were far from automatic. My respondents insisted that they also depended on certain preconditions on the part of both reciters and listeners. According to them, both listeners and reciters had to prepare themselves with pious Islamic practice in fields other than *na't* recitation in order to be receptive to the reciting voice and experience its desired transformative effects. Also, one has to keep in mind that the recitation of *na't* in honor of the Prophet is a controversial practice among Muslims, who tend to disagree on the legitimacy of the practice along sectarian lines. Thus, sectarian affiliations and the sensibilities that accompany them also influence how a voice reciting *na't* affects particular listeners. The effects generated by sonic atmospheres are, therefore, not self-evident and can vary widely between listeners.

This in turn raises the issue of the intersubjectivity of shared Islamic piety that the recitation aims to bring about. How is it produced? If there is nothing automatic and self-evident about the effects of sonic atmospheres, what mediations account for the shared character of the sensations that my interlocutors reported, such as the feeling of being seized and carried toward the abode of the Prophet? In this chapter I demonstrate that such shared, intersubjective feelings come about as the result of the interaction of two kinds of mediation, the semiotic mediation I described in chapter 4, and the collective merging of those present into a shared felt-body (Leib), which leads to sharing in the same bodily felt movements. In order to grasp this specific sonic rendering of what Csordas has called "intercorporeality" (Csordas 2008), it is important to understand the relationships between subjects, felt-bodies, and their coming together in a shared suprapersonal felt-body through a process of encorporation.

#### VOICE AND SOLIDARY ENCORPORATION

On the night in August 2003, when I walked with Raouf to the house of Naseem's parents, relatives and neighbors came together for a *mahfil-e mawlud* at the bride's house on the occasion of Naseem's wedding. On that Friday night, the *mahfil* took

place with men and women seated in separate rooms in the home of the bride's family. The participants were all very familiar with the na't genre, mainly because they frequently listened to recordings of performances by well-known na't khwan. Anwar, who is the cousin of the bride, and Irfan were the two main organizers of the event, and Anwar was locally known to be a young aspiring na't khwan himself. Active in transnational Ahl-e Sunnat networks and a follower of a maulana and Sufi sheikh from Mumbai, Anwar thus lived his devotion to the person of the Prophet in multiple ways, his role as an emerging na't khwan being just one among them.

In making a sound program for the mahfil, Anwar and Irfan had listened to two recently released Mauritian cassettes and CDs with na't recitals, *Naaté-Rasool*, volume 6 (Chady 2000b), and *Naaté-Rasool*, volume 8 (Chady 2001), selecting na't for a mahfil in celebration of Naseem's wedding and rehearsing the recitation. Anwar and his friends had gathered in the living room of the bride's house to assemble the program. They had brought audiocassettes and CDs, as well as booklets with texts of the poetry, including handwritten texts some of them had transcribed while listening to recordings.

On the night of the mahfil, the event began with a Qur'an recital that concluded with a darud sharif, the invocation of blessings to be bestowed on the Prophet, which all present recited three times. Then Anwar delivered an address in Mauritian Creole on the Prophet's daughter Fatima as the ideal, virtuous married woman, entirely devoted to the Prophet, while drawing a link to his cousin's wedding. All present then continued to enact the devotion to the Prophet that was the subject of his address by listening to and reciting na't. The recitation of a particular na't very popular at the time was one of the highlights of the evening. Several of my interlocutors told me that "Madina, Madina" was their favorite na't, one that they would also listen to daily, such as when traveling in their cars or in the early morning before going to work. As Anwar and Irfan began reciting the na't, everyone present instantly recognized it and responded with spontaneous calls of excitement. Shareef also told me about the great success of this particular recited poem, remembering that "it was all the rage at the time." Irfan and Anwar were the lead reciters of this na't, its popularity ensuring that most of those present knew the poetry by heart. In many ways, this na't encapsulated what makes the genre so popular among Muslims following the Ahl-e Sunnat in Mauritius: its attractive tune and its focus on the exuberant description of Madina that would not raise any suspicions of unduly elevating the Prophet to a godlike status. As several of my Mauritian interlocutors pointed out, the ineffability of its attraction lay in the difficult-to-describe ways in which the recited poetry would take you to Madina, as Mohamed had put it. That is, its listeners found the recitation moving in a literal way.

In the following, lines marked (IA) were performed by Irfan and Anwar only, those marked (I) by Irfan only, and unmarked lines by all present.

## EXAMPLE 6.1

Sallallahu alayka ya rasulallah (I)

Wassallam alayka ya habiballah (I)

Sallallahu alayka ya rasulallah

Wassallam alayka ya habiballah

Madina, madina hamara madina (IA)  
Hamein jan-o-dil se hai pyara madina

Madina, madina hamara madina  
Hamein jan-o-dil se hai pyara madina

Suhana, suhana dilara madina (IA)  
Suhana, suhana dilara madina  
Har 'ashiq ki ankhone ka tara madina  
Har 'ashiq ki ankhone ka tara madina  
Sabhi 'ashiq-e Mustafa keh rahe hain

Sabhi 'aashiq-e Mustafa keh rahe hain

Hamein to hai jannat se pyara madina

Hamein to hai jannat se pyara madina

Paharon hai bhi husn kante bhi  
dilkash (IA)

Baharon ne kaisa nikhara madina

Madine ke jalwon pe qurban jaun

Madine ke jalwon pe qurban jaun

Hai qudrat ne kaisa sanwara madina  
(IA)

