Islamic Non-Friday Sermons in Bangladesh

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Scholarship on 'Islamic sermons' has in recent years increasingly emphasised the importance of various kinds of sermons, held not only in mosques but at religious gatherings outside the mosque, or transmitted by cassettes, television, or other, newer media (Howarth 2005, Hirschkind 2006, Scholz et al. 2010, Sætren 2010). Nevertheless, many forms of Islamic sermons have not yet been included in the literature, and many aspects remain unexplored. This is true particularly for Islamic sermons in South Asia, and even more so for Islamic sermons in Bangladesh. The genre in question here, denominated most often as sermon congregation (wa'z mahfil), has so far been mentioned only in passing in some historical studies of the region as well as in an article focusing on more recent shifts in gender dynamics (Shehabuddin 2008). The discussion here aims to expand these inquiries by considering the sermons as an example of a universal human phenomenon – of rhetoric and poetics influencing convictions and evoking pleasure for the listeners – which can, however, only be studied in its specificity; in its embeddedness in expectations, references and social realities of a specific time and place. While Islamic sermons have long since developed a mixture of education, exhortation, salvation and drama (Hartmann 1987: 339), the workings and composition of this mixture certainly vary over the course of time and space, as well as between different kinds of sermons. How do we, then, encounter the sermon congregations in contemporary Bangladesh?

It is difficult to overlook them, particularly during their main season in 'winter', or more broadly during the time of the year in which moving and finding space for outside events is not hampered by the monsoon or wet-cropping. This does not mean that there are no such events at other times, as they peak according to the liturgical calendar. 'Winter', nevertheless, is the time when there will be at least one sermon congregation every evening in most towns and many villages in Bangladesh. It is impossible to estimate the total number, but when I tried to collect the events in and around the district town of Sylhet in

March 2014, there appeared to be two to three taking place every evening only in this area – just imagine what this implies for the whole of the country, even if we take into consideration that sermons might be less numerous in other regions. While Dhaka has its share, the most vibrant hubs seem to be sub-district towns and the rural areas surrounding them. While many preachers travel throughout the country during most of the year, in the peak months of December to March they will perform nearly every day, sometimes in more than one event. A preacher I interviewed summarised this situation by saying that the attendance of sermon congregations is "a craze and characteristic" of the Bengali people (Nuri: 2014). The congregations take place mostly during the evening and night, typically starting only after the sunset prayer and not drawing a big audience before later at night: in the early hours, children are the primary group of attendants.

Fig. 1: Posters announcing sermon congregations

They are announced during the day in various ways, e.g. by posters which are placed either on walls, preferably next to mosques or areas with Islamic shops, but also on buses, lamp posts or trees (see Fig. 1). The posters by far outnumber painted banners and are printed by small printing and advertising businesses which do not necessarily focus on religious printing but also print party and company posters.

As these companies reuse successful designs for later occasions, the design of the posters announcing sermon congregations have a lot in common. The posters never display faces or photographs, thus marking themselves off from political posters, and they often include sketches of 'Islamic' forms such as minarets, mosque architecture, but also stars and other attractive shapes. The main title is printed in a fancy font and often highlights the event's importance and situates it in the genre by denominations such as "Congregation of Quranic exegesis", "Congregation of the Prophet's Birth [milad]", "Great Islamic Gathering", and "Huge Islamic Assemblage". The posters also include the names of the invited speakers under honorific headings such as "main guest", "main attraction", "main discussant" or only "honoured scholars" as well as that of the "chairman", who is mostly the one putting most monetary and organisational effort into the event and is awarded social credit for this.

Apart from such social information, the posters also disclose the ideological orientation of the congregation in question. This is done by several indicators. If a religious school is the place of a congregation, it is possible to draw inferences about its orientation from its name that indicates whether it is a government-supported religious school or an independent one modeled after the famous Islamic seminary in Deoband. If the congregation takes place at a shrine of a saint, this allows conclusions regarding the theological orientation of the event. Moreover, often slogans are printed on top or to the sides of the poster such as "God is great", "Oh Prophet of God" and the like. These are slogans specific to the important Sunni sects of South Asia (Deobandi and Barelwi).

