

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Sonic matters: Singing as method and the epistemology of singing across Bengali esoteric lineages

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Abstract

"Songs are knowledge" (*gāne jñān*) is a recurrent saying among Bauls, Fakirs, Sahajiyas, and other Bengali esoteric and heterodox communities. The sonic dimension of songs is related to cosmogonic vibration, seed, food, and feminine bodily fluids. Singing, requiring breath control and concentration, is associated with yoga. How is the performance of songs simultaneously an embodied way of knowing and an act of indigenous scholarship? Can the epistemology of singing coexist with hegemonic sensory epistemologies in a postcolonial South Asia? This article draws upon a ten-year ethnographic engagement with Bengali-speaking gurus and performers to discuss how singing provides a transformative and anthropopoietic knowledge, rooted in bodily experience and exchanged among performers-listeners to build togetherness in ways that subvert dominant ideologies of relatedness. This article also adopts Bengali understandings of ensounded knowledge to question the ocularcentric and scriptist epistemologies that underlie modern academia. Taking songs seriously as ways of knowing in their own right, I suggest singing as method and using the feelingful body as a research tool, not only for an ethnography that reflects the sensory epistemology of the communities I work with but also as a promising way to decolonize anthropology's epistemic ethnocentrism.

KEYWORDS

sensory epistemology, singing, South Asian religions, decolonization, Kirtan, Baul, Sahajiya, Bengal

Resumen

"Las canciones son conocimiento" (*gāne jñān*) es un decir recurrente entre baules, faquires, sahajivas, y otras comunidades bengalíes esotéricas y heterodoxas. La dimensión sónica de canciones está relacionada con vibraciones cosmogónicas, semillas, alimentos y fluidos del cuerpo femenino. El cantar, que requiere control de la respiración y concentración, está asociado con el yoga. ¿Cómo la interpretación de las canciones es simultáneamente una manera corporeizada de saber y un acto de conocimiento indígena? ¿Puede la epistemología de cantar coexistir con las epistemologías hegemónicas sensoriales en un sur de Asia postcolonial? Este artículo se basa en un involucramiento etnográfico de 10 años con gurús y artistas de habla bengalí para discutir cómo el cantar provee un conocimiento antropopoiético, enraizado en

experiencia corpórea e intercambiado entre artistas oyentes para construir sentimiento de unión en formas que subvierten las ideologías dominantes de relacionalidad. Este artículo también adopta entendimientos bengalíes de conocimiento en sonido para cuestionar las epistemologías ocularcéntricas y escritas que subyacen en la academia moderna. Tomando canciones seriamente como formas de conocer en su propio derecho, sugiero el cantar como método y usando el cuerpo lleno de sentimientos como una herramienta de investigación, no solo para una etnografía que refleja la epistemología sensorial de las comunidades con que trabajo sino también como una forma prometedora para descolonizar el etnocentrismo epistémico de la antropología. [*epistemología sensorial, cantar, religiones del sur de Asia, descolonización, kirtan, baul, sahajiva, Bengala*]

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF SINGING

Studying with Master Moshai was at first very disappointing. I had been living in Birbhum district, in West Bengal (India), for a couple of years, and I had yet to find a guru who could help me to decipher the enigmatic texts of the Sufi-inspired Baul songs of a composer named Bhaba Pagla. I was full of excitement and expectations when someone directed me toward Master Moshai, a retired schoolteacher who was revered as a guru of esoteric Islam (*mārphat*). During the long afternoons spent on the straw mats laid on his mud veranda, I was eager to hear exegeses of these esoteric songs. Instead, he spent most of the time mocking me because I read too many books (“Books will turn you into a *paṇḍit*, a snob erudite, but they will not make you knowledgeable—*jñānī*!”) and reiterating that songs can only be understood by sensing the “thing” (*bastu*) that the songs allegorically describe. To make this point clear, Master Moshai loved to use the mango metaphor:

If you know the thing [*bastu*], the mango, if you have tasted one, you tasted its essence [or flavor: *rasa*], then you can enter in one room and smell that there is a mango somewhere, you get a picture [*chabi*] of it in your mind. . . . If you have not known the *bastu*, then I can go to the other room for a moment, and smear my beard in tamarind paste and date jaggery. Then I come back here and ask you [squeezing his beard like a wet cloth] to chew on my beard, and I can convince you that this is mango.

Fortunately, I did not need to chew Master Moshai’s long silky white beard to understand that he was alluding to a direct relation between sound/speech (*śabda*) and food/seed/substance (*bastu*), between hearing and tasting, and between tasting and knowing. His warnings (“You read too many books!”) were shedding light on an epistemic world by which tasting the *rasa* (essence, juice, esoteric truth) was superior to reading its description. This sophisticated system of sounded knowledge, which carries synesthetic relations linking sound with other senses, the physical body, and the emotional body, is what I refer to as the *epistemology of singing* among Bengali esoteric lineages. Such knowing implies a hierarchy of *knowledges* in which erudition is inferior and dangerous, without foundation in experience and an ethical concern toward building togetherness.

In this article, songs are considered as ways of knowing in their own right. Moving beyond the abstractable semantic dimension of song-texts, I pay attention to the ways singers and listeners consider songs as transformative oral-aural modes of discourse that mobilize senses and substances of the body. I discuss this epistemology of singing by drawing upon long-term ethnographic interaction with Bengali gurus and performers, developed over a decade (2009–2019) of practice and research (or practice-led research) with diverse lineages, located mainly in the Indian state of West Bengal, in western and southern areas of Bangladesh, and in the Indian archipelago of the Andaman Islands, where low-caste migrants from East Bengal have been resettled since the 1947 Partition.¹

Singing is an activity with profound affective, ritual, and pedagogical significance in any human culture. It is hard to think of any human society devoid of “songs”—not intended as “natural” or “universal” traits of verbal expression, but rather as contextually and culturally defined performative modalities of ensounded communication. In this sense, it is disconcerting that the emergence of an anthropology of singing has remained an underexplored and unfinished project. Modern academic scholarship has struggled to include songs as “serious” subjects of social scientific inquiry. In dominant Global North ideologies, songs came to be perceived as commodities produced for the entertainment industry and managed by prosaic show-business enterprises. In the hierarchy of representational models of knowledge, sound has been confined to a marginal position. “In the West, the ear gave way to the eye as the most important gatherer of information,” according to Murray Schafer (1994). Observation—not hearing—and the collection of visual data have been associated in the sciences with the quality of objectivity. Writing became an “immutable and impersonal mode of discourse” tied to rationality (Goody 1968, 44). This epistemological model has been imposed onto other systems of knowing through modalities of colonial and neocolonial domination, and it is still pervasive—which is why I am writing an article, rather than singing it.

However, in numerous South Asian communities, songs can be serious scholarship on their own terms: for Bengali esoteric practitioners, songs are considered paramount ways of acquiring and exchanging knowledge, while doctrinal treatises and sacred scriptures can only provide an inferior kind of indirect and inferential knowledge (*anumān*). As it will emerge in the course of this article, singing as knowing (and knowing through singing) enacts changes in the body of singers/listeners and exchanges (between those bodies) that produce an ethical kind of relatedness that disrupts the dominant ideology of gender, caste, and sectarian affiliation.

The contribution and the provocation of the epistemology of singing is twofold. First, it demonstrates that the choice of postcolonial Bengali practitioners of esoteric religious movements to express and gain knowledge through songs, valuing sound and embodied experience rather than authoritative texts, is neither arbitrary nor neutral. Rather, it is embedded in complex and unequal power relationships in the field of knowledge. Building upon the work of feminist scholars and sensory anthropologists, I situate Bengali esoteric songs in a historical landscape of conflicting epistemologies, where they emerge as radical vehicles of an egalitarian, anthropopoietic, and antipatriarchal ontology. This approach enables me to trace a common sensory epistemology that cuts across regions and connects individual communities of singers/practitioners that are otherwise studied separately.

