MUSC3070 – Music of Southeast Asia

ESSAY: MUSIC AND THE SPIRIT WORLD IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Western music suffers the unique phenomenon of existing for its own sake; rarely is it incorporated into daily ritual, or used as a means to some greater outcome. Not so is the case for the traditional music of Southeast Asia. Here, it is integrated so completely into culture that it simply cannot be understood independent of its function in society. More specifically, the music of this region often serves as a link between the human world and the perceived world of the spirits, which exists parallel to the human world. This belief is the basis of the animist tradition, which so powerfully influences all music from this region, despite centuries of external religious influences including Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Though musical interactions between the human world and the world of the spirits or gods vary significantly between cultures, there are equally as many similarities, the most important of which is the fact that music is rarely performed in isolation. Rather, it is combined with other performing media, most commonly dance. This paper outlines the ritual practices of four Southeast Asian cultures: the healing ceremonies of the Malaysian Temiar, the funeral ceremonies of the Hmong people, the *Evening Overture* and *wai khru* ritual from Thailand, and the *rangda/barong* ritual of Bali. Underpinned primarily by music, these ritual performances allow members of their respective cultures to communicate directly, become possessed by, or simply appease the deities whom the people rely on for prosperity.

SONGS OF HEALING IN THE TEMIAR RAINFOREST

The Temiar people are native inhabitants of the upland rainforests of Malaysia. Being animists, they believe that the world around them is imbued with spirits belonging to living and inanimate things. When a Temiar man (or occasionally a woman) is asleep, his or her head soul detaches from their body and interacts with other head souls of surrounding entities (both living and non-living). It is through these interactions that the dreamers learn songs from spiritguides, which they can later recall in ritual. It needs to be said that songs only have power in ritual if they are performed by the person who dreamed them, or one who learned the song from the original dreamer. The singing draws in the spiritguide from the surrounding forest into the longhouse (where rituals take place), empowering the medium and allowing them to perform the healing ceremony, where music assists in returning lost headsouls to ill patients. Roseman (1991: 66-67) suggests that in fact it is not just the song that is transferred from the spiritguide to the dreamer, but also almost every aspect of performance including dance steps and bamboo-tube percussion. It is also noted that the song is taught in the manner of the familiar first singing line-by-line which the dreamer will repeat (*ibid*: 53), until the song is learned. In healing performance, the song is performed in the same manner, with the medium singing one line, which is

repeated by a female chorus. It would seem then, that almost every aspect of the healing ceremony is informed by the spirits with whom the Temiar are interacting. It comes as little surprise then that songs comprise the majority of the Temiar musical repertoire. These songs are of great importance, because the people believe that the spirits can see high above the forest, and so "bring extensive knowledge and perspective to bear on human problems." (Roseman 2006: 150)

From the first interaction between dreamer and spirit familiar, music acts as a conversation or transfer of knowledge. In the second case, where the spiritguide is summoned to a healing ceremony, the possession of the medium seems to be the case. Trance is a frequent occurrence in healing ceremonies, particularly those in which the medium wishes to alleviate a sense of longing. Music becomes the primary means of inducing such a state, considering the rhythmic nature of the bamboo stampers and the importance of dance in the ceremony. Trance is seen as the manifestation of the spiritguide within the body of the medium (Roseman 1991: 131).

It seems totally natural that the Temiar use song to interact with the spirit world, given the nature of music. Roseman (1996) states:

> Songs stretch the parameters of everyday speech […] Dance stylizes gestures of daily life […] and the transformative power of ritual is literally and figuratively set in motion. (p. 233)

In other words, song and dance act upon speech and movement, turning them from ordinary phenomena into extraordinary ones. This transformation is paralled by that which occurs when a medium transitions between the everyday world and the spirit world.

Roseman (1991: 156) also claims that there is a tension between the human world and the spirit world, "with humans attempting to draw spirits into their realm during ceremonies, while spirits likewise attempt to draw humans into their realm." In addition to healing illness, music then also acts as a means to control longing and prevent a human's headsoul from being attracted by the spirits to leave its host and live in the jungle.

