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Review: Rachel Harris, Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam

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Rachel Harris

Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020.

Xi + 249 pp. ISBN 9780253050182 (hardback),

9780253050205 (paperback), 9780253050199 (ebook).

Islam is a religion of the book with origins in the Middle East, but, as Rachel Harris notes in the first ethnographic chapter of this important study, “As experienced by Muslims over the past fourteen centuries, most of whom could neither speak nor read Arabic, the Qur’an is primarily sound, not script.” The Uyghurs of Xinjiang, northwest China, at the eastern edge of the Turkic-speaking world, exemplify the merits of a “soundscape” approach. Harris combines ethnomusicological sophistication with pioneering field research at the grass roots of Uyghur society and acute political analysis. It is an unfortunate consequence of the present situation in Xinjiang that, in order to protect her subjects, she is unable to divulge much detail concerning the local contexts or the religious specialists with whom she worked.

The theoretical background is laid out in the opening chapter. Harris is concerned to grasp the experiences, emotions, and habitus of her Uyghur subjects, rather than cerebral meaning and ideologies. The thrust of her reflections on soundscapes (mainly but not exclusively based on works pertaining to Islam) is a holistic collapsing of boundaries and causalities: place and body, affect and memory are viscerally intertwined, and discourses acquire their power through repetition in the practices of everyday religion. Deploying the concepts of embodiment, emplacement, and entrainment, Harris shows that the forms taken by popular Islam in Central Asia diverge from the constellations we

know from the scholarly literature on the Islamic heartlands, for example, with respect to gender. This periphery has been decisively shaped in the past by Sufi heritage (even if that term is not used in the villages of contemporary Xinjiang) and in recent decades by the controls of the socialist state.

Within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (many activists and some scholars prefer to speak of Eastern Turkestan), Harris limits her enquiry to the titular people, who comprised over 80 percent of this territory’s population when it was incorporated into the republic of Chairman Mao in 1949. Thanks to minority recognition and socialist educational policies, a strong collective ethnic consciousness has emerged. Yet in the very same decades the mass immigration of Han Chinese in the course of agrarian and industrial development has rendered the Uyghurs a minority within their homeland. By the early twenty-first century, the contradictions were boiling over (to use a metaphor frequently used by rural Uyghurs themselves in other contexts).

This book is the culmination of the author’s decades of productivity in ethnomusicological studies of Xinjiang. Harris has previously investigated Uyghur classical *Muqam* traditions as well as contemporary pop music. These are primarily male worlds. For this book, which is linked to a larger comparative study of Islamic soundscapes across China,¹ she has exploited the access afforded to her by affinal connections

to present ethnographic analyses of Uyghur women's religious activities in rural southern Xinjiang. Participant observation in rituals in 2009 and 2012 is supplemented by interviews with diaspora Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and by internet research after further fieldwork in Xinjiang became impossible.

Chapter 2 is devoted primarily to peasant women's *khätmä* rituals and the transmission of the specialist knowledge of the *büwi*, who in addition to her female genealogies may also maintain contacts with official imams. Particularly on sacred occasions such as the night of Barat, qur'anic recitation opens up to rhythmic entrainment: song, trance, and collective weeping. The analysis is extended in chapter 3 to performances of *hikmät* verse (religious poetry held to derive from Khoja Ahmad Yasawi) well known throughout Central Asia. Harris integrates a historical account with recent data from two locations in Xinjiang and a third just across the border in Kazakhstan. Ritual specialists have always operated at what Jack Goody called "the interface between the written and the oral." The manuscript versions of the *Diwan-i Hikmät* that circulated over centuries have recently been supplanted by printed publications. As in the past, the canon is continuously modified by more prestigious written versions. Contemporary intellectuals in Xinjiang base their editions not on local oral performances but on compilations published abroad. The era of Islamic revival is characterized by simplified, less emotional performances on the basis of texts that have been filtered by nationalists in Turkey or Uzbekistan.

While female renditions of *hikmät* spiritual poetry do not circulate digitally, the following chapters examine ways in which new technologies facilitate the global

transmission of male performances in other genres. Drawing theoretically on the well-known work of Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood in Egypt, Harris presents evidence from Uyghur diaspora communities in neighboring post-Soviet states to show how Uyghurs have come to connect with the sensoria of a vast spiritual compass. Local styles of qur'anic recitation are devalued in comparison with the perceived modernity of those disseminated from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan. Yet these transnational circuits (sometimes underpinned by a commercial dimension, notably in the halal food market) are compatible with local rootedness. Returning to her initial Barat example in rural Xinjiang, Harris shows that multiple styles can be combined within the same ritual ("Salafi sounds in a Sufi ritual," 128–29); this is not syncretism but a "disjuncture" typical of sonic globalization.

