Review

Flagg Miller, *The Audacious Ascetic: What the Bin Laden Tapes Reveal About al-Qaʿida* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), ISBN: 978-0-19-026436-9 (hb).

In early 2002, an Afghan stringer working for CNN came across a collection of audiocassettes taken from Osama bin Laden's residential compound, where the tapes had served as a lending library for the 'Arab-Afghans' in Kandahar between 1997 and 2001, the height of al-Qaʿida's international operations under bin Laden.[1] CNN purchased the tapes, which were initially transferred to the CIA, then to the Afghan Media Project at Williams College and finally to the Yale library. Flagg Miller, linguistic anthropologist and scholar of Arab media and religion, began listening to the tapes in 2003, and supplemented his impressive analysis over the following decade with interviews and audition sessions with dozens of native Arabic speakers, including 'ex-fighters . . . who had known bin Laden intimately', and bin Laden's son ʿUmar (7).

Miller's primary endeavour in *The Audacious Ascetic* is to trace an intellectual history of the concept of *al-qaʿida* (which he translates as 'base', 'rule', or 'precept') as it was employed in bin Laden's camps, through an examination of the lectures, sermons, speeches, conversations, and anthems in the approximately 1,500 tapes in this collection. Careful to avoid taking the collection, or any single tape from it, as a 'window into [bin Laden's] mind or the attitudes of those who listened to the recordings', Miller considers the archive as a historical record of a social network in which Arab-Afghans in Kandahar between 1997 and 2000 'tried to make sense of bin Laden's aims and credibility as a leader', and 'sought to process bin Laden's point of view and its implications for their own lives' (111, 114).

Music scholars who have little need for an extended exploration of jihadi ideology will nevertheless find much to admire in the interdisciplinary perspectives that Miller brings to the cassette archive. These range from biographical history to poetic exegesis, from painstaking archival work to that most fundamental of ethnomusicological methods: listening to a tape with an interlocutor, asking questions, and attempting to gain insight into how they hear and experience the sound. Given the current scholarly interest in the ethnography of the archive, Miller's book presents us with a fascinating and significant case study.[2]

1 'Arab-Afghan' is the term for the Arab volunteer fighters who initially travelled to Afghanistan to fight against the USSR in the 1980s.

2 See David Zeitlyn, 'Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41/1 (2012), 461–80.

The first three chapters deal with Osama bin Laden's biography, detailing his family history, upbringing in Saudi Arabia, and move towards religious fundamentalism and political involvement. Miller adds to this fairly well-documented biography a thorough understanding of the religious discourse from which bin Laden and other Saudi jihadis drew in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Much of this discourse circulated in cassette form and is preserved in the archive, allowing scholars to flesh out bin Laden's ideological development from Saudi student, to aspiring (if under-credentialed and controversial) figure in the Saudi Awakening movement, to Arab-Afghan fighter, to stateless exile, to leader of an international, anti-Western terrorist organization.[3] Miller emphasizes here the concept of *zuhd*, an asceticism of 'pious renunciation' (31), a tenet which bin Laden employed early in his career in Saudi Arabia as a means of gaining religious and social authority without the credentials of a legal scholar. The concept also underpinned his self-depiction as a rugged Arab-Afghan freedom fighter in Afghanistan, and his later campaigns as a global media figure.

The writings of some of the Islamist thinkers cited here (Muhammed 'Abd al-Wahhab, Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya, Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb) will be well-known to readers familiar with twentieth-century Islamist movements. More significant than these written sources are the speeches and sermons disseminated in cassette form from the 1960s onward, by such figures as Saudi Awakening leaders Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali, and Muhammed Qutb (brother of Sayyid), who moved to Saudi Arabia following his imprisonment in Egypt and described an ascetic opposition to global capitalism inflected by anti-Semitic conspiracy theorizing. Miller's profound knowledge of these discourses allows him to place each recording into a hypertextual *isnad* (chain of attribution) of poetic quotations, *hadith* (accounts from the life of the prophet and his companions), political disputes, and allusions to other recordings.

Miller strives to contextualize the contents of the cassette archive within the religious and political discourse of Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as to detail bin Laden's complicated and shifting relationship with the Saudi state and the 'Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries'.[4] Given the relative paucity of anthropological literature on modern Saudi Arabia, Miller's attention to the internal politics of Saudi religious discourse is itself a welcome contribution. Stating that al-Qaʿida is 'less a non-state entity, as it is so frequently depicted in counter-terrorist discourses, than it is a relation to state power' (371), he warns against analysis that neglects connections to the nations housing bin Laden's physical bases, and to the state-sanctioned and -facilitated religious discourses that constitute so much of the cassette archive.

