Musical Atmospheres and Sea-Nomadic Movement Among the Sama Dilaut: Sounding Out a Mobile World

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Abstract
During a traditional wedding parade of the sea-nomadic Sama Dilaut community in insular Southeast Asia, the bride’s flotilla of brightly decorated boats sets out to greet the groom’s flotilla as it approaches the moorage. On several boats among both parties, gong ensembles play independently, and their music coalesces into a thick, multi-part texture. While the couple ties the knot, all involved in the wedding literally move through the layers of the music, which becomes a sonic manifestation of the new multi-family network sealed in the ceremony. The annual Regatta Lepa, a cultural festival in Borneo (Malaysia) dubbed “a celebration of the Sama Dilaut,” makes ample use of that same musical practice, sounding out what it might mean to be Sama Dilaut in the 21st century. Drawing on extensive ethnographic materials, I argue that, for the duration of the Regatta Lepa, the gong music is central to the emergence of a shared feeling that manifests as an atmosphere of Sama Dilautness. This atmosphere reverberates with an alternate, distinctly sea-nomadic and Sama Dilaut spatiality that is both intrinsically mobile and intrinsically sonic in nature. I explore the dynamics that transduce structured sound into an atmosphere, rendering this distinct sense of spatiality tangible. In this process of transduction, music, atmosphere, and movement form a relationship that is as triangular as it is circular and dynamic.

Keywords
atmosphere, music, Sama Dilaut, sea-nomadic spatiality

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Introduction

Each year in April, the sleepy little town of Semporna on Borneo’s eastern coast transforms into something else: the *Regatta Lepa* festival is taking place. For three consecutive days, the town’s shoreline is lined with *lepas*, the traditional-style Sama Dilaut houseboats which give the festival its name. The Sama Dilaut, a community of boat-dwelling sea nomads, consider the *lepas* their traditional homes, built to be in motion constantly across the South China Sea, scouring the area for fish and other sea produce. Historically, there have been a number of boat-dwelling communities across insular Southeast Asia, and they continue to exist to this day. However, since roughly the mid-20th century, many of them have begun to adopt sedentary or semi-sedentary lifestyles, typically settling in elevated wooden stilt houses along the coasts of seaside towns. But for the Sama Dilaut and many other maritime communities, their primary cultural identification remains, regardless of their current type of dwelling, their eponym: the sea, *laut*.

The *Regatta Lepa* attracts roughly 15,000 visitors, mostly Malaysians, annually. The program is similar every year, with the official program spreading over two days. The day before the event's official opening ceremony, the *lepa* boats, each carrying a gong ensemble and usually dancers as well, pour into the moorage, one by one, to secure their spots. The next day, they will compete in the *Regatta Lepa’s* central event, the selection of the “most beautiful” *lepa*. Together with the *lepa* boats, a significant number of *kumpit* boats – larger, engine-driven boats that have increasingly taken the place of the *lepa* in contemporary Sama Dilaut life in the course of the 20th century – gather at the moorage the afternoon before the festival's official starting day to participate in the celebration. For the duration of the festival, several gong ensembles play independently of one another on the boats, wrapping the small mooring area, its waters, and everyone within hearing range in a thick, dense cloud of sound. The constant motorboat noise and the sound of carnival barkers, kids playing around the pier, and people socializing all add to the emerging sonic complexity (see video 1). As the boats tied to the shore compete for the festival title of most beautiful *lepa*, for many Sama Dilaut, it is this complex sonic environment that makes the festival space distinctly Sama Dilaut. In ordinary life, by contrast, that same space is shared, however tension-ridden, by several communities – a co-existence with considerable compartmentalization, evident in many of the Sama Dilaut opting to occupy stilt houses along the shoreline and away from the festival site, rather than any concrete homes in town, where the various cultural groups mix more freely. “*[The Regatta Lepa] is a celebration of the Sama Dilaut,*” said one of the people I worked with, raising his voice so that I’d be able to hear him in the midst of the complex soundscape and bustle as we were walking past the shoreline during *Regatta Lepa* 2010. “It’s not in the details,” said another, musing about the colorful *lepa* lineup at the shore and the musical repertoires playing on their boats as we walked past the jetty. “I don’t know; it’s the whole thing, really. It just gets to you.”

