Invoking the supernatural and the supranational: Tappu, trance and Tamil recordings in Indo-Guyanese 'Madras Religion' and the politics of sonic presence

Invoquer le surnaturel et le supranational : tappu, transe et enregistrements tamouls dans la « religion de Madras » indo-guyanaise, et politique de la présence sonore

Stephanie Lou George
Invoking the supernatural and the supranational:
Tappu, trance and Tamil recordings in Indo-Guyanese ‘Madras Religion’
and the politics of sonic presence

Stephanie Lou GEORGE

Abstract: The sonic dimensions of Indo-Guyanese Madrasi music – both acoustic “live”
performances at temples and the consumption and playback of recordings – mediate forms of
power, authority, and verity on the basis of cultural ideals and historically contingent modes
of listening. One’s ability to access knowledge about the otherwise ambiguous and fraught
origins of Madrasi ecstatic practices primarily occurs through people’s embodiment of the
sonic presence of the goddess Mariamman. Madrasi sonic practices have become ever more
prestigious and valorised, particularly in the North American context. A crucial catalyst for
this growing prestige has been the emergence of a discourse promulgated by Indo-Guyanese/
Americans which emphasises Madrasi sonic practices as having “ancient Tamil” origins. I argue
throughout that Madrasi music, though marginalised, offers people a compelling sonic modality
that produces feelings or “vibrations” of “power,” “proof,” and presence as political acts amid
inter- and intragroup tensions. I suggest that people are drawn to the sonic dimensions of
Madrasi music because they mediate and assert cultural authenticity, religious authority, and
verity as they seek forms of belonging in the context of South Asian American diaspora culture.
I analyse how the sonic-somatic embodiment of Madrasi music invokes tactile sensations of
“Tamil” diasporic sounds.

Keywords: Sonic materialities, diaspora, Indo-Guyanese, spirit mediumship, transnationalism,
South Asian American

Résumé : Les dimensions sonores de la musique madrasi indo-guyanaise, qu’il s’agisse
de performances acoustiques en direct ou de l’écoute d’enregistrements, communiquent
des formes de pouvoir, d’autorité et de vérité sur la base d’idéaux culturels et de schémas
historiques contingents de l’écoute. La capacité de découvrir les origines, par ailleurs ambiguës
et problématiques, des pratiques extatiques madrasi passe principalement par l’incarnation
de la présence sonore de la déesse Mariamman. Les pratiques sonores madrasi sont devenues
de plus en plus prestigieuses et valorisées, en particulier dans le contexte nord-américain.
Un facteur déterminant de ce prestige croissant a été l’émergence d’un discours promulgué
par les Indo-Guyanais et les Américains qui revendiquent que les pratiques sonores madrasi
ont des origines « tamoules anciennes ». Je soutiens que la musique madrasi, bien que
marginalisée, offre aux individus une fascinante modalité sonore qui produit des sentiments ou
des « vibrations » de « pouvoir », de « preuve » et de présence comme actes politiques parmi
les tensions inter et intragroupe. Je suggère que les individus sont attirés par les dimensions
sonores de la musique madrasi car elles communiquent et affirment l’autenticité culturelle,
l’autorité religieuse et la vérité dans leur recherche de formes d’appartenance dans le contexte
de la diaspora américaine d’Asie du sud. J’analyse la façon dont l’incarnation sonore-somatique
de la musique madrasi invoque les sensations tactiles des sons « tamouls » de la diaspora.

Mots-clés : matérialités sonores, diaspora, Indo-Guyanais, médiumnisme, transnationalisme,
Américain sud-asiatique
Introduction

En route to a Mariamman temple in East Berbice, Guyana, in the summer of 2016, I found myself enveloped by an intersection of sounds situated between the temple and the home of a local “Madrasi” priest, or pujari. Thunderous tappu drumming reverberated from the yard of the Mariamman temple throughout the surrounding area, a sonic notification to those living nearby that a puja was underway. Particular rhythms indicated the drummers were invoking the presiding deity to “manifest” the head pujari who had travelled from New York to Guyana to officiate an annual puja and would deliver her divine messages. Meanwhile, a recording of a popular Tamil-language devotional song about the goddess was being projected through large speakers of a sound system located in the “bottom-house” of a local pujari’s dwelling next to the temple who was preparing to conduct puja as well. This pujari had for years stopped attending that temple due to a disagreement among leaders based in Guyana and New York City as to how much involvement he should have as a healer and spirit medium. Meanwhile at that moment I was reminded of another local pujari, much younger and whom many do not consider to be a legitimate pujari, who invokes the presiding deity upon himself by praying while listening to YouTube recordings of songs about Mariamman and other Madrasi deities.

