Sounding Singapore: Sound as Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The paper will present the findings of a small-scale study done to ascertain Singapore's soundmarks and the place and meaningfulness of sound in Singapore society. I critically evaluate the significance of these findings in relation to Singapore's cultural and political economy and the population's lived experiences. The paper will also examine sonic events that reveal how sound's regard impacts the cultural and political lifeworlds (Lebenswelt) of Singapore/eans. An oft neglected phenomenon in Singaporeans' lived experience sound inevitably informs, influences and dictates Singapore's social, cultural and political identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historian Alain Corbin stresses how citizens' habitus condition their ways of listening [1]. Sound does not only resonate with the cultural realities of a society, community or country but shapes its practices and policies. In an attempt to apprehend the acoustic ecologies of Singapore and their impact on lived experiences, this paper examines sound as a means of accessing and understanding the society's cultural and political realities. It is thus an inquiry into Singapore's sonicities and soundmarks, but it is also concerned with the hermeneutic dimensions of these soundscapes. The paper presents the findings from a small-scale study done by the author, in 2021, that sought to ascertain the importance of sonicity for Singapore residents and what Singapore's soundmarks are. The findings are evaluated for their acoustemological significance in relation to recent sound events that reveal how sounds, in their dramatization and reception, reflect as they determine the cultural and political life-worlds (*Lebenswelt*) and lived experiences of Singapore/ans. As Jürgen Müller posits, nations "quite often make collective acoustic experiences which help to shape the national identity" [2].

2. SOUNDING SINGAPORE

As part of a research grant study (RI 2/19 TCC), 200 Singapore residents were surveyed between February to July 2021, in-person and online, to gather information on the value of sound in everyday experiences of Singaporeans, and what they believed were soundmarks that determined the *Lebenswelt*, life-worlds, or what Husserl explains as the collective lived experiences of subjects in a world, living with and together with it. Hereby are the leading questions:

1. How attentive are you usually to the sounds around you? Are the sounds around you significant/important to you?
2. What are some of the sounds that are distinct in your residential neighborhood or the area you work/study?
3. How long have you been living/working/studying in the location mentioned in Q2? Have you noticed any changes in the types of sounds there?
4. What do you think are the sounds that are unique to Singapore?

2.1 Methodology

An inductive content analysis approach was taken to identifying themes and concepts across the thick survey data. Three thematic headings were generated on respondents' attitudes to their sonic environment after responses were transcribed and scanned for semantically equivalent words. For example, some spoke about their preferences of soothing or "relaxing" environments as opposed to feelings of "irritation" and "dislike" when they hear loud noises. These phrases were then grouped into the constructed unit of meaning -- of sound's function to influence the mood of the listener. Relative to the emotional dimension of sound was how these reactions were often paired with respondents' aim to be productive. These sounds "distract" them and "decrease [their] effectiveness" to carry out a range of tasks like working or studying. More than the impact on concentration, respondents also cited how their perceived quality of certain sounds shapes the ambience of a setting. The "character" of a place is defined by this pervading mood that is associated with the varying emotional responses to factors like noise levels, sound types, presence of music and even participant etiquette. Sub-categories, namely *Influences Mood, Impacts Concentration, Sense of Familiarity* and *Shapes Experience of a Space*, were then abstracted to form the main thematic heading of sound's "affective function" that postulates the relationship between the sounded environment and the listener's emotional reaction (be it positive or negative) to the sound they hear,

which then forms their unique listening experiences. The other two thematic categories that were generated after the above coding process was repeated were: (a) Spatial Awareness; a common thread in the responses was how respondents thought of sound as sensory "information" that allow them to position themselves, know what is near them and alert them if there is danger around; and (b) Embodied Experience/Memory, where respondents revealed the embeddedness of the familiar and/or remembered sounds in their daily lives which formed their sonic expectations.

Identified soundmarks of Singapore were also tallied and ranked based on modality to find out which were the most common sounds that respondents felt uniquely represents cultural identities. Data sets were tabulated across age groups, gender and ethnicity to identify meaningful patterns between respondents' frames, expectations and meanings they have towards their sonic environment. These trends were extrapolated and expanded to discuss possible themes and to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Singapore's soundscapes.

2.2 Key Findings

54% of respondents said they "Always" or "Frequently" paid attention to the sounds around them while 46% said they "Sometimes" or "Never" give much attention to them. When asked to identify what are some of the distinct sounds in their residential neighborhood or the place where they work or study, many took some time to recall, proving how sounds have become "keynotes" and naturalized as part of their everyday lived experiences. The finding is significant because it reveals how almost one in two persons living here do not regard sound as a significant way of conscious knowing, of revealing experiential truth; sound is regarded as functional or affective, something that one has to negotiate with daily. Responses to the follow-up question reveals this as well:

40.5% cited that sound has mainly an informational, or functional purpose – for example, as a way to alert them to danger or to provide information on the activities around so they know how to respond; 58.4% believe sound evokes emotional responses (positive or negative ones) and 28.3% says sound impacts concentration thereby affecting their productivity and focus at work or study. The data reflects the cultural pragmatism that is characteristic of Singapore/ans. Singapore's political culture and climate have always been based on pragmatism; that ideology which constructs much of social policy and practice has impacted not just Singaporeans' lived experiences but also their ears – of how they listen and what they listen to, what is sonically meaningful, and what is not. Sound is regarded functionally or as a means of evaluating productivity. The types of sound respondents revealed to be soundmarks also reflected deeply the physical realities of living in an urban densely populated country and in a multicultural society.