Video 1: Excerpt from Regatta Lepa XVI, Semporna, Sabah/Borneo (Malaysia), 18 April 2009. Recorded by Birgit Abels.  
https://vimeo.com/246125939
Everyone I spoke with agreed that the gong music played on the boats, *tagunggu*, is central to the festival (cf. Fernando 2002, 22). As for the festival itself, they described it as exuding an “atmosphere of [being] Sama Dilaut.” Most were quick to add that this Sama Dilautness of the festival came about through the overall sonic experience, which consists of, among other things, all the gong music being played on all of the boats – not only the decorated *lepas* tied to the shore, but also a considerable number of other boats that keep roaming the festival area throughout the celebrations. Music during the *Regatta Lepa*, they suggested, is a deeply holistic and inclusive experience. To many Sama Dilaut, embracing the festival’s overwhelming sonic complexity and allowing themselves to be swept away by it are what makes the experience so worthwhile. Clearly, this sonic “whole” that is so much more than the sum of its parts is what makes Semporna theirs, and at the same time makes them Semporna’s Sama Dilaut – but only until the sound of the *Regatta Lepa* fades. Within the social fabric of Semporna, this fleeting instance of “nomadic aesthetics is [a] counterpart of the politics of peripheral resistance to new hegemonic formations” (Braidotti 1994, 16), a performative enactment of a cultural geography that is different from the dominant one: a counter-geography. Accordingly, each year, the moment the festival ends, the everyday social hierarchies relegating the Sama Dilaut to the lowest rank within the community that had been suspended for three days by the *Regatta Lepa* are restored.

Thus, to a significant extent, the Sama Dilaut’s Semporna realm comes into existence merely through the sensual experience of *tagunggu*, only to vanish when the music stops. For the other communities in the area, Semporna may be readily there on a map, but for the Sama Dilaut, traditionally, Semporna is neither a material place, nor an immaterial idea. During the *Regatta Lepa*, to the Sama Dilaut, Semporna is, instead, an experience in sound, one that will last for the duration of the sonic event. In the terminology of new phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz, the meaningfulness of the *Regatta Lepa* for the Sama Dilaut I worked with resides in the significant, shared situation (Schmitz, Müller & Slaby 2011, 244) brought about centrally through the thick sound envelope that wraps Semporna’s shoreline in the sounds of *tagunggu*. For the other shoreline communities in and around Semporna, Hetherington’s definition of place may apply to Semporna perfectly: a place that forms an immaterial entity resulting from the placing, ordering, and representing of material objects (1997, 192). If to the sea-nomadic Sama Dilaut, by contrast, Semporna is mostly an experience, and if music-making is the primary means of evoking this experience, then music holds analytical potential *vis-à-vis* the community’s alternative spatiality and, since theirs is a deeply nomadic spatiality, their alternative mobility. But at the same time, their alternative spatiality and mobility may provide important clues that lead to a deeper understanding of their music-making practices – clues that promise to be relevant beyond understanding the particularities of the experiential mobility node that is the *Regatta Lepa*, the sleepy little town of Semporna, and the Sama Dilaut. In this article, I will follow these clues, trying to get closer to some of the meaningful dynamics arising between movement.

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1 My research is based on field work in and around Semporna between 2007 and 2010.

2 By “mobility nodes”, Sheller & Urry (2006, 213) mean the social spaces around which mobile forms of social life, full of multiple and dynamic connections, are orchestrated, often across long distances. They are (physical) spaces of intermittent movement. By “experiential mobility node”, I mean a space with similar qualities. This space, however, is not so much a physical space as it enables, and comes about through, an encompassing sensory experience.
atmosphere, and music that make the *Regatta Lepa* such a treasured event for the Sama Dilaut. My analysis will show how all three – movement, atmosphere, and *tagunggu’* – constitute epistemic forms that enact each other. “There is nothing before movement; movement expresses how things are”, says John Urry (2007, 33). The same applies to music. As I will show below, the mutual enactment of movement, atmosphere, and music renders the procedural knowledge inherent in all three experiential, intensifying the effect each of the three has as a dimension of being-in-the-world and allowing for something new to come about between them. That *something new* is a distinctly and exclusively Sama Dilaut space: Semporna during the *Regatta Lepa*.

The Sama Dilaut’s experiential Semporna involves both the individual’s physical body and the physical environment, comprising both sound itself and how it fills the space that is Semporna. The latter is not a matter of either outer materiality or inner perception. Rather, it involves both and emphasizes the relationship and continuum between the two. Music-making generally does this, as it does with any partaking of music. Sound is as much within the hearing/listening individual as it is materially “out there.” But with the sea-nomadic Sama Dilaut, their fundamentally mobile conception of space is heightened, even operated upon and made tangible, through the central role they ascribe to music making as a way of relating to their surroundings (cf. Fernando 2002, 27). I will elaborate on the processes behind this in greater detail below. In this way, music elicits an experience of their world as this world is coming into being, to paraphrase Ingold. Far from serving merely symbolic purposes, this experience in sound “gets to you,” as my interlocutor put it – it gets to you as an atmosphere. It is this triangular relationship between an intrinsically mobile spatiality, music-making, and atmosphere that I seek to explore in this article.