Hamein jan-o-dil se hai pyara madina

May blessings be sent to the Prophet of  
God

And greetings be sent to the beloved of  
God

May blessings be sent to the Prophet of  
God

And greetings be sent to the beloved of  
God

Madina, Madina, our Madina  
Madina is dearer to us than our life and  
heart

Madina, Madina, our Madina  
Madina is dearer to us than our life and  
heart

Madina, the very pleasing and sweet one  
Madina, the very pleasing and sweet one  
Madina is the star of every lover's eye  
Madina is the star of every lover's eye  
All those immersed in love for the  
Prophet proclaim

All those immersed in love for the  
Prophet proclaim

Madina, which is dearer to us than  
paradise

Madina, which is dearer to us than  
paradise

Even the mountains are beautiful and  
even the thorns attractive

How the spring seasons have brightened  
up Madina

May I sacrifice myself for the splendors  
of Madina

May I sacrifice myself for the splendors  
of Madina

How the Almighty himself has adorned  
Madina

Madina is dearer to us than our life and  
heart

Wahān pyārā ka'aba yahān sabze gunbad

Voh makkah bhī mīṭhā to pyārā

madīna

Phirun girde ka'aba pīyun āb-e zam zam

Phirun girde ka'aba pīyun āb-e zam zam

Main phir āke dekhaun tumhārā madīna

Main phir āke dekhaun tumhārā madīna

Yeh diwāne āghā madīne ko āen (IA)

Yeh diwāne āghā madīne ko āen

Bulā lo inhein ab khudārā madīna (IA)

Bulā lo inhein ab khudārā madīna

Bulā lijiye ab to qadamon mein āghā (IA)

Bulā lijiye ab to qadamon mein āghā

Dikhā dijiye ab to pyārā madīna (IA)

Dikhā dijiye ab to pyārā madīna

Khudā gar qayāmat mein farmāte

māngo(I)

Khudā gar qayāmat mein farmāte māngo  
(I)

Lagāenge diwāne na'areh madīna (IA)

Lagāenge diwāne na'areh madīna (IA)

Madīne mein āghā hamein maut āye (IA)

Madīne mein āghā hamein maut āye

Bane kāsh madfan hamārā madīna

Bane kāsh madfan hamārā madīna

Madīna, madīna hamārā madīna

Hamein jān-o-dil se hai pyārā madīna

If there [Makkah] is the beloved ka'aba,  
here is a green dome [of the resting place  
of the Prophet in Madina]

As Makkah is sweet and beloved, so is  
Madina

First I circumambulate the ka'aba and  
drink the water from the well of zam  
zam

First I circumambulate the ka'aba and  
drink the water from the well of zam  
zam

Then I come to see your Madina

Then I come to see your Madina

May this fervent servant of yours be able  
to come to Madina

May this fervent servant of yours be able  
to come to Madina

Invite me to the divine Madina

Invite me to the divine Madina

Master, invite me to where your  
footsteps are

Master, invite me to where your  
footsteps are

Now show me the beloved Madina

Now show me the beloved Madina

If God orders us to choose on the day of  
judgment

If God orders us to choose on the day of  
judgment

Those immersed in love for the Prophet  
will be clamoring for Madina

Those immersed in love for the Prophet  
will be clamoring for Madina

May we breathe our last breath in  
Madina

May we breathe our last breath in  
Madina

May we be buried in Madina

May we be buried in Madina

Madina, Madina, our Madina

Madina is dearer to us than our life and  
heart

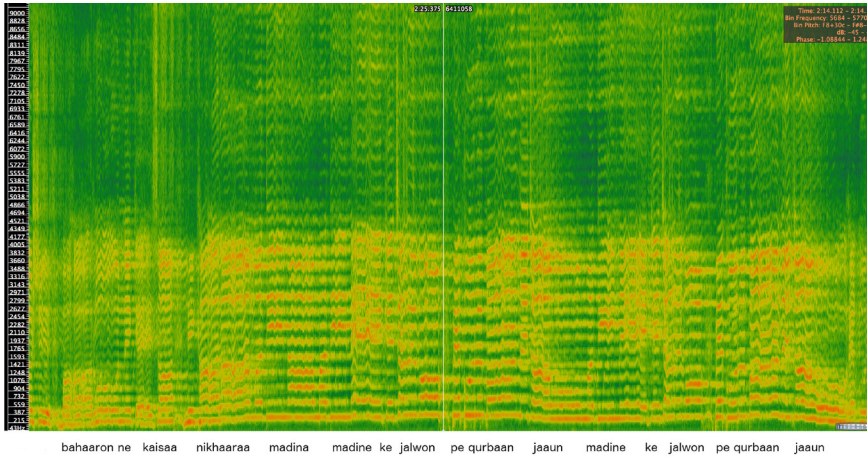


FIGURE 12. Spectrogram of “madine ke jalwon pe qurbān jāun.” Illustration by the author.

AUDIO 7. “Madine ke jalwon pe qurbān jāun.”

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One of the culminations of intensity in the recitation occurred when all present joined Irfan and Anwar to recite the line “madine ke jalwon pe qurbān jāun.” This line, expressing longing for Madina and love for the Prophet so great that one becomes willing to sacrifice oneself for him, was a moment of special exuberance. It suggested a transcending of individual selves as they merged into a shared movement toward a desired destination, Madina, the favorite city of the Prophet, with its promise of encountering his presence in person.

