

**2nd Symposium of the ICTMD Study Group on  
Sacred and Spiritual Sounds and Practices**

# **Roots and Routes**

## **Ritual and Liturgical Creativity in Sacred and Spiritual Music Traditions**

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**University of Szeged, Hungary**



# Abstracts

**Daniel Kodzo Avorgbedor**, University of Ghana

*Slouching Towards the Secular? Bodily-Visual and Sonic Creativities in Contemporary Ghanaian Rituals and Ceremonies: Challenges of Social Media Appropriations and Representations*

This paper discusses examples of innovative, creative performance practice in contemporary indigenous ceremonial and ritual traditions with respect to inter-artistic sensibilities present at festivals, royal and funeral ceremonies and rituals, and in the general context of religion and spirituality. Drawing on sites of bodily and visual reconfigurations and sonic manifestations, the paper highlights specific ways in which sensuous, multi-intersensory and general artistic-aesthetic elaborations are foregrounded in circumstantial and seasonal enactments that occur in indigenous, Christian, and popular cultural contexts. The central objective of the analysis is to approach both the *location* and the pronounced affectivities of such contemporary tendencies as an ultimate, interstitial framing and thus blurring of sacred and secular dichotomies. The paper further considers the general ideological, strategic, and ludic proprieties of such phenomena and offers opportunities to reexamine the concepts *performative* and *performativity*. The need for reconsideration is justified due to the nature of the interstices and also to the domain of the supranatural which often lies beyond logical reasoning and is somewhat inaccessible to our “sensitive scientific” instruments. The paper concludes by identifying current social media practices that selectively extend, re-display, (re)present and (auto)archive these contemporary traditions and ways in which they cloud, redirect, amplify and reinvent tradition, including questions of rights, ethics and ownership. Audiovisual examples will support the arguments in the paper.

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**Steven Friedson**, University of North Texas

*Veiled Atmospheres: The Black Atlantic Pulse*

An Islamic atmosphere permeates the ritual life of the Kunde shrines of West Africa. Attend a Friday gathering and you will hear the *azan*, the call to prayer, the *shahada*, the profession of the faith; you will see a *buta*, the vessel for pouring ablutions, even a red fez on the head of a priest. Yet, ask a shrine member or a priest if they are Muslim, and the answer will be an emphatic no. Members do not face Mecca five times a day, nor are they interested in going there to fulfill a religious obligation. At Salah, the Friday gathering, the call to prayer *is* faithfully rendered; however, the profession of the faith is not recited but sung by women while dancing in a circle to the drumming for the mother of the pantheon, Ablewa. This is not the only music you would hear at a Salah (named after the Arabic word for prayer); it is saturated with singing, clapping, and drumming that speaks the language of northern gods. The drum that sounds Ablewa’s appellations is the one that followed her south and the one that calls out to these northern deities to possess their devotees and, in doing so, dance themselves into existence. And when they arrive, shrine members will take the buta and greet them by drawing a path in the sand with water, then perform an ablution by pouring water over their hands and feet, fitting for northern gods. The Kunde pantheon are strangers and, according to a deep costal ethos,

strangers should be welcomed with open arms, made to feel at home, for you never know when you may be one. These dancing gods followed a route from a “North” always already marked as an Islamic “Other” to the southern shores of the Guinea Coast, where they were domesticated within the religious pulse of the Black Atlantic, a pulse whose core is a musical way of being-in-the-world for both deity and devotee. It is this musical way of being that is of concern in this paper, of how musical experience pierced this Islamic veil, welcoming these stranger gods into the musical world of the Black Atlantic.

**Marie Agatha Ozah**, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

*Nsibidi, Masquerade, and the Acoustic Archive: Multimodal Ritual Communication in Ejagham Ekpe Sacred Music*

The Ejagham people of Cross River State, Nigeria, maintain one of West Africa's most complex sacred music systems within the Ngbe (Ekpe) cult. This paper examines the productive interplay between rootedness and transformation in Ejagham ritual soundscapes, focusing on how vocal chants, percussive ensembles, masquerade performance, body inscription, and nsibidi graphic signs function as complementary semiotic registers that encode law, history, and spiritual authority. Drawing on ethnographic documentation and oral histories, I argue that Ngbe (Ekpe) musical repertoires—comprising call-and-response sequences—operate as coded ritual language intelligible only to initiates, serving simultaneously as mnemonic archive and jurisdictional instrument across village networks.

The paper discusses both conservative mechanisms and adaptive trajectories. Continuity is maintained through hereditary custodianship, initiation protocols, and the integration of sound with visual signs (nsibidi) and embodied practice. Yet these traditions have never been static. Long-distance trade networks, colonial suppression, and forced migration generated significant transformations: ritual roles were reconfigured, public visibility negotiated, and entire lodge systems reconstituted. Most dramatically, Ekpe practices traveled the Middle Passage, re-emerging as Abakuá in Cuba, where ritual drumming, coded language, and material forms were creatively adapted to new social and political locations and exigencies.

Finally, the study illustrates how sacred music traditions provide steadfast continuity with the past while simultaneously circulating through migration and institutional channels; how creativity operates as both inherent quality and transformative response; and how boundaries between sacred authority and secular power are continually negotiated through multimodal performance. It reveals that ritual music is not merely transmitted but actively remade at the intersection of roots and routes.

**Andreas Meyer**, Folkwang University of the Arts, Essen (Germany)

*Presenting Ritual Practice – The Salaka Feast in Tobago (West Indies)*

The performance of music, dance, and other cultural forms of expression as part of cultural heritage is often associated with the notion of a fundamental shift in meaning, as these practices are seen as detached from their original functions and instead serve to represent aspects of a group's culture and identity. A further assumption holds that, in

this altered form, cultural phenomena become disconnected from tradition. By framing these phenomena as acts of preservation, what were once continuous processes become “frozen” or “mummified.” Recent studies exploring religion and heritage, however, suggest that the idea that cultural expressions undergo a profound change in meaning when transferred to the heritage sector should not be taken for granted. Indeed, when religious phenomena are designated as cultural heritage, this process may bring about secularization; nonetheless, religious meanings are often retained, and religious faith may even be reinforced. Various studies therefore focus less on the contrast between heritage and religion and more on their complex entanglements and fluid boundaries. Informed by these insights, my paper deals with ritual practices and cultural heritage preservation on the Caribbean island of Tobago.

The focus is on the *Salaka Feast*, a traditional ritual honoring ancestral spirits, which today is performed only as a reenactment during the annual Tobago Heritage Festival. I explore the history of the ritual and show how the distinction between ritual practice and its staged presentation in the festival becomes blurred. Furthermore, I highlight creative transformations in the music associated with the ritual being performed. As part of the Heritage Festival, the feast is transmitted as a continuously evolving event.

**Genevieve Nrenzah, University of Ghana**

*Reconceptualizing Sacred and Secular Boundaries in Contemporary Ghanaian Music*

The paper explores Ghanaian musicians, particularly those in the genres of gospel, highlife, hiplife, and Afro-fusion, who reconfigure spiritual expression by integrating religious themes into the aesthetic structures of popular music commonly associated with secular entertainment. In the past, sacred music was used for liturgical purposes with a didactic, moral and devotional purpose, while secular music was used for recreational and commercial purposes. Contemporary Ghanaian spiritual music, however, continues to challenge the historical dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. It embraces mainstream musical forms that transcend the church to reach wider audiences, producing hybrid sonic spaces that mirror changing cultural, religious, and social realities. This change is driven by the growth of media and the rising influence of youth culture, which is demanding more accessible, relatable expressions of faith.

