



*International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*

*ISSN 2348-2990*

*Vol. 3 No. 9, August 2015, pp. 73-83*

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homepages: <http://ijsshrjournal.com/>

## The sacred sound of kirtan: An ethno musicological – anthropological analysis of the Sikh community in Athens.

Elli Kosteletou<sup>1\*</sup>

[1] *PhD candidate in Ethnomusicology, Department of Music, National and Kapodestrian University of Athens, Greece.*

\*Corresponding author's E-mail: [ellikostelo@hotmail.com](mailto:ellikostelo@hotmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the dynamic relationship between music and the sacred. In particular, it presents an ethno musicological – anthropological approach of the Sikh community in Tavros in Athens, Greece. Based on fieldwork research, I explore the ways in which the sacred music of kirtan is perceived and conceived by the members of the community. As fieldwork reveals, the migratory experience affects the musical performance of the sacred music. Despite these alterations, I argue that music in its ritual context empowers the sense of belonging of the community in the foreign place away from their motherland, India.

**Keywords:** ethnomusicology, religious music, migration, ethnic identity.

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## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays there is a clear observation that there are “places” within the Greek society where people from different parts of the world live and coexist. These people bring their culture, their customs, their traditions and their religious beliefs with them. The ethno musicological interest in non-European musical traditions which are transplanted into a foreign cultural, i.e. European context is obvious. My work focuses on collecting data through fieldwork in order to contribute to such a study. Moreover, there is the important attempt to reveal the presentation and representations of reality of the immigrant himself through an ethno musicological perspective. The subject of ethnic communities provides an extremely interesting field for researchers aiming to understand the social phenomenon. This particular field reveals the concepts of interactivity and interaction of each ethnic community, both internally and externally, regarding its relations with the wider contemporary social context. Music as a performative art constitutes a means of intercultural interaction between humans. Thus, it provides a productive way to study contemporary social phenomena.

The relationship between music and society is my main interest. I am particularly interested in the ethno musicological approach of the Indian community in Greece. Being a musician, I find Indian music charming and intriguing. In addition, I am fascinated by the sounds, the images, the philosophy, the culture and the customs of India. Furthermore, as a student I have attended classes and seminars on Indian music, history and culture as well as on Minorities issues. On the other hand, apart from my personal interests, I propose a systematic study of Indian music, society and culture within the contemporary Greek context, through the application of sociological, anthropological and ethno musicological methodologies. This article is part of my PhD research (Music and Minorities: an ethno musicological approach of the Indian minority in Greece), focusing on the ways in which the members of the Sikh community in Greece, present and represent their musical and cultural identity through the performance of sacred music. In this respect, I explore musical performance as a lens to understand the relationship between the expressive and aesthetic practices of religious music and the social life of the community<sup>1</sup>.

## **2. Literature Review**

The relationship between music and the sacred is a special issue that is often displayed in the contemporary ethno musicological debate. The special role of music in the processes of representation, conceptualization and alteration which penetrate human culture is emerging in the light of religious music in a special way (Sullivan 1997:9-10). The dialectic relationship between music and ritual is still a main object of the ethno musicological / anthropological study in connection with the sacred. The analysis may concern the purely religious form of music; for example, looking into the concept of "ritual trance", as signified in accordance with the cultural context (Rouget 1985). Other researches however, examine the limits and the interaction of

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<sup>1</sup>This research has been co-financed by the European Union (European Social Fund – ESF) and Greek national funds through the Operational Program "Education and Lifelong Learning" of the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) - Research Funding Program: Heracleitus II. Investing in knowledge society through the European Social Fund.

music and religious practices in the framework of a globalised environment (Bohlman, 1997). Beck (2006) highlights the important role of musical performance in the social life of religious communities. He systematically examines six of the major world religions (among them Hinduism and Sikhism) through music. On the same issue, Greek literature is almost nonexistent regarding the presence of Indian immigrants in Greece, let alone the relationship of immigrants with music and the sacred.

Moreover, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) approaches religion as a cultural symbolic system through which cultural perceptions are formed. He highlights the significance of these cultural beliefs concerning religion and the way they affect the social daily life. I rely on this context of Geertz's thinking in order to approach the notion of rituals.

