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Technologies of the spirit

Devotional Islam, sound reproduction and the dialectics of mediation and immediacy in Mauritius

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Abstract

Users of contemporary media technology in religious settings often oscillate between immediacy in spiritual interaction and the increasing complexity and visibility of media technology as human artifacts. Drawing on approaches to mediation from philosophy and media theory, I examine Mauritian Muslims’ uses of sound reproduction in performing a devotional genre to show how theological assumptions about mediation shape the domestication of media technology in religious settings in different ways. A semiotic approach can throw new light on the dialectics of mediation and immediacy that frequently result in searches for technical solutions to bypass established forms of interacting with the divine.

Key Words

Islam • Mauritius • media technology • mediation • semiotics • sound reproduction

As the anthropological study of media continues to expand, it becomes increasingly clear that both media theorists and media anthropologists are concerned with a common theoretical question in their work – the dialectics of mediation and immediacy. In this article I explore the ground between media theory and ethnographic studies of media use in religious settings, focusing on the immediacy and transparency which new electronic media are widely considered to enable. I intend to examine the following paradox: as uses of new media technologies gain greater prominence in the contemporary world, these same complex artifacts are also the focus of fantasies of immediacy or unmediated transparency between communicating actors. In religious uses of media, this dynamic is often manifest in the wishes of actors in the ritual context at hand to establish immediate connections with spiritual agents in a religious or otherworld, which some see supported by the use of electronic media. While philosophers and media theorists have for quite some time paid attention to the contradictory qualities of media technologies as forces...
of poetic creativity and constraining formal apparatuses (Boyer, 2007), I suggest that ethnography can tell us why and when people are dissatisfied with established forms of mediation and why they paradoxically look to media technology for a solution.

In this essay I investigate the socio-cultural contexts of media use among Mauritian Muslims to show how sound reproduction has come to be associated with immediacy in spiritual interactions. Comparing the Mauritian case with uses of audiovisual media in religious settings in West Africa and India, I further show how such evaluations of the electronic medium rest on ultimately theological assumptions about the nature of mediation that drive the domestication of new media technologies in religious settings in different ways. Finally, I suggest that a semiotic approach to mediation is useful for understanding such assumptions that link contemporary media technologies and wishes for immediacy in religious interactions.

THEORIES OF MEDIATION AND MEDIA THEORY
Mediation, or the objects and processes linking opposed or otherwise differing people, concepts, or social formations and activities across qualitative, spatial or temporal gaps, has of course long been an established topic of philosophical reflection. According to Hegel, perhaps the foremost thinker on mediation in the Western tradition, mediation is identical with the process of attaining knowledge itself. Subjects know themselves through being confronted with an other appearing as a ‘thing in-itself’. Through an act of ‘determined negation’ of the independence and otherness of the ‘thing in-itself’, the subject comes to realize its fundamental connectedness with the other, leading to a synthesis of subject and other on a higher level (Hegel, 1986). The implication is that subjects only exist and gain knowledge through the mediation of an other. Thus for Hegel mediation is the fundamental condition that subjects and objects exist always in relations of interdependency with others. Marx applied Hegel’s insights about mediation to the analysis of social forces, most prominently in his analysis of capital as the mediating force between individuals, as well as humans and their natural environment under conditions of capitalism. And regarding the problem of religion and mediation, even Friedrich Schleiermacher, who famously argued that the roots of religious phenomena can be found in the wish to enjoy a more immediate relationship with the ‘universal’ and that an ‘intuition of the universe’ is at the origin of religious phenomena, recognized that such religious intuition presupposes mediation through the ‘finite’, by which he means the ultimately social world created by ‘humanity’ (Schleiermacher, 1988[1799]; Nassar, 2006: 830–1).

Yet the fundamentally mediated character of social life has also frequently been the object of distrust, as a negative clouding and withholding of truth and authenticity. In the Western intellectual tradition, probably the earliest and best known instance of this is Plato’s distrust against writing in comparison with speech which, because it introduced a new layer of mediation, he considered as less reliably conveying truth. This perceived alienating exteriority of mediation became a mainstay of Christian theology about spirit and body, developed into the notion of the authentic self as based on interiority (see Taylor, 1989: 127–39), and also found its way into Hegel’s dialectics. In fact, Hegel readily admitted the close parallels between the Christian trinity, where God splits himself in two, materializing himself in the Son, subsequently requiring the reunion of Father and Son in the Holy Spirit, and his account of dialectical mediation, where a
subject can only come to know itself through a movement of emptying exteriorization (Entäusserung), which then requires the synthesis of subject and the external other at a higher level.¹

The movement between immediate intuition of truth or spirit and its problematic externalization is a dominant theme in Western philosophical reflections on mediation as they have maintained a close relationship with a long tradition of Christian theology on the subject, particularly since the advent of Protestantism with its further radicalized reaction against embodied and other object-like mediators assumed to be in contrast with a sphere of spiritual interiority. Interestingly, modern media theorists have developed a very similar theme in their analysis of the consequences of contemporary media technologies (Boyer, 2007). According to their analyses, uses of media technology reveal two contradictory aspects of mediation that closely resemble the dialectics of immediacy and problematic externalization in philosophical approaches to mediation. On one hand they enable interactions that seem increasingly immediate and realistic so that the act of mediation and the technology enabling it almost appear to vanish. On the other hand the ever more pervasive use of such technologies leads to their greater visibility as complex objects and apparatuses that seem increasingly and problematically decoupled from human agency.

Martin Heidegger provides a good example for such a Janus-faced approach to technology. Although much better known for his pessimistic critique of technology as Gestell, ‘enframing’ and shaping both humans and the world in its own image as a quasi-autonomous force, Heidegger at times also suggested that the nature of technology lies in its special relationship with immediacy. Heidegger describes technology as a form of technë and poeisis that brings about the factual presence of things in the world, ‘with a view to the finished thing envisioned as completed’ (Heidegger, 1977[1954]: 13).² Here he draws a connection between technology as a creative producer of things and what he at various points calls the ‘unconcealment of Being’, which for him takes the place of transcendental ‘truth’. ‘Technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence [west] in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where alētheia, truth, happens’ (Heidegger, 1977[1954]: 13, compare also Heidegger, 1971[1950]: 71).

Seeking to overcome what he terms the ‘oblivion of Being’, his approach here aims at grasping the unqualified and pre-hermeneutic presence of the world. For Heidegger such presence is above all manifest in its thing-like substantiality and its dynamic movement (Heidegger, 1971[1950]: 41–2, 56; Gumbrecht, 2004: 68–72), and he suggests that precisely technology understood as a form of poeisis may bring about such unmediated presence.