Another way of announcing the sermon congregations I encountered was that of audio broadcasting via loudspeakers tied to a three-wheel taxi (see Fig. 2). Next to reading out the information provided by the poster, the announcement included the incentive that partaking in the congregation would be rewarding for the hereafter. Furthermore, this way of announcement can link directly to the characteristic soundscape of the congregations, heralding its sound experience. It is this sound dimension of the congregations which seems to be their most effective means of self-presentation. Great effort is put into assuring enough stable energy supply as to broadcast the congregation not only to its participants, but also to the surrounding neighbourhood, and in the countryside, to the surrounding villages which entails positioning loudspeakers as far away from the location of the congregation as possible. Using the virtual impossibility to 'hear away', this broadcasting is high-

ly effective in drawing, as has been described, more and more people to the congregation over the course of an evening and creating across Bangladesh the soundscape typical of the preaching season.

Fig. 2: CNG rickshaw announcing sermon congregation via loudspeaker

The spatial setup, of course, varies according to the location of the congregation. The most typical localities are probably schoolyards, fields after harvests, and open spaces in the city, be it public squares, sport grounds or simply street corners. In schoolyards, the space is enclosed to the greatest and in huge gatherings in open squares to the smallest degree. The general setup of the congregations is oriented towards that of other festivities in the region. Most typically, a 'pandal' (tent) is built up by surrounding the space of the congregation with panels of colourful fabric and a roof of the same fabric stretched across above. In a rural setting, sermon congregations often give rise to a little village fair, with colourful flags and lights indicating the way to the tent with a beautifully decorated entrance, and small stalls selling typical rural eatables, tea and even handicrafts (see Figs. 3 & 4).

Fig. 3: Inside the tent of a sermon congregation

Inside the congregation space, the audience is seated on simple bamboo mats or anything saving them from the often chilly temperatures, huddling together to warm up. The speaker sits down in front, on a slightly elevated stage on a comfortable chair, sometimes behind a low table. Next to him is the chair of the 'chairman' or of the 'special guest', as well as local dignitaries, religious functionaries and the troupe accompanying the preacher. All of them face the audience and thus perform a certain role between the speaker and the listeners: as they sit next to the speaker, they allow for the intimate setting of a didactic conversation which the sermons often seem to be engaged in, for example, when asking didactic questions (often yes-no questions or utterances of consent), or telling jokes or stories in dialect. The people sitting next to the preacher might also aid him with details, be it of the journey's whereabouts, the place's name or even in regards to religious knowledge. On the other hand, their behaviour of intent listening and their answers display to the audience its own ideal role, thus enhancing the already effective group dynamic and collective visibility of the audience in the glaringly illuminated tent. It is not only the mimics and gestures of the preacher which are important visual elements, but also the reactions of the audience which are then simultaneously reproduced by the rest of those present in the tent.

Fig. 4: Inside the tent of a sermon congregation

As has been indicated, the audience by far exceeds the space of the tent. This is of particular importance for women, who are not present in the tent in which the speaker and the men are sitting. With the exception of those sermon congregations held inside religious boys' schools (which have a counterpart for the opposite sex), this non-attendance in no way implies that the sermon congregations are a purely male function. Not only are women explicitly addressed in all the sermons – by the conservative formula of "mothers and sisters hidden by parda [veil]" – but they are also specifically considered by the preachers. Women groups meet in nearby houses to listen to the sermons in an act of nocturnal mobility and sociability. The importance of women is also reflected in the setup of the sermon congregations by the increasingly common practice of erecting another tent for the wo-men next to the main tent for the male audience. As in the case of a congregation at a girls' school, where the voices of the female students were audible to the segregated male audience, here the voice, and sometimes even the picture, of the preacher is transmitted to the women's tent by audio-visual technology. Although I myself have never verified this, a preacher told me that in this way the number of women surpassed that of men in many congregations, and indeed there are also specific women's congregations held by some preachers (cf. Shehabuddin 2008: 593).