I recount this experience because I think it encapsulates the significance of the sonic dimensions of Madrasi music – both acoustic “live” performances within face-to-face temple settings and the consumption of recordings – as having the capacity to mediate power, authority, and verity based on historically contingent modes of listening. It also illustrates power dynamics produced within a transnational religious network whereby people’s ability to mediate the sonic presence of the “Divine Mother” or “Universal Mother” through “authentic” Madrasi musical practices has become ever more prestigious and valorised. Practitioners, primarily those who emigrated from Guyana to New York City during the decades following national independence, newly promulgate a discourse of prestige which valorises Madrasi sonic practices as having “Tamil” or “ancient Tamil” origins. An ancient Tamil origins narrative for Madrasi Religion represents devotees’ recent attempts to shift, transform, and overcome ongoing negative perceptions about ecstatic religiosity that undermine longstanding Indo-Caribbean cultural ideals about Hinduism.

Most Indo-Caribbeans consider Madrasi sonic practices to be “cultural survivals” brought by the minority of South Asian indentured laborers who embarked for the Atlantic colonies of the British Empire between 1838 to 1917 via the southern port of the Madras presidency. Yet, most still express anxiety and ambivalence about “MADRAS Religion” due to negative perceptions of ecstatic religious practices, including loud, often perceived as excessively loud, fast-tempo tappu drumming, shouting of songs, prayers, and mantras that invoke the presiding deity and deities within the “Madrasi”

---

1 I thank my advisor Peter Manuel, Aisha Khan, Stanley Thangaraj, Jane Sugarman, Herman Bennett, and Eliot Bates for their guidance on various versions of this article. I also thank the editors of Civilisations journal for their insightful feedback and flexibility.
pantheon who manifest chosen individuals with signature dance movements and stances, animal sacrifice, the use of alcohol and cigarettes to appease deities, and self-flagellation. Partly due to such ecstatic practices, other Indo-Caribbeans, especially those who belong to dominant North Indian-derived Hindu sects, generally regard the relatively unrestrained musical styles emblematic of Madras Religion as backwards and uncivilised due to its similarities with Afro-Caribbean religions. Nevertheless, Madras Religion has proliferated in New York City, which in turn has revitalised ecstatic goddess worship in Guyana due to its increasing prestige and appeal in North America. I argue throughout that Madrasi music simultaneously symbolises marginality and alterity while offering a compelling sonic modality that produces feelings or “vibrations” of “power,” “proof,” and presence as political acts amid inter- and intragroup tensions as people seek belonging within South Asian American diaspora culture.

A growing number of scholars address the ways Caribbeans experience a tension between belonging and non-belonging to South Asian American diaspora culture in everyday life as “twice migrants” in the US context, in New York (Gosine 1990, 2002; Warikoo 2005; Tanikella 2009; Rahemtullah 2010; Halstead 2012), in London (Warikoo 2007), as well as to African American and Afro-Atlantic diaspora culture (Hintzen 2001) within transnational contexts (Richards-Greaves 2016). Within this scholarship, however, little is problematised regarding the contingencies of racial formation, and in particular Caribbean/American diasporic subjectivities, that emerge through new modes of social manoeuvrability and mobility afforded by the generative dimensions of music or sonic practices.

Dominant theoretical frameworks tend to approach the study of Indo-Caribbean culture and particularly music through comparative analyses by focusing on the survival, retention, transformation, development, or “calibration” of formal features essentially seen as derived from South Asian cultural traditions (Ramnarine 2007). Postcolonial scholarship which aims to decenter hegemony, namely Indian cultural nationalism, circumscribes Indo-Caribbeans for generally two related reasons: to give greater visibility to Indo-Caribbeans as subalterns (Mehta 2004) and the relatively neglected histories of Indian migration and to do so in the service of highlighting instantiations of subversive or alternative Indias, especially in transcending patriarchal structures (Gopinath 2005; Niranjana 2006). Ultimately, this theoretical lens reinscribes an idea of diaspora as emerging and progressing via a unilinear temporality that conceptually leaves intact a hierarchy between authentic and derivative cultural formations. Thus, my intervention in the study of Indo-Caribbean music, religion, and transnationality is a critique of the notion that South Asian American diasporic identity necessarily constitutes a linear temporality. At the same time, Indo-Caribbean efforts to reclaim or reimagine a (South) Indian lineage should be taken seriously. Devotees’ (re)articulation of Madras Religion as a legitimate religion is political in that it involves audacious attempts to enact creative agency by mobilising the potency of these ecstatic sonic practices.
Drawing from Jeremy Wallach’s notion of “sonic materialism” (2003) to contribute to the “new materialist” turn within ethnomusicology, I analyse concrete examples of how Madrasi sonic practices produce cultural capital and social prestige on the basis of people’s sonic encounters with listening and embodying this origins narrative.