Clearly, the mind-body dichotomy that continues to bear such a substantial imprint on the way human beings are imagined in the North Atlantic intellectual tradition is not analytically productive here. In this line of thinking, human beings are generally seen as subjects that form a “seat of awareness, bounded by the skin, and set over against the world” (Ingold [2000] 2011, 243). This, however, raises the fundamental problem of perception usually referred to as the “mind – body problem”: How can anything “cross over” from the outside to the inside, from the presumably material world to the presumably immaterial mind (ibid.; Crane and Patterson 2000; Leys 2011)? Music washes over this and other ontological categories like wavelets in the sand, as the example of *tagunggu’* makes so abundantly clear. Here, a place is not conceived of as a set of material properties perceived by a subjective entity, but a fleeting sensation that is coming about in the act of making sense of the place musically. It becomes a part of ourselves, a realization of the sensation that “[w]e cannot define where a body begins and where external nature ends” (Whitehead 1968, 21). Resonating with both discursive and non-discursive frames, musicking (Small 1998) transcends the notions of inside and outside by way of its primarily corporeal experiential quality. At the same time, it relates to both. In the words of Lawrence

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3 This notion of sound differs from both the widely accepted scientific view that defines sounds as waves that propagate through a medium such as air and philosophical definitions of sound that view music as essentially a human mental construct. Both (and other) stances have analytical merit. Here, however, I am interested in music as atmospheres in shared situations, which emphasizes the relational affordances of sound and their bearing on social worlds. For this, I need to take into account both the sonic materiality and the shared sensation of musical events.
Kramer, in musical experience, “presence of mind is potentiality of body, presence of body potentiality of mind, and both may exist at the same moment” (Kramer 2016, vii). The space brought about by music-making, then, is where a specifically sonic and intrinsically musical form of human dwelling in the world is taking place. Importantly, though, music-making as dwelling is not primarily a discovery of a world “out there.” To a significant extent, it is part of a dynamic formation of procedural knowledge that “rides on the cusp of the very movement of the world’s coming-into-being” (Ingold [2000] 2011, 245). This is because musical experience accentuates the intense relationship – indeed, the connectedness – between what is commonly referred to separately as mind or body. Both notions refer to parts of the same force that constantly imbricates us in Ingold’s world-coming-into-being.

Always already tossed into the immediate experience of engaging with music and leveraging affective, emotional, interpretative, and corporeal frames, musical experience, therefore, is as much a part of a world coming about as of humans relating to that world-coming-about. It also is a movement – acoustic wave forms traveling through physical space, resonating with the complexity of human interaction with the world. At the same time, this distinctly musical form of relating to the world is always one step ahead of the reflective language that seeks to capture its meaningfulness in full (cf. Kramer 2016, 23-64). It shouldn’t come as a surprise that similar things have been said about movement itself (e.g., Manning & Massumi 2014, 41f.). This, then, is also what has been described as the unsayable and ineffable in music, – that about music which touches you, yet you feel your are not able to describe it. It accounts for the overwhelming feeling of being at a loss for words my interlocutor had when he said, “I don’t know, it’s the whole thing, really. It just gets to you.”

In this article, framing this much-mystified capacity of music as atmosphere will enable me to recast a significant part of the presumably ineffable work that music does in terms of suggestions of movement as defined by Schmitz, on whose work on atmospheres my argument builds throughout the article. In the case of Sama Dilaut tagunggu’ during the Regatta Lepa, these suggestions of movement manifest as a shared feeling of Sama Dilautness. But movement here also serves as a double analytic: Being sea-nomads, the Sama Dilaut make sense of their environment not so much by means of a well-ordered set of oppositions and map grids, as Cartesian space would suggest. Rather, the sites along their journey attain cultural significance only as the Sama Dilaut move through them. Even though many have become more sedentary in the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Sama Dilaut’s conception of space itself remains intrinsically mobile. Therefore, the analytical category of movement is central to understanding

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4 Vadén and Torvinen (2014) consider this space an in-between space. I’d rather like to think of it as an alternative space.

5 All of these four adjectives refer to contentious and complex concepts that have been defined and used in many different ways. With affect, I here refer to Massumi’s understanding of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of affect (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987) according to which affect is sheer intensity, presubjective, prelinguistic and preconscious (Massumi 2002, 24f.; also see Ott 2017, 10ff.). Interpretive discourse, in my usage here, accordingly has a taming effect on affect, “codifying its generative force” (Wetherell 2012, 19). Emotional frames are socially configured and interpretively qualified; corporeal ones involve both the body and the felt body. These are not mutually exclusive categories (for instance, Massumi’s affect has a considerable bodily component), and I follow Ruth Leys (2011) in contending that the clear distinction between them cannot be sustained. As a matter of fact, the concept of atmospheres, I believe, has the analytical potential to sound out important resonances between them. For a more detailed exploration of the relationship of atmospheres, affect and music, see Abels forthcoming.
both Sama Dilaut music-making and spatiality, as well as how they engender and reinforce each other through atmosphere. For this reason, I’m not “applying” theories of mobility and atmosphere to music here; this would not serve any purpose other than to confirm what we think we know about movement. Instead, I’m thinking through these theories through music because music enacts both movement and atmosphere, and it does so in a highly sensual and felt-bodily way. I will argue that Sama Dilaut music-making practices resonate with the community’s alternative spatiality, and vice versa: that their sea-nomadic sense of both space and place is as much mobile as it is sonic, and hence, experiential. This is why *tagunggu*’ (and its accompanying dances, which are beyond the scope of this article; cf. Santamaria 2012) plays such an important role in Sama Dilaut cultural life. It’s a key strategy to facilitate the felt-bodily experience of movement, which is their preferred mode of dwelling – or, to refer to Ingold’s phrasing again, which will become a recurrent theme in the course of the article, it is their prime strategy when it comes to riding “on the cusp of the very movement of the world’s coming-into-being.”