If media technologies of acoustic amplification and video projection shape live performances, what about mediatised forms of the ser-mons? As has been described for Egypt by Hirschkind (2006), in

Bangladesh, too, recorded sermons are widely circulated. Cassettes were introduced in the 1980s, before CDs took over in the late 1990s; currently, sermons are loaded on mobile data cards against a small charge, or exchanged among friends. The internet is also becoming increasingly important in distribution. Another significant media shift was that to video recordings distributed via VCD (and now made public via YouTube, as well). Of course, not all preachers have taken part in this development, but many of those who were more famous did, with a pioneering role taken on, as in many media developments, by politically active preachers.

The spread of video recording technology has important implications: a voice amplified by the microphone is heard by an audience far away, thus allowing for new speech styles, making for example a soft and intimate way of speaking possible despite a great number of listeners. Similarly, the recording and transmission of the preacher's facial expressions yield a completely new dimension of intimate communication. In addition, VCDs at various points of the sermon overlay nature pictures, pictures of holy localities or symbols as well as television pictures, thus adding a visual dimension fitting the sublime or practical content of the sermon which continues in the soundtrack. That no other techniques of enhancing the visual experience are employed also testifies to the fact that media formats have not (yet) developed a life of their own.

In contrast to the case of Arab television preachers, whose popularity often exceeds that of any other preacher and who have programmes designed particularly for television (or the global Indian television preacher Zakir Naik who completely merged the setting of the sermon to that of a television show), the broadcasting of wa'z mahfils in Bangladesh is still bound to the live setting. There are virtually no radio or television programmes. This is, as will be seen below, linked to the performative dimension of the wa'z mahfils, which can hardly be reproduced in a television format as it relies on a live interaction and an extended timeframe. The audio-visual recording of sermons thus seems to remain, for the most part, bound to the live events. This is the case for recordings by the organisers of their own events as well as for the above-mentioned market of CDs and VCDs which are sold along with other entertainment products in shops, by ambulant agents carrying them on transport rickshaws, or at mobile shops close to mosques (see Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Video-CDs of recorded sermons

101

'Little media', like cassettes, CDs and VCDs, take on an important role in spreading the fame of preachers who are thereby more likely to be invited to live events. They become a means of information for organisers of sermon congregations to get to know possible invitees. In this way, the degree of distribution of a preacher's media is an indicator of his success, and so one preacher proudly remarked to me that "in all the countries of the world in which there are Bengalis, I am also present. On cassettes or loaded on mobile" (Hosen: 2014). Compared to visual recordings, audio recordings have the advantage that they can be listened to while doing other things. They are sometimes played in buses and tea stalls and used for pious entertainment or means of staying awake and passing time by occupational groups such as drivers and night guards. The idea of using one's time effectively was, for example, expressed by the driver of a baby taxi, who complained that he was, like other people, always too busy to have time for his religion. Of course, he conceded, while listening to such recorded sermons he would not be able to raise his hands during the final prayer, as he had to hold on to the steering wheel, but he could at least join in saying amen.

The distribution of recorded sermons on a national level and the co-extensive travel activities of the more famous preachers seem to play an important role in relation to the language employed. From the beginning of my research, many of my Bangladeshi friends told me that what I studied was a rural phenomenon, found only deep in the countryside, employing local dialects. To the contrary, I have come to think of the sermon congregations as fostering a genre-specific standard language. This does not mean that dialect is not employed; certainly there are local preachers who would not venture out of their own area and preach in their own dialect. However, particularly the bigger congregations always invite people from outside their locality, and these preachers are the ones who are attributed the top positions in the hierarchy reflected in the sequence of speakers during the evening, i.e. speaking later at night than the local preacher. From this situation of nationally-circulated recordings and ambulant preachers, arises a strong drive towards a nationally understandable idiom. This is, of course, not a 'high' Bengali of the Calcutta variant, and neither the Dhaka variant of television news, but a more colloquial variant – one, however, understandable to people from other regions.