This paper examines how lyrical content, performance contexts, and visual representation contribute to this reimagining, employing content analysis of six crossover gospel and secular songs. Spirituality is often communicated by artists using vernacular languages, urban slang, and personal narratives, thus bridging generational and socio-economic divisions. The collaborations between gospel and secular musicians also signify the growing acceptance of fluid identities within Ghana's music industry. Some critics see this convergence as a dilution of the sanctity of religious music, while others see it as a lively form of contextual theology that speaks to today's lived experiences. The study suggests that redefinition of sacred and secular boundaries in Ghanaian spiritual music points to broader societal changes, including shifting views on morality, identity, and religious expression. Far from diluting religious significance, these hybrid forms expand the reach and importance of spirituality in a rapidly changing cultural environment, making music a crucial vehicle through which Ghanaians grapple with faith and modernity.

**Amos Darkwa Asare**, University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna  
*Embodied Lineages: Musical Knowledge, Spiritual Mediation, and Cultural Stewardship in the Priesthood of Baba Gasese*

This paper examines the priesthood of Baba Gasese of the Sankofa religious community in Duakor, Ghana, foregrounding his role as a bearer of embodied musical and spiritual lineages within a marginalized cultural enclave. Although relatively young within the hierarchy of shrine leadership, Baba Gasese has emerged as one of the most authoritative figures in the Duakor community. His shrine is the most vibrant, his counsel widely sought, and his ritual activities central to communal life. Baba Gasese's use of his body, voice, gestures, ritual performance, and everyday actions serve as a living archive of Sankofa spiritual and sonic traditions. Through ethnographic engagement with his ritual performances and everyday interactions, I explore how Baba Gasese's musical knowledge, mostly manifested in chants and invocation, functions as a crucial medium of spiritual communication and communal coherence. The paper argues that his ritual sound practices operate simultaneously as tools of spiritual mediation and as cultural practices through which Sankofa identity is enacted, transmitted, and safeguarded. In this sense, Baba Gasese embodies a complex form of cultural stewardship through which he preserves inherited sonic traditions while adapting them to contemporary social needs, guiding devotees through personal crises, community disputes, and collective aspirations. By situating his musical priesthood within broader discourses on tradition bearers and custodians of culture, the paper demonstrates how embodied ritual soundwork sustains cultural continuity, spiritual authority, and social resilience in a minority fishing community negotiating its place within a rapidly transforming cultural landscape.

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**Eben Graves**, Yale University

*Imaginal and Material Routes of Devotion in the Sung Poetry of Bengal*

Metaphors often link sacred musical practices to specific places and a sense of the past. When musical sound is linked with ritual practice, as in the case of *padābali kīrtan*, a form of Hindu devotional song in South Asia, the association between place, history and sound is often represented with references to soil. One example of this is found in how *padābali kīrtan* is defined as a musical-religious phenomenon that “developed in the soil of [the] Northwestern part of Bengal” (Chakraborty 1992). The link between a region, sound, and soil expressed in this example is pervasive in the discourse surrounding devotional song in Bengal; moreover, this relationship was often reframed in the register of regional nationalism in Bengal during the early twentieth century (Graves 2022). However, these associations can paper over the ways that supra-regional influences were key to the development of this musical form. This paper will explore two examples from the lyrical and formal features of *kīrtan* to illustrate how creative interactions across South Asia during the early modern period were central to the genre's development. The first case studies the centrality of Brajabuli as the linguistic register that was used to compose lyrics about Radha and Krishna that became central to this genre, an adoption that highlights routes of exchange between Mithila and Bengal through vocabulary and phonetics. A second case traces the routes of itinerant musicians from beyond the Bengal region,

which led to the formulation of a musical system and *tāl* theory central to the ritual realization of the genre's sung poetry. The geographic routes that have contributed to this musical style are further reflected in the types of imaginal routes that are the aim of *padābalī kīrtan*, as the genre's poetry aims to evoke images of deities that are central to the religious practice.

**Christopher L. Ballengee**, Polish Academy of Science

*Sounding Ancestral Arrival: Ritualizing Migration in Indian Caribbean Musical Performance*

This paper examines how Indian Caribbean musical performance traditions function as sites for the ritualization of migration narratives, focusing on *tassa* drumming and related forms in Trinidad and Tobago. While these practices are often framed as secular or folkloric, I argue that they operate as dynamic modes of sacred expression through which histories of indenture, displacement, and arrival are reimagined and re-embodied. Drawing on ethnographic research and performance analysis, the paper explores how musical structures, choreographed movement, and narrative staging evoke what may be understood as a sacred recounting of ancestral journeys.

I position ancestral arrival to Trinidad as both a foundational narrative (root) and an ongoing process of cultural circulation and reinterpretation (route). In *tassa* competitions and staged productions, performers mobilize sonic and visual motifs that reference the voyage from India to the Caribbean, plantation life, and the emergence of creolized identities. These performances do not simply represent the past; rather, they enact a form of ritual memory that blurs the boundaries between sacred and secular domains.

By framing Indian Caribbean performance as a form of ritual creativity, this paper contributes to broader discussions of how sacred and spiritual meanings are produced outside institutional religious settings. It argues that the ritualization of migration narratives constitutes a key mechanism through which diasporic communities negotiate identity, belonging, and historical consciousness in the present.

**Pankaj Rawat**, Independent Scholar, New Delhi

*Drum Beats of Devotion: Ritual Jāgar Music and Community Identity in Uttarakhand Himalayas, India*

Jāgar folk ceremonies in the Uttarakhand Himalayas exemplify how rooted sacred music rituals shape social identity, collective memory, and cultural continuity. Yet, systematic scholarly engagement with their dynamic musical, social, and ritual dimensions remains limited within ethnomusicological discourse. Addressing this gap, the present study ethnographically examines Jāgar traditions, with particular attention to the socio-cultural positioning of the lower-caste drummer (Dholī) community and their central role in mediating ritual performance and spiritual communication across selected regions of Uttarakhand.

Drawing from interviews with musicians, ritual specialists, and priests, participant observation of live ceremonies, and audio-visual documentation of performances across

multiple village sites, the research documents sacred and ritual song practices, and captures variations in practice. It further integrates the ASEB (Activity–Setting–Experience–Benefit) framework alongside contextual musical analysis of rhythm, structure, and lyrical content to interpret performative and experiential dimensions.

The findings reveal the pivotal role drummers and mediums play in sustaining ritual processes. The intricate musical structures combining classical and local rhythmic patterns that the drummers produce alongside codified ritual sequences not only facilitate spirit possession and divine invocation but also serve to reinforce shared belief systems and facilitate communal participation. Variations in performance style and ritual intensity observed reflect localized identities and shifting socio-economic conditions, while adaptive continuity resulting from changing socio-cultural contexts reveals maintenance of the practice's ritual core. The study highlights that Jāgar is not a static tradition but a living, evolving practice that bridges continuity and change. Its implications extend to ethnomusicology, anthropology, and heritage studies by demonstrating how localized sacred music traditions remain relevant while responding to shifting cultural contexts and emerging modes of transmission.

