From prayer beads to the mechanical counter

The negotiation of chanting practices within a Hindu group

Du chapelet au compteur mécanique : la négociation de pratiques chantées dans un groupe hindou

Del rosario al contador mecánico: la negociación de prácticas que se cantan dentro de un grupo hindú

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Religious communities often use objects as agents of other-worldly connections and experiences. Members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Iskcon) rely on the non-discursive use of objects and aesthetics within a practice of devotional love or *bhakti*¹. Among Hindus, “Vaishnavs” are those who worship the deity Vishnu and his incarnations such as Krishna and Rama. Established in the lineage of a sect founded in the 16th century by the Bengali mystic and saint Chaitanya, and incorporated in New York in 1966, Iskcon is a global Hindu group with spiritual headquarters in Mayapur, West Bengal, India. Based on the soteriological worship of the deity Krishna, Iskcon’s philosophy is popularly known as “Krishna Consciousness”. The group emphasises Vedic² texts and orthopraxy but also initiates non-Indians and non-Hindus as Brahmins, the highest level in the Hindu caste system. By doing so, it builds upon a Bengali or Gaudiya Vaishnav tradition that de-emphasises the importance of birth and reinforces the importance of reformation.

Part of the work of global transposability was already done through the late nineteenth to early twentieth century in colonial Bengal by Bhaktivinoda Thakur (1838-1914), the founder of the Gaudiya monastery, and his son Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874-1937) when they used print technology to present Vaishnav philosophy in a manner that could be understood by non-Hindus and Westerners (Bhatia, 2009; Fuller, 2005; Sardella, 2013). Once the message of Krishna-devotion was ready, it required the efforts and charisma of Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), the founder of Iskcon, and access to the West in the late 1960s to more widely disseminate the faith (Goswami, 2012). With access

1. Non-English (Sanskrit and Hindi) terms have been italicised. Words naturalised into the English language such as guru, karma and mantra are not italicised. Instead of diacritical marks, I have inserted an extra vowel to indicate emphasis, as in *maalaa*. However, a single vowel is used for consistency with commonly referenced terms. Hence, Bhagavad Gita.

2. The Vedas are the four Sanskrit texts that constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hindu philosophy. See Das (1998) for the specific manner in which Iskcon uses the term Vedic.

to a larger pool of members, a previously geographically bound sect grew into a global, proselytizing organization.

To understand Iskcon's theology one must know that the male deity Krishna is worshiped, not just as an incarnation of Vishnu but as the "Supreme Personality of Godhead". As such, everything Iskcon does is for the glorification of Krishna and his female consort Radha. Krishna is a pastoral king who is portrayed in various forms: a child, a prankster, a cowherd and a lover, and the omniscient hero of the scripture "Bhagavad Gita"³. Radha is the main *gopii* or cowherd girl/milkmaid of the sacred town of Vrindavan in north India and the chief consort for Krishna. Worship in any Iskcon temple consists of the care of divine images or figures of Krishna, Radha, and sometimes, other *gopiis*. The stories of divine play (*leelas*) between Krishna and Radha, and Krishna and the other *gopiis* are an important part of the *bhakti* tradition. The devotion of the *gopiis* to Krishna is considered exemplary and, as an aid to their practice, devotees are often exhorted to meditate upon the unconditional love of the *gopiis* for Krishna. The esoteric, philosophical details cannot be further explored here, suffice to know that the relationship between Krishna and Radha provides a model for the relationship between the human with the divine.

Iskcon's devotional practice is a form of Gaudiya Vaishnavism where the spontaneity and emotional directness of *bhakti* is accompanied by a strong emphasis on transformation and regulation through monastic discipline. An ascetic, in Hinduism, is a person who needs great determination but also has to work toward eradicating will through the dissolution of self. Iskcon's members include various ethnicities and nationalities, and "renouncers"⁴ as well as married devotees. Keeping in mind the dispersed nature of Iskcon's membership as well as its universalising mission, *how* can a devotional practice be "transnationally transcendent" (Csordas, 2009: 1), and what are the issues that arise in making a practice both portable as well as experientially compelling?

Within a philosophy of soteriological actions or "karma yoga", devotees have some free will and can influence their destiny by choosing to perform those actions that transform them and move them closer to the deity. The *jaapamaalaa* or prayer beads (literally recitation beads in Sanskrit), hereafter referred to as *maalaa*, is a meditational device that is considered essential to every devotee's daily practice as a form of regulation that helps control and transform the body, mind and senses. In the central practice of chanting (*jaapa*), devotees recite the words of a mantra – the *mahaamantra* – to invoke the deities Krishna and Rama

3. The Gita is the central, revelatory scripture in Iskcon. Part of a larger epic called the "Mahabharata" that describes the feud between two north Indian clans (Pandavas and Kauravas), the Gita portrays the dialogue between the Pandava prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna on the battlefield. When Arjuna hesitates to fight, Krishna reveals his true, omniscient form and advises him. This advice takes the form of spiritual guidance for devotees.

4. Hindu renouncers or *sannyasis* are those who renounce worldly and materialistic pursuits and dedicate their lives to spiritual pursuits.

as incarnations of Vishnu. A mantra is a set of sacred sounds or a formula that possesses ritual efficacy and chanting the *mahaamantra* is a soteriological tool: the only way by which people in *kali yuga* (the current, incoherent age in the Hindu cosmic cycle)⁵ can achieve liberation from the eternal cycle of *samsaara* (birth, death and rebirth). Given the importance of chanting, I will explore *jaapa* as a bodily technique and analyse the kinds of effects that are created.