In my research the religious ritual is also illuminated by Collins's (2004) theory. Influenced by the theoretical approaches of Durkheim and Goffman, in relation to the concepts of ritual and performance respectively, Collins argues that the social nexus consists of rituals defined as interactive performative practices (interaction rituals).

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology I use is ethnographic and has an empirical - experiential orientation. Its main feature is the collection of primary material, without neglecting the use of secondary sources. Specifically, I conducted systematic research in the religious community of the Sikh in the area of Tavros 2009-2013 and visited their temples (gurdwara). During my fieldwork I used numerous tools: a) records and calendar notes regarding the process of research, b) in-depth discussions, semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews with members of the community and c) audiovisual material, collected during my contact with the Indian community. In this article I use aliases instead of my interlocutors' real names for ethical reasons. Aiming to understand the multiple realities of everyday life of the Sikh in Athens, this methodology helped to highlight the basic principles and needs of the community being studied

### **4. Finding**

In this article, I attempt an anthropological - ethno musicological approach of the Indian community in the capital of Greece, Athens, focusing on the Sikh religious community in the Gurdwara (Sikh temple) in the area of Tavros. The analysis revolves around two axes: music and society. In this respect I begin my analysis through an introductory presentation of the Indian community in Greece.

The first Indian immigrants arrived in Greece from various regions of north-western India, mainly from the region of Punjab, in the 70s. The number of these immigrants was small. They were travelling in the Mediterranean country either individually or as small family groups (Christopoulou, 2013). For Badal, a resident of Marathonas, the main reason for migrating was employment, so that he would be able to financially support his family back in India. Badal's case is not unique. The economic criteria were, and still are, the main cause of expatriation of the majority of Indians in Greece. Over the years, the families and friends of these immigrants followed. According to the 2001 and 2009 census statistics, the proportion of male immigrants was superior compared to the percentage of women immigrants with Indian citizenship. Over the

years though (2001-2009), the number of women increased, tending to balance. Moreover, the statistics show an increasing tendency of the population of Indian origin towards Greece by 2011, ranking India among the top countries with growing migration trend.

According to the 2011 census (El.Stat, 2011) settlers in Greece having India as their previous country of residence are 3,273 (2,376 men and 897 women). Overall, the population of the Indian community is estimated at about 12,775. However my fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2013, a period of financial crisis. As stated by the president of the Greek-Indian Society, Maghar Gandhi and according to testimonies that emerged from fieldwork, social developments have deeply affected the Indian community in Greece, significantly reducing its population.

According to information provided by the Indian Embassy in Athens, the largest part of the migration flow from India comes from Punjab. By extension, the largest Indian community in Greece is the Sikh community. Sikhs share a common religion, language and geographical origin, a special common culture. The language spoken is Hindi and Punjabi. Smaller Indian groups come from different parts of India mainly from West Bengal (Calcutta). Their religion is Hindu or Muslim and the language spoken is Bengali and Hindi. Therefore, Hinduism and Sikhism are the main religious identities of Indians in Greece. Hindus practice their religious beliefs in Mandir and Hare Krishnas whereas, the temples (*gurdwaras*) of the Sikh community are scattered throughout Greece. The main demographic and social Indian Sikh community can be found in Athens, whereas other Sikh communities are settled in rural areas of Greece such as Marathon, Oenofyta, Halkida, Kranidi, Poros and Crete. The countryside proves to be extremely important, since the main employment of migrants are rural and farming operations, fish farms, and few are employed to guard private spaces. In Athens there is a variety of professional options, while an important part of the community is employed in factories. Both in Athens and in the countryside, the community has created places in which the religious beliefs of the Sikh (*gurdwara*) are exercised. These places constitute an ideal field of study of the daily life of Indian migrants.

The Sikh temple in Tavros founded in 2005 is housed in a three storey building. Before the establishment of the Gurdwara in this area the Sikh community used to practice their religion in temples located in areas outside of Athens (e.g. Marathon). The hours for praying and reading the scriptures are in the morning and the afternoon. The temple is available for Indians who come to the capital from other parts of Greece for a few days to stay overnight. Besides prayers, food and tea are offered in the temple while after the ritual, speeches and debates among worshippers often take place. Specific areas are used for creative activities for children. Among these activities, children read various books and magazines pertaining to Indian culture so that through them they can get in touch with the culture of their country. The programmed of activities in the *gurdwara* includes courses for Indian musical instruments, like tabla and harmonium, and Indian vocal music of the musical tradition of *shabad kirtan*.

