The vast number of cultures that exist or that have existed in this world all generated their own music—or, as we say, their own different “musics.” Often they are very different indeed, the first time South African Zulus heard Christian hymn-singing, they were amazed, just as much as the missionaries were when they first heard Zulu music. Yet for all their diversity, the musics of the world do share some parallels, as we are going to see in the Global Perspectives section of this book. There are parallels of musical function in society, there are parallels of musical technique, and sometimes there are parallels of both altogether.

Often these parallels come about as the result of influences of one culture on another—but influences are never accepted without modification and the blending of a foreign music with music that is indigenous. At other times parallels appear in musics that have nothing whatsoever to do with one another. Considering all these parallels, we have no reason to believe that certain basic functions for music and certain basic technical principles are virtually universal in humankind.

One of these near-universal features—and one of the most fundamental—is the role of music in the service of religion. Singing serves across the world as an essential means of marking off the rituals of worship, signaling their sacred status and their difference from other, secular, pursuits. The repository of Gregorian chant developed in the Christian Church of the Middle Ages (see pages 56–62) is only one of many traditions of monophonic religious choral, albeit one of the more elaborate.

**Islam: Reciting the Qur’an**

Another highly elaborate tradition of chant is found in Islam, practiced today by about a fifth of the world’s population, and the dominant religion in some fifty nations. Across all of Islam, the revelations of the prophet Muhammad gathered in the Qur’an (or Koran) are chanted or sung in Arabic. Muhammad himself is said to have enjoyed this melodic recitation.

Usually Qur’anic recitation is rigorously distinguished from all types of secular music making. It is thought of as “reading” the sacred text aloud, not “singing” it; it is not even considered to be the same sort of activity as secular singing or playing instruments. These nonreligious activities might be referred to as “music” (musiq), but reading the Qur’an is not.

Given these distinctions, it is not surprising that Qur’anic recitation, like Gregorian chant, is monophonic, monometric, and does not involve instruments. It aims, above all else, to convey the Qur’anic text in a clearly comprehensible manner. Unlike plainsong, it has been passed along in oral tradition down to the present day. It has passed the written notation that came to be a part of the Gregorian tradition already in the Middle Ages. To this day, great Islamic chanters sing the whole 114-chapter Qur’an from memory.

**Ya Sin**

Our excerpt is the beginning of a long recitation of one of the most highly revered chapters from the Qur’an. It is titled “Ya Sin” and is recited in times of adversity, illness, and death. A skilled reciter, Hafiz Kadir Kayru, “reads” the verses in a style midway between heightened speech and rhapsodic melody. His phrases corre-
spond to lines of the sacred text, and he prays after every one. He begins:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.  
Verily,  
He who eversed Qur'an  
Let them act as these act  
On a straight path.  
A revelation of the Mighty, the Merciful.  
That those may learn a folk whose fathers were not warned, so they are heedless.  
Already hath the word passed away of none of them, for they believe not.

In his first phrases, Konya begins at a low tonic and gradually extends his range to explore pitches around, or 658, he reaches a pitch central to his melody, a fifth above the tonic. The succeeding phrases circle around this pitch, reciting words on it and decorating it with ornamental melodic formulas of varying intricacy. In this regard, it is a bit like the Gregorian singing tone we studied before (page 59), only more elaborate in its melodies.

The Azan

Like Gregorian chant, Islamic chanting has developed a wide variety of approaches and styles. The best-known type of Islamic chant employs a style related to recitation, though it does not take its words from the Qur’an, the singing of the adhan or azan. This is a call to worship issued five times daily by a special singer called mu’tashib or muezzin. That an entire society comes to a stop five times a day for prayer reveals the tremendous force of Islamic religion.

Hawaiian Chant

We should not be too surprised to find certain broad similarities between Qur’anic and Gregorian chant. Both Islam and Christianity emerged from the same region, the Middle East, and Muhammad drew on elements of Christian doctrine in forming his new religion. He counted Jesus Christ as one of the Islamic prophets.

It is more surprising to find some of the same features in religious chant from halfway around the globe, in Polynesia—in Hawaiian prayer songs, or moʻolelo (oral pool-eh). By reciting these prayers, Hawaiians intended to bring to life images of their gods fashioned of wood, stone, or feathers, animating them with divine powers.

Our brief example shows a style similar in some general ways to our Gregorian Prelate and Qur’anic recitation. It is monophonic, like all traditional Hawaiian song. It is also almost monotonous, with only one prominent pitch other than the central reciting tone. In this it contrasts with more active melodic styles used in

There Hawaiian singers. They make large, resonant sounds on the ground to accompany this song.

The muezzin traditionally delivers his azan from the minaret, a tower attached to the mosque, and later inside the mosque to begin the prayers. In Islamic cities today, the azan is often broadcast over loudspeakers to enable it to sound over modern urban noises.
other Hawaiian genres of song—especially love songs and maile lehua, or hula-dance songs.

The maile mute takes its rhythm from the words and shows little trace of meter. Though nearly monotonous, it is ornamented with various shifts of vocal delivery and divergences from its reciting tone. The most prominent of these is a clear prolongation, almost sobbing, or wavered pitch, that is the singer, Kau'i Gurentzener, introduces on long syllables. This technique, called ?E, is a stylistic feature much prized in many types of traditional Hawaiian song. It is felt to endow melodies with special, deep emotion.

A Navajo Song

One more example of chant comes to us from Native American traditions. In these, too, singing is closely allied with the sacred. It plays a role in healing, hunting, social rituals, and—embracing all these activities—in human relations with gods, spirits, and ancestors. Most Native North American song is monosyllabic like the Hawaiian, Arabic, and Western chants we have heard. Unlike them, it is usually accompanied by drums or rattles of one sort or another. Our example comes from the Navajo nation of the Four Corners area of the American Southwest. It is called “Kadnikiny’ya,” which means “I’m leaving,” and it dates from the late nineteenth century.

Just as individual Egyptian chants have their assigned places in Catholic services, so this chant has its own special role. It is sung near the end of the Enemy Way ceremony, a central event of Navajo spiritual life. In this solemn ceremony, warriors who have come in contact with the ghosts of their enemies are purified and fortified. Such purification is still performed today, sometimes for the benefit of U.S. veterans of Vietnam or other wars.

“Kadnikiny’ya” falls into a group of Navajo sacred songs known as hyi’nu’ni songs, and you will hear the related word sii’nu’ni (“beautiful,” “lovely”) sung alongside “Kadnikiny’ya” to end each of the seven central phrases of the song. Every phrase of the song begins with the syllables “he-yah-eh, ying-a-ag-a.” These are recognizable syllables having no precise meaning. Vocabularies are sometimes called “nonsense syllables” and listened to the “scriber-las” and “tita-diddler-diddles” of European nursery rhymes, but these are hardly nonsensical. Instead, as scholars have gradually realized, they can carry secret, venerable, and even mystical significance.

At a powwow in British Columbia

The melody of “Kadnikiny’ya,” like the other chants we have examined, is organized around a prominent reciting tone (the pitch of “hyi’nu’ni”), each phrase rising upward at its end (on “hyi’nu’ni”). The song’s meter, given the regular drumstrokes, is more pronounced than in any of our earlier examples. The formal plan consists of a refrain at the beginning and end, with a group of parallel phrases in between.