Methodology

To analyse the dynamics of a transnational Madrasi network in processes of knowledge production, I also draw from William Mazzarella’s idea of “nodes of mediation” (2004). He theorises “nodes of mediation” as “the sites at which the compulsions of institutional determination and the rich, volatile play of sense come into always provisional alignment in the service of (and always, in part, against the grain of) a vast range of social projects” (ibid.: 352). I examine the interplay of multiple “nodes of mediation” that in which the sonic materialities of “ancient Tamil” Madrasi religious practices produce a (South) Indian diasporic consciousness as they reverberate knowledge within a transnational network. One involves spirit mediumship and the diagnostic ritual procedure of “calling up.” Secondly, I analyse the significance of Kali/Mariamman devotees’ consumption of recordings of Tamil Hindu devotional songs as cultural listening practices that also produce tactile sensations of proximity with the goddess and Madrasi deities.

In addition to ethnographic research in New York City and online since 2011, I conducted observations, participant observations, and interviews in Guyana on separate trips from 2012 to 2018. Doing so enabled me to track the emergence and trajectory of an ancient Tamil origins narrative for Madras Religion in creating a transnational network. I hypothesise that the growing prestige of a Tamil origins narrative in North America revitalised ecstatic goddess worship in Guyana. I initially travelled to Guyana with head pujaris who traverse this transnational circuit to conduct annual and biannual “Big Puja” festivals.

Madrasi subject formation in the New World

The Mariamman religious tradition, derived from Hindu mother (Amman) goddess worship in southern India, has become increasingly popular among urban gentrified classes within the past few decades throughout the state of Tamil Nadu (Waghorne 2004), as well as Tamil-speaking diasporas in Singapore (Sinha 2014), Malaysia, Fiji, and Réunion Island (Desroches & Des Rosiers 2000), Martinique (Desroches 1996), and South Africa (Ganesh 2010) (see Younger 2010). Mariamman worship is on the rise in the Americas due in large part to the migration of Tamil Indian and Sri Lankan nationals in the late twentieth century to urban centers such as New York City and Toronto. The vitality and vibrancy of Mariamman worship in Guyana and North America today, however, constitute a different trajectory.

The revitalisation of Mariamman worship in Guyana and in North America is remarkable given that there was virtually no contact between South Asian labourers in the Anglophone Caribbean and the Tamil region after the Indian indentureship
period (1838-1917) (Bassier 1987; Vertovec 1992, 1996; Younger 2011). Arriving in the New World before the era of telecommunications and rise of global networks, Indo-Caribbeans comprise a category that Peter Manuel in his analysis of the “dynamics of diaspora” within Bhojpuri Indo-Caribbean music defines as an “isolated transplant” (2000, 2015). Whereas Caribbeanist scholars have long theorised notions of cultural loss and retention in the New World, Madrasi religious practitioners also engage in these debates. Madrasi temple leaders in particular lament the loss of the Tamil language due to their virtual isolation from the Indian subcontinent and the marginalised status of Madrasis, which according to most accounts is attributed to being vastly outnumbered by their North Indian counterparts. Furthermore, as Williams (1991) has analysed, Madrasis encountered prejudice as they came to represent one of many social categories that emerged via colonial-era racial and religious stratification and historical North-South status and colour divisions in South Asia that were assimilated into Guyanese society.

