



REVIEW

Chinese Mosuo “Laying Dance” Music Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Being the only extant matriarchal society in China, the Mosuo people are now living in the border of Yunnan and Sichuan. Under the combined influence of its unique form of society and the coexistence of diversified ethnic groups, the Mosuo people have thus developed a unique kind of music with compatible features. In this paper, through the introduction of the “playing dance” music of Mosuo people in Yunnan, I tried to further discuss the phenomenon of compatibility in their music, so as to enhance people’s understanding of the characteristics, as well as the values of Mosuo music.

1. Introduction

Living in the southwest of China, Mosuo people is the only surviving Chinese matriarchal society, and they still adopt the so called “Walking Marriage” form of marriage, in which “both men and women do not need to marry”. In this particular form of society, the Mosuo people have accordingly developed their own unique form of folk music, ranging from songs, music dances to instrumental music. The folk songs can be divided into Ahabara, Madada, Wheat-reaping tune, Drinking songs, Guem songs, Earth-tamping songs, Asha love songs, etc. While the music dances include Jiacao dance, Cuodi dance, Jiacuoyou dance, Gemucuo dance, and other types of swing dance. Among these music dances, the Jiacao dance (aka “playing dance”) is arguably the most popular one and can be seen as representative of Mosuo

type of music. Apart from Mosuo people itself, the “playing dance” music also incorporated many music features from other ethnic groups, this phenomenon is not hard to understand since Mosuo people have long been deeply influenced by many other ethnic cultures, such as the Tibetan, the Pumi and the Lisu. Even today, the influence still permeates every aspect of life in Mosuo people. So, from this point of view, we can understand that the cultural interplay has laid a solid foundation for the formation of “playing dance” music, which in turn determines the features and characteristics of the “playing dance” music. Taking the “playing dance” music of Mosuo people in Yunnan as an example, this paper tries to illuminate the compatible features of Mosuo traditional music through three aspects: the ecological environment, the musical form, and the social function.

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2. A General Overview of the “Playing Dance” Music

The Mosuo people are good at both singing and dancing, and the “Jiacuo dance” (commonly known as “playing dance”) is probably the most popular one. “Jia” means happiness, while “Cuo” refers to dance, together they convey the meaning of “dance for the happy times”. It is said that the “playing dance” can be dated back to the distant antediluvian era, which bears some similarity to the “playing dance” of Lisu and “Guozhuang” of Tibetan in pattern. The “playing dance” is a kind of collective dance usually held during such joyous days as Spring Festival, Initiation Rite and Wedding Celebration. Finished the dinner, lit the bonfire, people then begun to “playing dance”. There always be a leading dancer to start the dance, who is good at flute or gourd sheng, then people at all ages singing and dancing around the bonfire, to the accompaniment of the flute. The “playing dance” is also one of the major activities for Mosuo people’s annual “Mount-rounding Festival”, after paying religious homage to the Mount Goddess Gemu, people then gathered at the foot of the hill, singing and dancing happily all through the night.

“Playing dance” incorporates both singing and dancing, but its movements are relatively uniform, it varies slightly from festival to festival. For example, during the Initiation Rite “playing dance”, women firstly dance three times clockwise around the right column indoor and then dance out, while men dance three times counterclockwise around the left column indoor and then dance out (There are usually two pillars inside the main house, the left one is the “pillar for men” while the right one is the “pillar for women”). After they have finished the three rounds, the outside people can then join and dance together. People dance around the bonfire in the formation of a semi-circular or a crescent, with each one holding the next one’s left elbow with his right armpit, or they just link up with their shoulders or fingers, to make such formation changes as circular, curve, cabbage-shaped and arc.

“Playing dance” can be generally divided into two parts: the fast part and the slow one. The fast part is vigorous and ebullient, while the slow part is lyrical and emotional. Usually, it will play a total of 8 to 9 songs during one round of dance, and each melody will last 4 to 5 minutes. Many songs will be repeated again and again, people then adjust their movements to the melody changes. The movements of the dancer’s steps are colorful, it can be stamping, or jumping, halting, plodding, hopping, crossing. However, the upper body movements

are relatively much less, and together they producing a sense of uniform aesthetic. When people dance to the climax, they will gradually increase the twisting of waist and the bending of upper body with the warm atmosphere, while yelling out such words as “Nuohi” and “Ruobala” to express their happiness. The dances and the songs, the laughter and the flute’ sound, all came together as one part, it’s so beautiful and excited a scene.

