

Hearing Sacred Sounds in Hindi Film Songs: Thoughts on the *Mawlid* in Tamale, Northern Ghana

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Abstract

This contribution explores the role of Hindi film songs in the Mawlid in northern Ghana, where Tijani Muslims combine Islamic texts with Hindi film song melodies to celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. It explores how and why Hindi film songs are used in the Mawlid performance each year.

Keywords: Mawlid, Ghana, Hindi film songs

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In this contribution I explore the sonic, cultural, and historical relationship between Hindi film song melodies and Tijani Muslim communities in northern Ghana through their use in the Mawlid. The Mawlid, an all-night celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth, is an under-documented aspect of West African culture. In West Africa, the Mawlid is widely practiced within the Tijaniyyah Sufi order of Sunni Islam, an order that originated in North Africa and later spread throughout West Africa. For Tijani Muslims across Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Guinea, Niger, Chad, northern Ghana, and northern Nigeria, the Mawlid is intended to educate youth about Islam, the Arabic language, and, most significantly, the life history of the Prophet.¹

Beginning in the mid-1950s, hundreds of Hindi film song melodies arrived in northern Ghana, soon taking on new religious functions when combined with Arabic texts in order to praise the Prophet during the Mawlid. While Hindi film song texts and filmic situations

themselves usually center around stories of romantic love rather than religious or sacred themes, Hindi film song melodies are ascribed new religious meanings and associations when entering into a new political, cultural, and social climate in northern Ghana. In his work on Islamic counterpublics, Charles Hirschkind posits that sonic sensibilities are rooted in the experiences of the body in its entirety, as “a complex of culturally and historically honed sensory modalities.”² Throughout this contribution, I explore how participants in the Mawlid in northern Ghana hear Hindi film songs through their own culturally honed sensory modalities, associating particular sound patterns with everyday local religious practices and experiences in their own community.³

The Mawlid Performance on Northern Ghanaian Terms: A Brief Background

The Mawlid celebrations in Ghana are all-night festivities including dancing, singing, and drumming, performed annually to honor and celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Mawlid celebrations can, however, also take place during life-cycle events such as weddings and naming ceremonies of newborn babies, otherwise known as outdoorings. In northern Ghana, the Mawlid is organized and led by Tijani Muslim religious leaders, known as *mallams*, who are respected Islamic scholars within the community. By day, mallams are the leaders and head teachers at local Islamic schools, known locally as *makarantas*. By night, mallams structure, organize, and teach the Mawlid repertoire for large groups of youth in their local communities.

Several months prior to the Mawlid, which occurs in the third month of the Islamic lunar calendar, mallams begin to create choreographed dances, drumming patterns, and vocal texts detailing the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The majority of the texts set to Hindi film song melodies for the Mawlid are in Arabic, sourced from the Qur'an. However, some Mawlid songs are performed in Hausa and Dagbani, the two principal languages spoken in Tamale, the third-

largest city in Ghana. Once perfected, this combination of Arabic text and Hindi film song melody is taught to youth in nightly practices via a call-and-response format between mallam and youth. Additional teachers assist with choreography at these nightly practices and also accompany each performance on small metal drums. Over several months each year, Tamale's Tijani youth are exposed to a confluence of popular and sacred sounds as Arabic texts from the Qur'an mix with Hindi film song melodies in lengthy nightly practices.

Hindi film songs, as extra-Islamic popular music, have become integral in the development of a localized Islamic soundscape in northern Ghana through their use in the Mawlid. During my research in Tamale in 2016, mallams who used Hindi film song melodies as the melodic foundation for their own repertoire in the Mawlid articulated the reasons that Hindi film songs “sound right” and “fit” within the Mawlid. A common response was that Hindi film songs were easy to “get into your ears” and that “those who know the Qur'an find it easy to use Indian songs.”⁴ Mallams in Tamale thus listen to Hindi film song melodies in relation to their own lived sonic environment: the timbre, texture, ornamentation, and melismatic nature of older Hindi film song melodies hint at historical and cultural links with the Arab world as well as everyday Islamic religious practices in Tamale, such as the *adhan*. In both hearing and employing Hindi film songs as part of sacred Tijani practices, mallams anchor the foreign or alien by making it more locally legible. Hindi film song melodies thus act as “shells of commodities,” taking on new functions and meaning when used in a familiar form like the Mawlid.⁵

