

Rhythmic style in Ladakhi music and dance

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A. H. Francke's early studies on Ladakhi music were quite unique and for many years his work was the main authority on Tibetan music (Francke, 1922). It is remarkable, then, that his observation that "Ladakhi music and dancing is so entirely different from Tibetan music and dancing that non-Tibetan influences must be suspected" (Francke, 1904:366) seems to have been overlooked until the recent awareness, arising from a more complete knowledge of true Tibetan music, of the various ethnic influences to which Ladakhi music is subject.

One of the most striking differences between Ladakhi and Tibetan music which has become apparent is their rhythmic aspect: the ternary rhythms of Francke's musical transcriptions – which he noted were a feature of the Ladakhi style – were found to be largely absent from Tibetan music (Crossley-Holland, 1967). Thus Francke's work now alerts us to the need for a cross-cultural study of Ladakhi music, especially in the rhythmic domain.

Until now only one ethnomusicological study of Ladakhi music has been made (Larson, 1985), in which Eric Larson has demonstrated that the differences in vocal and instrumental styles point to their separate origins: the vocal style in Tibet and the instrumental style in Kashmir. But his conclusions were largely based upon melodic considerations, with little attention being given to rhythm.

It is because the highly relevant rhythmic aspect of Ladakhi music has been virtually neglected, that I wish to concentrate on it alone. My approach is two-fold. Firstly I shall show how the rhythmic properties of Ladakhi music further differentiate vocal and instrumental styles and in so doing provide additional evidence that the instrumental style derives from Kashmir. But while on the one hand it is true that these two quite different styles are in some respects opposed to one another, it is implausible, on the other hand, that mutual acculturation, or interaction, has not taken place to some extent; so secondly, I shall examine rhythmic style with respect to the adaptation of vocal music to instrumental forms, as found in dance-songs and other accompanied songs.

Dance is an essentially rhythmic phenomenon because rhythmic resources of poetry, movement and music are integrated to enhance the aesthetic or spiritual experience, specific to the function of the dance, of the participants. Thus in Ladakhi dance the intricate movements of the hands and feet are carefully co-ordinated with the stresses of the drummers' rhythmic patterns, and these patterns, performed on the *daman* (*Ida-man*, kettledrums), also support the tune of the *surna* (*sur-na*, oboe) which in turn may serve as a vehicle for a poetic text sung by the dancers.

However, this principle is only true in the most general sense; in reality very few dances are sung to, and most songs are not dance-songs, so it would seem that even in dance music, where we

expect to find the most consummate forms of rhythmic organization, vocal and instrumental styles are still mostly separate. On the occasions when they do come together – that is, at particular group events, social or ritual, when a band of musicians is available – voices and instruments tend, therefore, to be juxtaposed rather than integrated. In such a performing situation, songs are sung antiphonally with the surnas, never together in unison, and meanwhile the dancers remain standing in rows before the dance commences. Only after the singing has finished will the dance begin, accompanied by the appropriate drum pattern. But in spite of this segregation of vocal and instrumental practices, their juxtaposition in particular social contexts inevitably brings about some degree of mutual stylistic adaptation. Indeed, the formal types of song used on such occasions (e. g. *chos-glu*, religious songs; *gzhun-glu*, congregational songs; *gying-glu*, heroic songs – Shakspo, 1985) have come to be accompanied by drum patterns similar in type to the dance rhythms. Conversely, the dance tunes have taken on vocal characteristics and share the same stock of motifs as vocal melodies.

This flexible relationship between vocal and instrumental performing styles is highlighted by the manner in which texts and melodies are freely adapted to specific rhythmic schemes. The inconsistency of poetic forms, and the freedom with which meaningless syllables (*tshig-lhad*) can be inserted into the texts means that it is the rhythm of the musical accompaniment, rather than any literary constraints, which dictate the lengths and stresses of the syllables. This lends credibility to the idea that the particular rhythmic style found in accompanied songs (including dance songs), and which permeates even some unaccompanied folk songs, has been imposed on a pre-existing vocal culture by the use of foreign instruments and instrumental styles. We are thereby justified in isolating the rhythmic aspects of Ladakhi dance music in order to identify some of the characteristic features of the Ladakhi rhythmic style.

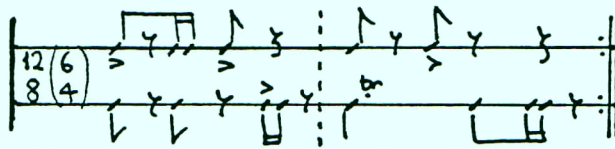
Firstly, and most importantly, rhythmic accompaniments take the form of repeating cycles of drum patterns which function as a kind of drone; in fact Francke (1905:96) likened the rôle of the daman to the European bagpipe, which is similarly tuned in fifths. But rather than sustaining any harmony, the daman articulate unique regular patterns by giving each drum-stroke a differential character, based upon three parameters:

- (1) length (i. e. time interval between beats)
 - long/short
- (2) accent – strong/weak
- (3) timbre – high (played on *mo-skad*, small drum)
 - or low (played on *pho-skad*, large drum)

The regularity with which these stroke-patterns are executed create isometric schemes of typically 4 to 7-beat metres, although the patterns themselves frequently extend over more than one measure, producing multiple patterns of 8, 10, 12, 14 or 16 beats. Even though the use of ternary units, noted by Francke, give rise to symmetrical metres in compound time, such as $\frac{6}{8}$, $\frac{9}{8}$ and $\frac{12}{8}$, additive, or asymmetrical metres are also common. For instance $\frac{9}{8}$ may be rendered as 2+2+2+3 rather than 3+3+3; and the 7-beat metre 2+2+3 is particularly popular.

