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Songs, Cultural Representation and Hybridity in Ladakh

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Songs, Cultural Representation and Hybridity in Ladakh

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LADAKHI LU: SONGS, CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND HYBRIDITY IN LITTLE TIBET

This article examines how Ladakhi songs represent cultural self-images through associated musical, textual, and visual tropes. Many songs of the past, both from the old royal house and the rural Buddhist populations, reflect the socio-political structure of Ladakhi society. Although some songs, past and present, reflect a pan-Tibetan identity, a distinct Ladakhi identity is nevertheless consistently asserted. Situated on the caravan routes between India, Tibet, China, and Central Asia, Ladakhi culture developed distinctive hybrid characteristics, including in its musical styles. The article discusses this tradition of hybridity from the 17th Century to the present day. Ladakhi music has moved into modern media space, portrayed through scholarly works, concerts, mass media, and the internet. The article examines various contemporary representations of “tradition” and ethnic identity in both traditional and popular music. Looking at Ladakhi popular music, we see further hybridity based on media influences from Nepali popular music, Bollywood, and from Western popular styles, revealing how they interact with concepts of modernity in 21st Century Ladakh.

In this article I examine how Ladakhi songs or *lu* (*lu*), past and present, characterize cultural self-images through associated musical, textual, and visual tropes. I show how Ladakhi *lu* represent the ways in which the people of the former Himalayan kingdom, more specifically the Buddhist population¹, have situated themselves over the centuries in relation to the broader universe, and particularly the larger surrounding cultural centers.

Located on a major trading nexus between India, Tibet, and Central Asia, Ladakh absorbed varied influences in material and non-tangible culture, melding them with a predominantly Tibetan substrate. The result is a certain hybridity characteristic of Ladakhi music from the 17th Century to the present day.

Many songs of the past, both from the old royal house and the rural Buddhist populations, reflect the socio-political structure of Ladakhi society. They portray a view of social and spiritual interconnection between people, social strata, and the wider world. Looking at Ladakhi culture through semiotic glasses, I have found a reflection

of Geertz’s model which views man as “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz 1973: 5). This is particularly true of a number of the song texts, which, in my view, can be seen to present Ladakhi society as a mandala, that is, a symbolic diagram of the world according to Vajrayana Buddhist iconography that acts as a focus for meditation in tantric Buddhist practice. Mandalas are often in the form of a circle with a central focal figure and surrounding attendants. Others present a hierarchical field. I examine the transformation of this social representation in song as it interacts with history and culture from the early Tibetan Gesar epic, through the height of the Ladakhi Empire, and finally to Ladakh’s transition into the modern world.

The advent of modern mass media has allowed for various contemporary representations of “tradition” and ethnic identity portrayed through scholarly works, concerts, audio and video recordings, and the internet. An examination of Ladakhi popular music shows how cultural identity interacts with concepts of modernity and hybridity in 21st Century Ladakhi media space. Native music styles have given way to a *mélange* of Bollywood, Nepali pop, Western pop, reggae, etc., combined with a group of musical characteristics I term “generic Himalayan,” containing semiotic elements from Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh,

1. Ladakh’s population of approximately a quarter million is evenly divided between followers of different Tibetan Buddhist sects and Shiite Muslims.

and Nepal. Combined with visual imagery in music videos, we see the dichotomy of scenes from rural life and the life of young Ladakhi urbanities struggling to reconcile where they come from with where they are now.

THE GESAR EPIC AND PAN-TIBETAN SENTIMENT

The pan-Tibetan epic of King Gesar portrays the pre-Buddhist archetype of the “heaven- sent king” (Hermanns 1965). This pan-Tibetan epic is told everywhere from Ladakh to Mongolia. It transcends religion in Ladakh, with Muslim story tellers known to be some of its most renowned exponents (Rizvi 1998). We have Gesar records of texts and melodies dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, transcribed by Moravian missionaries such as Francke and Ribbach. The epic is conveyed through a mixture of story-telling, chant, and song. In the Ladakhi repertoire the Gesar songs are known as ‘*gying glu*’.

Gesar is a supernatural/superhuman figure who single-handedly overcomes enemies, human and otherwise, through a mixture of martial prowess, great strength, magic, and cunning. He is the archetypal charismatic hero, portrayed as a universal monarch. In the course of time the epic acquired Buddhist overlays, casting Gesar as an emanation of Avalokitesvara (Tib. *Chenrezig*), the bodhisattva of compassion in the form of a *chos-gyal* or Dharma king—a concept that repeats through the centuries. One of the rhetorical themes of the Gesar epic is a recitation of the hero’s superhuman childhood conquests. An example is a song Francke calls “Kesar’s Four Victories” (Francke 1902: 306).²

- 1) *When I, a boy, had reached my eighth year
I subdued the three Anubandhes of the East.
The boy has been triumphing over all of them.*
- 2) *When I, a boy, had reached my twelfth year,
I subdued all the great ministers of the hills.
The boy has been triumphing over all of them.*
- 3) *When I, a boy, had reached my sixteenth year,
I subdued the devil Khyabpa Lagring³ and his men.
The boy has been triumphing over all of them.*
- 4) *When I, a boy, had reached my eighteenth year,
I subdued all the bad Yarkandis⁴.
The boy has been triumphing over all of them*

Hermanns notes that the epic depicts an older, nomadic view of leadership based on personal charisma, rather than the kingship found in nation-states such as the Yarlung dynasties of Tibet (Hermanns 1965).