Second, I discuss singing as knowledge through an ethnography based on singing as method. I propose an ethnographic engagement that transcends participant “observation” and **employs the immersed body as a heuristic tool, expanding the “-graphy” of ethnography and the role of the researcher’s sonorous body.**

Since Bengali practices of knowing by singing question academic practices of data collection and knowledge dissemination, this article also suggests that knowing as/by singing can dialogue with, and perhaps challenge, the power structure of ocularcentric and scriptist epistemologies that have permeated the study of South Asian religions, and modern academia at large.² I argue that singing as method, and ethnographies that use the feelingful body as a research tool, appear as fundamental instruments to provide criticism of the hegemonic hierarchy of (gendered) senses and have a significant decolonizing potential by challenging epistemic ethnocentrism (Nye 2018). I suggest that attention to local sensory elaborations on sound/speech—and how “sonic matters” fit into ways of knowing and experiencing the world—should be part of any anthropological inquiry.

This ethnography of singing among marginalized Bengali-speaking performers and listeners contributes methodologically and theoretically to the growing field of sensory and sensuous anthropology (Classen 1991; Van Ede 2009) by using singing as the key to unravel the culturally specific and socially regulated ways in which the senses are perceived, gendered, experienced, and combined as simultaneous shapers and bearers of knowledge. **Building upon previous works on senses and substances in the anthropology of South Asia (particularly Lambert 2000; Pinard 1991), but integrating the centrality of sound in the ethical and epistemic frames of South Asian religious communities, I transcend the otherwise predominant focus on vision (*darśan*) in shaping relationships between human and divine (Eck 1998), and I demonstrate that “sonic matters” create knowledge and interpersonal ties of relatedness, paving the way to be and to become a human (*mānuṣ*).³**

BACKGROUND

The word sugar can surely be written on paper.

If one licks that paper, would the mouth get sweet?

In the same way the word God is written on the scriptures.

—Song of Duddu Shah⁴

Bengali esoteric lineages employ sonic epistemologies that shape the aesthetic, ethical, and affective sensibilities of the participants in material ways. This phenomenon is situated in a historical continuum. Singing spiritual songs is ubiquitous in the religious history of South Asia. Tantric practitioners were probably the first to use songs and dance as means of achieving a state of nonduality (Davidson 2002, 223–24). In medieval India, the *bhakti* movement from the Tamil south made its way northward, entering North India and Bengal. In the anthologies of *bhakti* “literature” (Schelling 2011), one can find a variety of songs that *bhakti* saints employed to ecstatically and emotionally relate to their personal god. Yogis, Bhaktas, and Sufis have interconnected histories in the north of the subcontinent. Their oral-performative sphere overlapped from the twilight of the Delhi Sultanate throughout the Mughal period (Burchett 2019). Among South Asian Sufi lineages, the use of songs and dance as collective experiences (*sama*) to reach the ultimate state of ego dissolution are widespread (Qureshi 1986). These sonorous ceremonies might have influenced the development of *kīrtan* (congregational singing) in Bengal, popularized by the Vaiṣṇava saint Caitanya in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries as the highest way to access liberation in this dark age (Kali Yuga). These various threads of **trans-sectarian sonic theology** are interwoven in the sociocultural fabric of premodern Bengal, influencing the development of the Bengali songs of ecstasy and self-realization (*bhāb saṅgīt*, *sādhana saṅgīt*) discussed in this article. The communities that compose and perform such songs emerged from the confluence of Tantric Buddhist ideas, with Nāth, Vaiṣṇava, and Sufi influences (Cashin 1995; Dasgupta 1962) in the historical region of undivided Bengal.

With the influence of Western notions around modernity and the cultural impact of British colonialism radiating from Calcutta as the capital of the empire, Bengali religious communities that place emphasis on body and sound have been pushed increasingly underground, attracting the concerns and the attacks of social reformers who saw them as antimodern deviances (Lorea 2018b).

I use the generic terms “esoteric” and “heterodox”⁵ in order to discuss the onto-epistemology of contemporary Bengali practitioners who use situational and varying terms of self-definition (such as Bāul, Fakir, Vaiṣṇava, Sahajīyā, mārphati, Lālan panthī, Kartābhajā, Matuṣyā), depending on their lineage, their guru, their sectarian affiliation, or their region.⁶ The heterogeneity among these groups does not allow us to talk about a single “tradition.” However, lineages often conflate, overlap, define their goals as interchangeable, swap disciples, recommend each other’s gurus, and participate in each other’s ritual-performative events. For this article, I group together lineages that employ singing for didactic, ritual, and soteriological purposes. Songs are considered as the best vehicle and repository of knowledge (*gāne jñān*, “songs are knowledge,” says a common proverb) and also as a kind of practice to achieve self-realization in their own right (*gān sarbaśreṣṭha sādhanā*, “singing is the best *sadhana*,” says a famous song). For some disciples, songs are revered as revelation, “just like the Quran.”⁷ Others compare esoteric songs with *śāstra*, the doctrinal texts of Hinduism. Songs are an encyclopedia of ideas about the human body and the cosmos. They are also compared with *mantras* (Jha 1999, 392) because it is their sonic dimension that performs a powerful transformation, not only their semantic content.

During conversations between gurus and practitioners, doctrines and practices are always explained through songs. Just like we as scholars sustain our arguments by using citations that reference previous (published) scholarship—Foucault wrote this, Bourdieu wrote that, etc.—the gurus intersperse their speech with entire lines drawn from songs of enlightened composers, sometimes jumping from speaking to singing, back and forth. **Songs are the currencies circulated among this epistemic community for knowledge production and authentication.** In this context, rather than the visual-textual, the “sonic” matters, together with songs’ constitutive substance—their “sonic matters.” Songs’ substance, made of sound, breath, and words, moves through air, passing between bodies, manipulating their flows of emotions and nourishing them, like food. Songs produce togetherness and disseminate a transformative knowledge that is qualitatively different from bookish erudition.⁸

Apart from singing, Bengali esoteric lineages share other common traits. The goal of their body-mind transformation through esoteric practice (*sādhanā*) is the experience of love (*prem*) and the accomplishment of the blissful state known as *sahaj*.⁹ To experience *prem*, one has to tame and sublimate the king of the six human afflictions, namely *kām*, selfish sexual desire, which is the opposite of *prem*, selfless and unmotivated love. *Bartamān*, direct knowledge through embodied experience, is painted in opposition to *anumān*, meaning hearsay, guesswork, vicarious knowledge. *Bartamān* literally means the present, the here and now. Knowing through sacred scriptures of Brahmanical Hinduism and Islam, performing exterior worship of deities, and maintaining ritual purity by avoiding contact or commensality with lower castes falls under the spectrum of *anumān*.¹⁰ Those on the path of *bartamān* worship the human and do not believe in hierarchical differences marked by caste or birth. All esoteric Bengali lineages are vocally against caste, since caste divisions are not substantiated by differences in the body.

