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LADAKHI FOLK SONGS AND INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

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The arts are unique among cultural phenomena because they are forms of communication for which there is no substitute; they express information which we can understand in no other form. Music is unique among arts in that it must be re-created anew at each hearing. Therefore, each performance of music is an active perpetuation of tradition, and a continuing creation of expression. In many cultures, music has proven to be extremely durable, surviving for centuries where other arts, governments or even populations have disappeared.

This is especially pertinent to the music of Ladakh; for there, music is not a casual thing, as are, for example most kinds of western popular music, where virtually any piece of music is appropriate on any desired occasion. On the contrary, the songs and instrumental music of Ladakh are integral to the life that surrounds them. Nearly any event, from working to marriage, from making religious offering to playing polo, has its own necessary repertoire of songs and music. Without them these events would be incomplete, and sometimes quite impossible.

Such close association to other cultural events can be of great advantage in perpetuating an ancient musical tradition during times of cultural stress, such as Ladakh has felt in recent centuries. Thus, for example, the songs and music of the former royal *dosmoche* (*mdosmo-che*) festival of prayer are now performed by villagers during New Year celebrations, although the royal dynasty no longer reigns.¹ Therefore, perhaps music can also inform us of very early times, from which little hard evidence remains. For example, although Ladakh was originally settled by peoples from the west in the centuries before the rise of Buddhism, no written history, no temple, nor scarcely any artwork remains from that time. But the musical instruments of Ladakh, especially the surna, and perhaps some elements of their performance practices, are among the very oldest artifacts which remain in Ladakh today.

Unfortunately, the folk music of Ladakh has, until now, received much less attention than it would reward. Although several good folksong studies were carried out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were mostly incidental to historical or literary research, and ignored melody and instrumental music almost entirely. In the last 25 years, purely musicological researches have produced recordings, but many give only scanty and sometimes inaccurate notes. Moreover, nearly all these studies have examined only the repertoire of central Ladakh, and all the recordings have been made at Leh.

Therefore, I would like to speak about some of the most common traits of both folk song and instrumental music as I found them on my journey to the Ladakhi district of Zanskar in 1982, and show how they may be put in

historical or demographic perspective. The people of Ladakh constantly make a distinction between song, called *lu* (*glu*), and music, called *yangs* (*dbyangs*). Many times during my collecting I came upon this distinction, and often found it to be so strict that a person asked to sing would not provide accompaniment, though a flute might be at hand, nor would a person asked to play a tune give the words unless he were specifically asked to do so.

But other observations in Zanskar, and, later, my analysis of the samples I collected, show that there is more than just a linguistic convention to differentiate songs and music. There are also many differences in performance practice, and many basic differences on a purely musical level. When these are compared with the musical traditions of surrounding countries, they suggest that the arts of singing and playing converged on Ladakh from two different directions, and have remained remarkably distinct to this day.

Central Ladakhi songs have been classified by many writers, including native Ladakhis, into several categories, such as wedding songs, love songs, *ling* (*gling*) songs (the songs of the Gesar epic), religious songs, congregational songs, etc., according to their texts.² Although I found no such system recognized in Zanskar, the texts there are similar and could be made to fit such a scheme.

But I would like to take a purely musical view of songs, and to do so it is not only unnecessary, but hazardous to consider their texts. For it is a common practice to substitute new texts into favorite tunes, as I often heard, and thus we cannot take for granted that a text and its melody share the same background. Musically speaking then, the songs which I found by far the most common were also the simplest. They were the songs sung for me by villagers everywhere, especially young women, and comprise nearly 75% of the sample I collected (not counting duplicate performances of the same tune). Their texts include a great variety of themes, but their melodies all share several very specific musical traits. All of this group of songs are of a very simple strophic form, sometimes having only one repeated strain of melody, but usually having two phrases of equal length, in the form A-B, repeated. Sometimes also one or both of these phrases is repeated individually, sometimes with slight variation, in the form AABB. About two-thirds of these songs also have roughly the same melodic contour, rising very quickly to their highest note, usually the octave, in the first phrase, and drifting slowly downward in the second phrase, resting once or twice along the way.