MUSIC IN HMONG FUNERALS

Like the Temiar, the Hmong are originally uplands people, although they are now distributed around the globe. Within Southeast-Asia, their population is mostly spread across northern Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. Their musical tradition consists of both secular and sacred music, the latter of which communicates with the spirit world. The Hmong are not generally considered to be animists, although

their religious views have much in common with animism. Tapp (1989: 59) states that "the Hmong world is inhabited by a variety of natural, ancestral, and supernatural spirits or Gods … [and] is closely modeled on the Chinese Otherworld." There is no greater display of Hmong spiritual rituals than those witnessed in a Hmong funeral, where music plays a critical role. A six-piped mouth organ, called a *qeej*, acts as a bridge between the human world and the spirit world. Its role is to instruct the soul of the deceased on how it may journey to the world of the ancestors. The role of the *qeej* is critical, for without it, the soul can never reach the afterlife (Xiong 1999 in Falk 2003: 4). Furthermore, the soul cannot understand the message unless it is played through the *qeej*. The message is unintelligible to living audiences, as it has been encoded first in memorized songs which are only known to master *qeej* players, and second by the substitution of musical pitches for vocal tones on the pipes. This encoding arises from the belief that if a living person were to understand the message, they would also be carried away into the afterworld. (Falk 2003-2004: 25-26).

As with the music of almost every region of Southeast Asia, movement is as much part of the music as sound. In the case of this ritual, the *qeej* player customarily turns and spins around the drum which also plays during Hmong funerals, firstly to physically guide the soul of the deceased to its ancestors, and secondly to confuse evil spirits who may wish to follow the soul in pursuit; all spirits, not just that of the deceased, can understand the instructions performed by the *qeej* (Thao 2006: 256). The *qeej* player, unlike the Temiar healer or patient, does not become possessed. The interaction is more communicative, and the two entities never make direct contact. In fact, Hmong spiritual rituals belong in the minority of musical rituals in the region that do not encourage entering a state of trance. Also unlike most other cultures in Southeast Asia, the living audience has little interaction with the spirit world. In fact, even the qeej player is excluded from spirit communication, when one considers that "the *qeej*'s funeral message is not identified with its player. It is the *qeej* itself that speaks (Falk 2003: 5).

Falk (2004: 9) also claims that "both audiences – the invisible and the living – very much enjoy the *qeej*'s pieces for "fun." This implies a different, more passive interaction between the musician and the spirits, which is very much a one-way conversation.

It is interesting to note one particular similarity between Hmong funeral music and Temiar healing music. In both cases, the origins of the music itself come from divine sources. For the Temiar, songs are passed on from spiritguides, but in the case of the Hmong, the invention of the *qeej* and the words it plays during funerals and other ceremonies are attributed to the Great Creator Saub and the dragon *zaj,* who passed on the knowledge to the Hmong ancestors, who in turn passed it down through an oral tradition (Falk 2003: 5).

RITUAL MUSIC IN HINDU-BUDDHIST THAILAND

The *Evening Overture* in Thailand, a series of pieces that usually precedes nighttime ritual performances, stands as exception to the general rule, according to which music in Southeast Asia acts in conjunction with other performing genres (such as dance) in order to communicate with the spirit world. Save perhaps for the *Talu* in Javanese *wayang kulit*, it stands as one of the only cases in the region where instrumental music is the only force that interacts with the spirit world. In the case of this ritual, the spirit world is not one of deities who inhabit the objects in the living world. Rather, it is a heavenly realm where Gods reside. Through the performance of the *Evening Overture,* particularly in *wai khru*, the Gods, including the Hindu gods Shiva and Vishnu (known also as Narai), are summoned from the heavens to the ceremonial venue to give their blessings to the event (Lysloff and Wong 1991: 328). This interaction is not so different to that of the Temiar, who invite spirits from the outside into their longhouses. A key difference between the two rituals lies in the fact that the *Overture* music is completely instrumental. Another difference is that the role of the deities is to simply oversee, rather than to assist healing or impart wisdom. Accompanied by the *piiphaat* ensemble, the works are considered to be some of the most sacred in the repertoire of Hindu-Buddhist music in Thailand.

The *Evening Overture* for the most part is performed in the *wai khru* ritual, where in many cases, spirit possession occurs. The ritual itself is a celebration of the ability of Thai classical music to connect with the sacred world. Wong (2001: 24) remarks that trance-dancing would often occur during times when the *piiphaat* ensemble was performing, although it is unlikely that this occurred during the playing of the *Overture*. However, possession serves no real function in the ceremony and in many performances of *wai khru*, possession does not occur (*ibid.*). The *Overture* music invalidates the claim that music requires some form of physical movement in order to communicate with the non-living realm.

