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The Hindu Thaipusam festival is the most important religious event of the year for Singapore's Indian minority population. However, drumming in the Thaipusam procession has been illegal since 1973. For some Hindus, this creates a sense of imminent danger, as drumming is believed necessary to sustain the trance of devotees undergoing penance. Such tensions culminated in 2015, when plain clothes policemen forcibly halted Hindu drummers during the Thaipusam procession, and a brawl ensued. In this article, I describe the long history of controversy surrounding Hindu drumming in Singapore, which goes back to the nineteenth century. Surveying the influence of liberal notions of the relations between sacred sounds, public space, discourses on heritage and postcolonial governmentality, I argue that the 'soundscapes of modernity' are not always homogeneous but may be fragmented and pluralistic, involving contestations over the efficacy of sacred sounds and debates on where they should be located on the streets of today's ethnically diverse global cities.

Keywords: Singapore; Sound Studies; Indian Music; South Asia; Southeast Asia; Urban Space

Pluralising the Soundscapes of Modernity

Scholars working in sound studies have produced a holistic notion of the word 'soundscape', taking it to denote how 'the individual and society as a whole understand the acoustic environment through listening' (Truax 2001: xviii).¹ Focusing on

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¹Here I do not survey the voluminous writings in sound studies but rather consider 'contestation' as a theme (and absence) in writings on soundscapes. Examples of what I call the 'holistic approach' include Corbin (1998),

sound reproduction technologies in modern life, writers on urban soundscapes have produced ‘ethnographies of emplaced auditory landscapes and media usage, leading to an understanding of media and the construction of the urban landscape as mutually constitutive of each other’ (Samuels et al. 2010: 336).² The problem with this holistic approach is that it has difficulty registering how a soundscape can be a contested affair, forged through debates about what sounds are allowed when and where, and the legal status of sounds that serve to strengthen or threaten the dominant sonic ethics.³ Of particular concern to me here is Tripta Chandola’s (2012: 392) assertion that sound studies has largely refrained from engaging with writings that attend to ‘the discourse of structural othering and violence on the urban poor and marginalised in the transforming cities of Asia’, for it is by attending to how sound is used in processes of structural othering, I suggest, that contested soundscapes become easily recognisable.⁴

This article is an attempt to theorise some processes that facilitate contestations over the place of sound—particularly sounds marked ‘religious’—in the streets of ethnically diverse global cities. In particular, I explore a long history of debate in Singapore about the appropriateness of Hindu sounds in Singaporean public space. Focusing on the controversies (from the nineteenth century to the present) that have surrounded processional drumming in the most important Hindu festival in Singapore—the annual ritual procession called *Thaipusam*—in what follows I explore colonial and postcolonial entanglements between liberal notions of the relations between culture, community, religion, sound and space, on the one hand, and Hindu investments in sound as a means to sustain trance in the midst of public displays of penance on the other. I consider how colonial and postcolonial governmentality has regulated Hindu sounds and bodies in the name of liberal tolerance and respect for the shared (and presumed secular) nature of public space, and in turn I show that such restraints have been enacted when Hindu sounds are heard to disrupt the everyday workings of capital (including development projects), by straying from ethnically demarcated communal places (like Hindu temples and Singapore’s Little India district) into ethnically shared public spaces.

I should stress up front that my narrative is more complex than that of a simple binary between a secularising governmentality and Hindu sonic efficacy. In what

Hirschkind (2006) and most of the essays in Born (2013). The canonic term is Steven Feld’s (1996) ‘acoustemology’, the ‘aural cues’ that ‘triggered distinctive ways of knowing and navigating an environment’ (Fisher 2014: 8).

²See Kelman (2010) for a consideration of the ‘uses and abuses’ of ‘soundscape’ following Schafer’s (1977) canonic theorisation of the term. As is well known—and not unlike the British colonists I write about further later in this article—Schafer holds a negative attitude toward urban sounds, confusing ‘cacophony with social disorder or, worse, inhumanity’ (Sterne 2003: 342), since he views the ‘ideal acoustic community’ as a small-scale, almost-urban society.

³This is not to say that scholars have failed to attend to the uses of music to promote violence; my interest here is in the structural conditions that produce an ethical ambiguity about certain public, sacred sounds.

⁴Chandola’s (2012: 391) ethnography of sound in a Delhi slum-settlement explores how the ‘the preference given to one kind of organisation of sounds over another is also reckoned to be a *de facto* reality, which is thus considered apolitical’. For work on contested soundscapes that dovetails with mine, see Anjara and McFarlane (2011) and White and White (2004).

follows I describe how Singapore's Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), the organisation that represents Hindu interests to the Singaporean government, has played a role in debates on Thaipusam by showing an intolerance towards certain kinds of Hindu drumming within Hindu temples—in the following I will show this to be a case of caste politics. It bears mentioning, too, that those who work in the Singaporean government—many of them Chinese, and some of them Indian and Malay—do not always or necessarily think of public space as secular, even though the laws that they tend to support do promote the legalisation of a liberal notion of secular and shared public space. Thus my argument is that ethical systems—in this case those emanating from diverse strands within Singaporean Hinduism, authoritarianism and liberalism (defined here as an attitude applied through laws that regulate public space)—articulate how the secularisation and maintenance of sacred sounds in public space have proceeded in global modernity.⁵

A society's soundscape, then, may consist of multiple, overlapping soundscapes, containing contrasting definitions of sonic efficacy, of the characteristics and possibilities for sacred sounds in public space, and of personhood (as well as differing assumptions about how persons are thought to relate to sacred sounds). Rather than just assume that public space is disenchanted, in this article I provide a historical narrative which shows how liberal notions of the relations between culture and ethnically-defined spaces (such as Singapore's 'Little India' neighbourhood) have been used to legitimise the view that Hindu sonic efficacy is not really efficacious but actually ethnic heritage, thus legalising secular perspectives on public space while delegitimising the work of Hindu processional drummers. A crucial component of the soundscapes of modernity, I contend, are the convergences and conflicts between governmental understandings of what sacred sounds can do and notions articulated by religious traditions that come to be defined in the public sphere as ethnic cultural heritage.

Writings that take the long view on the history of relations between sound and politics (e.g., Attali 1985)⁶ and music and community (including Ranciere 2004)⁷ have considered the efficacy of ritual musics to have died out in modernity, and thus are not useful for registering how enchanted sounds engage with (neo)liberal governance.⁸ Scholars working in South and Southeast Asian Studies have attended

⁵By 'secularisation' I mean the ways in which public spaces in modernity have become perceived as naturally disenchanted, thus influencing the legal determination of sacred sounds as 'festivity' rather than as efficacious ritual technologies. The dichotomy between interpretations of religion as 'symbols' and as 'practices' has been discussed extensively by Asad (1993).

⁶Attali defines music history as developing in four stages, the first of which he calls 'sacrificing'—a period characterised by ritual music, oral tradition and festival, which supposedly died out around 1500 AD, with the advent of printed music and the development of the musical marketplace. *Urumi melams* (drum ensembles) would seem an anachronism to Attali.

⁷For Ranciere, 'The *representative regime* is an artistic system of Aristotelian heritage that liberates imitation from the constraints of ethical utility and isolates a normatively autonomous domain within its own rules for fabrication and criteria of evaluation' (Ranciere 2004: 4, translator's introduction; original emphasis). The language of liberation here is a derisive one, which assumes the ethical utility of music has been superseded, and that this is a good thing.

to the politics of processional musics, but such writings rarely situate processional sounds through a language that respects their function in ritual.⁹ My work here brings this literature into dialogue with a different set of writings, namely those in anthropology and South Asian Studies that show how the differential regulation of populations in postcolonial locations occurs via legal disputes over the regulation of the senses.¹⁰

In her work on indigenous North Indian capitalism (family-run and caste-owned businesses) in the colonial period, Ritu Birla argues that political liberalism, a philosophy promoted by colonial law and British attitudes from the late eighteenth century, determined Indian modernity ‘and its capitalist genealogy’ as ‘the staging of the distinction between public and private as a distinction between economy and culture’ (2009: 3).¹¹ Politics and economics were assigned to the ‘public’ spheres of governance and the market, while community formation, culture and the arts (the latter two developing more fully as concepts in the later nineteenth century) were assigned to ‘private’ domains such as households and temples. Andrew Sartori (2008) defines ‘liberalism’ as beginning in the British colonies with the Bengal Renaissance (in the late eighteenth century) and ‘culturalism’ as a different phase that emerged after European theorisations of culture in the mid-nineteenth century—although he stresses that these two distinct ideological movements frequently overlapped. While ethnomusicologists have tended to focus on the transformation of musics during the ‘culturalist’ phase by considering how traditions were classicised and turned into ‘national’ music cultures (e.g., Allen 1997; Bakhle 2005; Weidman 2006), in this article I consider the effects of liberalism, which (through its formulation of the relations between community, sound, culture and private spaces) set the stage for culturalism and continues to persist with it.

Rather than define Hindu processional musics as efficacious offerings to the gods and as technologies for personal, ethical transformation, British colonial officials described such musics as ‘harmless tom-toming’, ‘noise’ and expressions of religious devotion (see Roberts 1994: 25).¹² Sacred musics were perceived as emerging into public space after their constitution in communally defined private spaces; consequently, restrictions on public sacred sounds were understood as matters of public safety that would presumably have little effect on religious practice. A series of

⁸Theorists have tended to assume the move towards artistic autonomy as a totalising, global rupture (see, for instance, Habermas [1962] 1989: 39).