The current plight of the Uyghurs becomes the dominant theme in the book's closing chapters, in which the feedback loops that Harris has previously identified in the realm of sound are replicated as spirals of violence in the realm of politics. Chapter 5 consists mainly of internet ethnography. In 2013–14 the platform WeChat functioned as a form of "small media" that allowed Uyghur users to communicate during their intensifying "crisis of suffering" with intimate circles of friends inside and outside Xinjiang. With the rise of the smartphone, familiar disjunctures appeared in new forms. Social media purveyed the full gamut of sound, from the most sacred to the most profane horror memes (in Xinjiang even a Malaysian freak show could occasion contrasting religious interpretations). Popular videodiscs harked back to Sufi

traditions to provoke a surfeit of emotions, but austere performances of poetry praising Allah called *anashid*, sung without musical accompaniment, also circulated widely. The emotional impact of the latter on youth was especially notable. Some of these sounds merged with familiar tropes of masculinity and secular nationalism (blood, wounds, and sacrifice) to celebrate revolutionary violence. Harris insists, however, that the great majority of those who consumed the new pious media were concerned with new ways of listening, not with fighting; with the formation of a counterpublic that was ethically superior to the secular authorities, rather than with revolutionary jihad.

Since 2014, the possession and circulation of any Islamic materials have been equated by the authorities with terrorism. All traces of faith must be eradicated from the smartphone. In chapter 6 Harris pursues emplacement in the form of territorialization (Gilles Deleuze). Like landscape, the soundscape is constructed and contested. They merge in the bodies of experiential subjects. The Chinese state has cast the sacred soundscape as “noise” and criminalized every expression of piety. Mass mobilization to counter religious extremism requires Uyghurs to participate in patriotic songs and feign nostalgia even for the dark decade of the Cultural Revolution. Folklore performers must smile during their emotional labor as they sing and dance to satisfy official whims. These repertoires give rise to anxieties, especially in diaspora commentaries. Uyghurs who have come to accept reformist puritanism condemn all musical practices as *haram*, especially toxic when they are so crudely manipulated by punitive Han Chinese ethnic managers. Yet many Uyghurs in the homeland have come to view these

traditions as an integral element of their national heritage.

Harris concludes that the Beijing government’s repression amounts to an attempt at “erasure” of Uyghur soundscapes and the very identity of the Uyghurs as a people. She compares the state’s “weaponization of music” with U.S. Army practice during the Iraq War. However, just as the traumas of the Cultural Revolution failed to eliminate Uyghur distinctiveness, Harris is confident that coercive listening and forms of rhythmic “dressage” (Henri Lefebvre) in the re-education camps are doomed to failure. The Chinese state postulates a link between “terrorist” violence and the revival of Islam and has been able to get away with this since 9/11 with the complicity of Western powers, which pathologize Islam in similar ways. Harris concedes that the “lure of the illicit” has made extremist positions attractive to a minority of Uyghurs, while insisting that the wider Islamic revival in Xinjiang has more to do with self-cultivation than with secular politics. Some readers might conclude, on the basis of the evidence provided by the author, that, here too, causalities are inextricably intertwined.

The approach via soundscapes generates rich insights into the simultaneous ethical transformations of persons and the collective spiritual reshaping of communities among the Uyghurs, from the level of the village to that of the ethnic group. This fine study will be particularly appreciated by specialists in Xinjiang studies and the ethnomusicology of Islam, but it also has much to offer scholars in other fields. In broaching topics such as weeping as an expression of emotion, entrainment in musical performances, and colonial palimpsests of power, Harris opens up many instructive comparisons beyond

the Islamic world (for example, with the repression of indigenous ritual practices in the Americas). The book is very well written and has been produced to a high standard, with numerous illustrations and an excellent index. (A glossary listing the many terms of Arabic, Chinese, Persian, and Uyghur origin would have been an additional bonus.)

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NOTES

1 Rachel Harris, Guangtian Ha, and Maria Jaschok, eds., *Ethnographies of Islam in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021).