Bengali esoteric movements transmit teachings on the body (*dehatattva*) based on a Tantric-Yogic worldview of the somatic microcosm. The main idea is that whatever is in the universe, be it the wind, the planets, or the tides, is also in the human body (*yā āche brahmāṇḍe tā āche ei dehabhāṇḍe*). Hence, knowledge of the cosmos must be rooted in the knowledge of the embodied self. Only human beings have the privilege of accessing such wisdom through the experience of love (*prem*). Therefore, there is nothing higher than humans, and even gods want to be born as humans. A person is not necessarily born as human (*mānuṣ*). **Practitioners strive to become human; this involves a process of feminization because women are considered to be “more” human, or closer to the ideal human.** Practitioners worship the human not only metaphorically but also materially, performing rituals and offerings directed toward another human being. **Practices to “become” human involve the disciplining of the senses (*indriya*), the control of breathing, the regulation of sexual intercourse to avoid seminal discharge, and the manipulation or intake of bodily substances (semen, menstrual blood, in some cases urine and feces, and also breast milk).** These substances are in correlation with the five elements, the cosmogonic stuff (*bastu*)¹¹ **that makes up the universe (Recording 1).**

For Bengali esoteric lineages, singing summons the various dimensions of this ontology. Singing is a work of the breath, arises from the same reproductive substance as seed, manifests love, and enacts the ethical concern for equality irrespective of caste. **To grasp the nuances of the sensory and synesthetic ropes that connect singing and knowing, ethnography needs to be tuned toward participant “listening,” and the ethnographer’s body sensorium becomes itself part of the “field” of fieldwork.**

SONGS AS METHOD, BODY AS RESEARCH TOOL

In 2009, Sannyasi Das Baul became my first teacher of Baul songs (Figure 1). He taught me the *khamak* (a double-string neckless chordophone), then songs and how to accompany these with dance steps. Before his morning job as a tea peddler on local trains, Sannyasida¹² would wake me up before sunrise with a hot cup of milk tea, prepare a clay pipe (“Very good for the voice!”), and lead our sessions for a couple of hours. When I had to write down in my notebook every single verse of a new song that he taught me, Sannyasida would look at me very disoriented, puzzled by the fact that I had so many difficulties memorizing the songs without writing them down. Because of his marginalized socioeconomic background, Sannyasida is unschooled and unlettered. But in the realm of sound, he is well learned and very knowledgeable, with the ability to remember a new song just by listening to it once. Sannyasida also showed me how to play *kartāl* (cymbals), an indispensable rhythmic instrument across genres of Bengali spiritual



FIGURE 1 Sannyasi Das Baul performing at the festival of Agradwip Mela, Bardhaman District, West Bengal, 2009. (Photograph by the author) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

songs. This proved to be very useful. I often played *kartāl* as a way to participate in singing sessions of diverse lineages and to keep awake and focused during whole-night music sessions.

Sannyasida taught me that singing is a matter of *bhāb*: a barely translatable term meaning mood, particularly an ecstatic mood of divine love. Baul songs ought to be sung while being “on *bhāb*,” otherwise it is an insult to the song (*gān-ke apamān kare*). I quickly learned to use the concept to my own advantage to avoid requests for singing when I was too shy or too tired (“Pardon me, I am not in the *bhāb*!”). Despite palpitations and stage fright, however, sharing these songs with an expert public was a precious tool to understand, through trial and error, the expectations, regulations, and taboos around songs. Songs should be always sung from the beginning to the end. Some songs can be sung only at a particular time of the day. Not every song can be sung in front of everybody. The same song would be given different interpretations, according to the kind of audience. But most importantly, songs are about *bartamān*. They verbalize bodily experience; they *are* an embodied experience and must be understood through firsthand embodied practice.

To understand certain lines of a song, I was asked to meditate on a certain part of the body. On some occasions, I was encouraged to vocalize a sound and then feel in which energetic center (*cakra*) it resonated. To understand some verses, I had to first meditate upon the mouth, as the place from which both speech/sound and food move in and out of the body. In short, apprenticeship in this musical tradition required not simply training the voice but also an encompassing process of self-formation and ethical formation—what some have called a conscious molding of the self (Bryant 2005) and a disciplining of sensitivity (Hirschkind 2001, 641).

Songs rarely feature as subjects or sources of academic work. They might be the domain of the folklorist and the ethnomusicologist, but they are unlikely to appear in the archive or in the formation of scholars in the humanities and social sciences. In Western modernity, songs came to be associated with the entertainment and leisure industry (Baldacchino 2011). This is partly a result of the sanitization of sounds in Global North modernities, where sounds have been publicly silenced, highly regulated, or restricted to those skilled, trained, and specialized, and where people are largely encouraged to consume songs rather than to produce them (Attali 1985; Baldacchino 2011). When I submitted an audio CD to accompany my dissertation in 2015, this was neither evaluated nor considered as an integral part of my evidence or argument (I suspect it was never played by the committee members either). Like most academics, my institutional training placed emphasis on developing refined reading and writing skills, using laptops and writing software for typing, editing, and referencing. By contrast, the audio samples that accompany this article were recorded with the cheap and unsophisticated devices that I could afford during my fieldwork without any previous training in sound recording or editing.

Learning Baul songs, and attempting to understand songs as events rather than texts, helped me realize that sound remains incredibly marginal in the training of ethnographers and in the criteria of recognition of good scholarship, dominated instead by a scriptist and ocularcentric bias. The scriptist bias of Western educational systems (Harris 1986, 46) is the tendency to assume that reliable information is naturally to be subsumed under the headings of writing and print. **Ocularcentrism**, or the hegemony of the eye, is a Eurocentric discourse establishing seeing—and therefore observation, the collection of visual data, and written sources (Hoang 2011)—as the higher sense, epistemologically as well as morally (Van Ede 2009, 62). These presuppositions have posed a serious hindrance to the study of cultures that follow different epistemologies, such as those centered on sound. The hegemonic epistemic premise, founded on the priority of texts and sight as the epitomes of modernity and rationality, objectivity, and neutrality (Ong 1982), delegitimized other ways of knowing (Hall and Tandon 2017; Santos 2014). **Even the immersive and sensuous experience of ethnographic fieldwork has been mostly discussed in terms of participant “observation,” but rarely as participant “listening” (Forsey 2010), or as “sensing” of the lifeworld of those we work with. The endeavor to learn a different world of sounds, the local habitus of listening and its aesthetic and affective contours, is “good method and good fun” (Myers 1992, 31), but it rarely trespasses across the disciplinary fences of ethnomusicology.** Therefore, while studies of South Asian religious literature that use songs as primary sources abound, these works rarely, if ever, address the practitioners’ understandings of what songs are made of and used for.¹³

Texts have been privileged as markers of canonicity in the study of religiosity in South Asia (Coburn 1984; Lutgendorf 1991). These religious texts, rather than silent and static, are often performed as “audible texts” arousing “acoustic piety” (Wilke and Moebus 2011, 12). However, sacred songs in South Asia are often studied as disembodied poems, alienated from ankle bells and cymbals, detached from listeners’ tears and singers’ voices. Studies on sung literature and chanted scriptures of South Asian religions abound, but these are focused on abstracted textual aspects, such as literary devices and figures of speech.¹⁴ Previous works on Bengali esoteric practitioners often consider song-texts as far as they reflect more “serious” Tantric-Yogic beliefs and practices; songs are studied as literary items that represent a repository of worldviews.¹⁵ This hierarchizing of the media corresponds to Western expectations but hardly at all to the actual use of these media in indigenous practice (Wilke and Moebus 2011, 4). Attempting to understand Bengali esoteric traditions solely through a literary study of song-texts will miss out on precisely those sensory media that are central to the practitioners themselves.