⁹For example, the final chapter of Anthony Reid’s (1988) classic *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680* is called ‘Festivals and Amusements’, and describes music as a kind of gratuitous epiphenomenon to the ritual process.

¹⁰For discussions of the role of sound recordings in land disputes, for instance, see Povinelli (2002) and Seeger (2008).

¹¹The canonic philosophic formulation of this idea is John Rawls’ (2005) ‘veil of ignorance’ and ‘original position’: that decisions affecting policies should be made under pretences of equality, without taking into consideration communal biases and affiliations (see Kymlicka 1995).

¹²Tamil Hindus do have a discourse on devotion to a personal god (*bhakti*), a ‘religious atmosphere [in which] devotees are linked with their god and with one another by a bond of “shared” love and grace’ (Cutler 1987: 1); however, *bhakti* is not just an interior or private state but is shown through public acts, like penance.

Noise Ordinances (the major one was in 1865) determined when and where musical processions could move in the British Empire, influencing the legal apparatus (a procession license) through which they were sanctioned (for work on this issue in Ceylon, see Roberts 1994; Sykes *forthcoming*). Such regulations contradict the importance of 'circulation' to the Enlightenment and liberalism, which as Brian Larkin attests 'was central to the idea of a world freed from the fixed hierarchical relations of feudal society ... a concept which represented a world in movement and open to change' (2008: 58). The reason this contradiction developed, I suggest, is that some heard (and continue to hear) Hindu processional drumming as crossing the chasm between public and private, and thus as being an unnecessary disruption of the public marketplace by communal culture. This is a narrative continued by Singapore's postcolonial government, which (as I describe below in detail) has enforced a ban on drumming in street processions since 1973. The result, which I document in full, is that in both the colonial and postcolonial periods the attempt to quiet drumming in the name of orderly silence has fomented a disorderliness that produces and is associated with noise.

In sum, I am not simply making the point, advanced by Charles Taylor (and critiqued by Talal Asad), that 'though secularism emerged in response to the political problems of Western Christian society in early modernity ... it is applicable to non-Christian societies everywhere that have become modern' (Asad 2003: 2). Rather, I suggest with Asad that 'the distinctive feature of modern liberal governance ... is *neither* compulsion (force) *nor* negation (consent) *but* the statecraft that uses "self-discipline" and "participation," "law" and "economy" as elements of political strategy' (2003: 3; original emphasis). The ban on drumming in street processions I describe here is a kind of force, but what follows demonstrates that a legal liberalism towards sound in public space is not an anathema to the Singapore government's authoritarianism; rather, it allows the government to make authoritarian decisions via the argument that such decisions are made in the name of liberal tolerance. A secular attitude is embedded in these regulations because the law does not consider drumming to be a religious requirement of Hindu festivals.

The postcolonial Singaporean government's attitude towards public festivities reflects what Daniel Goh (2013: 229) calls 'the ambivalence of a developmental state embracing neoliberal globalization and a consumption society emerging from bureaucratic authoritarianism'. The postcolonial state's interventions into public festivity go back to the time of Singapore's independence from Malaysia (1965), after the country witnessed Chinese-Malay riots break out amidst a Malay procession honouring the Prophet Mohammed's birthday in 1964. Goh (2013: 230) remarks that the state's multi-racialist policy that emerged after the 1964 riots 'was not only driven by the idealism of creating a hybrid national culture, but also by the fear that, left alone, pluralism would naturally and inevitably degenerate into racial conflicts.' This nationalistic emphasis on hybridity was transformed during a second phase (from the 1980s) in which the state began emphasising the distinct heritage of the country's ethnic

groups—the ‘CMIO’ categories (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other; the last category is usually taken to refer to Eurasians). From roughly 2003, the state has turned towards a ‘third phase of multiculturalism,’ by attending to how:

as globalisation brings with it cultural diversity, cross-cultural understanding and dialogue are encouraged to foster hybrid Singaporean identities that would bind Singaporeans in a lattice of shared cultural links, grounded in the heartland and spreading out into the cosmopolitan world. (Goh 2010: 19)

Drawing on Bakhtin’s notion that carnivals, by separating spectators from participants, turn potentially disruptive events into spectacles, Goh (2011, 2013) shows that the major annual Singaporean carnival, the Chingay Festival, was ‘purified’ from its Chinese-Malay syncretic religious origins into a nationalistic display of ethnic and racial harmony, following its revival by the state in 1973. Tong Soon Lee has shown that it was right after this (between May and July 1974) that the government and local Islamic organisations decided to redirect the loudspeakers of mosques inward, as part of a general ‘noise abatement campaign’ (Lee 1999: 89).¹³ As we will see in the following, the legal distinction between Chingay and Thaipusam is a key source of contention for the debate on drumming in Thaipusam: there is a ban on foot processions and music in religious festivals in Singapore; and because Indians are allowed a foot procession in Thaipusam, those in favour of the ban on music note that Indians are given special treatment compared with other communities. In what follows, I show that the issue of ‘sonic enchantment’—the idea that sound actively causes the fulfilment of religious requirements in Thaipusam—is perhaps the major source of contention between those in favour of music in the festival and those against. It begs us to question what role the discursive and legal disenchantment of sounds plays in the formation of carnivals as non-subversive spectacles.

Today, Indian heritage in Singapore is associated with the area around Serangoon Road, which by the early 1980s was already known as Singapore’s ‘Little India’ district (Siddique and Purushotam 1982; Sinha 2011). As with Little Indias elsewhere (such as in Kuala Lumpur, Malacca and Penang), Serangoon Road and its surrounding streets are full of all things Indian, from saris and spices to CDs of Indian music and vegetarian restaurants; it is also a site where festivals like Deepavali attract foreign tourists, government officials and devotees from across the island’s Hindu communities (Sinha 2011: 46). The area has undergone strategic conservation and ‘thematic planning’ since the late 1980s, as (for instance) 900 shop-houses were torn down or renovated in 1989 and a ‘core’ area was identified and targeted for conservation (Chang 2000: 41). The increased emphasis on Indian heritage, Chang notes, caters to tourists and has led to ‘a decline in traditional retailers and outlets as emphasis is focused on new and economically viable merchants whose links to Little India are often spurious’

¹³It is notable that the use of the radio to broadcast the call to prayer, which Lee says went some way towards alleviating Muslim concerns about the redirection of the loudspeakers (1999: 92), is not an avenue open for Hindu processional musics. For broader discussions on the morality and geographies of popular musics in Singapore, see Kong (1995, 2001, 2006).

(2000: 41).¹⁴ The neighbourhood remains associated in the popular imagination, however, with the thousands of temporary (largely South) Indian workers who come to Singapore on short-term and long-term contracts, who live in or congregate in Little India. On 8 December 2013, a riot erupted in Little India, the first Singapore witnessed in 40 years: an Indian was killed by a bus and roughly 400 Indians (mainly temporary workers from Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) pelted the driver with objects, turned police cars on their side and destroyed 25 emergency vehicles.¹⁵ The incident, which is outside the scope of this article, brought into Singaporean consciousness the marginalisation of South Indian migrant workers, their often squalid working and living conditions, and the resentment such workers sometimes feel towards Singapore at large (and receive from some Singaporeans).¹⁶

The difference between the public sphere and the ethnicised neighbourhood, I contend, is construed as a split between public (secular) and private (communal, sacred) space, with Hindu culture discursively positioned as located in an interiorised Little India and in places of worship located both inside and outside the neighbourhood—locations that processions are assumed to emerge out of. Isabelle Nabokov explains why this liberal view misunderstands Tamil Hindu processions:

a Tamil ritual procession to an ‘outside’ place does not exactly correspond to a ‘passage’ out of the community as implied in Van Gennep’s (and Turner’s) model, nor to a ‘sacred’ place apart from the ‘profane’ as suggested in Durkheim’s view of religion (1965). Quite the contrary, it actually announces a movement toward a ‘public’ realm. (2000: 8)

The Tamil word for god (*katavul*), she notes, ‘means “crossing,” “exceeding,” or “surpassing,” suggesting that the religious experience is always conceived as a form of intersection, a point of contact and coalescence between two domains or more of experience’ (Nabokov 2000: 8). Consequently, she says,

Participants’ return to an ‘inside’ place, be it a temple or a household ... does not announce a reincorporation into society, as in Van Gennep’s model of the ritual process, but rather an interiorization or individuation of the ‘public’ world. This is evident by the fact the procession back home does not start until participants solemnly ‘promise’ to live up to the newly acquired identities and their concomitant roles and obligations. The commitment is the culmination of the Tamil ritual process, its *raison d’être*. (Nabokov 2000: 10)

What follows, then, is a theorisation of colonial and postcolonial negotiations between diverse publics with differing ideologies about the ethical value of sounds in public space. I propose to call such attitudes ‘sonic ideologies’, a phrase I develop out of

¹⁴Increasingly, the neighbourhood is catering to upwardly mobile tourists from India, who come ‘to experience the familiarity of Indian cuisine whilst marvelling at the differences in cultural practices and varying modes of consumption of Indian merchandise’ (bin Yahya and Kaur 2009: 226).

¹⁵*Straits Times*, 13 December 2013. The *Financial Times* (9 December 2013) headline read ‘Riot tarnishes Singapore’s image as place for ethnic harmony’.

