

JOSEPH JORDANIA
(AUSTRALIA, GEORGIA)

TRADITIONAL POLYPHONY IN ASIA:
PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

My greetings to the participants of the Fifth International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony. Those who attended the previous symposia, would remember that we've never had before a separate topic dedicated to a certain region (or a problem) neither on our symposia, nor at the Borjomi International Conferences held in the 1980s. We did have couple of discussions about adding a special theme earlier, most notably during our 1988 Borjomi Conference, and finally, during the final session of the fourth symposium, in 2008, we decided to introduce a new tradition of adding a special new topic to the existing broad range of themes. Such a special theme can represent one of the elements of phenomenon of polyphonic music (for example, the drone), or a region of the world (for example, Asia), or a study method (for example, comparative method), or a problem of terminology (for example, what is polyphony). It was clear that these symposium-specific themes must represent a topic, which seems to us particularly important, or, on the other hand, a particularly neglected sphere of contemporary ethnomusicology.

Traditional Polyphony in Asia was chosen as the special theme added to the program of the current, fifth symposium. Some of our colleagues might find our choice of this theme strange, as Asia is mostly known among ethnomusicologists as the biggest region of the world covered by the monodic singing traditions, with very small and far between elements of polyphony scattered around. For example, even is huge index of the volume *South Asia* of the Garland encyclopedia of World Music the term *polyphony* is fully absent. I will try to argue in my paper that this general perception of the Asian music is not justified, and I will do my best to convince colleagues and the listeners that Asia is the home of extremely rich and interesting polyphonic traditions. Some of these traditions are virtually fully neglected and left out of scholarly attention. We will also hear a few examples of traditional polyphony from some regions of Asia.

First of all let me briefly discuss what is the reason of such a neglect toward the polyphonic traditions in Asia:

1. When ethnomusicologists study musical culture of a certain country or a region, they usually concentrate on one, usually the most representative, *trademark* musical genre, characteristic for this country or region. Such leading genres are, for example, mugham-makom system in the number of musical traditions of the Middle East and the Central Asia, vocal polyphony in Georgia or Albania, or the gamelan in the countries of South-East Asia. As polyphony is not considered as the central, "trademark" element of any of the Asian countries, study of polyphony usually stays out of the research interests of the scholars;

2. Traditions of vocal polyphony are present in Asia, as a rule, among the national minorities, populated peripheral regions of the country, and as we know, musical traditions of the national minorities rarely get serious scholarly attention;

3. Traditions of vocal polyphony are present in Asia, as well in many other parts of the world, in the geographically most isolated and distant regions: in high mountains, islands, big forests massifs, swampy terrains. Such an awkward geographic distribution makes it physically difficult to access, record and study the

surviving polyphonic traditions.

4. Widely accepted in contemporary ethnomusicology approach of *cultural anthropology* particularly favors long-term study of musical tradition with a “master” of this tradition. Traditions of professional and semi-professional musicians in many parts of Asia suits this model of research very well. On the other hand, non-professional, group type of the music-making in most of the polyphonic traditions is almost impossible to approach from the learning process with the “master”. That was probably another reason why the study of professional and semi-professional musical traditions were favored over the study of elusive “folk” group practices.

As we can see, the widespread neglect of most of the Asian traditions of vocal polyphony has several reasons: these traditions are on the periphery of the interests of national and international scholars, polyphony is present among national minorities, polyphonic traditions are as a rule present in the most isolated and faraway geographic regions, and the most accepted practice of the ethnomusicological research also suits better for the study of the professional and semi-professional (usually monophonic) musical traditions.

I would like to offer an advice to my colleagues, particularly to younger generation of ethnomusicologists, why might be interested in the phenomenon of vocal polyphony: if any of you is eager to discover new traditions of vocal polyphony in any country of their interest, you should first study seriously the physical map of the country, and find out, where are the most isolated, hard to access regions. After this a series of fieldworks should be organized in these isolated regions. I have noted in several my publications, that choral polyphony seems to be an extremely ancient phenomenon, the remnant of human evolutionary history, and as time passes on, traditional vocal polyphony is gradually disappearing (and in the best case scenario is becoming professionalized in city and village ensembles, interested in tours and financial rewards). In this process the surviving traditions of polyphony most likely to be found in the most isolated regions and environments. That is the reason why I propose to my younger colleagues to search for the surviving traditions of vocal polyphony in the most isolated regions of the world. I believe such aimed search will give higher chances of finding new polyphonic traditions.

