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Birgit Abels

# Music Worlding in Palau

Chanting, Atmospheres,  
and Meaningfulness

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## Music Worlding in Palau



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# Music Worlding in Palau

*Chanting, Atmospheres, and Meaningfulness*

*Birgit Abels*

Amsterdam University Press



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Map 1 Political map of Palau

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*Birgit Abels, July 2021*



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Figure 1 Bai ornament in Ngril as documented by Augustin Krämer during the Hamburg South Seas Expedition. (Krämer 1929b, double plate 26) Krämer's dscription: "A depiction 'of the singer Goldegól, who came from Nggëiangël to the south on the old kaberruög [kaberruuch] boat with his baskets full of songs to help build the dock of Ngarekamáis (right), left Ngarekobasáng'." (KETC 2017c, 41)

# Music Worlding in Palau: An Introduction

## Abstract

The introduction sketches the book's theoretical framework and trajectory, outlining its rationale and aim. I introduce the notions of meaningfulness and atmospheres and position them vis-à-vis Pacific Islander and specifically, Palauan ontologies.

**Keywords:** meaningfulness, atmospheres, Pacific Islander ontologies

It was a cool and quiet February afternoon in Melekeok, with a soft breeze from the east coming in from the sea. We were sitting under the palm trees, shaded from the sun, and, like all the other women around, 82-year-old Victoria was chewing betel nuts. She was pondering how to respond to the question I had just asked her: How would she describe the musical genre I had come to research, *omengeredákl*? She was a well-known omengeredákl singer and clearly did not find it an easy question.<sup>1</sup> I was expecting to hear about the omengeredákl songs she liked the most and perhaps the vocal qualities and musical skills she was looking for in fellow singers, but she had something else on her mind. “You know”, she said slowly after a while, “in omengeredákl, there’s the *esbe* [a solo part in the vocal ensemble performing the omengeredákl]. The word *esbe* is related to *mengesb*, and it has to do with that lunar constellation when the moon stands right in the centre of the sky. We call [that part of the vocal ensemble] *esbe* because its sound is almost like the moon up there...” – while talking, Victoria had begun to wave her left hand in a

<sup>1</sup> In this book, I italicise terms from other languages than English the first time they appear but use roman type whenever they occur again later. For quick reference, all words from Oceanic languages used in this book are listed in the glossary.



semicircle, slowing down the gesture and pointing to the sky as her hand reached the highest point – “... and we’re down here”. Her hand dropped into her lap again. She continued to chew her betel nut and, nodding slowly, after a while added: “But really, we’re all the same.” A number of the women sitting around us nodded approvingly, but I was a little puzzled at first by Victoria’s response. Later on, we all engaged in a conversation about specific *omengeredákl* songs, talking about the lyrics and how the voices were sometimes supposed to blend in with one another but remain discernible at other times. I asked a couple of questions about the individual parts of the vocal ensemble, trying to identify the rules for individual voices, and the women answered them patiently for a while. However, at some point, 80-year-old Oribech seemed to feel that I was completely missing the point. With a wave of her hand, she laughed and said, “Look, [when you’re singing *omengeredákl*] you simply know how it’s supposed to feel. Everybody knows. And when you know that, it’ll make a lot of sense to you. You’ll know what to do.”

The scene I just described took place at the Melekeok Senior Citizen Center in Palau, Western Micronesia, in 2005. Six women from Melekeok, the Palauan state situated on the eastern coast of Palau’s “big island”, Babeldaob, had come to talk to me about the repertoire of traditional Palauan singing groups. They were elders, aged between 70 and 89, and known for their knowledge of traditional Palauan songs. We listened to historical recordings from the 1960s<sup>2</sup> and talked about them. The women would then perform a number of songs for me to record, explain the repertoire they chose and tell me about the individual songs. Several of the women made a comment about *omengeredákl* similar to that of Oribech’s in the previous paragraph: While they all agreed that its characteristic musical structure and the musical responsibilities of individual singers were, of course, central to *omengeredákl* as a musical form, *omengeredákl* performances were supposed to have a certain “feel”. That feel, to them, was constitutive of *omengeredákl* as a genre. In other words, the women suggested that the whole of *omengeredákl* is much more than the sum of its (musical) parts. The “indeterminate quality of feeling poured out into space” (Böhme 1995, 27)<sup>3</sup> that, to Victoria, Oribech and the other women, was so crucial to *omengeredákl* was what made performing it so meaningful.

2 These were recordings from the Barbara B. Smith collection (see Koch and Kopal 2015).

3 Original text: “[...] eine unbestimmt räumlich ergossene Gefühlsqualität”. All translations from the original German text in this book are my own.

## Meaningfulness

This sense of meaningfulness as a self-explanatory yet obscure phenomenon is at the heart of this book (I will explore the atmospheric workings of *omengeredákl* in greater detail in Chapter 3). Such meaningfulness is not normally distinguished from meaning in music research. Meaningfulness, as I use it in this book, draws on neo-phenomenological accounts of diffuse signifiatory complexity. Neo-phenomenology, in the broader sense, and the theory of atmospheres, in particular, have grown into a burgeoning field in recent years across disciplines ranging from philosophy (Böhme 1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2017; Hauskeller 1995; Griffero 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019a, 2020; Krebs 2017; Schmitz 1990-2014; Slaby 2020), cultural geography (e.g., Anderson 2009; Anderson and Ash 2015; Bissell 2010; Closs Stephens 2015; Edensor 2012; Kazig, Masson, and Thomas 2017), sociology (e.g., de la Fuente and Walsh 2020; Thibaud 2014, 2015), anthropology (Eisenlohr 2018a, 2018b; Ingold 2015; Julmi 2017; Rauh 2012, 2018; Schroer and Schmitt 2018, Sumartojo and Pink 2019), architectural studies (Borch 2014; Bille 2015, 2020; Bille and Sørensen 2016; Pallasmaa 2014, 2020; Pallasmaa and Zumthor 2013; Tidwell 2014; Zumthor 2006) inter alia. The neo-phenomenology of atmospheres has also begun to inform music research (Abels 2013, 2017, 2018b, 2020a; Herzfeld 2013; McGraw 2016, 2020; Riedel 2020a, 2020b; Riedel and Torvinen 2020; Schulze 2020; Turner 2020; Vadén and Torvinen 2014).

A general characteristic of the anglophone discussion surrounding atmospheres is that, with few exceptions, it tends to treat atmospheres as a particular register of the affective and/or collective feeling in a broad sense. This is an intuitive move often linked, in one degree of intellectual kinship or another, either to Kathleen Stewart's wonderful book *Ordinary Affects*, published in 2007 or those of Gernot Böhme's texts that are available in English (1993a, 1998, 2000, 2017). Böhme, philosopher of science and nature as well as a key figure in German ecocriticism, develops the notion of atmospheres into an *aesthetics* of atmospheres. Böhme's work is better known by far in the English-speaking world and, accordingly, his name is associated with the neo-phenomenology of atmospheres much more than that of Hermann Schmitz. One reason for this is rather mundane – unlike Schmitz, Böhme's work has circulated in English for more than two decades. Schmitz's enormous body of work, by contrast, is only slowly being translated into English (e.g., Schmitz 2020; Schmitz, Slaby, and Müllan 2011). Schmitz's ideas, which in most instances predate those of Böhme and Böhme-inspired work, have increasingly been garnering scholarly attention lately (see Riedel and Torvinen 2020) and are slowly beginning to enter the

said anglophone discussion of atmospheres. But until now, a great deal of that discussion is really far away from Schmitzian atmospheres. Owing to the language barrier, there will often be no references to his oeuvre at all. More importantly perhaps, however, Böhme's theorising of atmosphere is much less idiosyncratic than Schmitz's and certainly more easily adaptable into theoretical frameworks that are current in contemporary scholarship across the range of the humanities and social sciences. I will explore some of the ideas that set Schmitz's work apart from more established understandings of phenomenology in Chapter 1. Böhme's work "mitigate[es] Schmitz's radicalism a little" in the appraisal of philosopher Tonino Griffero (2020, 6). Such mitigation arguably also takes away some of Schmitz's acuity and ability to think against the grain of categories and ideas that have been foundational to an entire tradition of thought.