Religion, to follow Mauss (2003, 2006), should be considered as relying on bodily techniques. A religious rite is a traditional, efficacious action which has bearing on things that are called sacred. It is efficacious both in itself and through the mediation of the religious being to whom it is addressed. As Mauss (2003: 51) states, the power of the rite comes not only from conformity with a given prescription but also from the rite itself, that is, “a rite has a real, material, efficacy.” Works by Turner (1979, 1985) and Bell (1997) emphasise the importance of studying the emotive and performative aspects of religion. A focus on praxis and the transformation of the subject through action is also found in the work of the *Matière à Penser*⁶ group that stresses that the two entities – bodily-and-material – cannot be separated in practice (Gowlland, 2011; Naji and Douny, 2009). Warnier’s (2001) “praxeological subjectivation⁷” argues that material culture is an essential counterpart to sensorimotor culture. Religious subjectivation implies a double movement of self-government and of subjection – of techniques of the self, techniques of the body, and technologies of power. The process of subjectivation takes place at the junction between the individual subject and his/her networks of actions, and between the devotee and the group.

Mauss (2006: 90), in his famous essay titled “Techniques of the Body”, asks about the descending *kabyle* slipper-wearer, “How can he keep his feet without the slippers coming off?” Warnier (2009: 7) answers with the reasoning that the slippers have been incorporated into his motor habits by apprenticeship and that the slippers have become part of his body-schema or *körperschema*. The concept of body-schema was first proposed by Schilder (1950: 11) to suggest “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind.” The body extends beyond its coetaneous envelope and its schema is composed of both precepts and images of internal and external stimuli. Following Schilder, the body’s schema or self-image constantly changes depending on the physical in-corporation or ex-corporation of objects. Against this framework, the resulting self and its corporeal boundary is related to the formation of the subject through internal and external forces such as emotions, perceptions, senses and actions.

5. The four *yugas* or epochs in the macrocosmic Hindu theory of time and society are *krita*, *treta*, *dwapar* and *kali*. The *yugas* move in a cycle of repetition and progressive degeneration with the current age of *kali* representing the most chaos and loss of coherence before the beginning of a new cosmic cycle.

6. The *Matière à Penser* group was formed at University Paris-Descartes by a few staff members, students and doctoral candidates. It lasted from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s and has now dispersed into a network.

7. See Mohan and Warnier (2016).

Based upon this theoretical toolkit, I will explore devotional transformation as a practice that connects the subject to divinity. Iskcon devotees are dressed in a distinctive manner that includes carrying and using a set of prayer beads. They do not seem to be coerced into using these beads and comply in a seemingly voluntary manner. If the aim of *bhakti* is to form a relationship of love with the deity Krishna, such that one's soul is freed from *samsaara* and ultimately returns to "Godhead", then how is this goal aided by chanting as a bodily-and-material technique?

Prayer beads as connection between the immanent and transcendent

In an interview conducted in English with a senior renouncer in Mayapur, I was informed that the *maalaa* is "transcendental". In this section, I will attempt to unpack the concept of a transcendental artefact and the kind of efficacy that is expected from such an object. In some cases, the hand tally or mechanical counter is used instead of the *maalaa*. The use of these two objects will be compared later.

Initiation of the devotee and induction of the *maalaa*

The first of two initiation ceremonies that a devotee may undergo is called *diksha*, signalling the initiate's commitment to the group and to certain practices. The devotee formally takes a vow to chant sixteen sets or "rounds" of the *mahaamantra* a day and gurus – the spiritual guides – give devotees the *maalaa*s on which they will chant for the rest of their lives. The guru chants during the ceremony and then hands the *maalaa* to his disciple. One might say that the guru initiates not only the disciple (i.e., communicates the mantra and hands him/her the *maalaa*) but also opens up the *maalaa* to its spiritual purpose by using it to establish a spiritual connection. Through his/her guru, the devotee connects with a specific lineage of gurus and saints that ultimately leads to Chaitanya. Having set up the initial "connection" so to speak, the disciple then takes the *maalaa* and chants on it.

It is around 6:30 a.m. in Mayapur and I have been invited to attend the *diksha* ceremony for Nandini⁸, a young woman from Mexico. A second-generation devotee, Nandini has delayed initiation till this time to ensure that she found the right guru and could be firm in her commitment. The mood is quiet and contemplative and there is little noise except for the murmur of chanting in the *gurukul* (traditional school) where the ceremony is being held. Nandini's guru and family are present along with approximately twenty other devotees.

8. All names and associated countries of origin are pseudonyms. Initiated devotees take on the last name *Das*, if male, and *Dasi*, if female, both of which mean servant in Sanskrit.

The sky is dark and the landscape around the *yagna* (sacrifice) room is covered with a foggy white mist, but the sun comes out as the ceremony progresses. All this contributes to what an acquaintance terms a “magical experience”. The *gurukul* students conducting the sacrifice arrive with their ritual paraphernalia and provide woollen blankets for the audience to spread over the cold brick floor. A framed and garlanded picture of Prabhupada looks on from the opposite side of the room.

The initiation ritual is about two hours long, and is prefaced by addresses from various people who comment on the power of chanting and the suitability of Nandini as an initiate. Her guru compliments her on waiting for *diksha* and not rushing into the process, while a senior devotee attests to her strength as a devotee in a Christian school. The mood in the room gets more contemplative as these personal testimonies are provided. Nandini is in tears and the rest of the devotees appear to be lost in thought. Without going into details, the ritual consists of alternate tossing of ghee into the fire and chanting of mantras by the Brahmins conducting the *yagna*, while the guru and Nandini throw un-husked rice into the fire at appropriate times. At the end of the ceremony, Nandini’s guru presents her with a new *maalaa* that she initially wears around her neck but later transfers to a bag.