So movement in space and movement in sound are profoundly enmeshed experiences here, and they yield significant situations that affect people as atmospheres of Sama Dilautness (cf. Santamaria 2012, 82; Abels 2015, 3). This is because “[t]he orders of experience are incommensurable. There is always a residue, a holding itself in reserve, each in its own element. At the extreme, each order suspends itself in its own reserve potential […]. In the middle, they splay together in their difference. […] Modally incommensurable, they only relate outside anything in common – most especially outside the logical common of anything that can be attributed a core mental status” (Manning & Massumi 2014, 41). The notion of atmosphere, therefore, allows for an analytical exploration of that experiential entanglement of sound and space and its mobile dynamics: that “splaying together in their difference.” Therefore, investigating *tagunggu* as suggestions of movement contributing to an atmosphere of Sama Dilaut belonging also will point to perspectives on the underlying notions of a distinctly mobile spatiality.

I will continue this line of thinking by sharing some basic observations about Sama Dilaut notions about space, place, and music. Following that, I will proceed to analyze musical practices of the Sama Dilaut during the *Regatta Lepa* as suggestions of movement that enable people to relate to, and make sense of, their surroundings. Against this backdrop, I then will reflect on the experiential dynamics generated by the interplay of mobility and musicality, suggested by atmospheres. How do we carve out the processes that transform structured sound through movement into shared feelings? What does the musical experience of atmosphere tell us about movement and belonging that non-musical modes of attunement do not reveal? The article will close with some preliminary answers to these questions.

**Sama Dilaut Spatiality**

Belonging to the Austronesian-speaking Sama, the Sama Dilaut are one of the most geographically dispersed groups in Southeast Asia. But while most Sama groups identify with coastal settlements across the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, for the Sama Dilaut, it is not so much a specific geographic position or a national boundary that marks their space, but the mobility between their various economic and social networks. In spite of the physical distance and national borders separating them, the Sama Dilaut communities in Borneo and the Philippines, for instance, are closely related. There’s a constant coming and going between Semporna
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in Borneo and Sitangkai in the Philippine Sulu archipelago. While their geographical location is not irrelevant to them, it is incidental, a stop along the way (cf. Chou 2005). Their affiliation with a specific place is contingent upon mobility, i.e., upon the possibility of leaving that very locale at any time (often to escape systematic discrimination and violence that they face from land-based communities). Starting roughly in the 1950s, some Sama Dilaut began to trade in their mobile lepa homes for stilt houses and village dwellings and, more rarely, for engine-driven houseboats. However, the lepa has remained a potent cultural symbol, so much so that in the mid-1990s, politicians came up with the idea of a cultural event revolving around the boat as the emblem of a way of life. Hence, the Regatta Lepa was born, a “celebration of the Sama Dilaut,” as several of my interlocutors called it.

So, as Chou notes, Southeast Asia, as a term of geographic reference, holds little meaning for the area’s maritime communities. Instead, “the social space they recognize is constructed in terms of permanent mobility and whatever can be reached by sea – a region [consisting] of a network of social relations sharpened by the extent of a people’s mobility” (2005, 236). This space is imagined as a timespace in that Sama Dilaut oral histories narrate their historical connections within the region and, in doing so, give historically and socially framed meaning to physical space and its landmarks. At the same time, Sama Dilaut perspectives on space reference both historical itineraries and how travel at sea engenders the organization of time (cf. Bottignolo 1998, 19, 63). Similarly, for the Sama Dilaut, traveling the sea is a cultural practice situating them in their very own historical and social world.