An implicit or explicit assumption in much of the recent anglophone work on atmospheres, whether it has grown out of Böhme's aesthetics of atmospheres or builds on anglophone scholarly traditions of thinking about emotion and affect, is that the sonic and, by extension, the musical afford a recomposition of affective publics by way of a (felt-)bodily impact that takes place prior to any discursive framing of an acoustic or musical experience (see, e.g., Szarecki 2017; for a critique of this assumption, see Eisenlohr 2018b). All of this work is relevant to this book. However, my interest is different in *Music Worlding in Palau*. I am less concerned with the intellectual history of the notion of atmospheres (for that, see Riedel 2019), its positioning within the field of affect studies or the study of emotion, or its compatibility with postmodern cultural theory. I regard Schmitz as the prime figure in the neo-phenomenology of atmosphere, but I turn to him not so much for that but because of the originality andchutzpah of his thinking. The true analytical value lies in the unfettered radicality with which Schmitz follows the phenomenological "logic" of atmospheres (which sits uncomfortably with a number of the analytical core categories that inform much of anthropological scholarship) throughout his work. That logic, owing to the surfaceless nature of both sound and atmospheres, is very akin to the rationale inherent in a truly musical comprehension of the world, which is what *Music Worlding in Palau* is all about. If, then, my trajectory in this book is much closer to some of Schmitz's ideas than to a lot of the current literature on atmospheres, then that is because my thinking begins with and always returns to sound as a relational phenomenon. Accordingly, my interest is in the sonic and, specifically, musical workings of meaningfulness. Böhme's aesthetics of atmospheres is a fine piece of scholarly work, but it is philosophical at heart. This does

not make it an unproductive framework to think with. But exploring music-making with Schmitz will yield a different and arguably more profound type of insight as both music and Schmitz's neo-phenomenology are ways of comprehending and making sense of one's imbrication with the world. As one makes sense of Schmitz through music, and of music through Schmitz, the real intellectual takeaway crystallises in their in-between as a meaningful Gestalt. And this, in turn, is very much in keeping with the logic of atmospheres, as *Music Worlding in Palau* seeks to demonstrate.

## Music Worlding

This is what the title of this book, *Music Worlding in Palau*, refers to: echoing the new materialist idea that body and world are not separate entities but co-create one another, I turn to meaningfulness for it to help me unpack how Palauan music-making and lived realities are constitutive of one another, one with another yet always co-present. Kathleen Stewart (2010), describing the affective nature of the world, has emphasised how the forms, rhythms and refrains of life climax into an intense sense of legibility for an individual person. As people interact with these processes, worlding “takes place” – and life-worlds emerge. Worlding, then, implies not being but becoming; a “mobile but more or less stable ensemble of practices, involvements, relations, capacities, tendencies and affordances” (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 8). To make music, then, is to partake in a process of “becoming with” a world in which “natures, cultures, subjects and objects do not pre-exist their intertwined worldings” (Haraway 2016, 13) but enter into a co-constitutive relationship in which together, they “evoke, trigger and call forth what-and-who-exists” (Haraway 2016, 16). Worlding is also a by-product of attunement to an experiential dimension or specific situation which involves an active interaction with the materiality of the processes we are encountering. “Worlding is a particular blending of the material and the semiotic that removes the boundaries between subject and environment, or perhaps between persona and topos. Worlding affords the opportunity for the cessation of habitual temporalities and modes of being” (Palmer and Hunter 2018). This makes worlding a deeply embodied process of enactment: material-body-world encounters emerge through performing arts inquiry and “material-body-world encounters emerge, become known, felt, described and relayed both within and beyond the ephemeral moment of movement/encounter” (Hunter 2018; Palmer and

Hunter 2018). *Music Worlding in Palau*, in turn, is an intellectual attunement to Palauan music and dance.

Schmitz explores meaningfulness as internally diffuse signification processes. I will explore this idea in greater detail in Chapter 1. In this, he differs significantly from earlier understandings of the term, for instance, Schleiermacher's nineteenth-century classic distinction between meaning and meaningfulness. Against the backdrop of post-Enlightenment hermeneutics, Schleiermacher's meaning was more objective and qualitative in nature, accessible to anyone who understood the language in which that meaning was expressed. Schleiermacher's meaningfulness, by contrast, was a rather subjective and quantitative phenomenon that cannot be understood without consideration of its concrete historical audience (Clancy 2000, 8; Schleiermacher 1998). By contrast, musical meaningfulness, as I use it throughout this book, refers to the layered complexity through which music makes sense, via the felt body, in a *distinctly musical* way: no other cultural practice, including language-based ones, will be able to give you the same sense of meaningful communion in which music allows you to partake. They will offer you other, no less significant, shared feelings. However, whatever, in a given musical situation, has just meaningfully manifested in sound will never fully translate into a different medium. Naturally, this also means that language, including scholarly language, is forever bound to fail musical meaningfulness. Bookshelves have been filled with work exploring the intricate relationship between music-making and the descriptive language that seeks to capture its essence. This is an issue that will surface here and there in the course of this book, but it is not central to my pursuit here. This is because I am not so much interested in the *what* of meaningfulness: *what* does music mean? Instead, my aim is to draw closer to the *how*. *How* does musical meaningfulness come about? *How* does it give rise to an affective efficacy, the power of which is categorically unique enough for people to speak proverbially of *the power of music*? *How* is it that seemingly complex musical situations become self-explanatory the moment we partake in joint music-making, as Oribech suggested? And *how* could Oribech be so sure that music's meaningfulness would become unfailingly obvious to me if only I immersed myself in omengeredákl's musical structures?

These questions anticipate the analytical trajectory of this book. Exploring musical meaningfulness, the chapters of this book will inquire into that emotive quality of chants that my Palauan interlocutors found so essential to their singing. However, while the central questions I pose in this book have grown directly out of my ethnographic work in Palau, which spanned a period of more than ten years, this book will not be a

musical ethnography in the traditional sense (see Abels 2008 for a more traditional and systematic exploration of music and dance in Palau). In addition, the neo-phenomenologically inspired conceptual apparatus I employ in this book is, for the most part, not Palauan but European-derived. And yet, the key concepts that have marked the book's intellectual pathfinding process have originated in my ethnographic work. I came across the notion of meaningfulness in a number of conversations with my Palauan interlocutors and friends long before I immersed myself in the neo-phenomenological exploration of this term. My interlocutors would very casually speak of the characteristic atmospheres only specific chants could evoke and how those atmospheres were meaningful to them without me ever mentioning either term. I would not have turned to neo-phenomenology, and specifically the theory of atmospheres, if it had not been for my Palauan friends who used those same categories in our conversations that neo-phenomenologists explore so systematically. In fact, many of the neo-phenomenological ideas share a significant overlap with Pacific Indigenous conceptions and belief systems. Examples include the Schmitzian notion of sonic historicity and Oceanic ideas, such as *tauhi vā*, about temporality as a spatio-temporal dimension with an aesthetic element engrained in it (see Chapter 2); and the idea of suggestions of motion as kinetic atmospheric energy feeding into the rhythm of a person's vital drive with *he'he nalu*, Hawaiian surfing. A Kanaka epistemology, *he'he nalu*, is based on the notion of a "center that is always moving, seeking to grasp a mobile but determinate complexity" (Ingersoll 2016, 109). *He'he nalu* comprises practices of bodily motion in attunement with the sliding ocean; these practices produce an open "body-ocean assemblage" and afford affective immersion (Ingersoll 2016, 109; also see Shapiro 2000). Pasifika research has espoused indigenous epistemologies and research methods for a number of years now (e.g., Smith 2012; Tamasese Efi 2005; Thaman 2003; Vaoleti 2006) in an attempt to foster and further self-empowering research agendas (Matapo 2016) for very good reasons. They have not *enriched* previous scholarly methodologies, which came from the philosophical traditions of the Global North. Rather, they have served as a much-needed and sometimes radical corrective, calling out normative and latently (neo-)colonial scholarly frameworks and suggested that we all explore viable alternative knowledge systems (also see Hereniko 2000; Hviding 2003; Banivanua Mar 2016). The underlying concern is, of course, epistemic in nature, reflecting an Indigenous effort "trying to validate indigenous epistemology that was undermined in the very histories of colonization and imperialism" (Matapo 2016). There is much more to come