**Ayushi Koul**, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

*Embodying Mazoomiyat: Singing Vulnerability in Precarity*

Through examining *Nauha*, ritualistic mourning songs sung collectively during the holy month of Muharram, this paper observes how devotion transforms into vulnerability, and grief into moral and political register. The paper focuses on sonic tradition during the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain in the Battle of Karbala by the minority Shi'a community of Srinagar in the Indian Occupied Kashmir. Drawing on ethnographic observation during 2024 and 2025, it argues that *Nauha* sung as part of *matam* (mourning) in Kashmiri Shi'a rituals do not merely commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala but re-enact *mazloomiyat*, a state of unjust suffering, as a lived, collective disposition. Due to the political instability of Kashmir, emphasis is brought on the *mazloom* (vulnerable) persona of Imam Hussain over his warrior identity. A *Korimol*, a destitute father, brother, son becomes the persona through which Hussain is remembered. The ritualistic performances through the lens of *mazloomiyat*, emphasize and resonate with local histories of loss and dispossession in a conflicted and militarily occupied territory. Through collective singing in processions, majlis (gatherings), and gendered mourning spaces, vulnerability is made visible, binding religious memory to contemporary experiences of political precarity. The mourning songs performed only using rhythmic beating of the chest also become a means of catharsis for personal and collective loss.

Conceptually engaging with Hamid Dabashi's (2011) formulations of deferred obedience and the Shi'a paradox, Schneider's *Performing Remains* (2011), Christopher Small's *Musicking* (1998) and Judith Butler's discussions of grievability (2004), the paper suggests that mourning through Kashmiri *Nauha* sustains a local memory of unfinished justice rather than closure. Ultimately, the paper argues that in Kashmir, the performance of vulnerability through *Nauha* functions as a form of endurance, allowing Karbala to live as a lens through which global and local injustices are inhabited, and contested.

**Dóra Pataricza**, University of Jewish Studies, Budapest  
*Szeged Synagogue Soundscapes: 120 years of Liturgical Music*

The musical life of the Szeged Synagogue offers an exciting case study of how sacred sound practices navigate between inherited forms and emerging routes of transformation. This paper examines the synagogue's liturgical music across three periods to trace how cantorial traditions, organ music, and congregational singing have been reshaped by migration, institutional change, and evolving communal needs. At its 1903 inauguration, the synagogue's musical program embodied Neolog Judaism's aspiration to modernize worship while maintaining ritual authenticity. The grand organ and professionally trained cantors reflected Central European influences, particularly from Vienna and Budapest. Archival evidence and oral histories reveal ongoing conflicts among cantorial authority, organ accompaniment, and congregational participation, which have become constitutive of the Szeged liturgical soundscape.

The Holocaust fundamentally disrupted these musical traditions. The murder of cantors, decimation of the congregation, and loss of musical knowledge created ruptures that could not be bridged by institutional continuity alone. Post-war musical practice operated under radically different conditions: drastically reduced community, limited resources, and the constraints of state socialism. Yet musical creativity persisted through adaptation, with cantors from nearby cities and, unique for Hungary, a woman conducting services.

The post-1989 period introduced new routes for musical circulation: growing tourism, international influence, and public concerts. The synagogue's magnificent acoustic space increasingly hosts performances that sit ambiguously between religious service, cultural heritage, and public entertainment. How does the community's liturgical authenticity align with touristic expectations? What happens when sacred music becomes heritage performance?

Drawing on musical recordings, cantorial ego-documents, concert programs, and interviews, I argue that the Szeged case illuminates broader questions about sacred music's capacity to carry multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings. Rather than viewing these transformations as "secularization," I propose understanding them as creative negotiations that generate new hybrid forms through which Jewish sacred sound continues to resonate in contemporary Hungary.

**Ivanka Perković and Dražena Todorović**, University of Arts, Belgrade  
*When the Root Resists the Route: Serbian Folk Church Chanting and Compositional Practice in Vlastimir Perić's Kto Bog Velij (Who Is A Great God But Ours?, 1998)*

The gradual collapse of socialist ideological frameworks across Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe in the last two decades of the twentieth century brought about a series of changes in the cultural and religious spheres, including, in the Serbian context, a renewal of Orthodox choral music production after nearly four decades during which sacred composition had remained largely outside the boundaries of acceptable artistic practice. Vlastimir Perić (1927–2000), a music scholar, composer and pedagogue belonging to the first postwar generation educated at the Belgrade Music Academy, whose compositional output rests predominantly on the expressive means of late

Romanticism and post-Romanticism, turned to a sacred text only once in his career, in his last composition, the choral setting of the Prokeimenon *Who Is A Great God But Ours?* (*Kto Bog Velij*, 1998), dedicated to the Study Choir of the Institute of Musicology. The work is based on the melody of the seventh mode (Serbian: *sedmi glas*; Greek: ἦχος βαρύς / *echos varys*) of Serbian folk church chanting (*srpsko narodno crkveno pojanje*), a monophonic liturgical singing tradition that took shape in the second half of the eighteenth century within the Karlovci metropolitan area, on Byzantine and post-Byzantine foundations, absorbing along the way elements of Ukrainian church singing mediated through Russian ecclesiastical channels as well as characteristics of Serbian folk song. Transmitted orally for generations and shaped through communal, folkloric processes, the tradition has been recorded in staff notation only since the mid-nineteenth century.

The aim of this paper is to examine the musical means employed in the composition and to determine the relationship Perićić establishes toward this inherited chanting tradition, given the multi-decade discontinuity in the production of Serbian sacred choral music. Our analysis indicates that the composer adheres closely to the received chant melody, with a harmonic treatment that does not substantially depart from established conventions, raising the question of what happens when a prolonged rupture in compositional practice does not result in the transformation of liturgical musical material, but rather in its reaffirmation.

## **Stephanie Molea, National University of Music, Bucharest**

*Theoretical Elements of Psaltic Music in “Bazul teoretic și practic al muzicii bisericești sau Gramatica melodică [Theoretical and Practical Basis of Church Music or the Melodic Grammar]” by Protopsaltis Anton Pann*

Protopsaltis Anton Pann was a Romanian composer, translator and folklorist. His important role as a lead cantor helped shape the Romanian repertory of psaltic music in the Romanian Orthodox church. This paper aims to explore and contextualize this sacred music at the beginning of the 19th century through the study of the theoretical elements of Byzantine chant outlined in Pann's pedagogically-oriented musical treatise *Bazul teoretic și practic al muzicii bisericești sau Gramatica melodică [The Theoretical and Practical Basis of Church Music or the Melodic grammar]* (1845). Found within this work is a detailed discussion of musical notation and musical theory as well as modal theory and commentary concerning the prior history of Romanian psaltic music. The research for this paper included a preliminary transliteration of the treatise from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet and a summary translation of the treatise from Romanian to English.

The objective of this paper's analysis is to highlight the historical and pedagogical significance of *Bazul teoretic* through an examination of the treatise and its cultural impact up until the present day. Using this treatise as a conduit for his process of Romanisation (the process of adaptation of foreign work into the Romanian language and culture), Pann adapted and simplified many aspects of Greek chant that were previously predominant in the church, resulting in Romanians in the church gaining a better understanding of the contents of the music, the theology, and the prayers. This led to a general strengthening of heritage and national pride within Romanian culture in the 19th century. Ultimately, the systems established by Anton Pann in his treatise have had a profound and lasting impact on multiple facets of Romanian culture.

**Monique M. Ingalls**, Baylor University, Texas

*Music Of and Beyond Belief: Conceptual Tools and Cross-Purpose Conversations for Research on Spirituality and Music-Making*

What are the spiritual purposes of community music-making, and how does sacred music function in pluralistic contexts? The first part of this paper addresses these questions by introducing two conceptual tools: *spiritual conviviality* and *religious intersectionality*. Both tools stem from ongoing research into British and European community gospel choirs, which examines how singing gospel music encourages singers to challenge—and sometimes to redraw—religious, racial/ethnic, and social class boundaries. ‘Spiritual conviviality’ extends Paul Gilroy’s concept of conviviality beyond race and ethnicity to describe musical practices that foster a sense of spiritual belonging without requiring shared religious beliefs or values. The concept of ‘religious intersectionality’ proposes to expand the scope of intersectionality by putting the accent on religious and/or spiritual affiliations (or the lack thereof), identifying the ways in which these interact with race, gender/sexual, and class-based modes of identification within the singing of religious song repertoires, including gospel music.

