

**Max Stille**

***Islamic Sermons and Public Piety in Bangladesh: The Poetics of Popular Preaching***

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In his pioneering book, Max Stille attempts to examine the *waz mahfils* (Islamic sermon gatherings) held in present-day Bangladesh as a mass religious and participatory public practice of the working classes. By engaging with recent studies on media, religious emotion, and popular culture (Hirschkind 2006; Eisenlohr 2016; Millie 2017), Stille attempts to rethink the role of the senses and religious aesthetics in public piety in the broader context of the public sphere, which gets caught between Islamic political mobilization and national electoral politics.

Stille's work rescues *waz mahfils* from getting reduced to the teleological narrative of Islamic terrorism prevalent as the blind spot in the scholarship on Islam in Bangladesh. Instead, *Islamic Sermons* proposes to read multivocality in *waz mahfils* and the contentions of different actors to investigate motivations of preachers and listeners across various gatherings. In doing so, *Islamic Sermons and Public Piety in Bangladesh* fills the gap in global scholarship not only on Islam in Bangladesh but also cultural history and popular piety to redraw their frameworks by reading Islamic sermon gatherings as popular communication in the public sphere.

By going beyond the binary between indoctrination and entertainment, Stille reads Islamic public preaching, so far linearly understood as a form of religious propaganda, as civic participation by highlighting the role of communicative conventions, aesthetic norms, the speech genre, and the power of the vernacular rhetoric. In his reconsideration of sermons as a narrative and performance genre, Stille rethinks religious communication as shaping the subjectivities of the audience and patterns of imagining and embodying the community in unique ways. Stille emphasizes the very specific regional context of communications that offer utopian, conservatory, and activist roles to the Muslim

audience of Bangladesh, but never pits the forms of local Islam and its improvisations and a more normative global against each other.

Stille also explores how the global template is enriched through various located acts of vernacular and popular mediation. Stille's work unravels sermon as a speech and performative genre, which along with the bodily dimensions of sound and music weaves together the "theological, narrative and rhetorical artifice" (3) in directed or undirected reception processes. Based on his fieldwork in various districts of Bangladesh from 2012–2016, he situates his study of the complex homosocial spaces in sermon gatherings in the broader political and social perspectives of Bangladesh, which often place the *waz mahfils* "against the master discourse of 1971" (6)—the secular ethos of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

The backdrop of Stille's book is set in Bangladesh's "era of polarization and democracy's retreat" (9). The landslide victory of the Awami League (AL) in 2008, which was the pivotal force in the political mobilization during the Liberation War of Bangladesh against West Pakistan, connected the public sphere with the memory of the birth of the nation. As the AL promised trials for the war criminals of the Liberation War, claiming justice was long overdue, it impacted national politics and strengthened unease toward the Islamic bloc in politics and the middle-class disavowal of religious sermon gatherings as religious chauvinism. One of the major accused, Abdul Quader Molla, was a regular preacher at *waz mahfils*. When the first verdict of his life imprisonment by the International Crimes Tribunal was announced instead of a death sentence, the collective mass sentiment transfigured into two distinct axes in 2013. The Shahbag Movement of the common people, university students, and women, outside the established party structure, showed their displeasure at a "lesser" punishment for a grave crime committed by a member of the orthodoxy. Contrary to Shahbag, the Hifazat-e-Islam gained national prominence with its demand on compulsory Islamic education to "protect" Islamic symbols. As the Shahbag movement shifted from its initial pluralistic agenda to become a loose platform to criticize the faith and practices of the people involved in war crimes, the Hifazat-e-Islam became more rigid as the self-proclaimed protector of Islam with a more structured mass mobilization. In this process of polarization between free speech and blasphemy, between a secular public sphere and an Islamized orthodoxy, *waz* was interpreted as counter-discourse to the public sphere.