I found an interesting exception to this rule in London, as here the local background of the migrants, and thus the attendees of many mosques, is quite homogenous and the link to a spoken rather than written native language is of foremost importance. It was here that I heard the most clearly marked dialectal sermon, held in the dialect of Sylhet. The comprehensibility of the sermons seems to be a matter of sociolect, i.e. the familiarity of the listener with Islamic vocabulary, particularly the often-used words from Urdu or Arabic, sometimes pronounced in a Bengali way. This knowledge is to some extent produced by the sermons themselves, which often employ loanwords and Bengali words next to each other, thus helping the unacquainted listeners to follow and creating a sense of achievement for those listeners more familiar with the language of the sermons. The range of languages next to Bengali, which makes up the greatest part of the sermons, includes Arabic as a liturgical language, while Urdu and Persian are mostly used for quotations from poetry or in praise songs for religious figures, and English is used when an 'educated' audience is addressed.

How is a congregation initiated and organised? Who puts up the posters we have encountered above? Most commonly, it is committees of locally affluent people who collect money, arrange food for the preacher (and his staff), for guests from outside and sometimes even for the entire congregation. This kind of congregation is also a means of

gaining or keeping ties with a locality, as for example by those who have migrated to Dhaka and host such an event when they visit their village. In such a case, the preacher might even be an acquaintance made after migration to the city.

Generally, the committee has to approach potential speakers long in advance, a process mostly taking place during the previous rainy season but sometimes even earlier, as star preachers are booked more than a year in advance. The latter will have assistants managing their booking, who also communicate special requests concerning, for example, the topic which is to be discussed. It might be that the committee urges the preacher to address topics of local concern, such as cases of theft or excesses of the youth, drinking, smoking or dancing. It might also be that they know of particular topics the preacher often deals with, such as dowry, and agrees that he speaks on those (Hosen: 2014). In case of preachers with 'ready-made' sermons on CD, often one of those topics is expected, with the committee making sure that the same sermon is not held repeatedly in their locality. There is also some interaction shortly before the sermon and even the chance of influencing the preacher during the sermon by handing over small slips of paper. The interaction is very limited, as the preachers mostly have quite a tight schedule and do not stay at one place more than necessary, particularly after the sermon when they have to rush to arrive home before the next day's sunrise.

103

The financial capacity of the organisers, i.e. the size of the 'gift' it can make to the preacher, the kind of setup they can provide and the size of the crowd the congregation is expected to draw, has to match the status of the preacher. Moreover, ideological restrictions prevail, as preachers of different Islamic groups do not participate in the same congregation. A different kind of organisation is found in case of the events held by religious schools as here the teachers and students will be responsible and established connections to teachers from other schools can be used for invitations. Most of the schools host a yearly congregation on a more or less fixed date, a practice most likely going back to the yearly convocation of the college of Deoband (Metcalf 1982: 93). As in the case of such congregations, the audience consists nearly exclusively of students and teachers of the religious schools, the sermons feature is a higher degree of special vocabulary and references to the school's traditions, scholars of the past, etc.

Both kinds of congregations (those in religious schools and those organised by local committees) can include the collection of money.

This might take the form of an appeal to give money to a community project, usually one linked to religion, such as a graveyard or a religious school which is to be established, or to the poor in general. It might, however, also be a more integral part of the congregation itself, be it by boys going around collecting money from those seated in the audience or included on the stage where people can come up, hand over or promise a certain amount which is then announced, together with the name of the giver, by the speaker who might pray to God to bestow a particular blessing on the giver. This is not limited to monetary gifts; in one newly opened but not yet finished boys' school, a promise was made to contribute twenty sacks of cement (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 6: Boy collecting money from listeners

As mentioned before, the sermon congregations usually take place between sunset and midnight in towns, or even later at night in rural areas. During this time, several speakers speak one after the other. A new speaker might, particularly in rural congregations, march in with his accompanying troupe, shouting slogans of "God is great" and the like. Before his sermon, he is announced by his name and titles of Islamic education and employment position in a mosque or religious school, as well as his other honorific attributes such as "notable intellectual", "internationally acknowledged speaker", "great Islamic thinker". He then sits down and waits for the previous speaker to finish, which the latter usually does quite quickly. If the previous speaker exceeds the limits allotted to him beforehand, he will not be interrupted

but will excuse himself or, in some cases, might even be driven down by an increasingly unsettled audience.