Mallams in Tamale also note a shared lexicon between Hindi film song lyrics and the Arabic language taught at local Islamic schools (makarantas). Hindi is not a known language for the majority living in Tamale, and, as such, mallams do not always associate Hindi film song

lyrics with their original intended themes of love and romance. Instead, mallams hear key words in Hindi film songs that are borrowed from Urdu's Perso-Arabic vocabulary.⁶ These words appear similar to the Arabic language taught via religious texts to youth in Tamale's makarantas. In many conversations and interviews, youth and mallams alike described their experiences hearing Arabic words and phrases in Hindi films. Beyond borrowed Perso-Arabic vocabulary, Hindi film songs also feature many words that sound phonetically similar or nearly the same as Hausa and Dagbani words, the two principal languages spoken in the region. People in Tamale commonly interchange Hausa and Dagbani words with Hindi words when singing popular Hindi film songs. The linguistic similarities and even interchangeability of Hindi, Arabic, Dagbani, and Hausa lyrics further encourage mallams to use Hindi film song melodies in their own Mawlid performances, especially when considering that the poetic and prose elements of the Mawlid define it as a genre.⁷

The popularity of Hindi films with Tijani Muslim viewers in Ghana has very much to do with the language of the films, for reasons that extend beyond the perceived shared linguistic and sonic characteristics mentioned above. While Hindi films were screened in a language few viewers in Ghana understood, Western Hollywood films available in Ghanaian cinemas were made in English without subtitles. For Tijani communities living in northern Ghana at the time, English was a language associated with missionaries, secular education enforced during the colonial period, and majority-Christian elite communities. Hollywood, then, became associated with Christian thought, secular education, and residual colonial power structures as well as class divisions between upper-class Christian communities and Muslim communities living in poorer migrant neighborhoods known locally as Zongos. In perhaps an unexpected confluence of social, political, economic, and gendered factors, Hindi film songs gained resonance within Muslim

communities across Ghana. While I deal here more specifically with the sonic relationship between Hindi film songs and their role in the Mawlid performance, the incredibly powerful socioeconomic, historical, and political associations present in Hollywood films ultimately encouraged the popularity of Hindi films among Muslim communities in Ghana.

The Introduction of Hindi Films in Northern Ghana

Hindi films arrived in Ghana just prior to independence in 1957, imported by Lebanese and Sindhi film distributors who screened Hindi films at cinemas across West Africa. The immense popularity of Hindi films arose in part because Ghana's majority Muslim audiences related to themes of morality and religiosity as well as the Islamicate iconography found in Hindi films. Hindi films popular in Ghana's Muslim communities, such as *Saat Sawal* (1971), *Noorie* (1979), *Ali Baba Aur 40 Chor* (1980), *Coolie* (1983), *Sanam Bewafa* (1991), and *Khuda Gawah* (1992), featured Islamicate cultural symbols.⁸

Older Hindi films from the 1950s to 1980s have remained popular in northern Ghana in part because of the presence of heroines wearing *shalwar qameez* and saris, as well as skirt-top-shawl *lehangas*. The dress of heroines in older Hindi films was read by northern Ghanaian women as a form of Islamicate iconography: that women in Hindi films dressed similarly to northern Ghanaian Muslim women engendered a sense of shared cultural practice and religious background. This was very much an unintended religious identification, as Hindi films dealt almost exclusively with themes of romantic and familial love, not Hindu mythologies or Islamic stories. Dress, then, encouraged Dagbamba and Hausa women to “think religiously about and around film,” again ascribing local meaning onto foreign cultural media.⁹