An analysis of an audio excerpt of approximately twenty-two seconds (figure 12, audio clip 7) from a CD recording of this na’t shows that the phrase *madine ke jalwon pe qurbān jāun*, *madine ke jalwon pe qurbān jāun* displays a dense buildup of acoustic energy in the bands, ranging from one hundred to forty-two hundred hertz.<sup>1</sup> This markedly differs from the end of the previous phrase (*bahāron ne kaisā nikhārā madīna*), where most of the energy in the spectral envelope is found in a range limited to one hundred to eleven hundred hertz.<sup>2</sup> Here the frequency range crucial to the “singer’s formant” does not even stand out in a marked way, as the timbre features an intensity of vocal sound throughout, up to approximately forty-two hundred hertz. The already considerable volume increases even further, as does the fundamental frequency, before the latter drops abruptly again at the end of the phrase. The na’t khwan’s voice thus features the sonic suggestion of an

intensified, elevating movement, coinciding with the discursive expression of utter devotion to Madina and, by extension, to the Prophet. The reverb effect applied throughout merely compounds the sensation of a movement to Madina, not just by the multiplication of all sonic events it brings about, but also by creating an ethereal sense of distance and the expansion of sound in a large space.

Focusing on the sonic dimensions of the recitation, how can we account for the generation of the shared, collective character of the feeling of being carried away to a pious destination? According to my interlocutors, the recitation produced such a feeling. My respondents also emphasized the quasi-contagious character of such sensations. This raises the question of how vocal sound can turn into a social force. The analytic of sound as atmosphere offers a compelling way to account for the sharing of sensation, because the suggestions of movement that the vocal performance enacts do not act solely on individual felt-bodies. It is more than merely the knowledge that others present are listening to the same recitation that brings about the social character of the feelings provoked by the performance. A merger of the suggestions of movement perceived by individuals results in the emergence of a shared felt-body, or we-Leib. This also produces the collective nature of the moods and feelings exuded by the reciting voice. As described by Hermann Schmitz, atmospheres act on the felt-body, or Leib, in a way going beyond the boundaries of the body as conventionally understood. As Gernot Böhme has pointed out, sonic atmospheres modify the space of the felt-body (Böhme 2000: 16). Discussing how vocal sound affects felt-bodies, he notes,

We listen to a voice in space. We are affectively struck by the voice because we are modified in our own presence in space through the voices we hear. To be present in a space means to reach out into this space through the sensing of the felt-body [*durch das leibliche Spüren*]. This occurs through feeling oneself contracted or expanded, pushed down or lifted up and much more. . . . The extraordinary effect of voices on our present emotional state is due to their immediately modifying our presence in space as sensed by the felt-body. They can make one [feel] contracted or expanded, they can be elevating and redeeming, or dampening and frightening. As tones are called high and low, having a broad base [*barus*], or pointed and sharp [*oxus*], so do our sensations follow the suggestive appeal [*Anmutungen*] of such tones by inviting or forcing us to be present in space in this or that way with the sensing of our felt-body. (Böhme 2009: 30–31)

The notion of felt-body stresses a decentered subjecthood, emphasizing the permeability of boundaries between humans and their surroundings, including other humans. It is precisely the sensation of how one's felt-body merges with those of others in following sonically mediated suggestions of movement that lies behind the power of na't performances. Schmitz called such experiential mergers incorporation (*Einleibung*), or the becoming part of a joint Leib, which thereby creates shared situations.<sup>3</sup> In a chapter on "collective atmospheres," Schmitz himself

discussed joint vocal performance as one of the key instances of such encorporation resulting in a merger of felt-bodies. “In the act of singing together[,] solidary encorporation [*solidarische Einleibung*] and suggestions of movement jointly exercised through felt-bodies mutually reinforce each other. They also reinforce the feelings expressed by them and the text into a kind of mood-umbrella [*Stimmungsglocke*] that covers the group atmospherically. This mood-umbrella is replete with sentimental fullness as in folk songs, or is filled with religious devotion, national pride or fighting spirit, etc.” (Schmitz 2014: 59).

This potential for solidary encorporation that is characteristic of sonic atmospheres applies not solely to the act of singing but also to a variety of acts of “musicking” (Small 1998)—that is, a broader range of engagement with performed music resulting in a web of social relations.<sup>4</sup> As Birgit Abels has recently commented on the relevance of Schmitz for the comparative study of vocal performance: “Schmitz speaks of a solidary encorporation [*Einleibung*] that creates shared situations. In solidary encorporation people plunge into a comprehensive felt-body, into a ‘we-Leib’ that includes the ‘I-Leib.’ I argue that an intrinsically social dimension pertains to this phenomenon, which is also central for the ability of music to communityize. This is because musical practices have the capacity to make such a processual relationality experienceable and subject to modification through solidary encorporation” (Abels 2017a: 218).

Returning to our example, the voice, in reciting *madīne ke jalwōn pe qurbān jāun* (“May I sacrifice myself for the splendors of Madina”), exudes a kind of sonic atmosphere that compels those listening to become momentarily part of a larger, collective entity with a somatically experienced base. This comes about through a momentary fusion of the felt-bodies of those present into a shared entity, the we-Leib. The result is that bathing in those pious vocal sounds enables one to overcome the boundaries of one’s self and join a community of Muslims while being moved toward the presence of the Prophet together with others. The sonic atmosphere exuded in the vocal performance thus affords suggestions of movement that provide orientation, in a joint effort to reach a pious destination.

While the sonic dimensions of the voice accomplish the suggestions of movement and the ensuing temporary somatic merger, its discursive dimensions work hand in hand with the sonically enacted movements, qualifying them as Islamic and specifying their destination as Madina, the favorite city of the Prophet, along with its wonderful attributes. This is possible because, according to the followers of the Ahl-e Sunnat, the recitation of na’t can bring about the presence of the Prophet and an attendant displacement of the devotee to Madina. Moreover, as I described earlier, the discursive aspects of the poetic performance also help accomplish a merger of participant roles that aligns the agency of those reciting the poetry with the revered saint-poets who were their composers in moments of divine inspiration.

