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Ethnomusicology in the Academy: International Perspectives

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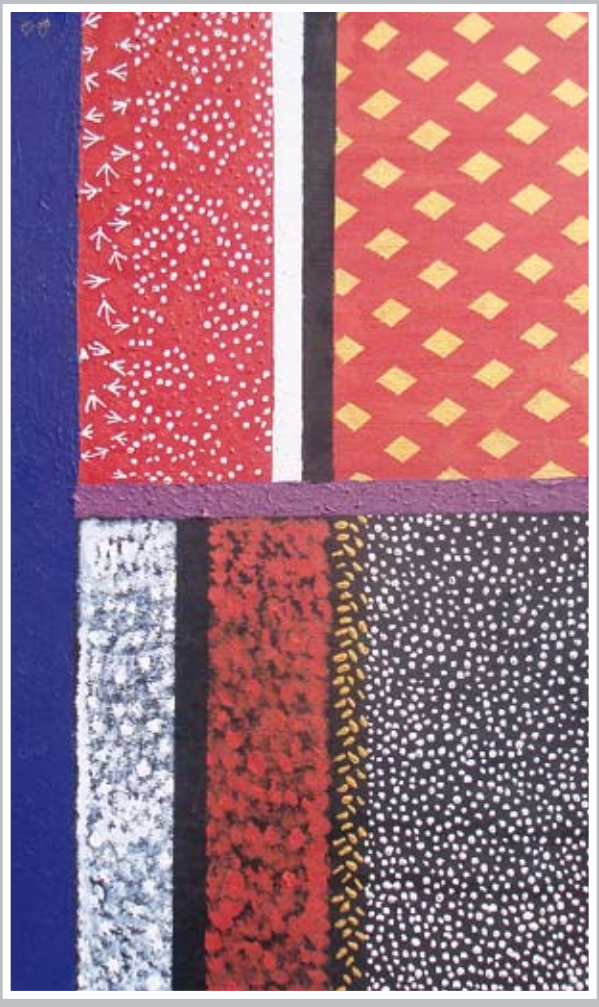

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Ethnomusicology in the Academy: International Perspectives

Jonathan P. J. Stock
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Recording Review Editor

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English translations of the poems of Persian Sufi mystics. One thing is clear. Koen believes that these ancient practices and beliefs carry an important lesson for our personal health, and for the health of our society, and that he is morally obligated to be a transmitter, a translator of these beliefs and practices. He is acting upon the advice he first heard from a Sufi mystic in the Pamir mountains that he repeats several times in his book: "A prayer without action is useless."

Beyond the Roof of the World: Music, Prayer, and Healing in the Pamir Mountains is one of Koen's ways of turning prayer into action.

Judith Becker

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2008 "Music-Prayer-Meditation Dynamics in Healing." In *The Oxford Handbook of Medical Ethnomusicology*, edited by Benjamin D. Koen, pp. 93-120. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Christine Guillebaud, *Le chant des serpents: Musiciens itinérants du Kerala*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2008. 383 pp., numerous illustrations, glossary, bibliography. DVD-ROM included. ISBN 9782271065100 (paper), €35.00.

"The Song of the Snakes: Itinerant Musicians of Kerala" is a major contribution to the study of musical life in South Asia, to the ethnography of performance, and to the study of music-theoretical discourse. Christine Guillebaud's French language monograph masterfully combines close ethnographic study of ritual music services provided by historically low caste practitioners in South West India with thought-provoking observations on South Asian musical culture and discourse more generally, in the process going a long way towards putting out to pasture once and for all several kinds of elitist-classicist scholarly blinders. As primary among these she identifies the hegemonic application of classicist music theory in the description and classification of South Asian musics in general, and a pervasive tendency to essentialize hugely diverse local musical practices into a unitary genre category of "folk" ("indigène" in French). This last she identifies as a major factor which powerfully drove her research agenda towards the study of music "in all its contexts." Guillebaud finds the study of itinerant musicians particularly helpful in thinking about the plurality of settings of the musical object; and she argues the importance of scholars bringing into their analytical purview hitherto overlooked dimensions of ethnography, notably the close articulation of the sonorous with the visual in ritual, and the manner in which musical instruments can embody active properties as much in a state of repose as in action.