Metrically, these songs are also very simple, with clear even beats and fairly regular measures. More than half of the songs are in a compound duple meter, similar to 6/8 time, sometimes mixed with measures of 3/4 time.

Another 40% of the songs are in simple duple meter, such as 2/4 time; but in many of these there is also a feeling of triple time, as the subdivisions of quarter notes are seldom sung as equal eight notes, but contracted into a triplet eighth-plus-quarter. Taking this into account, we can say that triply divided beats in groups of two characterize 75% of all these songs.

A good example of the forms, contours and rhythms just mentioned is *sna-sa pon-po glu*, as sung for me by Tsering Dolma (Tshe-ring sGrol-ma) of Yuger village (example 1).³

By far the most common trait of these songs, and perhaps the most telling, is the musical scale from which they are built. Eighty-five percent of these songs use the same anhemitonic pentatonic scale, having the chromatic degrees: first; major second; major third; perfect fifth; and major sixth. The most important notes, which give the melodies their cheerful tonal feeling, are the first, where nearly all the songs end; the fifth, where a few end and many rest; and the sixth, where several others rest and which acts as a leading tone to the first or octave. An example of this is *serchen demo* (*gser-chen bde-mo*), as sung by Tsering Wangdus (Tshe-ring dBang-bdus) of Padum (example 2).⁴

The remaining melodies, with only two exceptions, use another pentatonic scale, this one being a common inversion of the scale already mentioned beginning on its last note. It has the degrees: first; minor third; perfect fourth; perfect fifth; and minor seventh. Thus it is a kind of relative minor to the more common major pentatonic scale, and has a darker, sadder sound. *Sngasa pon-po glu*, mentioned above, uses this scale.

These particular pentatonic scales, especially the major one, seem to be of almost universal popularity in eastern Asia, and can be heard ubiquitously in songs from the Himalayas, Tibet, Mongolia, China and parts of southeast Asia. The major pentatonic scale, in particular, is often associated with China, for it was first theoretically elaborated there in very early times. Although this scale is too widespread to be concrete evidence of direct cultural influence, the strophic forms and regular rhythms of Ladakhi song melodies also help place Ladakhi songs in the Far Eastern musical sphere.

The several characteristics of Ladakhi folk songs we have just mentioned become particularly distinctive when compared to Ladakhi folk instrumental music, or *yangs* (*dbyangs*), for in the latter we find an entirely different style.

In Zanskar, *yangs* (*dbyangs*) means almost exclusively the music of the shawm, *surna* (*sur-rna*), and the drums, *daman* (*da-man*). The lute *sgra-snan* and the fiddle *pi-wang* are unknown in Zanskar, and the flute *lhingbu* (*gling-bu*) and the tambourine *dap* (*dab*) are used only to accompany songs with very little elaboration. Thus instrumental music is the exclusive domain of the *surna* and *daman*.

Immediately we see that this music is performed by an entirely different class of people, all of them men. Whereas folk songs such as those mentioned are the common property of all people, the performers of *yangs*

(*dbyangs*) are recognized specialists in the instruments and their repertoire. In central Ladakh the *mon* have been the traditional players of *yangs* (*dbyangs*), as have been *beda* (*bhe-da*) more recently; in Zanskar, however, this tradition does not apply. I was told there are no *mon* there, and there are certainly no *beda*. But the players of *surna* and *daman* whom I met were not yet among the highest class of Zanskaris. Usually they were farmers or labourers like their neighbours, who served the surrounding villages with music as a sideline speciality, and who were therefore of some local reknown. I found such *surna* players at Pipiting, Sani, Gumi, Char, and two at Zangla, each of who played with a drummer as a regular partner. I also met several persons in other villages who claimed to be able to play, but who had no instruments. There seems to be quite a shortage of instruments in Zanskar generally.