¹⁶See, for instance, <http://www.ibtimes.com/riot-little-india-underpaid-migrant-workers-form-foundation-singapores-wealth-power-1503396>. For a discussion of differential citizenship under neoliberal governance, see Ong (2006).

the 'language ideologies' theorised by linguistic anthropologists. Language ideologies are 'sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use' (Silverstein 1979: 193). Kathryn Woolard (1992: 235) suggests that, 'rather than casting language ideology as an epiphenomenon, a relatively inconsequential overlay of secondary and tertiary responses', we start instead 'from the proposition that ideology stands in dialectical relation with, and thus significantly influences, social, discursive, and linguistic practices.' By replacing 'language' and 'linguistic' with 'sound' and 'sonic' in these quotations, a perspective opens up in which soundscapes are understood as constituted by negotiations between those with differing sonic ideologies.

Through liberal governmentality, then, Singaporean Hindu processions are conceptually transformed from a public, sacred offering to the god Murugan into a 'counter-public', through which they facilitate the emergence of the 'audiences' that constitute sovereignty (Rutherford 2012; Warner 2002). By 'counterpublic' I mean that Thaipusam has become 'a third space that collapses public and private spheres' and is thus 'concealed yet communal' (Schwartz 2013: 254). Rutherford argues that 'some would-be sovereigns react not with anxiety but with pleasure to the sense they are being seen' (2012: xi–xii), so much so that 'the play of gazes ... incites and thwarts claims of sovereignty', and thus 'audience infects the very concept of sovereignty: audience is sovereignty's basis and its bane' (2012: 1–2). Debates about ritualised public sounds play a role in forming ethnic relations in Singapore, since they generate the perception that neighbourhoods may be 'transgressed' by ethnicised processional sounds. What I question here is not simply when and how a soundscape becomes ethical or unethical (Hirschkind 2006), but the effects such a legal decision has on perceptions of communal history and experiences of urban living.

Hindu Drumming at an Oil Refinery

Capitalism is continually reterritorializing with one hand what it was deterritorializing with the other. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 281)

In March 2013, I accompanied a drum ensemble (*urumi melam*) to a performance at a Hindu shrine dedicated to the god Muniandi. The occasion would not have been significant were it not for the shrine's unusual location, at a Shell oil refinery on an island off the coast of Singapore called Pulau Bukom. While Singapore is routinely described as a 'city-state', the country owns over 60 islands; although most of these are uninhabited, and some are used by the military or leased out to select businesses. Pulau Bukom is not accessible to the public, and to visit I obtained a security badge at a ferry terminal on Singapore, after which I took a 20-minute ferry ride to the island with drummers and Shell workers. Once on Pulau Bukom, a driver brought us to a large parking lot with the Muniandi temple at one end, dwarfed by oil refining towers behind (Figure 1).

The Shell refinery employs some 6000 workers of various ethnicities and nationalities; on the day of the festival (a Sunday), however, all but two of the people I saw there



Figure 1 Hindu temple (back right) at a Shell oil refinery, Pulau Bukom, Singapore.
Source: Photograph by the author.

were Indians, the vast majority temporary workers from India. Most in the crowd of about 500 wore bright, orange jumpsuits that signalled they were in the midst of a workday; I watched as they said their prayers, lined up for food and ate while listening to the *urumi melam* (Figure 2).

The *urumi* is a drum with a long history in Tamil Nadu, South India, where it is played by Dalits (an outcaste, stigmatised ‘untouchable’ group; Sherinian 2013) in an array of auspicious and inauspicious contexts.¹⁷ The Dalit community remain stigmatised by middle and upper castes due to a belief that interacting with them results in spiritual pollution (Virani 2014), a stigma achieved in part because some traditional Dalit occupations include scavenging dead cattle for drum skins and playing drums at funerals. Middle and upper castes often assume Dalits perform just in inauspicious contexts, but the use of the *urumi* (and the also-stigmatised *parai* frame drum) has been documented on auspicious occasions in India, such as Siva Ratri (Paige 2008; Sherinian 2013). Dalits maintain the power to call forth deities and facilitate possession, but by doing so they reproduce their low status by playing and touching highly stigmatised drums.

The modern history of Indian settlement in Southeast Asia stems from the British colonial plantation labour system of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁸

¹⁷“Dalit” is a self-selected term of oppositional politics derived from a Marathi and Hindi word meaning “broken down” and “oppressed” (Sherinian 2013: 14). The term was introduced in 1928 by Dr Bhimrao Ramjee Ambedkar, the famed activist who worked towards the emancipation of ‘untouchable’ peoples and drafted the Indian Constitution, but it was not adopted widely until the latter half of the twentieth century after Mahatma Gandhi’s term, *harijan* (children of God), was deemed too paternalistic (Sherinian 2013).

¹⁸It is estimated that 80% of the migrant Indian labour force in colonial Malaya were Hindu, with one-third of all Indian migrants coming from ‘the lowest rungs of the Indian class and caste hierarchy’ (Sinha 2011: 33). Indians have been present in Singapore since the beginnings of the British colonial settlement in 1819 (the 1824 census



Figure 2 The *urumi melam* plays (a) while Shell employees (b) serve dinner to other workers. The *urumi* is the drum in the middle; the other two are *thavils*.

Source: Photographs by the author.

More work needs to be done on what drums were used by nineteenth-century Tamil Hindu migrants, but it is safe to say that most wanted to leave the stigmatised *urumi* and *parai* drums behind. This may explain why Hindu festivals in Malaysia and

registered 765 Indians, or 7% of the population; Jain 1970; Sandhu 1969). Today, Singaporean Indians number around 350,000 (9% of the population), of whom 4% are Hindu—numbers that belie the visibility and diversity of the community (Sinha 2011: 31). Tamils remain the majority Indian population, but those from Andhra, Kerala, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and the Punjab are strongly represented (2011: 31).

Singapore during the mid-twentieth century, such as the esteemed Thaipusam festival (which is today the largest annual Hindu gathering in Southeast Asia), featured non-Indian percussion instruments such as timbales, cowbells and ‘found’ objects like bottles and trashcan lids.

Urumi melams came to prominence in Malaysia and Singapore only during the past two and a half decades, and the ensembles (which are different in style and instrumentation from their South Indian counterparts) are found mainly at auspicious events like the Hindu festival described above.¹⁹ The Southeast Asian *urumi melams* typically include male, teenage or 20-something Tamil Hindus who drum with frenetic energy; each group has a singer who uses a loud bullhorn, singing lyrics that praise Hindu deities. The groups are a type of social club, as can be discerned by their tendency to wear shirts with the name of their ensemble (*melam*) embroidered on them.²⁰ Depending on whom you ask, *urumi melams* either are a way to keep Malaysian and Singaporean Tamil boys out of trouble or they are trouble due to their facilitating cliquish, gang-like camaraderie.²¹

Emerging in Ipoh, Malaysia, in the late 1980s, this new type of *urumi melam* spread rapidly throughout the Malay Peninsula, catching on in Singapore by the mid-1990s. The groups are now ubiquitous at Hindu festivals and prayer ceremonies (held in preparation for festivals) at devotees’ homes. In Malaysia, the groups are famous especially for playing at Thaipusam, where thousands of devotees perform acts of penance for the god Murugan, including body piercing and walking on spikes in a street procession (Babb 1974; Sinha 2006, 2010).²² *Urumi melams* play at other Hindu festivals throughout the year as well, including those for Muniandi and Muneeswaran, deities who hold a special prominence in the region (Clothey 2006: 62; Sinha 2006).

From such devotional beginnings, *urumi melams* emerged in other contexts, like school functions and weddings, where the repertoire includes beats drawn from Bhangra and hip-hop. In Singapore, Chinese businesses occasionally hire *urumi melams* to bring them good luck, and I heard one case of a Tamil Hindu who worships the Taoist version of Muneeswaran (Dua ah Pek) by hiring *urumi melams* to perform for the deity inside Chinese Taoist temples.²³ In sum, the *urumi* phenomenon is among the most significant musical developments initiated by Indians since their large-scale migration to Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century; although it draws upon South Asian musical traditions, the genre has developed into a distinctly

¹⁹*Urumi melams* in Tamil Nadu typically include the *urumi*, the reed instrument *nadaswaram* and the drum *pampai*; in Malaysia and Singapore, they tend to feature the *urumi* and two different drums, *thavil* and *kata*.

²⁰One interlocuter suggested that Malaysian *urumi* musicians got the idea of wearing matching shirts from watching Malay *kompang* (percussion) ensembles.

²¹In Malaysia, some *urumi* groups have been known to maintain gang affiliations.

²²While Thaipusam remains popular in Singapore, the largest celebrations are at the Batu Caves (outside Kuala Lumpur), which now draw over 1,500,000 people for Thaipusam each year; also popular are the celebrations in Penang and Ipoh (Collins 1997; Willford 2006).

²³In Malaysia and Singapore, the Taoist ‘Hell Gods’ Di Ah Pek and Dua ah Pek are sometimes conflated with the Hindu guardian gods Muneeswaran and Sangili Karuppar, who are also brothers.

Southeast Asian music, capturing the devotional energies of the region's Tamil Hindu male youths.