So far, the research for Chines Mosuo people’s “playing dance” music is still rare, and mostly limited to general description. In such books as “Naxi Folksong Anthology”, “Chinese Naxi Songs Selection” and “Selected Chinese Folk Songs”, there are some introductions to Mosuo related music. There are also some papers about “playing dance” music, such as Sandra Nova’s “music dance of Yunnan Mosuo people on the bank of Lugu Lake”, Dijirchin’s “songs from the kingdom of females--the folk music of Yunnan Mosuo people”, Zhao Li’s “Impression of Mosuo songs and dances” and Yang Lifen’s “Mosuo people’s ‘playing dance’ music”. In addition, some local county annals also mentioned this kind of music, but all scratched the surface and none of them bothered to make in-depth analysis. Mosuo people shares many similarities with its neighboring nation in terms of living habits and cultural life, as a result of their history and living environment, so Mosuo music incorporated multi-ethnic characteristics. This compatibility of Mosuo music represents a development trend of spread and variation, and thus become a means of heritage protection.

3. The Ecological Background of “Playing Dance” Music Compatibility

In his “Multi Evolutionary Theory”, Julian Steward put forward the idea of “cultural ecology”, regarding that the fundamental characteristics of culture is determined by natural environment, and this kind of dependence is then determined by a variety of cultural factors.^[1] Mosuo people’s “playing dance” music is deep rooted in its social life, and the features it possesses can be seen as an embodiment of Mosuo social public characteristics. So, in order to analyze the compatibility feature of Mosuo “playing dance” music, we should set its living environment as a prerequisite first, then induce and generalize its ecological background through the perspective of both diachronic and synchronic. The author believes that the ecological background of Mosuo “playing dance” music compatibility is mainly reflected in the formation and development process of the nation, as well as the geographical characteristics, languages, religious beliefs and so on.

3.1 The Compatibility Feature in the Formation of the Nation

The Mosuo people call themselves “Nari”. According to historical records, those Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups as Tibetan, Yi, Pumi, Lisu, including Yunnan Mosuo people, are all descendants of the ancient Qiang people in north-western China. However, as the ancient Qiang people were forced to migrate to the south in large scale due to wars or other factors, different branches chose different migratory route and settled down, then combined with the local people, they gradually formed a variety of new nations. So, during Mosuo people’s long history and the development of its rich folk culture, there ever incorporated many culture components of Tibetan, Naxi, Pumi, Yi and Bai.

According to the Xinhua Yunnan Channel (2006-09-13) report, Professor Xiao Chunjie, leader of the Chinese Ethnic DNA Library Project and director of the Human Genetics Research Center of Yunnan University, had conducted some research on the origin of Mosuo people with his team. They collected DNA samples from Mosuo, Tibetan, Naxi, Pumi, Yi and Bai groups, then through deep analysis and comparison of the data, they found that the patrilineal genetic structure of Mosuo people bore great similarity to the Tibetan in Yunnan, while the matrilineal genetic structure was most similar to the Naxi in Lijiang.

It can be seen from the ethnic development process and the perspective of physical anthropology that the Mosuo is such kind of a nation who originally homologous with, then gradually combined with many other ethnics. So it is not difficult to understand its compatibility feature during the formation of the nation.

3.2 The Compatibility Feature in the Geographical Overlap

As early as the Qin and Han dynasties 2000 years ago, Mosuo people settled in the end of “Ling Guan Dao”, which was once the middle of the Southern Silk Road. From “Ling Guan Dao”, people could enter the hinterland of Sichuan northward through the Jianchang (Xichang), or they could reach Southeast Asia countries southward through “Yong Chang Dao”. So, we can see that Mosuo people lived in the traffic arteries since ancient times, people from different places and cultures gathered there and blended with each other, made this place a melting pot of different nationalities.