Like the melodies of folk songs just mentioned, the instrumental melodies of *yangs* (*dbyangs*) are composed of shorter phrases and repeated, but the similarity ends there. Three or four distinct phrases of greatly varying length may go into a *yangs* (*dbyangs*) tune, and in performance these phrases are often repeated individually with one or two standard variations within a repetition of the melody as a whole. This yields forms varying from the simple ABCD to complexities like ABAA/ABC/AAA. I found exactly the same techniques to be also practiced in Chitral, on the North West Frontier of Pakistan, where I heard many pieces, both popular and classical, performed on the *surna* in exactly this manner (see example 3).⁵ Few of the *yangs* (*dbyangs*) pieces which I collected in Zanskar have simple rhythms as do folk songs. The majority tend to be the most complex. Eight or ten traditional drum patterns are known in Zanskar, most of which are dance patterns associated with India, Nepal, Kashmir, etc. Few of these are squarely metric, and when they are combined with the elaborately embellished phrases of the *surna*, itself in irregular rhythms, even a regular pulse is scarcely noticeable to the uninitiated ear.

Tonally, also, these pieces are more complex than the songs: only one of the samples I collected is in a pentatonic scale — the same major scale found in most of the songs. Most of the remainder are divided equally between two hexatonic scales, one like the western major scale without its seventh; the other like the natural minor scale without its sixth degree. The latter scale is also the most common scale I heard in the *surna* music of Chitral (example 4). The several characteristics we have now mentioned set *yangs* (*dbyangs*) almost directly in opposition to *glu*, but every one of them associates *yangs* (*dbyangs*) with the *surna* of the Islamic musical sphere.

The instrument itself, with its drums and specialized musicians, its long, embellished phrases in fuller scales, are all akin to a tradition of shawm music rooted in Persia and transmitted across all of Asia, North Africa, and parts of Eastern Europe. Ladakh, too, has taken part in this transmission for it was Ladakhi musicians who introduced the *surna* and its music to Tibet.

Thus, it would seem that, whereas the musical style of folk songs has come to Ladakh generally from the east, the style of instrumental music has come from the west. This idea is consistent with our understanding that the entire region was settled first by Aryan Dards, and much later by Tibetans; and that it was at first influenced almost exclusively by Kashmir, and later almost entirely by Tibet. When these styles took root cannot be proven by such an isolated sample. What is most interesting is that the two have remained so distinct, preserved, perhaps, by their attachment to formal ceremonies and celebrations. To trace their development historically would require extensive comparison to many neighbouring regional and local styles of song and music, most of which are all but unknown to the rest of the world. But identifying related styles will be made easier by the distinct models of the folk songs and instrumental music of Ladakh.

NOTES

1 Nawang Tsering Shaksपो, Ladakhi Folk song presented at Columbia University, August 1982. In *Sounding in Tibetan Civilisation*, Barbara Aziz and Matthew Kapstein, editors. New-Delhi, 1985.

2 *Ibid.*, and Tashi Rabgias, "La-dwags kyi dbyangs dang rol-mo snong srol" in *Yearbook of the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of science and Language*, Leh, Ladakh. 1976.

3 The examples given here are also to be found on the disc Tibetan Music from Ladakh and Zaskar Lyrichord Discs LLST 7383, recorded by the present author. Sna-sa pon-po glu appears as Side A band 8.

4 *Ibid.*, side A band 3.

5 *Ibid.*, side B band 4 presents a different version of the same tune

RESUMÉ : La musique populaire ladakhi se divise en deux catégories : les chants (*lu, glu*) et la musique instrumentale (*yangs, dbyangs*), celle des chalumeaux (*surna*) et des tambours (*daman*). La différence très nette entre les deux suggère que chants et musique instrumentale ont convergé au Ladakh, venant de deux différentes directions.

Les *lu (glu)* se caractérisent par leur simplicité. La majorité — malgré les différences de thèmes dans les paroles — partage la même forme symétrique des strophes, la même ligne mélodique, la même mesure à 6 temps et la même gamme pentatonique. Tout ceci rapproche les *lu (glu)* de la plus grande partie de la musique populaire de l'Extrême-Orient. Le *yangs (dbyangs)*, joué par des professionnels de basse caste, tend à plus de complexité avec ses longues strophes asymétriques, ses formes étendues et ses polyrythmes complexes, très élaborés et étendus. En tous ces points le *yangs* s'oppose au *lu* et, par contre, se rapproche de la musique des instruments à vent du Moyen-Orient. Cette dichotomie, et ses origines, reflète l'histoire du Ladakh avec ses influences, venant d'une part du Cachemire, de l'autre du Tibet.