The term “Madrasi” was an appellation deployed by colonial administrators for South Asian indentured laborers who embarked for the Atlantic sugar plantations of the British Empire via the southern port of the Madras Presidency (Mangru 2005). Although there is evidence that North Indian counterparts also conducted ecstatic forms of Hindu goddess worship in veneration of Kali or Durga in the British colonies (Niehoff & Niehoff 1960; Jayawardena 1968; Moore 1997), ecstatic sonic practices performed by Indians became considered “Madrasi” because they were racialised as “Obeah” and as sorcery (Khan 2004; McNeal 2011). During Indian national independence movements, Hindu reformists who sought to canonise and institutionalise orthodox Hinduism in the British colonies made attempts to purge it of ecstatic sonic practices (Paton & Forde 2012: 21-22), especially those seen as similar to Afro-Caribbean religious practices. In subsequent decades, these also included those conducted by labouring or “grassroots” constituencies within postindependence contexts in the Anglophone Caribbean (Reddock 1998).

Harkening to Victoria-era discourse on racial hierarchy linked to notions of “civil” and “barbaric” religious and sonic practices (Dirks 2001; Khan 2004; Sykes 2017), Madrasi religious practitioners today are aware of dominant perceptions that continue to disparage them as racially and culturally inferior on the basis that they conduct “some kind of voodoo” or obeah, are superstitious, and/or are “not Hindu.” Within post-migration and contemporary North American contexts, Indo-Caribbeans encounter racial discrimination, as they have often been perceived by South Asian immigrants in New York City as “Indians who lost their culture.” Madrasis in particular are often “mistaken as Black” due in part to being read into the restrictive category “Indian” within the logic of US racial structures and working-class distinctions which characterise the majority of devotees. Meanwhile, the stigma of being “dougla,” a pejorative term denoting a person who biologically is a mixture of Indian with Black, is pervasive within Indo-Caribbean racial discourse, especially among Guyanese. This stigma still resonates among members at Madrasi temples. Rival Madrasi temple leaders foreground one’s racial identity as douglā or as not “real Madras” or “pure Tamil” in order to indirectly call into question an individual’s authority as a head pujari.
and knowledge of authentic Tamil practices. Yet, Madrasi temple leaders and devotees emphasise and valorise what they perceive as typical Tamil phenotypic markers despite their stereotypical resemblance with *douglas*.

Today, Madras Religion is more evident than ever. Members of Madrasi temples in New York may number nearly 30,000 within the larger Indo-Caribbean population of around 230,000 in North America. Yet, the present-day proliferation of Indo-Caribbean Mariamman worship in NYC, which is characterised by variance across the wider religious community rather than a monolithic community marked by homogeneity, has in many ways heightened practitioners’ awareness and anxieties of the authenticity and legitimacy of their own practices, claims, and beliefs. Due to this predicament, devotees measure authenticity according to one’s connection to an official temple versus “bottom-house temple” where people purportedly conduct corrupt and clandestine rituals or take advantage of members for mere financial gain (“money-making”). Official temples are largely viewed as having maintained “original” or “traditional” Madrasi sonic practices. Head pujaris of official temples in NYC are mostly upwardly mobile middle-class men who emigrated to North America in the 1980s during a politically-intense period when many Guyanese nationals fled the country to escape racialised violence and rampant economic deterioration. Official NYC-based temples also maintain transnational affiliations with “old” or “original” temples in Guyana through financial support.

**Interpreting spirit mediumship and Madrasi music as sonic presence**

The majority of Indo-Caribbeans who participate in Kali goddess worship in NYC recall their initial experiences of spirit mediumship as occurring after migrating to North America. Most of these individuals willingly acknowledge that they either rarely or were never involved in Kali worship while growing up or living in Guyana or Trinidad. In discussing their previous lack of involvement, people convey multiple and overlapping sentiments including surprise, shock, awe, bewilderment, embarrassment, and/or dismay as they find themselves confronted with questions about the meanings of their trance experiences and the need to reconcile their unsought association with negative notions about Kali puja among Indo-Caribbeans. More so, people both revere and fear the sounds of Kali worship – that the sonic vibrations of *tappu* and *udkay* drumming will provoke people to manifest against their will. This often indicates one’s need to submit to the goddess and rectify generational curses brought on by family members who failed to fulfil the goddess’s requests. An elderly woman who emigrated from Guyana to New York nearly thirty years ago explained to me why *tappu* drumming is so compelling yet frightening: “you get a scary feeling sometimes ... feelings you do not want to be there ... even if you are good.”