Not only did women in Hindi films dress similarly to Muslim women in Ghana, but these early postcolonial Hindi films further stood in stark contrast to the portrayal of women in other

films available in Ghana at the time, such as Westerns and James Bond films, which featured more sensual and sexually explicit depictions of women. Although Hindi films popular in Ghana were erotic to some degree, often with sexual tensions between lovers, that eroticism was portrayed in a way that did not offend the sensibilities of Muslim viewers. Nearly all of the Hindi films popular in northern Ghana today were made before 1990, and this is in part because pre-1990 Hindi films typically skirt visual elements including on-screen kissing, nudity, sex scenes, premarital sex, and revealing clothing that were at the forefront of Hollywood films of this time. The chasteness of Hindi films further reflects the stance of Muslim viewers in northern Ghana toward issues of sexual morality and gender that were absent in other films available at the time. Thus far, I have outlined some sonic, linguistic, cultural, economic, and political reasons for the resonance of Hindi film song melodies within majority-Muslim communities in Ghana. Below, I analyze a Mawlid song in order to detail the kinds of sonic and cultural associations that encourage mallams to include Hindi film song melodies in their Mawlid celebrations. The song in question, “Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka” from the 1971 Hindi film *Hare Ram Hare Krishna*, became a common melody used in Mawlid performances in Ghana beginning in the early 1970s.

***Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971) as Religious Sentiment**

Unlike the majority of my research on the Mawlid, which has been heavily participatory and presentist, this musical example presents a historical example of how Hindi film songs have been used in the Mawlid in Ghana. I came across this example by chance while watching the 1971 film *Hare Ram Hare Krishna* (1971) with a friend in her home in Tamale one November evening in 2016. My friend, a woman in her sixties, makes a living selling DVDs of Hindi films in Tamale's central market. While we were watching the film, she began to sing along to the opening song of the film, "Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka," but rather than singing the Hindi lyrics of the song (which she knows well), she sang over the Hindi lyrics with a Dagbani lyric version I had not heard before. When I asked where she had learned the Dagbani lyrics, she began to talk about her experiences performing in the Mawlid. As a youth studying in the makaranta in the early 1970s, she learned a variety of Mawlid performances intertwined with Hindi film song melodies. The lyrics below provide an example of the ways in which Hindi film song melodies can be transformed by mallams for use in Tijaani Mawlid performance.

Phoolon ka taaron ka,	Ti jammi ti duuma	We should worship our Lord
sabka kehna hai	Nawuni ni o gafara	God and his blessings
Ek hazaron mein,	Ti jammi ti duuma	We should worship our Lord
meri behna hai	Nawuni ni o gafara	God and his blessings
Saari umar	O namla dunia	He created the world
Hamein sang rehna hai	Ti jammi ti duuma	We should worship our Lord
Phoolon ka taaron ka,	Ti jammi ti duuma	We should worship our Lord
sabka kehna hai	Nawuni ni o gafara	God and his blessings

Above: Original melody used from the first verse of "Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka" from the Hindi film *Hare Ram Hare Krishna* (1971). Lyrics changed to Dagbani for use at a Mawlid performance in Ghana around 1972 or 1973. From left to right, Hindi transliterated lyrics, followed by Dagbani lyrics, followed by English translation of the Dagbani *mawlid* version. Dagbani to English translation by Abubakari Yushawu in Tamale, northern Ghana, 2016.

Why choose “Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka” as a melody for the Mawlid performance? Although the mallam who composed this specific song has since passed away and thus cannot express his own reasons for choosing the melody, the example is still fruitful for exploring some of the elements and characteristics of Hindi film songs that propel older Hindi film songs into Islamic religious spheres of listening, hearing, and performing in northern Ghana. Firstly, mallams use clips from Hindi films that visually espouse morals and values aligned with the Islamic teachings in makarantas. Thus, the particular musical scene from *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971) that this mallam used is between two young siblings, a brother and sister, in which the brother expresses his devotion to his sister despite their parents’ impending divorce. As Ruth Vanita suggests, this scene is common to Bombay cinema, where nonsexual relationships, such as friendships and sibling relations, take center stage with passionate intensity.¹⁰ And while the main subject of *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971) concerns adult romantic relationships and issues of divorce, “Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka” deals more specifically with nonromantic relationships such as the love shared between siblings. Thus, the context of the song espouses the right kinds of moral values desired by mallams.