and to look forward to. On Palau, however, there is no Palauan technical vocabulary for musical structures or for the phenomenon my interlocutors have described to me as meaningfulness. It is just not needed. However, we need to describe in a scholarly context before we can research. This is why I turn to the neo-phenomenology of atmospheres as both a language and resource for analysis in this book, and why I choose to traverse a very divergent set of onto-epistemologies. My goal is to not conflate them but, instead, to allow them to speak to one another. In this way, I hope to open this research into onto-epistemological multiplicity and the wisdom engrained in the appreciation of difference. It would be naïve, however, to ignore the manifold academic dilemmas, even dangers, this entails. The intellectual traditions of Oceania may well be much better equipped than many others to think in terms of intellectual genealogies and relationships even across great distances rather than hierarchies (Armitage and Bashford 2013a, 13). I, therefore, hope that both the junctures and the disjunctures between the various intellectual frames of *Music Worlding in Palau* add, in one way or another, to the book's value. In any case, there is no denying that one could have adopted different approaches which would have turned out to be just as legitimate and productive as the analytic of atmospheres, which I am opting for in this book. Such approaches would probably have yielded different but not categorically incompatible results.

As a firm believer in explanatory pluralism, I find this reassuring. I take seriously the synchronicity with which approaches from vastly divergent areas of research have, for a while now, all been pointing to the same dimension of the human existence that seems worth much more scholarly attention than it has received so far, and I believe a neo-phenomenological approach to music-making has a lot to offer to these burgeoning debates. I am referring specifically to what has been described in many different ways as the imbrication and interlacing of the felt body with its material and social environments (e.g., Manning [2009] 2012); a type of sensory intensity by means of which the body's boundaries dissipate in a Bergsonian ever-present now (Bergson 1911; Kapchan 2015); or the Extended Mind Hypothesis (e.g., Clark and Chalmers 1998; Greif 2017), to name but a few. With the steady dissolution of the now-historical subject/object divide that has undergirded much of North Atlantic philosophy for centuries, the focus has now irreversibly shifted from monist issues centred around ontological subjectivity, intentionality and consciousness to questions of interrelation, process and becoming. Explanatory pluralism originated in the philosophy of science (Gijsbers 2016; Mantzavinos 2018; Marchionni 2008) and was readily adopted



across psychiatry and the cognitive sciences (Gervais 2014; Marshall 2014; McCauley and Bechtel 2001). Essentially, an explanatory pluralist perspective not only accepts but also appreciates the coexistence and diversity of potentially valid explanations for a given phenomenon. It cherishes the thought that simultaneous explorations of a given phenomenon at multiple analytical levels at a time may aid one another not in spite of but owing to their methodological and theoretical diversity and complementarity. Mantzavinos (2018, 32-34) suggests we think less in terms of explanations and more in terms of explanatory games which are structured by means of normative and usually disciplinary rules. The players of explanatory games are constrained, at any moment, by the rules they play by. These rules “divide, in principle, the innumerable possibilities of providing explanations into those that can be undertaken and those that cannot” (Mantzavinos 2018, 36). Seen this way, not only do the rules of the respective explanatory game become crucial background information to any specific explanation but, more importantly, the social component of any explanatory activity moves into focus and with it, the relationship between explanatory rules and their cognisant agents. Heeding explanatory pluralism’s call for theoretical and methodological multiplicity, I have always found it encouraging that my own research into the neo-phenomenology of music-making has led me to ask questions which seem, on a meta-level, so akin to questions at which scholars have arrived whose journey began in completely different intellectual environments; at the same time, the repercussions between the key concepts of my neo-phenomenological analytic and the ideas my Palauan interlocutors shared with me have been the buoys that consistently reassure me of the course my work has been taking. It is in this spirit, then, that this book seeks to put forth its ideas about the complex ways in which music means: If music’s meaningfulness is internally diffuse by definition (see Chapter 1), then the very nature of this phenomenon resembles the internal diffuseness of both Palauan and scholarly perusals of explanatory frameworks, in that, clearly, there is meaning to be found in the in-between of taken-for-granted epistemological categories and disciplinary approaches. If there is resonance between ideas, then that which resonates in the space between them might be worth exploring. In the case of this book, I am pursuing the resonances between various explorations of how the (felt) body interlaces with the surrounding worlds: the cultural, social, material, historical and affective environments, in which we live in. I use meaningfulness as the funnel to listen out for these resonances, which I believe are deeply atmospheric in nature.



## Intensity

One of the premises of this book is that music lets us access something opaque, an intense experiential dimension that we cannot otherwise feel to the full. I suggest we explore this uniquely musical experiential intensity as musical meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is a neo-phenomenological term that has received systematic attention, especially in the work of philosopher Herman Schmitz. He proposed that we pay much greater attention to the atmospheric dimension of the human lived experience than most twentieth-century philosophers have bothered to, and to him, meaningfulness is key to understanding the affectivity of atmospheres. I will explore both the term meaningfulness and its conceptual baggage in greater detail in Chapter 1. Schmitz himself has consistently referred to musical examples throughout his oeuvre, but a systematic consideration of music and sound has not been high on his atmospherological agenda. As a philosopher, cultural practices and frameworks beyond the experiential and situational have not been a central focus to him either (see, for instance, Schmitz 2014, 9). This is where *Music Worlding in Palau* takes up some of the loose threads. At the same time, my approach builds on extant work from various disciplinary fields on music and emotion. But I also move beyond it in a perhaps somewhat unusual way.

Over the past thirty years, intellectual approaches across a vastly divergent range of disciplines have pointed to the inseparability of lived experience from its multiple environments. I have mentioned some of them in the preceding paragraph. The insights this research yields are all signposts pointing to the intellectual territory into which this book seeks to forge a path by suggesting we consider meaningfulness a major analytical category.

Against the backdrop of new materialist approaches to entangled human-world relationships, process-philosophically inspired notions of the felt body's imbrication, sometimes thought of as interlacing, with its material and social environments, often focus on the motional energy that drives the continual unfolding of "the movement of life", in anthropologist Tim Ingold's words (2011b, 72; also see Manning [2009] 2012). The incipience of renewal provokes experiential excitement that manifests as intensity – an intensity that accounts for the overwhelming experience that music and dance can afford. This approach suggests a type of *intellectual deep work* that is most conducive to thinking with atmospheres, I believe, because it necessitates thorough consideration of the medium-specific affordances of any given cultural practice (sound and movement, in the case of music-making) and how they intersect with the wider world. In Ingold's words

again, “[t]he practice of theory, in short, must be a modality of habitation – a way of thinking and working with stuff – on a level with the materials of its trade” (2017).