Design of the *jaapamaalaa*

The *maalaa* used by Nandini is similar to the ones sold in devotional stores in Mayapur and Vrindavan, the holy town in north India where Krishna is believed to have spent his childhood. The design of a *maalaa* is simple – a number of beads threaded along a long length of twine with a knot in between each bead. The knot ensures that the beads stay in place and also, in the case of smaller beads, provides space for the finger to grip and manipulate the bead.

Photo 1. Cyclical design of the *jaapamaalaa*, drawing by author

The design of the *maalaa* lends itself to being cheap, portable and usable by a range of devotees. The beads are simple, without special polishes or ornamentation, to suit the ascetic connotations of the practice. The length of the *maalaa* can vary for children and adults. The design of most *maalaa*s is such that there is no specific orientation to the beads. Most *maalaa*s have 108 beads, but there are smaller wrist-sized *maalaa*s made of 27 or 54 beads that are meant for travellers. These beads have to be counted several times more (four times for the 27 beads, two times for the 54 beads) to make up a full set of 108 repetitions. To help facilitate the counting of rounds, devotees may use counting beads (literally “witness beads” or *saakshiimaalaa*, where *saakshii* means witness in Sanskrit) that consist of 20 beads made of *tulasi* (a plant commonly known as the holy basil), rosewood, glass or plastic on a separate string, held in the other hand or attached to a bead bag.

Photo 2. *Jaapamaalaas* and digital clickers being sold in a shop, Mayapur, 2013, photo by author

The *maalaa* has a total of 109 beads carved from the *tulasi* stem and roots that are suspended on a nylon thread. One of these beads is larger than the rest and is called the head bead, or the *sumeru* that represents Mount Meru, the axis of the Hindu cosmos. This bead is not used or crossed over and hence only 108 beads are used in chanting. Sound in Hinduism is sacred since it is believed to emit from the cosmic root vibration. Words can be arrangements of sacred sounds and deities are embodied in specific mantras. By using the *maalaa* and chanting the *mahaamantra* in the vocative case, the devotee directly invokes Krishna and Rama, and the 108 beads represent the 108 names of Vishnu.

Maalaas also have a visual and tactile “signal” (Photo 1) that consists of a piece of protruding string after the first eight beads. This string marks the first eight beads as embodiments of the primary *gopiis*, while the remaining 100 represent the secondary *gopiis*. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the *gopiis* are regarded as archetypes of devotion for their mood of service and surrender to the deity Krishna. The symbolism of the beads relates to the idea that devotees must, through their own practice, contemplate and emulate the love of the *gopiis* for Krishna.

The process of *jaapa* and the *maalaa* bag

The combination of *maalaa* and bag acts as an important chanting aid. The design of the bag is teardrop-shaped with a long strap that can be suspended from one’s neck. The *maalaa* and the right hand are both placed inside the pouch so that they are concealed from view. The pouch has three holes, one of which is used to insert the hand and one to extend the index finger out of the bag since the “criticising” or pointing finger should not touch the *maalaa*. The primary function of the bead bag is to contain and protect the beads. The bag is part of the devotee’s body and a constant companion except when bathing or using the toilet. Simultaneously, it is more than just an accessory and must be handled with care.

Photo 3. *Jaapa* bag in use, Mayapur, 2013, photo by author

The *maalaa* bag is light and provides a degree of privacy for what is essentially a personal act being performed in public. In contrast to the saffron bag carried by renunciators that blend into their garments, the bag carried by lay devotees is often colourful and draws attention to itself. It is commonly machine-embroidered with images such as deities, plants, animals and birds. The bag forms a third space between the devotee's body and the public gaze, and the presence, absence or co-ordination of designs either announces its existence as a separate entity or helps it blend into the clothing.

With the right hand in the bag and the index finger protruding out of the bag, the devotee begins to rotate the *maalaa* that is supported by the bottom of the bag and chants the *mahaamantra*: *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare*, at every bead, repeating this process 107 times more to complete a round. The *maalaa* can rest on the middle or ring finger of the right hand and the beads are drawn with the help of the thumb toward the palm.

Chanting is performed using only 108 of the 109 beads, while the head bead is never used or crossed over. Instead it marks the beginning and end of one round of chanting. So while there is a start or finish to each round, this is a status that is not associated with a particular bead but is marked by the sequence of chanting. The bead that forms the end of one round of chanting (or bead 108) forms the beginning of the next round (bead 1) as the chanter simply turns the *maalaa* and proceeds to chant a new round in a direction opposite to the earlier round. The *saakshiimaalaa* helps keep track of the sixteen rounds to be chanted with a new bead being moved down the string with each completed round. The extra four beads are provided if the chanter wishes to use them to mark one set of sixteen rounds or one *granthi*, literally a "knot" or "junction" in Sanskrit. A novice is expected to chant sixteen rounds a day while "fixed" devotees (a term used by Iskcon) are said to daily chant one *nirbandha* – literally "to persist in something" in Sanskrit. Devotees report initially spending ten minutes to chant a round and then progress to about seven minutes per round.

108 beads/mantra recitations = 1 round

1 *granthi* = 4 rounds

1 *nirbandha* = 16 *granthis* = 64 rounds

Attentive *jaapa* is hard to put into practice and combines speaking with listening. As Beck (2004: 42) notes, Iskcon advocates "audible chanting" and emphasises "transcendental sound". One must chant aloud, and speak and listen carefully to one's own utterances in order to make sure that the words are properly enunciated. This is not just about the meaning of the words although they essentially hail the deities Rama and Krishna. Instead, efficacy also comes from the sounds as vibrations and forms of energy that tap into the primal sonic origin of the universe. Mantras don't necessarily require intellectual comprehension

but the seemingly mechanical aspect of chanting is balanced by the emphasis that one does so with emotion and care in hopes of forming a relationship with the divine. We will come back to this in the following section.