---

2 Based on data collected in the 2010 Census and the 2011 American Community Survey, there are approximately 140,000 Guyanese immigrants and 90,000 Trinidadians in NYC. In 2013, the NYC Department of City Planning issued a detailed report showing that Guyanese are the second largest immigrant group in Queens and the fifth largest in NYC. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/nny2013/nny_2013.pdf>
Devotees often attribute their manifestation as a divine calling beyond their control, usually conveyed as “Mother chose [them].” Such is the case for Latchmai who immigrated to New York in 1985 when she was fifteen. She describes herself as someone who “grew up in both religions,” with her mother’s involvement in the Lutheran Church in Guyana and father’s involvement in the Madras Church. In the summer of 2016, she reflected on why she considers herself “on this [Madrasi] side now” and explained her initial doubts about spirit manifestation:

L: You know like, I don't know, I said maybe it was meant to happen I don't know, I met her when I was born my grandfather took me and my great grandfather took me and came back with my name because I have a Madrasi name...Latchmai, yeah...He gave me my name. Who knows what he did, you down the line I was chosen to be a part of this, you know...I don't know...I never thought I was, it was like shock to me, like when I just, things started happening. Yeah...

SG: When would you say things started happening in terms of New York, after that or before that?
L: No when I came to New York, it just happened like in my early 30’s like not too long ago.

SG: You haven’t been to Guyana in 30 years, but I noticed... so some of my own observations, like in the village where your family is from, there aren’t a lot of women that play [manifest].
L: Yes, that’s an old tradition...But they are the only church that’s like that ‘cause there are other churches in Guyana that women are involved...[so] I do not see the sense in that, like with the religion, because we are praying to a female.

SG: Yeah, I know. Right?
L: You know it’s like She is a female, like what is given against you know... but then they can’t say [anything] ‘cause it does happen and they can’t say like who She manifests into... you know when She is... they can't control that. Even the person they can't control that. It’s who She chooses. It’s beyond us.... I never thought that I was going to. I never ever, ever, ever in my life thought it that I was going to be one of those people that you know She manifests into and it just started to happen little by little, little by little.

SG: Interesting...
L: You know we kind of like was puzzled when that started happening. My son [a pujari] took me somewhere to a lady that he knows to ask the question like why was that happening to me and She said it was to protect me.

SG: Do you know who you manifest?
L: Yeah, the big mother.

SG: Mariamman or Kali or?
L: Mariamman, yeah.

SG: It’s powerful to witness!
L: Yeah, it’s amazing I never really like to think that I will... never... you know.... It’s just, and you get to you know play it’s going to happen you know and it’s something I can’t control, I didn’t choose it, it chose me.

SG: That’s amazing... You must have been... where you scared at first? Or, you kind of knew what to expect?
L: I was like, I mean the way She came it wasn't like one shot, it was like little vibration, little vibration like so, get used to the feeling, like to the feeling of her and you know then slowly and slowly and slowly then She progresses stronger and stronger... yeah.
Latchmai’s account of when “things started happening” reveals the ongoing ambivalence that many devotees feel with regards to spirit mediumship. It also demonstrates how people find ways to verbalise why they trance or why the Divine Mother chose to embody them (and not someone else) to mediate her power. Initial anxieties stem from uncertainties about spirit identities due to ambiguities of not fully formed (“not full”) manifestations of deities and the “shock” they create when trance unexpectedly occurs. Latchmai and many others have explained to me that the onset of trance is an indication of Madrasi ancestry “somewhere back” and that they “must have Madras blood in them.” In addition, devotees like Latchmai newly emphasise their manifestation of Mariamman, the “sweet form of Mother” and use her Tamil name rather than Kali. The majority of people seeking answers to why they trance adhere to the Sanatan Dharm, the dominant Hindu sect in the Anglophone Caribbean. One’s initial trance episode is also sometimes perceived to be the possession (not “manifestation”) of malevolent spirits who usually are not of Indian origin referred to as “jumbies.” Thus, individuals are encouraged to undergo a diagnostic procedure referred to as “calling up” to confirm spirit identities and learn how to appease Madrasi deities for protection.