The idea of sensory intensity as a key force in the dissipation of the boundaries between the body and its life-worlds has found scholarly interest in music studies in recent years, for instance, in the work of Deborah Kapchan (e.g., 2009, 2013, 2015; for preceding explorations of the role of embodiment in musical meaning, see Johnson 2007; Meintjes 2004; Mrázek 2008; as well as the useful overview by Berger 2015). This body of work has grown from in-depth explorations of music and embodiment through affect theory in a broad sense. An affect, after all,

[...] is a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential [...] Because affect is unformed and unstructured (unlike feelings and emotions) it can be transmitted between bodies. The importance of affect rests upon the fact that in many cases the message consciously received may be of less import to the receiver of that message than his or her non-conscious affective resonance with the source of the message. Music provides perhaps the clearest example of how the intensity of the impingement of sensations on the body can “mean” more to people than meaning itself. (Shouse 2005, § 5, § 12-13)

The distinction here between musical meaning and something that goes beyond the idea of meaning surfaces explicitly. Recognising the transformative potential of these ideas, Kapchan points out that what she calls the “sound body” is “a material body that resonates [with] its environment, creating and conducting affect” (2015, 41). The material body “is a permanently fluctuating, continually deferred assemblage [...] The body is as much a biological matrix of structurally and functionally differentiated cells as discursively fragmented and semiotically synthesised manifold, reconfigured again and again by the most current conventions and ideologies” (Kozak 2020, 108). I propose the term meaningfulness to suggest that the ensounded, dancing body, “launched into sound [...] like a kite in the sky” (Ingold 2011a, 139), goes beyond the creation and conduction of affect: it embraces the complexity of lived experience and comes about in that intensity. However, the dancing “body” here refers to Schmitz’s notion of the *felt* body as meaningful sensation:

[S]ensing by means of the felt body is a holistic exchange of corporeal dynamics, a vibrant attunement to meaningful surroundings.

Correspondingly, the world shows up not as a neutral realm of already separate entities but as the atmospheric fields of significant situations, opportunities or quasi-corporeal forces or ‘opponents’ that in the first instance become manifest to the conscious person in form of the ‘internally diffuse meaningfulness’ of holistic corporeal impressions. (Schmitz, Slaby, and Müllan 2011, 244)

The relationship between theories of affect and meaningfulness is a complex one and has given rise to heated debate (see Eisenlohr 2018b; Leys 2011; Riedel 2020a; Slaby 2016). It will be a reoccurring theme throughout this book, however, as will become clear, it is not really a key issue for the exploration of meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is not about a specific significance or a set of significances; it is about the process of something significant becoming manifest.

The Extended Mind Hypothesis is a mostly cognition-driven approach to rethink human embeddedness in the world. Where it takes music-making into account, it builds on the long-standing acknowledgement that music-making is a powerful tool of emotion regulation (e.g., Becker 2004; Bicknell 2009; Krumhansl 2002). Based on the idea of music-making as an active engagement, in the sense of Christopher Small’s musicking (1998), a general consensus is that we intentionally engage in musicking to create an emotional resource from which we can then develop novel experiences, “thus granting phenomenal access to experiences that we would be otherwise unable to develop” (Krueger 2014, 1). Scholars have explored both the specifically musical affordances, in a Gibsonian (Gibson 1979) sense, that enable us to do so, on the one hand, and the multilayered regulative strategies that serve to expand the range of both individual and collective emotional experience, on the other. In these approaches, music emerges as the essential gateway to the possibility of accessing an experiential realm that remains otherwise obscure. Speaking from a cognitive-psychologicist perspective, Krueger goes as far as to speak of the “musically extended mind”:

Music serves as an external (i.e., outside-the-head) resource that can profoundly augment, and ultimately *extend*, certain endogenous capacities. When we engage in bouts of musicking, we potentially use music to become part of an integrated brain–body–music system – and within this extended system, musical affordances provide resources and feedback that loop back onto us and, in so doing, enhance the functional complexity of various motor, attentional, and regulative capacities responsible for generating and sustaining emotional experience. It is thus sensible to

speak of the musically extended (emotional) mind. (Krueger 2014, 4, *italics in the original*)

Krueger, while carefully trying to circumnavigate the question of the representation issues lingering in the inside vs. outside binary, emphasises that the question of whether music is representational of emotions is not essential to his ideas (2014, 5). Clarifying, indeed justifying the trajectory of his approach, he refers to John Sloboda's well-known Rorschach comparison:

Very often we feel that there is an emotion present [...] but we cannot quite tie it down. In such a state of ambiguity [...] we may well expect the profound and semi-mystical experiences that music seems to engender. Our own subconscious desires, memories, and preoccupations rise to the flesh of the emotional contours that the music suggests. The so-called 'power' of music may very well be in its emotional cue-impoverishment. It is a kind of emotional Rorschach blot. (Sloboda 2000)

Music for Krueger, then, is an

information-rich perceptual object. But representations of emotions need not be part of its informational structure. Rather, what matters is that music affords a sonic profile enabling the listener to *use* it to cultivate and refine specific emotional experiences. Music, when being used by the engaged listener, therefore becomes part of the extended vehicle by which these experiences are realized. (Krueger 2014, 5)

Putting forth the notion of the musically extended mind, Krueger, thus, subscribes to the hypothesis of extended cognition, a well-established (and well-debated) theory from cognition studies according to which human cognitive processes can extend outside our head and include objects in the environment (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Theiner 2011; also see Forlè 2016; Sprevak 2010, 353). Naturally, the hypothesis of extended cognition straddles internalist vs. externalist debates in the philosophy of mind: It walks the middle ground between the two, in that it suggests that "some phenomena strain externalist explanations because what's inside the head is often supplemented by what's outside" (Kersten 2014, 193). Musical experience, thus, involves both the non-neural, extended body and the musical environment (Matyja 2014, 203). From an extended cognition theory point of view, Gibsonian ecology, including affordances, is not necessarily incompatible with the notion that music processing extends beyond the confines of the

material body; after all, a key aspect of Gibson's work is his recognition of the interaction between the environment and cognising agents, which has found significant repercussions in ecological approaches to music as well (see Clarke 2005). Quite the contrary, some scholars from within the field have taken the stance that the way in which we perceive music is, to a significant degree, informed by the feedback loops co-produced by human bodies and their environment (Maes et al. 2014). Similar arguments have been made by organologists vis-à-vis the role of the musical instrument as an extension of the musician's material body (e.g., Cochrane 2008, 2009).

The field of music studies has offered numerous responses to work from the cognitive sciences more broadly (e.g., Becker 2004; Clayton, Dueck, and Leante 2013; Feld 1996) as well as the Extended Mind Hypothesis and parallel developments in music studies specifically. In a sense, Feld's acoustemology (e.g., 1996, [1982] 2012, 2017), seminal as a way of thinking, a milestone for the field and in its impact, anticipated and guided some of this work. In the early 2000s, the latter contributed to the increasing popularity of the notion of entrainment in music studies. Entrainment occurs when several independent oscillatory processes synchronise with one another to gradually adjust toward a shared periodicity (Clayton, Sager, and Will 2005). An often-cited historical example of entrainment describes the movement of two pendulums which gradually enter phase-synchrony through subtle vibrations in the walls and floor (Bennett et al. 2002; Krueger 2014; Winfree 2001). Dance is also a technique of bodily entrainment, one that is closely related to the desire to draw closer to meaningfulness as a peculiar spatial phenomenon: "[T]he coordination between sonic pattern and bodily movement [...] is an inactive gesture, a perceptual exploration of the piece's sonic topography" (Krueger 2010, 18). The phenomenon can be observed across a wide variety of domains. Krueger (2014) quotes scholarly work from the natural sciences, psychology, linguistics and the social sciences which addresses phenomena ranging from fireflies flashing in synchrony and synchronised communication gestures to synchronised clapping. He also, somewhat surprised, notes how "Music studies have thus far made little use of the notion of entrainment" (Krueger 2014). Entrainment is a way of

coordinating our reactive behavior to the music [...] a way of bodily gearing onto musical structures. This process emerges and takes shape as the music unfolds around us in acoustic space, where we (often unthinkingly) coordinate our movements with the dynamics of this unfolding – much the way that a dance between two partners emerges dynamically, in real-time, from the ongoing interplay and synchronization of each partner's

movements and their individual responses to what the other is doing. Temporality is thus a key feature of musical entrainment. (Krueger 2014, 3)