The Namgyal Dynasty traced its origins to the old

2. Francke notes that these may be the fulfillment of four prophecies in what he calls the “Springtime Myth.”

3. The chief demon of Bon-po, somewhat analogous to Satan (Tucci 1980).

4. He further notes that instead of “Yarkandis,” the word *Hor* may well be translated as “Mongolians.”

Tibetan royal dynasty as part of a narrative of historical legitimacy, even though there is evidence that it may only date to the mid-1400s. There is very little reference in Ladakhi traditional songs to the Yarlung Dynasty period in Tibetan history, when the Tibetan empire was founded and flourished. Some of the few exceptions are references in court songs about King Sengge Namgyal (ruled 1616-1642), which trace his lineage back to Nyatri Tsanpo, the semi-legendary founder of the Yarlung Dynasty. We see an example in the song “*Sonam mchog skyid*,” (The Highest Merit, Happiness):

*In King Nyatri Tsanpo’s bloodline,
The leaves of the wish-fulfilling tree are in full bloom.*

(Rabgias 1970: 70, trans. N.D.)

Another such reference is in the song “*shel ldan g.yu mtsho*” (The Crystalline Turquoise Ocean)

*The copper, white crystal
House of complete victory⁵
Inside on the lion’s throne⁶
Nyatri Tsanpo’s lineage.*

(Rabgias 1970: 76, trans. N.D.)

PRE-BUDDHIST HERITAGE

R.A. Stein, writing about the pre-Buddhist, legendary period of Nyatri Tsanpo, notes that Tibetan historians, especially those favoring Bon, described Tibet as being “protected” (i.e. ruled) by the Bonpos (priests), storytellers, and singers. There must have been some parallel functions between the Bonpos and that of the storytellers and singers. The storytellers (*sgrung*) passed on legends and other lore, and the singers (*lde’u*) sang riddles, and probably genealogies. Together, their body of lore constituted the “religion of men” (*mi chos*), as opposed to the “religion of the gods” (*lha chos*) presided over by the Bonpos (subsequently including Buddhist lamas). The few examples of *mi chos* that have come down to this day and are labeled as such are wise sayings told by the old men of the clan. These are always couched in poetic language, using metaphors, clichés and proverbial sayings (Stein: 1972).

Common with many religions of the region, people envision themselves situated in a matrix of the natural and supernatural world, with special guardians presiding over the cardinal directions. This mandala-like imagery is evident in the use of mythical pre-Buddhist references in some of the wedding song repertoire (*bag-ston lu*). Some of the most notable are the song contests known as “door songs” (*sgo lu*) (Francke 1923, Ribbach 1985). Five friends of the groom come to “purchase” the bride, and are known as *nyao-pa* (witnesses) or *nyo-pa* (purchasers). As described by Ribbach

5. The Dynastic name “Namgyal” means “Complete Victory” or “Victorious.”

6. This refers to King Sengge (Lion) Namgyal

in the early 20th century, the bride's party,] barricaded in the house, demands proof of their identity. The *nyao-pa*

claimed to be the sons of the gods of the high glacial mountains. The people of the house were suspicious. According to them no one could escape from that kingdom because it is guarded in all four heavenly directions (above, below, on the right and on left) by four female animals. The guards are the white lioness with the turquoise mane (*senge dkar-mo gyu-ral-can*) above on the glacier, Goldeye the fish (*nya-mo gser-mig*) below in the glacial stream, the queen of the wild birds (*bya-rgyal rgod-mo*) on the cliffs to the right and the giant tigress (*rgya-stag k'ra-mo*) in the sandalwood forest to the left.

(Ribbach 1985: 65-65).

There are variations, for example in what Tashi Rabgias calls the Ceremonial Arrow Song. These are not performed by *Mon* or *Beda* musicians⁷, but are the province of specialists known as *nyer pon*, or ritual masters.

See a great lion proudly posing upon that snow mountain.

See a vast turquoise mane upon that great lion.

See under the sutra the round turquoise lake.

See a female fish floating upon the turquoise lake.

See the agile wing extended upon the female fish

See the agile wing over the beloved solid ice.

See the solid ice upon the beloved earth and stone.

See the earth and stone upon the beloved mother fields.

See ripe grain on the mother fields.

(Rabgias 1970: 14, trans. N.D.)

SONG AS A REFLECTION OF THE PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL MATRIX

Other songs portray an awareness of local gods of the household, fields, waters, etc. For example, various writers have noted that a part of the marriage ritual and accompanying songs involves the bride saying good bye to her home deities, and the transfer of her allegiance to those of her husband (Ribbach 1985, Francke 1923, Mills 2000). This reflects the pre-Buddhist or Bon-po world view that situates people in a matrix of multiple realms: human, natural, and

7. The *Mon* and *Beda* are low-caste musicians who traditionally play instrumental music, such as the *surna* (double reed), *daman* (kettle-drums), and *daf* (frame drum), either for dancing or to accompany songs. In typical dichotomy, their music has traditionally been esteemed, while they were socially despised. The terms are used somewhat interchangeably, but *Mon* generally referred to sedentary, Buddhist subsistence farmers/carpenter/musicians, while *Beda* referred to migratory musicians. However *Beda* can also refer to Muslim musicians in general.

supernatural. Throughout the Tibetan cultural sphere, these Bon-po elements have joined seamlessly with Buddhism, fitting into the concept of the six classes of sentient beings: gods, demi-gods, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings.

The anthropologist Martin A. Mills contrasts renunciation, and the individualism of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism (all quests for enlightenment are that of the individual) with the web of social connections of the Ladakhi household (Mills 2000). He notes the traditional Ladakhi view of themselves as being rooted in local space and place, not just physically, but also chthonically—intimately bound up with the natal earth or soil. They are located in a complex matrix of relations between people and various spirits, such as household gods and protectors, naga, and itinerant demons. These deities are associated with features of the local geography, and they regulate and influence local agricultural and social production, so birth in one area or another signifies a relation with the deity presiding over it. The land itself is imbued with a notion of personhood and agency. Rituals are performed according to an astrologically and agriculturally influenced calendar, as well as in response to births, deaths, spirit possession, and unintentional pollution of places or household objects. These all function to maintain and/or restore proper relations with local spirit numina [*jig rten pa*].