Call up is characterised by vivacious tappu and udkay drumming. The first tappu rhythm is rendered as loudly and intensely as possible to invoke spirits. “Udkay singers” encircle the individual and recite particular prayers and mantras to beseech the spirit by yelling and projecting their voices through the hand-held hourglass udkay drum aimed towards the person’s head and chest. The succeeding rhythm is performed in a moderate tempo that devotees clap and dance to as they watch the entranced individual in their “full form” perform the deity’s signature dance and gestures. To maintain one’s manifestation, udkay pujaris sing verses of the Mariamman Thallatu (in Tamil, lullabies to Mariamman). Next, manifesting individuals must publicly announce their identity by name. Individuals are required to “take oath” by placing lit camphor pods into the mouth three times to prove they are unconscious (Figure 1).

---

3 The tappu is a single-headed frame drum usually either 16 or 18 inches in diameter. Guyanese Madrasi religious practitioners believe it is derived from the parai drum. Tappu drums are featured in performances by Dalit communities (comprising members of the lowest caste in India) predominantly in the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

4 Udkay is the Tamil word that Guyanese Madrasi use for a relatively small hourglass double-headed “tension” drum used to facilitate worship and trance during Kali/Mairamman puja ceremonies in Guyana, Trinidad, and in the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. Udkay singers adorn the drum with a cloth belt wrapped around the centre of the drum, which has small bells attached to it that sound when individuals tap on the drumheads. Udkay singers squeeze the cloth belt wrapped around the adjustable thin ropes securing the drumheads to produce a gliding sound. Mariamman holds the drum in one of her arms, as displayed on the murti (statuette) of the goddess in temples as well as depicted in images of the goddess in South Indian “Amman” films and other media.

5 On “taking oath” in Afro-Caribbean traditions, see Hutton 2015.

6 Most often, individuals who participate and undergo “call up” request not to filmed or photographed because of the highly sensitive and personal nature of the procedure. Thus, I have included photos that feature temple leaders for whom the outcomes of the procedure are routinely established.
Invoking the supernatural and the supranational: Tappu, trance, and Tamil recordings in Indo-Guyanese ‘Madras Religion’

At official temples, only head pujaris manifest Mariamman by delivering melodic messages in an ancient Tamil language, sometimes called “gori” or “creole Tamil,” that a designated interpreter translates into English for supplicants (Figure 2).

Figure 1. During a procession at an annual Kargam Puja in Queens, New York, an assistant pujari “takes oath” as she manifests one of the various forms of the presiding deity, or the “Divine Mother”.
© Stephanie Lou GEORGE, June 9, 2019.

Figure 2. The interpreter listens intently to Mariamman (back facing viewers) and gladly acknowledges Her words which he translates for the supplicant who also stands face-to-face with the goddess.
© Stephanie Lou GEORGE, June 10, 2017.
It often takes years before an individual fully manifests a deota, or deity, and reveals their identity. Meanwhile, the same sonic practices invoke the presiding deity in head pujaris (Figures 3 & 4).

Whereas Mariamman manifests head pujaris to ensure the protection of her devotees through Her divine presence, She also manifests people to provide personalised protection.
Sonic materialities of Tamil devotional recordings and Madrasi listening practices

Similar to contemporary performance dynamics of Afro-Atlantic religions including Santería or Orisha Religion of Cuba and Puerto Rico (Villepastour 2009; Beliso-De Jesús 2015) and Shango Religion of Trinidad (Houk 1995), literal meanings of orally transmitted song texts and sacred verses are almost entirely unintelligible to Guyanese Mariamman devotees and temple leaders. Practitioners access the Internet to learn anew or supplement their knowledge about Madrasi deities and the Tamil language by listening to Tamil Hindu devotional music recordings and watching film clips. Popular among devotees are “Amman” film songs about Mariamman performed by L. R. Eswari and those in praise of the Madrasi deity Madurai Veeran. Devotees also access digital copies of the Mariamman Thallatu with English translations and Tamil transliterations.

Increased access to Mariamman sonic practices on social media has also heightened Guyanese Madrasis’ ideals of authenticity. To transcend potential criticisms from outsiders (including Indian nationals and members of other Tamil diasporic communities) who discredit their practices as having changed, Madrasi temple leaders assert that they have preserved their Tamil ancestor’s traditions. One head pujari once remarked on his temple Facebook page that the sonic practices they conduct in NYC and Guyana are “closest to that of ancient times” to the extent that “most of it does not exist today, even in India” (June 2015).