Contrasting with Hegel’s dialectics of externalization and synthesis of the spirit, or Marx’s analysis of capital as mediator of the capitalist world, for contemporary media theorists, technologies of communication and data storage play the role of key mediating forces between human actors, as well as between humans and their natural environment. The main insight here is that the modalities and features of such technologies have a shaping impact on human relations, perhaps most memorably captured in Marshall McLuhan’s dictum that the ‘medium is the message’ (McLuhan, 1964). But the advent of new electronic media has also been described as a shrinking or even overcoming of time and space through new technical means (Harvey, 1989; Tomlinson, 1999), enabling relative immediacy in interacting with others, insofar as it makes the medium
of such interactions less obvious, rendering the presence of others so ‘real’ that the medium recedes into the background. Some have welcomed this development in hopeful, even utopian terms as the bringing about of greater interconnectedness among spatially and temporally distant human actors in a ‘global village’ (McLuhan, 1964; De Kerckhove, 1995). Others, however, have depicted the social consequences of new media technologies in a negative light, as the destruction of established social contexts of interaction and an impoverishment of human experience. It is quite remarkable how some media theorists analyze media apparatuses as ever more autonomous formations that are increasingly decoupled from human agency: in their most extreme formulations new media result in the unhindered flow and endless generation of information now finally separated from human subjects with their histories and languages. In a postmodernist vein, Friedrich Kittler, for example, announces the determination of ‘so called Man’ by technical standards (Kittler, 1997: 133), a coupling of humans and machines calculating away the human subject, language, and its attendant symbolic forms (Kittler, 1988, 1993a), which he celebrates as leading to a liberation from the ‘yoke of subjectivity’ (Kittler, 1993b: 181). Derrick de Kerckhove even predicts the rise of a redemptive ‘global consciousness’ in which a fusion of humans with new information machines corrects the intellectual weaknesses induced by the long dominance of literacy, above all the Cartesian division between subject and the world with its resulting sensory impoverishment (De Kerckhove, 1995). For others, however, like Jean Baudrillard (1994) and Paul Virilio, such effects of media technology can be catastrophic – not only do new media technologies in their drive to perpetually accelerate life destroy the established spatial arrangements in which social life takes place (Virilio, 1998: 128–9) and bring about the prevalence of ‘sightless vision’ (p. 147). Humans, turned into immobilized ‘invalids’, even lose control of their lives to information technologies, that in the guise of nanotechnology will in the final instance invade and colonize human bodies (pp. 20, 179).

What is striking in these assessments are the contradictory qualities of new media. On the one hand, they become almost invisible in their function of enabling ever more immediate forms of interaction and interconnectedness through a maximally transparent and therefore disappearing medium; on the other hand, their presence reasserts itself so forcefully as to override the creativity and control of human subjects. The dialectics of immediacy and mediation is reminiscent of what media theorists Bolter and Grusin have called the ‘remediation’ of new media as they alternate between attempting to erase all their traces, evident in the immediacy of virtual reality, and the ongoing drive to multiply themselves that Bolter and Grusin (1999) refer to as hypermediacy. What I try to show in this essay is that this dialectic between two contradictory aspects of new electronic media not only reappears in ethnographic accounts of media use. Most importantly, ethnographic studies examining the social and cultural contexts of such media-technology focused desires for immediacy can actually tell us when and why such wishes drive uses of media technology, and why they turn out to be utopian in the end.

As I examine the dialectics of mediation and immediacy in religious settings in this essay, I navigate between a Hegelian understanding of mediation as necessarily involving externalization and objectification, and Schleiermacher’s insights into the privileged relationship between immediacy and religion, while paying close attention to how a very similar dialectics between hypermediacy and immediacy characterizes the workings of contemporary media technology. In this essay I link these two intellectual traditions that
cast mediation as alternating between intuition and externalization, or immediacy and hypermediacy, respectively, to a third tradition, the semiotic analysis of mediation. As religious practice often revolves around processes of interaction across different ontological spheres, I find it useful to apply a semiotic approach to Hegel's understanding of mediation as the condition of possibility for social life. Here I above all think of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic dialectics of singular, material tokens and more abstract, conventional types. In investigating uses of new media in religious settings, a semiotic lens can provide insights in how a dialectics of mediation or immediacy unfolds, and why religious processes of interaction are often aimed at bringing about what in semiotic terms might be called the immediate presence of the token with its singular qualities, unmediated by types.

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF RELIGION AS MEDIATION

While media theorists have largely based their analyses on the technical and formal qualities of new media, media anthropologists have examined the actual uses of media as they become part of particular social and cultural contexts. Despite the fundamental differences in their approaches – largely formal analysis of media and the histories of their technologies favored by most media theorists as opposed to the ethnographic perspective on media use as culturally contextualized social practice – I suggest that media theorists and media anthropologists have encountered the same paradox in their investigations of media use: widespread desires for immediacy focused on new media against the background of ever more complex apparatuses of mediation that are supposed to enable more immediate forms of interaction. For example, anthropologist William Mazzarella describes the political scandal in the wake of the posting of video clips on an Indian news website, showing top-order Indian politicians and state functionaries accepting bribes and other favors from journalists posing as arms dealers, as the unfolding of a 'politics of immediation'. Analyzing 'e-governance' as an ideological formation that presents citizens and governments as entering an utopian relationship of complete transparency and responsiveness to each other's needs, he astutely comments on the hopes for uncorrupted transparency in governance that many pin on the spread of new information technology. Mazzarella concludes: 'One of the great structuring ironies of our age is the tendency for increasingly elaborate systems of mediation to be deployed in the pursuit of immediation' (2006: 500).

I take this paradox as a point of departure: as uses of new media technologies gain greater prominence in the contemporary world, and its material artifacts become ever more present and obvious in our surroundings, they also become the focal point of fantasies of immediacy, that is, wishes for direct and unmediated proximity between communicating actors. I will argue that this tension can be traced to a widespread dilemma found not only in uses of contemporary media but also in semiotic processes more generally, requiring, however, particular social and cultural conditions to become acute. I will therefore try to navigate between a broader focus on mediation as a necessary condition of social life (Mazzarella, 2004), and the particular cultural and historical situations in which desires for its overcoming or even abolition are particularly intense. In other words, I am concerned with the socio-cultural contexts that make desires for immediacy between interacting persons and institutions so compelling, resulting in the search for technical solutions in pursuit of such a goal.
Religious uses of media provide an especially useful perspective here. Certainly, they demonstrate that a dialectics between mediation and immediacy, often manifest in the wishes of actors in ritual contexts to establish immediate connections with spiritual agents in a religious or otherworld, long predate our present historical setting, including of course the spread of contemporary information technology. Different forms of media have often been important in the communication between different worlds in religious practice and ritual, and so have been recurring waves of distrust against them. However, technologies of mediation are indispensable for religious practice. As Hent de Vries has put it, religion does not exist in separation from processes of mediation and mediatization

without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place . . . mediatization and the technology it entails form the condition of possibility for all revelation, for its revealability, so to speak. An element of technicity belongs to the realm of the ‘transcendental,’ and vice versa. (De Vries, 2001: 28).