The final three chapters of the book explore several ways the word 'al-qaʿida' was employed within Arab-Afghan discourse: first, as a term for a military base, focusing on a tape by Mustafa

---

3 See, for example: Steve Coll, *The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008); Michael Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al-Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Najwa Bin Laden, *Growing up Bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take Us inside Their Secret World* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2009); and Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

4 While both of these terms refer to the same geographic area, the latter is the preferred language employed when invoking Saudi Arabia as a symbol of Muslim patrimony. In bin Laden's usage it is also a symbol redolent of specifically Arab historical pride, potentially sidestepping associations with the state.

Hamid, aka Abu al-Walid al-Masri (Chapter 12). Miller then examines it as a theological concept defining the precepts central to Islamic creed and practice, using tapes by Syrian jurist ʿAbd al-Rahim al-Tahhan, the most represented speaker in the cassette collection (Chapter 13). Finally, in Chapter 14, we hear 'al-qaʿida' used to describe a hierarchical organization with local and global military ambitions, led by Osama bin Laden, through an analysis of an audiocassette recording of a wedding celebration, produced by 'al-Qaʿida's Publicity Committee' in early 2001.

Throughout his history of bin Laden's philosophical milieu, Miller threads a historiographic account of the idea of al-Qaʿida as it appeared in the Western press. In one of the book's recurring arguments, Miller maintains that the various conceptions of al-Qaʿida as either a 'single, unified, hierarchically organized . . . global terrorist network', as a 'network of networks' or as an 'ideological framework or source of inspiration [for Islamist militants]', each fall short of accurately capturing how bin Laden and his associates employed the concept, especially though the mid-1990s (4). Moreover, Miller argues that translations of Arabic documents and speeches by Western journalists and analysts have tended to backdate the 'hierarchical organization' conception of al-Qaʿida, and the centrality of bin Laden.[5] Although he does not dwell on this point, Miller suggests that misinterpretations of quotidian uses of *al-qaʿida* ('base' or 'precept') as referring to al-Qaʿida (the organization) contributed to the United States' justification of the 2003 invasion of Iraq (295).

Miller devotes special attention to one of bin Laden's own speeches in the collection: the 1996 'Declaration of War against the American Occupiers of the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries'. In his reading, he deploys the expertise displayed in his previous book *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media*, on the aesthetics and politics of cassette poetry in Yemen, arguing that translations of the speech as it initially appeared in the Western press erred both in over-interpreting the word *al-qaʿida*, and in the complete omission of the fifteen poems that comprise the last third of bin Laden's speech as it was distributed on cassette.[6] Miller's analysis of these poems, focusing particularly on their use of historical symbols of 'militant asceticism', reveals a concern for the near enemy of Arab hypocrite regimes, rather than solely the ('Crusader-Jewish') far enemy of America, Israel, and the West writ large.

Miller makes the case that although the notion of al-Qaʿida popularized in the West was incommensurate with the way the term was employed by bin Laden and his associates throughout much of the 1990s, their own rhetoric and conception shifted in the late 1990s to more closely reflect the Western view. This shift worked both to exploit the possibilities of Western media attention and to sidestep internal battles over ideology and regional politics that had previously made bin Laden a divisive figure within Saudi Arabia's internal Islamist discourse (leading, for example, to his exile from the country in 1994). For Miller, '*al-Qaʿida* is less a single organization, network, or set of affiliates united by a common ideology than it is

---

5 The first unambiguous use of the word as a name for bin Laden's group that Miller identifies in the audio archive is from October 2000. He translates previous uses of the word in organizational documents such as the 1988 'Al-Qaʿida Charter' as referring to specific bases such as the al-Faruq camp in Afghanistan, or to more abstract rules or precepts.

6 Flagg Miller, *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media: Audiocassette Poetry and Culture in Yemen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

a tactic for winning battles within Muslim-majority societies' (376). His recontextualization of the history of the term within Saudi and regional Islamist audiocassette discourses thus provides a fresh understanding of the multiple battles, near and far, that shaped the years leading up to September 11, 2001.

Of special interest to Arabists and scholars of sound will be the website that accompanies *The Audacious Ascetic*, where the cassette recordings translated and analysed in each chapter are available digitally. These recordings provide invaluable sonic context, conveying emotional affect and inflection that Miller attempts to describe even while acknowledging the incommensurability of reading with the experience afforded through the material cassette.