In other contexts, listening to Tamil devotional songs provides devotees a visceral modality through which to embody diasporic identities that enable them to prove their legitimacy as healers and spirit mediums. In 2016, I met with Arjunen, a young and aspiring head pujari in Guyana who conducts puja in his family’s small shed. He participates at the town’s Mariamman temple while gaining reputation as a Madrasi healer and spirit medium. Yet since he had not yet been recognised as a pujari by leaders of that official temple, he has often been labelled as performing obeah. Many devotees, especially those based in NYC, discredit his ability to conduct Mariamman puja properly. Yet, he avidly seeks to learn what it means to manifest and become a pujari. A significant outlet for him has been listening to and watching Mariamman film clips and Tamil devotional songs. He explained to me his newfound preference for Tamil over Hindi language devotional songs.

He described why he was drawn to these songs and the powerful and visceral sensations that listening to them produces:

[Hindi bhajans] don’t sound better than the Tamil. The Tamil get more power than the Hindi one… I feel Mariamma is more present, you know? When I hear it… I feel like She’s in me…I feel different. I feel light. I feel like I can go anywhere. I feel… Anytime I hear them. I feel like Mother come in me and me gone somewhere far. Meh thoughts, gone far, yes, like gone to where She is (August 10, 2016).

In this statement, Arjunen conveys a sense of belonging to a Tamil diaspora through particular listening practices. Listening to Tamil Hindu recordings enables Mariamman to become “more present” to the extent of virtually transporting him
beyond his present physical surroundings “to where She is.” In addition, experiencing the sonic materialities of the recorded medium produces the sensation of being closer in proximity to the goddess that entails embodying Her. As he continued to share with me why Tamil film songs, as opposed to Hindi-language Bollywood films, appeal to him, he stated:

I like to hear dem hot, hot Tamil song, the hottest song meh could hear! Deh singing, you know, like more powerful than anything. Like in deh movie, like you have Mariamman movie, like when dem gyal’s singing dem song for Mudda, just like that. Like deh singing that song, like you know, in chutney, when like, you know? Like that…They sing them faster. And all the udhay and tappu, all of deh in there. So that’s why you feel better…Yes, I love them. Because I see Mariamma, yuh know? Yes, I love them. Like She can dance right now! When just you type “Mariamman movie” you see anyone, all deh there. Yea. See how Mariamman kill demon; see how She do everything (ibid.).

As illustrated in this passage, listening to and viewing Tamil song recordings via digital media provides a multisensory visceral experience in which to learn about Mariamman and access knowledge about the potent symbols of Tamil Amman worship such as the udhay and tappu drums and dance styles. His alternative preference for Tamil Mariamman songs seems to validate his sensibilities towards, and embodiment of, both ecstatic religiosity and Indian identity. He also plays back Mariamman song recordings to call up on himself. Without the assistance of a dedicated team of tappu and udhay drummers to facilitate call up, this young aspiring pujiari utilises audio recordings that produce the same effects and outcomes of Her divine presence.

In New York City, I have encountered similar situations in which less-established self-proclaimed pujaris utilise music recordings to conduct puja at their homes. In a conversation with Devin, a second-generation Indo-Guyanese American in his mid-twenties, he described what prompted him to seek Tamil devotional music about South Indian deities:

In September, October of 2012, these were a couple of months of depression. I was trying to figure out exactly who [Madurai] Veeran was. I downloaded a ‘bhajan’. I only knew of Kal Bhairo.

As someone who manifests Veeran, Devin sought these musical recordings to learn about the deity who had chosen him as a medium. Devin explained how he did not know the Tamil name for the deity and previously knew him as “Kal Bhairo,” the name used by the majority of Indo-Caribbean Hindus. Devin also shared how listening to the music would bring him in closer proximity to the deity. As he stated, “Being that I didn’t even know who he was, I figured if I could play his music, and pray to him, it would somehow create a bond.” When I asked what attracted him to Madras Religion, he recalled his impressions of its sonic dimension:

I think it was the drumming that drew me to it. It is hard to explain. The drumming just sounds very powerful. If you listen to the Tamil ones, it's actually really loud. Rap music now, it does not even make sense. I don’t understand it but it is very powerful.
Thus, while the sonic dimensions of Madrasi music within face-to-face settings are compelling, the consumption of song recordings that produce tactile sensations are enthralling and confirming of the transformative realities, origins, and diasporic reverberation of Madras Religion.