Chapter One introduces the ritual service practices of Pulluvan, Mannan and Panan musicians and their interactions with patron families, focusing on the Pulluvan couple Narayanan and Parvati, to whom Guillebaud was introduced to by her research advisor the senior scholar of Kerala music L.S. Rajagopalan. Chapter Two undertakes an ethnography of Narayanan's

work coordinating and leading a multi-day, multi-media ritual to propitiate snake deities who inhabit a copse or grove in the yard of an Ilava patron family. The snake deities must during the ritual be temporarily removed from their grove to a ritual space in the patron's yard on which the Pulluvan specialists have drawn a *kalam*, an elaborate design in colored sand, and at the conclusion of the ritual will be returned to their grove. Guillebaud describes with considerable nuance how Narayanan—who is on the one hand the owner of a knowledge, executor of a service, and a talented pedagogue (fluently instructing the patron family on how to act at each point of the ritual and answering their questions on the meanings of particular actions)—is on the other hand unable to lead all the parts of the ritual due to his relatively low caste status, so he has trained a young man from a higher caste Nayar family to perform those portions of the ritual.

This ritual propitiating snake deities is requested in advance by the patron family, involves the patron's extended family as participants-cum-beneficiaries together with several members of Narayanan's own family as ritual practitioners, and follows a well-structured sequence of activities over the course of several days. Chapter Three in contrast discusses Narayanan's spouse Parvati's solo work going from door to door proposing to sing *naveru* songs, designed to "chase language" away from young children, to protect them from jealous or otherwise potentially malevolent words (representative footage of these tours is included on the accompanying DVD). Guillebaud pays close attention to how women specialists like Parvati must work sensitively and strategically with all the contexts of musical performance, here understood as significantly aleatory or chance, to turn the situation to their advantage. Potential patrons who might assume that Parvati is a beggar upon her approach to their house, must be quickly educated regarding the nature and the value of the service she is proposing. The discussion takes a reflexive turn as Guillebaud notes how her presence on Parvati's itinerant musical ritual tours affects their outcomes, Guillebaud in particular receiving unusually warm welcomes and gifts, Parvati introducing her as being from Paris and telling her sotto voce "Next time, come dressed in traditional clothing; we'll make money!" (p. 99).

The narrative significantly shifts scene in Chapter Four as the discussion turns from the ritual setting of Pulluvan performance in family compounds, to examine the importance of the Trichur station of All India Radio (AIR) in the contemporary patronage of music. AIR serves as a huge "terrain of collection" of local musical styles and over the last few decades has been a primary agent in the essentialization of a huge variety of local practices to create a new category of Kerala "folk" music. In this chapter the author's attention turns from Pulluvan musicians as subjects and their performance contexts, to examine how their music is processed via the work of civil servants who manage the radio station and by the musical experts (almost totally high caste practitioners or theorists of classical music) who are engaged to collect, select, program, and classify the repertoire, and to rate the musicians involved according to AIR's letter grading system. Guillebaud notes an admirable egalitarian impulse in the rating of "folk" vis-à-vis classical musicians—musicians' contracts all say simply "Indian Music," not specifying genres of performance, and the pay scale is the same for all musicians of the same grade. But the announced egalitarianism is "very relative" as for example only classical musicians receive the highest grade of A+ and very good "indigenous" musicians typically receive a grade of only B+.