In the contemporary world there are many practitioners in the most diverse religious traditions that in apparent paradox see desires for more immediate access to supernatural or spiritual worlds supported by the use of electronic media, as a rapidly growing anthropological literature on religion and media testifies (Hirschkind, 2006; Krings, 2005; Lutgendorf, 1995: 224; Meyer, 2004: 104–5, 2006b: 302–4; Morris, 2002; Schulz, 2006: 220; Van de Port, 2006). At the same time, some have doubts about the authenticity and appropriateness of electronically mediated religious experience (e.g. Van de Port, 2006: 445), or fear that the use of such media will lead to what they consider an unacceptable mixture of religion and entertainment (e.g. Meyer, 2006b: 299). What are the social and phenomenological conditions that account for the tensions between the necessity of communicating through media with its attendant semiotic forms, and the recurring dissatisfaction with this constraint and the consequent denials of such a mediatory in-between, or even the wishes for its abolition? Instead of postulating a general ontology of electronic mediation and its dilemmas, I intend to elucidate specific cultural and historical constellations which account for such downplaying or even denying of the same processes of mediation that actually enable new forms of expression.

Investigating the desires for immediacy that often inform religious uses of media technology requires addressing mediation as a complex phenomenon on at least three levels: first, as technologies of mediation; second, mediation as interactive rapprochement between different actors, who in religious settings may even be located in separate ontological spheres; and third, mediation in the sense of provisionally bridging the irreducible singularities and differences we encounter in our lives through semiotic practices, above all through their subsumption under semiotic types. My suggestion is that we have to look at the interplay of these three levels of mediation in order to understand how desires for immediate interactions drive uses of media technology, particularly in religious contexts. Thus, my analysis seeks to demonstrate not only that media technology is involved in processes of religious interaction. I also stress that the relationship between religion and media technology revolves around the tensions and dissatisfaction
semiotic practices of provisionally reducing difference and incommensurability provoke. Above all, I suggest that such unease caused by semiotic practices of mediation that actually enable religious interaction profoundly shapes uses of media technology.

However, semiotic suspensions of the unique and the singular in religious interaction do not invariably provoke discomfort. I will argue here that such unease presupposes particular semiotic ideologies according to which mediation tends towards a problematic exteriorization and alienation of the mediated religious experience. Taking as an example Hegel’s analysis of mediation involving a moment of ‘emptying exteriorization’ (Entäußerung) which, although a valuable and necessary step in a process of self-realization, needs to be overcome through reintegration at a higher level, I will call basic understandings of mediation that highlight such dangers semiotic ideologies of exteriority.3 As Hegel himself acknowledged, the Christian theological underpinnings of this perspective on mediation are striking, which not only suggests that it is difficult to separate theologies and philosophies of mediation. It also implies that different theologies of mediation may have very different consequences of how people treat modern media technologies in religious settings and how they see such technologies contributing to their religious practices.

This theology of mediation also has important consequences for the semiotic dimension of mediation I just mentioned, mediation as the bridging of difference through provisional subsumption under semiotic types. One intriguing aspect of it is the ease in which it links what appears to be the externalization of inner spirit or agency to semiotic typification. Semiotic types, or the conventional and abstract elements of signification that enable us to recognize the 15 token realizations of ‘the’ on one page as instances of the ‘same’ word (Parmentier, 1994: 7–8; Peirce, 1932: 141–2, 1933b: 423–4), are responsible for what Derrida (1991) has called the ‘iterability’ of the sign. In making the repetition of signs possible, semiotic types are therefore responsible for signs’ relative autonomy from individual agency and intentionality. As we shall see, in the framework of a semiotic ideology opposing the external objectifications of what is mediated to a true inner spirit or agency, the typifying dimensions of signification become easily aligned with the sphere of emptying exteriority mediating but at the same time constraining the true inner spirit. It is in this sense that what Saussure (1983) described as the ‘arbitrariness’ of conventional systems of signs can be experienced as a tyrannical, external imposition on an inner spiritual truth or agency, at the same time provoking desires for an immediate overcoming or bypassing of such conventional forms of mediation.

In what follows I examine how notions of immediacy as enabled by media technology among Mauritian Muslims cultivating a particular genre of devotional poetry are underwritten by particular semiotic ideologies, ‘basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world’ (Keane, 2003: 419). They shape what counts as mediation, and what constitutes immediacy, and define the relationships between materiality and signification. Analyzing how Mauritian Muslims have made sound reproduction part of practices of spiritual mediation therefore requires an investigation of such fundamental assumptions about mediation and signification that enable sound reproduction to be treated as an authenticating way to circulate and transmit devotional discourse. In a further step, I briefly explore the significance of different semiotic ideologies of mediation for contemporary uses of media technology by juxtaposing
Mauritian Muslims’ uses of electronic sound reproduction with two other scenarios of media use in religious settings. Both the Mauritian case and the adoption of audiovisual technologies in pentecostal-charismatic churches in West Africa provide evidence of a fascination with and distrust of modern media technologies, leading in both instances to an ongoing tension between desires for immediacy in religious interaction strongly focused on contemporary media technologies and a lingering unease about such technologies. As I will discuss below, recent ethnographic studies on audiovisual media and religious practices in India also report a salient link between wishes for immediate interactions with the divine and uses of audiovisual media. However, in ethnographic work about India there is scant evidence of the unease about media technologies that semiotic ideologies of exteriority provoke in the other two settings, showing that the objectifications religious mediations necessarily involve need not invariably be viewed as ‘external’ to a presumed ‘inner’ spirit of poetic creativity, or be treated as a corrupting and emptying alienation of religious experience. The comparison thus suggests that semiotic ideologies of mediation drive the domestication of media technology into religious settings in varying ways, and above all lead their users to different conclusions about their promises and dangers.

**ISLAM AND SOUND REPRODUCTION IN MAURITIUS**

Mauritius is a former plantation society in which almost 70 percent of the population are of Indian origin. Members of the middle class among Hindus, 52 percent of the population, in particular those of north Indian background (approximately 41% of the total population), have dominated the Mauritian government and state institutions since independence from Britain in 1968. They have established the hegemony of a notion of cultural citizenship according to which Mauritians are subjects with origins in other parts of the world and ongoing commitments to diasporic ‘ancestral cultures’. These ancestral traditions are in turn largely identified with different religious traditions, as religious difference is of supreme importance in the making of boundaries between the ‘communities’ distinguished both by the Mauritian constitution and the larger public. The cultivation of officially recognized ancestral cultures with religious biases is strongly encouraged and supported by Mauritian state institutions. Mauritian Muslims, who like Hindus are also of Indian background, constitute 17 percent of the population of 1.2 million. Islamic traditions represent the official ‘ancestral culture’ for Mauritian Muslims, which has in turn heightened concerns about the authenticity of such traditions legitimizing the place of Muslims in a Mauritian nation. One of the consequences has been debates about the permissibility and authenticity of certain religious practices, such as the performance of devotional genres linked to practices of intercession, which in turn are closely linked to competition between different South Asian Islamic traditions in Mauritius, most notably the Barelwi and Deobandi schools (Eisenlohr, 2006a, 2006b).