The beginning of the sermon is similar among most preachers and is usually performed in a solemn and calm voice which contrasts with the often agitated end of the previous sermon and the slogans raised when approaching the stage. After the Arabic greeting "peace be upon you" to which the audience responds "and upon you", follow liturgical parts which are known from the Friday sermon, such as the praise of God and seeking refuge with him, blessings on the Prophet, the recitation of the "affirmation of faith" and short Quranic verses. Having created a liturgical frame, the preacher switches back to Bengali and addresses first the chairmen and special guests and praises the event, often with the help of others reminding him of the names of the locality and organisers. Following this he again thanks God for making the congregation possible and accepting their prayers in a typical Bengali-Arabic formula upon which the audience says "praise to God" in Arabic.

The participation of the audience is next triggered by a prayer for the prophet (often called durud or durud-e-Ibrahim) which is in Arabic, but known by most of the participants by heart and is often recited alternately by the preacher and the audience or together. This participatory element creates, in the words of a preacher, a "loving [mahabbat] attitude of the wa'z-sermon" among the listeners (Nuri: 2014). The sermon is continued with a direct address to the listeners, which often includes, next to the obligatory address to women and "brothers of Islam", specific social groups such as Islamic scholars, businessmen, intellectuals, youth, rickshaw-drivers etc., according to the setting.

The rest of the sermon varies substantially from event to event and from preacher to preacher. However, it seems to continue and extend both the vocal art in the preacher's presentation and the dynamics of audience response which the liturgical frame has set. This can be done by repeating elements such as the blessing on the Prophet or the inclusion of a zikr, a rhythmic repetition of "Allah", which is also initiated by the preacher and continued by the audience. On a side note, the emotional warmth attributed to these practices in the interview quoted above is also reproduced on a profane bodily level, as the accompanying bodily movements warm up the audience and contribute to forming bodily bonds among them. Also, the preacher has the chance to sip his tea in the short moments in which he does not recite along with the audience.

Next to the salvific expectations raised by the congregation – the hope that participation in this non-obligatory religious activity will lead to redemption on the day of judgement – it seems to be this collective attunement by a mixture of following the preachers voice and responding to it, by the stories from both the listeners' life-world as well as the Islamic imaginary, which create the specific pleasure and state which draws the listeners to the sermons and which cannot be reproduced by solitarily watching recordings. Let us therefore look into some settings of sermon congregations.

Fig. 7: Village sermon at religious school for small boys

Our first setting is that of a village about half an hour out of the harbour city, Chittagong, where a sermon congregation is being held on the occasion of the establishment of the primary religious school mentioned above. Next to the half-finished school building and the decorated grave of its founder, a simple tent is erected and flowers are put on the table next to the preacher, whom the students greet by touching his feet as a sign of respect. The sermon is short and relatively early in the evening so that the preacher can attend another congregation afterwards. The direct audience consists mainly of boys who have just started to study in the school (see Fig. 7). The preacher stresses the importance of Islamic knowledge and education by reciting a few Quranic verses and quotations from the Prophet. What is interesting is that he does not do so in a manner concentrated on 'proving' points. Rather, he focuses on teaching the melody and pro-

nunciation of the Arabic quotations as well as their translation to the audience by making the children repeat every single word.

The stress on auditive learning is reflected in the way the preacher pronounces the Arabic quotations: instead of breaking up the Arabic sentences into single words he often choses units based on phonetics and according to the flow of the recitation. In reciting the sayings of the Prophet (Hadith), the Arabic introductory formula "the Prophet, peace be upon him, has said" is employed each time. As the children become familiar with this repeated clause quite quickly, this technique fosters recognition and learning success. Both the children's learning process and their success are communicated to the surrounding area of the boys' school, as their voices are included in the transmission by loudspeakers. Furthermore, the children hereby also learn that there is a particular way of dealing with Arabic quotations when rendering them into Bengali, a way which is again linked to the voice: Not only is the Arabic saying recited melodically, but the preacher also adopts a melodic way of speaking for the Bengali translation. This is interesting in itself, but is linked to yet another phenomenon, namely that the translation is also an elaboration, extension and dramatisation of the Arabic saying – in short, an interpretation focusing on making the holy saying palpable emotionally as well as musically.