The modern Mosuo people mostly lives trans-provincially in the upper reaches of the Jinsha River, which ranges from the first bay of the Yangtze River to longitude 110 ° 41 ‘ east. From the north to the south, this area can

be divided into two parts, and the area around Lugu Lake is the major community for the Mosuo(Lugu Lake lies in the border of Ninglang Yi Autonomous County of Lijiang City in Yunnan Province and Yanyuan County of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province). Mosuo people also lives scattered over Sichuan Yanbian County and Muli Tibetan Autonomous County.

So, as Mosuo people lives together with many other nationalities and spreads over traffic arteries, it is rather convenient for them to communicate with the outside world and in turn, being influenced greatly by them. These facts played a certain role in the formation of its ethnic cultural compatibility feature.

3.3 The Compatibility in the Absorption of Multi-Ethnic Languages

Mosuo language belongs to the Yi branch of Tibeto-Burman language group of Sino-Tibetan language family. However, the language varies in some pronunciations and usages from region to region because of the influence of different neighboring ethnic languages. For instance, the Yongning Mosuo contact with the Tibetan and Han people frequently, thus their language is greatly influenced by Tibetan and Chinese; the Langqu Mosuo communicate mainly with the Han and Yi people, thus both Chinese and Yi language have a great impact on their language; the Labo Mosuo associate regularly with the Pumi, Naxi and Lisu, thus the Pumi, Naxi and Lisu language all play an important part in their language. As Mosuo people have long been living together with other nationalities, many of them possess bilingual ability. Apart from their mother tongue, they also communicate in Chinese, or sometimes in Pumi, Tibetan, Yi, Lisu, or Naxi. So there exists distinct compatibility features in Mosuo people’s use of language.

3.4 The Compatibility in the Coexistence of Multiple Religious Beliefs

Mosuo people first believe in their primitive religion -- the “Daba religion”, and some Mosuo also believe in Pumi’s “Haba religion”. After Tibetan Buddhism was introduced into Mosuo area, it became the main religion, but Mosuo people still took faith in some primitive worship and the “Daba religion”. In Mosuo people’s religious life, there also exists the phenomenon of combined worship, different religions blend and interact with each other, forming a distinctive picture of religious compatibility.

For example, in the funeral rites of Langqu Mosuo, the written “Soul-Redeeming Scripture” should be chanted by the Lama, while the oral “Spirit-Guiding Scripture” must be chanted by the local priest called “Bizha”; Lama should

preside over the cremation ceremony, while “Bizha” shall not participate; During the bone-sorting ceremony on the next day of cremation, it is “Bizha” who then should guide the relatives of the deceased to perform the rite. So, it can be seen that the funeral rites of Mosuo incorporated both its primitive religion and Tibetan Buddhism at the same time. Various religions combined and complemented with each other harmoniously in Mosuo society, constituting the distinctive compatibility feature of Mosuo people’s religious culture.

In addition, the traditional festivals of Mosuo people include not only such indigenous festivals as the Mountain Rounding festival, the Ancestor Worshiping festival, the God of Cattle Raising Worshiping festival, the Land Worshiping festival, the annual wine making and pork fat cutting rite in harvest season, the big gathering in Lama temple on October 25 lunar calendar and the ancient ceremony of fetish and god worshiping, but they also include the Chinese Spring Festival (Mosuo people call it “Kushi”) as well as the Dragon Boat Festival.

To sum up, the overall cultural development of the Mosuo is a process of integration. As music development is closely related to cultural development, then music is also influenced by culture in terms of characteristics and pattern of development. So it can be concluded that the compatibility feature of culture must be reflected in music, and thus become one of the most significant characteristics in the variation and inheritance of music.