While doing research in Mauritius, my initial interest in how the production of diasporic relations, linguistic practices, and transnational media flows intersect led me to the question of electronically mediated interaction in contests about religious authority among Mauritian Muslims. In particular, I was interested in the implications struggles over religious authenticity have for both the position of Mauritian Muslims in a Mauritian nation and for the kind of relationships they entertain to competing centers.
of Islamic learning and authority in South Asia and beyond. I was struck by the extent to which the legitimacy of performing a particular popular devotional genre, na’t, had become a main issue in these debates. Although a contested genre, na’t audiocassettes and audio-CDs have recently become very popular in Mauritius. The adherents of na’t as a religious practice are now using these recordings as a guide to organize devotional gatherings known as mahfil-e mawlu¯d and have drawn on them as authoritative examples of Islamic practice in order to defend the performing of na’t against its detractors. Their engagement with sound reproduction oscillates between desires for the immediate presence of the supernatural and concerns about the generic conventionalization and typification of religious practice, hereby illustrating a particular semiotic ideology according to which media technology is characterized by certain promises and threats.

Na’t is a devotional genre frequently performed in South Asian Muslim settings, most commonly in Urdu. These are devotional poems in praise of the Prophet Muhammad and also Islamic authorities such as prominent Sufi saint-teachers of members of the family of the Prophet. But performing na’t is above all an act of devotion to the Prophet, which for many Muslims in South Asia and beyond is a key part of what they consider proper Islamic practice. In Mauritius, as I have described elsewhere (Eisenlohr, 2006b, forthcoming), reciting of na’t most often takes place in mahfil-e mawlu¯d that are held on the occasion of the birthday of the Prophet, the anniversary of the demise of a saint (’urs) or also auspicious occasions in ordinary people’s lives, such as weddings, moving into a new home or the passing of important school exams. Apart from its association with such institutionalized contexts, the reciting of and receptive listening to na’t is best seen as an act of pious transformation, which moves its practitioners towards experiences of love and deep affection for the Prophet. Those reciting na’t praise the Prophet in exuberant terms and invoke his spiritual presence, sometimes manifest as pure light (nur-e muhammadî), and establish a close personal relationship to the Prophet as the performance of na’t unfolds. The performance of na’t combines the character of a highly conventionalized established ritual occasion revolving around the faithful recitation of devotional poetry with the search for personal, immediate encounters with the Prophet resulting in a sense of visceral closeness to him.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s cassette recordings of na’t performances from Indian and Pakistan, and later also cassette and audio-CD recordings of local performances, have become widely available in Mauritius. These recordings are above all used to prepare for and guide performances of the genre at mahfil-e mawlûd, its traditional setting (Eisenlohr, 2006b). But they have also led to the extension of the genre into contexts in which it was previously absent, such as listening to na’t alone at home or in the car. While previously na’t texts were above all known by Imams who kept written collections of na’t from India and Pakistan in mosques,5 and a few older people had also memorized some na’t, the circulation of cassette and audio-CD na’t has brought about a new popularization of the genre among younger Mauritian Muslims and has acquainted many with accomplished recitals of the genre. This happened amid increasing conflict about the legitimacy of na’t and other practices of spiritual intercession, which is primarily related to the conflict between followers of the Barelwi and Deobandi traditions in South Asian Islam. Followers of the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama’at, one of the reform movements emerging in 19th-century South Asian Islam (Metcalf, 1982; Sanyal, 1996), also known as the Barelwi tradition, are among those most strongly supporting
the performance of na‘t. The Ahl-e Sunnat tradition distinguishes itself through its openness to Sufism and associated practices of spiritual intercession, and above all through pronounced devotion to the figure of the Prophet. The founder of the movement, Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856–1921), was actually known as an accomplished composer of na‘t (Sanyal, 1996: 13). The better-known reformists of the school of Deoband have vigorously opposed na‘t and other practices appealing to human mediators between Muslims and God, on the grounds that this constitutes a grave sin as it dilutes the oneness of God. In contemporary Mauritius, the followers of the Sunnat Jama‘at, as the representatives of the Ahl-e Sunnat or Barelwi tradition are locally known, are those defending the performance of na‘t, and they tend to be more numerous in the rural districts of the island. The Deobandi perspective, with its hostility towards practices of spiritual intercession such as performing na‘t, is most forcefully represented in Mauritius by the global missionizing movement Tablighi Jama‘at. They now dominate the urban environments and have overall made large inroads among Mauritian Muslims, whose traditional leadership since the 1930s had been dominated by the Ahl-e Sunnat.6

The close and overwhelming personal encounter with the Prophet sought by those performing and listening to na‘t echoes a more widespread theme in Sufi traditions of Islam, the desire to approach God through emulating the Prophet. A preferred way to attain this goal is literal embodiment of the Prophetic ideal through spiritual exercises (Buehler, 1998; Werbner, 2004). Through surrendering to the personal authority of the Sufi Sheikh, who has accomplished this ideal, devotees establish a ‘heart-to-heart connection, leading to a vividly intense experience of Muhammad’ (Buehler, 1998: 17). Resembling the dialectics of mediation of exteriority versus immediacy with God I have discussed as the religious legacy of much contemporary media theory, Sufi traditions also posit an inner-outer dichotomy of spiritual attainment in which practitioners strive for intimacy with God through an inner meeting of hearts with the Prophet (Buehler, 1998: 7–13; Schimmel, 1975). Here, the voiced benedictions and sheer presence of the spiritual master (living or present in his tomb) are often valued higher than learnedness in written texts. This is, for example, attested by the ‘ulema of Farangi Mahall in Lucknow, one of the major centers of Islamic learning in India, who despite being accomplished scholars venerate the illiterate saint Sayyid ‘Abd al-Razzaq (d. 1724) and attend his yearly ‘urs (Robinson, 2001: 109).

The Ahl-e Sunnat tradition is unique in the South Asian world for its defense of Sufi traditions through fusing them with ‘ulema-based Islam, to the point that scholars of South Asian Islam have credited the movement of Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi for the continuing vitality of Sufi traditions in South Asia (Buehler, 1998: 176–7; Sanyal, 1996; Werbner, 2004: 10). Moreover, contemporary Sufi leaders’ uses of modern print, audiovisual, and transport technology to reach mass audiences, or the use of sound reproduction in devotional practices that stand in close proximity to Sufi traditions such as cassette and audio-CD na‘t, have not led to the disappearance of the embodied authority of Sufi ‘heirs of the Prophet’ (Werbner, 2004).7 The personal appearance of spiritual masters at ‘urs continues to be an occasion for overwhelming personal and emotional affection on the part of those attending such gatherings (Landell-Mills, 1998).

Apart from popularizing na‘t, among the most important consequences of the circulation of cassette and audio-CD na‘t are the shaping of notions of textual and performative authenticity of the genre. Recordings of performances by accomplished na‘t
khwān (na’t reciters) from Indian and Pakistan, and in recent years also of local na’t khwān trained by Indian Imams in Mauritius, have emerged as authentic models to be emulated in local performances. For many practitioners of na’t, electronic reproduction of voice facilitates authentic transmission of both the ‘correct’ poetic text and the appropriate performative style. In privileging voice rather than written text in the process of authentic transmission, cassette na’t thereby stands in proximity to an established tradition of ‘logocentric recitationalism’ also attested for other Islamic traditions (Messick, 1993: 21–5). Even though the paradigmatic scenario within this semiotic ideology is the recitation of scripture, regarding voice as the locus of truth is also evident in other Islamic traditions of textual traditions, such as the authoritative testimonies of the words and deeds of the Prophet and his companions (hadith) or, as in the case here, the authentic transmission of na’t poetry. As even its supporters acknowledge, in expressing exuberant praise of the Prophet na’t is a delicate genre, because of the danger of elevating the prophet to a God-like figure. This, of course, is the chief reason why followers of more purist traditions, such as the Tablighis, reject na’t. Composing na’t is therefore a difficult task best left to learned scholar-poets. The challenge is to navigate between uttering the highest possible praise of the Prophet while clearly avoiding describing him in a way resembling God. It is therefore of great importance to ascertain that the text of a na’t is ‘correct’ and can be traced to a credible authority.