My paper today has two aims: (1) to give a brief review of the most important polyphonic traditions in Asia, and (2) to discuss Asian polyphonic traditions in the context of the world polyphonic traditions, and suggest the perspectives of their diachronic study.

1. Polyphonic traditions in Asia

It is impossible to discuss in any depth all the existing polyphonic traditions of Asia, therefore I will concentrate only on the most important and less known to the listeners polyphonic traditions. We will also hear musical examples from some of Asian traditions.

The unique tradition of vocal polyphony is still surviving on the **Island Bahrain, in Persian Gulf**. Carriers of this tradition are local pearl divers, who go out in the open sea on big boats. Boats contain several rovers and a diver. Diver dives in the open sea and searches for the pearl on the bottom of the sea. After the search divers are pulled out by the rope, which is tied to his foot. Each dive is risky, as sea is full of sharks. Divers do from 20 to 40 dives every day. Each boat contains an experienced singer, who sings the melismatic melody. Rovers accompany the melody with the very specific bass. The bass is a very low drone (two octaves lower than melody), performed with loud growling accents. According to the singers, this deep sound is a stylized symbolic representation of the whale sound from the deep of the sea.

Let us hear the example of polyphony of the pearl divers. This example was recorded by the French

scholar Scheherazade Hassan (I am very grateful for her kind permission to use this sound recording) (audio ex. 1).

Before we move to other Asian polyphonic traditions, I want to remind readers, that the history of Bahrain was closely associate with the Sumerians, and were known to Sumerians as “Dilmun”. Scholars believe that the business of pearl diving has been going on Bahrain for five or six thousands years, and the technology of the business (and most likely the accompanying singing) has not changed much for all this time. Sadly, after the establishment of the artificial *pearl farms* in the 20th century, the business of pearl diving and all associated culture started to decline. The tradition of pearl diving has been lost in the second half of the beginning of the 1950s, and the ancient tradition of drone polyphony is also on its way of dying out. Apart from Bahrain, the presence of similar songs has been reported in Kuwait.

Now I would like to briefly discuss the vocal polyphonic traditions of **Afghanistan**. In general, Afghanistan is known as a home of highly developed traditions of vocal monophony, but in eastern Afghanistan, in the impenetrable mountains of Hindukush, in a region known as Nuristan, there is a very interesting and mostly unknown tradition of vocal polyphony. This tradition is stylistically very close to the polyphonic traditions from the Europe, more specifically – to the Balkan and Baltic dissonant vocal polyphony. I have discussed the existing parallels between the Baltic and Nuristani traditions in detail in my 2006 book (Jordania, 2006), so I will not go back to this topic. I would like symposium participants to hear two examples of Nuristani polyphony, performed the first example by women, and another by men. This material was recorded by Austrian scholar Herman Pressl, during the peaceful for Afghanistan 1960s. These recordings were sent to me by the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv, and I am very grateful to them (audio ex. 2, 3).

Surrounded by Moslem countries from all sides, Nuristan population was successful in keeping their ethnic integrity, lifestyle and culture intact from much of the foreign influence for the thousands of the years. It is widely known that Nuristanis were friendly towards the Alexander the Great, who came to them as a friend on his quest to conquer India and the rest of the world. On the other hand, Tamerlane, who came to Nuristan more than 1500 years later to conquer them, got a non-friendly reception, and was defeated by the severe terrain. After all the horses of Tamerlane died in mountains, the great conqueror turned his back to Nuristan and thanked Allah for his safe return. Only in 1895 managed Afghani rulers to subdue the independence of the region, and they immediately enforced Moslem religion upon the region. Before the 1895 this region was known in Afghanistan as *Kafiristan (the land of infidels)*, but after 1895 the new name was given to the region: *Nuristan (the land of light)*. As we can see, the old musical traditions so far had not been affected by the new religion.

Let us now move to Vietnam. Vietnam, like Afghanistan, is also known as the country of vocal monophony. Here, as in Afghanistan, polyphony is present only among national minorities, who live in the most mountainous regions of the country. It is widely believed, that the bulk of contemporary Vietnamese, so called *Viets*, came here from China during the last few centuries. Viets gradually replaced the older aboriginal population, and the older population was forced to retreat to the mountainous regions of the country in the central and northern parts of Vietnam.