The Hindi song lyrics that accompany the melody in “Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka” borrowed for this particular Mawlid performance include a reference to a shared or borrowed word used in Hindi as well as Dagbani, Hausa, Persian, and Arabic. In the second verse of the Hindi film song version, the first line reads “ye na jaana duniya ne tu hai kyon udaas,” which translates as “the world could not know why you are sad.” *Duniya* also appears in the Dagbani Mawlid version shown above in line five: “O namla dunia.” The word *duniya* found here in a Hindi film song, with its origins in Persian, has links with Muslim West Africa in the Hausa term for “world” that is often borrowed in Dagbani as well. Mallams and youth who listen to Hindi film songs in

Tamale are aware of these linguistic similarities, and it is likely that the mallam who wrote the above text in Dagbani for the Mawlid intended to reference this linguistic link between Hindi, Persian, Arabic, Hausa, and Dagbani. The presence of Perso-Arabic borrowed words in Hindi film songs may in part explain why mallams hear Hindi film songs as suitable for local religious events like the Mawlid.

“Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka” also features key sonic elements that mallams in Tamale hear as similar to the sounds of everyday religious practices in Tamale’s majority Muslim neighborhoods. Sung by Lata Mangeshkar, “Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka” features lengthy melismatic lines and vocal ornamentation throughout. The use of a melismatic melody with ornamentation for the Mawlid is significant because it draws a Mawlid performance closer to other Islamic religious practices such as the *adhan*. As one mallam explained: “When Indians sing, they make sounds which just look the same as when we do call for prayers. . . . [T]he call to prayer, they take a syllable and put it on different notes. Indian songs, they do the same thing.”¹¹ That mallams draw a sonic link between the ornamental and melismatic nature of both the *adhan* and popular Hindi film songs like “Phoolo Ka Taaro Ka” is an example of an embodied listening practice, where the listener hears and forms perceptions about Hindi film songs through associations with their own everyday lived sonic environment. The process of cultural reinterpretation, as Herskovits suggests, is a syncretic process. In Tamale, mallams apply religious sentiment to Hindi film song melodies, shifting the cultural value of a foreign musical form.¹²

Conclusion

For Tijani Muslim communities in northern Ghana, everyday religious sounds, words, and sentiments are reflected in Hindi film songs heard in the cinema, on the radio, and in the home. Hindi film songs enter sacred realms including the Mawlid precisely because they have traversed transnational borders, entering into new political, geographic, economic, and social boundaries that come with different ways of hearing and ascribing meaning to sound. Attention to Islamic soundscapes in Tamale provides an unexpected example of how sounds become religious, as borrowed words, vocal styles, and mediated images encourage mallams in northern Ghana to transfer local perceptions of religious sound onto transnationally circulating popular music.

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² Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 101.

³ Thomas J. Wagner, “Hearing the Hillsong Sound: Music, Marketing, Meaning and Branded Spiritual Experience at a Transnational Megachurch” (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2013), 121–23.

⁴ Mallam in discussion with the author in Tamale, Ghana, November 16, 2016.

⁵ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 195.

⁶ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 103.

⁷ Lois Ibsen al-Faruqi, “The Mawlid,” *World of Music* 28, no. 3 (1986): 82.

⁸ The term Islamicate is defined by Marshall Hodgson as the “social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.” See Hodgson quoted in Mukul Kesavan, “Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema,” in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*, ed. Zoya Hasan (Boulder: Westview, 1994), 246.

⁹ Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 3.

¹⁰ Ruth Vanita, “The Romance of Siblinghood in Bombay Cinema,” *Journal of South Asian Studies* 36 (2013): 30.

¹¹ Mallam in discussion with the author in Tamale, Ghana, November 5, 2016

¹² Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 553.