Singapore's 'Diaspora Hinduism', Vineeta Sinha (2011: 28) writes, has always been diverse, consisting of 'pluralism and syncretism ... evident in strong attachment to theistic and devotional Hinduism, in the worship of a range of Vaisnavite, Saivite and village deities, venerated in homes and temples, and reflected in the everyday acts and religiosity of practitioners', including 'foundational elements of Sanskritic and "non-Sanskritic Hinduism"'.²⁴ *Urumi* drummers are traditionally affiliated with 'non-Sanskritic Hinduism', and it is this, including the drum's historic stigmatisation and association with Dalits in India, that makes it controversial for some Hindus when the drum is performed inside temples that honour Sanskritic deities.²⁵ When one *urumi* musician drowned a few years ago, drummers told me the boy's parents requested that an *urumi melam* play at his funeral; when a video of that performance made the rounds on YouTube, some Hindus argued vociferously that *urumi melams* should be banned from Agamic temples in Singapore.²⁶ Complaints were voiced especially by the HEB, the administrative body that represents Hinduism in Singapore, which runs four out of Singapore's 24 registered Hindu temples.²⁷ After 2008, *urumi melams* were banned from playing inside Singapore's oldest Hindu temple, the Sri Mahamariyamman Kovil (founded 1827), during that temple's fire-walking ceremony (*timiti*); inside the Sri Thendayuthapani Kovil (the 'Tank Road Temple'), where preparations are held for Thaipusam, signs were hung up warning *urumi melams* not to play there during the festival.²⁸

The group I saw play at the refinery that day, Siva Sakti Muniandy Urumi Melam (Figure 3), plays original tunes and songs culled from YouTube and CDs of popular

²⁴Sinha defines non-Sanskritic Hinduism as 'Hindu religiosity ... associated with rural-based lower caste groups and communities in the Indian context' (Sinha 2011: 63, ft.2). The terms 'Vaisnavite' and 'Saivite' refer to two prominent Hindu sects devoted to Vishnu and Siva, respectively.

²⁵Performances of *urumi* inside temples housing Sanskritic deities are not known in India. Sinha remarks that among Singaporean Hindus:

one encounters ... a desire to remain outside the purview of institutionalized religious boundaries, to practice a style of religiosity that does not need to rely on scarce and guarded resources—such as ritual procedures as dictated by religious texts, the framework of Agamic temples, Brahmin priests and other ritual specialists and paraphernalia. (2014: 132)

Unsurprisingly, such practices—which include *urumi*—are not embraced by the 'supporters of "Official Hinduism"' (Sinha 2014: 132).

²⁶Agamic temples house Sanskritic deities and are constructed according to building codes laid down in canonic texts of Hinduism, called the Agamas.

²⁷The majority of Singapore's 24 registered Hindu temples are in the South Indian style; 23 were registered before World War II (Sinha 2006). There are three categories of temples: Agamic, non-Agamic and a third type Sinha (2011: 59) called 'jungle temples', which include "'labour-lines temples", "estate temples" and "plantation temples"', the latter being 'unnamed religious edifices' that 'have not left any physical traces of their existence, especially in the increasingly urbanizing spaces of Penang and Singapore' (Sinha 2011: 59). *Urumi melams* are often associated with the latter, as we see in the example of the Muniandi shrine.

²⁸Personal communication, *urumi melam* drummers, spring 2013.

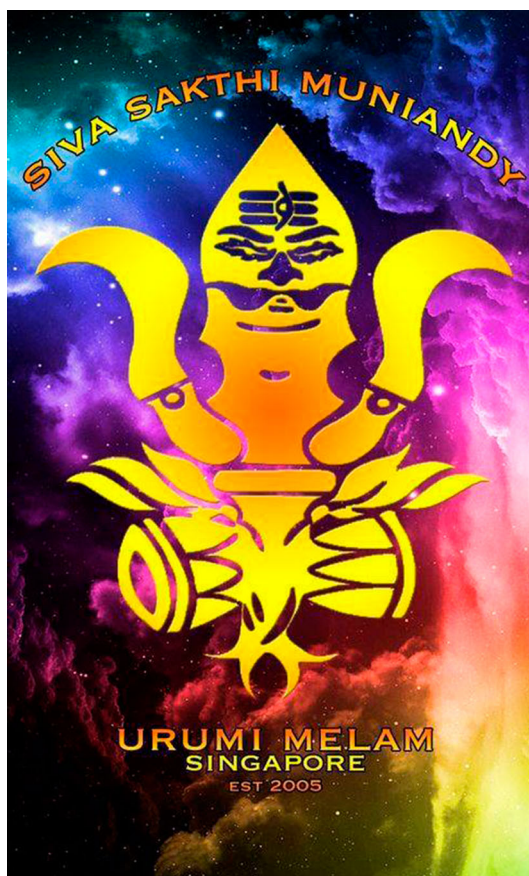


Figure 3 Poster for Siva Sakti Muniandy Urumi Melam.

Source: Courtesy of the artists.

Malaysian groups. At festivals and prayer ceremonies, Siva Sakti has a standard set that begins with a song for Ganesha (the god of good luck and beginnings), followed by songs for Muneeswaran, the goddess Mahamariamman and Murugan; they then conclude with a number of songs for whichever deity is the focus of that particular ceremony. The music is styled to fit the gods' personalities: Muneeswaran receives aggressive songs, while brave Murugan receives tunes sung at a statelier tempo. The music is played for the gods' enjoyment.

As I discussed *urumi* with Siva Sakti at the refinery that day, the musicians spoke of buying their drums in Johor Bahru, the Malaysian town across the causeway; of going to Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur to perform; of how Singapore's Thaipusam has been affected by a ban on drumming in the festival's street procession; and how another ritual for Murugan, Panguni Uthiram, is becoming popular in the wake of such restrictions. Drummers told me that the newfound success of Panguni is due to the fact that the ritual is held in the far north of Singapore, in an area called

Yishun, where it happens away from the Central Business District and the expats who (supposedly) telephoned police in 2010 to complain about the noise of Thaipusam.²⁹ Due to the relative lack of restrictions on Panguni Uthiram, the festival is now drawing comparisons with the riotous version of Thaipusam held annually in Penang, Malaysia, where a party-like atmosphere reigns on account of the devotional music that blares from stereos set up at roadside festival stalls (*pandals*).

All this is to say that Singaporean Hindu musics emerge at the confluence of capital, labour and religion to materialise Malaysian Indian and 'Indian' Indian sonic geographies with long histories in Singapore, in a contemporary scene that is understandable only via reference to Singaporean governmentality and local Hindu politics. The corporate and governmental links between Singapore, India and the West, so clearly displayed that day at the Shell refinery, thus belie an altogether more local musical geography. This means that understanding Hindu processional drumming in Singapore requires learning not just how the music persists through and because of globalisation, but how it does so despite the efforts of two different yet interrelated regulatory regimes (the government and the HEB).

Because scholars have noted the receding of caste in Singapore since the 1970s (Govindasamy 1975; Parameswaran and Sebastian 2007), I was surprised to learn that *urumi* strikes some Hindus as unethical when the genre is performed inside temples for gods that the music honours (interlocutors tended to view this as a caste bias). I was less surprised to hear that the genre's ethicality outside is legally determined by whether it transgresses the boundaries set for it by the state. From the government's perspective, *urumi* that occurs inside, or which happens quietly inside partitions set up for it on temple grounds where the drumming has been authorised, is acceptable, but *urumi* at unauthorised times and places, or which generates calls from weary expats deprived of sleep, is noise pollution. Although it is safe to say that most Singaporean Hindus find *urumi* to be ethically proper, I was struck by the power of the government and the HEB to control when and where the drums are played, to such an extent that drummers must move constantly to avoid the powers that would silence them.³⁰

Such powers were on display at the 2013 Panguni Uthiram, which was held at the most rural place one can imagine in Singapore: the procession began at a makeshift shed surrounded by forest, from which drummers marched to the edge of a field, under elevated train tracks; they then had to halt their drumming as they marched through 'public space' (a street with no buildings or pedestrians, although there

²⁹We will see in the following that stories differ on the reasons for the crackdown on music in Thaipusam.

³⁰My focus in this article is on the ethical debates surrounding one side of a musical dichotomy in the Tamil Hindu musical world, between the musics of folk and Agamic Hinduism. A complete study of the ethics of Tamil Hindu musics in Singapore would place these 'folk drums' (Sherinian 2013) in a dialogical relationship with the auspicious temple musics (*nadaswaram* and *thavil*) performed by middle-caste performers (who in Singapore are largely shipped in from Tamil Nadu, India, on temporary contracts) and with *odhuvars*, the chanters of Saivite Hindu texts (a practice called *Thevaram*). In the next section, I elaborate on how *urumi melams* engage with and produce a Tamil Hindu ethics of sound that contrasts with that provided by the government and the HEB.

were cars), past a construction site, concluding with a restarting of their drumming just outside a temple across from condos. I learned that this route was shorter than the year before, because that route had to be changed since it went directly by condos and the residents complained. It seemed obvious to me that once construction along the current Panguni route was completed—adding still more condos to already burgeoning Singapore—the route would have to change again. *Urumi melams* are always on the run, and development, at least as much as ethicality, conditions Hindu musicality in Singapore.

It was not until 2015, however, that debates about *urumi* erupted into Singaporean consciousness so fully that it became a national issue. During the 2015 Thaipusam celebrations, a group of *urumi* drummers had initially stopped playing once they left the Perumal Temple—as they are legally required to do—but they started playing again to support a devotee in trance. While drumming on Desker Road, a group of plain clothes policemen approached them and forcefully demanded that they stop. An altercation ensued, during which a policeman forcefully pushed a woman to the ground (an incident caught on video, which quickly went viral). Three Indians responsible for hiring the *urumi melam* were arrested and accused of being drunk—a charge they denied.

