Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society

May 17, 2019

**The Muses of Myth, Modernity, Materiality, and Mobility**

**“Interwoven” – Introductory Remarks**

Philip V. Bohlman

**On Origin Myths and “Interwoven”**

As I reflected on possible ways to introduce the Neubauer Collegium “Interwoven” project on May 17, 2019, it occurred to me that one way to account for beginnings was to turn to origin myths. The Indian Ocean world itself, of course, bears witness to a remarkable fabric of origin myths. So much so, moreover, that it might be possible to understand the Indian Ocean world by seeking the confluence of the origin myths that form the materiality and mobility that we, in this project, describe as “Interwoven.”

Some of the origin myths assume grand and sweeping forms. We remember, for example, that the biblical “Garden of Eden,” Gan Eden, has at least two Indian Ocean locations in the mythological imagination, the delta formed by the Tigris and Euphrates, and Adam’s Peak in Sri Lanka. The *Ramayana* provides us with additional myths from the Indian Ocean world, not least among them the great battle for Sita on Lanka between the forces of Rama and Ravana. We do not forget, of course, that Rama sang a prayer in the moment before he shot the arrow that felled Ravana. I spent several hours this week searching for origin myths in Indian Ocean folk tales, and once again, I was richly rewarded for my efforts. To turn again to Sri Lanka, we find abundant tales about the songs accompanying unknown souls as they washed ashore from the sea, returning to life with narratives resounding places far away.

Remarkably, such myths contain much in common, indeed, for the interwovenness of the Indian Ocean world, past and present. There is the connectness of the sea, always a source for the beginnings and endings of religion: No less so for the Abrahamic faiths than for Hinduism and Buddhism, whose soteriological presence across the Indian Ocean world forms counterpoint with the eschatological symbolism of gardens of Eden. The sea and movement across the sea has been thematically central to the complex fabric of religion.

Visual and archeological representations of that fabric, we also recognize, proliferate, intensifying the aesthetic counterpoint. The culture of shrines, temples, and sites of worship has unfolded across time and space, sounded by the movement of pilgrims and unleashed through the liturgy of ritual specialists. The trade in artistic and musical objects from Africa’s east coast to Southeast Asia seems rarely to have ceased. Musical instruments—the bowed *rebab*, as the locus classicus —possess the same central importance in an Iraqi *chalghi* orchestra as in the Javanese or Balinese gamelan.

The connectness of myth has also been critical for the formation of modernity in the Indian Ocean World. We are constantly amazed by the processes of exchange afforded by the emergence of sound recording and film in Africa and Asia during the twentieth century. It is almost baffling to trace the canonization of the canonic East African popular music style, *taarab*, from Zanzibar to the recording studios of colonial Bombay and Calcutta, where the musical lingua franca of Swahili was inscribed on shellac, only to be recirculated to Africa. Indian Ocean trade, from past to present, recharted the city landscapes along the littoral, creating what we might call an “entrepôt culture.”

**“Interwoven” – From Myth to Modernity**

These myths, these connections, this mobility born of materiality—all this is what led us to undertake the Neubauer Collegium project we call “Interwoven.” Like the subject we study—“the sonic and visual histories of the Indian Ocean world”—we seek new paths of connectness as we embark on “Interwoven.” We, too, as a collective, have origins, some of them a bit mythical. Our forces have converged from two earlier projects on the “Sonic and Visual Cultures of South Asia,” which became one, even after tracing paths through workshops and conferences in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

With the assistance of the Neubauer Collegium, “Interwoven” both expands and affords a fabric strengthened through the convergence that collaboration makes possible. We, too, seek to cross the vast sea of myth, modernity, materiality, mobility that make it possible to chart the sonic and visual histories of the Indian Ocean world in new ways.