Though drawn from ethnographic fieldwork within musicking communities, these two theoretical models can also be fruitfully applied to how we conduct academic conversations around musicking and the sacred. To illustrate this application, I draw on experiences co-organizing study days and a biennial academic conference on Christian congregational music that have sought to cultivate a generative dialogue among scholars from diverse (non-)religious and spiritual backgrounds. Tensions among participants sometimes working at cross-purposes can pose challenges. Yet bringing dissonant voices together to discuss research on Christian music-making also proves profoundly generative, opening new avenues of inquiry and forging surprising connections. Attending to the spiritual dimensions of musicking can not only enrich our understanding of the communities we study, but suggests that sharing our research can serve ethical—and, at times, even *spiritual*—purposes.

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**Anna Niedźwiedź**, Jagiellonian University, Krakow

*Between Tradition and Innovation: Orality and Sound in the Spiritual Practices of Ghanaian Catholic Women*

In this presentation, I discuss religious and spiritual “oral” practices I witnessed during ethnographic field research conducted in the central part of Ghana. My particular focus is on Roman Catholic women living in the religiously diverse environment of contemporary postcolonial Africa. By analyzing the “roots” and “routes” of their spiritual practices, I refer to two paradoxically entangled religious traditions: the so-called “African Traditional Religion(s)” and the recently expanding pentecostalization of African Christianity. I also apply the concepts of “oral theology” and “theology in practice” and compare them with anthropological approaches to “lived religion.” “Oral theology” and “theology in practice” are concepts introduced by African scholars associated with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. These concepts not only emphasize the importance of “oral theology” in the African context, but also promote a broad understanding of “orality” (see, e.g., Oduyoye 2019). In this sense, “orality” refers not only to the textual dimension of

speech, but also to sounds and their various forms (such as singing, speaking in tongues, silence, and sacred noise), bodily movements (gestures and dances), soundscapes, and even the use of clothing and jewelry, as well as the communal nature of “oral” spiritual experiences.

Drawing on these conceptual frameworks, as well as anthropological approaches to lived religion, I demonstrate how Ghanaian Catholic women combine “traditional” and “innovative” uses of sound and orality in their spiritual practices. Broader questions—concerning women’s positioning in religious, family, and ethnic contexts, as well as their communal and individual forms of agency—emerge from the ethnographic case studies. The presentation also addresses issues related to official and unofficial “liturgy” and the transformation of Ghanaian Christianity and Catholicism in postcolonial and decolonial African contexts.

**Henriette Stierlin, University of Szeged**

*In the Lure of Magical Sounds. The Role of Music in the Jesuit Missions of Moxos (Bolivia) and its Effects Until Today*

The heightened sensory impact of the Baroque era was a defining feature of the 18th century, shaping a wide range of artistic expressions. In the colonial Americas, it played a key role in the conversion of indigenous people to the Christian faith engaging their participation in religious practices. While music and drama were already important to Jesuit traditions in Europe, these performative expressions became particularly powerful in the colonies, where music often communicated more effectively with the neophytes than words alone.

Moxos, located in present-day Bolivia is known for its impressive traditions of music. It is also the place where hidden musical scores of Baroque music were discovered in the 20th century more than 200 years after the expulsion of the Jesuits. This paper will illustrate how such musical traditions were not only preserved but how they have risen in prominence in recent years.

**Christianne Strothmann, Folkwang University of the Arts, Germany**

*The Precious Bundle – A Grammar of Tibetan Ritual Melodies Melody (ké), Textual Modularity, and Ritual Creativity in Tibetan Yungdrung Bön*

This paper examines ritual creativity in the Yungdrung Bön tradition of Tibet through the relationship between text, melody, and ritual composition. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork with the Bön ritual musician Dawa Namgyal Kharnatsang, as well as online research collaboration with Sherab Palzin, senior nun of the Ratna Menling convent in Dolanji, India.

I argue that ritual meaning in Yungdrung Bön does not arise from textual content alone but from the coupling of textual fragments with specific, tradition or teacher-bound melodies. These text–melody units determine how a given passage is ritually classified in a particular moment, effectively assigning ritual function to otherwise polyvalent textual material. The same text may function as a part of the Phowa (’pho ba, transference of consciousness) practice when performed with a Phowa-associated melody, or as Guru

Yoga when sung with a different melodic setting. Across lineages, however, these associations are not stable. In the Menri tradition, Guru Yoga is typically performed with a distinct textual corpus different from that used in Phowa practice. In contrast, within the Shen lineage, the same text that in Menri is associated with Phowa may be recontextualized as Guru Yoga through its melodic realization.

I propose that this coupling of text and melody—and, more broadly, the composition of multiple textual segments with multiple melodic settings—is a central site of ritual expertise and the primary domain of the ritual master’s creative work. Rather than simply performing fixed, canonized rituals, ritual specialists are often called upon to assemble rituals for specific purposes, adapting them to individual persons, places, and situational contexts. From this perspective, ritual creativity in Yungdrung Bön is not located outside tradition but is embedded in the compositional practices through which tradition is continuously enacted, reconfigured, and made operative in concrete ritual contexts.

**Lars Gajda**, Folkwang University of the Arts, Germany

*Ritual Practice Beyond the Monastery: A Case Study of a Former Tibetan Monk*

This paper approaches the symposium’s theme through a case study of a former Tibetan monk, Yungdrung Tenzin (Dominique), whose biography exemplifies the dynamic interplay of “roots” and “routes” in sacred musical and ritual practice. The study is situated within my PhD research on intercultural music education in Tibetan religious contexts, combining perspectives from music pedagogy and ethnomusicology. I first met Dominique at the Tibetan Yungdrung Bon exile monastery Menri in Dolanji, India, an institution central to the preservation of Bon traditions. Having spent seventeen years there as a monk, his spiritual practice represents a close engagement with the “roots” of Tibetan sacred practice. Since returning to France in 2017, however, his life and practice have undergone transformation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in France (2025–2026), this paper traces how his ritual and musical practices have been reshaped in a secular environment.

One result of my fieldwork is that Dominique maintains an active spiritual practice while adapting it to the structures of everyday life outside the monastery. Rather than abandoning monastic forms, he reconfigures them into a more flexible and individualized practice. This process illustrates how sacred traditions circulate across cultural and geographic contexts and become reinterpreted through lived experience. Dominique’s case demonstrates how ritual and musical knowledge can be both preserved and transformed, resulting in hybrid forms that integrate spiritual discipline into contemporary secular life. In this sense, his biography offers a micro-perspective on broader processes of circulation, adaptation, and innovation within Tibetan spiritual music traditions.

**Edris Voet**, University of Oxford

*Magical Melodies: Musical Notation in the Five Great Mantras, 1485*

This paper explores the musical characteristics of Buddhist mantras contained within a mediæval Korean compendium of spells, the *Five Great Mantras*. These five “great”

mantras were used in various ritual contexts including official ceremonies and private rites. The presentation begins with an introduction to the system of Buddhist liturgical music known in Korea as *pŏmp'ae* 梵唄, of which this text is one of the earliest examples, and provides an account of the development of *pŏmp'ae* in Korea that led to the publication of the *Five Great Mantras*. The compiler of the work, the monk Hakcho, utilised the newly invented Korean alphabet (K. *hangŭl*) to record the mantras. Korean was a tonal language in the premodern era, with a distinction between low, high and rising tones, and thus a way of recording tones was encoded into the writing system in the form of tone markings. This technology was appropriated by Hakcho, who used the tone markings not to indicate tone but the musical features of the chanted mantra.