Entrainment, in this sense, can be described as a felt-bodily latching on to suggestions of motion, another Schmitzian key term that I will explore in the chapters to come. As a matter of fact, it has also been used to explore affective synchrony (Krueger 2014; Phillips-Silver and Keller 2012, 1), i.e., shared feeling states that emerge when people entrain their physical movements with one another, for instance, when tapping their feet to music together or walking with a partner. The term, thus, describes a felt-bodily programme to navigate and mould the atmospheric stirrings we encounter. It describes a physical manifestation of the felt-bodily communication processes which are at the heart of meaningfulness: the felt-bodily attunement to atmospheric affectivity. Interestingly, Krueger concludes that

[w]e engage with music because, unlike most other non-musical sounds, it affords synchronously organizing our reactive behavior and felt responses; and we take pleasure in letting music assume some of these organizational and regulative functions that, in other contexts, normally fall within the scope of our own endogenous capacities. In other words, we ‘offload’ some of these regulative processes onto the music and let it do some of the work organizing our emotional responses for us. (Krueger 2014)

The felt body’s attuning to a complex, motion-laden situation, this suggests, is an embodied strategy geared toward the reduction of situational complexity. In musical terms, then, musical and choreographic genre conventions – prescriptive of the entrainment responses considered *suitable* for specific musical styles and vastly different in the cases of, say, Argentine tango and Māori haka – can be understood as cultural practices designed to domesticate and, at the same time, savour the complexity and creative chaos of situations saturated with diffuse meaningfulness.

## Atmospheres

This book suggests that neo-phenomenology can help one understand the atmospheric framework of cultural practices. These cultural practices themselves can be viewed as localised strategies that serve to unpack the atmospheric density of musical situations. Zooming in on the processes of felt bodily communication, the analytic of atmospheres focuses on dimensions



of cultural attunement otherwise rarely acknowledged in the humanities and social sciences. While the term has begun to receive increasing scholarly attention in music and sound studies in recent years (e.g., Abels 2013; Eisenlohr 2018a, 2018b; McGraw 2016; Riedel 2019; Riedel and Torvinen 2020; Vadén and Torvinen 2014), there continues to be debate, if not doubt, about the methodological usefulness of the approach. This book seeks to break a path here. While I strategically depart from Hermann Schmitz's ideas and terminology here and there, his foundational work on atmospheres provides a rough roadmap for many of the ideas contained in this book. Hence, a brief review of some of his key terms is in order (Chapter 1 will explore some of them in greater detail).

Hermann Schmitz's atmospheres are attractive and notorious at the same time. A neo-phenomenological key concept, they offer truly novel perspectives on human ecologies, emphasising the relationality intrinsic to the human experience of being-in-the-world. They facilitate an analytic redirecting attention toward the in-between rather than the categorical: toward co-occurrence rather than causality; half things rather than subject vs. object; texture and process rather than shape. In many ways, as long as one resists the temptation to use them metaphorically, I believe that atmospheres are a missing link between the various categories more conventional approaches in the analysis of cultural practices draw on. Additionally, they potentially open promising new perspectives for a whole number of current debates: the auditory culture vs. sound studies discussion (Kane 2015); the omnipresent affect debate (Massumi 1995, Eisenlohr 2018a) and, in particular, the affect/interpretation divide, which is related to the older cognition/emotion binary, and the relationship between reason and knowledge (Mercier and Sperber 2017), to name but a few. They speak directly to the issue of human entanglement and imbrication with the surrounding world paradigms, such as those the Extended Mind Hypothesis seeks to explore. But their greatest strength is simultaneously their greatest weakness. Atmospheres are, to a considerable extent, vague; on the other hand, they reach beyond the confines of verbal description, which is where music arguably does its main work. They seem very abstract, yet they are concerned with the immediacy of felt-bodily experience. A common critique of atmospheric theory is that the various neo-phenomenologies of atmospheres may be theoretically convincing but ultimately lack analytical merit.

The academic debate centred around atmospheres, building on the so-called New Aesthetics of Gernot Böhme, philosopher of culture and technology, holds quite a lot of allure for an empirically minded cultural



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analysis. While atmospheres are theoretically convincing, however, we have to say that it is difficult to operationalise them. What is more, they lose their meaning once one tries to explore the practical dimensions [of cultural practices] through in-depth ethnography. Put differently and in a nutshell: Where a cultural analysis of everyday practices seeks to reach beyond representation, symbolic forms and rational practices, we will need to sharpen precisely those tools and methods which have the potential to productively combine phenomenological and praxeological approaches. [This is necessary] to make the often vague concepts of late modern cultural theory more concrete and methodologically more accessible.<sup>4</sup> (Tschofen 2017, 19)

Cultural anthropologist Bernhard Tschofen is referring to Gernot Böhme here. His concerns are not specific to Böhme's work. Hermann Schmitz – one generation older than Böhme, still untranslated for the most part (but see Schmitz, Slaby, and Müllan 2011) and a key figure of German neo-phenomenology – is also decidedly unanalytical and unethnographic. For him, culture is a broad container term both largely dependent on and posterior to what he calls the “abstraction base” (“Abstraktionsbasis”) of a given social entity: a “set of fundamental ideas or concepts so deeply entrenched in common experience that they provide a deep framework of intelligibility in which all things appear in experience and that shape the terms in which everything is routinely understood and interpreted” (Schmitz, Slaby, and Müllan 2011). It is the “filter that determines which elements of immediate lived experience pass in a manner for them to enter concept formation and appraisal”<sup>5</sup> (Schmitz 2004). Schmitz's approach

4 Original text: “Die an die ‚neue Ästhetik‘ des Kultur- und Technikphilosophen Gernot Böhme anschließende verstärkte Rede von ‚Atmosphären‘ hat auch für die empirisch arbeitende Kulturwissenschaften etwas Verlockendes. Es handelt sich dabei jedoch, wie wir immer häufiger bestellen müssen, um ein zwar theoretisch überzeugendes Konzept, das aber schwer operationalisierbar ist und noch dazu an Bedeutung verliert, wenn man in höher aufgelöster empirischer Arbeit nach den Praxisdimensionen zu fragen beginnt. Anders und nun ganz kurz gesagt: will sich eine Kulturanalyse des Alltags nicht auf Repräsentationen, symbolische Formen und verstandesmäßige Praktiken beschränken, wird sie nicht um eine Schärfung gerade jener Konzepte und Methoden herumkommen, die phänomenologische und praxeologische Zugangsweisen produktiv zu verbinden wissen, um so die oftmals diffus bleibenden Konzepte spätmoderner Kulturtheorie konkreter und vor allem methodisch zugänglicher zu gestalten.”