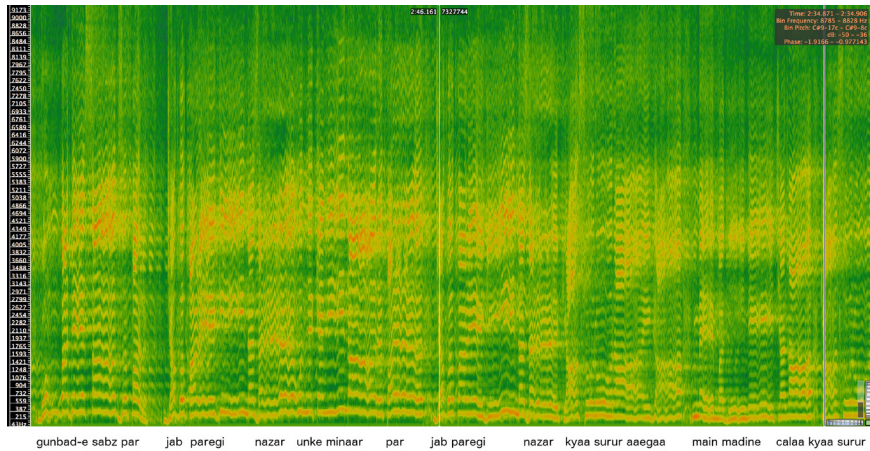


FIGURE 13. Spectrogram of “gunbad-e sabz par jab paregi nazar.” Illustration by the author.

AUDIO 8. “Gunbad-e sabz par jab paregi nazar.”

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Let us examine the intertwining of poetic performance and sonic atmospheres by reconsidering an example from chapter 4, *main madīne calā*, focusing on the excerpt *gunbad-e sabz par jab paregi nazar* (example 4.1), taken from a CD recording of this na‘t.<sup>5</sup> This example also illustrates the combination of a discursive invocation of a journey to Madina through poetic language and sonically enacted movements of travel toward a desired destination. The lines describe the exuberant feelings of a devout follower of the Prophet when he is finally able to see the green dome and the minaret of the resting place of the Prophet in Madina.

In addition to analyzing the poetic language in the na‘t, let us examine how a vocal performance sonically acts out the movement to Madina in this audio excerpt of approximately twenty-two seconds (figure 13, audio clip 8), paying attention to the acoustic parameters of reverberation, loudness, pitch, and timbre.

This spectrogram of the recitation of the four lines above features an increase of loudness and pitch in the recitation of the first two lines, *gunbad-e sabz par jab paregi nazar*, *unke minār par jab paregi nazar*. A concentration of acoustic energy in the “singer’s formant” frequency range also coincides with the rise of pitch and loudness as the reciter extols the sight of the green dome and the minaret of the resting place of the Prophet in Madina. This literally enacts an expansive, uplifting

movement that can be experienced collectively, followed by a relaxation of the movement as pitch and loudness decrease in *kyā surūr āegā, main madīne calā*, which is also accompanied by a greater concentration of acoustic energy in the lower bands of the spectral envelope. The reverb effect that provides a sense of spatial expansion is again discernable throughout and most clearly visible in the spectrogram as a decaying echo in the brief pause of approximately 350 milliseconds after the initial phrase, *gunbad-e sabz par*, before the line continues with *jab paregī nazar*.

The process of encorporation described earlier that results in a merger of felt-bodies into a shared we-Leib through jointly felt suggestions of movement is also responsible for the power of the recited lines above. Encorporation is behind the “physical transformation” that takes place in response to the na’t khwan’s voice, as Shareef described it; he also insisted that the voice “directly” enters one’s soul. Furthermore, the voice acts on a collective of persons present, in a quasi-contagious process. As Mohamed suggested, the na’t khwan’s voice makes one vibrate. Taking the perspective of a na’t khwan, he said, “One needs to make this gathering vibrate.” This is a literal way to describe how the sonic atmosphere that a vocal performance emits can somatically unite those present through solidary encorporation under the impact of shared suggestions of movement. As Farhad mentioned, the na’t khwan’s voice then “grips you powerfully,” the sensation compounded by the momentary dissolution of the boundaries of the felt-body as a multiplicity of felt-bodies merge in a joint movement. The discursive dimensions of the poetry then further qualify the joint destination of the movement as Islamic, as Madina, the abode of the Prophet. The sight of its landmarks, such as the green dome and the minaret of the Prophet’s mosque, provokes boundless joy among his devout followers.

The expansive suggestions of movement that my interlocutors described as a feeling of being lifted upward and carried to Madina are not the only sonic feature of na’t recitation that brings about the merging of felt-bodies through encorporation. In fact, this process occurs through sequences of alternating movements of expansion and relaxation. The acoustic and musical parameters I have described, such as pitch, loudness, and timbre, enact such alternating movements in obvious ways. As sonically suggested movements simultaneously act on a multitude of individual felt-bodies, they provide the ground for their merger and, thus, the creation of a new, intercorporeal, and social entity. At the same time, the discursive dimensions of the poetry can strongly underline a sense of joint travel together, as a community of Muslims. Let us examine the following na’t (example 6.2, image 6.3), which also revolves around the Madina theme.<sup>6</sup> The lines marked with asterisks feature increases in pitch, loudness, and the concentration of acoustic energy in the spectral envelope at higher frequency bands, contrasting with the unmarked lines, which display decreases in all these parameters.