It is this life-world that is evoked by the lepa line-up during the Regatta Lepa, which is reminiscent of the historical practice of having small gong ensembles on board that would be played during rituals, such as wedding parades (Santamaria 2012, 82). The musical performances that come with it are quite literally a sounding out of the physical environment because sound, especially the sound of gongs, carries significantly further and resonates differently on water than on land. On calm water, the sound will be reflected on the water’s surface in such a way that the sounds of the gongs appear to be amplified to listeners both on boats and on the shore. As a result, the music seems louder and richer in timbre, sometimes overwhelmingly so. A sound event in an enclosed space and its acoustic reflections give the listener clear psychoacoustic information on the properties of the room (Howard & Angus 1996, 233ff.). On the open ocean, by contrast, that same quality of sound produces an intense sonic effect of spatial vastness and openness. Making music, and at the same time traveling through the sonic space emerging from it during rituals such as the wedding parade, the Sama Dilaut travel through their physical environment, and at the same time, through its sonic avatar (‘avatar’ in the sense of a musical materialization). This, I argue, is a technique that renders space sensually tangible by increasing movement’s impact on the individual’s felt body by way of sound. As their bodies resonate with sound, the people who choose to envelop themselves with this sonic environment process this tangibility in a profoundly felt-bodily way (Abels 2015, 7). The resultant effect is one of feeling pushed and pulled into the surrounding space by sonic movement. One interlocutor described this effect of gong music on water as “in-between, like the beach.” The beach lies in between the land and the sea, the site of a constant coming and going of high and low tides that blur the line between the land and sea. It is constantly pushed and pulled in one direction or the other – washing up, then washing away. This, then, is how the Sama Dilaut, enveloping themselves
in gong music on the open sea, envision themselves when they are sensually exploring the space they consider theirs: like a strand between the ocean of sound and the land of fixed coordinates.

During the historical wedding parade – “historical” because it is no longer a common cultural practice among the Sama Dilaut – the flotillas of both the groom and bride slowly move toward each other. On several boats among both parties, gong ensembles would play independently, their music coalescing into a thick, multi-part texture. While the couple ties the knot, all involved in the wedding are pulled into the sonic space emerging from the layers of music. By entering and moving through that same sonic space for the duration of the wedding, the two families become one, affirming the in-law bond between both families. The sounds of gongs, the sonic environment they create, and the Sama Dilaut’s cultural practice of sounding out that environment by moving brings about the space where Sama Dilaut connect with and reaffirm social relationships, as well as perform rituals – the space where they dwell as Sama Dilaut. This is a space not arbitrarily visited, but purposefully created.

New phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz distinguishes between spaces of geometric nature, in which there are coordinates and distances between objects, and “surfaceless spaces,” in which there are none of those entities. Examples of the latter, for him, are the spaces of weather and silence. The Sama Dilaut space emerging during a wedding parade belongs in this category of spaces. Humans relate to surfaceless space in a decidedly immediate and felt-bodily way; however, “as soon as the surface comes into play, the felt body’s estrangement from space begins” (Schmitz 1998, 74). Schmitz counts music among the surfaceless phenomena, and, as such, partaking in music facilitates the temporary convergence (as opposed to estrangement) of space and time with the felt body. Therefore, it also allows for the temporary convergence of the felt body with its own spatiality, its own temporality. This convergence comes about through the atmospheric suggestion of movement. People can encorporate such suggestions, according to Schmitz. Whenever several people encorporate music in a similar manner, the resultant “solidary encorporation” enables them to relate with each other via the resultant patterns of movement. Solidary encorporation creates shared situations: A we-Leib (Wir-Leib) comes into being, and through movement, it unites all the I-Leibe (Ich-Leib) – the people who have encorporated the same music. A situational sense of belonging starts to manifest as an atmosphere. This atmosphere is procedural and felt-bodily, and, in the case of the wedding parade, it fills physical space with an atmosphere of Sama Dilautness.

6 “[M]it der Fläche beginnt die Entfremdung des Raums vom Leib” in the original German.

7 For a more in-depth exploration of Hermann Schmitz’s theorizing of music and atmosphere and its implications, see Abels 2017.

8 Recent ethnomusicological work on entrainment addresses a related but different musical effect. While entrainment describes how two rhythmic processes “interact with each other in such a way that they adjust towards and eventually ‘lock in’ to a common phase and/or periodicity” (Clayton et al. 2004, 2), solidary encorporation occurs when a synchronization of felt-bodily attunement to specific suggestions of movement in a given situation has been reached among the individuals present. Entrainment therefore refers to a primarily cognitive process; encorporation describes a kind of corporeal communication that manifests as felt-bodily experience. See Schmitz et al. 2011; Abels 2017.
Tagunggu’ Suggestions of Movement