The national debate that followed (see later) is only the most recent example of a longstanding tendency for drumming to elicit discussions in Singapore about the ethical propriety and legal status of Hindu sacred sounds in public space, particularly in relation to the sounds of the other major Singaporean communities, the Chinese and Malays. I turn now in two directions: first, I move backwards in time to locate debates on Hindu processional drumming at the beginnings of the British settlement in Singapore; and then I move to the debates that followed the ban in 1973, in order to trace continuities between colonial and postcolonial sonic ideologies. Understanding such continuities, I aim to show, is necessary if we are to locate a secularising liberal legality at the heart of contestations over sacred sounds in the soundscapes of modernity.

Noise, Fear and the Ban on Drums in Thaipusam

Indian musics enter the Singapore archive via their inability to be contained by sovereign power. Letters by colonists to newspapers expressed fear that Indian processions (Hindu and Muslim) were disorderly and would result in disaster.³¹ The earliest account I have found is in the *Singapore Chronicle* in October 1833, where a writer says that ‘although no accidents from fire occurred on this occasion [of a procession] ... it is absurd to argue ... that because no accidents have happened, therefore none ever can or will happen.’³² The editor, replying that ‘these processions, obscene as they sometimes are, and often dangerous from the number of torches used, are a

³¹Letters complain about Indian ‘Mohamedan’ and ‘Kling processions,’ the latter being an old term for Indians that could mean Hindus or Muslims, and which has derogatory connotations (Tschacher 2006: 24–25).

³²*Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*, 31 October 1933, p. 3; see also Dairianathan (2005: 211).

serious nuisance to civilized society,' says they must be tolerated because they are 'a religious ceremony with the natives.' While music must be inferred in this example, a writer to the *Singapore Free Press* in 1837 complains about being woken 'during the last six or eight nights by the riotous and disorderly processions of the Mahomedan natives of India who have been celebrating one of their festivals for several days past.'³³ The writer continues, 'when the sound of their tomtoms and villainous noises died away, you merely "swore a prayer or two and slept again"' (*Singapore Free Press*, 20 April 1837: 2). Singapore was a penal colony for South Asians, so Indian sounds in the streets signified criminals were on the loose; this facilitated a discourse where Indians were compared unfavourably with the supposedly more law-abiding Chinese:

Will people in Bengal or in England believe that the Singapore authorities act impartially in permitting 800 or 900 convicts—the offscourings of Indian jails, armed with swords, spears, &c., and infuriated with arrack and bang, to walk in procession through the town and outskirts for successive days and nights ... while the same authorities (of Singapore) during the very same week, refuse to permit a small body of the most wealthy and intelligent of our Chinese merchants, to walk in procession for half an hour in open day ... on the occasion of his giving his daughter in marriage.³⁴

Music was not considered dangerous *per se* but was the annoying sounds that accompanied and were metonymic for danger. In 1849, a writer complained that a 'Kling procession' had lasted 'nearly the whole of the week', as 'the inhabitants of our commercial town were annoyed by bands of Klings who under grotesque, and sometimes disgusting disguises were not only walking through the streets, but also impeding business by an infernal music and a public begging ...'.³⁵ Describing the secret societies that had gained sway in the Straits Settlements, the writer felt police should 'put down in writing, the roads or streets through which at a given hour, the sectarians of the red flag were to pass, point out other roads or streets for those of the white flag, of the Convicts &c.' (*Singapore Free Press*, 30 November 1849: 2). In 1846, the *Straits Times* reported that 'Malay and Kling bands' played 'alternately on a variety of musical instruments' at a Chinese funeral procession for the head of a secret society, the Hueys.³⁶

The difficulty for the English East India Company was to appear as though they were not meddling in native religions when there was a need to keep order in the streets. As Sinha (2011: 80) puts it, the British wished to enact 'a careful and cautious mix of neutrality, tolerance and non-interference ... [but] ideals of religious tolerance and non-interference could not be translated into practice without alienating and

³³*Singapore Free Press*, 20 April 1837: 2.

³⁴However, the Chinese were not immune from complaints by British residents about their festivals (DeBernardi 2004).

³⁵*Singapore Free Press*, 30 November 1849: 2.

³⁶*Straits Times*, 14 March 1846: 2.

offending sensibilities of some party—either at home or in the colonies.³⁷ In 1856, the English East India Company (which then ruled the Straits Settlements from Madras Presidency in South India) introduced ‘a new police act that gave the police comprehensive powers to control processions, to prevent obstruction in the streets, and to license public performances of music’ (DeBernardi 2004: 44). The Chinese in Penang resisted these efforts (DeBernardi 2004; Sinha 2011: 67). The law was enforced in 1857 in Singapore, when drummers were arrested for blocking the road outside the Nagore Dargah (a Sufi shrine).³⁸ The Singapore and Penang governments cracked down on the annual Muslim *muharram* processions during the 1860s, which by then had grown into sites of competition between secret societies, the ‘White Flags’ and ‘Red Flags’, who battled over ritual honours (Tschacher 2010: 199).³⁹ Music appears not to have been at the centre of those disturbances, but the *muharram* celebrations of Tamil sepoys in Penang developed into a Malay comical theatre genre (involving music) called *boria*, groups that played a role in the Penang Riots of 1867 (Fujimoto 1988).

What emerged as central to colonial regulations of processions was the ‘permit’, a document that named which instruments were allowed, what roads processions could go down and where musicians should remain silent. For instance, a 1922 permit (Sanmugam 1996: 71) shows a request for ‘3 drums, 2 cymbals, no gong, 2 flutes, no fiddles, no banners, 20 lanterns, not cloth pieces’; written in red ink at the bottom is the line ‘No music is allowed within 200 yds of any churches’, and in print underneath that it says ‘Caution:—No music allowed in the Roads and Streets which are underlined in red ink and only the musical instruments mentioned allowed’ (Sanmugam 1996: 71). As I remark elsewhere about Ceylon (Sykes forthcoming), where poles were set up near churches and mosques to show Sinhala Buddhist drummers where they should be quiet, noise is as much about placement as decibel level (the need for red ink and underlining shows that attempts to tell musicians where to be quiet often failed).⁴⁰ The most widespread violence in Ceylon’s colonial period erupted due to anger over the placement and presence of processional sounds (Roberts 1994; Sykes forthcoming).

Indian processions in Malaya may have irritated and been a threat to order, but they were peaceful compared with those in Ceylon. In Malaya, orderly processions commanded the audience of the sovereigns by greeting the representatives of royalty, such as during Queen Victoria’s Golden and Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 1887 and 1897, which featured processional musicians from the island’s main ethnic groups (Figure 4).⁴¹ In 1914, the *Indian Emigrant* described a ‘torchlight procession’ on the Indian holiday of Navarathri that went through the ‘principal thoroughfares of

³⁷For instance, a writer in 1856 describes a ‘Kling procession’ as a ‘monster nuisance’ that had to be tolerated because ‘the Chinese processions having been permitted it would be hard to deny a similar request to other classes of the population’ (*Straits Times*, 19 February 1856: 4).

³⁸*Singapore Free Press*, 26 February 1857.

³⁹Tschacher (2010: 198) describes a disturbance that occurred in Singapore’s *muharram* procession in 1864.

⁴⁰As we can see from my narrative above, a locative definition of noise continues to exist in Singapore, as the 2013 Panguni *urumi* drummers were forced to perform in a remote field.

⁴¹*Singei Nesan*, 27 June 1887: 2.

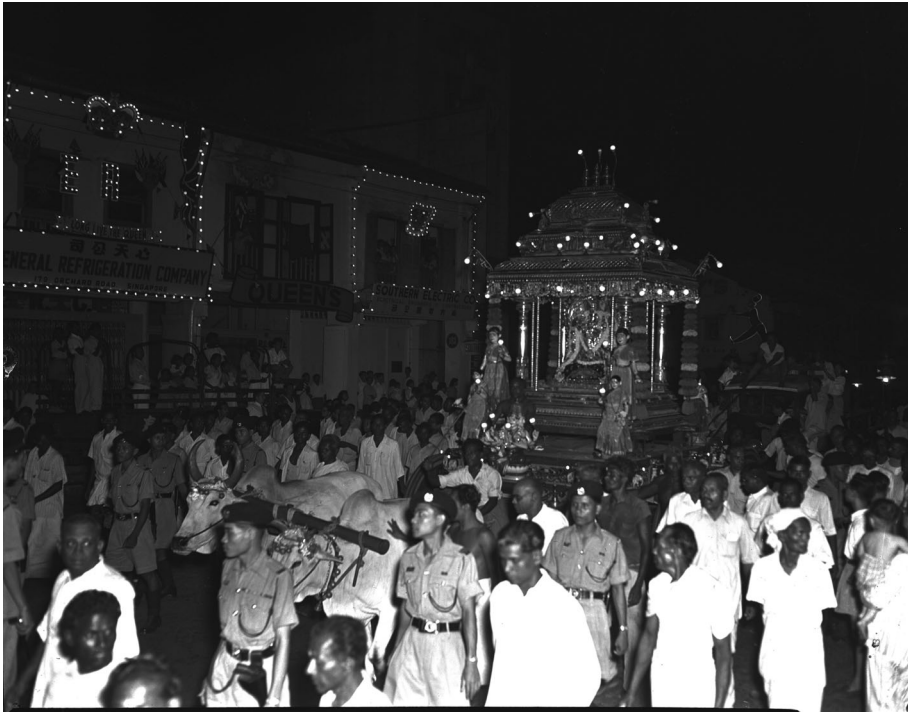


Figure 4 Singaporean Hindu procession celebrating the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, 1953.

Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts.

the town' and was a success 'despite the hard times as a result of the war' (World War I).⁴² Orderly Indian sounds were metonymic for stability as much as their disorderliness signified danger.