This paper analyses the premodern system of musical notation as a creative and novel invention of a Buddhist monk for the purpose of recording the proper way of chanting mantras. Although this system is detailed and relies on complex phonological rules, it reveals the importance of recording the music of mantras, skill in song being a mark of a virtuous monk. It also shows the close relationship between spirituality and music during this time. My presentation will also include data collected from fieldwork undertaken in 2025 of a monk from Bomunsa Temple, Seoul chanting some of the mantras contained in the *Five Great Mantras*. These examples will serve as material for comparison with the premodern source.

## **John Plemmenos**, Hellenic Folklore Research Center, Academy of Athens *“God may have a Sense of Humour”: Religious Parodies in Modern Greek Culture*

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This paper seeks to discuss a special genre of religious music and hymnography in modern Greece, namely, ecclesiastical parody, a little-discussed topic among scholars, possibly due to its sensitive nature and content. The sources to be considered here come mainly from the musical archive of the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, Academy of Athens as well as other Greek literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Several parodies of ecclesiastical poetry were first attested during the middle-Byzantine period (12<sup>th</sup>- 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) in various manuscripts of the time or in later printed editions). Following a relative eclipse during the Ottoman occupation, they were revived after the liberation of Greece (1830) and mainly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Christian Orthodox faith became the official religion of the Greek state. Ecclesiastical parodies are often located in Greek islands. Some of the reasons for this are the reportedly strong sense of humor of the islanders, the geographical distance of the islands from the Greek capital, and the influx into several islands of dissident monks from the monastic community of Mount Athos. Greek religious parodies do not only use Christian hymns of a festive character (such as those related to the Nativity and the Resurrection), but they even satirize funeral services by suggesting that the deceased, as well as several local priests, bishops, monks, and nuns, get drunk in Hades! In the past the hymns were performed by church cantors at religious gatherings, such as festive dinners and celebrations, but they found their way into literary works, such as those by the celebrated Greek writer, Alexander Papadiamantis of Skiathos island, who had composed some of them. The paper will also explore the mechanics of parodying, the recorded composers, their modern performers and their settings, as well as their survival in modern Greece

**Mira Kopanarov, York University/Toronto Metropolitan University**  
*Do Letters Sing? A Glagolitic Perspective into Sacred Sound, Rhythm and Lyrics.*

Academic research associated with the mysterious ninth-century Glagolitic script and its related philosophy is generally rooted in the sacredness within a religious context, or paleographic analysis, with conflicting arguments about historical accuracy (Veder, 2008; Uspenskij, 2013; Burlieva, 2021; Zhelyazkova, 2021; Towarek, 2023). In recent years, enthusiasts, outside of academia, have shown increased interest in the endangered alphabet, often attributing supernatural qualities to the graphemes by calling them “the letters that speak” or turning them into national icons (Tyran, 2025). What has rarely been addressed in Glagolitic inquiries is the sacredness in rhythms, chant designations, and lyrics of liturgical, but also national hymns, like the official Istrian (Croatia) hymn “Krasna Zemljo” (Beautiful Land) – music composed by Matko Brajša Rašan, lyrics by Ivan Cukon – or Tchaikovsky's Hymn written in honour of the Saints Cyril and Methodius. The sacred phenomenon of Glagolitsa, and its legacy as the precursor of the Cyrillic alphabet, has had a profound impact on Slavic-speaking nations. The veneration efforts dedicated to its creators extend to national holidays, monuments in nature, and liturgical hymns for Eastern Orthodox and Catholic services. Other commemorative forms include Enlightenment movements in Bulgaria and cross-cultural pilgrimage routes (Council of Europe), in addition to various art forms found online. These efforts have departed from the geographical boundaries of Slavonic nations, inspiring the construction of new monuments globally, like the “Sts. Cyril and Methody Macedono-Bulgarian Cathedral” built in Toronto in 1910. This paper will argue that the Glagolitic script has taken strong musical roots since its creation by Saint Cyril Constantin the Philosopher in Southeastern Europe. The analysis will draw on liturgical and additional examples such as composer Leoš Janáček’s “Glagolitic Mass” and Nikolay Mihaylovski’s lyrics “Walk Nation Reborn” set to Panayot Pipkov’s music to illustrate how the movement of sacredness necessitates a continuous negotiation of forms and sounds.

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**Michelle Collins, University of South-Eastern Norway**  
*Voicing Grief Beyond the Wake: Keening, Affect, and Contemporary Ritual Practice*

The *caoineadh/keen*, a vocal lament traditionally performed at wakes and funerals in Ireland, functioned as a ritual practice situated amongst a range of wake customs and alongside, and at times in tension with, institutional religious frameworks. Although the practice disappeared from funerary contexts by the mid-twentieth century, keening has re-emerged in recent decades across a range of new settings – facilitated ritual contexts, contemporary music, and in performance and sound art.

This paper examines how keening is being reinterpreted as it moves across these contemporary contexts. Focusing on shifts in ritual framing, material conditions, and environments, it explores how these factors shape the emergence and expression of vocal and affective intensity. Drawing on personal embodied practice, participant observation at a number of contemporary keening-inspired ritual forms, and the facilitation of related group practices, this study explores how keening operates as an affective practice in which emotional intensity does not reside solely within the individual voice, but arises through relations between bodies, materials, and ritual configurations.

Rather than framing these developments as revival or preservation, the paper considers how keening is being adapted and re-situated in ways that respond to contemporary needs. In settings outside of the historical context of the wake - where there is no longer a corpse present and ritual structures are greatly altered - the paper asks how participants understand what they are doing, and how collective vocal expression can produce forms of shared affect that may be experienced as meaningful, reflective, or “spiritual”. By examining these shifts, the paper shows how sacred and spiritual musical practices are reshaped as they move along new routes, and how this influences how they are experienced and understood.

**Nathan Myrick**, Mercer University, Georgia

*What Counts as Participation? Neurodivergent Children and Worship’s Participatory Infrastructure*

As awareness of the needs of neurodivergent children grows (ND), congregations across denominational spectrums are beginning to ask themselves how they can serve the worshipping needs of those who may be unintentionally excluded from full participation in the life of faith. This concern is further pronounced when we realize that sensory processing is a primary means of dysregulation among ND children (van Ommen 2024, for instance). Orders of service, with their sometimes-rigorous decorum and adherence to sonic and visual stimuli, are often unwelcoming places for ND children.

But how does congregational music affect this experience? Could music be a key to unlocking a more caring, nurturing, and edifying formational practice of worship? Perhaps, as some psychologists have suggested (Kim et al 2024, for example), music may generally help ND individuals regulate emotions and process sensory information more pleasantly. Could congregational music play a similar role in the life of Christian communities? This paper suggests that it does, and argues that pursuing forms and patterns of musical worship that better include ND children and adults is both a matter of justice, in the sense that inclusion of ND individuals is a moral imperative, and flourishing, in that composing and performing music that welcomes and includes all members of the community is necessary for living well (Leidenhag and King 2023; Reynolds 2023; Waldinger and Schultz 2023). Based on the first year of a 5-year research project, The Sacred Spectrum Project, this paper further suggests that ideas about participation, presence, and place need to be re-considered in light of the expressed needs of neurodivergent individuals.