But sound reproduction is also important for what many view as the safeguarding of the appropriate performative style, which is as important as the textual dimension for its efficaciousness as a practice of pious transformation and spiritual intercession. Above all, according to several of my informants, including one prominent Mauritian na’t khwān, the style of recitation should never remind one of Bollywood film songs, which are extremely popular in Mauritius. A na’t recital reminding one of the performative styles of the Hindi film industry, with its unwelcome moral associations, would turn the spiritual benefits aspired to by those practicing na’t into its very opposite. Since there are not enough accomplished na’t reciters in Mauritius, and because performative style is difficult to transmit through written text, cassette and audio-CD na’t now play a key role also in safeguarding this dimension of authenticity.

Writing about the origins of sound reproduction in 19th- and early 20th-century North America and Europe, the historian of media Jonathan Sterne has argued that many commonsensical notions about the characteristics of sound reproduction technologies, such as separating sounds from their sources or enabling us to hear the voices of the dead, are not empirical descriptions of presumed inherent characteristics of these technologies but emerged from a contemporary context of wishes and currents of culture that led to particular technical innovations and uses (Sterne, 2003: 8, see also Lastra, 2000). For many Mauritian Muslims, such wishes include transparency and immediacy in practices of spiritual mediation. Na’t ‘correctly’ performed produces the affective dispositions that underpin ideally transparent and immediate relationships to the Prophet, and the desire to, literally, ‘tune into’ these affective stances of spiritual mediation, too, is part of a cultural complex of ‘wishes people [have] grafted onto sound reproduction technologies’ (Sterne, 2003: 8). And one could add, technology is not only the object of projection of such wishes, but actually the condensation of such wishes and the social relations they are embedded in.
PERSONALIZATION OF SPIRITUAL INTERACTION AND SEMIOTIC TYPIFICATION

So far I have emphasized how practitioners of na‘t view sound reproduction as supporting the faithful transmission of authoritative religious discourse, against the background of a semiotic ideology of ‘logocentric recitationalism’ informing the modalities of discourse circulation in several Islamic traditions. Also, those listing to na‘t cassettes and audio-CD na‘t do not only think that sound reproduction aids the transmission of ‘correct’ texts in the diaspora – a process traditionally supported by writing – but that it also and crucially supports authenticity of na‘t performances in terms of performative style. However, the emphasis on the faithful repetition of ‘correct’ poetic text in the appropriate manner leads to a certain tension for those seeking a transformative spiritual experience. This is because the performance of this devotional genre unites deeply contradictory elements. On one hand, na‘t is authorized and spiritually effective when those present at a mahfil-e mawlu¯d recite the ‘correct’ text ideally traceable to saint-teachers assumed to be their composers, and do so in the appropriate style and manner. On the other hand, the performance is also a highly personal matter, where those reciting the poetry are immensely moved towards love and affection for the Prophet and in a sense gain a lived, immediate connection to him that is often experienced as a personal encounter. That is, the performance brings together a strong focus on the ‘correct’ reproduction of stereotypic forms of devotion with highly emotional and personal forms of spiritual interaction.

For most of those Mauritian Muslims I worked with practicing na‘t, sound reproduction supports both these dimensions of an authentic spiritual experience. Sound reproduction helps to safeguard the faithful transmission of the correct text and the appropriate style of recitation. But in doing so, it also enables what many value as a spontaneous, immediate encounter with the prophet and other Islamic authorities in which na‘t plays a central role. That is, people value sound reproduction over the traditional written compilations of na‘t precisely because the reproduction of an accomplished na‘t khwa¯n’s voice moves its listeners to an experience of closeness to and affection for the Prophet in a way most cannot derive from a written text. Sound reproduction as a complex medium then paradoxically enables experiences of relative immediacy in spiritual interaction. The qualities cassette and audio-CD na‘t acquire as they are used by those Mauritian Muslims friendly to the kinds of spiritual intercession (shafa’a) that form the background of the practice of na‘t are therefore deeply contradictory. On one hand, they represent an elaborate technology of electronic mediation used to reproduce highly conventionalized forms of devotion; on the other hand, they cater to the desires for personal immediacy in spiritual interaction widespread among those taking part in mahfil-e mawlu¯d. This tension is reminiscent of what Flagg Miller, writing about the cassette circulation of political poetry in another Islamic context, has termed the intersection of an ‘aesthetics of circulation’ concerned with abstract and external objects that can be easily circulated through a modern recording industry, and an ‘aesthetics of resonance’. The latter ‘enables reflections on the emergence of such objects from the sensate, dynamic, and therefore partly metaphysical qualities of media’ (Miller, 2007: 24) and constitutes a sphere of the ‘more localized, embodied and irreducible engagements’ (p. 444). Correlating this opposition of ‘circulation’ and ‘resonance’ with the visual and the sonic in local sensoria (p. 444), he argues that Yemeni activists use
audiocassette poetry to build bridges between the two political aesthetics. As in Miller’s analysis, the example of na’t among Mauritian Muslims demonstrates how sound reproduction is part of a complex technical and industrial apparatus, but also becomes linked to relative immediacy in an Islamic context. I am, however, less concerned with aligning the tension between forms of mediation experienced as abstract and external and relative immediacy with different dimensions of the sensorium. After all, in Sufi traditions the visual often also pertains to the sphere of relative immediacy, as in the visual appearance of the living saint or in apprehending the *nur-e muhammadi*, while in Western traditions the correlation of the visual with the external and abstract and the aural with intimacy constitutes what Jonathan Sterne has called a longstanding ‘audiovisual litany’ (Sterne, 2003: 15–19). What I want to emphasize is that these contrasting dimensions and their relationship to each other are not only the product of particular theologies of mediation but can also be, under certain ideological conditions, identified with different semiotic processes.

Sound reproduction plays the role of a vanishing mediator enabling relative immediacy, a medium that performs so well it becomes invisible, and thus seemingly provides a ‘direct’ experience of the recitation with its transformative effects. It is therefore a technical solution responding to what media theorist Hartmut Winkler has called the ‘dread of arbitrariness’, the desire for authentic, singular immediacy bypassing stereotypical forms and signs (Winkler, 1997: 214). But the example of na’t also makes clear that such a desire is utopian. It is inevitably confronted with the necessity of mediation not only through particular media technologies but also, in the final analysis, mediation through conventional forms and types such as the ‘correct’ poetic texts and the presupposed performative conventions that are part of what constitutes na’t as an established speech genre, and without which the spiritual interaction that those practicing na’t aim for would be impossible.