Both Mills and Ribbach have described this complex of relationships in the extensive Ladakhi marriage rituals, in which the bride transfers her allegiance from her paternal household god (*pha lha*) to that of her husband. This transference is so complete that she is no longer allowed into the paternal shrine (Mills 2000, 2003, Tucci 1980, Ribbach 1985). In the following text from a *bagston lu*, referred to by Tashi Rabgias as *Ama'i dkar chol du* (At the Mother's Libation), the local deities are invoked to witness the coming of the bride and her attendants:

I supplicate the god living in the castle or anywhere else.

I supplicate the god living in the village or anywhere else.

I supplicate the god in the earth of this place.

I supplicate the god protecting the bride's attendants, man and horse.

Om, may it be auspicious.

(Rabgias 1970: 18, trans. N.D.)

SONG, MANDALA, TANTRA AND BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY

The concepts of tantric visualization pervade Ladakhi Buddhist song texts of many genres, both at the court and village level. These visualizations are based around iconographic depictions. The meditators are expected to use a verbal description to ultimately allow them to mentally recreate the image. Drawing up this type of verbal imagery,

many song lyrics describe a central figure, placing it in what can be characterized as either a mandala (Tib. *khyil 'khor*—symbolic visualizations of a pure land) or a field of merit (*tshogs zhing*) in which buddhas, bodhisattvas and/or gurus are surrounded by their worshipers, disciples, and/or attendants.

The local matrix is part of an extended traditional cosmology, consisting of the three levels of heaven, earth, and under the earth. In addition, the earth is envisioned as four continents with Mount Kailas (Tib. *Tise*) or the mythical Mount Sumeru in the center. The known world of India, Tibet, etc., is located in the Southern continent of Jambudvīpa (Tib. *Dzambu Ling*). In unknown mythical regions in various directions are legendary realms of righteousness. These are the heavenly, blissful abodes of buddhas and/or bodhisattvas into which one may be born for a time. The pure realms are all accessible through experiential meditation and trance *sadhana*, visualizations that are described in texts and oral teachings, as well as in songs. Visualizations such as these derive from the threads of Bon and Buddhism combined in the Tantric traditions, which involved a combination of deep analytic philosophy, ritual, and visualization meditations.

CENTRALIZED KINGSHIP AND THE SOCIAL MANDALA

Starting around the 15th century, kingship in Ladakh was increasingly centralized in the town of Leh under the Namgyal Dynasty. Frequent conflict with Muslim Baltistan and Kashmir led to increased militarism. By the late 16th century, Ladakh's empire expanded in the Western Himalayas, and was brought to its greatest heights by its most famous king, Sengge (Lion) Namgyal. Sengge extended Ladakhi control over parts of Baltistan and into Western Tibet, while at the same time engaging in devotional activities in conjunction with Lama Stagtsan Raspa, including the founding of monasteries at Hemis and Hanle and building *stupas* and *mani* walls. In addition, he built the formidable Leh Palace that overlooks the town.

This was a time of Buddhist resistance to Muslim pressure from the West, and yet also a time during which features which derive from the Muslim cultures of Kashmir and West Asia, such as rhythms, melodic patterns, and musical instruments, became part of Ladakhi music. Specifically, the Muslim, West Asian musical traits include the use of asymmetric and ternary meters, and mixed pentatonic and heptatonic scales. This contrasts with the more purely pentatonic scales and binary meters of Tibetan music. Mark Trewin has noted the influence of the Islamic cultural centers of Kashmir and Turkestan in Ladakh's secular arts and crafts. Yet their profound impact is barely acknowledged by the Ladakhi Buddhists themselves (Trewin 1995: 40). The map in figure 1 (Francke 1907) shows the position as, as Janet Rizvi calls it, the crossroads of high Asia (Rizvi 1998).

Ironically, one of the most iconic features of Ladakhi

music is the Muslim-derived *surna* (double reed oboe) and *daman* (kettle drum) ensemble, which was a symbol of royal power and general prestige, and brought by Sengge Namgyal's Muslim mother, Gyal Khatun, from Baltistan as part of her entourage. Even into the 21st century, no Ladakhi music performance is considered to be complete without the accompaniment of *surna* and *daman*. This instrumental combination derives from the West Asian military processional ensemble, such as the Turkish *zurna* (double reed oboe) and *davul* (double-headed bass drum) combination of Janissary bands, which spread into Central, South and East Asia in such incarnations as the *shehnai/naqqara* of the North Indian *naubat*, and the *nagaswaram/tavil* of the South Indian *periamelam*. Originally reed/drum bands functioned in a multi-faceted way, firstly, to scare the living daylight out of opposing armies (cf. the Scottish Highland bagpipe and drum bands), secondly as a representation of, or homage to, secular authority. As these ensembles spread, they frequently became associated with ceremonial homage to important persons, places, or events in sacred contexts. An example of this partial resignification in Ladakh is the use of the *lha nga* ensemble, not just to honor the kings, but important lamas and oracles as well. The Ladakhi-derived Tibetan *gar* ensemble honoring the Dalai Lamas is another example, as is the use of the *shehnai*, not just in the *naubat* ensemble (itself used to honor both kings and saints), but in Hindu temples, and as an important ceremonial adjunct in North Indian weddings.