Analysis and conclusion

Based on her field research in 1980s in Guyana, Brackette Williams discusses how various people viewed Kali worship to be the only religion to “have the potential to serve as a ‘true Guyanese’ religion” (1991: 211-212). Their reasons included the egalitarian selection of pujaris; inclusivity and acceptance of various religious affiliations; and, a syncretic blend of practices in which no single religious component dominates. Williams asserts the underlying reason for people’s lack of participation in Kali worship to be ideological:

There is more to this status evaluation, however, than the link between spirit worship and backwardness. That the religion is considered to be essentially Guyanese (that is, creole) means that, to be positively valued, it must overcome generally negative (at best ambivalent) valuations of things “creole,” “inside,” or in the word most often used, doogla. Historically, European and non-Europeans alike valued such things less than those they believed to have been transported or subsequently imported from the “outside” world. Despite the historical coexistence of contradictory and ambivalent valuations, and government-proclaimed efforts to overcome this vestige of “colonial mentality” notwithstanding, the ambivalence toward “things Guyanese” persists. Once something is labelled genuinely as Guyanese, its status rank must still be reckoned against that of non-Guyanese counterparts – a process from which religion is not exempt (ibid.).

I draw from Williams’ insightful analysis about the ongoing “ambivalence towards ‘things Guyanese’” to better understand the significance of Madrasi sonic practices in shaping contemporary practitioners’ ideas about ecstatic religiosity, race, and diasporic belonging in an era of increased globalisation and mediatisation of world religions. I concur with Williams that the growing prestige of Madras Religion is sutured with people’s perceptions of belonging to an ecstatic religious tradition with roots in (southern) India and transnational appeal that extends beyond Guyana and a Guyanese diaspora in North America. Madrasi sonic practices have become legitimised as a transnational phenomenon precisely as the transnational is invoked through tactile “Tamil” diasporic sounds. At the same time, people’s visceral experiences with and through Madrasi sonic materialities could be seen as an attempt to reclaim what is Guyanese.

Thus, Indo-Guyanese/American Madrasi religious practitioners contend with the contingencies of enacting a transnational religious identity. This phenomenon recalls Aihwa Ong’s idea of “transnationality” which she theorises as “the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space – which has been intensified under late capitalism” and has produced “new modes of subject making and the new kinds of valorised subjectivity” (1999: 19). Ong’s assessment of transnationality applies to the emergence of “new kinds of valorised subjectivity” among Madrasi
religious practitioners who emphasise (South) Indian ancestral purity (see Johnson 2007 on the New York Garifuna joining the religious African Diaspora). Yet, people’s embodiment of ancestral Tamil spirits and deities present is not predicated on the kind of physical mobility that Ong and other scholars of globalisation have theorised as privileged forms of mobility. Rather, Indo-Guyanese Kali/Mariamma devotees enact “transnationality” by remaining in place and encountering the identities of their ancestral spirits who traverse physical places to embody them. This case study speaks to recent scholarship about relationality, veracity, and mobility as aspects of “cultures in circulation” whereby “as objects, ideas, and people circulate, they transform and are transformed” (Sorensen 2018). Ancestral Tamil spirits and deities make themselves known through sonic presences that circulate representations of the material realities of Indo-Guyanese Madras Religion.

In emphasising the Tamil derivation of Madrasi sonic practices, Indo-Guyanese Mariamman devotees attempt to overcome the negative perceptions of spirit mediumship and relatively unrestrained styles of music that produce anxieties about its origins and racialised discourses that portray ecstatic goddess worship as falling outside the purview of Hinduism. Yet, inter- and intra-group power relations that stem from assertions of authenticity, exclusivity, and verity of “ancient Tamil” sonic practices also reify cultural hierarchies. While they seek legitimacy by appealing to notions of Indian purity that reify racial hierarchies, devotees also assert an alternative mode of emplacement based on experiential knowledge enacted within local and translocal dynamics of power. This dynamic speaks to Aisha Khan’s suggestion to approach diasporic people “as being part of cultures rather than as possessors of culture” (2015: 47). Thus, rather than analyse and point to fragments or traces of Indian music culture as constituting the presence of a South Asian diaspora in the Americas, I suggest that in the case of Indo-Guyanese ecstatic goddess worship, the ongoing canonisation of Madrasi sonic practices and the embodying Mariamman’s divine presence through sonic materialities are recent attempts by people to (re)articulate Tamil diasporic identities within transnational structures of power.

References


Invoking the supernatural and the supranational: Tappu, trance, and Tamil recordings in Indo-Guyanese ‘Madras Religion’


