**Toward an Acoustemology of Muslim Citizenship in Kenya**

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The problem of Muslim belonging in predominantly Christian Kenya has taken on added urgency for academics and policymakers in recent years, in light of attacks by global Islamist militants on Kenyan soil, a massive influx of Muslim migrants from Somalia, and struggles over the future of the country’s Islamic courts system, among other factors. In my sound-centered research on social identification on Kenya’s Muslim-dominated coastal strip, I explore the contemporary conditions of Muslim citizenship—in the broad sense of social belonging within the nation-state—by taking an ethnographic ear to contestations over public space that happen in relation to public sound. My methodological approach is grounded in Steven Feld’s (1996) acoustemology of place, which he describes as an investigation into sounding and listening as ways of experiencing and knowing physical and social environments. Here I lay out some basic coordinates for an acoustemology of spatial politics and Muslim belonging on the Kenyan coast.

**Hearing Spatial Politics**

I begin with a story that crystallizes how sonorous contestations over public space articulate with larger issues of Muslim citizenship on the Kenyan coast. In July 2006, the Kenyan coastal village of Kikambala played host to a dramatic dispute between a local imam and a member of the coast’s expatriate community—a woman of apparent East Asian extraction. The dispute began after the imam’s mosque was fitted with new rooftop loudspeakers, including one aimed at the expatriate’s nearby house. The expatriate made her way over to the mosque early one morning to register her complaint, but the predawn adhan, or call to prayer, had just been cut off. The expatriate, who was said to have stood outside like this,”—she crossed her arms and puffed up his chest, imitating the haughty police officer’s posture—“listening…” She completed the thought with a simple “eh-hee,” indicating that such a move would certainly be taken as a serious provocation.

**Islam, Sound and Space**

Charles Hirschkind (2006) provides an invaluable starting point for an acoustemological approach to Islamic-Swahili conceptions of public space in his discussion of Muslim subject formation as a matter of engagement with the quotidian ‘pious soundscape’ of calls to prayer, Quranic recitations, and religious sermons. Though focused on Muslims in Cairo, Egypt, Hirschkind’s work bears directly on Muslims of the Kenyan coast (and elsewhere) who engage with similar pious sounds across different cultural contexts. Through ‘correct’ listening, Muslims in coastal Kenya, as in Cairo, cultivate bodily comportments and doxic understandings that are key to what it means to be a good Muslim. The sounding and listening practices associated with the pious soundscape thus comprise an *acousteme*, a system of knowing in and through sound, within which sites of worldly action are sonically transformed into sacred topoi for the act of submission that is worship. This idea is put forward in a hadith passage, albeit in different terms. In this passage, the prophet Mohammed is reported to have said, “When the Imam comes outside, the angels present themselves to listen to the khutba [the Friday sermon]” (Al-Bukhari 1997:23). According to this image, angels literally “present” themselves (make themselves present) in the physical world, within the space and time of the pious soundscape. Heavenly beings, that is, hear the imam’s words not through some mystical mode of listening, but by temporarily joining with human beings in their worldly environment, effecting a sacralization of space.

On the Kenyan coast, the pious soundscape’s sonic demarcation of Muslim space sets the stage for large and small struggles over conceptions of Muslim communal autonomy, even, one might argue, struggles for Muslim communal autonomy. The dispute between the expatriate and the imam in Kikambala, which involved the participation of leaders of national Muslim organizations, provides an example of a large struggle over Muslim communal autonomy. One Swahili friend in the port city of Mombasa opened my eyes to a far subtler struggle. The visible evidence of which can be observed weekly during the Friday khutba, in the Muslim-Swahili neighborhood of Old Town in Mombasa. Referring to a mosque that sits just across a narrow road from a police station staffed mostly by non-Muslim, upcountry Kenyans, my friend told me, “You know, those police hear every word of the khutba just sitting there in the station. But if just one of them would stand outside like this”—he crossed his arms and puffed up his chest, imitating a haughty police officer’s posture—“listening…”

"Doing Acoustemology"

My friend’s perceptive ethnomethodological observation of the social choreography that accompanies the pious soundscape in Mombasa Old Town highlights both the necessity and the difficulty of doing acoustemology in the contested spaces of the Kenyan coast. Acoustemological research ideally generates theoretical knowledge through an active process of listening, involving a personal engagement with sounds and subjects in their spatiotemporal contexts. Even at its best, this form of research is fraught with methodological, ethical, and practical challenges, all of which are amplified when a researcher from the global North works among Muslim subjects in the global South, given that the latter may reasonably fear being listened in on by the former. What precipitated my Swahili friend’s lesson on the politics of listening to the khutba was a problem that had resulted from my own inattention to these challenges: A few days earlier, some worshippers at a mosque close to my apartment in Mombasa Old Town became concerned that I was making an audio recording of the khutba, concerned enough to hold a meeting on the matter after the fact. Though I was trying not to be conspicuous in making my recording, neither was I hiding what I was doing. I was naively comfortable in the knowledge that I was not doing anything in violation of professional ethics. Not only was I recording a public broadcast in public space, I was recording a broadcast of which I would have [heard] every word … just sitting there in my apartment. I failed to understand, however, that as a white foreigner, my act of [standing] outside like this,” recording, was not only inherently suspicious but also a symbolic performance within the context of an ongoing struggle over Muslim communal autonomy. Fortunately, good friends who were respected members of the local community quickly defused tensions and allayed fears in the wake of my faux pas. But the embarrassing episode stays with me as a visceral reminder that ethnographers also carry particular understandings of publicity, privacy, sound, and space, which may be subject to contestation.

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