Shabad kirtan is an integral part of the Sikh sacred ritual. It is the musical performance (hymns) of the sacred Sikh writings which are contained in the holy book *Guru Grand Sahib*. The specific

musical tradition started about 500 years ago when Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the first of the 10 Sikh prophets, began to express musical versions of the sacred word. Today, kirtan constitutes an important part of the Sikh religious worship ritual. Besides the live performance of music in the gurdwara, during my research I observed the phenomenon of the listening to recorded kirtan by the members of the community during their daily life, both in and outside the temple. Which elements, though, render the "presence" of kirtan so important in everyday life of Indians, particularly of the Indian religious community of Tavros?

My fieldwork has shown that kirtan is performed by a group of musicians called *rāgī jathā*. Specifically, in the Gurdwara in Tavros, *rāgī jathā* consists of one singer accompanied by the musical instruments harmonium and tabla. In special circumstances, and especially for the parts where the musical structure of kirtan takes the form of "call and response", three or four other voices may be included to the *rāgī jathā*, supporting the musical vocal response of the worshipers.

Kirtan follows the tradition of Hindustani music of Northern India which is based on the melodic system of *raga* and the rhythmic system of *tala*. A musicological approach to kirtan shows that a lot of information about musical interpretation arises from the text itself. As far as it concerns the tradition of classical Indian music, the exact number of ragas cannot be determined precisely, but as Hapsoulas (2015:60) mentions "the number of ragas that form the basis of modern classical Indian music is no more than 300". Kirtan as devotional music is expressed by the use of 31 specific ragas as these are defined by *Guru Granth Sahib*. Each hymn bears notes which define the form and the subject of each *shabad*, the house (*ghar*) to which it belongs and the raga to be performed. As Kaur (2011) mentions, kirtan is performed in a variety of musical forms such as *pade* (hymn with verse-chorus), *chhand* (metered verse), *var* (ballad), *ghorian* (wedding song), *alanian* (song of death) etc. The meaning of *ghar* is lost over time. However it seems to be associated with numbers corresponding to particular ragas (Kaur, 2011). Ragas may be explicitly referred in the sacred text by their name. They could also be indicated by numerical designations which are related to the *ghar*. It should be noted that no clear instructions are given in the text of the *Guru Granth Sahib* regarding the rhythmic interpretation of music (*tala*). The rhythmic structure of *tala* in kirtan is defined by the meter and pace of the Sikh sacred text itself. Each raga is performed at a specific time of the day, while expressing a very distinctive emotional content (*rasa*), which is usually recognized only by a musically literate audience. The musical performance of kirtan draws basic musical elements such as raga, melorhythmic formulas - compositions and rhythmic cycles as defined by the sacred text from the past, in order to readjust and conceptualise them into the present. The ultimate aim of the musical performance is to create the aesthetic perception of raga which is defined as *rasa*. Moreover, musical improvisation in kirtan strengthens and emphasizes the aesthetic content of each raga.

However, in the Sikh community in Greece, musicians who perform kirtan do not follow the strict theoretical rules of raga performance. Baldev, a member of the Sikh community in Tavros,

conveys the view of the *Granthi*<sup>2</sup> who performs kirtan in the Gurdwara, stating that “Granthi uses them slightly different. He changes it around. Using some ragas, and accompanying them with tabla, he creates a “result”. The Gurus were all following classical Indian music. Kirtan normally has 31 ragas. Here in Greece, Granthi uses Bhairav, bilavel, dhansri”<sup>3</sup>. Gurjind, another Sikh musician, commenting on the view of Baldev, explains how the musicians of kirtan in Greece knowingly do not follow strict rules regarding the choice of raga they use. Their repertoire is based on the musical knowledge each of them has:

Here in the temple, they do not perform all the ragas. They do those they know. With one raga you can do many kirtan. It doesn't matter that there are rules that define that this text should be performed in this raga, or that this raga should be played in the morning, the other in the evening etc. In India, every raga should be played in a specific time of the day. This is done when someone is a very good musician, otherwise here, in Greece, they do any raga they know. It does not matter, it is alright.