Governmental intrusion into music in Thaipusam goes back at least to 1896, when police confiscated instruments used for the festival from the Tank Road temple. Alagappa Chetty, 'head of the Chetties and trustee of the Temple', was arraigned (charges later dropped) for 'using music contrary to the terms of a license granted' (Dairianathan 2005: 175).⁴³ Intrusion into the festival became lasting, however, only from 1973, when Singapore's nascent postcolonial government (the People's Action Party [PAP]) enacted a ban on music in all religious processions. The reason given was that music slows processions down, encouraging dancers to occupy the road, creating traffic jams.⁴⁴ Indians were not expected to complain since they were given special treatment: while foot processions were not allowed for the religious ceremonies of other communities, Indians were allowed three foot processions—Thaipusam,

⁴²*The Indian Emigrant*, August, 1914.

⁴³*Singapore Free Press*, 12 February 1896: 3.

⁴⁴*Straits Times*, 24 March 1981: 9.

Panguni Uthiram and Thimithi (fire-walking ceremony). All other processions would have to use vehicles.⁴⁵ According to Lily Kong (2008: 304), the government began regulating processions at this time to avoid a replay of the riots that had broken out between Malays and Chinese on 21 July 1964, when a Malay procession passed through the predominantly Chinese Kallang area.⁴⁶

One can imagine the HEB would have been up in arms about these restrictions on Hindu festivity, but they supported the ban, citing concerns that youths had been turning Thaipusam into a 'comic opera' and 'carnival'.⁴⁷ In 1979, the HEB announced before Thaipusam that it would be on the lookout for "deviant" groups in order to uphold the sanctity of the festival' (Sinha 1987/88: 127). The *Straits Times* reported that 'One irate Hindu complained that some supporters of the kavadi bearers were turning the day into a song and dance carnival "very much like those in Harlem or Tahiti."' ⁴⁸ A list of 'dos and don'ts' was published that included a prohibition on dancing by those accompanying *kavadi* carriers and 'a ban on musical instruments alien to the festival, such as bongos and drums.'

In January 1981, Indians appealed the ban but were rejected 'on the grounds that the ban applies not only to Hindu religious processions but also to those of other religious groups and that police experience before 1973 showed that en route music aggravated traffic congestion.'⁴⁹ Here the PAP revived the British colonial sonic ideology: what was important was not how each community's sounds are treated, but that each is treated equally. An editorial in the *Straits Times* escalated tensions by marking a difference between 'religious' and 'cultural' festivals:

The ban against the playing of musical instruments applies to ALL religious processions but cultural processions, such as the *zhuang yi* (chingay), are exempted. Police spokesman Supt Au-yong Weng Wah said: 'The distinction between religious and cultural processions must be made.'⁵⁰

⁴⁵Lawrence Babb (1974: 111) reports that a foot procession was not allowed during the Sri Mariamman fire-walking (*timithi*) ceremony in 1972: 'The Central Police Station informed the temple that a chariot procession permit only be issued on conditions that:—the procession shall be a vehicular one—no foot-procession permitted.—no stops were permitted enroute.—no music was permitted enroute.'

⁴⁶If this were so, it seems unlikely it would have taken nearly ten years to enact the ban on music and foot processions. I think it more likely the restrictions were part of a hardening towards many kinds of public behaviour during the 1970s, for which the Singapore government became internationally known.

⁴⁷*Straits Times*, 5 February 1979: 9. The irony is that, as we saw earlier, a carnivalesque atmosphere was common in Indian processions throughout the nineteenth century: it was the idea that Hindu festivals were originally solemn affairs that was new.

⁴⁸*Straits Times*, 5 February 1979: 9. *Kavadi* ('burden') is a structure carried by devotees in festivals that honour Murugan, which symbolises the burden a devotee wishes to vanquish through penance. Today they are often elaborate constructions with flashing lights, icons representing Murugan (such as his spear or a peacock) and with metal rods that pierce the devotee's torso.

⁴⁹*Straits Times*, 24 March 1981: 9.

⁵⁰*Straits Times*, 20 January 1981: 11. One can imagine Indian readers being upset at the double standard: Chingay is an annual parade that, despite its incorporation of major Singaporean ethnic groups, is dominated by Chinese; yet by the early 1970s, Thaipusam had already developed into a cultural display of Indian identity and was not only a religious ritual (the HEB acknowledges as much in their worries about how the festival is perceived by others). The comparison with Chingay, we will see, erupted as well in the controversies about the 2015 Thaipusam.

The article compares Indians unfavourably with those who participate in other public events, stating: 'Organisers of funeral bands and lion dance performers undertake not to play their instruments en route before being given a permit.' As in the colonial period, Indians were being viewed unfavourably with the supposedly more law-abiding Chinese. The writer then refutes rumours going around that 'the police had turned a blind eye to a strict enforcement of this ban over the past three years', noting (with apparent glee) that 'Last year, at Thaipusam, we seized 10 bongos, 17 drums, 8 tambourines and one flute'.

Three days later, Jason Wang wrote in to defend the use of music in Thaipusam, asserting that the festival is a 'cultural' event: 'Supt Au-Yong may be correct in defining Thaipusam as a religious festival but at the same time isn't it one of Singapore's most colourful and spontaneous cultural events of the year?'⁵¹ The writer says that although he is not Hindu, he is (Figure 5):

sure the Kavadi carriers need all the inspiration, the ambience and the support through chants, prayers and even bongo drums to create the rhythm he or she requires to complete the religious walk. *Watching this year's Thaipusam procession is like watching a concert on TV with the volume turned off—or it is like listening to a beautiful choir with cotton wool in my ears.* (Straits Times, 24 January 1981: 21; emphasis added)

Wang concludes by asking, 'Will the authorities please remove the cotton wool from their ears and listen?'

Not to be outdone, the head of public relations for the Singapore Police Force wrote back five days later, reminding readers that Thaipusam is an exception since it is allowed to take place on foot. Responding to the previous writer, the policeman said:

the fulfilment of vows by Thaipusam devotees is a solemn religious act and should not be compared to a TV concert. Neither should it be allowed to degenerate into a carnival through the use of bongo drums as suggested by Mr. Wang.⁵²

By 1986, the silence of Thaipusam had been going on long enough that Indians complained about the 'new normal' (Figure 6). One writer remarked that he has attended:

the Thaipusam festival at the Chettiar Temple in Tank Road every year. No devotional songs, especially kavadi songs, have been played over the temple's public address system for the past few years. I don't know who imposed this ban on the songs but the party responsible obviously does not appreciate the needs of both the penitents and the crowd. The whole festival atmosphere has been robbed of its splendour by the resultant quiet in and around the temple. The relatives and friends of the kavadi bearers have to resort to chanting songs. Trance-like states do not pop out of the thin air. One not only needs faith but also the accompaniment of a fast song and/or music. The ban on drums has compelled the devotees to rely solely on the clappings and chantings of relatives and friends, who are hoarse by the time they reach the temple.⁵³

⁵¹Straits Times, 24 January 1981: 21.

⁵²Straits Times, 29 January 1981: 17.

⁵³Straits Times, 6 February 1986: 18.



Figure 5 Kavadi bearer, Singapore Thaipusam procession, 1984.

Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts.

The writer urges readers to ‘picture a [Chinese] lion dance without the accompaniment of the drums and cymbals. What is a traditional festival without the traditional music?’ Taking the PAP’s dictates to their logical conclusion, he remarks, ‘if the party responsible is not enlightened and kind enough to lift the ban on songs, perhaps the devotees will have to carry along with their kavadies portable stereo sets, headphones and all.’

It was in the mid-1990s that *urumi melams* entered the scene. The drummers must have been a welcome addition to what by all accounts had become a sombre festival. But by 2008 controversy was brewing: as mentioned in my introduction, that is when *urumi melams* were banned from the Sri Mahamariamman Temple during that temple’s fire-walking ceremony. In 2011, the issue of Indian noise and hooliganism



Figure 6 Thaipusam procession, 1990.

Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts.

erupted into Singaporean consciousness again. Two weeks before Thaipusam, the HEB issued guidelines about acceptable behaviour, which Hindus met with approbation: 'The guidelines state, among other things, that shouting, playing of music and the sounding of gongs and drums are not allowed. But the singing of hymns would be permitted.'⁵⁴ A week before Thaipusam, Law Minister K. Shanmugam reminded Hindus that 'such rules have been in existence for 38 years.'⁵⁵ In fact, he said, the guidelines

⁵⁴<http://singapore2025.wordpress.com/2011/01/23/thaipusam-singapore-2011-singaporean-indians-resist-ban/>.

⁵⁵*Straits Times*, 15 January 2011.

were a relaxation, since the singing of hymns was now allowed. Hindus debated whether the HEB felt pressured by the PAP to publish the guidelines, or whether the HEB had its own interests in promoting them.

A common perspective was that since Thaipusam does not go through the 'heartlands' (areas outside the city centre, occupied by ethnically mixed Housing and Development Board [HDB] flats), the new enforcements came into being because expats living near the procession route had complained about the noise during the prior year's Thaipusam.⁵⁶ Others felt the HEB dislikes *urumi* because of the drum's association with polluting funeral rites; yet others felt the HEB was serving the needs of rich North Indian immigrants who recently came to Singapore in droves. Such worries came to a head in an instructive blog post where the writer begins by describing the 2011 Thaipusam as a disappointment:

Everyone who attended the beginning of the event last night felt that the entire thing feels like a pathetic affair with all the life sucked out of it. Looking at the Hindus walking down the road at midnight with no fanfare at all is like looking at zombies roaming from Serangoon Road to Tank Road.⁵⁷

The commentator says he's 'ashamed to be a Hindu Singaporean and seeing all this happen in my lifetime' and that:

Thaipusam and the fire walking ceremony in Singapore is dead. This is because the PAP government thinks Indians here pray to demons and devils ... I pray for God to curse this PAP government, the Indian PMs and Ministers, and the HEB. All these scoundrels don't deserve an ounce of our support, much less our votes.