There are two processes in the circulation of cassette and audio-CD na’t that ultimately thwart the dream of a fully transparent, or vanishing medium. First, there is the association between audiotaped performances of na’t and the Hindi film industry with its perceived moral dangers among those opposing the genre. Music, above all the qawwali genre, is often an integral part of South Asian Sufi traditions (Qureshi, 1995). Nevertheless, those among my Mauritian informants favoring na’t performance clearly drew a line between performing na’t and music. For critics of this devotional tradition, however, the recitation of praise poetry often crosses into the questionable domain of music and singing. This is especially the case when the performers are not accomplished experts, but relatively untrained and oriented towards the performative styles and kinds of delivery prevalent in the Hindi cinema. The ‘Bollywood’ film industry is extremely popular in Mauritius, and the latest films and their soundtracks constitute omnipresent forms of entertainment, particularly in Indo-Mauritian communities and neighborhoods. As Hindi films frequently stand for the sensual pleasures of dance and romantic love, some orthodox Muslims view them as morally dubious. In addition, na’t poetry has actually been performed in a few Hindi films. As those critical of na’t see the genre as blurring into the domain of ‘music’ and commercial entertainment, cassettes and audio-CD lose their aura as transparent mediators of more immediate spiritual encounters. On the contrary, they become problematically visible in their association with morally questionable entertainment, in particular Hindi films and their songs.
But the moral dangers of Bollywood are not the only reason for the undermining of utopian immediacy enabled by new technical forms of media. Here it is important to recall the multiple levels of mediation that religious uses of new media involve. Such uses do not only raise the issue of mediation because they comprise the use of media technology, or because they often result in the interactive rapprochement of communicating actors. They also involve mediation in the sense of reducing irreducible singularities and differences through semiotic practices, or in semiotic terms the relating of tokens to types. This is the second major reason why dreams of immediacy eventually remain unfulfilled.

Media technologies enable the storage of signs and images in a material medium, such as writing, or an electronic medium, when circulating sound, images, or text. These signs and images are then available for retrieval and repetition. Media usage therefore revolves around cycles of storage and repetition of circulated signs and images. Through using writing, sound reproduction, or audiovisual technologies, tokens, or singular material instances of signs can be captured and stored for future instances of repetition. But in order for repetition to be possible, such stored tokens must again be brought into relation to types, that is, the conventionalized dimensions of signs. Thus, in enabling cycles of storage and repetition of signs and images, media technologies do not only deposit signs and images into some kind of material storage, but in making the repetition of the ‘same’ signs and images possible they also involve the re-inscription of tokens into types.

But different types of material storage afforded by media technology can have different consequences for the circulation of signs and images. The important point is that sound reproduction and audiovisual technologies can store particular singular tokens of signs and images without having to relate them to types. The latter usually occurs only when media users retrieve the stored signs and images, such as when listeners relate particular recorded auditory tokens of ‘the’ with the corresponding type in the English language. But in contrast to the written text, where the linking of tokens to types (here the conventional signs of a writing system) is already part of the act of storage, and not just retrieval, electronic media such as sound reproduction and audiovisual technologies seem to offer a way to store tokens directly, without recourse to types. The impression of enabling a more immediate, singular experience is also reinforced by the fact that audiovisual media are able to store singular tokens together with their iconic characteristics, their material and embodied qualities that Peirce referred to as ‘qualisigns’ or ‘tones’ (Peirce, 1932: 142, Munn, 1992: 16–17), such as the qualities of a particular voice.11

I suggest that this formal difference in the modalities of storing signs and images is one of the chief reasons why these electronic media technologies seem to enable more immediate, direct experiences and interactions than, for example, writing. They stir wishes for a utopian bypassing of conventionalized, typified experiences and interactions, the desire for lived immediacy, singular experiences embedded in their particular material qualities unencumbered by the forces of typification and conventionalization propelled by a ‘dread of arbitrariness’. In the performance of na’t with its privileging of personal and affective transformation through experiencing love and devotion for the Prophet, there is a tension between the search for immediate and personal spiritual interactions and the highly conventionalized and carefully transmitted poetic performance which accomplishes such pious transformation. In other words, there appears to be a tension between the already established semiotic types and the excess of the singular
instance of performance that both constitute na’t as a speech event. I propose that this
dynamic plays a key role in the use of contemporary electronic media technology not
only in the performance of na’t but also in other religious settings where practitioners
have to negotiate between established typified forms of religious interaction and the
search for personal immediacy in interaction with the divine. Thus, the unease provoked
by semiotic practices that make differences and singularities at least temporally commensurable through processes of typification is one of the chief driving forces in the use of
contemporary media technologies in religious settings.

COMPARATIVE DIALECTICS OF MEDIATION: PENTECOSTAL AND
HINDU VISUALITIES
A related dynamics of immediacy and mediation is evident from recent ethnographic
studies of Christianity and media in Africa, particularly on the adoption of video and
other audiovisual technology by pentecostal-charismatic churches (Gifford, 1998:
90–1). The links pentecostal-charismatic Christians draw between visibility and revela-
tion in a spiritual sense, in opposition to darkness, ignorance, and demonic forces, are
striking. Proselytizing Christians have frequently mobilized this contrast against the
followers of ‘traditional’ African religious traditions and their ritual specialists. In her
work on Christianity and media in Ghana, Birgit Meyer has described how pentecostal-
charismatic churches have adopted new audiovisual media technologies in the context
of ‘media ministries’. These missionizing movements draw on new media technology as
supporting visually revealed truth, and combating witchcraft and disbelief. Followers of
these churches identify the capabilities of audiovisual media with revelation and the
throwing of light into darkness, establishing an ‘analogy between the Spirit of Discern-
ment and modern audiovisual technologies’ (Meyer, 2006a: 440). Another important
element in connecting such technology to Christian concerns about revelation is its
association with the ‘openness’ of the public sphere, hereby contrasting with the focus
on secrecy and graduated limits of knowledge widespread in traditional African religions.
While European Christian missionaries and mainstream Protestant churches stressed the
role of the biblical text as an agent of light and divine truth, they were ‘reluctant to allow
for more elaborate vision practices (such as having visions, going into trance, interpret-
ing dreams and similar techniques) geared to the unmasking of occult forces such as
witchcraft’ (Meyer, 2006a: 439). This in turn motivated the rise of independent African
churches privileging such visual practices, and the recent domestication of audiovisual
media into conducting and supporting such visual practices aimed at discerning the
divine and unmasking the demonic.

Such contemporary uses of audiovisual technology in contemporary Africa also seem
to illustrate the paradox of a search for immediacy through ever more complex forms of
media technology. Here, the desire for what appear to be more immediate forms of
revelation in terms of dramatic visibility as opposed to textual hermeneutics motivates
the use of video and other audiovisual technology in religious practices. The domes-
tication of new media technology unfolds against the background of a theology of revela-
tion that places special emphasis on visibility, in contrast to the recitational logocentrism
I have seen prevailing in the adoption of sound reproduction among Mauritian Muslims.
But both uses of new media technologies in religious settings can be understood as
attempts to bypass previous forms of religious mediation centered on written texts, and
as technical solutions in the search for seemingly more authentic, personal, and direct encounters with the divine, eschewing too conventionalized forms of interacting with God.