In the 17th and 18th centuries this Muslim-influenced music was combined with sophisticated Buddhist texts to produce a genre of art songs in Leh's royal court. These *zhung lu* (congregational songs) are in praise of important persons and places. Most consist of verses listing the attributes of the objects of veneration, and in many of these *zhung lu* and other traditional genres, the songs begin with verses in which the listeners are reminded of their place in the world by giving homage to a hierarchy of places, and peoples. Listed from top to bottom, these are:

- The blue sky filled with the sun, moon, and constellations
- The lama and his attendants in the monastery's square debate courtyard
- The king in his high castle surrounded by attendants
- Parents and kinfolk in the noble house
- In the case of rural songs, all gods of the village and environs

As I have suggested, this sort of listing can be seen to constitute a mandala or symbolic representation of the world, and is a well-known part of tantric Buddhist meditative visualization, recited in people's prayers, both in the monastery and by lay people even out to the village level. It would also not have been totally foreign to the Muslim population that was so intimately entwined with the

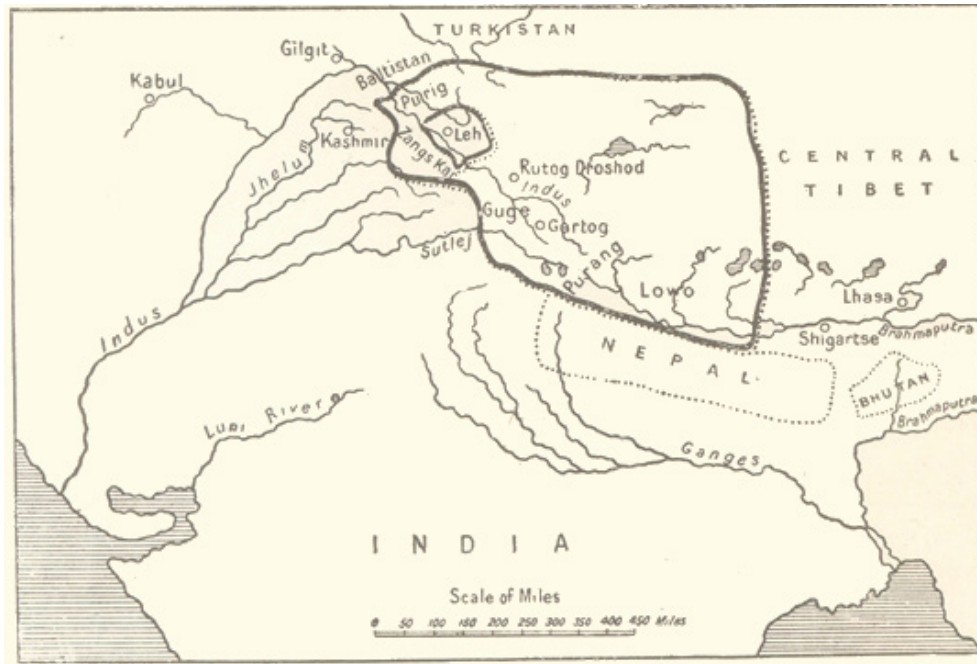


FIGURE 1—THE EMPIRE OF KING TSEWANG NAMGYAL AND THAT OF KING JAMYANG NAMGYAL, ABOUT 1560 AND 1600 A.D. 1 (FRANCKE 1907)

Buddhists.

Let us examine a *zhung lu*, “*bstod pa zhig ‘bul*” (Offer Praise) dedicated to Sengge Namgyal, as sung for me by two staff musicians at All India Radio (AIR), Leh, Ali Mahmud and Tsering Angchuk Ralam. It begins with the world hierarchy for a number of verses, after which it lists attributes of King Sengge Namgyal. These include comparing one of his forts to Buddhist ritual offerings surrounded by an army of deities to protect Ladakh.

*Offer praise, offer praise.
To the blue sky, offer praise.
Behold with joy both sun and moon.
Behold with happiness the gathered stars.*

*Offer praise, offer praise.
To the square dharma court, offer praise.
Behold with joy, the lama guide.
Behold with happiness, the gathered disciples.*

*Offer praise, offer praise.
To the high castle, offer praise.
Behold with joy, the ancestors of the great lord.
Behold with happiness, the gathered officials.*

*Offer praise, offer praise.
To the square noble house, offer praise.*

*Behold with joy, the fathers and mothers of the parents.
Behold with happiness, the gathered helpers.
Fort Garuda Horn⁸ [is] a ‘brang rgyas⁹ of white butter.
The small, dark Garuda Horn’s ‘brang rgyas.
This Ladakhi army of deities [is] a pool of apricot seed oil.¹⁰
Sengge Namgyal [is] a pool of apricot seed oil.
Behold with joy, Ladakh’s army of deities.
Behold with happiness, Sengge Namgyal.*

*Fort Garuda Horn [is] a saddle of white metal,
The small, dark Garuda Horn’s saddle is of white metal.
The Ladakhi chasm’s army of deities’ saddle of steel,
King Sengge Namgyal’s iron saddle.
Behold with joy Ladakh’s army of deities.
Behold with happiness Sengge Namgyal.*

*Fort Garuda Horn [is] Lahore’s gun
The small, dark Garuda Horn
This Ladakhi army of deities is a gathered dharma army.
Sengge Namgyal is the gatherer of the dharma army.
Behold with joy Ladakh’s army of deities.
Behold with happiness Sengge Namgyal.*

Fort Garuda Horn [is] the gathered dharma horses.

8. The mythical Garuda is an enormous predatory bird with intelligence and social organization, having characteristics of both birds and gods. It is commonly depicted with bull-like and/or unicorn-like or rhinoceros-like horns.