SUMMARY: Ladakhi folk music is divided into two parts: *lu (glu)* or song, and *yangs (dbyangs)* or instrumental music: of the shawm, *surna*, and the drums *daman*. The very basic differences between them suggest that the two converged on Ladakh from two different directions.

Lu (glu) are characterized by simplicity. The majority, though of many textual themes, share the same symmetrical strophic form, melodic contour, compound duple meter, and pentatonic scale. In these points it is similar to much of the folk music of eastern Asia. *Yangs (dbyangs)* the music of low-class specialists, tends towards complexity in its long, asymmetrical strophes, extended forms, elaborate embellishment and complex polyrythms. In all these it is quite opposite to *lu (glu)* but shares much with the shawm music of western Asia. This dichotomy and its sources reflect Ladakh's history of settlement and influence from first Kashmir, and then Tibet.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Die Volksmusik Ladakhs ist zweifach gegliedert: *lu (glu)* Lied und *yangs (dbyangs)* Instrumentalmusik hauptsächlich der Schalmei (*surna*) und der Trommel (*daman*). Die grundsätzlichen Unterschiede zwischen den beiden Musikarten führen zu dem Schluss, dass sie wohl aus zwei verschiedenen geographischen Richtungen stammen müssen.

Lu (glu) ist von Einfachheit gekennzeichnet. Die Mehrheit, auch wenn viele verschiedene Themen auftauchen, zeigt dennoch die gleiche symmetrische Strophenform, melodische Kontur, 6/8 Takt, und pentatonische Tonleiter. In dieser Hinsicht ist *lu (glu)* der Volksmusik Ostasiens sehr ähnlich. *Yangs (dbyangs)* ist die Musik von Spezialisten niedriger sozialer Stufen, und ist von Komplexität gekennzeichnet: durch ihre langen asymmetrischen Strophen, ausgedehnten Formen, Verzierungen und Polyrythmen. In allen diesen Punkten setzt sie sich stark von der *lu (glu)* ab, aber zeigt eine Verwandtschaft zur Schalmeienmusik Westasiens. Die Dualität dieser zwei Musikarten und ihrer Ursprünge finden wir in der ladakhischen Besiedlungsgeschichte und ihrer Einflüsse wieder — zunächst von Kashmir und danach von Tibet her.

Das Epos von König Gesar ist überall im tibetischen Kulturraum anzutreffen. Wir finden es in der Mongolei, in Tibet, Ladakh, Baltistan, in Sikkim, Bhutan und Nepal. Es lebt in den Erzähltraditionen zweier religiöser Einflusssphären: in der buddhistischen und der islamischen. Erzählt und geschrieben wird es in den Sprachen des Sinto-tibetischen, des Indoarischen und des Mongolischen. Wir wissen nicht nur von zahlreichen Handschriften und Drucken, sondern auch von Niederschriften mündlicher Vorträge. Damit steht der Epenforscher vor einem Berg von Fragen, z.B.: Wie gestaltet sich das Verhältnis von Schriftversionen zu mündlichen Rezitationen? Welchen Wandlungen unterlag das buddhistische *geprägte Gesar-Epos* (von nun an: *Gesar*) bei Aufnahme in die islamische Tradition? Welche Auswirkungen haben die verschiedenen Sprachfamilien auf den Formelgebrauch? Probleme, die sich für den am ladakhischen Epos Interessierten auftun, sind z.B.: In welchem Maße sich Abhängigkeiten oder Interdependenzen zu den Versionen der Nachbarländer nachweisen? Werden wir in Ladakh mit einer einheitlichen Tradition konfrontiert oder stoßen wir auf eine buddhistische und eine islamische? Wie weit basiert — wenn überhaupt — die ausschließlich mündliche Überlieferung des ladakhischen *Gesars* auf Schriftfassungen?