Besides the work of South Asianists who infused ethnographic life into otherwise muted song-texts,¹⁶ little is known about the ways in which the ensoundment of these media shapes the sensibilities of the participants, constituting a way of knowing in and of itself. These important aspects do not necessarily emerge from a logocentric study of lyrics. **Steven Feld (1996) has pioneered a sonically aware ethnography to understand people’s acoustemology: how people perceive and interpret sounds and how sounds shape their ways of being in the world. Local understandings of sound, noise, music, and speech articulate how senses and media are culturally informed and socially regulated. Thus, to integrate local elaborations on sound is not only important for ethnomusicologists and sound studies scholars but also could be effectively part of any anthropological research, just as we are trained to give attention to issues like class, gender, and power structures.**

These ideas laid the foundations of what I call *singing as method*. Throughout fieldwork, I considered singing songs, learning songs from the people I worked with, talking about songs, collecting their oral interpretations, attending singing sessions, and performing songs as powerful ways to understand a worldview—or, shall we say, a “world-ear” and a “world-touch” (Van Ede 2009, 72)—in a “feelingful manner” (Feld 1982, 237). Besides observing and interviewing, I would often record songs, play my recordings to hear people’s reactions, and learn what makes the difference between a good performance and a lousy one. This multisited and hyperparticipative approach allowed me to trace a shared epistemology of singing across various lineages. Conceptualizations of singing as knowing were discussed in identical manners throughout lineages that previous scholars have studied individually, in their particular context, be it the Lālan Panthīs in the western region of Bangladesh, Matua singers on the Andaman Islands, or self-defined Bauls and Bhaba Pagla followers in the borderlands of West Bengal.

Singing as method builds on “participant observation” but strives for an immersive and fully sensory experience that engages an open mind and an open body as research tools (Van Ede 2009). In this approach, embodied knowledge is not inferior or subordinated to the discursive fieldwork material of logocentric interviews, often overwhelmingly populated by male voices, especially in cultural contexts where articulated speech and the power of written representation is gendered as male (Jackson 2012). **By placing sound and body at the core, singing as method provides ethnographic engagements that displace the androcentric and logocentric bias of traditional ethnography, the writing noted by the observing “AnthroMan®” on his Anthro “NotePad®”—as satirically described in John Jackson’s (1998, 173) critique of ethnographic acts.**

Similar to the ways dance ethnographers employ their dancing bodies to inform their anthropological work,¹⁷ singing as method, anchored in the embodied experience (*bartamān*) of songs, is conducive to a kind of scholarship that reflects more closely the epistemology of the communities I work with. Like other methods that employ embodied research to radically reimagine the form and content of academic work, singing as method expands the “-graphy” of ethnography beyond scriptist protocols of hegemonic knowledge production.¹⁸ It displaces writing from ethnography by reconceptualizing it as sung utterances and movements of bodies and tongues, of soundwaves and plucked strings, reclaiming the body sensorium as a semiotic arena that blends incorporation and inscription (Phillips 2009), ultimately entextualizing other ways of knowing onto one’s body. In this sense, the ethnography of singing is simultaneously an ethnophony of singing, reflecting Bengali esoteric practitioners’ phonocentric lifeworld, where songs are both the method to reach self-realization and the ideal mode of communicating it.

EPISTEMOLOGY OF SINGING

I don't need to meditate: Songs are my worship and my *sādhana*/
 Kuṇḍalīnī wakes up, I get mad and overwhelmed and I drive the world crazy.
 —Song of Bhaba Pagla¹⁹

Previous scholarship on Bauls and esoteric groups in Bengal has often had an overriding focus on cosmological beliefs and esoteric rituals as more “serious” aspects of their religious practice rather than singing.²⁰ My research showed that among contemporary Bengali lineages, music making and Tantric-Yogic practices are inseparable. Both bodily and musical *sādhana* control and transform the body-mind, producing an ascendance through the manipulation of breathing and substances (Trottier 2000, 90–91). Over the years, I have heard many singers describing such transformation through the vocabulary of yoga and meditation. For example, singing is equated with *prāṇāyāma*: “It naturally brings inhalation and exhalation under control.”²¹ It awakens the feminine *kuṇḍalīnī* energy at the base of the spine, “running up through the *cakras* . . . and removing the obstacles from the flow.”²² Songs empty the mind from exterior thoughts, just like *dhyān*, or seated meditation, allowing one to reach a higher spiritual state. Singing is described as accomplishing all the goals of yoga but in a simple and natural manner (*sahaj*), that is for everybody, “both for *paṇḍits* and for common men.”²³ It offers the same results as practicing austerities and yogic penances, which are perceived as methods for high-caste males, “but it does it by arousing *bhāb* and spreading joy [*ānanda*] among the listeners.”²⁴

Distributing *ānanda* by sharing a sonic experience, songs dismantle the boundaries between self (*āpan*) and other (*par*), strangers and relatives.²⁵ Performing songs responds to the ethical concern of establishing togetherness in the form of sound with others, that is, people from any caste or religion, extending and dissipating boundaries between individual selves. Songs, sharing *ānanda*, reflect the injunction of giving happiness to others instead of directing it to oneself.²⁶ This relates *ānanda* to selfless love (*prem*).

In the field of the body, sharing *ānanda* is discussed as lovemaking without ejaculation. It stands in opposition to *nirānanda*, which is a symbolic term for seminal discharge, a result of the influence of *kām* (selfish sexual desire) in the body. Overlapping the field of sound and that of the sexual body, singing esoteric songs is believed to deliver from *kām*, emplacing material transformations in the body and producing ethical forms of relatedness.

Matua performers explained that, through singing, the flow of *bhāb* swells, which is why listeners may cry. Like a river, *bhāb* may overflow and produce tears in the current of liquid emotions that characterizes the emotional body (Hayes 2006, 43; McDaniel 1989, 75), made of *prāṇ* (vital breath). By listening to the current of soundwaves, the audience is said to be washed like “at the holy junction of the three rivers [*tribeṇī*] at the time of the high tide.”²⁷ This refers to the cleansing ritual bath (*snān*) that Hindus perform at auspicious times of the ritual calendar. However, in the metaphorical language of songs, the water at *tribeṇī* is also a trope symbolizing menstruation, which is a powerful and purifying substance, believed to contain uterine blood and female seed.²⁸

For the singers, the transformation of the emotional *prāṇic* body through songs occurs through the control of breath. Breath regulates the flowing of every substance circulating within the body, including emotions. A Vaiṣṇava Baul woman singer explained that song melodies contain life force, *prāṇ*. It derives from seed and it passes in the melody through breath, that is why singing is so tiring (Hanssen 2002, 375). Through the distribution of sound/seed, singing is nourishing for the listeners: songs are associated with reproductive fluids, regarded as the wellspring of emotions. According to Hanssen’s ethnography, “the vital force in songs nourishes and invigorates those who are exposed to it, which is also the distinguishing trait of menstrual blood” (366).

Semen and menstrual blood are microcosmic equivalents of cosmogonic “stuff” (*bastu*), the substances that created the universe. There is a correspondence between sound/speech (*śabda*), cosmogonic expansion (*brahma*), and (pro)creative substances (*bastu*). As a practitioner eloquently put it, “The melody [of the song] is Brahma. Singing, then, is the best way to realize Brahma,” the universal creator.²⁹ Brahma also indicates male seed in the semantic field of the practitioner’s body. In fact, the practice of seminal retention for male practitioners is called *brahma-rakṣā* (protection of *brahma*) or *bindu-rakṣā* (*bindu* meaning seed, semen, or extremely condensed point).³⁰ For Bengali esoteric practitioners, vital energy is transformed into its gross form of semen when it goes down; when it goes up, it takes the form of *śabda*, with the double meaning of “sound,” equivalent to *brahma*, and “words” (Jha 1999, 392).