While in the beginning of the sermon the preacher quotes the Arabic text each time before providing its Bengali interpretation, in the later part of the sermon the Bengali dramatised version takes the Arabic part's place. For example, when quoting an account of the tradition on the Prophet's announcement of his death, the emotional reaction of the companions upon hearing this announcement is added as part of the preacher's dramatic interpretation, but is made part of the Prophetic tradition by reciting it in the typical melody. In other words, this vocal technique blurs the lines between holy text and interpretation, making the communicative additions holier (by reciting them in a melodic voice associated with the presentation of canonical holy texts) and the holy text closer to the recipients' experience (by interweaving the dramatisation of the text and the described situations). We will later see how important the connotations of the melodic voice built up here are for the genre.

The second setting is the annual congregation of a large Islamic college of the Deobandi model in a sub-district of Bangladesh's northeast (see Fig. 8); many important figures also from the recently mobilising movement of Hefazat-e Islam are invited as speakers. I

here want to concentrate on one of the speakers whom I heard several times in religious schools and who, despite a different ideological orientation, seems to continue many aspects of what I have outlined above in the case of the sermon for children. Given the more advanced audience, the level of sophistication of the sermons increased compared to the setting described above. Next to quotations from the Quran and Hadith, quotations of poetry in Bengali, Urdu and Farsi, as well as the call to prayer and slogans of the movement, were included in only half an hour of speaking time.
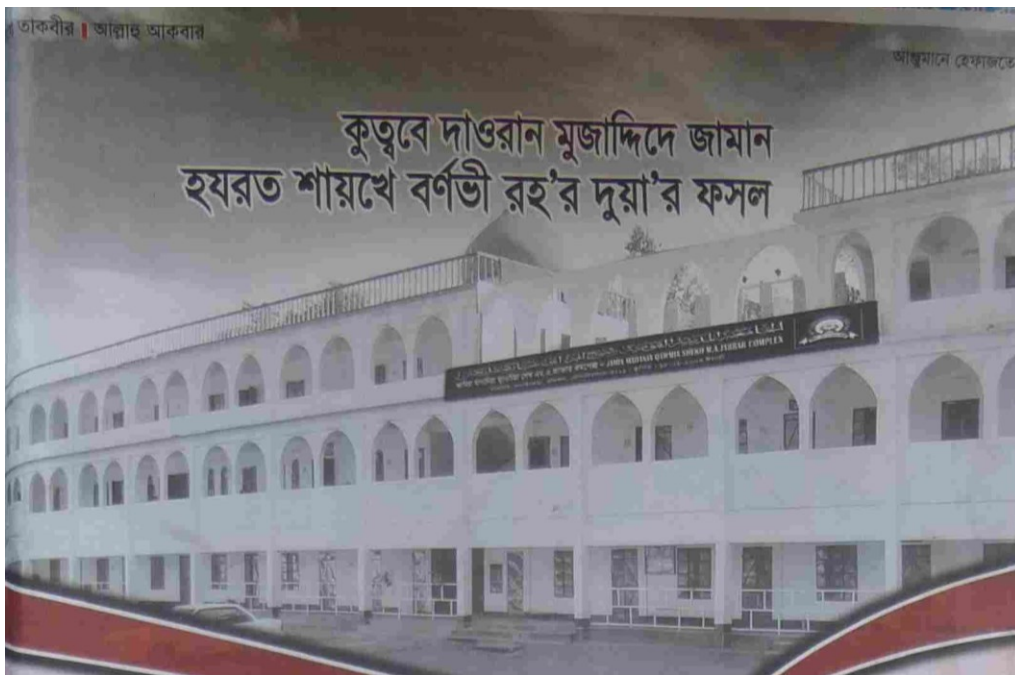
Fig. 8: Picture of poster announcing sermon at religious college

How does this feast of linguistic and vocal performance work here? The speaker starts in *medias res* by referring to the topos of the transitory and fleeting character of the world, with the paradise being the real home, citing the first line of a Bengali poem "I am a man of the low-tide, in that land is my house / In the high-tide land there is no one of my own, everyone is strange to me". After determining that the low-tide land is a metaphor for paradise and the high-tide land for the earth, he elaborates that in this world there are neither true brothers nor uncles nor other relatives, but only one truth: Allah.