Ich möchte hier drei Fragen anreißer: 1) In welchem Zustand präsentiert sich die ladakhische Erzähltradition heute? 2) Welchem Genre ist der ladakhische *Gesar* zuzuordnen? 3) Wie können die neueren Erkenntnisse in der Epenforschung zur Klärung einiger Probleme des ladakhischen und tibetischen *Gesars* eingesetzt werden? (Unter dem ladakhischen *Gesar* verstehe ich die in Ladakh vorgenommenen Notierungen mündlicher Vorträge; mit dem tibetischen *Gesar* meine ich die in Tibet gefundenen, vorwiegend schriftlichen Texte.)

Es war gerade der ladakhische *Gesar*, mit dem das *Gesar-*

Epos weitbekannt wurde. In den von A.H. Francke publizierten Versionen (1900: *Der Frühlingsmythus der Kesarsage*, 1902: *Der Wintermythus der Kesarsage*, 1905-1941: *A lower Ladakhi Version of the Kesar Saga*) wurden im Westen erstmals Editionen mit Übersetzungen aus dem Tibetischen greifbar. Zuvor war das *Gesar-Epos* nur in Übersetzungen aus dem Mongolischen oder als Zusammenfassungen bekannt. Das Besondere an Franckes Versionen ist, dass es sich um Notierungen mündlicher Vorträge handelt. Damit sind wir heute - mit Einschränkungen — in der glücklichen Lage, diachrone Untersuchungen an der Erzähltradition vornehmen zu können, da in Ladakh die mündliche Form der Überlieferung noch heute lebendig ist. Zwar existieren Vereinzelt auch Texte vom *Gesar*, aber vornehmlich wird das Epos mündliche tradiert.

Ich flog im Sommer 84 nach Ladakh, um orale Versionen des *Gesars* zu sammeln. Tatsächlich war es möglich, in kurzer Zeit mehrere Erzähler auf Tonband aufzunehmen. Ich nahm acht Versionen aus Gegenden wie Chiktan (gChig-brtan), Wanla (Wan-la/Wam-la), Da-Pema (mDa'-be-ma), Phyang (Phyi-dbang), Shey (Shel), Thikse (Khrig-se) und Sabu (Sabu/Sa-phyud) auf.

Des Überblickes wegen werde ich in folgenden eine grobe Zusammenfassung des *Gesar-Epos* geben, so wie es heute in Ladakh erzählt wird. Der Kern des Werkes besteht aus vier Teilen, Kapiteln oder Episoden, die die Ladakher "*ling*" nennen: 1) *Lhayul* (*Lha-yul*), 2) *Lingkhar* (*gLing-mkhar*) oder *Skyesraps* (*Skye-rabs*), 3) *Dutyul* (*bDud-yul*) und 4) *Horyul* (*Hor-yul*).

1) *Lhayul*: Das Land Lingkhar ist königlos, und da König der Götter den Menschen von Lingkhar verpflichtet ist, verspricht er, ihnen einen seiner Söhne als König zu senden. Er fragt seine drei Söhne, wer zum Gehen bereit sei. Das ist nur der



Example 1: Sngasa Ponpo gLu

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The musical notation for Example 1 consists of three staves. The first staff is in 2/4 time, followed by a 3/4 time signature, and then another 2/4 time signature. The second staff includes a '3' above a triplet of notes and a '2' above a pair of notes. The third staff is labeled 'scale:' and shows a simple ascending scale.

Example 2: Serchen Demo

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The musical notation for Example 2 consists of three staves. The first two staves show a melodic line with various rhythmic patterns and slurs. The third staff is labeled 'scale:' and shows a simple ascending scale.

Example 3: Rimpoche dByangs

A musical score for a piece titled "Rimpoche dByangs". The score is written on ten staves, all in the key of G major (one sharp). The music is characterized by complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, typical of Tibetan Buddhist chant. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings. The first staff begins with a whole note G4, followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The subsequent staves continue the melodic and rhythmic development, with some staves featuring more intricate rhythmic patterns. The score concludes with a double bar line.

Example 4: dByangs Scales

A musical score showing two scale lines. The first line is an ascending scale starting on G4 and ending on G5. The second line is a descending scale starting on G5 and ending on G4, with a flat sign (b) under the G4 note. The scales are written in a shorthand notation with slanted lines and dots, indicating the pitch contour.