So, how exactly does all this happen? Both during the wedding parade and the Regatta Lepa, tagunggu’ plays a key role in the emergence of this space, my interlocutors emphasized. Schmitz’s ruminations regarding the relationship between music’s suggestions of movement and spatial alignment are of a general nature, and as such refer to any and all music. But they may be of particular relevance to Sama Dilaut music-making. I argue, because the Sama Dilaut’s sea-nomadic spatiality accentuates this interdependence more immediately than most sedentary spatialities. This is because they conceive of music, as well as space, primarily as both movement and enabling movement. With this, movement becomes the primary means to explore both physical and sonic spaces, and since music is intrinsically in motion itself, music-making becomes a strategy to explore physical space for the Sama Dilaut. In tagunggu’ performances, this double movement – physical movement through sonic space and sonic movement through physical space – is not only emphasized, but also transduced into a felt-bodily experience that enables the emergence of a shared feeling that is as sonic as it is mobile. In this case, the shared feeling is an atmosphere of Sama Dilautness. In this process, the sense of hearing becomes the transducing mediator; it involves sensory organs that perceive sound by transducing physical vibrations into nerve impulses, and the brain transforms these impulses into the subjective experience of hearing (Johnson-Laird et al. 2012, 19). What’s critical for my analysis here is the latter part of the hearing process: the transformation of impulses into the individual experience of hearing, for it is here that structured sound leverages both felt-bodily and cultural frames: In making music, the felt body is being “tinged with mentality, in its own mode” (Manning & Massumi 2014, 45). Investigating this process, in the following section, I shall take a closer look at this transductive process by identifying specific musical suggestions of movement at work during the Regatta Lepa, carving out how structured sound as felt-bodily experience resonates with key aspects of Sama Dilaut spatiality and cultural frames, then finally explaining how these processes feed into the emergence of a meaningful atmosphere.

Sound example 1 is the audio track of video example 1, filmed during the Regatta Lepa 2009. I recorded it on a moving boat. Thus, the track resembles the listening position that someone on a boat during a wedding parade would have. Naturally, however, a recording cannot render the actual spatial experience of listening on the water’s surface.

https://soundcloud.com/user-655623594/sound-1-regatta-lepa-xvi-2009
Icon: CC BY Plainicon, Online unter www.flaticon.com
The track captures a brief excerpt of the sonic environment that characterizes Semporna’s shoreline from early morning until sunset during the *Regatta Lepa*. The instruments on this recording include the traditional *kulintangan* ensemble (often referred to simply as *tagunggu*), which typically consists of the *tambul* drum, the *agung* (hanging gongs), and the *kulintangan*, a row-gong instrument that gave the ensemble its name (see fig. 1). *Tagunggu* players within each ensemble are usually members of the same family, and boats carry complete ensembles that are playing independently of the other ensembles within hearing range.

In sound example 1, several basic musical parameters suggest movement:

1. **Rhythm.** Like all *tagunggu* repertoires (Fernando 2002, 24), all *tagunggu* ensembles documented on this recording are playing in duple meter, with resultant rhythmic patterns of mostly four or eight beats. As can be heard on the recording, the gong instruments within an ensemble produce an interlocking rhythmic pattern. If Fernando notes that in Sama Dilaut *tagunggu*, “pieces appear to generate a sonic atmosphere of high tension or dance” (Fernando 2002, 25), then this already indicates the presence of suggestions of movement in the performance: *Tagunggu* invites entrainment. With several ensembles playing within hearing range of each other, the interlocking rhythmic structure becomes even more complex, as several rhythmic layers interact across ensembles. Adding to the suggestions of movement inherent in the rhythmic texture of individual pieces, further rhythmic motion emerges from in between the in itself interlocking structures of the individual ensembles, but also from in-between all instrumental parts that can be heard from any given position within earshot.

When you’re partaking in the *Regatta Lepa* the way most participants do – on a moving boat, or strolling along the shoreline – your own physical movement continually changes your listening position, *vis-à-vis* the various sound sources, which are also moving. As orientation in space depends, to a significant degree, on the psycho-acoustic perception of the environment, this results in a profound sense of spatial disorientation experienced as a dynamic tension affecting the felt body. Entrainment pulls you into the sonic space, but the continuous re-positioning of sound sources keeps distorting your aural orientation within that space. The resultant felt-bodily sensation is one of being seized and pulled through space – along unpredictable trajectories.

2. **Melody.** Generally speaking, melodies are movements through tonal space, which, in itself, suggests movement. If most of the Semporna Sama Dilaut’s *tagunggu* repertoire shares fundamental structural similarities (Fernando 2002, 24) and is based on repetitive phrase structures, as the recording confirms, then this has two primary implications for melodic suggestions of movement. Both can be observed on the recording. First, the individual parts of an ensemble resemble their counterparts recognizably across the boats. But since the ensembles are not playing in coordination with each other, i.e. the musicians are neither starting at the same time nor sharing the same tempo, similar melodic motifs reach the listeners’ ears time-delayed and/or from changing sound sources that are moving around them. This may even have a displacing effect, as it makes the sonic space a continuously morphing one, e.g., a new boat entering the listener’s hearing range, playing bits of repertoire that are structurally similar to the boats already within hearing range. Naturally, the boat and the sound of its *tagunggu*