4. The Analysis of Compatibility in “Playing Dance” Music Pattern

4.1 The General Feature of “Playing Dance” Music

The songs selected in “playing dance” can be generally grouped into impromptu songs and fixed ones. The impromptu songs mainly provide a description of the scene of “playing dance”, while the fixed ones are mostly used to pay homage to goddess Gemu like the “Mother’s Song”, or to extol the ancestors like the “Virtue Song”, and also to worship the nature like the “Sweet Spring Rain”. When it comes to the key of the “playing dance”, it is said to have up to “seventy-two keys” by local folks, this is deemed as an exaggeration by most people, but it does reveal the abundance of “playing dance” music. According to the local Mosuo people, some commonly used keys in “playing dance” include the major key (Mosuo language as *chuō zhì*): the first and basic key of “playing dance”, and everyone would use it; the twenty-three Lu (Mosuo language as *chuō*): hemp skin (hemp is a kind of plant, this key derives from the movement of scraping the skin from hemp); the Sapu (Mosuo language as *chā*):

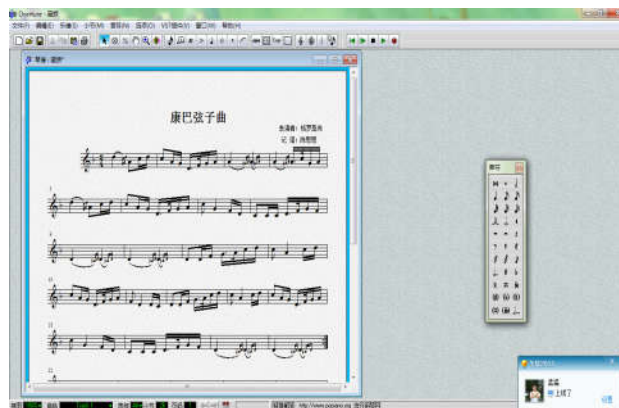
after scraping, the hemp should be washed, this action of hemp washing is then revealed in the Sapu key. These are the traditional Mosuo “playing dance”, however, as they communicate more and more frequently with the outside world and other nations, the modern dance is also being incorporated into the Mosuo dance, such as Mosuo disco, grain threshing song and so on.

Mosuo “playing dance” music has absorbed many musical elements from the Tibetan, Han, Yi, Lisu, Pumi and other ethnic groups, and occasionally they will insert some Yi, Lisu, Tibetan or even Han ethnic music into the “playing dance”, such as “Tigela” of Yi, “Lusheng tune” of Lisu, “Gesala” of Tibetan, “Osmanthus Open in August” of Han, etc.^[2] However, with the development of the times, some old tunes have been lost now already.

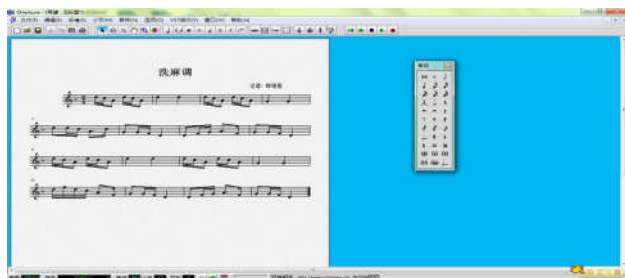
4.2 The Reflection of Compatibility in “Playing Dance” Music

4.2.1 The Tibetan Musical Elements in “Playing Dance” Music

The Yongning Mosuo area is very close to the Tibetan residential area and is greatly influenced by them, so the Tibetan folk songs and language are popular among Mosuo people, thus Mosuo music also incorporates many Tibetan elements. The Tibetan music adopts the Chinese pentatonic scale as its main musical scale system, and commonly uses Yu (the sixth note ‘La’), Shang (the second note ‘Re’), and Zhi (the fifth note ‘Sol’). The melody sometimes goes up gradually, and reaches the treble through the round-about grace notes; it usually uses the one verse-type, two-verse type and four-verse type, and repeats several times. As for musical rhythm and tempo, it is common to see the even rhythm, the dotted rhythm and the triplet type rhythm, often with the feature of special singing voice, such as the throat singing and the vague grace notes. For example: “Kambah strings” which was performed by Ge Luo Sangbu, and recorded by Chen Sisi.



