

CONTRASTING ACOUSTICAL SIGNATURES AND THE POWER IN RITUAL: SOME EVIDENCE FROM NUAULU SPIRIT HEALING IN THE MOLUCCAN ISLANDS

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Abstract: Different kinds of Nuaulu ritual activity are accompanied by distinctive acoustical signatures. These can be separated out for analytic purposes from a more synesthetic profile of sensory experience. The main ceremonial cycles of maturation and sacred house-building are punctuated by rituals where the role of sound is predictable and consistent with highly-structured and pre-planned actions and exchanges. These events reinforce a model of conventional Austronesian hierarchical relations of precedence and authority within and between clans and houses, and between houses and their ancestral guardians. By contrast, seances in which mediums summon ancestral spirits allow for more informality and spontaneity. This is evident in the accompanying sounds: the intermittent sonorousness of the bamboo mouth harp, the utterances and 'para-linguistic' features of speech behaviour employed by mediums when in character as a spirit, and the sometimes alarming and unpredictable acoustical consequences of bodily movement. I suggest that these sessions, in addition to the healing purposes that they serve, provide a kind of counterpoint of 'anti-structure' that reinforces the importance of structure and the necessarily predictable relations of the major rituals that reproduce Nuaulu life.