**Mark Soileau**, University of Hamburg

*Tradition in Motion: The Ritual Re-Synchronization of the Alevi Miraçlama*

Ritual musical traditions become embedded in the life of local communities, where inherited forms are repeatedly enacted in shared gatherings and accumulate liturgical depth and weight with each successive performance. Yet as they move through time and space, such forms find new channels of transmission and are realigned in response to new conditions, while carrying forward what prior enactments have deposited in them. This paper explores these dynamics through a case study of the Miraçlama, a core rite

practiced by Alevis — a devotional community of Anatolia, now also widely present in diaspora settings across Europe — which narrates the Prophet Muhammed's mythic ascension and his joining with the Gathering of the Forty Saints.

In its embedded form, the *Miraçlama* brings together poetic narrative, music, and collective bodily movement into a single unified rite performed within a specific liturgical order. The paper argues that the synchronization of these expressive media into a coordinated flow serves to bring the mythic past into sensory presence for participants gathered in the here and now. This synchronization and its effects are sustained and deepened through repeated collective enactment in traditional settings, accumulating force and meaning within the communities that practice it.

Yet over the centuries, the *Miraçlama* has traveled and diversified, adapted its constituent forms to new historical conditions, and found new channels of transmission — from oral performance in dispersed rural communities, through consolidation in local liturgical traditions, to the global circulation enabled by modern recording and media technologies. The paper traces how through this movement the *Miraçlama* has maintained its capacity for presenting a past by means of re-synchronization: the realignment of its inherited forms to changing conditions of transmission. It reflects, in turn on what is preserved and what changes as a tradition travels and transforms.

**Manami Suzuki**, Graduate School of Asian and African Studies, Kyoto University

*Voicing Grief: Women's Voices as Ritual Practice in the Alevi Cem*

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This paper examines the role of women's voices in Alevi ritual practice, focusing on how grief is enacted and mediated through vocal performance in the *cem* ceremony. While *mersiyeler*—lamentations commemorating the martyrdom of *Imam Hüseyin*—constitute a deeply rooted component of Alevi ritual, this study shifts attention from textual meaning to vocal practice, considering how sorrow is articulated through embodied sound.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Turkey, as well as musical analysis, the paper explores multiple vocal forms within the ritual context, including the singing of the *mersiye* genre, the recitation of *dualar* (prayers) associated with the distribution of *sakka suyu* (sacred water), and characteristic modes of vocal delivery such as sobbing timbre and melodized speech. These practices are not treated as expressive additions to ritual, but as constitutive elements through which ritual meaning is produced and shared. Particular attention is given to the gendered dimensions of these vocal practices. In Alevi poetic and ritual discourse, figures such as *Fatma* and *Zeyneb* provide models for articulating grief, often framing lament as both mourning and witnessing. By examining how women's voices engage with and embody these models within the ritual setting, this paper suggests that vocal performance functions as a key medium through which suffering is collectively experienced and ritually sustained. While focusing on Alevi ritual practice, this study also situates its findings within a broader comparative perspective on women's vocal roles in Islamic devotional traditions, highlighting both shared patterns and distinctive configurations of gendered voice. By foregrounding the voice as an embodied and gendered practice, this paper offers a perspective on how ritual sound is sustained, shared, and experienced within sacred musical traditions.

## **Çiğdem Abda, Istanbul Technical University**

### *Music as a Medium of Divine Encounter: Sacred Sound and Embodied Ritual in Otman Baba Cem Practices*

This paper examines the role of music as a constitutive element of sacred experience in the *cem* rituals of communities affiliated with the Otman Baba tradition in Bulgaria. Moving beyond approaches that treat music as a representational or ancillary component of ritual, the study argues that musical performance functions as a primary medium through which participants engage with the divine and collectively construct spiritual meaning.

The analysis draws from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2025 and 2026 in the village of Alan Mahalle, located in the Haskovo (Turkish – Haskova) district of Bulgaria, the fieldwork including participant observation, audiovisual documentation, and semi-structured interviews conducted during various community gatherings. Particular attention is given to the internal structure of the ritual, especially the sequence following the “seven *dem*” (sacred drink consumption) phase, during which specific *nefesler* (devotional songs) are performed according to the type of *cem* (e.g., *Muharrem*, *Nevruz*, or *Birlik*). These vocal performances are followed by extended *semah* practices, in which music, movement, and collective participation converge into a continuous embodied flow.

The findings demonstrate that music in this context operates not merely as a vehicle for transmitting religious narratives or cultural memory, but as a performative domain in which the sacred is actively realized. Participants describe musical engagement as a means of becoming “one with the divine” while simultaneously commemorating Otman Baba, indicating a dual function of music as both a spiritual conduit and a medium of historical continuity.

By foregrounding the inseparability of sound, movement, and ritual structure, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on sacred sound practices, challenging the distinction between representation and experience, and highlighting music’s central role in shaping religious subjectivity and collective identity.

## **Ameneh Youssefzadeh, Independent Scholar**

### *Ebrāhim Adham in Performance: Sacred Narrative and Musical Transmission in Khorasan*

This paper examines the narrative of Ebrāhim Adham as preserved in the repertoires of professional and semi-professional musicians in Khorasan, across diverse ethnic, linguistic, and confessional communities, including both Shi’a and Sunni traditions. It explores the historical depth of two repertoires of sung poetry in northeastern Iran and analyzes the narrative’s connection to core cultural and religious values of the Iranian world. The narrative centers on Ebrāhim b. Adham (d. ca. 166/777–78), an 8th-century figure associated with the Khorasani school of mysticism, who is said to have renounced his princely life in pursuit of divine love. Often compared to Prince Gautama (the Buddha), his story reflects a shared motif of royal renunciation. Over time, Ebrāhim Adham became a prominent figure in the works of poets and religious writers across Khorasan and neighboring regions, eventually entering musical narrative traditions.

In northern Khorasan, the story survives in a prosimetric form within the trilingual repertoire of *bakhshi* (bards), combining Persian prose with sung poetry in Khorasani Turkic. This version includes three episodes: Adham-e Divāne (his father), the life of Ebrāhim Adham, and the story of his son, Mohammad. In eastern Khorasan, by contrast, it is performed in Persian among Sunni minority communities as a shorter poetic narrative focused on a single episode.

By focusing on performance practice, transmission, and variation, the paper contributes to discussions on “roots” and “routes” in sacred and spiritual music. It shows how the Ebrāhim Adham narrative functions as both continuity, anchored in enduring cultural and religious values, and movement, continually reshaped through circulation, oral transmission, and performance across confessional and linguistic boundaries. Rather than treating tradition as fixed, the study highlights how meaning emerges through situated performance in Khorasan’s diverse musical landscapes.

**Irene Markoff**, York University, Toronto

*The Confluence of Traditional Roots and Transnational/Intercultural Routes in the “Becoming” of a Contemporary Alevi Aşık (Minstrel) and Composer: The Case of Ahmet Ihvani*

Drawing from years of research with Alevi master musicians, minstrels (*aşıklar*), ritual music specialists (*zakirler*), and Alevi expressive culture in Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Canada, this paper focuses on the art and craft of Ahmet Ihvani, an Alevi *aşık*, composer, and virtuoso *bağlama* (long-necked lute) player who is a longtime resident of Toronto, Canada. A Kurdish Alevi with roots in Suşehri (Sivas province, Türkiye), Ahmet began formal *bağlama* and solfège lessons when he moved to Istanbul at age ten. Strongly motivated to write Alevi poetry (*deyişler*), and without traditional master-disciple training, Ahmet immersed himself in the study of Alevi-Bektashi mystical poetry and living *aşıks*, eventually producing his own poems set to musical compositions based on regional Alevi music models.

