

Ensounding Politics, Religion and Culture in Southeast Asia

Hearing Southeast Asia: Sounds of Hierarchy and Power in Context, by Nathan Porath (Ed.). Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2019, 384 pp. \$32.00 (pb); 9788776942618

Southeast Asia is very diverse in cultural practices and identities. *Hearing Southeast Asia* recognizes this diversity through presenting ways of listening and contextualizing sounds in particular sociocultural and political conditions. While it is not the first book on Southeast Asian sound and music, the book is a significant contribution for understanding the diverse roles of sound and silence in Southeast Asia. The collection, edited by Nathan Porath, uses religion, spirituality, and politics to understand how sounds in different Southeast Asian spaces are heard, produced, and contested within embedded hierarchies of power. With these analyses, *Hearing Southeast Asia* provides a fresh and argumentative insight for approaching the way we hear in the region's sonic milieu.

Porath's edition shows that Southeast Asian regions include distinct music and sound cultures based on sonic and linguistic properties. The authors that Porath collected for the edition help to uncover the role not only of sound but also of silence and non-verbal expressions. The collection specifically emphasizes how "different silences are also central to the elevation of certain sounds" vis-à-vis hierarchies, and this is reinforced within multi-sensorial dimensions discussed throughout the different chapters (p. 21). Although this innovative synesthetic approach is important, the collection could have used more attention upon contemporary migration, diasporic communities, and popular music production and circulation, which are also relevant to hierarchies of sound and power in the region. While these topics were discussed briefly in Chapter 1, a chapter or two about these issues could have strengthened the overall analysis.

Chapter 1 starts with Porath setting the tone of the book by drawing Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari's and Louis Dumont's concept of strata to understand hierarchies as embedded in sound. For Porath, hierarchical organization of sound is ingrained in an individual or society's ontological position. Hierarchy for sound studies is then expanded through an analysis of politics, religion, language, history, and contemporary spaces across different Southeast Asian countries. The chapter shows the significant role of sound and silence in Southeast Asia, albeit with the existence of a few shortcomings in various countries or cultures. Nonetheless, this introductory chapter is commendable for its attempt to cover the use of sound and music in asserting political, religious, economic, historical and symbolic presence. By introducing these concepts, Porath also gives enough coverage and a needed rationale of why Southeast Asia should be heard – especially because of the inter-sensorial relationship of sound in people's actions, language, and society.

A chapter on the "Cline of Malayness" follows, emphasizing that hierarchy is exhibited by producers of sound and music among Malay-speaking groups. Geoffrey Benjamin shows certain differences in musical characteristics of the tribal, peasant, and aristocratic Melayu. Such differences also parallel the groups' ways of performing their organizational and social everydayness. Cynthia Chou and Margaret Kartomi, in Chapter 3, discuss how sound is instrumental in the navigation of cultural and social lives among the Orang Suku Laut of Indonesia. The authors discuss the meanings that the "sea nomads" attach to sounds in their environment and their life, including their belief systems, mythology, rituals, and daily work, which is a good addition to some recent work on boat dwellers of Asia (Ellorin 2015, Santamaria 2018). Still in Indonesia, Porath writes the subsequent chapter on the Orang Sakai of Riau's mode of ensoundment through illustrating "ontological sources of power from non-physical and embodied realms" in healing ritual and comedy (p. 143). Such hierarchy and power are ensounded through the *dikei* performance, specifically the word-sound – in song and other verbal communication – as artistic embellishments to the ritual.

Discussing another ritual in the Moluccan Islands in Indonesia, Roy Ellen presents Nualu people's practice of séance as characterized by their "acoustical profile." He points out the inter- and multi-sensorial dimensions of the ritual through language and paralinguistic sounds while differentiating it from other rituals that involve singing and/or drumming, since Nualu séance rituals only involve a mouth harp, utterances, paralinguistic features, and bodily movements. This chapter opens a discourse that sound and hierarchy may not always be similarly associated with what other cultures hear. Rituals may involve contrasting acoustical signatures and power structures that are usually only thought of as background rather than a significant component of the ritual experience.

In Chapter 6, Timo Duile examines sound in relation to ecology. He analyzes how the Dayak activists in West Kalimantan, Indonesia understand and contextualize "acoustic ecologies" in distinguishing between cultural and natural sounds. For the activists, these ecologies are vital for understanding the political and environmental changes brought by palm oil agriculture. From the palm oil fields, Chapter 7 moves into Muslim Indonesian society to talk about perceived "sound wars." This religious noise controversy, as David Henley argues, is related to religious and political identity and freedom in the country, interestingly not between different larger religious groups but between intra-Muslim groups. Andy McGraw's chapter presents how symbolic and active modes attached to the *gong agung* embody political, religious and economic power in Balinese society. With such meanings, the *gong agung*, however, is not void of contestation and resistance, which makes the gong's agency more legitimate as people act and react to the power associated with the instrument. Hierarchy and power then do not only rely only on sound but also on the medium of ensounding, based upon who constructs such meanings.