From this first climax the preacher leads into a zikr in which the listeners join in and which the preacher enriches with yet another Urdu poem, which states that it was only for work that the poetic persona went to the flood-land. The interpretation this time follows in yet ano-

ther vocal register: arranged in a simple melody alternating between two fixed poles, up- and downwards, the preacher explains, again in Bengali, that this work consists of the religious duties of praying, fasting, reciting the Quran, and remembering the Prophet in order to go to paradise. He then addresses the audience, asking those who want to go to paradise to raise their hands and shout "Allah is great" – which the audience does enthusiastically, so that it seems that they accomplish what the preacher had recounted just before: that when one founders of the Deoband school called to God, this call made the entire mosque tremble.

A similar structure of a musically presented text which is linked to a vocal as well as a content-wise interpretation and listener participation takes place later in the sermon when the preacher takes up the first chapter of the Quran. Here, the interpretation emphasises the dialogic nature of the Quranic text by providing, equally in melodic speech, the answers Allah gives to the believer who addresses Him in the verse. For example, after translating Verse Five "Thee we worship; Thee we ask for help", the preacher continues in melodic speech "Allah says: 'that you worship I have understood and that you ask for help I have agreed upon. What else do you need?'" As in case of the preacher discussed above, aligning commentary and translation by a joint style of recitation allows the preacher to create a dialogue with Allah, a dialogue which is later extended to non-Quranic passages of the sermon as well.

As a contrast to this specialised sermon in a religious school, building on a homogenous audience familiar with and convinced of the importance of religion, let us have a look at a third example of preaching, an example of a preacher who is deliberately depicting himself as far from being a scholar but rather takes pride in his popularity. His outlook is very clear: he does not want to attack or offend anyone, but aims at fulfilling people's hopes. One of his favourite topics is that of parents', particularly the mother's, pains, a topic reaching out to as many people as possible, consciously including women as an important audience. Among his formulas of success are long stories which revolve around human conditions of heightened suffering. These can be stories of the sacred figures in such a condition or stories of ordinary people linked to this suffering by a depiction of similar emotions, for example narrations of the death of a child or a mother, or the great peril and compassion of a mother.

These topics link successfully to a wide audience. The above-quoted baby-taxi driver, for example, told me that he particularly likes re-membering his mother when listening to the sermons. There are also obvious parallels to contemporary television, so that it is not even clear who borrows from whom, the preacher from the serial or the serial from the preacher: in 2014 a serial started bearing the title "With your blessing, mother, I am doing fine" (see Fig. 9).

Fig. 9: Still from television serial
"With your blessing, mother, I am doing fine"

In an interview, this preacher told me that while the happenings of Islamic history do not change, one has to add some novelty to them by linking them to happenings of "reality" and by "giving them a new form" (Hosen: 2014). Explaining this technique, he compared his ad-ding of bits of reality with the adding of a fresh kind of chilli to a dish usually prepared with dry chillies. This comparison seems apt as the pieces he adds to the old stories are indeed spicy like chillies; his newest one, he told me, being that of a mother hacked to death by her daughter-in-law. But what outweighs these hyperbolic novelette stra-tegies is the way he combines them, again, with strategies of voice. One aspect of this is his speciality of including in his sermons songs which he also markets on CDs and in booklets he publishes. Just as film songs are available separately from the movie but serve as important points of recognition in its reception, these songs are often

sung along by the audience. Secondly, the melodies which are, as we have seen above, in the sermon congregations often linked to narrations of the sacred text, its interpretation and dramatisation, are employed preferably in relation to dramatic scenes of suffering parents and children.