Since settling in Canada, Ahmet has recorded four albums (*İşk İle* – 2011, *Dem Ü Dem* – 2015, *Perde* – 2020, and *Beder* – 2022) and numerous singles. An analysis of selected examples from these albums reinforced by my longstanding discussions and involvement in mutual projects with the artist will reveal his continuing path of self-discovery. I will accomplish this by illustrating ways in which that path is built on a balancing of Alevi and Kurdish identities and a commitment to preserving tradition. At the same time, I will also comment on how Ihvani is instinctively open towards hybridity in the evolution of his creative process as a poet, composer, and performer through stylistic innovations and intercultural/transnational collaborations with Turkish, Iranian, Kurdish, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Mexican, South Indian, Polish, and Canadian performers in Türkiye, and Canada.

**János Sipos**, Franz Liszt Music Academy, Budapest  
*A Special Melody of the Bektashis in Thrace*

From 1999 to 2003, Éva Csáki and I systematically visited Bektashis whose parents migrated from Bulgaria to the European part of Turkey. In the process, I tried to find answers to questions of interest to me such as: Is there any connection between “domed-form” Hungarian and Bektashi melodies? What role do these melodies play in the music repertoire of the Thracian Bektashis? What is the Eurasian background of this melodic form?

To accomplish my analysis, I examined the existence of the afore-mentioned form/s in the music of other Turkic peoples, as well as in old and new European sources. What I discovered was that among the typical descending melodies of Turkish and Hungarian folk music, “domed-form” songs could most definitely be viewed as a foreign influence from Western Art music. I also concluded that these types of melodies most likely came to Bektashi music from Turkish Art Music. In Hungarian folk music, these songs fall into a large and common musical style that replaced older tunes and became one of the most popular and most widespread folksong types shared among Hungarians today. In the case of Anatolian Turkish folk music, one can encounter this style as an accepted form, but not to the same degree as is the case in Hungary. In the religious music of the Thracian Bektashis, it is a well-defined melody group.

**Fatma Belma Oğul and Seyede Moozhan Ayatollahi**, Istanbul Technical University

*Choreopolitics of the Grave: Raghs-e Soog as Embodied Resistance in Post-2006 Iran*

Following the mass killings of civilians in Iran in January 2006, a profound transformation emerged within the landscape of public grief: the rise of Raghs-e Soog (“Mourning Dance”). This paper examines rhythmic movement, collective swaying, and popular music integrated into funerary rites — practices that displace state-sanctioned devotional recordings and mandated stillness — interpreting Raghs-e Soog as embodied resistance that reconfigures the cemetery from a site of regulated sorrow into a space of political contestation and collective presence. Raghs-e Soog occupies the threshold where mourning tradition and secular political expression converge. Its displacement of devotional recitation by popular music and rhythmic movement renegotiates the boundary between the liturgical and the political, transforming an institutionalised space of grief into a contested arena of collective will.

Theoretically, the inquiry is situated at the intersection of biopolitical governance and choreopolitics. Drawing on new materialist conceptualisations of the body as “agentic matter” (Barad) and post-structuralist understandings of performativity (Butler), I argue that these dances function as “insurgent archives” that materialise grief in ways exceeding authoritarian control, utilising Deleuze-Guattarian affect theory to explain how political emotion is transmitted through movement rather than linguistic discourse.

The methodology employs a conceptual examination grounded in publicly circulated digital documentation and reported accounts, navigating the “media ecologies” of contemporary Iran, where the digital visibility of the body both facilitates transnational solidarity and invites state persecution. The research focuses on the post-massacre

period, exploring how women's bodily presence, historically subject to Foucauldian surveillance, becomes the primary medium for challenging the juridical boundaries of the state. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that *Raghs e Soog* represents a fractal form of resistance that recursively adapts across dispersed spaces. By exploring the interconnections between ritual performance and political activism, the study reveals how ethnochoreological inquiry can illuminate the ways bodies in motion refuse erasure, transforming the act of mourning into a visible assertion of agency and an enduring critique of authoritarianism.

**Christian Poske**, University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna

*In the Cauldron of Conflict: Political Trajectories of Christian Cultural Expressions in Contemporary Naga Music Culture*

While there has been ample research on Christian music cultures across the globe (e.g., Dueck and Reily 2016), including in Indigenous contexts, there has been little research on the politicisation of Christian cultural expressions in Indigenous music cultures. Contributing to this domain, this presentation examines the use of such cultural expressions in musical works about the Naga conflict, one of the longest unresolved armed disputes in South and Southeast Asia. In doing so, it elucidates how Christian cultural expressions have assumed new political and social critical meanings in contemporary Naga music culture, and more generally, how cultural expressions derived from imported religions cross boundaries between the sacred and the secular in Indigenous music cultures.

Since 1947, Naga separatist factions have endeavoured to gain traction for their armed struggle for a sovereign Naga state through battle hymns, military songs, and a national anthem stylistically aligned with choral and gospel music styles, referencing spiritual concepts, narrative themes, and visual motifs associated with the Christian faith to reinforce their political messaging and make a point for Naga independence, banking on the fact that Naga society has become predominantly Christian through progressing proselytization since the British colonial period. Similarly, biblical themes frequently occur in compositions underscoring the suffering of the Naga population during the conflict, some of which were composed by church figures and civil activists engaged in peace-building initiatives such as the Forum for Naga Reconciliation, an organisation reaching out to Naga separatist factions and civil-society bodies to work towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In this way, Christian cultural expressions have been used in confrontational and reconciliatory ways in politically charged songs about the Naga conflict, underscoring the semantic and semiotic malleability of cultural expressions originating from imported religions within Indigenous music cultures, which imbue these expressions with new meanings.

**Indira Anna Hajnács**, GWZO Leipzig/University of Szeged

*(Re)Sounding the Steppe: Re-enchantment and Neo-Pagan Imaginaries in Contemporary Hungarian Folkloresque Music*

“Let’s strengthen our eastern roots”— this invocation, heard frequently at the start of concerts inspired by nomadic music cultures in Hungary, signals a profound shift in the nation’s sonic imaginary. After centuries of positioning Hungarian national identity within a secular Western framework (Hofer 1991), cultural codes associated with the Magyars’ premodern, nomadic, Eurasian past have re-emerged in the 21st century with renewed intensity. This revival is not only politically charged but also manifests as a form of spiritual-musical creativity that seeks to “re-sacralise” the nation (Povedák 2025) by reconnecting with its ancestral pagan spirituality. Such practices aim to address the healing of what is often framed as a “wounded collective identity” (Máté-Tóth 2022).

Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted at selected sites pertinent to this particular sonic re-enchantment, among musicians, audiences, cultural professionals, and locations of memory, this paper examines how selected musicians engage in the reinterpretation of historical, mythological, and ritual elements as a form of re-enchantment and collective healing. Situating these practices within this framework helps a deeper understanding of music as a mnemonic and affective medium that not only can foster collective healing but also subvert processes of secularisation. At the same time, it critically addresses the potential of such practices to promote essentialised and idealised images of the past as inherently “re-enchanted.” In line with Christopher Partridge’s call not to trivialise spiritual movements operating outside institutional religious frameworks (Partridge 2005) the paper takes these emergent musical forms of vernacular spirituality and their socio-cultural implications seriously.

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**Brenda Salisman**, York University/Toronto Metropolitan University

*Reggae Music and Rastafari Spirituality*

Rastafari began in Jamaica in the 1930s as a Black liberation and counter-hegemonic social movement against colonial authority. Its socio-political and religious message is rooted in resistance to Babylon, a term that refers to European colonization of Africa and the Caribbean. It is also associated with the Biblical city which symbolized corruption and defiance of divine order. From the 1970s onwards, as reggae music gained prominence on the cultural stage, Bob Marley and other artists carried the philosophy of Rastafari to a global audience, articulating critical perspectives on race, social stratification, and religion.