9. Offering cake in the shape of a young girl’s breast.

10. Apricot seed oil is a prestige oil, native to Ladakh. Oil lamps are an offering analogous to candles in Christianity.

*This dark Garuda Horn is a gathering of dharma horses.
This Ladakhi army of deities' cavalry's guns.*

*Sengge Namgyal's cavalry's guns.
Behold with joy Ladakh's army of deities.
Behold with happiness Sengge Namgyal.*

*Fort Garuda Horn [is] of soft wool
This Ladakhi army of deities [is] the good of a young
magpie.
This Ladakhi army of deities [is] the good of a young
magpie¹¹.
Sengge Namgyal [is] the good of a young magpie.
Behold with joy Ladakh's army of deities.
Behold with happiness Sengge Namgyal.*

(Rabgias 1970: 63-66, Trans. N.D.)

Thus we see the mandala laid out in several distinct stages. Firstly, the world hierarchy: the heavens, lama and disciples in the dharma court, the king and attendants in the castle, the parents and kin in the family house. Secondly, we see King Sengge Namgyal situated in a combination of martial settings and accoutrements: Fort Garuda Horn, a cannon from Lahore, a steel saddle, cavalry guns. The martial and the spiritual overlap in the form of an army of deities that protect Ladakh, as well as there being references to *drang gyas* offering cakes, and pools of apricot oil.

Even at the rural level we have songs that lay out the mandala locating the listeners in the world's hierarchy. The following is an example of what I term a "Marriage Blessing Song."

SGOR RDZA 'DEGS SKABS—ROUND CLAY VESSEL OFFERING SECTION

*OM, may it be auspicious.
May it be auspicious.*

*High in the height of a vast blue sky
High in the height of both the vast sun and moon
The height of men, the gathered constellations
From atop the three beautiful high ones I supplicate the
three jewels.*

*High in the vast height of the square dharma court
Height of the vast lama guides
The height of the men, gathered disciples
From atop the three beautiful high ones I supplicate the
three jewels.*

*High in the heights of a vast, high realm
A high lord is in a high place
three jewels*

11. The Bactrian magpie (*Pica pica bactriana*) is a crow-like bird with many mythical associations. It spends summers in Ladakh. The connotation is the gentleness of a magpie chick.

*The height of the men, gathered high and low officials
From atop the three beautiful high ones I supplicate the*

*High in the heights of a vast, square noble house
High in the height, the groom and bride
The height of men, gathered bride's attendants
From atop the three beautiful high ones I supplicate
the three jewels*

*I supplicate the god that lives in the castle and wherever
else.*

*I supplicate the god that lives in the village and
wherever else.*

I supplicate the earth god of this place.

I supplicate the god that protects the kinfolk.

OM, may it be auspicious.

(Rabgias 1970: 23-24, trans. N.D.)

Similarly, the playful *chang* (beer) songs often have philosophical content, placing the laity in their proper sphere. The following excerpt is from a song Tashi Rabgias calls "Question and Answer".

*Question: I do not drink chang; I will fly into the sky.
When the blue sky takes me in her lap, then I will drink
chang.*

*Answer: The ones who are taken in heaven's lap are
both the sun and moon.*

We cannot compare with both the sun and moon.

O surely, don't talk like that; drink chang.

Young one, don't talk like that; drink chang

(Rabgias 1970: 55, trans. N.D.)

Here we have a dialog between Buddhist high culture and earthy village life. The questioner refrains from drinking *chang*, so that through yogic austerities he can fly into the sky. The respondents proclaim themselves more inclined to enjoy life and drinking, as befits their place as lay people. This accords with Mills observations about the dichotomy between lay and monastic life, with the Ladakhi laity stressing social connection at the human and chthonic level, whereas monastic existence is based upon the individual quest for enlightenment, even if it does follow the bodhisattva path of seeking it for the benefit of all sentient beings (Mills 2000).

REFLECTIONS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

In 1842 the social mandala was disrupted when the kingdom of Ladakh was conquered by the Hindu Dogra Dynasty of Jammu and Kashmir, relegating the Namgyal dynasty to a small estate and palace in the village of Stok outside of Leh. As an influx of Kashmiri Muslims and Dogri Hindus accompanied Dogra rule, Ladakh subsequently suffered various sorts of exploitation from officials, landlords, and businessmen. In one apparent remnant from

the Dogra period, we have a *zhung lu* entitled “*blon chen bi Ta dzo gi*” (Minister Pita Jogi), in which the minister is subject to sarcastic criticism. This follows in the Ladakhi rural tradition of sarcastic songs known as *tsig glu* (word songs). In the first verse (listed below) the words compare the Hindu Dogra minister to a sun covered by clouds. The song lays out other aspects of the mandala metaphor in a negative sense, presenting a list of various good omens that will *not* attend him (Rabgias 1970: 66-67, trans. N.D).

The sun rises in the east, the east, in the shadow it sets
(2x)
The sun blocked by clouds, my good lord.
The sun blocked by clouds, Minister bi-Ta-dzo-gi. [PiTa Jogi]

On the top of Padum Castle, a gold rose flower. (2x)
A gold rose flower, my good lord.
A gold rose flower, Minister bi-Ta-dzo-gi.

Up in yon high sky, a couple of small peacocks. (2x)
It will not be a small peacock, my good lord.
It will not be a small peacock, Minister bi-Ta-dzo-gi.

Up in yon high lake, a couple of small golden-eyed fish.
It will not be a small golden-eyed fish, my good lord.
It will not be a small golden-eyed fish Minister bi-Ta-dzo-gi.

This type of song with its oblique criticism, although listed in collections as a *zhung lu*, has similarities to the sarcastic *tsig lu* sung in rural settings, which have a long documented history going back centuries (Francke 1905).

