Final Report Summary - MUSTECIO (Musical Transitions to European Colonialism in the eastern Indian Ocean)

2. MUSTECIO’s aim is to produce a history of how the musical fields – the soundworlds – of the eastern Indian Ocean changed during their transitions to and through European colonialism. Our focus is on North India and the Malay world, largely under British colonialism c.1750-1900, and combines the methodologies of history and ethnomusicology to analyse visual, material, and literary sources on music, sound, and listening, in key regional and European languages. The project consisted of three Case Studies – the Awadh (India), Malay, and India-Malay Case Studies – whose findings were increasingly pooled in order to make larger-scale sense of how local musical systems and networks were transformed across the region in their encounter with European colonial power. This deeply collaborative and cross-disciplinary project has had exciting and field-changing results.

1) We have established for the first time that vast and rich historical archives exist for North Indian and Malay-world music history c.1700-1900. These archives are in many languages, extremely diverse, and represent multiple lineages of knowledge.

2) We have developed four new methodologies for the study of such archives: A) A focus on sound and listening, leading to a broadening of our field from music to auditory history. B) Multilingualism: in these regions, operating in multiple languages was normative; so we too needed to place different languages back into dialogue. C) Intermediality: attention to the ways visual, literary, and sonic media historically interconnected and enriched each other. People across this region cultivated rich, virtuosic aesthetics of borrowing and reuse across media; and an intermedial perspective is required to make sense of how they responded to new, European entrants into this regional space. D) Stereophony: detailed connection and comparison across the Bay of Bengal between India and the Malay world.

3) We have developed a new model for the transition of regional knowledge systems to and through European colonialism – paracolonial lineages and economies. Colonial power had enormous distorting effects on regional soundworlds, but “colonial discourse” on music was itself irrelevant to most regional systems of knowledge until well past the mid 19C. Of far greater impact were European notions of the proper uses of space, time, and resources; ways of doing business; employment of musical labour; interference in older economic modes; civic regulations and jurisprudence; new technologies; and significant acts of physical violence, notably the British suppression of the 1857 Indian Uprising, and the 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty that cut the Malay world in two. The archives show that late-19C reformist discourses represented only a limited top-slice of local opinion, and were not a “mainstream” of regional views. Precolonial knowledge systems did not consecutively give way to transitional, then colonial knowledge systems. Instead, reformism was but one strand among many thriving lineages of knowledge that competed for precedence in dynamic musical economies during the colonial era. These streams were facilitated or altered in their course by colonial presence and action, but the vast majority were not beholden to colonial epistemologies.

In seeking to account for these economies while never losing sight of the coercive colonial context that shaped them, we have developed the concept of “paracolonial” knowledge systems (after Stephanie Newell), denoting lineages of knowledge that continued, developed, and were born and died alongside and beyond the colonial. The paracolonial enables us to account for the many otherwise unaccountable regional musical practices and knowledges that coexisted, waxed, and waned in differing relations to European power and culture during the years conventionally marked off as the “colonial period”. It also makes sense of the persistence of older forms and ideas long after independence in India and the Malay world.

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