After multiple chapters concerning Indonesia, the book shifts to Myanmar in the next two chapters. Gavin Douglas discusses how a particular sound, music or silence play different roles in the development, articulation, and challenging of power in Myanmar's political environment. Celine Coderey, in Chapter 10, focuses on the healing sounds used in Rakhine and how those who recite words and sounds in healing rituals demonstrate religious positions and status. The chapter is interesting as it shows differences in hierarchy and power between three groups executing healing sounds in public and private spaces – with Buddhist monks to correctly, clearly, and loudly chant, the healers to accurately recite in a variety of ways and volume levels, and the laypeople who usually recite healing sounds with a low voice in public places. But more than the aim towards better wellbeing, such a hierarchy shows the efficacy of the rituals and healing sounds, implying different political and religious positions in Burmese society.

The only contribution concerning the Philippines is a chapter discussing the *pabasa* among Roman Catholics in Pampanga. While many papers have been written about the *pasyon* and *pabasa*, Julius Bautista's take is intriguing as he focuses on the sensory experience or what he calls an "aural sensorium" taken via an ethnographic account (Ileto 1979, Rivera-Mirano 1986, Perkinson and Mendoza 2004). In considering two main acts in the ritual – chanting and self-flagellation – he argues that "sonic piety" is cultivated around the visceral energy that intersubjectively interacts within and between ritual acts and sounds. This sounding is embodied in religious practices and is essential to the nurturing of pious discipline.

The book aptly finishes off with a final chapter asking a question on how Thailand sounds, and consequentially hinting how Southeast Asia sounds (although to use Thailand as a generalization of the region may not be the best way to frame, as the work focused much on each country's nuances and particularities in context). Martin Platt emphasizes that Thai society and its sounds, including speech and literature, are paradigmatically hierarchical. The place of sound in the hierarchy or continuum is based on the kind and quality of the sound produced and heard in Thailand. Again, even silence is given similar consideration, having various terms according to levels and contexts of silence in the specific Thai setting.

Hearing Southeast Asia is an excellent supplement to students or researchers who study ethnomusicology or cultural sociology of music, and those interested in the role of music and sound in religion and politics will benefit even more from the book. The book offers a list of audio recordings that are provided as links on Soundcloud. Readers, especially those unfamiliar with the cultures and sounds of Southeast Asia, will hear the listed audio recordings as a vital resource.

Porath's collection is a much-needed reference for understanding Southeast Asian sonic environments, but may fall short in offering articles from underrepresented Southeast Asian countries like Timor Leste, Laos, and Cambodia, due, in part, to a concentration in Indonesia. Nonetheless, with the very diverse cultural groups in the region, Porath surely had a hard time choosing specific articles to represent how Southeast Asia is heard. Ultimately, I wonder why Southeast Asian scholars are underrepresented in a book about Southeast Asian culture. Still, Porath undeniably curated a conceptually and theoretically rich collection on sonic studies in Southeast Asia and its people. Equally, the authors provide essential research-based contributions justifying the importance of the area's position in sonic, music and cultural studies.

Notes on Contributor

Carljohnson Anacin is a PhD candidate at Griffith University, Australia researching identity and translocality of Filipino musicians in Australia. Carl received his Master's Degree in Social Studies from Benguet State University and a Bachelor's Degree in Social Sciences (Social Anthropology) from the University of the Philippines. His research interests include cultural sociology of music, qualitative research, and interdisciplinary studies. Carl is also the Director for Research and Extension at Panpacific University, Philippines and a multi-instrumentalist.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Ellorin, B.B. 2015. *Trans-cultural Commodities: The Sama-Bajau Music Industries and Identities of Maritime Southeast Asia*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Hawai'i.
- Ileto, R.C. 1979. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Perkinson, J., and S. Lily L. Mendoza. 2004. "Indigenous Filipino Pasyon Defying Colonial Euro-Reason." *Journal of Third World Studies* 21(1): 117-137.
- Rivera-Mirano, L. 1986. "The Pabasa of San Luis, Batangas." *Asian Studies* 22-24: 99-116.
- Santamaria, M.C.M. 2018. "Music, Dance and the Sama-Bajau 'Diaspora': Understanding Aspects of Links among Communities through Ethnochoreomusicological Perspectives." *Journal of Maritime Studies and National Integration*, 2 (2): 86-90.

Carljohnson G. Anacin
School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science, Griffith University-Gold Coast Campus
c.anacin@griffithuni.edu.au