## EXAMPLE 6.2

Ek yahī sahārā hai is jahān mein jīne kā

Ek yahī sahārā hai is jahān mein jīne kā

\*Ek yahī sahārā hai is jahān mein jīne kā

\*Is jahān mein jīne kā

Bāt kar madīne kī zikr kar madīne kā

Bāt kar madīne kī zikr kar madīne kā

\*Voh tujhe bacāeinge pār bhī lagāeinge

\*Voh tujhe bacāeinge pār bhī lagāeinge

\*Pār bhī lagāeinge

Un pe choṛ de kashtī gham na kar  
safine kā

Un pe choṛ de kashtī gham na kar  
safine kā

\*Kyon bhaṭaktā phirtā hai  
puch apne murshid se

\*Kyon bhaṭaktā phirtā hai  
puch Al'a Hazrat se

\*Puch Al'a Hazrat se

Voh batāeinge tujko rastā madīne kā

Voh batāeinge tujko rastā madīne kā

\*Choṛ kar ghadam unke  
uṛnā tū hawāon mein

\*Choṛ kar ghadam unke  
uṛnā tū hawāon mein

\*uṛnā tū hawāon mein

Rastā yahīn se hai qurbe haq ke zīne kā

Rastā yahīn se hai qurbe haq ke zīne kā

There is just one support for living in this  
world

There is just one support for living in this  
world

There is just one support for living in this  
world

For living in this world

Speak and recite the remembrance of  
Madina

Speak and recite the remembrance of  
Madina

He will save you and guide you to a safe  
haven

He will save you and take you to a safe  
haven

Take you to a safe haven

Leave the vessel's course to him and do  
not worry

Leave the vessel's course to him and do  
not worry

Why are you roaming around aimlessly  
Ask your master

Why are you roaming around aimlessly  
Ask Al'a Hazrat

Ask Al'a Hazrat

He will tell you the way to Madina

He will tell you the way to Madina

Do not fly into the air in search for him

Do not fly into the air in search for him

Do not fly into the air

For the way to him is via the Prophet's  
ladder

For the way to him is via the Prophet's  
ladder

*Āp ke qadam jab se āe hain madīne mein	Ever since your [the Prophet's] steps have graced Madina
*Āp ke qadam jab se āe hain madīne mein	Ever since your [the Prophet's] steps have graced Madina
*Āe hain madīne mein	Have graced Madina
Zarra zarra roshan hai āj bhī madīne kā	Every single particle of it emits a resplendent light even until today
Zarra zarra roshan hai āj bhī madīne kā	Every single particle of it emits a resplendent light even until today
*Āe alim cal tū bhī rah le madīne kī	Oh, Alim! You, too, prepare to take the road to Madina.
*Rah le madīne kī	Take the road to Madina.
Bas wohin se miltā hai rāz har khazīne kā	Just from there you will obtain every treasure of this mystery
Bas wohin se miltā hai rāz har khazīne kā	Just there you will obtain every treasure of this mystery
Bāt kar madīne kī zikr kar madīne kā	Speak and recite the remembrance of Madina

As an illustration of the sonic suggestions of movement, consider the spectrogram of the audio excerpt from the recitation of this na't (figure 14, audio clip 9). The alternation between movements of contraction and expansion (cf. Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby 2011: 245), suggested by increases and decreases on a range of acoustic and musical parameters, immediately strikes the listener. This excerpt of approximately forty-four seconds is from the first stanza, in which increases along these parameters characterize the recitation of the first two lines:

Ek yahī sahārā hai is jahān mein jīne kā  
Is jahān mein jīne kā

They are followed by two lines of recitation displaying decreases along these parameters, suggesting a relaxation of movement and, corresponding to this, a relaxation of the mood conveyed.

Bāt kar madīne kī zikr kar madīne kā  
Bāt kar madīne kī zikr kar madīne kā

The first two lines are immediately discernable on the spectrogram, as they feature greater acoustic energy on higher frequency ranges in the spectral envelope, especially the additional concentration of acoustic energy between four thousand and fifty-five hundred hertz. A moment of marked emphasis is the drawing out of *hai* in *ek yahī sahārā hai* at high pitch, clearly visible as the long, straight line repeated throughout the harmonics on the left side of the spectrogram. These lines contrast

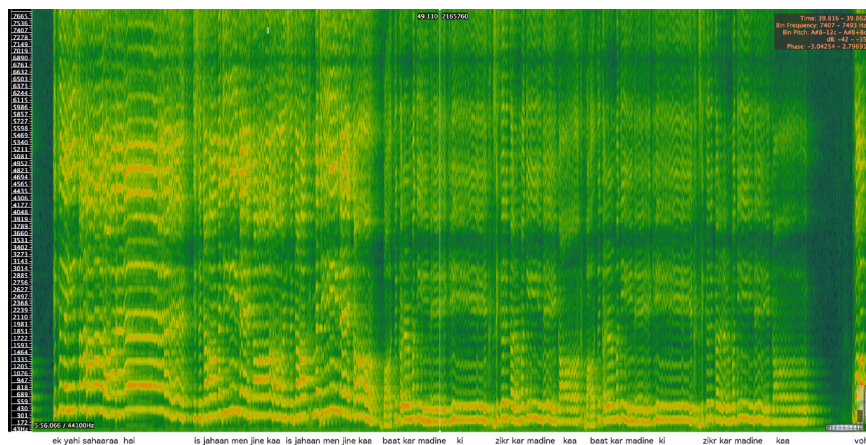


FIGURE 14. Spectrogram of “ek yahi sahārah hai.” Illustration by the author.