He concludes that:

the PAP government wants to end Thaipusam and firewalking in Singapore and quash the local Indian Hindu population, probably to replace them with new North Indian citizens who Lee Kuan Yew prefers. Perhaps very soon we will see Hindi replace Tamil as Singapore's fourth National language ... As everyone knows, when Kuan Yew was the PM, the great Sivan temple built by our ancestors was demolished at its original location at Dhoby Gaut and moved to Geylang East.⁵⁸

Comments on the post make comparisons with other religions ('What about all the COUNT DOWN—Christmas, New Year, Lunar New Year (Spring Festival), Hungry Ghost events, etc'), highlight caste bias ('feel sorry for you and all Hindus, the pariahs BRAHIM, and HEB, are the very culprits. The caste system is still on') and compare how much better the situation is in Malaysia ('Walao! Malasia can

⁵⁶<http://singapore2025.wordpress.com/2011/01/23/thaipusam-singapore-2011-singaporean-indians-resist-ban/>. Shanmugam denied this was the reason.

⁵⁷<http://www.tremeritus.com/2011/01/20/pap-has-killed-thaipusam-in-singapore/>. A video made the rounds of drummers who openly defied the ban, performing loudly on timbales to the cheers of the audience until a police officer told them to be silent: <http://singapore2025.wordpress.com/2011/01/23/thaipusam-singapore-2011-singaporean-indians-resist-ban/>.

⁵⁸<http://www.tremeritus.com/2011/01/20/pap-has-killed-thaipusam-in-singapore/>. I consider the moving of Hindu temples in the next section.

even build a cable car for tourists & Hindu devotees’).⁵⁹ Another writer sums up how the ban on music in Thaipusam sows racial disharmony:

The PAP would do well not to underestimate the public perception of its laws on the Indian community and how these very rules could contribute to unnecessary racial tension. The public around the participants (when questioned by the police) remarked that the police would not stop a Chinese lion dance troupe (or a Chingay festival), and next time, the participants should perform a Chinese lion dance during Thaipusam instead.⁶⁰

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the saga is that the online community seemed unaware of the 1973 ban. Music, then, had become prevalent over the prior two decades, undoubtedly because of the emergence of *urumi melams*. But as during the colonial period, Hindu sounds signified a threat to order and required regulation—although, unlike the British, the PAP banned processional drumming in religious ceremonies altogether. Meanwhile, the HEB leveraged their ties to the government and enforced their own sonic ideology, that *urumi* should not be allowed in Agamic temples. The irony is that the collusion of silence provoked the threat of unrest, not the order both parties longed for. In response, *urumi melams* have invested in Panguni Uthiram, a festival that—at the moment of writing—appears to be in nobody’s way.

The 2015 Thaipusam incident produced much of the same chatter about the 1973 ban, but what was significant was the role social media played in turning public sympathy towards the Indians. When some in favour of the ban on drumming mobilised stereotypes about Indians (particularly public drunkenness) as ‘evidence’ that the ban is needed, a public letter written by one of those arrested contested the charge, and this was distributed widely online.⁶¹ The build up of public support for *urumi melams* can be glimpsed by the lambasting faced by Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam when he posted an explanation of the ban on his Facebook page. Although some commentators did come down on the side of the police, many others complained that since the law allows music in cultural but not religious processions, it discriminates against Indians—this is because Chingay (a ‘cultural’ festival) is widely seen as a Chinese event, and Thaipusam (a ‘religious’ festival) is an Indian one. Perhaps the most insightful comment came from a Chinese contributor, who remarked that:

If the religious nature of an event requires a ban on musical instruments, technically Chinese gongs at a Buddhist funeral, bands at an outdoor church event, and Kom-pangs at a Muslim wedding should be banned because of their religious nature, no? I don’t think it’s unfair to call this discrimination, whether or not they possess the privileges of being allowed to carry out foot processions. As a musician, I know that music plays a huge role in culture and religion. To disallow music for an

⁵⁹Real sad that the White Ghost PAPies have turned Thaipusam into a night-time walkathon. Pretty soon, our Hindus will have to go to Malaysia to observe Thaipusam, just like local Chinese go to Malaysia to light firecrackers ...’ (<http://www.tremeritus.com/2011/01/20/pap-has-killed-thaipusam-in-singapore/>).

⁶⁰<http://singapore2025.wordpress.com/2011/01/23/thaipusam-singapore-2011-singaporean-indians-resist-ban/>.

⁶¹<http://www.tremeritus.com/2015/02/07/man-arrested-at-thaipusam-speaks-up/>.

event like this is like a person being put into a coma. He will stay alive but he will not have a life. I hope you can understand why people feel like the Hindus are given unjust treatment. Their privileges do not cancel out disadvantages and restrictions imposed upon them.⁶²

It is worth noting that, amidst such liberal appeals for equality in the treatment of music in religious processions, little emphasis is typically placed on the fact that music is a part of the religious requirements of the foot procession—that music plays an efficacious role, by keeping devotees in trance and allowing them to forget the pain induced by the body piercings they undergo for penance.

Meanwhile, the government and the HEB do not seem to be budging. A few weeks after the 2015 Thaipusam arrests, the Ministry of Home Affairs put out a statement saying that, ‘If such activities are deemed to incite enmity between different communities and races, the Police will investigate and take firm action against anyone responsible for such offences.’⁶³ Once again, the demand for silence in the name of order led to noisy unruliness, which was then interpreted as demonstrating the need for orderly silence.⁶⁴

Indians, Chinese and the Musically Hindu

Unless you have witnessed it, it is hard to imagine the deafening volume of an *urumi melam* performing in an HDB flat, with other residents living above, below and next

⁶²Similar comments to Shanmugam’s post include:

In the video we cannot figure out who are the assailants and victims so much for passer-by. Temple officials and plain clothes policemen and volunteers allowed western instruments to be played at clemenceau avenue much later that night of thaipusam. So where is the fairness in keeping up with the strict rules on music not to be played along the procession route?

Also found are cynical statements like:

This is an extremely weak argument. I had to read this article a few times to find the fairness that you are trying to get across but I found none. I’m utterly disappointed. And anyways, thank you for granting us these 3 foot processions. I’m sure we are extremely grateful for the privilege.

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/k-shanmugam-sc/thaipusam-lion-dances-kompangs-discrimination-against-hindus/829552680424597>.

⁶³<https://sg.news.yahoo.com/why-thaipusam-is-no-longer-a-public-holiday-in-singapore-050043065.html>.

⁶⁴My consideration of debates about the noise of Hindu drumming should be viewed in relation to a number of recent flare-ups in Singapore over the ‘sounds of Others’. For instance, in 2013, a Singaporean-Australian of Chinese descent was issued a warning from the police and subsequently lost her job due to tweeting racial slurs about the Malay tradition of holding weddings on the ‘void decks’ (open ground-floor sections) of HDBs (HDB high-rises); a similar example is the viral YouTube videos of an Indian man singing loudly on the MRT (Singapore’s subway system), which elicited a discussion about public singing, particularly by Indians. Such complaints about sound can be situated in turn amidst a flurry of incidents that exacerbated communal tensions but which caused a backlash of communal tolerance, such as when a recent immigrant from China complained to authorities about the smell of her neighbours’ Indian curry and Singaporeans launched ‘National Curry Day’ as a response. Such events are widely reported online and spread through social media (I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing these events to my attention). See, for instance, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/police-report-filed-against-amy-cheong-over-racist-facebook-post.html>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63NSt9tiY7o>; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/singapore/8704107/Singapores-anti-Chinese-curry-war.html>.

door. This point needs to be emphasised: *urumi melams* play at prayer ceremonies in HDB flats. There is consensus that such ceremonies should go on to about 10:00 p.m.; the entranceway to the flat will be decorated with leaves, the door left open, and family and friends stand or sit inside while others remain on the balcony (a long outdoor hallway leading to other flats and elevators)—you cannot avoid drumming on such occasions. It is remarkable such a tolerance of sound exists in Singapore—it would not happen in apartment buildings in New York or London (the preference for loud recorded music in those cities notwithstanding).⁶⁵

In Singapore, there is an understanding that Chinese, Malays and Indians have their own sounds that transgress HDB architecture. The void decks at the bottom of HDBs ('neutral' spaces intended for communal gatherings) are popular for Malay wedding receptions with *kompang* (drum) ensembles; each year, Chinese drummers perform their lion dance for businesses at the bottom of HDBs during Chinese New Year. HDB living is a modern phenomenon with no links to Singapore's past: there are pre-HDB and post-HDB eras. But the sonic tolerance shown in HDBs has always been a hallmark of communal relations in Singapore. To put this another way, the intrusion of the Chinese-dominated Singaporean government into Thaipusam should not be taken as evidence of anti-Indian sentiment among Singaporean Chinese. Rather, the tolerance shown by all Singaporean communities towards one another's sounds in HDBs is a continuation of the pleasant sonic and other interactions between communities found throughout Singapore's history (Sykes 2015).