By uttering a “seed-mantra” (*bīj mantra*) in their ears, a guru employs the (pro)creative power of sound/seed to establish ties and affective bonds with the disciples. During initiation, the sound of the seed-mantra gives new birth to the initiate, who is ritually reborn as a new person, emerging from the intercourse of the guru’s tongue with the metaphorical vulva of the disciple’s ear (Hayes 2006, 57–62). Inheriting the same sonic insemination from the guru-progenitor, disciples under the same teacher share his substance and become bonded by a new kind of relatedness, expressed in kinship terms: disciples are all guru-brothers/guru-sisters; their mother, *guru-mā*, is the wife or consort of one’s guru, and so on. Most of my interlocutors are also, simultaneously, my siblings, parents, cousins, etc., a social relationship created by sharing sound, acting as procreative seed. Such sonic-substantive kinship works in parallel yet subversive manners in respect to biological families. Sonic matters create social relationships by erasing those dictated by patrilineal kinship and caste.

In the work of Helen Lambert (2000), flows of substance—sexual fluids, breast milk, and food—facilitate the development and maintenance of affectionate and binding ties, especially those that are not acknowledged within the dominant ideologies of patriliney and caste (for example, nurtur-

ing a foster child). These adoptive and optative forms of relatedness are considered superior to kinship by blood and marriage because they are not tainted by sexuality, but they take the form of putative consanguinity in terms of reference and address (85). Similarly, sharing sonic substance in Bengal produces long-lasting relationships of mutual affection and responsibility (for example, between guru and disciple) that disrupt the dominant ideology of relatedness (*āpan* versus *par*) marked by birth, caste, and class.

Sound as seed is intimately connected with food. Seed (*bindu*), according to the physiology of the esoteric body, is the most concentrated and rich of seven bodily components. These components are assimilated as food and then refined and differentiated through digestive cooking. For every part of food, “one-tenth goes to the blood, one-tenth of it [1/100] goes to the flesh, one-tenth [of 1/1000] goes into the bones, one-tenth to marrow, one-tenth to the brain, and one-tenth to the formation of *bindu*.”³¹ When I asked performers/practitioners what singing *kīrtan* does to the listeners, some straightforwardly replied, “It is like food [*khādyā*]. The soul which we have inside gets fed, and our tears [of *bhāb*, by listening to songs] satisfy its thirst.”³²

Keeping in mind this sensory framework, where sound/seed/food are tied in a web of synesthetic correspondences, it is not surprising that knowledge is compared to tasting a ripe mango; singing songs from village to village in exchange for alms is called *mādhukarī* (honey gathering), and inference (*anumān*) is compared to licking a piece of paper. The verb that is used to present spiritual songs on stage, or at congregational singing sessions, is the same verb employed for serving food (*paribēśan karā*) distributed during ritual gatherings. Both are acts of *sebā*—from Sanskrit *seva*, service. Among Bengali esoteric groups, *sebā* means offering and sharing substances: showing selfless love and deference to others and establishing togetherness through feeding and sharing a meal (Hanssen 2018, 150–55). *Sebā karā* primarily means “to eat,” although *sebā* also refers to the sharing of other sacred substances, such as ganja (sharing the same pipe), ritual sharing of bodily fluids (of a guru, or a partner), and sharing sonic substance through singing. Acts of partaking in these substances, including sound, are discussed as *sebā*.

Sebā, an instantiation of giving, caring, and nourishing, is associated with womanhood. It is the ultimate labor of love, a training toward *prem* that practitioners are taught to perform with care, whether in the form of singing a song, cooking food for guests, or fanning the guru on a hot summer afternoon. While *seva* in orthodox Hindu contexts means to ritually perform devotional service toward the deity—for example, bathing and offering food to a theistic recipient in its iconic form—in Bengali esoteric lineages, this devotional service is addressed to human beings (*mānuṣ*), the ultimate vessels of divinity. Feeding songs and tasting sounds make people human and bridge the human and the divine. The epistemology of singing is anthropopoietic and actualizes the egalitarian concern of effacing differences (e.g., caste hierarchies) between humans.

Dislodging the ocularcentric presuppositions of previous scholars, Sylvain Pinard (1991) argues that taste dominates the Indian sensory and aesthetic model. With *prasād* (food offerings), social relationships between humans and deities are confirmed and reestablished through reciprocal yet hierarchized transactions. Sharing sound/seed performs a similar interpersonal form of exchange, feeding the listeners, caring for strangers (people unrelated by kin or caste), and thus establishing a form of togetherness on the basis of love. Sharing sound is nourishing, transformative, and potentially healing due to the permeability of interpersonal substance.

Building on Marriott (1976, 194), Pinard reiterates that the idea of transmissibility of individual substance is key to the Hindu notion of personhood, whereby individuals are not bounded and fixed entities but rather composite, open, and permeable. My research suggests that such permeability, enabling material and affective exchanges between persons, thus enabling new ties of relatedness, is not confined to the sensory field of taste and to exchanges of actual food but also pertains to the sonic field of aural-oral exchanges. Singing songs can transfer substances between individual bodies. Pinard explains that with food, the cooking process is already the beginning of ingestion, transferring qualities of the cook to the taster—which is why in orthodox Hindu views, eating a meal that is cooked by a low-caste person is considered polluting. In such gustatory exchange, sharing the food prepared by people necessarily means sharing in their nature (Pinard 1991). The same occurs when singing songs, in the context of Bengali esoteric groups. By sharing sound/seed, singers exchange with listeners a sonic substance that is not confined to the individual but is transferable and transformative.

The transformative anthropopoiesis engendered by singing involves a shift in the performance of sexuality and gender identity. Heterodox Bengali lineages sustain an antipatriarchal ideology and have been defined as woman-centric (Jha 1999, 12, 302). Women are most perfected and closer to the ideal human (*mānuṣ*). This is substantiated by the fact that female bodies produce more fluids than men, like uterine blood and breast milk, and give them generously for the sustenance of new life. It is said that being born as a woman in this life is the result of good deeds in the past life. Male practitioners seek to develop their femininity and to “become a woman” in emotional as well as somatic ways (Lorea 2018a; Openshaw 2007, 326). A performer of Matua *kīrtan* explained that the qualities of a good singer are like those of a mother who breastfeeds her baby.³³ This evocative exegesis of singing as feeding breastmilk resonates with the words of Lambert (2000, 85): “Flows of sustenance parallel flows of affection, and the paradigm for emotional and substantive nurturance is, of course, the mother-child relationship, in which actual bodily substance is shared.” Lambert explains how, in Rajasthan, exchanging nurturing substances produces relatedness in ways that cannot be confined to biological kinship because they trespass the ties established through birth and caste. For example, troublesome wandering spirits can be transformed into ancestors of the household through offerings of milk, the nurturing substance par excellence (82–83). Sharing milk can incorporate the spirit of a different caste into the household as an ancestral relative. Lambert employs this example to discuss the role of milk feeding, and more generally of nurturance and commensality, in the constitution of relatedness, intended as the establishment of enduring social connections that carry rights and responsibilities, invoke permanent affection, and entail lasting solidarity. Sharing songs in Bengal performs a similar function. Sound is nourishing, hence exchanges of sonic matters between singers and listeners produce and maintain ties of relatedness.

I have heard from numerous performers that listening to spiritual songs decreases *kām*, the enemy of the practitioner's body, antagonistically opposed to love (*prem*). Women, in these traditions, are teachers of *prem*, and the disciple, in order to acquire love, has to surrender to—and internally become—a woman (Recording 2). Practitioners explained that their *gāner dharma*, “religion of songs,” teaches that all humans come from the same mother. Therefore, by listening to songs, men will be delivered from *kām* and all tyranny against women, including sexual harassment and rape, will come to an end.³⁴ A Matua guru eloquently explained that *kīrtan*, through singing and dancing, uplifts the *kuṇḍalīnī* and liberates from *kām*, which produces material changes in the body: “If you see my guru's penis, it is so small!” The guru explained that it reduced in size because of the beneficial effects of *kīrtan*.³⁵ The path toward spiritual perfection entails a distance from heteronormative masculinity and a progressive feminization.³⁶ This process is engendered through the allied practices of singing and bodily *sādhana*.