The holes in the bag provide additional functionality. If interrupted while chanting in the middle of a round, the devotee can hang the beads out of the bag-lip to mark the spot where he/she left off chanting. Woollen “glove-bags” are also available for devotees in countries where the winters are too cold to chant with bare hands. With the introduction of zippered compartments for one’s phone and money, and a detachable key ring, the bag is a multitasking item indicating that chanting may take place in different places rather than being relegated to the home or the temple.

Situated needs of devotees and the effects of chanting

Indian and non-Indian devotees in Mayapur highlighted different aspects of a common belief in the powerful effects of chanting. Vamsidas, a Mayapur resident from Africa, was emphatic that the initial effect of chanting was to cleanse the heart. “When you chant it is Krishna. Krishna comes in contact with the heart and ch-ooo-k, cleans it! So if you hear properly it’s like a drill removing the dirt.” He gave the analogy of people digging ditches and encountering the many layers of sand, soil and rock, and cautioned me that each person’s practice was different. Some may find the digging easy since they are hitting the sandy layer, while others may struggle since they have hit rock.

Others referred to the emotions and sensations induced by chanting. Gaurangi, my Bengali neighbour in Mayapur had to steal time away from taking care of her boisterous children. Periods of scolding them would often end with her slamming the door shut and chanting in the doorway outside my flat. With shining eyes and a big smile on her face, she described the process as something that was *najuk* (tender), but would slowly change my emotions from inside and promised me that after chanting, I would feel stronger and better than everybody else. Another devotee described it as “enlivening”, bringing peace, joy, hope, and realizations including the confirmation that one’s guru was the right conduit to Krishna. Anand was an Indian from the UK who was coping with the aftermath of his mother’s death and found the chanting of various mantras useful in dealing with his feelings of grief and anger. Gesturing to his heart with his right hand, he described how these mantras became “tools” that he stored away in separate boxes, to call upon when necessary.

Ujjwala, an American devotee, was weak from chronic jaundice but argued that this was a blessing.

Krishna took away from me the thing that was most precious – the energy that I needed to do as much service as possible. So all I had was what was in my heart. I no longer had my body. And Krishna forced me into the heart and the heart is where he lives. In other words, he brought me to him.

Here, chanting was important, not because of purifying vibrations, but because the *mahaamantra* was a way to express “sincere desire” and call upon Krishna to engage the devotee in service. Ujjwala used her imagination as a tool when developing her chanting and recalled the many *leelas* of the deities Radha and Krishna in her mind to concentrate and induce a suitable mood.

So far, we have heard from devotees in Mayapur, Iskcon’s spiritual headquarters. By contrast, devotees in the cities or those who live far from the temple have a devotional life that is often compartmentalised. If it takes a devotee anywhere between seven to ten minutes to chant one complete round of 108 mantras, then the amount of time needed to chant a daily quota of sixteen rounds is approximately two to three hours. This is not an insignificant amount of time. For many devotees this raises questions about the sustainability of the practice, creating space to consider alternatives.

Shubroto was a young Bengali devotee who lived in a major south Indian city. He was not initiated but nevertheless practiced chanting since initiation is not a prerequisite to chant⁹. He reasoned that what was important was the intention behind *jaapa*.

Sixteen rounds of *jaapa* is very restricted to a temple life. But I feel that if I am going to work in a cab – if I listen to a *kirtan* [devotional song] rather than listen to the radio – that forty-five minutes – the number of times I listen to the *mahaamantra*, isn’t it equivalent to the *jaapa*? Or do I have to hold the bead and count it on that at a specific time of the day? You can sing about Krishna, you can cook for Krishna, you can talk about Krishna. So that is also a *jaapa*!

Shubroto worked for a corporation that outsourced jobs to India. In order to coincide with the schedule of his employers, his workday started in the early hours of the morning when everybody else was asleep. Shubroto’s hours for working and socialising were different from that of people who worked within an Indian time schedule. His workday would end in the early afternoon and he would go to sleep many hours before his friends. Being constrained for time to socialise, Shubroto had started a routine of elaborate worship of his home deities on Sunday and invited his other Vaishnav friends. Practices such as home worship, a good meal and listening to *kirtans* had taken on part of the significance of *jaapa*. Shubroto positioned himself as a modern devotee who lived a life different from that of devotees in the temple and focussed the efficacy of *jaapa* on its ability to invoke the memory of Krishna through various other forms of engagement.

Shyama, a first-generation European devotee in her sixties, has been a committed member of Iskcon for decades. Initially, she was able to travel the world

9. As previously indicated, initiation is an event that marks the fact that the devotee is committing him or herself to a disciplined practice of chanting a certain number of rounds every day.

and support the various temples, but with the arrival of her baby she found it extremely difficult to conduct her devotional duties.

You are flipping out and your kid is miserable. Neither of you is getting sufficient sleep. What is the point of all the stuff that you have to do? You are supposed to have more affection for Krishna. There is no other purpose behind it. I did chant my rounds but did it in my own way... There is a framework that we work in that will help us reach our goal. But it is up to us to find what works for us... We get too caught up in the externals of it all and can really lose the essence. Saying you have to do it this way or that way... these are parameters created by great *achaaryas* [teachers] who are actually talking to the deities. OK, well, that's what he said, I don't know, I am not talking to the deities!