Nevertheless, as Meyer’s analysis suggests, the dialectics of mediation and immediacy also return to the uses of audiovisual technology by pentecostal-charismatic churches in Ghana. As the pentecostal aesthetics of media-aided dramatic revelation have emerged as a highly influential force in the contemporary Ghanan public sphere, they have increasingly shaped other forms of public expression such as the products of the local film industry, and blended with the realms of entertainment and advertisement (Meyer, 2004, 2006b). The spilling over of such religious media practices into commercial entertainment also ‘entails the price of trivialization, invoking doubt as to whether there is anything behind the spectacular public performances of revelation’ (Meyer, 2006a: 444, compare also Meyer, 2006b: 299). In other words, instead of permanently working as vanishing mediators enabling immediate relationships with the divine, the fear of trivialization and the inauthentic makes audiovisual media suddenly again visible as complex human artifacts.

Also in India, the adoption of modern media technologies into religious traditions has caught ethnographic attention. In a parallel to research about media and Christianity in Africa, the role of mass-reproduced, filmic, and now also electronically circulated images has emerged as a main focus of research. And here also, modern media technologies have not been treated as inimical to authentic religious experience, but are eagerly adopted in religious practices. The ubiquity of chromolithographed devotional images and calendar art in Indian public culture since the late 19th century, the popularity of the film genre of ‘mythologicals’ in Indian, above all Hindi cinema, and the televised and video circulation of Hindu epics such as the Ramayana are among the most salient examples of the intersection of religious traditions and modern media technologies (Derné, 1995; Lutgendorf, 1990; Pinney, 2001, 2002). Ethnographers working in this field have stressed the importance of different traditions of visual practice in the domestication of these media, especially the Hindu tradition of darshan. This mode of visual interaction with the divine in Hindu traditions can be understood as an intense encounter between the devotee and a divine image in which the devotee undergoes a profound experience of seeing and being seen by the deity (Eck, 1998). The highly affective interaction can result in a spell-like attraction of the devotee by the image and is akin to a ‘physical relationship of visual intermingling’ (Pinney, 2001: 168), in which the gaze is ‘a vehicle of transmission for powerful essences’ (Jain, 2007: 262). Visual interaction with the divine thus is a bodily activity involving a broad range of the human sensorium, and constitutes a practice of enchanted ‘corpothetics’ in contradistinction to modern Western notions of visual aesthetics (Buck-Morss, 1992; Pinney, 2001, 2002).

Most important for my discussion, ethnographers working on the visual dimensions of religious experience in India describe that their informants treat modern media technologies such as chromolithography, film, and more recently also audiovisual technologies as enhancing the ‘sensory immediacy’ and ‘non-absorptive directness’ (Pinney, 2001: 161, 168) they look for in their visual-devotional practices. The screening of ‘mythological’ films and videos featuring the exploits of deities in Hindu tradition have thus become a focus and occasion of ritual activity (Lutgendorf, 1990; Pinney, 2002: 358) as they facilitate a more immediate presence of deities.
In a striking parallel to the adoption of electronic sound reproduction in religious contexts by some Mauritian Muslims, there is a strong sense of continuity with long-established traditions of religious mediation in the way ethnographers have described the domestication of audiovisual media technology in Hindu religious practices centered on vision. It seems that uses of such technology often become incorporated into what one might call a *darshan*-paradigm, in which devotees seek a highly affective, frontal and immediate visual interaction with deities. In other words, the use of new media technologies does not necessarily lead to profound changes in people’s religious practices. But nevertheless, audiovisual media are clearly treated as enhancing relative immediacy in visual encounters with the divine, and thus it is fair to conclude also from this body of ethnographic research that desires for immediacy drive the adoption and uses of new media in religious settings.

As much as mass-reproduced chromolithographs, calendar art, films and other audiovisual media seem to support and feed into an established tradition of frontal immediacy in visual interaction with the divine, their uses at the same time also lead to towards greater de-personalized typification and conventionalization in the devotional practices they otherwise seem to enhance. One of the most obvious consequences in this regard is the increasing standardization of iconography in images of deities under the influence of mass-reproduced and mass-circulated images. One prominent example is the typifying influence that, for example, the televised *Ramayana* serial had on Hindu visual representations of divine characters (Lutgendorf, 1995: 244–6). Also in the contemporary Indian context modern media technology cannot deliver the dream of immediate spiritual experiences bypassing conventionalized types, in this case the increasingly standardized visual iconography of the Hindu pantheon.

However, unlike among Muslims in Mauritius or Pentecostal Christians in Ghana, there is little sense of a widespread unease with what for others would appear to be emptying exteriorization and typification of religious experience. Also, the very obvious crossovers into entertainment and advertising that the circulation of divine images involves, particularly in films and calendar art, evoke little concern that this could de-authenticate or otherwise undermine religious practices centered on ‘visual intermingling’ with deities. On the contrary, ‘the efficacy of images accrues and devolves in large part through their circulation as objects or bodies’ (Jain, 2007: 368), and this also includes the presence of mass-circulated divine images in entertainment and advertisement contexts. The comparison suggests that widespread unease with the aspects of mediation that result in typification and objectification presupposes a particular semiotic ideology of exteriority which seems to be present in the Mauritian Muslim and West African Christian settings I have outlined. In contrast, such worries about mediation resulting in corrupting exteriorization and alienation of religious experience, even as it makes this very experience possible, do not feature prominently in accounts of contemporary media use in visual-religious practices in India. And this is not surprising, since there is little that is ‘exterior’ in a problematic sense about divine images in Hindu Indian contexts (compare Davis, 1997).

**CONCLUSION**

I have pointed out that the use of media technologies, such as sound reproduction or audiovisual technologies, involves sequences of acts of storage and repetition in which semiotic tokens, which always have a material form, are deposited in and retrieved from...
a medium of storage, thereby traveling to new contexts and settings. If we take Heidegger’s analysis of technology as poetic techne¯ as a starting point for describing this process, sound reproduction could be understood as a technique to bring about the material, purely factual presence of the linguistic token embedded in its singular qualities (tones). But the role of technology in such a dialectics of immediacy and abstraction is deeply contradictory. Seemingly bringing about the factual, material presence of things in the world, such as linguistic tokens, the acceleration and scalar increase of circulation it affords may also simultaneously lead to greater abstraction and typification fed back into the cycles of storage and repetition of discourse. As contemporary electronic media make greatly increased frequency of acts of storage and repetition of signs possible, they also enable greater semiotic typification, that is, they work as machines fitting singular token performances into typified forms at greater scale and speed.12 In Peircean terms, electronic media as machines of repetition at potentially immense scale and speed thus contribute to the condensation of tokens into types by producing ‘habits’ of mental association between the sign and its object (compare Peirce, 1933a: 210), a process of typification that Benjamin held responsible for the loss of ‘auras’ of singularity in the field of art (Benjamin, 1968).