The epistemology of singing that emerged from my engagement with gurus, performers, and listeners aligns knowledge with aurality, femininity, and bodily experience. Bengali esoteric traditions that reject caste, and worship femininity, rely upon aural media instead of “visualist” (Jardine 1996, 13; Maslen 2015, 55) epistemologies that produce disembodied and objectivist knowledge. This sonorous way of knowing is qualitatively different from the scriptist and ocularcentric ways of knowing, which became the universally valid foundations of modern education and academic knowledge through colonial modalities of cultural imperialism. How does the epistemology of singing coexist with conflicting hierarchies of senses and media in a postcolonial society? Is this epistemology of singing useful for us, scholars—the “*paṇḍits*”—to think about ingrained academic practices and change them? I suggest that to take knowing as/by singing seriously means not solely to rehabilitate songs as legitimate subjects of anthropological inquiry but also to consider them as indigenous acts of scholarship, enabled to dialogue with (and question) hegemonic epistemologies and entrenched academic conventions.

CONFLICTING SENSORY EPISTEMOLOGIES

In “Enlightenment and the Question of the Other,” Hwa Yol Jung (2002) argues that ocularcentrism and the scriptist bias of Western knowledge have created prejudices not only toward other senses and ways of knowing but also toward the categories of body, woman, nature, and non-West. The hierarchy of senses, and of authoritative sources, that positions sight at the top—epistemically and morally—is not neutral: it carries the baggage of racial and gender prejudice. For example, the early-nineteenth-century German thinker Lorenz Oken (1847) hierarchized the human races according to their prevalent sense organ: the white European was of course described as the “eye-man,” the Asian as the “ear-man,” all the way down to the Black African “skin-man” at its closure. This sensorial racism should be kept in mind in any discussion on decolonizing academia and the classroom (Nye 2018). To decolonize academia necessarily means to question such sensorial hierarchy and recognize it as culturally specific (Jung 2002, 302).

The work of feminist historians and sensory anthropologists helps us to trace the racial and gender prejudice deeply rooted in ocularcentric epistemologies. From the Renaissance to early modernity in Europe, women were said to have natural capacities for smell, taste, and touch, which made them inadequate for intellectual labor, which relies on sight (Classen 2005). Women were associated with debased oral culture, gossip, and folklore, the realm of tales and superstition, while men were assumed to represent the propriety of grammar, logic, and literature (Neufeld 2001, 59). Descriptions of the sense organs are impregnated by preconceptions around gender, leading Rachel Devorah (2017) to theorize that androcentrism is embedded within ocularcentrism. Vision travels to an object; hearing is passively receptive, spherical as opposed to linear, subjective as opposed to objective. The eye is an outward-protruding surface; the ear concerns the inward. In short, the dominant discourse codes seeing as masculine and hearing as feminine, prescribing that women must be seen and hearing, while men must be heard and seeing—and ruling, or overseeing (Devorah 2017, 313).

It should be noted, though, that much of this scholarship has taken for granted the assumption that theorizing the senses as gendered is a modern construction of Western culture (Classen 1997). But from an anthropological perspective, constructions of perception are always already culturally informed, unfolding together with hierarchies of morality and power. These hierarchies, and the ways they draw correspondences between senses and genders, vary across human traditions. If in the premodern West, for instance, male semen was conceived as tied to the eyes (and therefore excessive coitus was believed to harm the sight), in Bengali esoteric lineages, it is the production of sound/speech that can deplete the body of seminal fluid. This example is meant to clarify that my critique of the ocularcentric paradigm is not due to its gendering of the eye as male, for Bengali esoteric conceptions of sound and singing are also gendered and gendering. The visualist regime of modernity (Classen 1998, 1) is not the only one entrenching women's subordination, but it is the epistemic model that, hand in hand with exploitative imperialist ideologies of domination, has historically defined itself as scientific and universal.

The marginalization of sound, a sense often gendered as feminine, as emotional rather than rational, as tied to body rather than mind, is entangled with racial and gender bias, providing moral justification for cultural imperialism and epistemic violence. Neglecting the emic importance accorded to sonic efficacy, restrictive regulations in colonial and exploitative contexts have systematically erased indigenous sound cultures. In Bengal, entire genres have been silenced, particularly women's repertoires of songs, considered obscene or incompatible with new standards of morality under British rule (Banerjee 1987). Drumming among enslaved people and indentured laborers of Indian descent was systematically banned in plantations throughout America and across the shores on the Indian Ocean. Christianizing and colonizing forces often coalesced to criminalize indigenous musical cultures, leading to a “musical epistemicide” in Africa (Chikowero 2015).

The politics of the senses embedded in European cultural history had a deep impact on colonized societies. Colonized subjects have been insistently represented as effeminate (Linsley 2013), irrational, subjective, and superstitious, in opposition to the rational and logical masculine (eye-centered) science of the colonizers' civilization (Said 1978). Bengali subjects of the British Empire, in particular, have been described as effeminate and feeble, lacking the masculine traits of courage, independence, and veracity (statement by Macauley from 1843, published in Macauley 1967; described in Linsley 2013).

After British colonial rule was established and interiorized in Bengal, esoteric movements that employ songs as their primary way of transformative knowledge started to be classified as morally deviant or straightforwardly heretic by colonial officers and local reformers (e.g., Bhattacharya 1896, 381; Risley 1891, 34). In the late nineteenth century, the Matua and the Kartābhajā lineages printed collections of their songs. Having a sacred text as a printed object became a quintessential requirement to be a respectable and modern religious movement. "Untouchable" Matua practitioners often pointed out that in Brahmanical Hinduism, women and low castes were not allowed to recite or even hear the recitation of the Vedas, or else their tongues would be cut off or melted lead would be poured into their ears as punishment.³⁷ For centuries, low-caste communities and women were forbidden from gaining access to literacy-based formal education. Even the renowned social reformer of modern Bengal Ishwarchandra Vidyasagara (1820–1891), acclaimed as one of the fathers of the nation, categorically advocated for confining education to "higher classes" and denied admission of low-caste students as the principal of Calcutta Sanskrit College (Biswas 2009). Disparity in literacy and education in India and Bangladesh is still determined along gender and caste lines.

In a context of power inequality, where rational minds and writing hands have been portrayed as civilizing agents over sensual bodies, the difference between sonic epistemologies and literary activities is no longer simply an instance of heterogeneity of media; rather, "they become part of dynamics of domination and resistance" (Besnier 2001, 142). Knowing by/as singing among Bengali esoteric movements does not simply engage oral-aural media as arbitrary channels of an alternative epistemology. In the light of contrasting and asymmetrical sensory epistemologies in South Asian history, sonic repositories of knowledge need to be understood in their struggle not only to be acknowledged and valued but also to be permitted to exist as a way of knowing. Centering their knowledge on songs, sound, and embodied experience rather than texts, Bengali esoteric songs need to be situated in a scenario of conflicting epistemologies that predicate very different relationships and hierarchies among senses, genders, and media. Implied in their theory of knowledge, which values *bartamān* over *anumān*, body over word, feminine over masculine, and sound over text, is the association of orality and hearing with exchange among equals, and writing and sight with social domination, casteism, and patriarchy.³⁸

CONCLUSION, OR A CALL FOR PROVOCATIONS

The wood speaks, sand speaks, all things speak/

The dogs bark but we are different, we are different/

We sing.