Guillebaud's discussion of her conversations with Smt. Sukumari, a vocalist working at the Trichur station, is particularly revealing. Sukumari's career trajectory graphically illustrates both the creation of an essentialized genre of Indian "folk" music over the last few decades, and the manner in which a wide variety of local musical practices have been altered and

appropriated in the process. Trained classically, Sukumari took an interest in "folk" music and due to her classical music credentials was employed by AIR as a judge of auditions. She began learning songs from Pulluvan and other musicians who came to the studio to record, and soon began organizing musicians into troupes and encouraging them to perform in festivals. By the time of being interviewed, she had recorded a commercial cassette of "folk" music and was touring nationally and internationally, now as a representative performer of Kerala's "folk" music. Sukumari talked openly about how various changes which normally shouldn't be made to "folk" music needed however to be made in the name of commercial considerations, notably the introduction of a new instrumentarium including harmonium and *tabla*. Sukumari's producers also saw a light "ornate" voice quality—far from the husky esthetic of Pulluvan women singers—as essential to sell cassettes.

Guillebaud notes Sukumari's candor in stating she hardly knows who the musicians are from whom she "harvests" songs, or where they live; the radio station provides her with continuous access to new material which she has begun re-setting for commercial release and performing in concerts and festivals at home and overseas. And she notes the reflexivity on the part of Pulluvan musicians about the process which takes their music and essentializes it into a unitary genre in order to be displayed in performance as generic Kerala cultural patrimony, then places their music at a second remove as it is increasingly recorded and publically performed in new contexts by classically trained performers from outside their social community.

The second section of the book explores various tools ("supports" in French) and forms of knowledge mobilized by specialists to make music. Chapter Five discusses how musical instruments have multiple uses, serving both as privileged supports for the manifestation of deities in ritual time, and conserving active properties and potency even when in periods of repose, hanging on the wall of a musician's home. The Nantuni lute is considered anthropomorphically as the body of the goddess—players of the lute know that they are holding her body in their hands, that from the instrument's stomach the voice of the goddess can be heard, and that the goddess-instrument needs to be periodically fed (whiskey is mentioned) in order to stay in good tune. Just as here musical instruments are seen as visual representations of deity, Chapter Six further foregrounds the visual in its interaction with the sonorous, demonstrating that the work of Pulluvan "musician-designers" who construct the ritual propitiating snake deities calls out for close attention to the visual in its intersection with the sonorous. Guillebaud's discussion here beautifully builds upon the introduction to the ritual given in Chapter Two, and the DVD provides excellent video footage and textual commentary on the construction of a *kalam* and its use during ritual.

Chapter Seven is an account of the process of circulation of musical terminology and the transformations of meaning which terms undergo in the borrowing. Guillebaud focuses on how Pulluvan musicians name the rhythms and melodies of their music, in particular their resignification of many terms from classical musicology (a discussion strikingly reminiscent of Manuel 2000 in which for Indo-Caribbean musicians, for example, 'tal' comes to mean cadence or 'Tansen' a local classical singer). While in Chapter Four the reader does not come away with a strong impression of Pulluvan musicians' agency in their encounters with the essentializing and commodifying activities of All India Radio, here the borrowings of terminology from classical music place the musicians much more at the center of their own narrative, creatively reinterpreting classical terminology to theorize their music (the name of the ubiquitous classical 8 beat South Indian tala cycle "Adi" being used by some Pulluvan musicians to denote 7 or 14 beat cycles), dipping into the "conceptual reservoirs" of classical as well

as Kathakali and Kerala devotional terminologies. Guillebaud documents how different Pulluvan musicians sometimes come up with different names for the same musical phenomenon, concluding that their theorization is complex and finds itself expressed in many familial micro theories, rather than constituting any sort of overarching collective knowledge and vocabulary, in strong contrast with the system-wide coherence of classical theory. The DVD is again here a crucial complement to the discussion as it contains a comprehensive audio library of various melodic and rhythmic patterns together with the names given to those patterns by particular musicians.