On the verge of a breakdown, Shyama realised that she would have to adapt her chanting routine to her role as a mother. This opened a path for her to re-evaluate why she was a devotee and helped her prioritise her time to make *jaapa* revolve around her child-care duties. I heard related testimonies from other women devotees who blamed their less-than-ideal chanting on a habit of inattentiveness acquired during child rearing. However, what differentiated Shyama was that she actually critiqued the injunctions around *jaapa* as being detached from her reality as a mother and lay-devotee, and thereby disconnected from her goal of loving Krishna.

As we have seen, *jaapa* does not exist in a normatively induced isolation from the realities of people's lives. The anecdotal evidence described so far indicates how chanting might progress from a mechanical recitation to emotional and spiritual sustenance, and how *jaapa* can be combined with other practices. These interviews indicate that chanting, although often spoken of in its idealized form, is in reality adapted to the specific demands of a devotee's life. In the next section, I will undertake a brief praxeological analysis of chanting to further explore the *maalaa*'s efficacy as a transcendental object.

A praxeological analysis of chanting

A praxeological analysis of chanting helps us explore how practice shapes the subject in a sensorimotor-affective manner. The seven senses model in the Western tradition includes animation, feeling, speech, taste, sight, hearing and smelling (Howes, 2009: 37). The senses of the kinaesthetic system can be further broken down to include those of equilibrioception, extero/interoception and proprioception that respectively refer to the body's sense of balance, the sense of one's external environment and internal organs, and a sense of the position and movement of the parts of one's own body. What would a study of the *maalaa* as a sensorially enhanced artefact reveal? Which senses are synchronized or feed-backed and how does the intention/desire of the user enable the process?

Sound as breath and rhythm

The phenomenon of sound as a result of regulation and emission of breath/air could be considered an important technique of the body. Breathing rhythms are inherently repetitive since breath moves in and out of the body, forming a series of exchanges. Breathing rhythms are normally patterns of which we are unconscious. Chanting, however, forces devotees to become aware of breathing habits through an emphasis on proper posture, speed of recitation and selection of pauses for inhalation/exhalation. The chanter also regulates the intensity and pitch of his/her recitation to use an optimum amount of energy, often resulting in a monotonal invocation. Habits and disciplined practice also support the coordination of senses. For example, the injunction to listen carefully to one's recitation is not just belief in the symbolic efficacy of sound vibrations but a means to harmonise the senses of hearing and speech.

In an experiment on the physiological effects of chanting (Bernardi *et al.*, 2001), scientists in Italy monitored the electrocardiogram, respiration and blood pressure of people as they chanted "*om mani padme hum*", a Sanskrit mantra associated with Buddhism. With no previous experience of chanting, the subjects were instructed to "repeat the mantra with an 'alive' resonant voice; to listen to the sound produced and to let it *flow freely*; and then to complete the expiration comfortably after the end of the mantra" (Bernardi *et al.*, 2001: 1447) (emphasis mine). Recordings were made of spontaneous breathing and controlled breathing as well as free talking and recitation. Mantra chanting was proven to be a lengthy activity with effects such as lowered respiratory rate, improved concentration and calm. The scientists also noted that if respiration was stabilized to a constant frequency and if this number coincided with cardiovascular rhythms, the latter was enhanced. This suggests that breathing rhythms and cardiovascular rhythms could be synchronized through chanting to create the experience of peace, calm and clarity that Iskcon devotees report.

Haptics, motion and cognitive embodiment

Our hands can be used to explore a wide range of haptic stimuli since the fingertips are highly sensitive to touch, vibration, temperature and texture. These sensations in turn are dependent on the physical properties and "affordances" (Gibson, 1986) of objects. Tactility must be studied in conjunction with motion (or the lack of it) since one does not appreciate the shape, texture and function of an object without accompanying motions such as sliding, stroking, grasping and pinching. Motion can further be articulated as the duration and rhythm of contact between skin and object surface, with an optimal time needed to convey the sense/recognition of touch (Hoggan, 2013: 344). The design of the *maalaa* offers such an experience since the chanter grips and slides the *maalaa* in a succession of discrete movements.

The senses of touch, motion, hearing and speech do not operate through separate channels but interact and create different perceptions. Experimental findings of manual haptic feedback demonstrate how sensory inputs can be converted from one modality to another to elicit emotions and sensations in response to an object's texture, shape and function (Jeon, 2011). Noting the limitations of simulated touch, as in digital haptics, helps us reconsider what the physical and sensory properties of objects, such as smell, shape and temperature, might contribute to the process of chanting. An example of such simulated feedback is the vibration felt when touching the screen of a haptically enhanced smartphone. Such simulations are often limited since neither the design nor the subsequent use of the object can alter the texture, smell and temperature of the object's surface. Instead, we have a smooth surface with a perception of resistance/pressure through the interaction of the sliding finger, and the confirmation of a sound response and/or motor vibration. While this is a simulation, its limitations do indicate how multisensory interaction is part of perception and how the senses are coordinated during chanting.

A significant difference between manual and digital haptics is the ability of the body to respond to the difference between active and passive forms of touch and create different perceptions. In a neurocognitive experiment (Berthoz, 2000: 86-88), an object that touches the body in passing produces a different perception than an object that the body interacts with intentionally, and points to the selective nature of perception as attention. Such experiments demonstrate the embodied nature of cognition by making intention part of the stimuli involved in multisensory perception. The active and predictive nature of motion and contact is supported by experiments where the repeated touching of the same object lessens neuron activity in a part of the brain that is sensitive to new stimuli (*ibid*). If using the *maalaa* ensures a certain rhythm and flow, could it not be possible that manipulating beads in one's fingers in a repetitive manner with sufficient tactile variations helps create localised, predictable and soothing stimuli?