#### AUDIO 9. “Ek yahi sahārah hai.”

To listen to this audio, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.53.9>



with the two following ones, *bāt kar madīne kī zīkr kar madīne kā* and its repetition, which show a sudden drop of acoustic energy, with most of the energy in the spectral envelope now concentrated in lower ranges between one hundred and six hundred hertz, accompanied by decreased loudness and pitch. The following separate illustration of the waveform (figure 15, audio clip 9) of this example, tracking volume (wave amplitude) and fundamental pitch (the separate graph in the lower half of the diagram), makes these alternations immediately evident in visual terms.

The recitation features an alternation between contracting and relaxing movements not just between the lines mentioned above but also throughout, following the same pattern of alternation. The marked phrases in the text of the recitation above display a sudden increase in pitch, loudness, and the concentration of acoustic energy in the spectral envelope at higher frequency ranges. They are followed by phrases characterized by a marked decrease on all these musical parameters. The voice thus enacts a sequence of movements that alternate between states of high energy and contraction, and drops in energy, featuring movements of relaxation and dilation. Listeners perceive these suggestions of movements as the boundaries between their felt-bodies blur and their bodies merge into a shared we-Leib, united by the rhythms of sonically enacted contraction and dilation, upward movement and its relaxation. Such a merger of the participants into a shared, bodily experienced whole provides the somatic ground for a community of Muslims on the

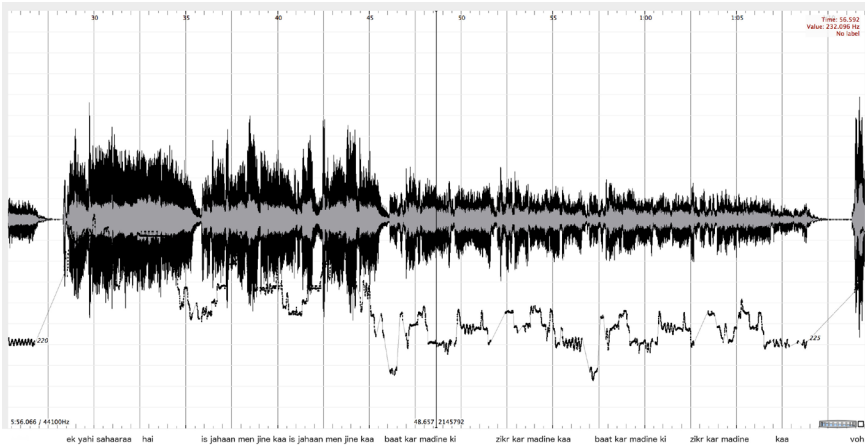


FIGURE 15. Waveform of “ek yahī sahārā hai.” Illustration by the author.

AUDIO 9. “Ek yahī sahārā hai.”

To listen to this audio, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.53.9>



way to their encounter with the Prophet. The merger is more than simply a matter of isolated gestures and movements away from where those present find themselves, and toward the destination of their desires. It becomes more enduring and is critically reinforced through a potentially open-ended sequence of alternating movements, suggesting a jolt toward Madina, and a relaxation of the movement, enabling its repetition. The flow of this alternating sequence then provokes the awareness that all present are under the impact of the same suggestions of movements. This brings about a somatic realization that all have begun to partake in the same movements, oriented toward their pious destination.

As is evident from the text, the discursive dimensions of the recitation and their poetic aspects constantly underline the sonic suggestions of movement that act on sentient bodies as an atmosphere. The sonic suggestions of movement I have described in turn resonate with particular social and historical configurations, such as the devotion to the figure of the Prophet and the desire to travel to Madina in order to encounter him personally, that are hallmarks of the Ahl-e Sunnat tradition. This kind of resonance then enables the discursive dimensions of the poetry to qualify the sonic atmospheric movements and their desired destination as Islamic in a specific sectarian sense. Through the medium of poetic language, they express utter devotion to the Prophet, metaphorically identified with his abode in Madina. As discussed in detail in chapter 4, the

recitation of the poetry also features a reorganization of participant roles that results in a merger of the agency and responsibility of the reciters in the performative setting and the saint-poets such as Ahmad Riza Kahn Barelwi, invoked as Al'a Hazrat, who are assumed to have composed the na't in moments of divine inspiration. As a result, the reciters align themselves with the authority of these saintly figures, while taking personal responsibility for the words uttered, which now feature as personal invocations of each one reciting the na't. These personal invocations are particularly clear in the use of locutives in the familiar form of address such as *bat kar* (speak), *chor kar* (give up/let be), *pūch* (ask). The poetic form of the text, manifest in multiple parallelisms such as in the complete or partial repetition of lines, as well as alliteration, meter, and rhyme, simultaneously bounds and marks off the text from other discourse, making it available for sequences of de- and recontextualization in new settings. The constant interplay of sonically suggested and somatically experienced movement and these discursive and poetic features of the poetry converge in a powerful sense of an Islamic summons to encounter the Prophet, felt in the flesh, the somatic evidence compounding its discursive qualification.