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9 In consideration of the interdisciplinary readership of this journal, I limit analytical jargon to a minimum in this article. For a more technical analysis of musical suggestions of movement, see Abels forthcoming.
ensemble approach the listener from a different angle than the sound of all other boats. This increases the effect of being felt-bodily-dragged in alternating directions within a changing sonic space. Second, several *tagunggu’* ensembles may be playing similar melodic motifs at the same time, but the ensembles’ tunings may vary. Therefore, similar melodic gestures may reach the listener’s ear from different sound sources and at different times, but their inner tonal structure also may be internally inflected, e.g., a scale degree 3 may be just audibly lower coming from an ensemble on boat A than coming from an ensemble on boat B. The psychoacoustic effects of this are complex and vary from listener to listener, but what’s important to the present analysis is that these microtonal scale inflections further contribute to the listener’s disorientation in tonal space. This is because the listener’s tonal frame of reference is based on one ensemble’s scale structure at a certain time, but then it gets constantly jolted by the arrival of another ensemble (which may pass by just a few meters from the listener) and its own tuning.

Like with rhythm, the listener’s own movement reinforces these effects considerably, as everything is continuously moving relative to each other: the listener, the sound sources, and the tonal structures. Because of this ongoing motion, the sonic space is fundamentally volatile – it keeps changing in unpredictable ways. The listener, therefore, must constantly realign with the space surrounding him or her, which keeps the felt body excited and active in the sense of Ingold: To keep riding “on the cusp of the very movement of the world’s coming-into-being,” listeners need to constantly sound out space and music by means of both.

(3) Loudness. Perceived loudness, the way in which the sense of hearing processes the intensity of auditory sensations, hinges on the distance between the sound source and the listener. Changes in loudness impact the listener’s spatial orientation, yielding orientational confusion the moment both listener and sound source are in uncoordinated motion. With both the listener and the position of sound sources continuously moving, loudness is a constantly shifting parameter in the musical experience of the *Regatta Lepa*.

(4) Timbre. The acoustic behavior of gong instruments is complicated, especially with a view to timbre development as the sound evolves (Sethares 2013, 174). The reason for this is that the partials keep rising and falling as the sound lingers. Such “energy exchanges give the gong its characteristic, evolving timbre – as if the partials of the gong are smoothly sweeping up and down the […] scale” (*ibid.*). Naturally, this effect is less clearly discernible on a recording, but powerful within the acoustic environment in question. Psycho-acoustically, it yields an effect of rotating motion within the individual gong sounds themselves, the succession of which forms melodic units. If, as described above, the melodic work of *tagunggu’* unsettles the listener’s spatial orientation, then the individual pitches that contribute to this effect themselves feature a spinning motion. This adds yet another dimension of unhinging spatial orientation.

The above set of analytical categories is far from exhaustive and allows for the exploration of suggestions of movement in any music, but, as shown above for all categories, they are particularly productive when music goes along with physical movement. This is because physical movement through ensounded spaces increases the spatial effect that the respective structural dynamics have on the felt-bodily experience. The felt body has to constantly re-familiarize itself with its (acoustic) surroundings. This heightened felt-bodily involvement (*Betroffenheit*, in the language of Schmitz) is the first step of the transductive process through which corporeal sensations manifest as shared feelings.
Returning to the work of Hermann Schmitz, for such musical suggestions on movement, as described above, to invoke a meaningful atmosphere of Sama Dilautness, they must modulate people’s vital drive. The vital drive is characterized by a continuous oscillation between contraction and expansion that responds to a stimulus beyond affect and perception. Paraphrasing anthropologist Charles Hirschkind, suggestions of movement continuously stir up “latent tendencies of [...] response sedimented within the mnemonic regions of the flesh” (Hirschkind 2006, 82f). Here, the mnemonic regions of the felt body are enveloped by the sonic environment of the Regatta Lepa resonating with mobile notions of space that are specific to the Sama Dilaut within the ethnic fabric of their life-world. By modulating the felt body’s rhythm of contraction and expansion, the suggestions of motion identified above cause the felt body’s knowledge about the particularities of that spatiality to resonate in a diffuse way with the musical experience of tagunggu’.

Hirschkind’s “latent tendencies [...] of response” are culturally formed. Tagunggu’, in the case of the Regatta Lepa, is both a model and an object of that cultural discourse. At the same time, it acts on this cultural disposition. To play tagunggu’ during the Regatta Lepa, therefore, is to exercise Sama Dilaut spatial understanding. To embrace the shared feeling arising from that musical exercise is to continue and transform Sama Dilautness (cf. Kramer 2016, 16ff). This is one instance of a specifically Sama Dilaut way to ride “on the cusp of the very movement of the world’s coming-into-being,” again, as Ingold puts it.