The data put forth in this section indicates that the work done by the *maalaa* is not just computational or mnemonic but phenomenological and praxeological¹⁰, and the body of the devotional subject is the field of perception and action. The chanting body is a sensitive organ that can move between various sensory modalities to achieve a transformational balance and coherence. In addition to these physiological factors, the use of the *maalaa* as a purifying link to divinity

10. Extensive handling of prayer beads may also temporarily or permanently change the body. The handling of beads with stains or oils may leave traces on the skin where they rub against the fingers. In a case of internal morphological change, Frank E. Bayham, Lisa N. Bright and Brenna K. Blanchard (2016) use archaeological recovery to argue that a specific pattern of hand osteoarthritis fits the biomechanics of performing the Catholic rosary ritual. They derive their data from a historic cemetery (1875-1935) located in San Jose, California, that was excavated from 2012-2014.

is supported by the material, form, appearance and smell of the beads. Through usage, the beads become an intimate part of the devotee's body-schema. Memories of one's initiation and the emotional link to one's guru are also powerful forces in creating intimacy and help support the efficacy of chanting. Through actions such as touching, handling, breathing, reciting and listening, and the emotions and sensations that accompany them, the subject literally and metaphorically feels and moves toward the divine.

Negotiating religious modalities and devices

The emphasis on expansion through conversion invokes some unique features of Iskcon as a global sect of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. As described earlier, Nandini was a devotee from Mexico who was initiated into the group through *diksha*. This practice is the result of previous Gaudiya Vaishnav innovation that allowed non-Hindus to be initiated. The idea that one can become a Brahmin, not by birth but through reformatory practice, is both a legacy of Gaudiya Vaishnavism as well as imbricated in Iskcon's unique history. While Iskcon's early years were defined by its membership of celibates and single renunciators, by the 1990s it had become a householder's movement in North America with the largest portion of its membership being married and having one or more children (Rochford, 2006: 33). As a result, one sees not just monks but also householders practicing chanting with a discipline modeled upon ascetic practice. Some of the tensions in living a householder's life were touched upon by devotees such as Shubroto and Shyama. I will further explore the topic of (negotiating) tensions as an aspect of devotion by describing the use of the mechanical counter and comparing its efficacy with that of the *maalaa*.

The mechanical counter

Together with the zippered pouches in the *jaapa* bag, the introduction and use of the mechanical counter (also known as the hand tally) indicates a change in the manner in which chanting is conducted. A device originally intended for use in contexts ranging from sports to retail, the counter was subsequently repurposed for chanting.

The counter is operated manually and consists of four rotating wheels, each numbered from zero to nine, housed in a cylindrical stainless steel case with one button that can be pressed to increase/decrease the counter and another button that can be rotated to reset the counter. The combination of digits can be read off the face of the counter, the lowest and highest being 0000 and 9999. Devotees chant while holding the counter and press the button to advance the digits when one round is complete. The design of the counter is portable, light and discreet, and makes chanting an occupation that can be combined with other activities.

The device can be easily carried in one's pocket, be advanced with the push of a button and read from the dial. The latter performs the function of the *saakshiimaalaa* (witness beads) and avoids the awkwardness of leaving beads hanging out of the bag or using a butterfly clip to mark one's exact position in a round.

Photo 4. Image showing that the mechanical counter can be used in conjunction with other activities such as drinking water, Mayapur, 2013, photo by author

Devotees' varied concerns about the counter are invoked in the "Krishna Store" webpage¹¹ where a device that is also used for secular activities is sold as a devotional item. The webpage acknowledges that using the counter is a "controversial practice" but can be used under circumstances "where beads might be difficult or dangerous to use." It advises the customer to glue half a *tulasi* bead onto the shiny metal counter so that they can touch the sacred *tulasi* plant and have a "more purifying experience." The debate over the counter and the *maalaa* cannot simply be glossed as an issue of "tradition" versus "modernity". What is the praxeological, perceptual and symbolic work done by the *maalaa*?

The strength of the counter is its ease and versatility of use. Based on the data presented so far, the push of the button does not have the same efficacy as the slide of a *maalaa* bead since 1) The kind of haptic stimulus is different.

11. <http://krishnastore.com/japa-clicker-hand-tally-for-mahamantra-chanting-h-krishna-1120.html>. Last accessed 10 December 2015.

2) The symbolic and emotional associations of the *maalaa* are lacking in the counter. 3) There is the likelihood that chanting is conducted in distracting circumstances. As Kratky (2012: 58) points out, the mechanical counter lowers the “cognitive load” of the computational aspect of the *maalaa* and frees up the mind so that the user can simultaneously complete other tasks. Similar observations can be made of the digital clicker and applications that allow users to turn their smartphones into a virtual *maalaa*. Like the counter, the virtual *maalaa* and digital clicker are portable and inconspicuous in public. In the case of the smartphone, instead of pressing or clicking a button, the devotee can slide the virtual bead after chanting each round. The bead also provides a limited form of haptic feedback through touch-induced vibration.

The *maalaa* references the Hindu cosmos with the bead in the centre representing Mount Meru, the axis of the Vaishnav universe. By using the *maalaa*, the devotee re-enacts the circumambulation of the universe with the deity at the centre. The myriad of symbolism attached to nearly every detail of *jaapa* and the design of the *maalaa* – the number of beads and rounds to be chanted, the beads as embodiment of divinity and the string as the primordial cosmic vibration – supports the emotional and salvific efficacy of the act.