#### SOUND AS AFFECT?

I have emphasized the close intertwining of sonic suggestions of movement with the discursive dimensions of the recited poetry. This intertwining appears to be in tension with some recent approaches to sound that identify the sonic with affect. In recent years sound has, for theorists of affect, served as one of the prime examples illustrating the autonomy of the supraindividual intensities, movements, and visceral forces that these theorists call affect from language and any other kind of signification—indeed, autonomy from any sort of sociocultural, historical, or subjective qualification.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the “autonomy of affect” (Massumi 2002: 35) is exemplified by the sonic if the latter is understood to be “an asignifying material flux” (Cox 2011: 157), or taken to be a key part of a larger “environmentality or ecology of vibrational affects” (Goodman 2010: xviii). Sound as a material, supraindividual energetic force that exists and propagates without the intervention of perceiving subjects seems to fit recent conceptualizations of affect to a striking degree.<sup>8</sup> As Roger Shouse has put it,

An affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential. . . . Because affect is unformed and unstructured (unlike feelings and emotions) it can be transmitted between bodies. The importance of affect rests upon the fact that in many cases the message consciously received may be of less import to the receiver of that message than his or her non-conscious affective resonance with the source of the message. Music provides perhaps the clearest example of how the intensity of the impingement of sensations on the body can “mean” more to people than meaning itself. (Shouse 2005: para. 5, paras. 12–13)

Sound can be understood as events that emit wave phenomena in a medium, and that exist independently from human perception (O'Callaghan 2007). Furthermore, humans perceive sound only within a limited frequency range. That means that the wave phenomena that surround us and provide the physical ground for the perception of sound are largely outside consciousness. They thus take the form of implicated acoustic signals, "noise," or "non-cochlear sound" (Schrimshaw 2013) that can turn into actual, perceivable sound only under certain conditions and in certain constellations. This has led some scholars in the field of sound studies to identify inaudible acoustic signals with autonomous affects: "The notion of the non-cochlear presented herein is aligned with this particular understanding of non-sound as a model of clamorous silence populated by inaudible yet affective signals, signals that are taken as structurally equivalent to autonomous and infraesthetic affects" (Schrimshaw 2013: 43).

These qualities of sound as it shifts between the perceptible and imperceptible have prompted scholars of affect to draw connections between sound and the Deleuzian theme of virtuality (Massumi 2002: 30–31, 62, Evans 2002: 183). Deleuze distinguishes between actual, individuated phenomena, and the virtual forces of difference and multiplicity behind it that generate the actual. For Deleuze, the virtual and the actual are equally real (Deleuze 1994 [1968]). Virtuality thus understood has played a central role in characterizations of affect as a force full of unpredictable potential beyond political ideology or any other form of intentionality and meaning-making. Affect as virtuality has also become of concern for reconsiderations of the political, based on the notion that affect points to the unconscious and pre-ideological potential for collective change, which some theorists conceive as liberatory (Hardt and Negri 2000). A range of scholars have recently brought forward the phenomenon of sound as a compelling illustration of immanence and virtuality that can turn into actualized acoustic forms in a multitude of ways while continuing to exist mostly in the form of the virtual (Cox 2009, Grimshaw 2015, Hulse and Nesbitt 2010).<sup>9</sup> In fact, Deleuze himself also used a sonic example to explicate his distinction between actual and virtual, in a discussion of Leibniz's remarks on listening to the murmur of the sea (Deleuze 1994 [1968]: 213–214).<sup>10</sup>

An opposition between affect as a material force and meaning as a mental phenomenon, residing in individuals and embedded in language and culture, is a key feature of these approaches postulating the autonomy of affect from signification and subjectivity. The reappearance of a mind-body divide in affect theory, according to which affect as a vital force passes through material bodies, while meaning is located in minds, has been noted before (Leys 2011: 458; see also Kane 2015). Here, I point out that when theorists of affect such as Massumi emphasize the autonomy of affect from meaning, they subscribe to a narrow intellectualist notion of signification that leaves out vast stretches of modern semiotics, especially the Peircean tradition. The latter views semiosis as thoroughly integrated with materiality, causality, and

embodiment, going far beyond the realm of the symbolic (Peirce 1932, Parmentier 1994).

Atmospheres share with affect the quality of an involuntary force that affects bodies while not always subject to conscious awareness. Atmospheres thereby point to the fleeting boundaries between the body and its environment, including other human bodies, because atmospheres are perceived by felt-bodies that exceed the material boundaries of bodies as normally conceived. Sonic atmospheres thus highlight the intermingling of bodies with the seemingly “external” environment. Atmospheres do not function only as bridges that overcome the internal-external opposition with respect to the body. An analytic of atmospheres is also inimical to a dualism between material, bodily forces and signification.

Sonic atmospheres contain suggestions of movement. Movements are not linguistic signs, but that does not mean they are outside the realm of signification. They fit Schmitz’s description of atmospheres as featuring “internally diffuse meaningfulness”: they always generate a multiplicity, if not an excess, of meaning that is hard to define clearly. When an atmosphere conveys “somberness” or “elation,” such a description will always be incomplete, because atmospheres, sonic or otherwise, will always suggest more than can be captured discursively, a condition made even more acute by the multisensory character of atmospheres. At any rate, in Peircean terms, the movements atmospheres suggest to the felt-body are suffused with semiosis, principally indexicality and iconicity, which often occur in combination. This is the case in the examples I have discussed, where the sonic envelopes of the voice’s acoustic energy frequently are diagrams of the spiritual journeys suggested. Following Peirce, diagrams are icons “which represent the relations . . . of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts” (Peirce 1932: 157). Thus, the sonic movements are diagrams of spiritual journeys because of their structural resemblance to them. This resemblance extends across qualitatively different domains, the flux of sonic energy on one hand, and the spatial movements of a devotee to a desired spiritual destination on the other hand. This kind of signification is not the result of an imposition of mental forms on signifying matter. On the contrary, the structural resemblances that make up the iconicity of sonic movements inhere in their materiality.<sup>11</sup>