The meaningfulness of the Regatta Lepa’s atmosphere of Sama Dilautness, then, resonates in bodies that have encorporated the musical suggestions of movement. There, resonating in the body, it interacts with culturally framed discourses. The repertoire played is not specific to the Regatta Lepa, and melodic bits and pieces you’re overhearing may belong to a specific, possibly holy place, thereby evoking the deity who owns the place in question. Certain rhythmic patterns may allude to a dance that carries a well-known narrative about the value of family. Such discursive dimensions add a gestalt to the emerging sense of belonging, to the sharing of a significant situation, and to an imagination of one’s own shared history.

Crucial to the emergence of a meaningful atmosphere, the encorporation occurring through sequences of alternating movements of expansion and relaxation must be a solidary one. In this way, musically suggested movements act on a gathering of individual felt bodies at the same time, starting the process in which many “I’s” become a “we,” i.e., a social entity. In other words, the coming about of a solitary felt body experientially creates shared situations and, thus, an experiential sense of community. The boundaries separating people from their environments, including the people within these environments, become pervious. The sensation of how one’s felt body merges with others in following sonically mediated suggestions of movement is precisely what lies behind the power of the Regatta Lepa. It’s how Sama Dilautness comes about musically here – as an atmosphere, forever transforming as it keeps moving through space. Like sea-nomads.

Conclusion: Mobile Practice, Musical Practice – Atmospheres in Double Motion

The workings of musical atmospheres are unpredictable to a significant extent. Similar musical suggestions of movement may yield disparate effects on the felt body. This is in part because musical atmospheres cannot sensibly be analyzed while isolated from the cultural, historical, so-
This, however, may be precisely the analytical concept’s forte, as the methodological implication of this is self-evident: It forces us to attend to the particular, rather than the abstract. “[B]oth the philosophy of music and musical aesthetics have faltered over this point” (Kramer 2016, 11), just as a great deal of mobilities theorizing has attempted to homogenize the contingent nature of social worlds of movement when attention to ethnographic details seems the only valid methodical choice to prevent us from missing the complexity of the phenomena under investigation (Vannini 2009, 8) and the nonfixity of boundaries (Braidotti 1994, 36). But “[t]here is no such thing as music. There is no phenomenon that corresponds to a single concept of music. Music is a prolific acoustic field of family resemblances. [… M]usic in the abstract can exemplify ideas, but not interrogate them” (Kramer 2016, 11). By contrast, bringing singular instances of music, such as the Regatta Lepa, into a conversation with concepts such as mobility and atmosphere does allow for a productive exploration of the particular interconnectedness of music, mobility, and atmosphere in this musical instance. I hope I have demonstrated that thinking mobility and atmosphere through music and music and atmosphere through mobility allow for a musical exploration of space that would not have been possible without the analytical affordances of atmosphere. Playing tagunggu’ during the Regatta Lepa is an atmospheric practice of the rendering of both space and Sama Dilaut spatiality that’s tangible through sound. Sound doesn’t necessarily “have” place; ever-moving, it instead pervades space, fertilizing the matrix that envelops which becomes meaningful in the process. It is not, therefore, the topology of sound that is of primary relevance when it comes to place-making. It is sound as movement. Hence, perhaps, the idiomatic expression “sounding out” a place.

Atmosphere is the missing link to understanding how place comes about: as a relationship within which a sensation of meaningfulness vis-à-vis the individual is becoming tangible as felt-bodily commotion, resonating with interpretive frames and cultural figurations, as I have shown above. In the case of the Regatta Lepa, the Sama Dilaut spatiality rendered tangible through tagunggu’ is experientially affirmative of the Sama Dilaut’s cultural framework, which, in turn, hinges on the idea of mobility. But if movement is the key factor here, then this does not mean that the findings of my analysis are only relevant for nomadic spatialities, even if they emerge particularly clearly in instances where music as movement finds repercussions in space as movement. In fact, one might even be tempted to argue with Isabel Stengers (1987) that mobility is one of the most “nomadic concepts” in postmodern epistemology, i.e. an epistemological position allowing for multiple interconnections and transmigrations of ideas (cf. Braidotti 1994, 23). Relating to space through music-making, music as a place-making practice is effective through the atmosphere that allows those partaking in the music to feel that place, both sensually and felt-bodily – whether their lifestyle is nomadic, sedentary, or something in-between. This means that Jensen’s suggestion that movement, as an analytical category, forces us to re-frame “subjectivity […] in such a manner that it avoids the sedentary pitfall of inward looking, and thus static notions of meaning and identity” (Jensen 2009, xviii) needs significant expansion. Thinking with both movement and particular instances of musical atmospheres,

10 See Abels forthcoming for a more in-depth discussion of the interconnectedness of atmosphere, affect, and cultural frames.
which too are movements, we need to re-focus on the procedural relationship between those who dwell and the places that come about as they dwell. Musical atmospheres as movement stir up a place. The experience of a musical atmosphere, therefore, is the experience of the becoming of a place-as-it-relates-to-you — for the atmosphere that enables you to relate to that place is in continuous motion with your felt body.

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