—Song of the Moken, in Ivanoff (2013)

Bengali practitioners' understanding of knowledge, and ways to represent it, are based on ensoundments of songs, which enact bodily changes and exchanges. Synesthetic interplays between sound and other senses shape the material, affective, and ethical sensibilities of performers and audiences. Similar to commensality, exchanges of songs correspond to exchanges of nourishment and produce ethical ties of relatedness that cut across castes and sectarian boundaries. Expanding the work of anthropologists like Pinard and Lambert, who examined how food offerings produce social relationships, my ethnography suggests that nurturing should not be interpreted as solely pertaining to tasting edible foodstuffs, but also to the synesthetic capacity of feeding and being nourished by sound—a cognate substance of bodily fluids such as seed and milk.

In this article, I built on my multisited ethnography with various Bengali heterodox lineages to demonstrate that singing fits in a theory of knowledge that goes well beyond music; it is based on synesthetic relations between sound, seed, and nourishing substances; it implies ethical tuning toward sharing and establishing togetherness among humans, irrespective of caste and sectarian distinctions; it creates humans, which implies a particular transformation in one's body and gender. Songs are about the human body, and the practice of singing is the tool to transform that body, making songs simultaneously knowledge and method for Bengali esoteric practitioners. To study and to represent such knowing, I employed an ethnography of singing through singing, proposing songs as an embodied research tool, which can be as powerful and heuristically valid as the disembodied recorder, the silent notebook, and the printed pages that will convey academic recognition to this very article. Tied to the materiality of cosmic and reproductive matter, songs are paramount ways to obtain and to disseminate knowledge. They are anthropopoietic: practicing songs creates human beings (*mānuṣ*) and makes people "more" human, or better humans, which is also understood as a process of feminization.

Songs, like anthropology, discuss the condition of being human, the ways of becoming human, and what this means to different people. Taking songs into serious consideration, we can access a different way of doing anthropological work and a way of questioning academic conventions of knowledge production. Nevertheless, as a precariously employed early-career scholar, I find myself spending considerably more time writing, rather than singing, and reading written sources, rather than editing my fieldwork recordings into audio-visual essays, preoccupied to fit in a competitive, publication-based academic market.

Feld has long argued for an ethnography of sound through sound, employing “dialogic editing” to bridge the worlds of the recording studio and of the rainforest in a circutable representation of culture in the preferred medium of his interlocutors (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 465). But scriptist and eye-centric academic infrastructures have made little room for such initiatives. Scholars take writing very seriously: anthropologists are conscious of their role as authors (Geertz 1988) and are taught the technologies and skills needed to write and edit books. **But the sound recorder and technologies for sound editing, although affordable and widely available, are not included in our training (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 471).** Conferences and classrooms may provide for projectors but rarely give access to a decent sound system. Besides a few academic journals, submissions are assumed to be exclusively written.³⁹ Publishers’ attempts to include audio-visual material through hyperlinks and QR codes are rare (and still quite clumsy). Professionalism is to be displayed through accurately written papers, read out loud during presentations of stiff, immobile bodies. This very article, primarily about singing, corroborates Feld’s prediction that the anthropology of sound will continue to be “mostly about words” (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 471). **But what if embodied and academic knowledge need not be clinically separated? What if the -graphy of ethnography need not be written in order to do its work? What if we addressed primary forms of privilege—whiteness and (English) language—that define the vast majority of work we cite and responded with choreographing⁴⁰ and ensounding anthropology, with choral forms of ethnographic/ethnophonic production that quote sonic rather than textual work?**

Cutting-edge debates to rethink the superiority of the written publication, as well as experimentation with multimedia and innovative formats, are confined to a few disciplines. Basing academic careers upon publications, institutions quantify our written material, making it countable and priceable on the academic market, quite like other state authorities sought to turn oral cultures into literate ones, and itinerant lifestyles into sedentary ones, to make people mappable, readable, and taxable (Scott 2009). Modern ocularcentric systems of validation structured public institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and prisons, into surveyable places where everything and everyone is in view and under supervision (Foucault 1975). Attali (1985) reminds us that it is impossible to separate the history of the senses, and particularly the suppression of sounds and noises, from the history of repression and surveillance.

Selection committees and reviewers of our academic achievements do not quantify how much we spend, use, or train our voice, body, and senses. However, to challenge the centrality of the written text is not only a matter of broadening the archive and diversifying our research outputs to reach a larger readership. It has wider implications. Singing as method and other kinds of embodied research appear as fundamental instruments to provide criticism of the hegemonic hierarchy of senses and genders, and have a great decolonizing potential, by challenging epistemic ethnocentrism.

“The word sugar can surely be written on paper. / If one licks that paper, would the mouth get sweet?” sang Duddu Shah. What Bengali songs can truly offer to academic conversations is a reminder that the centrality of written paper carries along a historical burden of ethnocentrism, whiteness, and patriarchal bias. Borrowing my relatives’/interlocutors’ criticism against sacred scriptures, I wonder if our system of knowledge aims to produce erudite *paṇḍits* or wise (*jñānī*) people. Is academic knowledge anthropopoietic? Is it transformative? Does it make us “more human”? Thinking of Master Moshai and his beard, I am reminded that wise people are not only intellectual specialists but also a community of ethical action and counter-voice that can challenge the “sacred scriptures” of the status quo, instead of adding more and more pages that no one would ever lick to get the taste of knowledge.



RECORDING 1 *Debdas Baul singing the song “Indriya daman āge karo man” in the small garden facing his house, in Bolpur (Birbhum District, West Bengal). The song, originally composed by Radhapada Gosain, is of the ātmatattva (doctrine of self-knowledge) category, urging the listener to lean from firsthand experience, and to start by mastering the control of the five senses (indriya daman) in order to proceed successfully in the path of sādhanā. (Personal collection of field recordings)*



RECORDING 2 *Shoshti Dom singing the song “āmi prem rasikā habo kemane” at the ashram of his guru, in Siur village (Birbhum District, West Bengal). The song is attributed to the famous composer Lalan Sai (or Lalan Fakir, d. 1890). In this song, the (male) singer impersonates the voice of a female lover and moans about the difficulty in overpowering and controlling kām—selfish sexual desire—which hinders him to become a true connoisseur of the taste of love (prem rasikā). (Personal collection of field recordings)*