5 Original text: “... ein Filter, der darüber entscheidet, was aus der unwillkürlichen Lebenserfahrung so durchgelassen wird, dass es in die Begriffsbildung und Bewertung Einlass findet” (Schmitz 2004). One of Schmitz's central assumptions is that one cannot understand phenomena detached from the “corona of meanings” (Hof der Bedeutungen: see Schmitz 1990, 20; also Andermann 2007, 257) that surrounds them as implications and preconditions.



is in keeping, in a somewhat idiosyncratic way, with Foucault's critique of phenomenology. Foucault takes into account the epistemological character of any phenomenology, which, according to him, necessitates an inquiry into the power and knowledge relationships within which a given phenomenon is situated (see Andermann 2007, 257). Schmitz's radical focus on the immediate lived experience grows from his critique of what he calls the "dominant European intellectualist culture"<sup>6</sup> (Schmitz 2009, 7): the historical ontological and epistemological assumptions that form the exclusive foundation of North Atlantic philosophy, namely, that discipline's abstraction basis. In his words, "the tenaciously powerful layer of things taken for granted that forms a filter between the immediate experience of life, on the one hand, and concepts, theories and evaluations, on the other hand. The abstraction basis decides what is taken to be important enough to enter theorising and evaluation through words and terms"<sup>7</sup> (Schmitz 2009, 11). In his project to inquire into the immediate lived experience, which according to him does not pass the said filter, he reaches for what is prior to the hegemony of the abstraction basis. He dates the emergence of the dominant European intellectualist culture, with its emphasis on reason and quantification, to the ancient Greece of the second half of the fifth century BC. Since then, he claims, the abstraction basis has not changed to any significant extent (Schmitz 2009, 12). This makes the history of European thought dangerous, he warns: "Under the surface of rationalization, the unseen dynamics of the affective involvement [of the felt body] accumulate. They will eventually burst through, uncontrollable, as in Germany under the reign of the Nazis"<sup>8</sup> (Schmitz 2009, 12). It is absolutely imperative for him that we identify the intellectual roots of the tough lessons the European twentieth century has taught us. For Schmitz, this entails a radical rethinking of the entire European philosophical tradition and a return to ideas that, for all we know, predate a history of ideas gone terribly wrong.

6 Original text: "[die] dominante [...] europäische [...] Intellektuallkultur."

7 Original text: "[...] die zäh prägende Schicht vermeintlicher Selbstverständlichkeiten, die zwischen der unwillkürlichen Lebenserfahrung einerseits, den Begriffen, Theorien und Bewertungen andererseits den Filter bildet. [...] Die Abstraktionsbasis entscheidet darüber, was so wichtig genommen wird, daß es durch Worte und Begriffe Eingang in Theorien und Bewertungen findet."

8 Original text: "[...] weil sich unter der Oberfläche der Rationalisierung die ungesichtete Dynamik des affektiven Betroffenseins staut und irgendwann unkontrollierbar durchbricht, z.B. in Deutschland unter der Herrschaft der Nationalsozialisten."

## This Book

As a cultural musicologist who works both ethnographically and music-analytically, I think through music and through people's complex relationships with musical practices. My primary interest is in those distinctly musical epistemologies which even music studies have not been able to address on their own, sonic terms. This interest in the specifically sonic workings of music-making is what has always sparked my curiosity about atmospheres: I believe the phenomenology of atmospheres can make a vital contribution here. Eisenlohr, addressing this question, makes a similar argument when he posits that

atmospheres as synesthetic characters and holistic phenomena [...] are prior to single, definite sensory impressions. [...] I contend that the sonic plays a privileged role in generating such holistic Gestalten. This is because the sonic, traveling vibrational phenomena that very often exceed the limits of the acoustically perceivable, are intimately linked to the suggestions of movement that atmospheres exert on felt-bodies, and that in turn provoke and interact with resonant stirrings of the felt-body. (Eisenlohr 2019a)

Here, we are presented with a truly novel opportunity to think about atmospheres as a spatial phenomenon through and not only with sound. For music does not only precisely “[provide spatial contexts] with a range of ecological and textural qualities [...], and these, in turn, shape perceptual and agential involvements in everyday spaces” (de la Fuente and Walsh 2020, 3). In a radically neo-phenomenologist approach, atmospheres are far from a merely added textural quality. Instead, they are constitutive of both lived space and the felt body and their mutual imbrication; hence, they can also make a valuable contribution to the acoustemology of place (Feld 1996). The value I see in the neo-phenomenology of atmospheres is analytical, in what it offers vis-à-vis the ethnographically specific and its definitive lack of explanatory qualities. You will never be able to explain or predict atmospheres, you will only be able to trace them. Explanations and predictions are, of course, precisely what Tschofen and other critics expected and were disappointed to miss in current discussions on atmospheres. This is why it is crucial to emphasise right from the beginning that atmospheres are not and never will be an explanatory model. Neither do they provide a methodologically sound framework or a ready-to-use theoretical agenda.



Atmospheres are not *an approach*. All they do is sensitise one to medium-specific aspects of cultural practices that are not normally considered in more conventional analyses. One cannot *apply* atmospheres, one can only try to make them work toward a specific set of analytical questions.

It is important here to note the relationship between the musical and the sonic. In this book, I consider musical conventions to be strategies to discipline and steer the energy flow of the sonic in its very incipency; musical genres to be strategies to tap into and mould this energy. Krueger argues that to explore structural features of music bodily is to bring “musical content” to phenomenal presence (Krueger 2011, 63), a way of enacting that content. This renders music-making practices a cultural strategy to work with the meaningfulness inherent in the sonic and to transform that meaningfulness. In neo-phenomenological terms, one of the main characteristics of sonic meaningfulness is that the sonic is potentially always already historical: “[sound’s] history often lives on”<sup>9</sup> (Schmitz 2016, 88; see Chapter 2) in the sonic. This is an idea that is very much in keeping with Palauan notions about the performing arts and chanting in particular. It opens up a number of vistas analytically on the meaningfulness of music-making. For this reason, it will prove crucial for the intellectual journey and overall trajectory of this book.

Schmitz is far from being a post-colonial philosopher in even the remotest way. And yet, in its desire to enable a philosophical apparatus alternative to the dominant mainstream of the North Atlantic tradition of thinking on which the humanities and social sciences are built, his project resonates with the decolonial dream: to introduce subaltern epistemologies and ontologies into the academy, not as ethnographic whimsicalities but as sound correctives to the hegemonic. Schmitz asks his readers to think radically differently than the North Atlantic tradition of thinking has taught us to. His may not be a post-colonial philosophy, but it is one that invites post-colonial perspectives that speak to his ideas.

## Music Worlding in Palau

The ethnography presented in this book began with my doctoral fieldwork, which first incarnated in writing as my PhD dissertation (Abels 2008), an ethnography of Palauan music-making with an emphasis on *chelitákl*

9 Original text: “Weil (die früheren Abschnitte des Erschallens) in der intensiven Dauer aber zu einem absolut unspaltbaren Verhältnis zusammengebunden werden können, lebt im augenblicklichen Schall oft noch seine Geschichte.”

*rechuódel*, the traditional song repertoire. Chelitákl *rechuódel* are creations of the Palauan gods. As such, they work magic on both gods and men, and Palauan oral history is full of stories which illustrate how this happens (e.g., Krämer 1929a, 283-92; KETC 2017b, 208-15). Like other people who have worked with Pacific Islander communities, I am not quite comfortable using the term ‘magic’, which is essentially a North Atlantic concept and a problematic “baseline” (Stephen 1995, xii) from which to understand other people’s cultural practices. I would prefer to simply speak of Palauan ritual, belief or cosmology instead. I agree with Michele Stephen, however, that “magic” is still a useful concept as long as it is used thoughtfully. The reason for this is that it provides some level of analytical specificity: Referring “to a belief system that assumes that through specific actions on the part of a human agent, involving incantations or spells and the use of magical substances and the performance of specified ritual actions, desired changes can be brought about in the material world” (Stephen 1995, xiii), it helps me to point out a particular way in which chelitákl *rechuódel* exude complex meaningfulness – one which is truly essential to music worlding through the traditional performing arts in Palau.