(interview: Kosteletou Elli, Gurjind Singh, February, 2012)

The unrestrained interpretation of kirtan resulting from the above examples relates to the experience and the way of life of Indian immigrants in Greece, which influences the music educational process of kirtan. In India the music education of kirtan is a long process during which the apprentice is trained in both the learning of musical development in relation to the raga and tala, and the content and pronunciation of the sacred word of *Guru Granth Sahib*. The process of learning is based on the oral tradition of music, as transmitted through the strong relationship between the teacher and the student. In recent years, there are special schools (*taksal*), which focus on learning kirtan (Kaur, 2011).

However, in Greece musical education cannot take place in that manner. During my research and through my conversations with musicians who perform kirtan in Athens and other parts of Greece, I found that the musicians of the community are trying to enrich their usually basic musical knowledge with the help of alternative sources, such as the internet, the use of CDs or books that provide basic educational theories and music examples of kirtan, sent from abroad. In a few rare cases indeed, when a skilled musician visits the community from India, he delivers exceptional courses in the temple.

From the above it is clear that during the migratory experience, the role of technology blurs the lines between oral and literate tradition. In Greece, musical compositions previously passed on through oral tradition are often transmitted through written - fixed form. Moreover, the choice of ragas by musicians of the community is limited and does not follow the exact rules of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Thus, it would be expected that the limited and freer choice of raga by musicians of the Sikh community in Greece would affect the aesthetic perception of music, both by the performers themselves as well as the audience.

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<sup>2</sup>Granthi is the ceremonial reader of the Guru Granth Sahib among his qualifications is the reading and interpretation of the holy scripture.

<sup>3</sup>Interview: Kosteletou Elli, Baldev Singh, November, 2011.

Another dimension, through which the aesthetic content of kirtan is conveyed, is the verbal context, as ascribed by the content of sacred text of *Guru Granth Sahib*. Regarding the verbal dimension of kirtan, we observe that the data obtained from fieldwork confirm what Dusenbery (1992: 305-402) says. The sacred text of the Sikh is a staple of the wordings of the 10 holy prophets who lived over the last 500 years. Thus, the text is attributed to a multitude of dialects (urdu, punjabi, sanskrit etc.), so that they are not necessarily understood by the community. Therefore, both the musical language of kirtan and the verbal / textual dimension are not necessarily perceivable by the audience and in many cases by the musicians themselves. Despite the deterioration suffered by the musical tradition during the immigration experience, the blurred boundaries between literacy and orality in music, as well as the obscure aspect of the musical and linguistic code, during my experience with the community of Sikh in Greece, I noticed that the aesthetic perception of music seems not to be affected. None of my interlocutors, musicians or listeners, of kirtan appeared to recognize the word *rasa*. However, when talking about kirtan everyone defined the music they heard in terms that referred to the aesthetic essence of music. In their effort to describe the significance of kirtan they referred to the concepts of "peace", "calmness", "love" and "sweetness".

The performance of kirtan thus surpasses verbality and, as Eliade (1959) would claim, addresses the thymic element. According to this logic, the emotions through the concept of *rasa* (aesthetic quintessence) activate - as an aesthetic experience in the present - symbolisms that derive from the collective memory of the past. For the Indians of the Sikh community, the essence of the aesthetic value refers to the concepts of "calmness" of "love" and "sweetness". These are concepts associated with the devotional aesthetic content of the Sikh religion (*bhakti raz*), which is based on the concept of "piety" and contains the aesthetic values of "love", "longing", "wonder" and "virtue" (Kaur, 2011). In this way, for the Sikh community of Tavros the experience of kirtan and the aesthetic essence of music are approached through its devotional content. Specifically, kirtan, through its devotional content, both as a structure and content, is connected and converses directly with symbolisms and concepts such as prayer, meditation and offering (*seva*).

The ethnographic field revealed the concepts of prayer, meditation and *seva* as central ideas around which the musical performance revolves and incarnates community cohesion. During my participant observation in the community and through open interviews, the concepts "prayer", "meditation" and "seva" were examined as cultural concepts of the Sikh community in Tavros. In this matter, these specific concepts were systematically explored as central ethnographic categories.

The practice of prayer is inseparable from the Sikh religious ritual. For Sikhs, prayer leads to but also approaches the mental state of connection to the sacred, which is experienced through the aesthetic content of peace and bliss. For the worshipers of the community kirtan is perceived as prayer.

