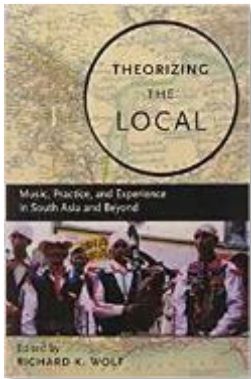


**[Review] *Theorizing the Local: Music, Practice, and Experience in South Asia and Beyond*, edited by Richard K. Wolf**

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On June 29, 1987, a group of record company executives met in a north London pub and came up with an idea to market some hitherto-uncategorized music. Before long, unsuspecting teenagers like myself were able to wander down the aisles of record stores to find a new section: *World Music*. Within this new category, I found LPs by Zakir

Hussain and Ravi Shankar in amongst The Chieftains and Nana Mouskouri, the Greek folk singer who was a household name in my corner of suburban Toronto. And as a representative of the entire continent of Africa, unsold copies of Paul Simon's *Graceland* eventually ended up in that bin, too. World Music in the late 1980s and 90s attracted a vast following in the West—including members of the diaspora and students eager to connect to a larger global community. It was accessible, and it was marketable.

In his introduction to *Theorizing the Local: Music, Practice, and Experience in South Asia and Beyond*, editor Richard K. Wolf describes a letter from a record company in 1994 rejecting his proposal to publish field recordings of folk music from south India—for the reason that they were only interested in music which “transcends context.” In other words, this particular record company, like many others in the 1990s, was positioning itself to be a global marketer of music—one that transcended specific places.

Generally eschewing the “big traditions” (with the exception of Karnatak violin, *varnams*, and Hindustani music) which he believes “marginalize and undermine the study of many traditions that do not circulate in the manner of many of today's commodities,” Wolf and his colleagues use long-term ethnographic studies to examine smaller, more localized traditions.



*Theorizing the Local* is divided into four sections. Part One, “Bodies and Instruments,” begins with Wolf’s own introduction to the collection of essays. Here, Wolf, like a professor leading an exchange trip, not only takes the student–reader through places where he has traveled, introducing them to local experts and colleagues along the way, but he also helps the student dig deeper into thematic patterns that emerge at various sites. He explains in the introduction how his colleagues may have defined what *local* and *theorizing* could be. He also connects ideas from different essays categorized under different sections but having common themes, such as gender, or how each colleague may have defined what *going beyond* could mean for their area of research. Susan A. Reed’s “Women and Kandyan Dance: Negotiating Gender and Tradition in Sri Lanka” describes changes to the Kandyan tradition. Amanda Weidman’s “Listening to the Violin in South Indian Classical Music” offers a new perspective on how the Karnatak violin came to be known as a South Indian classical instrument. Martin Clayton, in “Local Practice, Global Network: The Guitar in India as a Case Study,” studies guitarists from different genres and places throughout the country. Part Two, “Spaces and Itineraries,” begins with Gregory D. Booth’s description of the migratory histories of two brass bandmen, in “Constructing the Local: Migration and Cultural Geography in the Indian Brass Band Trade.” Shubha Chaudhuri’s “The Princess of the Musicians: Rani Bhatiyani and the Manganiars of Western Rajasthan,” describes the growth of the cult of a local deity. Gert-Matthias Wegner explains how time and space are understood by the participants, in “Music in Urban Space: Newar Buddhist Processional Music in the Kathmandu Valley.” Part Three, called “Learning and Transmission,” begins with Rolf Groesbeck’s “Disciple and Preceptor/Performer in Kerala,” in which he describes his personal learning experience in the tradition of *Kalamandalam*. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi’s “*Sina ba Sina* or ‘From Father to Son’: Writing the Culture of Discipleship” describes her discipleship experience in the Hindustani tradition within one family and clan. David Henderson’s description of body-learning, “Handmade in Nepal,” considers “the relevance of the local in the face of processes of globalization.” And lastly, Part Four, “Theorizing Social Action” begins with Stephen Blum’s “Modes of Theorizing in Iranian Khorasan” and his study of musical knowledge as demonstrated in performance. Sabir Badalkhan, in “*Zahirok*: The Musical Base of Baloch Minstrelsy,” describes the text, contexts, and performance. The collection ends with Wolf’s own “*Varnams* and Vocalizations: The Special Status of Some Musical Beginnings,” which also ties together some themes from the whole collection.