One of those many stories is the one of “Goldëgól”, a singer from the northern Kayangel atoll, who once brought eight baskets “filled with songs and securely locked” (Krämer 1929a, 226<sup>10</sup>) to Koror. The purpose of the chants was to help the men’s club of Koror build a new stone bridge; they had sent for Goldëgól to come and bring them songs “to secure a perfect outcome with the help of the magic of his songs” (KETC 2017b, 164). The bai, men’s house, of Ngri(i)l (KETC 2017a, 21-3; Krämer 1919) in Ngarchelong had a wooden carving of this story (Krämer 1929b, double plate 26; reprinted on the first page of this introduction). In order for the songs not to work their power in an undirected manner, they had to be stowed away safely. Such a repertoire is often of divine origin, brought by gods or ancestral spirits who will usually enter dreams to convey the chants (see Parmentier 1987, 301). Palauan oral history consistently suggests that the efficacy of chelitákl *rechuódel* is an inexplicably overwhelming one. The repertoire is also suitable as a human offering to the gods and a means to invoke and appease ancestral spirits, which are co-present in the world and not inhabitants of some separate realm. *Music Worlding in Palau* is centred around chelitákl *rechuódel* as well; however, its analytic and intellectual trajectory is very different from this earlier study. Still, the present book remains based on the music-analytical groundwork presented there, and

10 Original text: “[...] gefüllt mit Gesängen und gut verschnürt”.

small bits and pieces of it appeared there for the first time in an earlier form. Some parts of Chapters 1 and 3 appeared in an earlier form in Abels (2018b). Parts of Chapter 1 relate to Abels (2016) and (2020a). An earlier version of Chapter 2 appeared as Abels (2020a), and Chapter 5 is related to Abels 2020b.

Following this introduction, Chapter 1, *Latmikaik's Children and Their Music*, provides a conceptual and ethnographic view into the world of this book. It introduces the historical and cultural settings of music-making in Palau. I provide a historically informed perspective on the relationship between the role of Palauan chant traditions and musical structures and textures. Exploring the competing music ontologies and epistemologies that have been formative to current performance practice from both historical and post-colonial perspectives, I draft to what extent the neo-phenomenological concept of meaningfulness might prove helpful to unpack the central role traditionally attributed to music-making in Palau.

Chapter 2, *Vaguely Specific: Resonant Historicity with Chesóls*, proceeds to explore the conceptual ramifications of meaningfulness as an analytical concept for musical performance. Expounding the concept's scope, the chapter introduces the neo-phenomenology of atmospheres (Schmitz, Böhme) more systematically and proposes ways of thinking through music with atmospheres. Based on an in-depth analysis of *chesóls* (pronounced e-sols), a Palauan solo chant, I flesh out the layered complexity of musical meaningfulness: It often presents itself as an atmosphere that will be experienced with the felt body, leveraging both affective and interpretative frames but exceeding both by way of its primarily corporeal experiential quality. This finding opens vistas to overcoming several of the binaries (materiality and immateriality; affect and interpretation; the prepersonal and the signified) lingering in more dominant scholarly traditions of thinking through affective publics. The analysis of *chesóls* shows how both atmospheres and meaningfulness as analytical concepts implicitly address a much broader discourse straddling psychology and philosophy: They have the capacity to open new ideas about how music can mean things to certain people because it has “no object other than the situation's own intensity” (McGraw 2016, 142). This chapter also demonstrates how very disparate layers of meaning and meaningfulness coalesce in the experience of sound in situations characterised by musical atmospheres.

Chapter 3, *Listening with the Dancing Body: Ruk and Movement's Incipency*, takes the discussion to an inquiry into the bodily dimensions

of the interlacing of world with self, into the role of bodily experience in negotiating historical and cultural configurations, and further into the imbrication of bodily practices and complex social systems. Exploring the ruk (Palauan men's dance), I show how both music and dance are cultural practices enacting the already motion-laden body. Beyond the flesh, they actualise the human body in movement, allowing it to continually transform in sound while recomposing along historical, social and cultural configurations. When musical movement acts on bodily movement in this way, music and dance create resonances *between* the divergent registers from which lived experience emerges and which I have explored in the preceding chapters. Resonance, here, refers to "a type of relational dynamics of affecting and being affected" and can be "characterized as a process of reciprocal modulation between interactants" (Mühlhoff 2015, 189). The registers from which lived experience emerges include emotion, discourse and memory as they correlate with Palauan temporo-spatiality via felt-bodily attunement to traditional chant repertoire. The chapter concludes by showing how these resonances themselves are intrinsically atmospheric.

Chapter 4, *Rak, Where Is He Now?" Presence / Present*, explores the nature of the coalescence identified in Chapter 2 by systematically positioning meaningfulness vis-à-vis the history of musical meaning, both philosophically and as a searchlight for music studies since the discipline's early days. How do meaningfulness and meaning relate in music, and how, structurally and texturally, does music 'have meaning' and yet mean far more beyond this meaning? Presenting an exploration of omengeredákl, women's group chants, I single out "effects of meaning" and "effects of presence" (Gumbrecht 2003), showing how the dynamics arising between them lead to the emergence of a distinctly sonic atmosphere. There is no such thing as binary opposition in atmospheres.

Chapter 5 on *Resonance. Co-Becoming with Sound* provides an account of resonance as the key force bringing about musical meaningfulness. I argue that music-making in Palau is primarily a becoming, an incipience of renewal regarding musical structure, form and texture. As this incipience of renewal actualises across sense modalities, such as in music and dance, it becomes an overwhelming experience, one that accounts for the power of music and dancing experiences – and, in the case of Palau, for the meaningfulness of music and dancing.

Chapter 6, *Of Magic and Meaningfulness. Chelitákl Rechuódel and the Felt-bodily Dimensions of Spiritual Practice*, explores musical *ólai* practices. The practice of magic in traditional Palau required for spells not only to be

recited but to resound as *chelitákl rechuódel*, traditional chant repertoire. The reason for that is that the magic could be implemented only through the repertoire's capacity to link, via the felt body, the present moment experientially with Palauan 'deep time'. This shows to what extent the meaningfulness of *chelitákl rechuódel* resides in music's capacity to connect the categories of time, space and sociality into a whole. That whole emerges as a deep sense of Palauanness. *Chelitákl rechuódel* make Palauanness felt in an encompassing sense. This is how "music worlds".

The conclusion revisits the book's central argument, considers the key concepts used towards the analysis of musical meaningfulness, and addresses a few theoretical and methodological implications for music research beyond the Western Pacific ethnographic context.