INCLUSION IN MODERN INDIA

Since becoming part of modern India in 1947, Ladakh has been the focus of a number of armed conflicts. War over Kashmir flared between India and Pakistan in 1947 and 1965, and Pakistani Pathan irregulars actually occupied parts of Ladakh in 1947. Lama Jamspal, who was a novice monk at Likir Monastery at that time, remembers the Pakistanis using the *gompa* as a headquarters (pers. comm., August 1999). The Sino-Indian War of 1962 was a multi-front border conflict, part of which was fought over possession of the Aksai Chin region in Eastern Ladakh. Most recently, the Kargil War of 1999 was fought on the glaciers and high passes of Kargil District. These conflicts have necessitated a massive Indian army contingent whose presence has brought a growth in infrastructure and increased employment outside of the agricultural sector, as well as socio-economic changes.

As part of India's efforts to integrate Ladakh into the greater body politic, branches of All India Radio (AIR) were set up in Leh in 1971 (Dolma 2009) and Kargil soon after. Leh programming included much Hindi-language music such as film songs, ghazals, and Hindustani classical music. However, Ladakhi language broadcasting of news and music

allowed for dissemination of both traditional and popular music.

TRADITIONAL SONGS AND LINGUISTIC IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY LADAKH

In a different vein from the mandala-oriented genres, neo-traditional songs were composed during the 50s, 60s, and 70s, many of which encouraged participation in the new India, but at the same time encouraging preservation of Ladakhi language and customs. One of the leading composers and cultural activists in Ladakh is the scholar and poet Gen (Professor) Tashi Rabgias. One of his most significant projects has been the collecting of Ladakhi folk song texts throughout the region. This serial publication *Ladvag gyi yul glu* (Ladakhi Folksongs) presents Ladakhi as a language apart from Tibetan.

Until recently, Ladakhi has not been a written language, but merely a spoken vernacular. All writing was done either in formal literary Tibetan or in an artificial blend of Ladakhi and Modern Tibetan known as Bhoti. Unfortunately, Gen Tashi Rabgias's efforts did not include recordings or transcriptions of the music itself, leaving the task for future researchers.

THE SHIFTING SOCIAL MANDALA

As Ladakh has modernized, traditional rural life has transformed, with lengthy social rituals such as week-long marriage ceremonies having fallen out of fashion. In the town of Leh and in villages nearby, traditional songs are not as well known any more, but are being kept alive by a few singers who cultivate them in the way old folk songs have been cultivated in the West—not quite museum pieces, but no longer practiced in their original contexts, except in more remote villages where older folk still sing them for traditional holiday functions and recreation during the long, isolating winters.

However, new performance venues have arisen that allow some resurgence of traditional song, or *zhung lu*, where the word *zhung* is used to mean “common” or “traditional.” These new venues include concerts, All India Radio, Doordarshan Television, commercial recordings, and hotels catering to the tourist trade.

In addition, cultural advocates are also teaching traditional songs to keep them alive. The Students Educational and Culture Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) has been running summer camp programs at its campus in Phey, where traditional songs are an important part of the activities. Other workshops have been run in various locations by the Youth Wing of the Ladakh Buddhist Association and The Young Men's Buddhist Association. According to conversations with various people at the LBA, one of the main points of these programs is to train young people so that they can find employment as musicians for the tourist trade. Similar programs exist to train people as monastery guides.

TRADITION AND LADAKHI IDENTITY IN THE MODERN MARKET

In the twenty-first century the old hierarchical mandala has been replaced by a more multi-dimensional, individualist worldview. Since the troubles in Kashmir, Ladakh has experienced a boom in tourism, with a sharp rise in urban population and income. Ladakhis, flush with newfound prosperity, are embracing their cultural uniqueness, while enjoying the technological and social benefits of being part of modern India. Cultural production has increased, and multiple discourses on culture, tradition, and cultural preservation are current among artists, academics, and the general population.

In the marketing of “tradition” we are presented with images of rural life, as opposed to that of the modern, middle-class urbanite. Traditional dress, musical instruments, and rural locations are almost uniformly featured on cassette and CD covers of traditional music. In the realm of modern Ladakhi popular songs, we see a weaving together of Ladakhi linguistic and cultural identity, the influence of Hindi film and Nepali popular music. Young Ladakhis are often obliged to migrate outside the region for education and employment, but return frequently for holidays, maintaining a close connection with home. Culturally they are situated between Ladakh, India, and a global, mass-mediated modernity. Linguistically this can be seen in code switching that Ladakhi urban youth employ between Ladakhi, Hindi, and English.

It is useful to examine this shifting cultural landscape in the light of Appadurai’s “cultural dimensions of globalization” (Appadurai 1996). Upwardly mobile Ladakhis are frequently compelled to leave the region to pursue university education and/or job opportunities. Through interconnected webs, the Ladakhi diaspora maintain a sense of belonging, constructing a virtual community (ethnoscape) through financial networks (financescape), mass media (mediascape) and the internet (technoscape). Online music videos occupy Ladakhi techno-, ideo-, ethno- and mediascapes, disseminating images and sounds that transcend the physical boundaries of the region. Ladakhi youth produce and consume this mass-mediated product, functioning in the ethnoscape that affirms their ties to other Ladakhis, in part through the music, language and images of the video, but also through interchanges with others in the videos’ comments area.

The back and forth migration of educated Ladakhis, combined with modern mass media and the internet, create Ladakhi ethno- and ideoscapes detached from physical space. For example the Gesar legend is alive and well in the contemporary Ladakh mediascape. In images from a contemporary music video CD by Dorje Stakmo (2004), we see various aspects of King Gesar, conflating spiritual and temporal power. On one hand, we have the *surna* and *daman* as symbols of secular power and prestige. On the other hand, we see Gesar as an emanation of the compassionate

bodhisattva Chenrezig.