### Localizing, theorizing, and comparing

A prevalent theme throughout the volume is change, recognized especially by scholars who have conducted research over a long period of time or, in Wegner’s case, who live in their places of fieldwork. Interestingly, this collection doesn’t always attribute change to Western influence—there are many studies elsewhere that

take that perspective. Here, modernization comes from within and nearby. For instance, Reed's study on Kandyan dance looks at a brand of development or modernization in which Western influence is absent.

"Local" is defined by the scale, and by the concrete locale. In his study of drumming in Nepal, Henderson draws on Michael Herzfeld's experience of apprenticeship and theories about *localizing*. Herzfeld's description of local artisans and performers as those "who subsist on the margins, artisans who both knowingly and unwittingly instill in their apprentices a seemingly paradoxical combination of humble docility and fierce independence in the face of harsh reality" (199) could describe all the performers and participants who appear in this collection.

Although not entirely absent, more local voices and local theorizing could have added value to the collection. Clayton, in his study of Indian guitarists, does an admirable job of letting his informants—professional guitarists—do the talking and theorizing.

A less precise definition is attached to the idea of *theorizing*. In fact, Wolf himself shies away from specifically defining what *theory* is until the concluding essay, where he simply defers to the Oxford English Dictionary. Throughout the book, he lets individual scholars define what theory is: theory, then, "can be understood in more than one way: for some, all knowledge is acquired through some sort of theorizing; others restrict theorizing to self-conscious, verbal attempts at systematic explanation" (243). I would have thought that in qualitative research, theorizing—or the desire to formulate possibly overly-generalized hypotheses—could risk misleading student researchers to premature conjecture in other places. Wolf recognizes this in his introduction:

[E]thnomusicologists have been drawn with others into an array of discourses that pit the specificity of the local with the generality of the global, but many remain uncomfortable with the dichotomy. (8)

Closely related to theorizing is the use of comparative micro studies. Comparative musicology seems alive and well. Groesbeck, in his study of the *Kalamandalam*, hopes in his research to find patterns and analyze them, with the goal of comparing and contrasting them to other South Asian transmission methods.

The glossary in this collection is helpful, since phrases from 13 languages are scattered throughout the collection. Accompanying audio and video examples are available at [www.oup.com/us/theorizingthelocal](http://www.oup.com/us/theorizingthelocal). I recommend *Theorizing the Local* as a must-read for students of South Asian music; and the introduction to the collection is important for ethnomusicology students with any regional focus.

## Postscript

Much has happened since 1987, the inception of marketing the World Music category—and since 1994, the date of Wolf’s rejection letter from the record company. I believe there is a market for field recordings of folk music from India, but perhaps not in the way that Wolf originally envisioned. Here are two personal anecdotes:

In the small town in northern India where I’ve lived for about 14 years, there is a teenage girl from a tribal background. Her father originally spoke one tribal language, her mother spoke another. They can speak a third language, Sadri, to each other. At home, the family speaks mostly in Hindi; but because the kids have attended an English school, my young friend can function professionally in English as well. Needless to say, her academic and career prospects are favorable. More interesting to me, however, is how comfortable she is with her various layers of identity—tribal, national, and global—and how she celebrates all of who she is. Equally versed in Bollywood and current English-language pop tunes, she is also able to appreciate songs and dances from her ancestral village. According to her mother, the girls still participate in the local Sadri performance when they visit relatives every year. Also in my community are two brothers who daily fill my online newsfeed with heavy metal memes that border on the fanatic. One brother tells me that he currently plays in several bands: a tribute band that plays old Bollywood tunes, a gospel band, and, of course, a heavy metal band. Once, when he heard that I was interested in hearing rural songs, he told me that his mother tongue was Sadri and he burned me a compilation DVD of Sadri tunes and dances that he loved. For these young people in my community, identity is a multilayer of at least three languages in the various domains and relationships of their lives. They don’t hide the fact that they come from a tribal language group. Hindi, or “Hinglish,” is their heart language, but they also have the competency to navigate in English.

Two anecdotal examples do not make a complete theory, but allow me to indulge in a little conjecture and hypothesizing. Perhaps these stories confirm the fluid nature of identity that other researchers are describing in the 21st century (Friedman 2005; Banerjee 1998; Stokes 1997). For those of us who work where community development and the arts intersect, what are some implications for how we approach those we work with? What does it mean to be a member of a specific locale, or of a minority language group in present-day India? My local friends’ lives are rich because of all these layers of identity. Like my own teenage self, they too have had the stirrings to reach out to, and participate in, a larger, global community.

## References

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