Apart from bird songs, and the Koel bird being among the most characteristic sounds (3rd in the rank), the remaining sounds identified are archetypal of urban soundscapes; street noise, traffic and sounds from transportation modes and systems topped the list; construction sounds ranked 6. How respondents regarded characteristic Singapore sounds, sounds of cultural value reveal the highly urbanized, built-up environment with relative absence of nature or of hinterland sounds. Additionally, construction – of roads, tunnels, houses – is a ubiquitous sight in Singapore. 9 of the top 10 themes were then urban sounds, amidst what could be an acoustic ecology like any other metropolitan city. With relentless urbanization, the dominant soundscape experienced by city dwellers is increasingly homogenous and "lo fi."

The findings reveal Singaporeans' *Lebenswelt* is an experiential horizon of relentless industrial and mechanical progress. In addition to acoustemologies of urban progress, the survey responses also reveal how aurality can reflect the State's political design.

3. A POLITICS OF SOUNDING MULTI-CULTURALISM

Sound is distinctly revelatory of a State's political lifeworld as well. In Singapore, multiculturalism is one of the city-state's core foundational (social-political) principles that further determines many of the government's policies from education to housing and the rule of law. It is the belief that different ethnic groups (for the government, race can be categorically determined to be "Chinese", "Malay", "Indian" and "Others") can and will live and work together as a united and cohesive people, and no particular cultural heritage or ethnic, religious identity will precede the national identity and the nation's shared values. While the State advances the principle (which encompasses multireligiosity) primarily through visual signifiers such as ethnic costumes, religious festivals and skin color, multiculturalism has an acoustic dimension. Respondents of the survey reflected how the multilingual announcement made in public train stations was the most distinctive soundmark that reflected Singapore identity while the interplay of different languages, Singlish and the Singapore accent was the next most recognisable soundmark. Sounds associated with religious practices and ceremonies - church bells, chants, calls to prayer at mosques – was placed seventh.

While much can be written about the acoustic dimensions of multicultural practice in Singapore, I will examine a particular religious ceremony whose sacred sounds have been regulated and restricted. The Hindu Thaipusam festival is an annual ritual procession practiced by Singapore's Tamil Indian minority population and it commemorates the Hindu deity Lord Subramaniam otherwise known as Lord Murugan. The rite involves a procession of devotees carrying a *kavadi*, an elaborately decorated semi-circular frame made from steel and wood, and which, in some designs, has segments that are pierced

into the flesh of the bearer who, supposedly, feels no pain for he is sustained by faith. These *kavadi* bearers, along with devotees, proceed in colorful procession along public roads, accompanied by music and drumming, sacred sounds that are meant to sustain the devotees and create a soundscape of devotion. Religious foot processions are not permitted by law; Thaipusam is an exception. The conditions for dispensing this exemption include a ban on music and drumming, a restriction that has been in place since 1973 after fights between rival groups broke out, and music was used as a means of sonic competition thereby evidencing music's capacity to "inspire" disorderly behaviour. This restriction has, however, eased in recent years though not completely lifted. Critically considered, the ban reflects how Hindu sacred sound is metonymic of danger and considered noise pollution. In its practice, the religious is confronted by the secular in public space where sound cannot be effectively contained. Writing about the sonic politics of Thaipusam, Jim Sykes observes how "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" [3]. There is distinctly conflict 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 heritage" [4].

Such distinctions are also true of sacred Islamic sounds. In all Islamic communities, the loudspeaker, radio, and television are integral to the traditional call to prayer, or *adhan / azan*. The *adhan* is a soundmark of the Muslim lifeworld. While older mosques in Singapore, those built before 1975, had loudspeakers that faced outwards of the mosque, those built after 1975 were compelled by law to have speakers face the interior of the building. With urbanization, and with multicultural practice in view, there was a need for new considerations of the soundscapes of shared spaces for sacred sonicities were regarded as "intrusive" to those outside that community [5].

This sonic politics has not escaped controversy or interrogation by some Singaporeans who have criticized the censuring of sacred sounds as possibly "racist" and discriminatory. These netizens note how sounds of the cymbals and drums of lion dances, a characteristic feature of the Chinese New Year, singing of Christmas carols in public spaces, the loud rhythms of the *kompang*, a traditional Malay membranophone heard during processional Malay weddings, are not prohibited. These events take place in public spaces but are permitted to continue despite the "noise" that can occur. The government, however, articulates its defense with a threadbare distinction between religious celebrations and social/community, non-religious celebrations. Social celebrations can involve music, song and drumming but (some) religious ceremonies, in particular, those whose rites involve public processions, must manage sonic output. The justification for this tenuous distinction between religious and social/ cultural is founded on a belief that religious ceremonies carry a particular sensitivity with "the risks of incidents […] considered to be higher" [6].

4. CONCLUSION

Even as Singapore is regarded as a global exemplar of contemporary multicultural practice in which races and religions coexist harmoniously, such auditory events resound with a contrasting reality: complaints about religious vs sacred sounds reverberate with frequencies of difference and absent aurality; a lack of active, sonorous understanding. Lived multiculturalism is, more accurately, "practiced tolerance through a fierce possession of a right to not be harassed and to keep a safe distance from the Other" [7].

Acknowledgments

5. REFERENCES

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