MUSIC AND TRANCE IN BALI

Historically, Bali has always been one of the great locus points of the arts in Southeast Asia. Here, artistic ritual performances are incredibly diverse and frequent that no single art form can fully represent the nature of Balinese artistic expression. This diversity is driven largely by the fact that the Balinese regard all sounds, even those considered to be secular, as having power or intention (Gold 1998: 92). Of the

numerous rituals that communicate with the spirit world, the epic battle dance between Rangda the witch and the Barong, a mythical beast is particularly dramatic. Their confrontation is traditionally staged as part of festivals at the *Pura Dalem* (Temple of the Dead), and occasionally as part of an exorcism (Ornstein 1971: 58-59). In this ritual, music and dance work together to create the drama, in which the Gods and their followers are manifested in the dancers themselves. Trance plays a very important role in the ritual. Becker (1994) informs us:

> Before the ceremony begins, all the participants are put into trance at the temple to the accompaniment of long, slow vocal lines of classical poetry sung in union by a chorus of women from the village. (p 43)

Music, as with the Temiar and participants in Thai *wai khru*, plays a role in inducing a state of trance. In their trance, the men dance to the accompaniment of a Gamelan. Armed with daggers, they attack Rangda, but immediately become cursed and turn the daggers upon themselves. The gamelan music which accompanies the performers builds up in intensity to this point in the ritual, as the gong cycles shorten. This no doubt contributes to the frenzy that causes the dancers to attack Rangda and then later begin to stab themselves dangerously.

To perform the ritual without music is unthinkable, not only because of its accompaniment to dance. It is believed that the masks and costumes of the Barong and Rangda are conduits for the visiting deities, and the music is performed for their appeasement. Additionally, the instruments of the gamelan, particularly the gong, are believed to have supernatural powers that add an extra dimension of sacredness to the ritual.

The purpose of the ceremony is to bring balance to the cosmological forces affecting the village, and it is believed a successful performance of the ritual will prevent or end disease and disaster in a village.

MUSIC AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS

It is very difficult to make any generalizations about the manner in which music connects to the spirit world in Southeast Asia, other than it being a phenomenon that pervades most cultures in the region. It should really come as no surprise that music is one of the most suitable mediums for interaction with the spirit world, given its nature. Blacking makes the claim that “the essential quality of music is its power to create another world of virtual time” (1973: 27). It is invisible, much like the world of the spirits, and permeates space inescapably (Lysloff and Wong 1991: 315). Music also has the tendency to alter our perception of time, or sometimes completely suspend it. This is particularly relevant to the

Evening Overture in Thai rituals, which rely on this attribute to dissolve the barrier between the different worlds. Lysloff and Wong (*ibid*.) state that the *Overture* creates an atmosphere that interrupts the daily flow of time and establishes a special place for the audience.

It is also important to remember that music is transformative: it turns speech into song, and gesture into dance. So then, the way in which music transforms natural actions into supernatural ones mirrors the way in which the living world transitions from ordinary to extraordinary in ritual. The transformation of speech into song and movement into dance is recognized by the Temiar and the Balinese, who all regard music as something sacred. Even the Hmong take advantage of music's transformative quality by communicating to the other world by converting their speech into a new sound through the *qeej*.

Trance is present in most cultures, and in most cases coincides with a state of possession or visitation. Music, of course, is used to induce such a state of mind. Becker claims that "[trance] presents to the trancer a special type of knowledge, nearly always accompanied by a sense of absolute certainty in that knowledge." (1994: 46) It is also fast becoming common knowledge that trance is a learned behavior, due to the fact that cultural expectations play a part in shaping the behavior of a trancer. Although music is not compulsory for conditioning the mind into a state of trance (consider the Vietnamese mediums who become possessed in *hao vo* rituals) there can be no denying that it plays a central role in most rituals where possession occurs. The experience of trance strengthens the beliefs of the culture in the power of music as a means to communicate with the spirit world, which is the case for the Rangda and Barong ritual in Bali, the healing ceremonies of the Temiar, and even the Thai *wai khru*.

Ritual practice and the involvement of music seems to vary a great deal within the region of Southeast Asia, yet despite all these differences, music remains a central means of reaching the world of the spirits, regardless of the religious stratification within any culture, whether it be animist, Hindu or Buddhist. For this reason above all others, the music of Southeast Asia distinguishes itself from the music of the rest of the world.

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