On a sensory level, the *maalaa* is a meditative device that helps grasp and anchor the wandering or distracted mind. *Jaapa* as a *yoga* (connection, regulation, or effort in Sanskrit) controls and transforms the body and the mind, and the *maalaa* is a relational device that translates the invisible and distant divine into the tangible, immanent human. With the *maalaa* in his/her hand the devotee both holds onto “faith” and makes a conscious attempt to grasp and manipulate the intangible through the rhythm of his/her actions. The action of connecting with divinity is ideally sustained by the moving of beads on a *maalaa* such that neither the fluidity of the action nor the subject’s immersion is interrupted.

Time, action and value in secular and religious modalities

A comparison of the counter to the *maalaa* indicates that the former can be easily incorporated into, and excorporated out of, a devotee’s body-schema. The counter can be used in a context, location and time-independent manner as a counting tool, reducing the load on memory and turning the act of chanting into discrete, portable units. By doing so, it resonates the values of a post-industrial, global economy where people and their actions seem to have been detached from the constraints of time and space. Such a detachment also brings along with it different epistemologies of time and effort.

Time over the ages has been studied as the manifestation of power in the form of temporal rhythm whether derived through monastic schedules, religious calendars, factory production, military discipline or globalized work routines. In Europe, it took hundreds of years for clocks to evolve from marking hours

in Benedictine monasteries to the bureaucratic-industrial planning of tasks into minutes and seconds (Zerubavel 1980). In colonial India, the transition was much more abrupt and forced, and took place within a few generations. The phenomenon of disciplinary time has been used (Sarkar 1997: 190) to analyse the formation of 19th century Bengali devotional sects by members of the middle-class, who in responding to the harshness of office work (*chakri*) equated it to the image of colonial domination as *kali yuga*.

The concept of *kali yuga* is probably the most important framework in which devotees situate their actions for salvation. *Kali* is the present age or *yuga* in cyclical Hindu cosmology, and represents the maximum decline of morality, order and wisdom in the world. In Iskcon, *kali yuga* distances the devotee from Krishna and causes ontological disturbance and grief for the former. *Kali yuga* is significant vis-à-vis India's perceived dependence on the West and Western-style consumerism that has separated Hindus from their traditions and Krishna. *Kali yuga* is also important for Iskcon devotees as a term that they associate with religious voidism and impersonalism, where there is a lack of direct, sensory contact with the deity through his or her image and associated worship practices. Transposed into a global context, the problems of *kali yuga* could be viewed both as an extension of older concerns (*chakri*) as well as the negotiation of newer ones, with devotees trying to fit sacred time around temporally and spatially disjunctured work and life schedules. Based on the data presented so far, I suggest that the work of the *maalaa* is to detach the chanter from mundane time and attach his/her natural rhythms to the rhythms of cyclical, sacred time in the Hindu cosmos.

From an etic point of view, the existence of two different models of time – sacred and secular – raises a question about the comparative value of human effort. Let us assume for the sake of argument that secular and religious time can be completely separated. In religious time, the subject ideally follows the rhythms of the religious calendar, fasts on certain days, celebrates on certain days, works to embrace good karma and avoids doing anything that would induce bad karma. All the while, the cycle of cosmic time rotates and circumscribes the devotee's efforts. Situated within a religious framework, specific actions equate certain pre-calculated effects and the consequences of actions (or the worth of one's efforts) can be predicted. The value of a devotee's efforts and actions is determined by the group's theology and cosmology wherein the human body has to be attached to sacred time for god-realization.

In the secular model, time is also sovereign but is increasingly demarcated into smaller and smaller units. This makes time a resource that can be detached from bodies and actions, to be accumulated, consolidated and invested just as one would handle money. As the popular saying goes, "time is money". Similarly, gestures are also valued for their productivity, for example, through time-and-motion studies and the collection of performance metrics. The scientific and

mathematical measurement of time has given people more control over secular time, but has also made them more beholden to it. Time in a post-industrial society is not the seamless, revelatory entity that it was in a religious world. Instead, time is determined by what is mathematically feasible. Correspondingly, human effort becomes a resource that can be moved and mobilised anywhere. Young devotees, such as Shubroto, work for multinational corporations and have to alter their sleep and work rhythms to synchronize with a different time zone. Their adherence is not just to a secular clock but a global clock that forces them to adapt *jaapa* to their work routine.

In sacred and secular modes of life, the human being and the value of his/her effort is controlled by time. In secular time, people save time through the planning of actions around the minutes and seconds of the clock, whereas in *jaapa*, chanting is the cosmic clock. In both cases, technology (as bodily-and-material techniques) helps in the creation, transmission and maintenance of a certain feeling *of* and *for* time. Unlike sacred time, the consequences of actions in secular time affect the immanent self and do not have soteriological connotations. What is effected is a series of possibilities created by combining modular units of time, space and motion. By comparison, the effects of action in sacred time are transcendental and delayed, but clearly defined. What devices, such as *jaapa*, do is give this transcendental time a sense-able form and reality through actions, sensations and emotions. It appears that the issue of technological change in *jaapa* is not so much one of “modernity” versus “tradition” but the need to do two things simultaneously – emphasise the value of remembering Krishna in the secular world and spiritualise the act of computing. Paradoxically, a device that fits into a model of productive efficiency, such as the counter, is used to handle the excesses of standardized time. Indeed, when the stressful effects of disciplinary time are felt, *jaapa* also becomes a meditation technique that, somewhat ironically, alleviates the tensions of living “by the clock”.