Far from being “autonomous” from signification in Massumi’s sense, the instances of vocal sound I discuss in this book are shot through with semiosis in multiple ways. The reduction of meaning and semiosis to the symbolic, to Saussurean signs that are held together by social convention, is central to affect theory’s claims of the “autonomy of affect.” It has prevented theorists of affect, including those who work on sound, from realizing that there are other material modalities of sign relationships that constitute what some theorists misunderstand as nonrepresentative phenomena (Cox 2011: 156–157; see also Thrift 2008). Even though an

ethnomusicologist has recently suggested otherwise (McGraw 2016: 137), sonic atmospheres are therefore by no means nonrepresentative. Such an assessment betrays a truncated understanding of semiosis and signification, owing to the latter's reduction to an intellectualist concept of meaning. The meaningfulness of vocal sound is not the product of an imposition of mental representations on an essentially asignifying sonic materiality. Instead, such meaningfulness is internal to the processual nature of its material forms. The link between particular sonic movements and my respondents' reported sensations when vocal sound moved them lies in the iconicity of the measurable dynamics of sonic phenomena and culturally embedded perceptions of sound. Approaching vocal sound as atmospheres acting on felt-bodies can provide us with an account of how such an analogy of sonic movements and reported sensations comes about.

A key assumption in work inspired by the "autonomy of affect" is that meaning and signification always pertain to states of mind that are characterized by full awareness and consciousness. Accordingly, while the forces of affect operate as biophysical phenomena completely outside consciousness, the attribution of meaning to phenomena perceived through sensual perception happens in states of full awareness, after a temporal lag. This leaves out the entire range of intentional acts and phenomena that happen in semi- or subconscious states, such as the finger movements of a pianist that are below the threshold of full awareness but not entirely beyond consciousness and certainly not outside intentionality (see Leys 2011: 455–458, Gallagher 2006). Atmospheres and their diffuse meaningfulness operate precisely in this realm between full, conscious awareness and automatically occurring biophysical processes. Hence, unlike some recent work on sound and affect has suggested, it is not the case that "in human audition, environmental sound is affective in Massumi's sense; it is registered prior to the activation of semantic, causal, or cognitive listening" (McGraw 2016: 137). Sonic atmospheres are perceived, often in semiconscious states, as suggestions of movement. The perception of sound, whether through the ears or other parts of the body, and the perception of the suggestions of movements, are one and the same: they cannot be dissociated. The suggestions of movement that sonic atmospheres revolve around are not symbolic or cognitive qualifications applied after the fact. On the contrary, they inhere in the very material structures of sounds. They also cannot be explained as a cognitive reworking of auditory perception after a "half second delay" (Massumi 2002: 28–30), superimposing meaning on some prior "auditory real" (Cox 2011). At any rate, the suggestions of movement, such as the sense of travel and being carried away conveyed by the *na't khwan's* voice, are profoundly meaningful, even if they do not conform to an intellectualist understanding of meaning. In semiotic terms, they do not consist of symbols—that is, Saussurean arbitrary signs—but comprise iconic and indexical relations.

There is nevertheless a difference between the diffuse meaningfulness of sonic atmospheres and the more specific Islamic and even sectarian loading that the discursive dimensions of *na't* performance convey. As I have illustrated, sonic

atmospheres contain suggestions of movement. These movements are not devoid of meaning; their meanings are only of a polyvalent and diffuse kind. Poetic performance in its discursive dimensions, including its processes of genre-specific entextualization and its attendant organization of participant roles, then further contributes to this process of meaning-making. As I discussed in chapter 4, these elements of poetic performance specific to the *na't* genre thereby further qualify sonic suggestions of movement as Islamic, and even as Islamic in a specific sectarian sense. The resonance between the sonic suggestions of movement and concrete sociohistorical configurations, such as the *Ahl-e Sunnat*'s profound veneration of the Prophet Muhammad, enables such discursive qualifying of suggestions of movement as Islamic.

A layered account of sound and meaning emerges from the investigation of sonic atmospheres in Mauritian Muslims' devotional practices. It transcends the binaries between unqualified, sheer intensity and signification, or between automatically occurring biophysical processes and states of full consciousness in which the mind generates meanings. These oppositions current in contemporary affect theory need to be replaced by a more differentiated account. Such an account distinguishes between more diffuse and more strongly qualified kinds of meaningfulness in sound. It thus avoids falling into the trap of portraying the presence of signification and sociocultural qualification as an either-or question in which there is no middle ground between imperceptible biophysical processes and states of full awareness of socioculturally qualified meanings.

There is another important feature of sonic atmospheres that distinguishes them from understandings of sound as affect. Like affect, atmospheres contain objective energetic flows that humans are not always fully aware of. Unlike affect, however, the effects of atmospheres are not automatic. Not all Mauritian Muslims are fond of the *na't* genre, and they are not equally receptive to the sonically generated atmospheres of its performance. As my ethnography shows, sociocultural qualifications such as established habits of listening, sectarian affiliations and sympathies, and the contextual conditions of performing and listening to the genre all influence the impact of sonic atmospheres—indeed, whether they have any noticeable effect on listeners at all. This is another key reason why atmospheres are not “autonomous” from signification, as they do not exclusively operate at the level of the radically imperceptible. In order to be affected by atmospheres, bodies need to be receptive to them. Such receptiveness in turn also depends on the sociocultural and historical qualification of bodies.