For listeners with Arabic, the website also proves a useful reference for questions about Miller's approach to translation. For example: Miller translates the word *jihād* as 'struggle', a choice which has the dual benefit of indicating the term's multiplicity of usages and bypassing the baggage many English readers associate with it. However, both 'struggle'/'strugglers' and 'jihad'/'jihadi' make appearances in the translations, sometimes in the same passage, such as in the transcription of a lecture by Mustafa Hamid that begins Chapter 12. A close listening to the recording reveals that Miller differentiates between the near-synonyms *mujāhid* and *jihādī* (both derived from *jihād*), translating the former as 'struggler' while leaving the latter untranslated, presumably as a means of implying the increased focus on global militarism present in the original audio when *jihādī* is employed. While these types of questions are specialized, given the book's focus on the specifics of language, many readers will find listening to these recordings necessary to fully evaluate Miller's arguments.

Standard references to anthropological and social theory are almost conspicuously absent from *The Audacious Ascetic*, which is perhaps aimed at a wider readership than Miller's other work. The theorists who populate the 'works cited' list in Miller's *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media* (Barthes, Bhabha, Bourdieu, et al.) are nowhere to be found, and Miller largely confines his theorization of the cassette tape as a medium, and of the cassette archive as a social and historical object, to a single chapter. While this is undoubtedly a considered choice, as evidenced by Miller's obvious erudition and thoroughness in his approach to the Arabic sources, a reader looking for a lengthy meditation on the cassette medium, or a review of the literature on media and social movements in the context of the bin Laden archive, will be disappointed.

In Chapter 4, Miller discusses the 'Islamic Cassette' as a medium for education and proselytization, and attempts to summarize the 'social dimensions' of the audiocassette in six points (115). Some of these points have to do with the ease of recording, duplication, and playback, which have been significant attributes of the technology across a variety of global settings. Others, such as the audiocassette's ability to rally a specific community through linguistic specificity and opacity, and to circulate under the radar of the state, are of particular relevance to the Saudi and Arab-Afghan contexts. Miller's theorization of the cassette as a social artefact, while briefer than some scholars might prefer, rests on the specifics of the social world surrounding the archive in Kandahar. Readers interested in the cassette as a material mode of circulation would most profitably read *The Audacious Ascetic* alongside passages such as the following from *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media*:

> Through imaginatively reworking commonsense discourse, [poetic] tropes turn the cassette and its ordering norms into a medium of inscription that defers to accumulated forms of knowledge and power, even as it questions the justice of their inflexible perpetuation. While circulating as a graphic mark, the cassette also projects the strange vision of a circulating sound, inciting new conditions of knowledge, action, and voice.[7]

The connections between the circulation of aural and graphic signs, explored in *Moral Resonance*, are further examined in *The Audacious Aesthetic* through Miller's discussions of the visual coordinates that map out routes of cassette circulation: 'cartridges smooth over many years of use, labels ripped off and new ones attached, coils of ribbon spilling out of their shells, spools stripped bare, tapes still glossy from the factory and others smudged with food stains, paint, and dust' (106).

One noticeable absence that may surprise some readers is any reference to the work of Charles Hirschkind, whose *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Counterpublics* has solidly entered the sound studies canon in the decade since its publication.[8] This absence becomes less surprising, however, when read against Miller's previous work and particularly his interest in connecting, rather than separating, the graphical and the aural. Miller avoids any discussion of Hirschkind's work in *Moral Resonance* apart from a brief footnote referencing Egypt's Islamic Revival, and his 2009 review of *The Ethical Soundscape*, though largely positive, critiques those aspects of Hirschkind's work that have been most readily adopted within sound studies, taking issue with Hirschkind's identification of 'ocular-centric epistemology' as a Western mode of knowledge in contrast with Islam, and with the centrality of listening (above reading or speaking) for modern Muslim publics.[9]

It would be unfair and unnecessary to pit Miller and Hirschkind in opposition to one another in theorizing the Islamic cassette, not least because Miller has cited Hirschkind very positively elsewhere.[10] However, without questioning the value of Hirschkind's work in any way, it is worth considering the danger that the most 'sound-studies friendly' analysis too quickly becomes the default analysis of a given mediated social practice, for those of us engaged with the field. At the very least, the divergences between these two excellent scholars operating in closely related areas might caution us against the tendency to construct a singular canon as sound studies continues to grow.

BEAU BOTHWELL
beau.bothwell@kzoo.edu

---

7   Miller, *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media,* 35.

8   Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

9   Flagg Miller, review of *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (2006) by Charles Hirschkind, *Contemporary Islam* 3/3 (2009), 295.

10 Flagg Miller, 'Of Songs and Signs: Audiocassette Poetry, Moral Character, and the Culture of Circulation in Yemen', *American Ethnologist* 32/1 (2005), 82–99.