A map of Little India in the 1890s, reproduced by Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Purushotam (1982) in their book on the neighbourhood, shows that Indians were not the only ethnic group there at that time. Chinese lived at the Balestier/Lavender end of the street, and the authors document a 'Chinese garden' in the area as far back as the 1840s (Siddique and Purushotam 1982). The 'Race Course' that is now a field north of Race Course Road (another street in Little India) was a site of amusement for Europeans. It was the growth of the cattle trade in the early 1900s by Indian entrepreneur Kader Sultan that definitively turned the area 'Indian' (Siddique and Purushotam 1982). Once the cattle trade declined in the 1940s, the space emerged as a site for 'goldsmiths, garland makers, grocery and textile stores all of whom catered to the everyday needs of the Indian community' (Nafizath [1996] 1997; Sinha 2011: 35). But the neighbourhood remained a site for communal mixing through the first few decades after World War II. In her thesis on Little India, Yeo Chieh Sze cites Rama, the then-owner of the Ananda Bavan Restaurant, as saying that during this period:

There were a lot of Indians living in Wilkie Road, Sophie Road, Niven Road, Short Street and Princep Street in the Selegie side right up to Hindoo Road in the Serangoon side. Syed Alwi, Rowell and Desker Roads were more of a Chinese area. At that time there was a lot of racial intermixing. At Niven road there were a lot of Jews and there were Malays and Sikhs at the Mt. Emily Road. Everybody knows everybody and there was a lot of intermingling. Neighbours became next to relatives. The

⁶⁵I did run across one *urumi melam* that practices in a bomb shelter in the basement of an HDB due to the volume issue.

Chinese speak Tamil and the Tamils speak the Chinese dialects and Malay. An interracial community existed in Serangoon Road. (Yeo Chieh Sze [1998] 1999: 41)

E. Sanmugam (1996: 148) describes interactions between Chinese and Indians at the Mahamariamman temple (founded in 1827), which is located in what is now Chinatown:

The Chinese ... considered Mariamman as the protector and held Her equal to their Goddess of Mercy ... The two Chinese style windows at both sides of the towergate were perhaps built to satisfy the Chinese who wanted to offer their prayers from outside the temple ... The windows which enables the devotee to offer prayers to either Lord Muruga or Lord Rama must also have been designed to blend in with the Chinatown architecture ... Hundreds of Chinese devotees continue to take part in the annual firewalking ceremony [*timiti*]. Limes needed for the ceremonies connected with Theemithi are donated by the Chinese until today. Many of them also have donated generously towards the building fund of this temple.⁶⁶

In 2010, the AsiaOne news site ran a story about two Singaporean Chinese brothers who have performed over 100 concerts of Indian music on sitar and tabla.⁶⁷ Krsna Dasa Tan Guo Ming (sitar) and Radha Govinda Dasa Tan Guo Jun (tabla):

can credit—or blame, depending on how you want to see it—their father Krsna Lila Dasa Tan Thiam Teck for setting them on these paths ... Mr. Tan, who also calls himself Tabla Tan, has trained his sons in Indian classical music and their five-room Bishan HDB flat is a testament to their passion for it.⁶⁷

Krsna won the 2002 National Indian Music Competition while his brother won in the tabla category in 2006. In 2013, the brothers performed at the Kalliamman Temple on Serangoon Road during Navarathri. The brothers should not be treated as an anomaly: over the decades, Chinese have become respected Bharata Natyam dancers (see Figure 7), and they are a common presence carrying *kavadis* in Thaipusam. What the brothers point to is the persistence—in the HDBs—of a communal mixing that has long characterised Singaporean society.

Despite the benefits of Little India for Singapore's Indian community, the neighbourhood now displays, as Robbie Goh (2005: 126) puts it, an 'overt racial targeting and restriction of public space, which stands at some odds both with the notion of the "public" and the labour flows involved in Singapore's ambitions for a globalised economy':

symbolic orders, nuanced and gradated policies, and spatial strategies are used in Singapore to create differentiated and nuanced definitions of race and ethnic cultures, in order to appeal to economic packagings of race while deferring related anxieties within the context of official multiculturalism. (Goh 2005: 140)

⁶⁶Another Hindu temple attracting Chinese Taoist worshippers is the Sri Krishnan Temple on Waterloo Street, which is next door to the Kuan Yin temple (Sinha 2009: 90).

⁶⁷<http://news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20101119-248133.html>.

⁶⁷<http://news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20101119-248133.html>.



Figure 7 Chinese Bharata Natyam dancer, Singapore.

Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts.

How did the situation get this way? C. J. W.-L. Wee remarks that during the country's initial phase of capitalist expansion after independence from Malaysia in 1965,

the PAP regime 'used' parts of the British (and later the American) West—taken as a neutral or indeed universal culture, even as culture was downplayed on the island—as the source of its postcolonial identity and state formation ... This version of the West was used to *detrterritorialise*—to further the loss of culture in relation to social and geographical territory—the various immigrant and local cultures as the means to create a society ready for the jump to export-oriented industrialization. Such detrterritorialisation was facilitated by the fact that the Chinese and Indian sections of the population, being immigrant stock, were already partially detrterritorialised. (Wee 2007: 9; original emphasis)

For Indians, detrterritorialisation occurred through development projects that tore down neighbourhoods which once housed Indian labourers, requiring the elimination

or moving of Hindu temples. For instance, Tanjong Pagar is an area once famous for Indian dockworkers; three temples existed there until the area became known for hip cafes and designer clothing stores, and the temples were moved, leaving little trace of the area's Indian past. Sembawang, in the north, was a rubber estate and home to a naval base from the 1930s that housed Indian labourers; today it consists of ethnically mixed HDBs.

Vineeta Sinha writes that 'my list of "temples that used to be there" grew very long indeed, as did the list of "temples from X location which are now at Y location"' (2014: 135–36). She remarks that 'many of the Hindu shrines I had encountered during field-work throughout the late 1980s no longer exist' (2014: 128). The Thaipusam procession used to run from the Srinivasa Perumal temple to the Sivan Temple and conclude at the Thandayuthapani Temple on Tank Road, but when Orchard Road was developed into Singapore's premier shopping district, a Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station was constructed where the Sivan Temple stood and the temple was moved to Geylang East, shortening the procession. The Sri Vairavimada Kalamman Kovil, built at Killiney Road, was 'relocated two more times before it was finally moved to Toa Payoh';⁶⁸ the Sri Siva Durga temple (founded in 1906) was moved from the Laven-der Street area to St. Georges Road in the 1960s and to its Potong Pasir location in 1982;⁶⁹ the Sri Ruthra Kalamman temple was at Pasir Panjang Road and served Hindus working at the Alexandra Brickworks company, but the site was bought and the temple relocated to Depot Road (consecrated in 1983);⁷⁰ and on and on. Sinha (2009: 92) notes that several Hindu temples have been merged with Taoist ones, such as the 'Hock Huat Keng/Veera Muthu Muneeswarar Temple', which has been at its Yishun location since 1998, where the 'brothers' Tua Peh Kong and Muneeswaran are the primary deities (2009: 92).⁷¹

Since so many of the island's pre-1965 buildings have been torn down, the lack of old buildings outside central Singapore has left younger Indians—most of whom live in HDBs in the heartlands—without a felt attachment to the musical past in the areas in which they live. For such Indians—or so the ones I asked told me—the Indian musical past is an ethnic, religious and ancestral relationship, not one that is sedimented in the structures of their neighbourhoods. In one of the few studies of Indian musics in Singapore, Shobha Vadrevu and Audrey Perera assert that "The story of Indian music in Singapore is the story of the attempt to keep one's cultural roots strong and defined in a multiracial context" (Vadrevu and Perera 2010: 1). In this conception, the story of Singaporean Indian music does not include *urumi melam*; it is a story of free-floating signifiers of the Indian past that are deemed more ethically appropriate: Carnatic classical musics, and the reciting of *Thevaram* (poems of Saivite saints). I do not wish to downplay the importance of these genres, but it is important to recognise that with the disappearance

⁶⁸<http://www.heb.gov.sg/our-subsidaries/temples/19-sri-vairavimada-kalamman-temple>.

⁶⁹http://www.sivadurga.com/Temple_history.aspx.

⁷⁰<http://www.ruthrakali.org.sg/htmlfiles/history.htm>.

⁷¹The musical outcome of merged temples remains to be studied.

of Indian material history, the emphasis on free-floating signifiers of musical heritage ignores a broader history of Indian sonic presence on Singapore—encapsulated by *urumi melams*—while furthering the sense of historic separation of Indians from other communities on the island, through the liberal reduction of Indian heritage to Little India.

Conclusion

My aim in this article has been to show that the registering of Hindu sounds as disruption comes via a liberal sonic ideology that has been used by the Singapore government and the HEB for their own ends. In doing so, however, I have argued that the soundscapes of modernity should not be understood as inherently secular, nor as becoming secular simply through a Weberian rationalisation process ('disenchantment') or governmental mandate. Rather, I have shown that the soundscapes of modernity are inherently plural, and characterised by profound negotiations between governing powers (such as the government and religious authorities), on the one hand, and devotees who remain invested in producing public sacred sounds—efficacious religious technologies in public space—on the other.

The 'answer' to the 'threat' of Hindu musics, then, may have less to do with regulation and more to do with generating respect for sonic efficacy in both the law and in our theorisations of the term 'soundscape'. It is necessary to register the persistence of investments in enchanted sounds in our studies of sonic modernity, I suggest, if we wish to refrain from legitimising the secularising processes that lead to communal disenfranchisement—processes which in Singapore have been enhanced by the destruction of material heritage, and by the promotion of histories of communal difference that emerged in its wake.

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