For each of the five chapters of this book, Stille has chosen different angles to shed light on the Bengali *waz* sessions. Chapter 1 discusses the trajectories ranging from the global format of Arabic Friday *khutba* to Bengali *waz* preaching. By situating the forms of gathering and listening in a *waz* performance, the image and the role of the individual preachers—Allama Mahmudul Hasan, Abu Kashem Nuri, Tophajjal Hosen, Zaman, among others—across regions (Dhaka, Chittagong, Bhairabi) have been explicated as a broader template across the country, though the role is often context bound (age, training, lineage, location) and temporal. Here, after depicting all practical elements for setting up the *mahfil* performance as a coded surrounding, the author goes on to engage with the recent scholarship on Islamic religious mobilization (Pernau 2017; Schulz 2006; Stille 2016) to describe the preacher's roles, the audience's expectations, and transactions between the audience and preacher to understand the basic parameters and forms of affective and social mobilization. The author, here, proposes a reading of sermon as a form of storytelling that presupposes the copresence of the audience as attentive and "well-guided" listeners and followers to be persuaded to create consensus in a

call-response manner (formula exchange, feedback phrase, patterns of coded question and answer). He opens a separate discussion of the female audience too. Here, the author also recognizes major shifts since the 1980s with the advent of new media to mark not only heightened transterritorial exchanges with an increasingly global Islamic soundscape, but also new modes of personalization and branding of this speech act as it enters the domain of recording and technological reproduction.

Chapter 2 elaborates on the textual and performative features of the sermons. Here, a study of the multiple roles of the preacher as exegete and religious authority shows how he acts as “a translator and a master of a multilingual aesthetic repertoire” (75). For Stille, the sermons attain multilingual stature with the presence of Bengali, Arabic, and Urdu idioms, prompting him to trace the functions of “multilingual code switching” (75–88) and identities borne by these languages. Stille dwells at length on the role of the Qur’an and the Qur’anic translations in *waz* preaching. He starts analyzing the narrative structure of introduction, its persuasive techniques, and the main part of the sermon to analyze the relevance of the processes of translation by the preacher for the interpretation of the Qur’an and mark the use of various rhetorical elements (the use of synonyms, antonyms, and semantically close combinations) to produce religio-aesthetic emotions. Stille also explicates in this chapter the employment of nationalist emotion by the preachers to formulate the rhetoric of religious nationalism so unique for Bangladesh and places religious nationalism in the broader pan-Islamic framework.

By focusing on the structure of the sermon as religious and social speech, chapter 3 looks into the ways the sermons involve the audience with the lives of the heroes of Islam—the Prophet, his companions, and others—to inculcate Islamic ethic-moral behavioral codes in them. The emotional and ethical narratives connect “theological consequences” (25) with eschatological issues as the everyday morality of the Muslims. Following the tenets of narratology and drama theory, Stille shows that dramatic emotions are inherent in religious narratives, culminating in religious supplication. He also explains how, through such dramatization, the traditional thematic becomes an efficacious tool for mass mobilization, with human compassion as a binding factor.

In chapter 4, Stille argues that the melodic coding of the narratives, “prose chanting” (174), based on the double “allegiance” (160) to melodic *puthi* reading and the Qur’an, enhances and enables the impact of the affective narrative by acting differently on the bodily reception of the audience. By addressing multilingual code switching and analyzing pitch patterns (in Hosen’s speech, 182–83) and the music-rhetorical encoding of vocal performances (in Sayeedi’s speech, 185–86), Stille adds an important observation in the study of the connect between voice, pitch, self-affliction, and religious emotion. He develops a structural study of the production of aesthetic-affective response from an array of cultural vocal techniques. For this, he draws upon the contentious debate on the spectrum of musicality and its permissibility in Islam as interpreted and practiced by individual preachers across regions.

After a close analysis of the musical structure and emotional efficacy of the sermons, chapter 5 focuses on one ubiquitous theme and technique to induce narrative pleasure: humor. After discussing the use of humor as integral to Islamic didactic communication, which has a status removed from other kinds of social entertainment, Stille discusses its “transformative and mobilizing potential” (192) as political speech. Focusing on language, performance roles, and genre particular to humor in sermons, he discusses how humor has been creatively and strategically narrativized for popular mobilization,

against the collective Other. Going beyond the prevalent binary between didacticism and entertainment, the scriptural and the popular, global versus local ideas of Islam, Stille reads the *waz* as a local rhetoric of Islam enacted through dynamic multilingual mediations and “music-rhetorical encoding” (179). He blurs the disciplinary boundaries by reading sermons as public speech and goes beyond the restrictions of musicology and literary studies by reading communication as sensory guidelines embedded in the melodic structure of the “scriptural” text. Thus, he offers a new reading of the public marked by Islamic popular piety as a challenge to the theories of global publics.

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