Such online encounters allow various degrees of affirmation and/or contention with regard to identity, music authenticity, etc. These dimensions all go to create a Ladakhi ideoscape—a constructed, idealized vision of Ladakh as depicted in “Chespa Micho” or of a Ladakhi diaspora in “Oh ho chocho ldemo,” that shows Ladakhi youth working or going to school in places like Jammu or Delhi, but still joined together by language and memory of home (Cf. Appadurai 1996).

There is a similar process noted by David Henderson in his study of Nepali *lok git* [folk music] (2002). In the case of multi-ethnic Nepal, Henderson has noted the government policy presenting radio broadcasts of folk songs from all regions, but in polished arrangements translated into the common Nepali. Nevertheless, such *lok git* are represented as being from the various regions.

Henderson identifies two main audiences for folk songs on Radio Nepal. First, there are many people living in the city who grew up in villages and came to Kathmandu to work. Despite the hardships of village life, he found these people often talked about how folk songs remind them of life in a closely-knit community full of shared pleasure

People who have lived all their lives in Kathmandu enjoy folk songs for their evocation of simpler times that are seemingly still available in village life. This nostalgia is not rooted in actual extensive experience of village life, but rather memories of the folk songs themselves combined with memories of village images drawn from mass media (Henderson 2003:8).

Nevertheless there are differences between the Nepali urbanites and those living in Leh. Ladakhis are, for the most part, rarely more than a generation removed from village life, with many people still having relatives living in rural areas. Secondly, Leh, with a population of around 30,000, is nowhere near the size of the sprawling urban center that is Kathmandu, and does not isolate people in the same way an all-encompassing metropolis does. Thirdly, the outer trappings of tradition are still considered to be important, for example wearing *gonchas* (men’s Tibetan-style robes) and *sulma* (women’s pleated overdress) on formal occasions such as when important lamas are present—superseding modern jacket and tie.

The following screen shots (figures 2-4) are from “Chespa Mecho,” a modern, popular Ladakhi music video. Here we see shifting views of a group of teenaged girls, dressed alternately in traditional *sulma*, North Indian *salwar-kameez*, and Western blue jeans, t-shirts, and sun glasses.

In this and other videos we see a constant shifting back and forth between the different identities young urban Ladakhis experience: traditional Ladakhi, Indian, modern cosmopolitan sophisticate. We are shown young Ladakhis presented with, as Schmucl Eisenstadt describes, “alternative modernities” (Eisenstadt 2003), both the commonly accepted Western-culture-as-modern, as well as a pan-Indian identity,

and also a syncretic modern culture based in Kathmandu that they see as a sort of model. These identities contrast with the scenes in this video shot in a village setting, indicating an



FIGURE 2. “CHESPA MICHU”- LADAKHI GIRLS IN TRADITIONAL SULMA DRESSES



FIGURE 3. “CHESPA MICHU”- LADAKHI GIRLS DANCING IN SALWAR-KAMEEZ



FIGURE 4. “CHESPA MICHU”: LADAKHI GIRLS DANCING IN “MODERN” DRESS

underlying constant in the connection to home.

From a musical point of view Ladakhi pop music is completely different from the traditional music. The overwhelming majority of popular music available on CD, radio, movies, and the internet has no indigenous musical characteristics—the only uniquely Ladakhi feature is the language of the lyrics. Ladakhi popular music exhibits the concatenation of a heterogeneous musical vocabulary, characterizing what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 19).

The influences of Bollywood and Nepali pop are noticeable in the use of musical features that can be described as “Generic Pop Himalayan” or “Pan-Himalayan.” I coined this to indicate the mass mediated, common-denominator origins of these musical traits that include stereotyped melody forms, rhythms, and musical instruments that are common to Himalayan regions of India, Kashmir, and Nepal, as presented in movies, television, and pop music recordings. From a semiotic view these are indexical to the Himalayas, with all the associations of romantic or idyllic sentiments, rural simplicity, and nature.

A couple of melodic types predominate in current practice, both of which are typical modes of Himalayan India. Stylized forms of these melodic types have evolved into Hindustani light ragas, and which can be used here to characterize these modes. The Raga Pahadi (pahari = hilly) pattern originating in Himachal Pradesh, and the related Raga Jhinjhoti (the name refers to a martial dance genre) pattern combines elements from Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. Below are the patterns in both Western staff notation and Indian *sargam* syllables (figure 5).

For example, two songs that conform to these patterns

Raga Jhinjhoti—Basic Melodic Motion

Raga Pahadi—Basic Melodic Motion

FIGURE 5. MELODIC PATTERNS COMMON IN LADAKHI POP MUSIC



FIGURE 6. BASIC MELODY OF “OH HO CHOCHO LDEMO”



FIGURE 7. “CHESPA MICHO” OPENING SECTION

are “Oh ho chocho ldemo” (figure 6) and “Chespa Micho” (figure 7).

Rhythms used in this pan-Himalayan style include two common six beat patterns, which roughly correspond to the folk-derived Dadra Tal and Khemta Tal of Hindustani light-classical music, both divided in two groups of three. Khemta Tal in particular is characterized by the use of three-against-two cross rhythms, known in Western analytic parlance as hemiola, where there is either alternation or simultaneous playing of two groups of three beats versus three groups of two beats. This can be seen in the third measure of figure 7 above, and can be heard on the recording especially in the instrumental interludes.