Guillebaud argues that the competences Pulluvan musicians demonstrate in their vernacular theorizing remain far from recognized as such by most Indian musicologists, and that any desire to understand how low caste musicians theorize their music must lead inevitably to a consideration of the way in which "official" musicological discourse is constructed. To this end she analyzes conversations with her research guide L.S. Rajagopalan (who initially encouraged her to study "folk" music) and the AIR promoter-cum-performer of "folk" music Sukumari, introduced in Chapter Four. Guillebaud shows how classical Karnatak music theory serves Sukumari as the default template for analysis of any and all music, so that for example her description of "folk" melody inevitably casts this type of melody as a simple, albeit pure and tuneful, form of *raga*. Guillebaud notes that while not of great originality, while redolent with unexamined evolutionist assumptions, and while "at no moment does she [Sukumari] seem to imagine that musicians have a terminology for describing their music" (p. 251), Sukumari's opinions are very much representative of discussion of non-classical music from a classicist point of view. Thoughtfully contrasting the world view of Sukumari with that of her research advisor L.S. Rajagopalan, Guillebaud reports that in their conversations Rajagopalan advanced a more nuanced position, showing a desire to bring musicians' discourse into his analyses and being open to an auto-critique of his methods of analysis, though also noting Rajagopalan's attachment to the essentialization of the multitude of diverse local musical practices in Kerala as "folk" music. Finally, Guillebaud observes that while different ways of approaching music theoretically may be all equally analytical, only the classical theory presents itself as a "place of power" (De Certeau 1980: 62) due to its mathematical rationality capable of elaborating totalizing systems and discourses and in so doing asserting itself as the dominant musicology—alone capable of treating the vast heterogenous ensembles of music of India.

The third section of the book turns the focus from musicians' theoretical to esthetic conceptions, examining how auspicious properties are attributed to musical sounds in treating illnesses and misfortunes. Chapter Eight studies the privileging by musicians of the voice and the word ("parole" in French), as expressed through the use of syllabic verbalization and onomatopoeia. These generally pan-Indian practices prove extremely important in helping musicians to analyze and hierarchize instrumental sonorities. Chapter Nine is a detailed study of the logics of distribution of music in the Mannarsala temple, unusual in that it is a temple dedicated to serpent deities for which the cult is presided over by Brahmin specialists. The specific service provided here is to help families who have a grove of serpent deities in the yard of their home and for whatever reason need to move from that home. Such a grove cannot normally be moved; the Mannarsala temple provides the specialized service of relocating copses of serpent deities from family plots to a forested area just beyond the temple walls.

Guillebaud finds that in bringing together different groups of specialists and repertoires, the temple is a privileged place to observe the logic behind the distribution of musics, here involving crucially conceptions of purity. She traces the spatial placement of the various groups

of musician specialists who serve at the temple, musicians of relatively high caste performing their musical services closest to the sanctum, with various "orchestras of the periphere" arranged further outward from the sanctum dependent on caste status. Pulluvan musicians are present in the temple musical ecology, but due to their lower caste status are not allowed inside the temple proper; they stand outside the temple gates and offer their *naveru* sung service protecting young children, to potential patrons. While the Pulluvans say that they work for the temple, the temple authorities don't consider them temple servants per se, though they give them permission to solicit patrons at the temple gate and in fact encourage patrons to use their services in the temple brochure, saying "the magic and softness of Pulluvan song accompanied by the sounds of the small vina and the particular music of Pulluvan women playing the kudam—all this will fascinate" (p. 297).

The book's final chapter is an ethnographic description of a nocturnal tour of "songs of waking" by a Panan family, analyzing how the performers exploit intrinsic properties of sounds in creating transformative effects, in this case the "waking" of listeners to assure them health and prosperity. While the discussion reinforces many of the points made throughout the book, Guillebaud takes the opportunity here to draw a contrast between Panan and Pulluvan use of musical variation, attributing the much more modest recombination and substitution of melodies and rhythms among Panan musicians to the relatively perfunctory nature of their musical service which is performed only during one month in the year, simply and quickly in the context of night time tours.

Christine Guillebaud's achievement in "Songs of the Serpents" is nothing short of remarkable. She has ambitiously covered an extremely complex terrain in a beautifully clear fashion, offering tremendous insights on musical practice and discourse in Southern India today. She deserves great credit for moving South Asianist ethnomusicologists one large step closer to an integrated understanding of their subject. The meticulously and creatively prepared DVD which accompanies the book is an invaluable resource in itself. It is to be hoped that this important ethnomusicological document will become available in English and other languages in the near future.

Matthew Harp Allen

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