The tune used D Yu Pentatonic, and the notes went up closely. It started from the highest note d2, and the ornament aroused the main part. They formed a complex melody which repeats four times. It uses four-verse type. The dotted rhythm often with the feature of special singing voice, such as the throat singing and the vague grace notes. It is similar to Mosuo music. For example: “Xima Tune”, recorded by Chen Sisi



The tune used D Yu Pentatonic and la mi re are the main notes. The first note is the highest in this song. As for musical rhythm and tempo, it is the even rhythm, mainly with XXX X·X .It repeats four times to belong to the strophic song.

Another example is “Cuo de” which uses c zhi Chinese pentatonic scale. The notes goes up nearly. There are some fourth interval occasionally.

Singer:(Mosuo people) la ta midashicaier

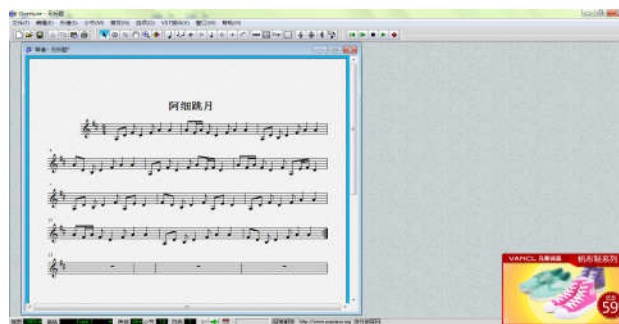
Recorder: Yang Min



In summary, because of the influence of Tibetan language, we can see some similarities in these two nationalities, especially in the scales and rhythm.

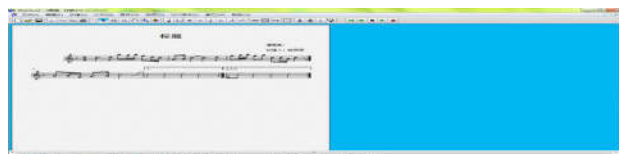
4.2.2 The Yi Musical Elements in “Playing Dance” Music

Mosuo music also incorporates many Yi elements. The Yi music adopts the Chinese pentatonic scale as its main musical scale system, and commonly uses Yu (the sixth note ‘La’), gong (the first note ‘do’) and Zhi (the fifth note ‘Sol’). Sometimes there are six notes in the scal, and the portamento is always used. People often cheer in the music to increase warm emotions. Such as “Dancing Under the Moon”^[3]



This song uses A zhi scal. There are some near distance intervals, some octaves are used between two near bars. As for musical rhythm and tempo, it is the even rhythm, mainly with X X X. It repeats four times to belong to the strophic song. People cheer with the music and push to the climax. There are some similarities with “playing dance” music. For example:

Recorder: Chen Sisi



The main notes in this song are sol la do mi, which uses C zhi scal. There are some near distance intervals. The longest intervals are in the first bar, from d2 to a2, and the third bar. Both of them are fifth. As for musical rhythm and tempo, it is the even rhythm, mainly with “x· ẋ” It repeats four times to belong to the strophic song. At the end of the song, there are some lining words, such as “nuo nuo nuo hei” and “a nuo· nuo nuo hei”. In order to push the song to the climax.

Talking what in above mentioned into account, there are some similarities between Yi and Mosuo music in mode rhythm and melody trend.

5. The Value and Significance of the Compatibility Feature Of “Playing Dance” Music

5.1 The Functional Value of the Compatibility Feature of “Playing Dance” Music

“Playing dance” is widely performed during Mosuo festivals of the year, and it is also an important part of many ceremonies. As in the Initiation Rite, the compatibility feature of “playing dance” music plays a certain role in promoting the inheritance and development of its rituals. The Initiation Rite, also called “Man-becoming Rite”, is a very important ceremony for Mosuo people. The original Man-becoming Rite is a ceremony for children from Mosuo matrilineal families who reach the age of 13 (nominal age). The rite is performed in “Yimi” (the main room) in