*Guru Granth Sahib* teaches that the essential function of kirtan is the encounter of man with the sacred. In this case, music, through its aesthetic content, is the vehicle of tuning consciousness

with the sacred leading to the ecstatic state of bliss. The purpose of kirtan, as Mansukhani (1982) also notes, is to bring calm and beautiful feelings to mind, so as to reach the stage of bliss. The concept of bliss during prayer, as Gurjind, a member of the Sikh community supports, differentiates from the feeling of joy, as it is penetrated by gratitude towards God, in his own words he states that during prayer “you have to be thankful to God”. In the state of bliss, the other sensory experiences recede and disappear into the subconscious (Kaur, 2011). Thus, the living experience of the sacred is embodied through music and prayer, i.e. through kirtan.

Prayer is closely related to meditation. During the worship ritual in the temple, the worshipers pray and many of them meditate. During the fieldwork experience, my interlocutors signified those ritual processes and their connection with the kirtan claiming that the performance of music and the aesthetic content deriving from it help their thought to concentrate towards the invocation of the divine name (*Nam*).

The Sikh philosophy, as expressed in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, stresses the importance of the invocation of the divine name (*Nam*). In this respect, the purpose of kirtan is also to connect to the sacred through the experience of meditation around *Nam*. During the performance of kirtan consciousness is concentrated on the invocation of the divine name and its distinct qualities. The poetry of the guru in the holy book attributes a plethora of features to *Nam*. Thus, for example according to Kariotoglou (1995: 67-76), *Nam* may be *sati guru* (the true guru) *nemu* (name), *Gun Nidham* (treasure of all qualities), *naik* (hero) etc. Through the dialogue between form and content, kirtan creates and strengthens the field upon which the living experience of meditation acts as a union with the Divine.

Another concept with spiritual content, which refers to the relationship of the worshipers with the Divine through the musical experience of kirtan, is the “seva”. The ideas and practical dimensions of volunteer work, offering and humility are essential principles and values of the community of the Sikh. As such they are linked, symbolically and practically, directly to the concept of “seva”. Prajit signifies the concept of “seva” and describes the ways in which it is expressed in the community:

Seva is ... your will to run errands, to participate in things that all do together, to cook, to clean... Seva is if you want to give something, maybe money ... This offer is called seva. It's when someone offers himself pro bono... One may offer his time to be at the Gurdwara selflessly; this is the Seva. Whoever wants to do seva can do it. You do not have to be a Sikh if you want to do Seva. For a Sikh it means "humility", that is what you learn when you wash dishes for the people eating or when you clean shoes. It teaches you to be humble and not to think that you are superior than others ... It stops the selfishness. We say that when you do Seva all your sins go away.

(interview: Kosteletou Elli, Prajit Singh, November, 2011)

Prajit's narrative connects practical dimensions of seva with concepts that define basic Sikh principles, values and needs, which are retrieved from the collective memory of the community. Subconsciously they are recognised as such by both the subject who acts as well as by the rest community members. In this matter, seva strengthens the feeling of “belonging” to the

community. The “offer”, the “selflessness” (Prajit constantly stresses the word *pro bono*), the “humility”, the feeling of “belonging”, “We” as opposed to “I”, as much as the notion of “catharsis” are the most important of these concepts. During my conversations with members of the community it became clear that kirtan is directly related to these basic principles, which are transmuted into their devotional content in an interactive relationship of the musician with the Divine. Jasbir, as a musician and member of the community, says that she would never link the musical performance of kirtan with financial gain. At the same time, she emphasizes that decoupling kirtan from the concept of *seva* can be noticed by the entire community, thus affecting the way of approaching the musical performance:

I do not get money when I do kirtan because I do *seva*. Others - for example, when one plays kirtan - they do it professionally. Then some people do not listen. They do not want to listen to the musician because they say that that person does not do what his heart says, he's doing his job. No matter how nice this person sings, he has, let's say, a defect. He is thinking that the better I play, the better I will gather people to leave money. But when you sing without money the people know, understand and pay more attention. They are thinking that that person is doing it only for pleasure, for God.