What I have characterized a drive for immediacy in religious interactions centered on the utopian wish to bypass semiotic typification and stereotypization through technology suggests a vision of technology as producing unmediated presence. However, semiotic ideologies of exteriority motivate such desires for affectively loaded, immediate experience of the otherwise removed presence of the other as they build oppositions between ‘external’ dimensions of mediation and poetic creativity and agency. While such fundamental assumptions about mediation can be found not only among Mauritian Muslims but also in a range of other ethnographic and historical contexts, I have sought to emphasize that they by no means underwrite all uses of modern media technology in religious settings. The extent to which the inevitability of typification constitutes a problematic ‘exteriority’ of what is being mediated ultimately depends on the multiple theologies underwriting the act of mediation.

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Notes
1 In the Phenomenology Hegel uses the key term Entäusserung also to refer to the incarnation of God in the Son in the same breath with Entäusserung as a more general characterization of objectification as one of the necessary elements in the movement of spirit (e.g. Hegel, 1986: 566–7, 570, English translation Hegel, 1977: 472, 475).
2 ‘Technē is a mode of a-letheuein. It reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us, whatever can look and turn out now one way and now another. Whoever builds a house or a ship or forges a sacrificial chalice reveals what is to be brought forth, according to the perspectives of the four modes of occasioning. This revealing gathers together in advance the aspect and the matter of ship and house, with a view to the finished thing envisioned as completed, and for this gathering determines the manner of its construction. Thus what is decisive in technē does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing. It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that technē is a bringing-forth’ (Heidegger, 1977[1954]: 13).

3 It is well known that Hegel developed his terminology against the background of his Protestant theological training. Hegel’s notion of Entäusserung he uses throughout the Phenomenology of the Spirit, particularly in the sections ‘The Revealed Religion’ and ‘Absolute Knowing’ to characterize the movement of the spirit, is one prominent example, as it echoes Luther’s biblical translation of the Greek ekkenoun and Latin exinanio (to make empty, to deprive) (Schnädelbach, 1999: 43). See, for example, the following two verses from the book of Philippians: ‘welcher, ob er wohl in göttlicher Gestalt war, hielt er’s nicht für einen Raub, Gott gleich sein, sondern entäußerte sich selbst und nahm Knechtschaft an, ward gleich wie ein andrer Mensch und an Gebärden als ein Mensch erfunden’ (Philipper 2, 6–7) – the King James Bible renders the passage Luther translated as ‘sondern entäußerte sich selbst’ as ‘but made himself of no reputation’. In English translations of Hegel Entäusserung is rendered as ‘externalization’ and sometimes ‘alienation’, but because of the specific biblical connotations of the term I prefer to translate it as ‘emptying exteriorization’.

4 According to the constitution Mauritians are divided into four principal ‘communities’: Hindus (52%), Muslims (17%), Sino-Mauritians (2%) and the General Population (29%). The General Population comprises all Mauritians who do not belong to the three aforementioned categories – de facto these are Creoles and Franco-Mauritians, who are Christians, overwhelmingly Catholics. With the exception of the small and multi-religious Sino-Mauritian community, there is a striking overlap between the boundaries between the officially recognized ethnic communities and religious boundaries in Mauritius.

5 Especially the popular Urdu language manual Milàd-e akbar (cf Hermansen, 1995; Qureshi, 1996: 55) was well known in Mauritis as a compilation of na’t. It also contained practical suggestions on how to hold a mahfil-e mawlûd, instructions on how to recite the poetry, as well as explanations of the benefits derived from this act.

6 The opposition between Barelwis and Deobandis in Mauritius is closely connected to the competition between two wealthy Gujarati trader communities who also have very extensive networks of trade, intermarriage and religious tradition in the Indian Ocean area, the Kutchi Memons and the Sunni Surtees. The Kutchi Memons had already been active as builders of mosques and other Islamic institutions since the middle of the 19th century and began inviting Barelwi missionaries to the island in the 1930s. The great majority of Mauritian Muslims, who were of indentured background, adopted the more institutionalized forms of Islam propagated by the Ahl-e Sunnat. In the 1950s the Sunni Surtee community invited the Tablighis to Mauritis and generally began building rival Deobandi institutions. Since the 1970s
there has also been a small but growing presence of Salafis trained in Saudi Arabia, who are locally known as Tawheedis, developing independently from the patronage of one of the established Gujarati communities.

7 Examining Sufi traditions, Buehler (1998) posits a contrast between ‘directing’ and ‘mediating’ Sheikhs. While ‘directing’ Sheikhs act through personal example and instruction in spiritual techniques for a relatively circumscribed group of committed followers to reach the embodied authority of a Sufi ‘heir of the Prophet’, mediating Sheikhs address and mobilize modern mass audiences through media technologies. Instead of spiritual perfection through techniques personally taught by the master, ‘mediating’ Sheikhs such as the leaders of the Barelwi tradition function as the focus of a more generalized love for large audiences for which they provide intercession with the Prophet. Buehler suggests that in the course of modernization since the late 19th century ‘directing’ Sufi Sheikhs have been supplanted by ‘mediating’ Sheikhs in South Asia, an argument criticized by Pnina Werbner who points to the continuing relevance of personal direction and acts of blessing of living saints in South Asian Islam (Werbner, 2004: 20–1). Also my example of electronically mediated na’t in Mauritius shows how the same modern mechanisms of mass address and dissemination Buehler views as characteristic of ‘mediating’ Sheikhs coexist with the striving for embodied, personalized encounters with the Prophet. Moreover, this point is not specific to Sufism, as the prominent role of modern media practices in producing embodied and deeply personal and emotional religious experiences is also attested for other contemporary Islamic traditions (Hirschkind, 2006).

8 In na’t poetry the personal encounter with the Prophet is often expressed in terms of traveling to Madina, widely considered the Prophet’s favorite city. See the examples in Eisenlohr (forthcoming).

9 Here ‘arbitrariness’ is to be understood in the Saussurian sense of conventionality.

10 Perhaps most famously in the classic Mughal-e azam (Asif, 2005[1960]).

11 This characterization of sound reproduction and audiovisual media as being predisposed to capture singularity contrasts with Benjamin’s well known argument that works of art lose their singularity and therefore their aura because mass reproduction turn works of art into mere tokens of a type (Benjamin, 1968).

12 The notion that greater frequency of exchange often goes hand in hand with greater abstraction of the values exchanged is also supported by anthropological and sociological theories of money. This is, after all, one of the conclusions of Simmel’s Philosophy of Money, which credits the ever-increasing exchanges mediated by money with a broad range of cultural transformations, most of all the growing reduction of interpersonal relationships to generalizable, quantifiable functionality (Simmel, 1990[1900]; see also Frankel, 1977: 12–13, 25). Parry and Bloch’s distinction between long-term transactional orders concerned with the reproduction of social or cosmic order and a sphere of impersonal, instrumental short-term transactions dominated by the principle of individual competition also points in a similar direction (Parry and Bloch, 1989: 23–4, 29). This is because the latter sort of transactions, which are often associated with monetary exchange, occur much more frequently than the former. This suggests a link between greater frequency of exchange and greater semiotic abstraction and typification of the values exchanged, such as is evident in most uses of money.
References

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