Conclusion: *Jaapa* and the negotiation of devotees as relational subjects

By focusing on the making and usage of the *maalaa*, I argued for the importance of a praxeological approach in understanding the formation and transformation of the devotional subject. I explored how internal and external forces, manifested in bodies, materials, events and ideas, shaped the subject and connected the devotee to the deity, making chanting durable and efficacious. Based on the data presented, I suggested that the *maalaa* gives actionable form to abstract concepts of value and time, and enables the devotee to use his/her body to manipulate these entities and form a sacred connection. In this context, asking what the *maalaa* means or focusing on its symbolism is limiting since it is what the *maalaa* does that matters.

The idea that beliefs unite a community is not new, but what I have explored in this paper is *how* belief might arise from a detailed study of practice. Chanting is both a private, subjective phenomenon and an intersubjective, relational one that generates a community of practice. In order to create connections and relationships, devotees rely on “feeling”, both as a term that connotes tactility and emotion. The repetitive gripping, sliding and handling of the *maalaa* beads unites the senses of tactility, aurality and orality and helps synchronize breathing mechanisms with cardio-vascular rhythms. The rhythms generated by these physiological and sensorial processes are also physically and metaphorically related to the rhythms of sacred time. The touch, the duration and the repetition help establish a connective flow between devotee and guru (and thereby with the deity), synchronizing the devotee’s body with the “cosmic” body. Aspects of this process were conscious to devotees but many were also unconscious, and could only be spoken of as the moods they induced such as peace, vitality and compassion.

If praxeological subjectivation is related to the transformation of the corporeal boundary through artefacts, then practice helps incorporate the *maalaa* into the devotee’s bodily-schema. Much like the *kabyle* slipper-wearer who runs down the stairs without losing his slippers, the practiced chanter becomes a devotee-with-*maalaa* who is distressed if chanting is skipped for a day. On the other hand, the ease with which an object, such as the counter, can be attached or detached (and the dynamic corporeal boundary that results) can also be desirable. Since the body’s schema can change, the use of the counter along with the *maalaa* suggests that we regard the devotional subject as a fluid result of negotiation between different technologies. Devotional subjectivity is not simply a steady evolution from neophyte to advanced devotee, but the result of what makes “sense” at a particular point in time. Devotees are not homogeneous entities determined purely by orthopraxy, but the uneven subjects of forces of self and time.

The needs of a devotee as a householder immersed in worldly activities conflict with those of the devotee as a quasi-renouncer constantly engaged in *jaapa*. In the examples described so far, the monastic discipline required to chant in an ideal manner is challenged by the daily routines of jobs and families. Tensions in chanting have to be negotiated by adapting the practice for a wider range of use. Based on these observations, I am led to a more nuanced exploration of devices, such as the counter, as technologies that facilitate the coexistence of sacred and secular time, and aid in the translation of an ideal into a practicable reality. I suggest that it is this technological flexibility that makes Krishna-devotion a reality for members across various environments.

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From prayer beads to the mechanical counter: the negotiation of chanting practices within a Hindu group

This paper compares the use of older and newer technologies in Hindu chanting through the example of Iskcon (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) devotees. Iskcon is global but has spiritual roots in West Bengal, India, and devotees try to connect with the deity Krishna through daily chanting. The use of prayer beads is compared to the mechanical counter, the haptics of chanting is linked to the co-ordination of mental and physical rhythms and the material affordances of the two devices are related to their respective effects. By analysing the views and practices of Indian and non-Indian devotees in different situations, technological changes are related to social changes and perceptions of time. Internal debates surrounding the use of the counter expose tensions between secular and sacred time, and indicate negotiations that accompany devotional performance within a contemporary landscape.

Key words: chanting, efficacy, hinduism, praxeology, technology.

Du chapelet au compteur mécanique : la négociation de pratiques chantées dans un groupe hindou

Cet article compare l'usage des anciennes et des nouvelles techniques mises en œuvre dans le chant hindou pratiqué par les adeptes de l'Iskcon (Société internationale pour la conscience de Krishna). Iskcon est une organisation mondialisée dont les racines spirituelles se situent au Bengal occidental (Inde). Ses adeptes tentent d'établir le contact avec la divinité Krishna par une récitation quotidienne. Grâce à une analyse des représentations et des pratiques d'adeptes indiens et non-indiens dans différentes situations, les changements technologiques sont mis en rapport avec les changements temporels et sociaux. La dimension haptique de la récitation est associée à la coordination des rythmes mentaux et physiques. L'usage du chapelet de prière est comparé avec celui du compteur, et les affordances matérielles de ces deux objets sont mises en lien avec leurs effets respectifs. Un retour sur les débats internes à l'organisation concernant l'usage des compteurs permettra, pour finir, de révéler les tensions entre temps profane et sacré et les négociations qui accompagnent les dévotions dans le paysage contemporain.

Mots-clés : chant, efficacité, hindouisme, praxéologie, technologie.

Del rosario al contador mecánico: la negociación de prácticas que se cantan dentro de un grupo hindú

Este artículo compara el uso de antiguas tecnologías de canto en el hinduismo, estudiando la forma en que sus adeptos recurren a dos dispositivos –un rosario y un contador mecánico. La investigación se ocupa de un grupo contemporáneo mundializado de nombre Iskcon (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) que se origina en Bengala occidental, en India. Los devotos tienden a relacionarse con la divinidad Krishna a través del canto cotidiano de mantras –textos sagrados–, con la ayuda de rosarios. El uso de nuevos soportes técnicos como el contador revela la tensión entre los tiempos sagrado y profano y la manera en que la ortopraxis se completa a través de tecnologías alternativas y a menudo ambivalentes. Es este género de adaptación tecnológica que vuelve las prácticas de Iskcon transferibles y susceptibles de imponerse.

Palabras clave: canto, eficacia, hinduismo, praxeología, tecnología.