Let us hear an example of vocal polyphony from north Vietnamese mountains. In this song women and men are antiphonally singing two-part polyphony based on sharp secondal harmonies. This recording was published by a Vietnamese-French ethnomusicologist Tran Quang Hai. Participants of the 2002 Symposium in Tbilisi would remember Tran Quang Hai, who delivered a paper on overtone singing tradition (audio ex. 4).

The most isolated polyphonic tradition of the world is also in Asia. It is located in North Japan, on island

Hokkaido, and is practiced by the aboriginal dwellers of the Japanese islands, Ainu. Japan, the same way as Afghanistan and Vietnam, is known as a monophonic country, and polyphony is only found in the national minority group. In this case there are no high mountains, but only the factor of surviving the older traditions in the fringes of the region. I am not going to give participants of the symposium to listen to the examples of Ainu vocal polyphony, as they will have a unique chance today to hear a special paper dedicated to Ainu polyphony, presented by Rie Kochi, a musicologist from Hokkaido, expert in Ainu traditional music. Also today, the participants will have a chance to hear the presentation by Daiva Rachiunaite, dedicated to the comparative study of Lithuanian Sutartines and Ainu traditional polyphony.

Similarly, I am not going to discuss very interesting polyphonic traditions from Taiwan, as we will soon hear the presentation of Lu Yuhsiu, an ethnomusicologist from Taiwan (currently is working at Beijing Central Conservatory of Music). So symposium participants will have a good possibility to learn Taiwanese polyphonic style. I want only to mention, that according to the scholarly interest towards polyphony, Taiwanese vocal polyphony is an exception in Asia. Study of Taiwanese polyphony was first conducted by Japanese scholars, so the live tradition of vocal polyphony became a part of common ethnomusicological knowledge earlier than many other polyphonic traditions from Asia. there's more. In October 2002, just a few days after the First International Symposium here, in Tbilisi, a special conference, dedicated to vocal polyphony, was held in Taiwan. This conference remains so far the only scholarly meeting in Asia solely dedicated to traditional polyphony.

Vocal polyphony is also present in India. More specifically, polyphony in India is distributed in the tribal northwestern part of India, Assam (among Naga tribes), in the southern part of India (again among the local tribes), and also in parts of North India, for example, in Garwhal and Kumaon. Polyphony in Assam was studied in the publication of Schneider and Kauffman (Schneider, Kauffman, 1960), but polyphony in other regions of India are mostly neglected, and as I've mentioned earlier, even the word *polyphony* is absent in Garland Encyclopedia of World Music dedicated to the music of India.

Polyphony is richly represented in the south-western part of China, again among the national minorities, living in the mountains. Out of more than 50 officially recognizes national minorities, about half of them have traditions of vocal polyphony. In some peoples the tradition of singing in parts is so strong, that no monophonic songs had been recorded there. We must note here, that unlike many other Asian countries where polyphonic traditions are mostly neglected, Chinese scholars are actively studying the polyphonic traditions of the Chinese minorities. As much as I know, traditions of vocal polyphony are also spread in the countries bordering with the Southern part of China, for example, Nepal and Burma, although I am not aware of any works dedicated to these polyphonic traditions.

And finally, I want to finish the short review of vocal polyphonic traditions in Asia with the example of vocal polyphony from Tibet. The fact of the presence of vocal polyphony in Tibet was known to me from the almost century-old book by Karl Butcher, *Work and Rhythm* (Butcher, 1919). Apart from this, recently, in 2006 in the Central China TV Program (CCTV) an extremely interesting example of Tibetan polyphony was broadcasted. The song was known as *Tibetan Women's Love Song*. Their polyphonic style is very close to the Balkan and Baltic traditions of polyphony, with drone and the sharp dissonant sounds. I want to thank Victor Grauer, co-participant of Alan Lomax Cantometrics project, who made me aware of this musical tradition¹ (audio ex. 5).

2. Asian polyphony in World context: research perspectives

Now I would like to briefly discuss the possible perspectives of the study of Asian vocal polyphonic traditions in the international context of polyphonic cultures.

I dedicated number of works to the comparative study of vocal polyphonic traditions. In these works I was noting the extreme stability of polyphonic traditions and the coincidence of the data of vocal polyphony with the data of physical anthropology and genetics (see for example, Jordania 1988, 1989, 2006). Therefore I consider the comparative study of polyphonic traditions of different regions extremely fruitful.

