

In: *Problems of Traditional Polyphony. Materials of the Sixth International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony*, IRCTP (International Research Centre of Traditional Polyphony), Tbilisi State Conservatory. September 25-29, 2014. Rusudan Tsurtsumia and Joseph Jordania (Eds.). Tbilisi State Conservatory, 2016: 22-30.

National Minorities, Traditional Polyphony, Cultural Policy and State Borders

It is enough to have a quick look at the world distribution of traditional polyphony to notice that big part of polyphonic traditions are distributed among national minorities (see Jordania, 2006, 2015). Polyphony of Ainu in Japan, polyphony of Tibetan and 25 other nationalities in China, polyphony of Nuristanis in Afghanistan, polyphony of Flores Island in Indonesia, polyphony of minorities living in Taiwanese mountains, polyphony of aboriginal tribes in Papua New Guinea, polyphony of indigenous Indian tribes living in the mountains of North Argentina, etc.

Of course, it would be wrong to proclaim that polyphony is spread only among national minorities. There are a number of countries where polyphony is widely spread among the main ethnic group of the country. This is the case, for example, in Georgia, in several countries of Balkan Peninsula, or many sub-Saharan African countries. At the same time, even in many of these countries the abovementioned feature is still prominent: for example, in sub-Saharan African countries, renowned for their strong polyphonic traditions, the strongest traditions still come from Pygmies and from Bushmen, representing national minorities in several countries of Central and South Africa.

This interesting fact of distribution of polyphony among national minorities is followed by another, this time a sad tendency: study of traditional polyphony in many countries does not attract much attention from the national scholars, and in some countries this sphere is left without any scholarly attention whatsoever. We introduced the topic of polyphony in the musical traditions of national minorities as the central topic of our symposium in order to facilitate interest towards the study of national minorities, in order to generate more interest and more research to this often neglected sphere.

In my paper I will discuss several interrelated topics. First I will review the geographic stratification of polyphonic regions, then we will discuss the reasons of the correlation of the regions of traditional polyphony and stratification of national minorities; then we will discuss the peculiarities of the historical process of forming of state borders, and finally we'll discuss the need for comparative method in study of traditional polyphony.

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(1) Stratification of Traditional Polyphony in the Light of the Origins of Polyphony

It is very important to remember, that the distribution of polyphony in most cases does not have a national (or tribal) character. On the contrary, in many regions polyphonic cultures create an “international polyphonic clusters.” Think of the number of polyphonic cultures of Caucasia, or Balkans, or South-West China. I will try to explain this geographic stratification by the very origins of the phenomenon of vocal polyphony.

I hope that at least part of ethnomusicologists, present at our symposium are aware of my model of the origin of traditional polyphony. I proposed that polyphony is not a late cultural invention that was developed on the basis of development of initial monophonic singing. All the existing information strongly supports the idea that polyphony is gradually disappearing all over the world. This fact does not support the hypothesis of the late origins of polyphony. It is widely shared today that polyphony was not invented by a single talented tribe or a people. Despite the fact, that development of peculiar polyphonic styles that we encounter today in different cultures are most likely the result of inner development of various national and ethnic groups, origins of polyphony as phenomenon is connected to a much more distant, truly pre-historic times.

According to my model, polyphony was created by the forces of natural selection during the earliest period of evolutionary development of our hominid ancestors, and it was a part of defense system. I will not dwell on this, as the readers can find the detailed account on this in my 2006, 2011 and very recent 2014 books (Jordania, 2006, 2011, 2014). Loud, rhythmically united sound, full of dissonant harmonies, coupled with the group synchronic dance was putting our ancestors in an altered state of consciousness, which I call the “Battle Trance.” In this state participants did not feel fear and even pain, group interests and saving their family and tribe members was becoming more important than their own survival. The psychological state of the battle trance was a crucial tool for our ancestors in order to defend themselves from predators and obtain food.

This is the reason why participation in ritual dancing and singing sessions before the military and hunting sessions is universally spread in traditional societies. During such ritual dancing and singing the morale of participants undergoes change, the feel of unity with the group members totally dominates the selfish feelings, even the instinct of self-preservation is subdued. Tradition of the ritual dances before military sessions has such deep roots, that it is well alive today not only among traditional societies, but among the most contemporary, well-equipped western combat forces. As an example, we can mention here the tradition of American soldiers, who often engage in group singing and dancing before their military sessions. You can read about this interesting phenomenon in the insightful book by Jonathan Pieslak “Sound Targets: Music in Iraq War” (published in 2009.)

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Let us now get back to our discussion of traditional vocal polyphony, as a trans-cultural phenomenon. As we can see, we have reasons to believe that polyphony is an ancient phenomenon that was created by the forces of natural selection during the formation of Homo sapiens. Vocal polyphony started gradually disappearing since the advance of articulated speech. Let us now try to explain why the big part of vocal polyphonic traditions is preserved among national minorities.

(2) Polyphony and National Minorities

In order to explain correlation between the distribution of polyphony and national minorities, let us recall one more time that vocal polyphony is gradually disappearing all over the world. This idea naturally leads us to the fact that vocal polyphony is mostly surviving in the most geographically isolated regions of the world. This is the most natural feature for the oldest layers of cultural traditions, ancient languages, or oldest biological species of plants and animals. Such ancient survivals are found in the most inaccessible, geographically isolated places. To cut this interesting topic very short, we can say that the pre-historical origin of polyphonic singing and its gradual disappearance is the central reason for the current uneven distribution of vocal polyphonic traditions all over the world.

The history of ethnic minorities and their demographic stratification shows the similar pattern. Let us recall typical process of arrival of new people on a territory which is already occupied by the indigenous population. Native population, as a rule, is gradually mixed with the newcomers. Native population much better survives in isolated, difficult to access territories (such as mountains, big forest massifs, islands). In such regions communications are more difficult, and conditions for survival are more extreme. It is this geographic isolation that helps the older population and their cultural traditions to survive for a longer period of time. