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Kirtan: Music, Emotion, and Belonging in Finnish Holistic Spirituality

Tero Heinonen

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the practice of *Kirtan* in Finnish contemporary spirituality. *Kirtan* is the Hindu devotional practice that consists of the accompanied congregational singing of *mantras* in praise of God or *guru*. In the past two decades, it has changed in Finland from a collective Eastern religious practice with soteriological ends into a holistic spiritual technique oriented on the well-being goals of its individual practitioners. Kirtan has acquired in Finland a therapeutic ethos and is perceived as pathway to spiritual meaning and individual every-day and transcendent objectives. The core element of *Kirtan* is the singing of *mantras*, *Hindu* sacred syllables in Sanskrit associated with the *Bhakti* and the *Tantric* traditions of India. Its Finnish practitioners have experimented with replacing *Kirtan*'s Hindu elements with those of other cultures and have come up with new forms and symbols according to their needs.

The chapter is based on my fieldwork in Finland for a doctoral thesis in the Study of Religions. The fieldwork consisted of participant observation and 100 interviews of Finnish *Kirtan* practitioners. More than half of my research participants reported not being affiliated with religious or spiritual institutions. This chapter is based on the interviews of the "spiritual but not religious" participants and their practice of *Kirtan.* In these interviews, *Kirtan*, instead of being aimed at praising and pleasing God, *guru*, or other devotees, acquired the purpose of achieving individual spiritual and well-being objectives.

There were practitioners with different goals and levels of commitment to *Kirtan*. *Kirtan* in holistic spirituality does not have a canonical scripture for its practitioners to learn and internalize. This chapter aims to discuss why *Kirtan*, as a collective musical practice, maintains a persistent role in Finland's contemporary spirituality, which tends to underscore the individual and diminish the doctrinal aspects. Secondly, emotions play a crucial role in *Kirtan* practitioners' approach to spirituality and in shaping its "therapeutic" results. How does *Kirtan* inform the construction of meaning in holistic spirituality? My informants reported that *Kirtan* has positively contributed to their psychological well-being. In what manner is the "therapeutic" ethos realized in *Kirtan*? First, I

will explore *Kirtan* as a phenomenon in holistic spirituality, followed by a discussion of experiences of the participants. My approach to theory in this chapter is social-constructivist and based on perceiving *Kirtans* as *interaction rituals* as defined by Randall Collins (2004).

Background

A growth in alternative spirituality in the Nordic countries since the 1970s has emphasized alternative practices that borrow from a variety of cultural sources and have remained popular until the present. Simultaneous trends of diversification, individualization, blending of cultural ideas and detraditionalization are taking place in the Nordic countries (Furseth et al. 2017). At the same time, the number of people without religious affiliation has been growing in Finland (Nynäs et al. 2015). Eastern practices have undergone a cultural and market-oriented process of "healthification," represented by the "fuzzy" distinction between religion and contemporary spirituality (Borup 2017).

Spirituality can be defined as the identification, maintenance, and articulation of the sacred in terms of objects, feelings of devotion, persons, or concepts that are discoverable within and transcend the self (Hill et al. 2000). Spirituality develops across the lifespan and helps the individual to discover or create new value so that secular ends, such as the search for personal meaning described in terms of emotions, beliefs, and behavior, become invested with sacred status (Pargament and Park 1997). Religion and spirituality inform meaning-making by permitting the use of symbolism to explain existential concerns and develop a coherent vision of sacred reality. They provide a sense of purpose and can be of help in coping with life's difficulties (Kashdan and Nezlek 2012; Pargament and Park 1997).

Spirituality, associated with subjective experience and inner discourse and understood in contrast to formal institutional religion, has emerged as a hybrid discourse constructed from alternative and popular sources (Pargament and Park 1997; Sutcliffe 2003). Large-scale social currents of eclecticism, post-institutionalism, and globalization have contributed to this change. They have led to "post-institutional" forms of religion and spirituality by reducing connections to traditional ways of believing and belonging. These forms are associated with individual cumulative searches for meaning, composite religious identities, doctrinal reduction, self-help, and emotions emphasized over rational thought (Hervieu-Léger 2006; Turner 2012). Emotions and feelings of interconnectedness are expressed in social contexts and characterized by participation to privatized and personalized expressions, including music, dance, and meditation (Zinnbauer et al. 1999).

Holistic spirituality underscores individualism and a relationship with the divine conceived as the inner self (Knibbe 2012; Sutcliffe 2003). It advocates therapeutic procedures premised on the conviction that personal emotions are authoritative as an inner guide (Riis and Woodhead 2010). It constructs visions of sacred reality through individual practices (Aune 2020) and new rituals, in which symbols and practices from different cultural traditions are borrowed and combined to reflect individual life-situations and problems (Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Magliocco 2014). What is deemed trustworthy is sought inside the individual, with the body understood as the path to authenticity and well-being.

The practices associated with holistic spirituality often take shape in small groups that strive towards empowerment and authentic self-expression (Sointu and Woodhead 2008, 265-267).

Kirtan as religious music is a practice of the *Bhakti* traditions of India. In *Bhakti*, emotion, embodiment, and experience of the sensible presence of the divine during prayer and praise are focused on an intimate loving relationship with a theistically understood God in a spiritual fellowship with other devotees (Burchett 2019; Heiler 1932; Holdrege 2015; Weber 1958). *Kirtan* has, together with other practices, contributed to sustaining and transmitting the faith and the sacred symbols of *Bhakti* traditions from generation to generation (Heinonen 2015; Riis and Woodhead 2010). Modern forms of *Kirtan*, developed from Hindu *Nām-Kīrtan*, call-and-response praise with *mantras* enabling individuals without education in classical Indian music to experience musical elation, include a popular style employing New Age, African, Latin American, and other features, and is currently being promoted by American and European singers in the West (Beck 2012).

In the *Ṛg-Veda*, mantras were believed to be invested with the living presence of the gods and goddesses and at times directly identified with them (Holdrege 2015). The ritual forms, institutions, and cosmological conceptions of *Tantra*, another ancient Indian tradition, were key elements in the social and political structures of early medieval India and persisted in *Bhakti* religions (Burchett 2019, 41). In *Tantric* thought, *mantras* were "the sonic form of deities," conceptualized as "powerful forms of divinity embodied in speech, whose use can produce both soteriological and this-worldly or other-worldly supernatural goals" (Goodall and Isaacson 2016, 4). The *mantra* is the deity, believed to be at once conscious, ritualistic, and meditative (Alper 1989). Sacred sound is conceived as feminine power in all major divisions of Hinduism where *Kirtan* is rooted (Beck 1993). These cosmological assumptions remain part of Hindu *Kirtan*.

Kirtan first came to Finland in the 1970s with the arrival of new religious movements and returning yoga teachers who proliferated Hindu *Bhakti* devotionalism in America and Europe (Beck 2012; Broo et al. 2015; Singleton and Goldberg 2013). Today, *Kirtan* is a small but lively form of alternative spirituality in Finland, with the number of practitioners ranging from several hundred to a few thousand individuals annually. It has been practiced for decades in *Bhakti* movements in Finland, including *Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇava* groups and small religious groups formed by Hindu immigrants. Although many of my informants belonged to a *guru*-movement, an equal number of them renounced the *guru* institution and membership in religious or spiritual movements altogether.

Kirtan that is not associated with institutions fits the definition of holistic spirituality given by Paul Heelas (2008). *Kirtan* in holistic spirituality is *experiential* in that experience is believed to transform the quality of one's subjective life. It is *expressive*, enhancing the quality of personal relationships through creativity in the company of others. It is *egalitarian* in that practitioners express shared concern for well-being, recognize each person as their own spiritual authority, value emotions, and assert independence from religious doctrine. It is *self-spiritual* in sustaining and connecting with an "authentic" inner self. It is *eclectic*, selectively including fragments of cultures into producing new holistic forms. *Kirtan* in holistic spirituality is not concerned with soteriological ends but is *this-worldly*, a "spirituality of life" (Heelas 2008, 174). Its

practitioners, including the overwhelming majority of my informants, tend to be *tolerant*, often stating that "all religions are equally true" (Frisk and Nynäs 2012, 52).

From my interview data emerges a description of local Finnish developments of *Kirtan* in holistic spirituality starting in the early 2000s, when *Kirtan* as the singing of Sanskrit *mantras* was practiced in yoga movements, eco-spiritual communes, and neo-shamanic circles. It was also influenced by the cultural appropriation of Indian, "New Age," and American indigenous cultures through "mystical tourism" practiced by Finnish "spiritual travellers" (Hill 2008; Rogers 2006; Tøllefsen 2021).

After the year 2010, *Kirtan*'s popularity began to grow, with recording bands of professional domestic and visiting foreign musicians touring in Finland. Since the year 2013, *Kirtan* has appeared in ceremonial contexts, where musical experience and expression are associated with themes of well-being and spirituality. Another recent trend is the appearance of gendered, mostly female-only *Kirtans*, after an increasing number of Finnish women have found alternatives to traditional Lutheranism from spirituality of Indian origin (Ahonen 2014). During the global pandemic, the practice of *Kirtan* diminished temporarily due to COVID-19 related restrictions imposed on all kinds of gatherings. Some of my informants began organizing online *Kirtans*, but these reportedly never reached the popularity of face-to-face events.

My fieldwork consisted of interviews and participant observation. One hundred practitioners of *Kirtan* were interviewed in Finland. The data was obtained from fifty "spiritual but not religious" research participants, who reported being unaffiliated with institutions. The interview questions were open ended, semi-structured, and descriptive, with interviews lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. The material was analysed following James Spradley's *Developmental Research Sequence*, which consisted of informant sampling, interviewing, transcribing, coding, and analysis (Spradley 1979).

The transcribed interview material was coded and analysed with the aid of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, with an inductive and iterative approach to methodology. The data is archived at the Cultural Sciences Archive *Cultura* at Åbo Akademi University. Each participant in the total sample had participated in *Kirtan* as call-and-response singing of *mantras* accompanied by musical instruments. The informants were committed to the practice and were often involved in organizing and leading *Kirtan*. The participants were contacted and informed after random and chain-referral sampling, both online and offline, with permissions obtained in face-to-face situations and via e-mail. Most interviews were conducted online or as telephone interviews because of the strict limitations placed on fieldwork after the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Kirtan in Holistic Spirituality

People typically came to *Kirtan* from teaching yoga; traveling in South and Southeast Asia; visiting one of Finland's spiritual summer fairs; or wanting to learn a new instrument. The instruments used in *Kirtan* varied but typically included the acoustic guitar, harmonium, tabla, *tanpura*, and cymbals (or *karatals*). Occasionally, base, flutes, *djembe*, *cajon, shruti* box, rainsticks, shakers, monochord, *khol* (or *mridanga*), piano, *sitar*, or violin were employed.

More exotic instruments could sometimes be heard, such as the *didgeridoo*. Locations included yoga studios, domestic and other indoor locations, and the park, city streets, forests, and other outside locations in the summertime.

People preferred being seated in closed circles together with the leader and musicians. The circle was considered the optimal seating arrangement due to its "clear visibility of everyone in close proximity." Leaders often prepared an altar with crystals, candles, flowers, fruits, and incense. Even a simple and improvised altar was believed to bring about harmonizing and focusing effects. Some organizers installed flower mandalas for an aesthetic effect and to help focus the mind.

A good *Kirtan* leader was described as trustworthy, not "in service of their own ego" but in the service of the practice and other practitioners. Good leaders were expected to have a clear understanding of collective practice, and were able to create a safe space for everyone to express their "individual voice." The ideal leader respected different traditions and were capable of engaging people into singing together. Only a few rules were to be followed and these concerned breaking the boundaries of a safe space. Organizers had noticed that many *Kirtan*-goers were struggling with psychological issues and hoped that people would consider their mental health prior to participating. Contemporary culture was perceived as "overly performance-oriented." *Kirtan* was believed to bring about a sense of acceptance and allow one to express oneself without the stress of having to perform. *Kirtan* was as an inclusive practice for everyone, regardless of age, gender identity, or ethnic background. It was a way to relax and meditate, and to have a break from everyday life. The participants sought an opportunity to express themselves in safe space created with music.

Nearly half of my informants were convinced that Finnish words and verses from the national epic *Kalevala* had a special "compatibility" for Finns because the words were believed to possess particular utility and functionality similar to Sanskrit *mantras*. The need for singing *mantras* in one's native tongue was a fairly recent trend. Other changes included the increasingly popular ceremonial therapies and the growth in the number and size of holistic spiritual summer fairs.

What Jonathan Turner calls primary emotions (happiness, anger, fear, and sadness), along with their combinations (e.g., blissfulness, excitement, anxiety) (Turner 2007, 3), were common in *Kirtans*. Informants reported emotions that were experienced as positive, such as joy, grief, passion, devotion, or gratitude; and emotions perceived as negative, such as boredom, anxiety, anger, pain, aggression, frustration, panic, even vengefulness. Negative emotions were interpreted as "unfinished emotional processes" that should be "consciously or intuitively processed" during *Kirtans*. The feeling of safety from "outsiders" was crucial in working with difficult emotions that were believed to have become "stuck in one's body". *Kirtan* organizers had integrated emotion sharing circles into their *Kirtans*. These were controlled situations, where everyone was given a designated time to talk about their thoughts and feelings.

Since 2013, Kirtan has been incorporated into cacao ceremonies, a therapeutic practice rooted in holistic spirituality. Participants gather in a circle to enjoy ritually prepared organic cacao imported from Guatemala, Peru, or Ecuador. Ceremonial cacao was believed to have been collected in connection with the plant spirit of cacao, which was believed to answer prayers and chants. Its harvesting, accompanied by the singing of sacred chants, was intended to guarantee that the spirit would stay in the cacao mass during its journey to Europe

and remain "willing" to aid people in the Nordic countries in facilitating their spiritual ceremonies. Cacao ceremonies were organized around themes (e.g., "healing of the inner child") or associated with one's gender identity. In addition to *Kirtan,* techniques practiced included silent meditation, vocal exercises, poetry writing, relaxation, and breathing exercises. Expressive art in the form of dancing and painting was associated with holistic themes. *Kirtan* was an important element in many ceremonies and was considered useful as a technique for managing one's emotions. Emotions were not to be held back but felt "through the *mantra*s," which were understood to act as "purifiers of the emotional level".

Kirtan informs spiritual meanings by providing practitioners with conceptual elements associated with *Tantric* Hinduism. In terms of structure, a world-view emerges, where the "divine" in one's "inner self" and in the Universe is transcendent to consciousness. Sound is believed to be one of the levels on which the Universe operates, and in which *mantras* are part of "the natural order." In terms of function, when uttered in a certain sequence, the syllables are believed to act as "energy keys" providing access to the mantra's deity. *Intent* emerged as a core concept in achieving *Kirtan*'s therapeutic goals. Intent did not have to be vocalized and could be related to everyday affairs. It was compared to "placing an order." This could mean recognizing opportunities to meditate, investigating layers of the inner self with song, or praying for healing. It could be directed at assisting a friend or family member or seeking help with one's spiritual life.

Mantras were understood in terms of a *Tantric*-influenced belief system. They were said to have become "repositories of energy" through centuries of singing and recital. *Mantras* were often described in modern Western technical terms as "fields" with a "frequency." It was believed to be possible to connect with them because so much "energy" had been "charged" into the *mantras* that they possessed "a consciousness." By connecting with the "energy" presumably provided by collective singing and one's intent, the individual was believed to be able to call different qualities represented by the *mantra*'s deity into his or her personality. The gods and goddesses associated with *mantra*s were believed by many of my informants to be aspects of their inner selves. They were accepting and taking roles that were emotionally analogous with their own needs. These roles were often appropriated from different religions but described in impersonal terms as archetypes or symbols representing aspects of their inner self.

Kirtan was thought to create a "flow of energy" passing through participants, who "attuned" to it and received qualities associated with the *mantra*'s deity. One can say that the deity was, in emotional terms, analogous to the practitioner's goals. For instance, women in need of help getting out of a "toxic relationship" would pray for help by singing the mantras of the goddess *Kali*. The "flow of energy" was thought to become "better" toward the end of the *Kirtan*, especially in the company of particularly expressive and committed participants, whose presence was believed to "elevate the energies" of *Kirtans*.

Kirtan's Enduring Appeal

Kirtan played a significant role in the lives of my research participants, who almost always associated *Kirtan* with their psychological well-being. The social dimension of *Kirtan* was associated with having a good time together and meeting friends while sharing a spiritually significant activity. *Kirtans* were believed to

alleviate the impact of urban isolation, a pressing issue in the Finnish society. The lives of those identifying as "spiritual but not religious" were perceived to lack social connection and a sense of community, an issue that *Kirtan* was believed to address.

Individuals had different expectations: some simply wished to be able to relax and find relief from stress; others wanted to experience and express positive emotions; many were striving for tranquillity and meditative states; some for discovering new connections and relationships. A few mentioned "completing the intuitive processing" of problematic emotions. Some participants expected quite specific positive emotions associated with their goals and expectations. *Kirtan* was believed to provide individual rewards, such as increased focus, elevated mood, the ability to share one's feelings, a sense of community belonging, inner peace, balance in one's everyday affairs, finding one's own voice, becoming sensitive to the needs of others, getting in touch with "one's own truth", discovering a relationship with *mantras* and deities, obtaining new musical skills, and finding spiritual guidance. These were also reported as the primary reasons for taking to organizing *Kirtans*.

Kirtans often had either a peaceful and meditative or ecstatic and jubilant atmosphere, both of which were described as elevating the overall mood in the group. As emotions emerged, people would cry or get excited, stand up, dance, and move about. *Kirtan* provided an opportunity to express both positive and negative emotions with one's body. It was also thought to be helpful by keeping one's thoughts from wandering, which often disturbed silent meditation.

Kirtan provided an area that was reserved for self-help that took the form of emotional regulation. It was about the creation of a safe space in which practitioners would reportedly have an opportunity to get in touch with themselves and others, listen to their body, become aware of their spiritual growth, and make spirituality part of everyday life. "Safe spaces" were safe because they were separated from disturbances and from those who did not participate in the activity. *Kirtans* were deemed successful when there was a positive mood, concentration on the "united voice" of participants, peacefulness, and the engagement of everyone in making music together. It was reported that in every *Kirtan*, the "accumulated energy of all the previous *Kirtans*" was "re-activated." People were encouraged but not pressed into proximity with each other. The majority of my informants reported that they experienced "energy" to increase with tempo, proportionate in intensity to the number of people present and "in sync" with each other.

The informants reported feeling "collective expansion of awareness" shared among participants "when everyone was in synchrony at the same time," and "oceanic feelings of deep motherly love" prevailed. Time and place were forgotten. There was a lack of interest for any sort of "performing". As authenticity is a core value of holistic spirituality, the sound of *mantras* was believed to emerge from "a genuine source within oneself." Ecstasy was referred to as "a state of natural high," filled with positive emotion, memorable but difficult to put into words. Ecstatic experiences were to some degree expected, but searching for peak experiences was perceived as entertainment that could motivate beginners but could easily develop into addiction. A special kind of ecstasy called *loving-energy* was understood to be at once personal and shared. Experienced as the "opening of hearts," *Kirtan* brings forth emotions of joy, harmony, and unity as everyone engages in singing together with a sense of loving

awareness. This collective experience leaves participants with "good feelings of loving and of being loved".

With themes associated with womanhood, gendered *Kirtans* were reported to be intimate and oriented on artistic expression. Their structure was ceremonial, which made them longer than typical *Kirtans* and supported their therapeutic goals. Their purpose was reportedly to discover and examine together "the ways of experiencing womanhood." The organizers combined *Kirtan* with a gendered approach consisting of meditation, drinking cacao, painting, writing, dancing, and other body-oriented practices, as well as sharing emotions in sharing circles. While statements of non-cisgender acceptance were prevalent, a question that remained unanswered was whether transgender individuals should take part in women-only events. Some felt that, for instance, a body perceived as male by other participants excluded transgender individuals from shared examination of womanhood.

Discussion

Collective emotion has been defined as "synchronous convergence in affective responding across individuals towards a specific event or object" (Von Scheve and Ismer 2013, 406). Shared cognitive appraisal structures, group-specific norms and practices, and the social sharing of emotions contribute to the emergence of collective emotion among individuals, requiring emotional contagion between individuals (Hatfield et al. 1993), groups, and collectives (Von Scheve and Ismer 2013).

Randall Collins (2004) has provided the ingredients to what Émile Durkheim called *collective effervescence* (Durkheim 1915): shared emotional experiences, mutual focus of attention on a joint activity, barriers to outsiders, bodily co-presence, and rhythmic entrainment. These are the ritual ingredients in Collins' *mutual-focus /emotional-entrainment* model of *interaction ritual chains* (Collins 2004). This theory focuses on interactions on the face-to-face level and implies the effects of emotional energy from earlier participation in interaction rituals.

What my informants called experiences of unity and happiness, "an opening of hearts," and a flow of *loving-energy*, are likely an experience of what Collins and Durkheim call collective effervescence. Collective effervescence is defined by Collins as "the rhythmic entrainment of participants into a mood that feels stronger than any of them individually, and carries them along as if under a force from outside" (Collins 2014, 299). The experience is often described in terms of "being energized" or "spirit-filled" and has four outcomes: social solidarity, sacred objects becoming symbols of social relationships, change in the individual level of emotional energy, and shared standards of morality (Collins 2004, 2014; Draper 2019; Durkheim 1915).

The majority of informants reported that the core activity of "a successful *Kirtan* experience" was "being intensively engaged in *Kirtan* together." The mutual attention to a joint task is sustained by the face-to-face circle of contributors engrossed in the activity, with a boundary raised between the outer world and the mutual activity in the enclosed space, the function of which is to maximize a sense of euphoria (Goffman 1961). An intensive intersubjective experience emerges through singing, embodied emotion, joint activity, and

shared goals, and leads to *merged intersubjectivity* that will be experienced with music as "unity" (Rabinowich et al. 2012).

Longer rituals may be associated with higher levels of effervescence (Draper 2014; 2019). This could explain the ecstasy reported by informants who took part in 12-hour *Kirtans*, which they reported as producing "incredibly deep spiritual states." Ceremonies that incorporated *Kirtan* lasted between four to six hours and featured various ways of engaging the attention of the gathered participants. The longer time people spend physically co-present with barriers to outsiders, and the longer time they focus their attention by gestures and sounds, the more real symbols and meanings become, and the greater the resulting interpersonal attachment and sense of community belonging becomes (Draper 2019).

The element that was overwhelmingly present in "successful" *Kirtans* was an experience of "energy" associated with "collective feelings of elevation," understood by the informants as emerging from the *Kirtan* participants themselves when they were intensively engaged in singing together. Other elements were "a peaceful or meditative atmosphere," which enabled people to turn inward and connect with their authentic, inner selves; and a communal feeling of "unity and togetherness" that was experienced through the music. The consequences of a successful *Kirtan* were "uplifting emotions that carried one over the mundane worries of everyday life"; help reportedly acquired for "processing" difficult emotions; and the feeling of tranquillity in a safe space.

Interaction ritual theory predicts the ritual "success" or "failure" of interactions. The emergence of collective effervescence creates social solidarity; emotional energy in the form of elation; enthusiasm; individual confidence; and symbols that represent those gathered and evoke their respect (Collins 2004). Collective effervescence is the phenomenon "through which collective representations are made sacred" (Draper 2019). Kirtans of holistic spirituality tend to have more "toned-down" emotionality compared to religious *Kirtans* (Broo et al. 2015). Interaction ritual theory may offer an explanation for this phenomenon: *Kirtans* of holistic spirituality are characterized by lower barriers to outsiders, lower attendance rates, and lower levels of social solidarity than religious movements.

Although my informants often stated that there were really no "failed *Kirtans*," descriptions of "unsuccessful" *Kirtans* may demonstrate how low levels of collective effervescence function in holistic spirituality. Based on my interview material, *Kirtans* described as "unsuccessful" tended to be characterized by minimal shared entrainment or emotional contagion and little respect for symbols of the sacred, including *mantras*. In failed interaction rituals, a sense of affirmation or effect on one's identity may be replaced by feelings of intense boredom (Collins 2004). Many informants described *Kirtans* that they simply hoped to end. Other causes for failure of *Kirtans* to produce collective effervescence included technical problems; the leaders' lack of musicality; unplanned, disrespectful, or self-serving behaviour; constant movement in and out of the safe space; discrimination; unequal distribution of emotional energy; and the lack of what Draper calls "mini-interaction rituals" (Draper 2019), such as drinking tea together and socializing after the *Kirtan*.

It has been shown that repeated positive emotions build psychological resiliency and trigger "upward spirals" toward improved emotional well-being (Fredrickson 2001). *Kirtan* was associated with repeated experiences of positive emotions. Recurring practice of *Kirtan* was reported to be associated with feelings of well-being and experiences of managing one's negative emotions. Repeated

successful experiences that are felt as improved well-being may have solidified *Kirtan's* place as Eastern technique within Western alternative wellness therapy discourses (Antony 2016).

Music arouses not only individual emotions but also emotions on the interpersonal level of collective emotion, when interpersonal processes trigger emotions in recurring interactions (Juslin 2019, 244). Judith Becker (2001) has defined emotion in relation to music as "an enactment and a way of being, where music making and music listening, emotion, dancing, and chanting of *mantras* are all aspects of a process in which participants enact a particular reality with norms and expectations" (Becker 2001, 148-149).

Scott Draper argues that chanting of *mantras* results in an invigorating group experience because it activates higher barriers to outsiders and higher effervescence; it requires one to verbalize foreign symbolism; it requires rhythmic entrainment and mutual monitoring that increase intersubjectivity; and it facilitates a mutual focus of attention (Draper 2019).

In addition to its invigorating social effects, *Kirtan* represents strong musical experiences with spiritual, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, bodily, and personal associations. For some research participants, *Kirtan* offered musical peak experiences, a "rare delicacy" that they longed to relive. According to Alf Gabrielsson (2010), in musical peak experiences there is total absorption and attention; a special "flavour" of awe or reverence; a complete loss of fear or anxiety; disorientation of time and space; transcendence of ego; and identification of the perceiver with the perceived (Gabrielsson 2010).

Based on the interview material, *Kirtans* are capable of eliciting strong experiences with music, including merged intersubjectivity that is experienced as experiences of "union with others" (Rabinowich et al. 2012). Patrik Juslin suggests that during live music activities people with shared interests and goals often have immersive experiences with group entrainment and social contagion (Juslin 2019, 389). The intentions of participants are important in obtaining strong emotional effects with music (Sloboda and Juslin 2010). Expectations also play a role in *Kirtan* experiences.

One of *Kirtan*'s functions that is experienced by its contemporary practitioners as therapeutic appears to be emotion regulation, with which is referred to an attempt to influence the shaping of emotions one has and the way one expresses them (Gross 1999). Music is commonly used as a tool to regulate emotions toward life events, to construct self-identity, to enhance desired and reduce undesired bodily and feeling states, and to create and maintain individual and shared emotions (DeNora 2001; Juslin 2019).

Emotion regulation in *Kirtans* of holistic spirituality may be aimed at what Richard Lazarus calls emotion-focused coping, achieved through regulating the emotions tied to a stressful life situation. Such *reappraisals of emotion* give them new relational meanings and generate cognitive and motivational processes that influence and change the meanings constructed from the stressful events (Lazarus 1999). They can be understood as attempts to "recodify" situations that act upon previous interpretations that gave rise to the initial stressful emotion and can change its meaning permanently for the individual (Von Scheve 2013).

Emotional interactions also play a role on the cultural level. Not only will one hear music and singing in *Kirtan*, but one takes part in discussion, teaching, sharing, and personal connection. Expectations associated with what Jonathan Turner (2007) calls human transactional needs and the ways of behaving that call

for positive responses from others are more difficult to know in groups that are not embedded in larger social units (Turner 2007, 87, 176). Turner argues that the less embedded an encounter is in social structures, the less clear are expectations and the more ambiguous and diffuse the culture. In formulating his sociological theory of emotion, Turner argues that culture must be constantly assembled in encounters, and when there is no social structure to “normatize” or bring its symbols, norms, values, and ideologies into the encounter, culture is assembled in face-to-face interactions (Turner 2007, 161, 176). *Transactional needs* are activated by directing the flow of interactions in each face-to-face encounter. One needs to verify one’s self and identity, to sense group inclusion in the ongoing interpersonal flow, to achieve a sense of trust from others, to receive positive exchange payoffs, and to achieve a sense of intersubjectivity and facticity (Turner 2007, 70, 102).

Transactional needs may be easier to satisfy in an encounter that is not embedded in a social structure, when everyone is of the same gender, ethnic background or social class. The ways in which people react and interact emotionally are very different in an encounter composed of entirely of men or women, of one ethnic group, or of one social class than those involving diverse genders, ethnics, or classes (Turner 2007, 80). Gendered *Kirtans* may be a way to “boost” the “interpersonal work” of the face-to-face encounter in order to meet the transactional needs of participants more fully and assemble a shared spiritual culture, whether inspired by *Hindu*, *Tantra*, or other traditions.

According to the argument by Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers (2007), “Post-Christian spirituality” is socially constructed, with a conception of the self being based on the epistemological premise that intuition or “inner voice” is the vehicle of truth instead of faith or reason. The sacred remains, but has lost its transcendent character and become part of the “dogma of self-spirituality,” that that which is sacred is immanent and resides in the deeper parts of the self (Houtman and Aupers 2007). Based on my material, I argue that *Kirtans* of contemporary spirituality are encounters where holistic spiritual culture is assembled in emotional and expressive face-to-face interactions.

Implications For the Study of Eastern Practices In The Nordic Countries

Finnish practitioners in the holistic spiritual milieu develop *Kirtan* and other techniques by appropriating cultural elements. In Richard Rogers’ definition (2006), cultural appropriation involves “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture,” in a process where such elements are taken and “made one’s own” (Rogers 2006, 474-475). Eastern philosophy, religious beliefs, cosmological assumptions, metaphysical ideas about the sacred, devotional artifacts, and musical elements are often learned orally from *Kirtan* leaders or from “New Age” literature, selectively combined and given new expressions.

Accessibility of *Kirtan* for practitioners emerged as a theme in my interview material. During *Kirtans*, participants were usually given song lyrics on paper; they could request songs in Finnish, bring their own instruments, or create their own “*mantras*.” Mary Grace Antony (2016) argues that the combination of Western and Eastern ideological frameworks can be understood in terms of

"strategic reframing aimed to minimize the perceived foreignness" (Antony 2016, 286) and to increase its accessibility for non-Hindu practitioners; and the expectations to have one's requests accommodated may indicate that *Kirtan* is "ideologically signified within individualistic structures that privilege a consumerist stance" (Antony 2016, 298). Finnish *Kirtan* practitioners that I interviewed were often uncomfortable with collective Eastern power asymmetries (e.g., the traditional *Guru*–disciple institution).

The reported results of *Kirtan* stress the management of individual emotions and experiencing transformative collective emotion. My findings show that strong emotional experiences arise collectively in *Kirtan* and are brought to inform individual spiritual meanings. Based on my findings, I understand *Kirtan* to be a form of interaction ritual chains, where the bodily co-presence of participants in close proximity with each other, borders to the outside world, task jointness with a mutual focus of attention, shared emotional mood, and rhythmic entrainment produce collective effervescence and long-lasting emotional energy that is carried over to other situations in the participants' lives, often long after the *Kirtan* is over (Collins 2004; Draper 2019).

It appears that an important reason behind *Kirtan*'s sustained popularity and continued appeal as a collective practice among individualized practices of contemporary spirituality lies in its ability to evoke and experience strong individual and collective emotions through intersubjectivity and music. Repeatedly emerging collective effervescence generated through recurring interaction rituals has powerful individual effects for those committed to *Kirtans* and brings them back to practicing it time and again.

In discussing how *Kirtan* informs meaning making in Finnish holistic spirituality, I argue that in addition to seeking experiences with therapeutic aspects and gatherings capable of producing collective emotion and strong experiences with music, participants come to expect *Kirtan* to support their individual goals. Its positive emotional effects are partly responsible for this expectation. Although emotional experiences were given new spiritual meanings, my research participants often learned from others the meanings associated with Eastern symbols, narratives, and concepts. While they associated the singing of *mantras* with Hindu deities, I understand them to be religious roles acquired orally from other practitioners and from literature, roles that became associated with the singing of *mantras* and were emotionally analogous to their individual needs. The learning of Eastern concepts was thought to deepen or enrich meaning-making in holistic spirituality, but did not necessarily lead the practitioners to adopt Hindu religious concepts or rituals into their lives.

For answering the question of the function of *Kirtan's* therapeutic purposes in holistic spirituality, it should be pointed out that during the interviews, loneliness and isolation were perceived as serious problems in contemporary Finnish society. *Kirtan* was believed to alleviate these societal problems by bringing people together and allowing them to "discover creativity and joy together." *Kirtan* was perceived as an ideal way to connect with others in a "respectful and beautiful manner" and to feel social connection and community belonging, without the many, often unhealthy, elements associated with modern societies.

Kirtan acted as a "therapeutic tool" for managing negative emotions and evoking positive moods, while improving one's holistic well-being. The collective emotion that emerged from *Kirtan* would "convert" emotions into shared positive moods. Embodied-relational and artistic-somatic techniques, such

as singing, dance, verbal sharing, painting, writing poetry, sound healing, and breathing exercises were practiced in the context of *Kirtan*. My research participants found in *Kirtan* a practice easily adapted to contemporary values of modern, secular, and individualized Nordic societies; it was an empathetic practice, capable of evoking individual and shared positive emotions, and perceived as beneficial for everyone's well-being, regardless of their musical skills or personal history.

The case of *Kirtan* illustrates how spiritual practitioners have taken to an Eastern religious practice for the purpose of achieving contemporary individual goals associated with holistic spiritual values, norms, emotions, and ideologies. In providing tools for well-being to its "spiritual but not religious" practitioners, *Kirtan* has joined other cultural artifacts appropriated and combined into holistic spirituality (Hill 2008; Rogers 2006). In the Finnish spiritual milieu, these elements are actively incorporated into a landscape of gradually changing practices, with themes such as nature, ancestry, past generations, and national identity shaping the practice in a way that speaks for the importance of these themes to contemporary Finnish people.

Kirtan is a way for individuals to discover communal ways to support and enliven their spiritual lives with others while allowing themselves to avoid committing to Eastern religious power-asymmetries that they experience as incompatible with their individualistic, subjective, and liberal values. On the other hand, *Kirtan* can be perceived as an example of how religion and spirituality are never either something totally individualistic and private or something totally communal (Pessi and Jeldtoft 2012).

Kirtan aids in the discovery of what the individual perceives as sacred through the collective emotion that arises with musical expression in the company of others. While the sacred is often perceived as an "authentic inner expression" under the right circumstances, the community as something larger than oneself, can easily be influenced by more familiar national symbols, ancestors, ways of life, and features of local nature such as lakes, fells, and forests.

Although there is still a sense of "mystical India" and a certain threshold for beginners to enter the singing of Sanskrit *mantras* or hymns, *Kirtan* is becoming less of a marginal practice and more "mainstream" within the Finnish contemporary spirituality. It is present at holistic spiritual summer festivals, which gather large numbers of visitors. This also changes its characteristics. Practitioners frequently wish for easier and more relatable ways to participate. This implies that *Kirtan* in the Nordic countries will gradually change in holistic spiritualities, where beliefs in *mantras* and Hindu deities diminish and become replaced by local, more relatable, social features. It may retain its Eastern character in religious movements that emphasize it as a sacred and eternal *sadhana* or spiritual practice, a lifeline for the religious devotee who through *Kirtan* establishes and sustains personal relationships with God, fellow devotees, and *guru*.

Regarding the belief of practitioners in Hindu deities that are so closely associated with *mantras*, I find in *Kirtan* a similarity to Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen's findings on Nordic yoga practitioners' perspectives on spirituality. For many *Kirtan* practitioners, the devotion to Hindu gods and goddesses as entities is no longer the primary focus, but rather the focus is on the effect the technique has on practitioners (Tøllefsen 2021). In addition to differences in ritual contexts and meanings, the boundaries between practicing in the religious, therapeutic, and

commercial arenas are fluid, with people moving between them and assuming different roles and exhibiting different degrees of commitment (Plank 2015). In the case of *Kirtan*, instead of practitioners easing away from religious elements, they sometimes also move the other way: visiting religious temples, observing religious fasting, going to learn a traditional Indian instrument, learning religious rituals, finding a *guru*, or joining a religious movement.

Similarly with Yoga or Mindfulness, *Kirtan* appears to be an example of an Eastern Practice that is still on the move from an Eastern religious sphere towards a Western secular one (Åkerbäck 2015). Although there is freedom of religion in the Nordic countries, societal and religious developments in the Nordic countries have often been observed within the context of the larger majority religion. Interviewing individual practitioners represented, for me, an approach on the microlevel, where it is possible to research how people make sense of their spirituality in terms of their individual experience (Pessi and Jeldtoft 2012).

Kirtan practice began in Finland with Eastern new religious movements fifty years ago. It has become part of eco-spirituality (e.g., in Nordic *Ting* meets), acquired animistic features, and incorporated elements from local culture. Regardless of its newly-acquired forms, the musical culture that has formed around *Kirtan* is held in high esteem by its practitioners. For them, it is an important social and cultural activity, a source of joy and meaning, and a way to serve others by helping them reach their destination.

Almost all of my participants wished for *Kirtans* to become more popular in Finland. I was told that *Kirtan* is not quite as popular in Finland than in the other Nordic countries. The global situation was also reflected in the interviews. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, several new *Kirtan* groups had been established. This was perceived as a time of crises, including climate change and vaccination conspiracy theories, along with societal problems characteristic of modern societies. It was a period when *Kirtan* was said to be especially welcome. Despite declining attendance in the Lutheran Church, looming global crises, stressful urban lifestyles, social anxiety, and experiences of meaninglessness and isolation, it seems unlikely that Kirtan's popularity in the Nordic countries will diminish anytime soon.

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