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ I was based in West Bengal throughout my doctoral research, for about four years (2011–2015). In West Bengal, I have worked with Baul performers and members of the Bhaba Pagla community of disciples and performers (2011–2015) in the districts of Birbhum, Nadia, Murshidabad, and, to a lesser extent, Bankura. During my postdoctoral research funded by a DAAD grant and an IAS fellowship (2016–2018), I studied traveling archives of transregional lineages based on fieldwork in West Bengal and Bangladesh (Kushtia and Meherpur district, and Manikganj). My current research on the Matua community and the soundscapes of religion and displacement across the Bay of Bengal is based on a multisited fieldwork (2015–2019) in Birbhum and North 24 Parganas (India), in Gopalganj, Barishal, and Khulna (Bangladesh), and among the Bengali refugee settlements of the Andaman Islands (particularly North Andaman, Havelock, and South Andaman).
- ² This aspect is discussed in the section titled “Conclusion, or a Call for Provocations.” I borrow the expression from a 2013 project on the sound of knowledge and its call for innovative uses of sounds in scholarly settings (<https://www.hastac.org/opportunities/call-provocations-pro-vocare-new-collection-sonically-inspiring-projects>).
- ³ In this sense, the epistemology of singing is also, already, an onto-epistemology of singing (see Introduction to this Special Issue). Epistemology cannot be separated from ontology: songs do not only convey knowledge in the sense of something one owns or holds, but rather are constitutive of one's being human; they participate in the transformative process of *becoming* human, and thus in the becoming of the world.
- ⁴ *Kāgaje cini śabda lekḥā yāy / sei kāgaj cāṭile ki mukh miṣṭi haṭ / tem'ni śāstre lekḥā īśvar* (Jahangir 1964–1965, 77).
- ⁵ These antinomian communities do not follow prescribed rituals of their Hindu and Muslim surroundings (e.g., they do not fast during Ramadan; they do not consider a menstruating woman “polluted”). Since the second half of the nineteenth century, most groups came to be condemned as blasphemous Muslim or as deviant Hindu sects (*apasampradāya*), and they have been subjected to various kinds of persecution (see Lorea 2018b). Most lineages cherish part of their knowledge and practices as secret (*gopan*) and specify a distinction between their public aspect (*bahiraṅga*) and private practices (*antaraṅga*), which have to be learned directly from a *guru*. Because certain practices are restricted to initiated members, according to their stage of *sādhana*, I do not write about teachings or techniques that gurus signaled as confidential. Studying esoteric communities involves particular ethical and epistemological issues surrounding secrecy and the local protocols of knowledge disclosure/accessibility. I discuss these aspects in a previous article (Lorea 2018c).
- ⁶ On Bāuls, see Openshaw ([2002] 2004), Knight (2011), Lorea (2016); on Bangladeshi Fakirs, see Salomon (1991) and Trottier (2000); on Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā, see Sarbadhikary (2015). On the Matua community, see Lorea (2020). On Kartābhajā songs, see Urban (2001).
- ⁷ Interview H.S., Kushtia, 01/02/2018.
- ⁸ For many practitioners, songs are also a source of income. Many are hired as professional musicians. Others sing while begging in exchange for alms. Some practitioners do not sing for public performances at all, but they employ songs within the *sādhanaṅga* and for personal practice.
- ⁹ This explains why these lineages have often been conflated under the etic category *sahajiyā* (followers of *sahaj* path).
- ¹⁰ While most lineages openly despise textual knowledge, their practices are never devoid of textual influences. Practitioners use written media, especially in the form of personal or shared notebooks, for writing down songs, or as a support for memorization and performance (I am currently leading a project to digitize personal manuscripts of Baul performers, see <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP1247>). Bāuls and Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās may reference premodern texts (particularly *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, but also *Caitanya Bhagavata*, *Vivarta Vilāsa*, and *padas* composed by Caṇḍīdās) to support their claims and give legitimacy to their practices. Lineages that in time have consolidated along sectarian lines (e.g., Kartābhajā and Matua) employ printed editions of songs from their revered composers as ritual objects during gatherings (e.g., *Bhāber Gīt*, *Śrīśrīmahāsaṅkīrtan*, and *Śrīśrīharisaṅkīrtan*). This seems to be a recent practice, influenced by the vicinity of Christian missions in the late nineteenth century (see Lorea 2018b).
- ¹¹ For the importance of microcosmic-macrocosmic substances (*bastu*) in their practices, these lineages have also been discussed as *bastubādi* (followers of *bastu*; Jha 1999).
- ¹² The suffix (from *dādā*, older brother) indicates seniority and respect.
- ¹³ For example, see Seely and Leonard (1982) and McDermott (2001), where Bengali songs to the Tantric goddess are discussed and analyzed as poems.
- ¹⁴ For instance, the Tantric songs studied by Kvaerne (1977) and the songs of the Kartābhajā community analyzed by Hugh Urban (2001).
- ¹⁵ As an example of this approach, prevalent among trained Indologists, see Das (1992).
- ¹⁶ See the exceptional works on songs in South Asia by Isabelle Clark-Decès, Antoinette DeNapoli, Kristin Hanssen, Linda Hess, Whitney Kelting, and Kirin Narayan.
- ¹⁷ See the work of Katherine Dunham, Randy Martin, Öykü Potoğlu-Cook, and Yolanda van Ede, among others.
- ¹⁸ Randy Martin (1998, 222n2) conceived the “graphy” of choreography as an inscription of moving bodies in space, and not on paper or on screens, where culturally informed movement activity is a precondition for inscription.
- ¹⁹ *Dhyān dhāraṇār nāi praṇajan / gāne-i āmār sādhan-bhajan / kuṇḍalini haṭ jāgaraṇ / āpani mete jagat mātāi*.
- ²⁰ See Openshaw ([2002] 2004, 238).
- ²¹ The same relation between singing, regulating air in the lungs, and the effects of *prāṇayāma* are reported in Hyam (2019, 82–89) and Narayan (2016, 212).
- ²² G.K., Digha, 11/02/2012.
- ²³ B.G., Barrackpore, 28/01/2013.
- ²⁴ *Bhābodāy ār śrotāder ānanda*. U. S. Havelock, 21/11/2018.
- ²⁵ See Openshaw ([2002] 2004, 151) and Hanssen (2018, 46).
- ²⁶ *Ātmasukh byabīcār*; see Wahab (2011, 138).
- ²⁷ P.M., Wandoor, 10/12/2018. See also Hyam (2019, 305): “Multiple Bāul performers told me that a central aspect of *gān sādhanā* is the ability to affect the flow of *prāṇa* in audience members through singing, which is inherently healing as this can unblock their bodily obstructions which inhibit the unhindered flow of *prāṇa*.”
- ²⁸ The cathartic function of religious songs has been discussed by Narayan in similar terms. For her singers/informants, *bhajan* songs are like a bath in the holy river Ganga (Narayan 2016, 188) and the flow of sounds can wash away their bad deeds (198).
- ²⁹ B.G., Barrackpore, 28/01/2013. In Tantric philosophy, these connections are enabled on the basis of a phonocentric lifeworld where both the *world* and the *word* emanated from primordial sound (*nāda-brahman*) (Wilke and Moebus 2011, 12–13). Sound is generative and pervasive in all layers of the cosmos (Flood 2006, 65).
- ³⁰ This identification can be found across several South Asian traditions. Lineages of North Indian Sant minstrels, for example, transmit their authority through *nād* (succession through sound, imparting a mantra), or through *bindu* (succession through seed, through biological descent) (Gold 1987, 100).
- ³¹ K.B., Shantiniketan, 19/01/2013.

- ³² T.M., Tatalpur, 14/02/2019.
- ³³ M.G., Hasmatabad, 13/12/2018.
- ³⁴ S.M., Majhdia, 21/04/2012.
- ³⁵ M.G., Radhanagar, 10/02/2017.
- ³⁶ I discuss these issues more thoroughly in a previous article (Lorea 2018a).
- ³⁷ These prescriptions are codified in the doctrinal texts called *Manusmṛti*.
- ³⁸ The tension between European-Christian literacy and Andean orality is presented in very similar terms as a conflict between cosmologies (Classen 1991).
- ³⁹ *American Anthropologist* (since 2017) and *Entanglements: Experiments in Multimodal Ethnography* (since 2018) have pioneered the effort toward multimodality. In 2016, Jonathan Goldner built a canoe as part of his master's thesis about apprenticeship as embodied knowledge. In 2017, rapper A. D. Carson received his PhD after submitting a thirty-four-song album as his doctoral dissertation. These examples of creative, nonlogocentric formats that received institutional recognition are few and confined to specific disciplines.
- ⁴⁰ Katherine Dunham's legacy—as an anthropologist of Haitian spirituality and dance, as a dancer, and dance pedagogist—is discussed as choreographing anthropology by Elizabeth Chin (2014, 81).

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