the morning of the lunar New Year's Day, and is directed by "Daba" (the inheritors of the local primitive religion, the equivalent of priests) and "Lama". "Daba" does the divine worship near the fireplace, while "Lama" holds the Buddhist service in the Buddhist hall, reciting a variety of praying scriptures. The Man-becoming Rite is a milestone in Mosuo people's life, marking that the people has been given all the rights and responsibilities of an adult. The "Playing dance" is a kind of collective dance held in the evening of the Initiation Rite, and is performed to add to the happiness of the rite. Since the Mosuo are influenced greatly by Tibetan Buddhism, the ceremony and music both reflect the characteristics of Tibetan culture. Thus, through entertainment, "playing dance" consolidates the influence of Tibetan traditional culture on the Mosuo. This results in the positive attitude towards the cultural compatibility feature in both ceremony and entertainment, and the willingness to spread it more widely through entertainment. Such kind of a compatibility then became a cultural characteristic of the Mosuo, and played a certain role in the inheritance and development of the Mosuo traditional ceremony—the Initiation Rite.

5.2 The Artistic Value of the Compatibility Feature of "Playing Dance" Music

American scholar Merriam has ever mentioned in his book "Ethnomusicology" that "culture is dynamic", is constant in human experience, although the rate of change differs in different cultures or in different aspects of a specific culture, no culture can avoid the power of change during time.^[4] Huang Xiangpeng, the renowned Chinese musicologist has also raised the concept "tradition is a river". "Playing dance" music, as one of Mosuo traditional culture, only in flow will it be more viable, only in constant communication will it be more active. As mentioned earlier, the musical features of any kind of music are deeply influenced by its overall musical culture as well as national culture, and thus can be seen as a concrete manifestation of cultural identity. Therefore, how to make full use of the compatibility feature of Mosuo musical culture to achieve the purpose of protecting and spreading the Mosuo music, is now one of the most striking topics, as well as the most thought-provoking problems, in the artistic value of the compatibility feature.

When it comes to the traditional music preservation in the past, we often referred to the "museum" type of preservation, which aimed to record traditional music so that they will always maintain the original state. However, as an open, dynamic cultural form, music cannot always stick to the original state, since its inheritance is people based. In order to adapt to environmental changes and

meet aesthetic psychology of the people, Mosuo music incorporated many features from other ethnic music while maintaining its own tradition, and when contacting with other ethnic cultures and modern civilization, there also existed some collisions, adjustments and absorptions. As an important way of inheritance, change and development, compatibility plays an active role in Mosuo music and thus become one of its major means of development. Compatibility has become another feature of Mosuo music, and is also a generally accepted style of music for Mosuo people.

5.3 The Practical Significance of the Compatibility Feature of "Playing Dance" Music

The compatibility feature in "playing dance" music can be essentially seen as an embodiment of national integration. Integration is an inevitable logic for the development of things, and national integration is a process with deepening communications and increasing similarities, it is a phenomenon of the current and the future. National integration is the opposite of diversity by nature, but opposition does not necessarily mean contradiction, opposition also reflects a relationship of interdependence. National communication is based on complementary needs resulted from the differences among different ethnic groups. Through communication, their similarities are bound to increase, so diversity is the basis for identity, while identity is the direction in which diversity develops. Cultural diversity and national integration are interdependent. The famous Chinese scholar Ji Xianlin once said: "the cultural development of a nation can be roughly divided into three steps: first, independent development according to its evolving cultural characteristics, based on the national common psychology; Second, accepting outside influences, and communicating in a large cultural system; Third, forming a cultural mixture body with the basis of national culture and the supplement of foreign ones."^[5] Mosuo culture is indeed such a mixture body which constantly absorbing other ethnic cultures and blending them perfectly with its original one.

To sum up, cultural exchange is the foundation for the development of "playing dance" music, and compatibility is one of the most significant features of "playing dance" music. Nowadays, with so many opportunities as well as challenges, this kind of cultural exchange is still continuing. Only through "developing" while "inheriting", and "inheriting" while "developing", can Mosuo music maintain its characteristic in the face of frequent communication and influx of foreign cultures, and ultimately achieve the purpose of further inheriting and developing the Mosuo music.

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