Broad look at the Asian polyphonic traditions suggests that there are promising perspectives in this direction. I want to draw your attention to a highly specific type of polyphony in several regions of Asia, which is characterized by drone, short melodic phrases, and most importantly, very sharp dissonant harmonies, based on the interval second. This type of polyphony is distributed in many parts of our planet, and is known to some as *Balkan type* of polyphony. This type of polyphony is more known with the term used by Florian Messner, *schwebungsdiaphonie* (interference diaphony). According to the acoustic research conducted in Germany and Austria, the seconds used in this type of polyphony from all over the world are of a very specific distance, comprising a distance between major and minor seconds, which creates the maximum *roughness* of the sound. For the English-Speaking countries I suggested the use of term *D/D polyphony* (short from *Drone-Dissonant Polyphony*).

Polyphony of this type we have already heard today from Nuristan, Vietnam, Tibet. We can find the same of polyphony in South-East China, Taiwan, also in Indonesia on Island Flores, Papua New Guinea, Melanesia, on the island Baluan. This type of polyphony is particularly well known in several regions of the Europe (Balkans, Baltic region, Polesie region between the Ukraine and Belarus; according to historical sources this type of polyphony was also present in Italy). Mixture of the drone and dissonant intervals, but in more complex three and four part texture is also present in Georgia, and is known among several peoples of the North Caucasus. Mixture of drone and secondal dissonances is also present in other regions of the world as well, for example, in western Africa, among the Krele tribe in South America among Q'eros living in the Andes.

When in the middle years of the 20th century a brilliant Dutch ethnomusicologist, Jaap Kunst, the leading expert of Indonesian music, heard for the first time the traditional polyphonic singing from Bulgaria, he was so profoundly impressed by the closeness of these traditions that in 1954 he published a book on the possible links historical between Bulgaria and Indonesia. During the last decade of the 20th century Austrian-Australian ethnomusicologist Florian Messner revisited Jaap Kunst's subject, visited these regions in Flores and Bulgaria, studied their polyphonic traditions and came to the conclusion that the closeness is so big and specific that it is virtually impossible to be a result of the convergent development. A song recorded in island Flores seemed to Bulgarian singers to have been recorded in neighboring Bulgarian village, and vice versa, Flores villagers thought that Bulgarian song was recorded in the neighboring village in Flores.

Let us ask a question: is it possible to propose that such a specific type of complex polyphony developed independently in such geographically faraway regions? Of course, theoretically everything is possible, but practically this would be difficult to imagine, particularly as we have the closeness of polyphonic traditions not only in two regions of the world, but in many isolated regions of the world.

To explain the existence of such a specific type of polyphony (I mean the *D/D style*, or drone-dissonant style), I suggest a very different from Jaap Kunst hypothesis. I propose that instead of late cultural contacts between peoples we are dealing with the survival of the earliest type of choral singing of humanity.

According to my own model of the genesis of the music, choral polyphony was developed by the forces

of natural selection, and was the potent strategic weapon for our hominid ancestors. It was transforming them from individual beings into a unit of a people with single collective identity, was putting them into the altered state of consciousness, in a *battle trance*, where they were not feeling pain and fear, and in critical moments were religiously dedicated to the group interests to the point of sacrificing themselves. This state of trance, which had a strong neuro-chemical basis, created the basis for the human social nature, for human morality and religion feeling.

Such primordial singing tradition, apart from other characteristic features, was based on extremely dissonant intervals, was performed extremely loud, virtually shouting, and was connected to dancing type rhythmic body movements (particularly round dances). In a new monograph dedicated to the music in human evolution (it was published in 2011), I argue, that this ancient polyphonic style, which was created by the forces of natural selection in the early stages of hominid evolution, had a crucial role in the survival of early hominids. I suggested that this type of choral singing was connected to such important morphological and behavioral changes, as bipedalism, losing body hair, appearing of long hair on human head, appearing of longer legs and the increase of body size, diminishing of teeth size and physical strength, increase of sweating and body odor, appearance of the phenomenon of asking questions and intelligence, making stone tools, body painting, use of cloths. In short, according to my model, choral singing, based on sharp dissonant intervals, was one of the central factors of the human evolution.

We are now speaking about the processes that took incredibly long time, literally millions of years to accomplish. If forming a tradition of choral singing was a part of these evolutionary processes, and if such an ancient polyphonic tradition ever existed, it must have been taken by our ancestors on their way out of Africa about two million years ago. Now, if we are searching for the possible remnants of this primordial choral tradition, then (1) the remnants of this tradition must be scattered around the world, and (2) they must be found in the most geographically isolated regions of the world, like in high mountain ranges, on the islands, and in forest massifs.