### Music Worlding in Palau: The Background

*Music Worlding in Palau* offers a music scholar's narrative of music-making in Palau, a small island group in Western Micronesia. The book explores the manifold and sometimes contradictory ways in which musical experience suggests meaning atmospherically. I first became interested in the music of Micronesia, and Palau in particular, in the early 2000s. I vividly recall reading an article, written in the 1960s, which openly decried all of Micronesian contemporary music-making as "inauthentic" bad copies of North American popular music. While I could not take this piece of writing seriously in any way, it did pique my curiosity and led me to do some initial research into the ethnomusicology of the Pacific Islands. I quickly discovered, to my amazement, how little had been written about the music of the Western Pacific Island world (the only systematic work regarding Palau was by Osamu Yamaguti in 1967). This was all the more striking to me as there were a number of historical recordings, some of them from as early as the first decade of the twentieth century, to which no one seemed to have paid any real attention. This is how my doctoral project was born, which grew into an inquiry into the Palauan traditional performing arts, *chelitákl rechuódel*, exploring twentieth-century performance practice from the earliest available wax cylinder recordings to then contemporary performance. I focused in my early field research between 2004 and 2007 on systematically exploring *chelitákl rechuódel*, documenting contemporary performance practice and conducting restudies of historical recordings together with my interlocutors. From 2006-2007, I had the privilege of working with my Palauan interlocutors on their oral traditions as an ethnographer for the Bureau of Arts and Culture, part of



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the Ministry of Culture and Community Affairs, Government of Palau. We spent a lot of time in the field collecting oral histories and conducting interviews. At that time, I was already intrigued by how regularly my interlocutors would refer to what they considered *chelitákl rechuódel's* self-explanatoriness: if you immerse yourself in the music, the bottom line was, you will not need to ask so many questions! I returned to Europe in 2007 and completed my doctoral work. But I kept coming back to Palau regularly for additional fieldwork and collaboration with Belau National Museum. Drawing on these sixteen years of work on and off the islands, *Music Worlding in Palau* mobilises the analytical distinction between the established concept of musical meaning and the much more recent and original notion of musical meaningfulness as a gathering of meanings which cannot necessarily be specified or even distinguished from one another. Meaningfulness is so telling because as a sum of many, typically indistinguishable meanings, it communicates more than could possibly ever be said about its single constituents (cf. Schmitz 1990, 19). Musical meaningfulness, unlike musical meaning, works by reaching people both corporally and affectively; it is also simultaneously subject to interpretation. However, in being subject to interpretation, it is prior to the contingent, historically and culturally specific interpretations that inform musical meaning. In other words, the musically meaningful is that powerful dimension of music which music scholars have not been able to put their finger on, referring it to the realm of the unspeakable and the ineffable instead.

All interviews quoted were conducted in Palauan and the translations are mine unless otherwise noted. I refer to my interlocutors by their first names only, foregoing their hereditary titles, to protect their privacy. In addition to my own fieldwork recordings, I have also used a number of historical collections of recordings from Palau:

- (1) The *Hamburg South Seas Expedition* recordings (1909). Among the six wax cylinders in the collection that, according to the expedition members' field notes, were recorded in Palau by Augustin Krämer and his colleagues, four contain Palauan music, while the remaining two contain pieces from other Micronesian islands. One of these was in all likelihood taken on Tobi, one of Palau's Southwest Islands. Paul Hambruch, a member of the *Hamburg South Seas Expedition*, used the phonograph to play German military marches to a bewildered audience on Tobi. Hambruch's subsequent attempt to record Tobian chants, however, was less well received by the islanders; only one person, his local interpreter,



eventually volunteered to recite into the device. Tobian oral history recounts how a “shaman” was forced to chant for the ethnographers to record. However, instead of providing the chant requested, he recited a curse on the device and, thus, put a spell on the phonograph. Hambruch himself does not relay any information on the content of that recording.<sup>11</sup> The *Hamburg South Seas Expedition* collection of sound recordings itself is currently stored at the Phonogramm-Archive Berlin, Germany, under the name of “Hamburger Südsee-Expedition” (“Hamburg South Seas Expedition”); some of the Palauan recordings have been published on CD (Koch and Ziegler 2011). For a critical historical and ideological contextualization of this and other ethnographic expeditions to the Pacific Islands in the early twentieth century, see Diettrich 2021 and Agnew 2005.

2) The Muranushi recordings (1936). Iwakichi Muranushi was the director of a Japanese anthropological excursion to the Micronesian islands in 1936. He recorded 36 Palauan songs and stories on Dictaphone cylinders. Owing to major differences in the speed among the recordings, many of the recordings appear distorted; the collection was published (Tatar 1985).

3) The Siemer recordings (1936). Wilhelm Siemer was a missionary in Palau for the Liebenzell mission from 1930 to 1938.<sup>12</sup> In 1935, Siemer was requested by Marius Schneider, then head of the Phonogramm-Archive Berlin, Germany, to document local music on behalf of the Archive. The collection, stored as “Siemer Palau” at the Phonogramm-Archive Berlin, includes 52 recordings originally taken by means of a phonograph.

4) The Barbara B. Smith recordings (1963). Barbara B. Smith, then professor at the University of Hawai‘i, undertook a field trip to Palau among other islands. Her intent was to document Micronesian music for preservational rather than scholarly purposes. Smith went at the request of student members of the Micronesian Club of Honolulu at the University of Hawai‘i, who had expressed their urgent wish that music-making in the West Micronesian islands be documented as soon as possible.<sup>13</sup> The Barbara B. Smith collection includes six CDs with digitalised reel-to-reel recordings that were prepared by Smith herself, and three CDs with dubbings given to her by the Palauan radio station WSZB Palau. This

11 Peter W. Black, personal communication, 5 September 2006; also see Buschmann 1996, 330. My thanks to Peter W. Black for pointing me to this significant detail.

12 See the personal communication between Sr. Ilse Szaukellis and Susanne Ziegler, 22 April 2002. Letter contained in the documents belonging to the *Siemer Palau* collection, Phonogramm-Archive Berlin, Germany.

13 Barbara B. Smith, personal communications, 11 February 2005 and 10 May 2006.

collection is stored in the Pacific Collection of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, USA; a copy is held by the Belau National Museum, Koror, Palau. A part of the recordings has been remastered and published by the Phonogramme-Archive Berlin in collaboration with Belau National Museum. (Koch and Kopal 2015)

5) The Yamaguti recordings (1965-66). Osamu Yamaguti (previously: Yamaguchi), then a master's student at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, went to Palau in 1965 as part of the preparation for his Master's thesis on Palauan music (1967), which was supervised by Barbara B. Smith.

6) Local Palauan recordings. These include private recordings not generally available to the public and recordings prepared by and stored at the governmental Bureau of Arts and Culture, Koror, Palau, where I was employed in 2006-2007.

I try to conform to the orthography of Lewis Josephs (1990, 1997) throughout the book, which is also the spelling convention the Palau Language Commission endorses. However, this is not as straightforward a strategy as it may seem: Many Palauans like to spell differently and, to complicate matters, the spelling used in historical sources varies from author to author. Moreover, the language of *chelitákl rechuódel* is deeply archaic and unintelligible to many, if not most, contemporary Palauans. For these reasons, the spelling I use in *Music Worlding in Palau* is basically Josephs's but simultaneously also a reflection of the spelling choices the chanters I have worked with make. Where I quote historical sources, I mostly retain the spelling used in the source.

And finally, a word on data protection: While some of them will be easily identifiable to many, I generally try to safeguard the anonymity of my interlocutors. In keeping with anthropological protocol (de Koning et al. 2019), I do not disclose their full names nor do I refer to them by their traditional titles.

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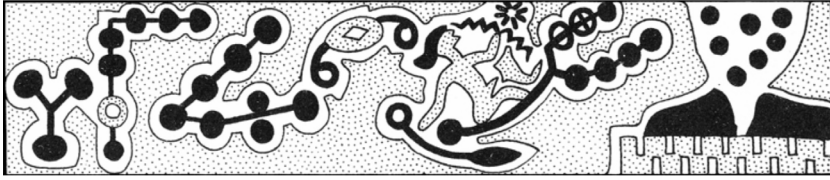


Figure 2 Bai ornament in Gurdmau (in Ngardmau) as documented by Augustin Krämer during the Hamburg South Seas Expedition. (Krämer 1929b, double plate 14) Krämer's description: "[T]o the left the Pleiades which the god steers, to the left of his head a figure resembling a nose clamp = the crab *gamáng* [*chemáng*], to the left of it a pair of fire tongs = the angle *gogádu*, far upper left (right angle) *bar aikngot*, below *aingúkl* (the 3 "fire stones)." (KETC 2017c, 63; italics in original)