Even if hyperbolic ones, these sermons remain acceptable instances of the genre. Although the preacher of the first setting despises the preacher discussed in the last example for his allegedly weak effort in exhorting the audience, he shares a lot with the latter in respect to his emphasis on and employment of the voice. Both preachers aim at a climactically increasing display and evocation of emotions. The preacher of the first setting describes this process as encompassing the following steps: first, he aims at creating a pious outlook with an emphasis on God's almightiness; second, he emphasises this emotion by referring to the fugitive character of this world, the topic around which our second example sermon evolved, and third, he gives some advice. It is only then, at a point of heightened emotionality after a short Quranic recitation, that he employs the melodic way of preaching, thereby increasing, as he puts it, love, attention and tears.

The preacher from the third example also follows a similar pattern, particularly in relation to consciously linking, in his narrations, the melodic way of preaching with depictions of pain and the effect of making the audience cry. A difference remains in the degree of linking this procedure with goals of socio-religious transformation, as the preacher from the first example includes comparatively more exhorting aspects relating to 'Islamic' behaviour in his sermons, while the preacher of the third example consciously describes the attention and emotional upheaval of the audience as goals per se. Nevertheless, there seems to be a shared implicit theory and practice of linking emotional and musical aspects of the sermons – a similarity which is also reflected in parallels in the biographies of both preachers. In the beginning, both of them were attracted by and excelled in vocal art, not in preaching or advice-giving. The third preacher even recalled a childhood memory of crafting a microphone from the trunk of a banana tree, as he had admired this technical item at festivals of Quranic recitation held in his village. Both of them emphasise that it was neither in formal education nor in personal instruction that they learned how to preach but that it was by listening, from childhood onwards, to Quranic recitation, to praise songs of the Prophet in different languages, as well as to sermons in sermon congregations, taking part first as reciters and later as preachers.

111

From the described setup of the sermon congregations and their way of presentation, it thus seems that there are success criteria of preachers and their audience which are based on rhetoric with a strong focus on oral aesthetics. While this seems to link to theories of oral poetry developed in the tradition of Parry and Lord, the mnemonic devices used for a "composition in performance" in the case of the preachers described here seem to be different from the 'singers of tales' (Lord: 1960). The sermons are usually not in verse or tied to a particular metre. The preachers' mnemonics often rely much more on memorising whole passages than has been described in theories of oral composition, reproducing exactly the same wording and timing over considerable parts of their sermons. The formal aspects at work seem to be, as has been described above, musical parameters linked to a rhetorical view of arousing the audience's emotions. In short, it is not so much the transmission of knowledge – this is controlled by written discourse – but the knowledge about its effective performance in which the oral is influential.

Fig. 10: Shi'a majlis in Lucknow

The pivotal art of vocal performance is, as we have seen, learned by audition and practice, and is not described in handbooks on preaching or formal education. It is the focus on this specifically oral configu-

ration which sets the sermon congregations described here apart from other genres of Islamic preaching in Bangladesh, not only from the Friday sermon with its ritualised tone, but also from the bayan of the Tablighi Jama'at and other similar organisations such as the Da'wat-e Haqq. It opens up connections between the sermon congregations and the roles of vocal performances in genres such as Jatra (Kunz: 2014), Jarigan (Dunham: 1997), Pũthi Para (Kane: 2008) and Shi'ite moaning gatherings (Qureshi: 1981) (see Fig. 10).

What questions does this perspective lead us to in the interpretation of the settings we have just glimpsed into? Are there, for example, differences in the weight and workings of the aesthetic processes bet-ween the preachers? How can the shifting relations between religious and aesthetic experience, e.g. comparing the use of melodies in the sermons of the different preachers, be grasped? What are the conse-quences of the observation that in the second example the vocal art directed the attention to poetry and exegesis and not to lengthy des-criptions of (sacred or human) figures as they are provided in the sermons of the preacher from the last example? It seems, after this general introduction, that the case of sermon congregations in contem-porary Bangladesh is a particularly interesting example for the study of oral aesthetics as part of literary and cultural history. It is hoped that continuing such inquiry helps finding the questions and approaches pertinent for the cultural phenomenon under consideration.

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