I suggest that we have exactly this happening when we look at the distribution of the D/D polyphonic style. This polyphony is distributed in very different regions of the world, on different continents, and everywhere in the most isolated mountainous, island, forest covered and peripheral regions of the world.

For sure, announcing that human tradition of choral polyphony is two millions of the years old, will be met with a big dose of skepticism by the most of the listeners and my colleagues. I can fully understand this skepticism. Up to date, the suggestion by victor Grauer that vocal polyphony can be 100 000 years old, is the oldest timelines that had been suggested in ethnomusicology. My suggestion (2 000 000 years) is twenty times older, than Grauer's suggestion².

If the incredibly deep date of the origins of vocal polyphony seems to a reader totally unrealistic, then a reader is left to somehow explain the obvious closeness of so many complex and specific polyphonic traditions from around the world, from the Balkans, Caucasus, Baltic, Hindukush and Tibet to the mountains of the Papua New Guinea, Flores, Taiwan, Central Africa and Andes. On the other hand, if we accept that the timeline of millions of the years is at least theoretically possible, then suddenly everything falls on its place.

My model explains the presence of specific vocal polyphony based on dissonant intervals in different most isolated regions of the world, and if we take into account the well known principle of *Occam's Razor*, then the survival of the ancient traditions of group singing will seem very logic and convincing.

I very much hope that our instinctive rejection of the huge timelines for the origins of human group singing will not become the unsurpassable psychological problem to see the obvious prospects of my sug-

gestion not only for the origins of vocal polyphony, but for many other crucial topic of human evolution.

Research of the polyphonic traditions of Asia can and should play the crucial role in the study of these processes.

Notes

¹After the 2010 Symposium, in October-November of 2011, I specially visited Sichuan province in China, and in Chengdu recorded several examples of this fascinating tradition from so called Alma Tibetan (or Aremai Tibetan) singers. While there, I also was made aware, that the song title on the CCTV was a non-traditional, added detail (just for publicity), and had nothing to do with love songs. In fact, according to the information I received, Aremai Tibetans do not have love songs, and the region is known for its free sexual mores

²Both Grauer and myself connect vocal polyphony to the earliest polyphonic tradition that were formed in Africa and that humans took from Africa to the rest of the world. The difference between our approaches is that Grauer's model is based on the so called *Recent African Hypothesis*, which considers the date of human origin as about 100 000 years old, and my own model is based on competing *Multiregional Hypothesis* (or as I call it *Ancient African Hypothesis*) which suggest that the so called Homo erectus was in fact an archaic Homo sapiens

References

Bucher, Karl. (1919). *Arbeit und Rhythmus*, Leipzig: Reinicke

Grauer, Victor. (2011). *Sounding the Depths: Tradition and the Voices of History*. Self published

Jordania, Joseph. (1988). "Folk Polyphony, Ethno-Genesis and Race Genesis". Journ. *Sovetskaja Etnografija* 2:23-33 (In Russian with English summary)

Jordania, Joseph. (1989). *Georgian Traditional Polyphony in International Context of Polyphonic Cultures: The Problem of Origins of Polyphony*. Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University Press (In Russian with English summary)

Jordania, Joseph. (1997). "Perspectives of interdisciplinary research of part-singing phenomenon". In: *Ethnomusicology and Historical Musicology - Common Goals, Shared Methodologies?* Erich Stockmann zum 70 Geburtstag. Edited by Christoph-Hellmut Mahling and Stephan Munch. P. 211-216. Tutzing: Schneider

Jordania, Joseph. (2006). *Who Asked the First Question? The Origins of Human Choral Singing, Intelligence, Language and Speech*. Tbilisi: Logos

Jordania, Joseph. (2011). *Why do People Sing? Music in Human Evolution*. Logos

Kauffmann, Hans E, Schneider, Marius. (1960). *Lieder aus den Naga-Bergen (Assam)*. Volume 19 of Congrès et colloques de l'Université de Liège

Audio Examples

Audio example 1. Pearl divers of Bahrain

Audio example 2. Afghanistan, women's singing

Audio example 3. Afghanistan, men's singing

Audio example 4. Vietnam, the province Kao Bang. Male and female groups sing in alternation

Audio example 5. *Aremai* Tibetan polyphony, group of three women