Instrumental sonorities are also part of this semiotic vocabulary. Very noticeable in many pop recordings is the use of the *bansuri* or bamboo flute, similar to the Ladakhi *ling bu*—a herder’s instrument. In a number of recordings the Kashmiri *santoor* (hammer dulcimer) also serves as a symbol of mountain culture. Various drum sonorities are also part of this vocabulary: tabla, dhol, dholak, and the Nepali *madal*. All these instruments have become iconic stereotypes, as perceived by both outsiders and even insiders, of all hill-region music. They are only partially authentic and indicative of local traditional music. Again, none of these are actually Ladakhi instruments.

Henderson raises another point in analyzing Nepali *lok pop*, popular music based on folk music, but with extensive mixing of tracks from Western genres like rock and reggae. He notes the use of reverberation in the mixing process. Reverb creates a performative echo in the beginning of the piece. Throughout the rest of the song it creates a sonic spaciousness that indexes to an imagined sound evocative of an outdoor performance in a Himalayan village (Ibid: 30). We see use of this type of indexical reverberation in “Chespa

Micho.” At the beginning of the piece the solo voice opens with quiet, static harmonies and no drums, using non-lexical syllables in free rhythm like the opening *alap* section in Indian music performances—a common device in Bollywood practice. The reverb evokes the echoes in the mountain valleys—a standard semiotic device indexing to the Himalayas that establishes a performative space.

Similarly to Nepali *lok pop*, a large range of Western-style popular genres, instruments, and compositional techniques, contributes to the new hybrid Ladakhi music. Guitars, kit drums, synthesizers, sampler tracks, and studio effects are widely used, with production facilities in Delhi, Jammu, and nowadays, even Leh. For example, producer/songwriter/singer Dorje Stakmo has a very sophisticated studio set-up, with several recording rooms and a control booth equipped with mixing boards, synthesizer, and a PC with ProTools editing software.

Many song arrangements are a rich, multi-layered blend, informed, no doubt, by both Nepali *lok pop* and by Bollywood’s voracious co-optation of everything in its path. An illustrative example is “Oh ho chocho ldemo,” the melody of which was given in figure 6 above. Added to the Jhunjhoti melody, a first layer adds a guitar track with a reggae-style skank pattern with short, choppy guitar chords on beats 2 and 4 (figure 8). This reggae influence most likely comes via Bollywood, where it was brought by the Indo-British composer Bally Sagoo. He in turn was part of the syncretic Indo-British *bhangra* movement, which has incorporated everything from reggae to hip-hop to techno.

Added to the above is an additional techno-style, drum synthesizer track that changes the leisurely reggae to an energetic dance, as evidenced by the video showing Ladakhi youth dancing in a Jammu discotheque, which is further punctuated with short passages on electric guitar.

CONCLUSION

We see that Ladakh, as a crossroads culture, has evolved a rich hybridity in the secular sphere, including in its music. West Asian-style melodies, rhythms, and instruments in traditional songs combine with texts containing varying degrees of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist content. Social, economic, and political changes are all reflected in the texts of both traditional and modern songs.

Over the centuries, visual media and song have been



FIGURE 8. “OH HO CHOCHO LDEMO” WITH REGGAE SKANK PATTERN (EXCERPT)

linked in Ladakhi expressive arts. Traditionally the mandala, as a meditation tool, went hand in hand with chant. Various traditional songs evoked mandala form and imagery, often used to cosmologically situate Ladakhi society in a broader cosmological scheme. Genres such as the congregational songs (*zhung lu*) from the Namgyal court place people within the old social and spiritual hierarchies, progressing from the heavens, to the monastic realm, to the temporal authorities, to the family. The Namgyal Dynasty kings are placed in a mytho-historical Pan-Tibetan continuum stretching from King Gesar through the Yarlung Dynasty founder Nyatri Tsangpo, conflated with imagery of the bodhisattva Chenrezig as a militant defender of Buddhism. This served to validate the kings' political and military power, while asserting a sense of national solidarity, at least at the aristocratic level.

Village songs, such as weddings songs (*bagston lu*) or beer songs (*chang lu*), have tended to focus on a more local web of connections, bringing in the Bon-derived images of mountains, guardian animals, and *nagas* (Ladakhi: *klu*), the local numina of earth and water, and situating people in their relationship with them. Buddhist monastic ideals are strongly present, but as noted in the *chang lu* and *bagston lu*, the connections of lay village life are affirmed and celebrated.

This model becomes one of many as modern media have become part of Ladakhi life. Traditional song repertoires are being preserved, although the contexts in which they were originally performed have changed. Mass media and commercialized recordings package "tradition," essentializing and reifying it through the use of idealized images of rural life.

As young Ladakhis go outside the region for school and work, and as external sounds and images invade Ladakh via the mass media, those external influences are in turn incorporated via the various Ladakhi media into a wider ethnoscapes to maintain and affirm Ladakhi identities. The process of cultural interchange and hybridization that characterizes Ladakhi traditional culture continues in the development of Ladakhi popular music, with incorporation of foreign, pan-Himalayan melodies, rhythms, and instruments, Bollywood and Western popular elements, all supporting Ladakhi language lyrics. The imagery of CD and cassette covers and video vignettes strongly stresses a connection with rural life, while at the same time showing young people adopting a generic modernity of blue jeans, t-shirts, and disco dancing. But modernization doesn't just mean westernization. A place like Ladakh has various perceivedly more cosmopolitan cultural spheres of influence to choose from – Bollywood, Kathmandu-based "pan-Himalayan pop," Western and Caribbean pop. Contemporary songwriters mix and/or overlay these various elements, joined with Ladakhi lyrics in an attempt to create a unique regional flavor.

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AN AMCHI (PRACTITIONER OF TIBETAN MEDICINE) FROM DOLPO, NEPAL, TREATING A PATIENT. DRAWING: TENZIN NORBU LAMA