(Interview: Kosteletou Elli, Jasbir Kaur, March, 2010)

Considering the above it becomes obvious that the concept of tradition, in this case through prayer, meditation and *seva*, permeates elements of space and time highlighting aspects of the everyday life of Indian immigrants in Athens. Thus, the concept of tradition is shifted, unfixed and changing<sup>4</sup>. Music as a performative art requires the communication of the participants, both the musicians and the audience. Communication exists in the realm of the imaginary, as the interaction between the poetic and rhetorical symbolisms, norms and values of tradition. The result of this interactive process, between real and imaginary, is the reconfiguration both of the symbolic and the socio-historical content of kirtan. In this respect, music functions in a symbolic level, converting the imaginary into real, and vice versa.

The relationship between man and the sacred is shaped by the need of giving meaning to life itself and exists both in the realm of imaginary and reality. As mentioned above, the transformation process of the imaginary into the sacred presupposes its transformation into a symbolic level; this is where the symbolic conceptualisation of kirtan acts. The manifestation of the symbolic into real is made possible through the ritual. Randal Collins (2004) sees rituals as a series of certain actions performed in a particular way. Influenced by the theories of Durkheim and Goffman relating to ritual and performance, he claims that the social grid consists of rituals defined as interactive performative practices (interaction rituals). However, for him, this particular concept of ritual practices does not exist outside the framework of the community. With this acknowledgement, the ritualistic practices are activated in the realm of the community's intellect through the concepts of cultural capital and emotional energy; thus, they are transformed into intellectual rituals, which, in turn, form the network of the social grid.

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<sup>4</sup>Regarding the creation of factitious re-enactments and the fluidity of the concept of “tradition” see Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992).

The concepts of prayer, meditation and seva are directly and practically connected with the concepts of ritual and collective memory and, through them, with that part of the ritual concerning music and specifically the performance of kirtan. The dimension of the ritual as a performative act is penetrated by the conceptualization and communication of these symbolical meanings and the way they are perceived both by the person that performs the ritual and the subjects that attend the specific procedure, and signify the ritual. In this respect, the ritual performance of music empowers the sense of belonging in the specific community.

## **5. Discussion & Conclusion**

In conclusion, the role of sacred music of the Sikh, i.e. kirtan, proved to be extremely important for the expression of religious beliefs of the members of the Sikh community. Sacred music is an integral and interdependent part of religious rituals. In the Sikh community in Greece, the musicians who perform kirtan do not follow the strict method for performing music as defined by the rules and the theory of the specific Indian musical tradition. As highlighted, during the migratory experience, the role of technology blurs the line between oral and literate tradition. The musical compositions previously transmitted through oral tradition, in Greece are often transmitted in written form. However, despite the deterioration the musical tradition suffered by the immigration experience and the blurred boundaries between literacy and orality of music, the aesthetic perception of music from members of the community is not affected. This happens because it is perceived through its religious content.

The concepts of prayer, meditation and seva emerged as central ideas around which the musical performance that incarnates community cohesion revolves. Thus, the conceptualisation “music as a prayer, as meditation and as seva” directly connects kirtan with the ethical and practical principles that define the everyday life of Indian immigrants in Greece. In this respect, during the devotional ritual, kirtan constitutes a musical embodiment. Through the symbolic and aesthetic value of music, spiritual and moral representations of the community in connection with the sacred are incarnated. These representations act as the implementation of the collective memory. In this perspective, Sikh’s sacred music has multiple significations in relation to the cultural understanding of the historical and experiential time. During the religious ritual, the sacred is de-crystallized into reality. Meanwhile, in the context of the religious ritual, the aesthetic essence of music activates symbolisms from the collective memory, which are perceived as an aesthetic experience in present. Thus, the importance of kirtan refers to two dimensions. In a first dimension it is defined and reconfigured in a purely intellectual framework forming a way of connecting and engaging with the sacred. In a second dimension, it defines the attitudes of the members of community, as reflected in their everyday behaviour, by reproducing their cultural understanding in a clearly familiar and ethnic context. It, thus, helps migrants empower the feeling of familiarity in a foreign environment. The sacred sound of kirtan is perceived as the special, "internal" sound of the Sikh community in Greece. It works as a catalyst to strengthen the sense of belonging to the community, while, at the same time, defines their difference from other social groups, as it strengthens both their ethnic and local identity.

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