Combined with the use of ganja (marijuana) as a spiritual practice, and reggae music as a vehicle for its voice, Rastafari draws on both to express devotion to His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I – born Ras Tafari Makonnen – whom followers regard as their messiah. Nyahbinghi music, used during reasoning sessions, involves chanting and drumming as a form of meditation. Sacred space can emerge wherever people gather, and these sessions allow participants to feel connected to the Rastafarian community even if they are not Rastafari themselves.

This paper uses “Herbs Promotion,” a song by Jamaican Reggae artist Tarrus Riley to demonstrate how meaning is produced through the reinterpretation of Biblical language,

and how reggae circulates these messages along global routes to affirm the sacredness of Rastafari, ganja, and the music itself. Meaning comes into focus through the song's transformation of scripture into lived practice. Riley uses the phrase "secret place," echoing Psalm 91:1, which speaks of dwelling under the protection of the Most High. His line "you can find me in a secret place with my chalwa"<sup>1</sup> (ganja) signals a metaphorical space of divine protection, spiritual closeness, safety, and trust in God's presence.

**Pawel Karolczyk, Polish Academy of Sciences**

*Following the Sounds: Ritual Song Circulation among Native Faith Communities in Poland*

Sound, understood as a dynamic and processual *flux*, is constantly flowing and circulating. The same is true in the case of ritual songs, which are becoming an increasingly popular form of expression among Polish native faith believers. Singing songs appears not only during holiday feasts, but also in the rituals themselves: it is a form of prayer to the Slavic gods. But what do people sing to the deities? How are prayers composed and how do they circulate among different groups and communities? That is what I would like to explore.

In my presentation, I will focus primarily on the prayers appearing in two native faith groups with whom I collaborate. While listening to the ritual invocations of the gods, I will examine their origins, inspirations and the underlying creative process. I will also explore how, through the process of so-called "ritual tourism", songs circulate and change the contexts in which they are performed. I would like to pay special attention to the songs heard by one particular native faith community during an early medieval historical re-enactment festival, which were later adapted by that community for use in their rituals. I will also present songs composed by individual members of the native faith community, which, thanks to songbooks and mutual communication between different groups, are spreading and creating a kind of canonical repertoire for performing rituals, extending beyond single community or religious association.

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**Nana Amowee Dawson, Independent Researcher, Ghana**

*Re-Authoring the Sacred: Ritual Negotiation, Media, and Artistic Translation in Mekra*

This paper examines the Mekra in Ghana as a contemporary site of ritual negotiation within African spiritual practice, where inherited sacred practices are not simply revived but actively re-authored through performance, media, and institutional logics. Drawing on preliminary digital ethnography of mediated ritual practices, based on circulated video materials, the study focuses on three interrelated moments: a praise and worship session at an open-air altar, the integration of instrumental performance into prayer at the altar, and a communal gathering centered on musical participation and social exchange. These moments reveal a deliberate reconfiguration of liturgical form. Elements commonly associated with Pentecostal-charismatic worship, including amplified live band performances, structured praise sequences, and circulation via social media, are recontextualised within an African traditional religious setting. Rather than signalling rupture or dilution, this paper argues that such incorporations constitute processes of

negotiation through which practitioners recalibrate the conditions of sacred experience, visibility, and legitimacy.

Conceptually, the paper frames Mekra as a lived instance of artistic-cultural translation within ritual space. Here, translation operates not only across aesthetic forms but also across epistemological and institutional domains, enabling the movement to navigate tensions between continuity and transformation, locality and circulation, and tradition and contemporaneity. In doing so, Mekra complicates dominant narratives of both preservation and revival, foregrounding creativity as an inherent and necessary dimension of sacred practice. By situating these dynamics within the “roots and routes” framework, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions about how sacred musical traditions are reshaped through mediated circulation and performative innovation, and how these processes generate new understandings of the boundaries between the sacred and the secular in contemporary African contexts.

**Mária Helena Varga**, University of Szeged; **Lili Kriston**, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest

*Songs, Community, Identity: Autoethnography, and Video-Elicitation in Romani Religious Musical Transformation*

This joint presentation explores the role of music in the religious and social transformation of Romani communities in Hungary in the early 2000s, focusing on the spread of Pentecostal and charismatic Christian congregations. We examine how songs and musical practices shaped community life, identity, and changing relationships to cultural traditions. The paper is based on a combination of autoethnography, participant observation, and video-elicitation, and forms the empirical and methodological foundation of the ongoing *Trauma and Creativity* research project at the University of Szeged. Helena Varga, a Romani artist, singer and songwriter, draws on her long-term involvement in Oláh Roma communities in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county. As both participant and observer, she collected songs, lyrics, and video recordings during the early 2000s. Her position as a community member and performer provided a unique form of access that differs from conventional ethnographic fieldwork: rather than observing from a distance, she was embedded in the musical and social life of the community. This enabled forms of trust, participation, and a sense of belonging that are often difficult to achieve in more external research settings and allowed for a deeper understanding of how music is lived, felt, and shared in everyday contexts.

A key methodological aspect of the research is the use of these archival video recordings in recent fieldwork. Through video-elicitation interviews, past events and performances are revisited together with participants, allowing reflection on memory, change, and continuity over time.

The research follows collaborative and community-based approaches and is guided by the ethical principle of “nothing about us without us.” It aims to support shared interpretation and responsible knowledge production.

The presentation focuses on the musical work of József Sebők (Polyák), a well-known singer from Kántorjánosi, whose bilingual (Hungarian–Romani) devotional songs connect traditional *hallgató* forms with newer Christian worship styles. This reflects a broader process of re-ethnicisation and musical transformation within Romani religious

life (Povedák 2019; Povedák & Povedák 2023) and relates to wider discussions on Romani music and changing religious practices (Silverman 2012; Podolinská 2021). The paper argues that music is a key medium through which religious change, cultural continuity, and Romani identity are experienced and expressed.

**Kinga Povedák, University of Szeged**

*Sonic Agency and the Reconfiguration of Sensory Regimes in Roma Vernacular Religious Practice*

This paper examines how competing aesthetic formations create religious conflict in contemporary Roma religiosity in Hungary. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and collaborative research on Roma religious musicking, I argue that ongoing transformations in 'Roma Christianity' are best understood not as purely doctrinal shifts, but as conflicts between distinct sensory regimes that (re)-organize religious experience, authority, and belonging.

Building on the concept of vernacular religion as "religion as lived", I focus on how Roma believers actively negotiate inherited Catholic traditions and emergent Pentecostal-charismatic practices in their everyday lives. Central to this analysis is the question: what happens when long-standing sensory affordances embodied through generations of Marian devotion are no longer recognized as orthopraxy? I suggest that this shift marks not simply a change in belief, but a transformation in what counts as proper religious mediation and experience. Following Birgit Meyer's notion of aesthetic formations, I conceptualize these traditions as competing sensory regimes: a Marian, image-centered formation structured around icons, pilgrimage, and devotional objects, and a Pentecostal pneumatic-sonic formation centered on praise and worship music, testimony, and embodied worship practices. These formations generate tensions within families and communities, as they entail different understandings of religious authority, mediation, and legitimacy. The shift from Marian devotion toward Pentecostal practices, often framed locally as a move away from idolatry, involves a reconfiguration of sensory hierarchies, in which music and sound increasingly displaces visibility as the primary medium of divine encounter. By foregrounding these conflicts as sensory and aesthetic negotiations, I conceptualize sonic agency as a central force in the reconfiguration of religious experience.