At the highest level of organization, the rhythmic continuity set up by these schemes may be interrupted by a change in drum pattern, in keeping with the extended nature and specific needs of the dance form. During the course of the performance there is an overall quickening of pace, and within this general accelerando, changes of pattern and metre occur at significant stages in the dance. These changes are brought about by a series of rhythmic (and corresponding melodic) “contractions” so that the initial slow pattern is also the longest and most complex, while the

final pattern is the shortest, simplest and hence the most "rhythmic". For example, the three patterns of the Male Dance (*pho-rtse*) fall in schemes of $[3+3+2]+[3+2+3]=16$, $[2+2]-[2+2+2]=10$ and $2+2+2+3=9$ respectively. It must be emphasized that the grouping of beats within a cycle is not always consistent, or even clear; nor is it obvious where the primary beat is or where the bar-line should be placed in transcription. But this is a purely technical problem, and in actual performance this ambiguity lends much to the excitement of the dance. When there are several various-sized pairs of *daman*, each playing their own rhythmic *ostinati* within the overall metrical framework, the resulting polyphonic texture can be quite complex. It is this intricacy which is reflected in the cyclic movements of the dancers' hands, in contrarhythm to those of the feet. In the *men-tog stan-mo* (flower festival) dance, for example, $2+2+2$ is set against $3+3$ —the hemiola pattern much loved in Ladakh:*



The principles of rhythmic and formal organization which I have outlined here have their foundation rooted in the music theories of pan-Islamic culture. The use of additive metres and the combination of rhythmic cycles to produce extended forms are found in the classical systems of India (*rāga*) and Persia (*maqāmāt*), and it is precisely these systems which, under the patronage of the 15th-century Sultans, came to Kashmir and gave rise to the Kashmiris' own *sufiāna kalam*. Although this was the music of the ruling Muslim élite, stylistic elements nevertheless filtered into the local folk music, so that some of the rhythmic patterns used by the Kashmiri *surnā* ensemble—equivalent to the *surna* bands—are the same as the *tāl* cycles of *sufiāna kalam*. For example, the 7-beat measure, which we noted to be a feature in Ladakh, is widely used, as indeed it is in other Sufi-influenced folk music cultures of Muslim Central Asia (and it has even reached Eastern Europe, where in Greece it is known as *kalamatianos*). In general, then, it can be said that Ladakhi instrumental music, although far removed from the conditions in which its basic principles were formulated, lies within the sphere of Islamic music culture*.

History tells us that the *surna* and *daman* were introduced to Ladakh by the musicians who are said to have accompanied Queen Khatoon of Baltistan on her journey to Leh to marry the Ladakhi King Jamyang Namgyal (ruled ca. 1560–1590). If we accept that this is how the distinctive rhythmic aspects of Ladakhi music also came to be known here, as seems most likely, then we must consider the extent to which they have been infused into the native, predominantly vocal culture during the 400 years which have since passed.

Bearing in mind that *surna* and *daman* ensembles were initially based at the Royal Palace in Leh, it is not at all surprising that the instrumental styles have not greatly affected the indigenous vocal styles. It is still true to say that many singers are not used to being accompanied. Their songs are simpler and freer, in contrast to the more stylized songs and dances of Leh and its surrounding villages. When voices and instruments do mix, it is usually on the occasion of formal gatherings when social constraints and conventions determine the types of songs which are accompanied, and the forms that they take.

* At this point a recording was played.

In Ladakh, therefore, there is not so much a distinction between "art" and "folk" cultures (as in Kashmir and other Muslim areas), as one between "urban" and "rural" cultures. In the upper valleys and plains of Ladakh, musicians are still unknown and the free, archaic vocal styles and vigorous foot-stamping dances (such as the *zhabs-bro*) which we observe in these regions remind us of the closeness between the pastoral/nomadic cultures of Ladakh and Tibet. In contrast, Leh is much richer in instrumental music, and it continues to thrive under new, foreign influence. Whilst it takes the lead in the accommodation of vocal and instrumental styles – preserving the old and promoting the new – it is nevertheless subject to the cultural inertia of the rural areas, and so the vocal and instrumental styles complement one another, combining only where so desired. This flexibility of expression reflects Ladakh's unique position on the interface between Tibetan and Indo-Persian cultures, and furthermore, it is this adaptability and freedom which makes Ladakhi music so interesting and appealing.

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- Note:** Fieldwork for this project was carried out during the summers of 1985-6 with grants from The Cripplegate Foundation (London) and the N'ions Association of The City University, London.

Summary

The academic legacy of the Moravian Missionaries in Ladakh includes the musical studies of Francke. This paper addresses one question raised by these studies, namely the relationship of Ladakhi music to that of Tibet, especially in the highly relevant domain of rhythm. In addition to identifying the rhythmic properties of Ladakhi dance music, and showing how they provide evidence that the instrumental style comes from Kashmir, I examine the extent to which this rhythmic style has adapted, and been adapted by, the native vocal culture.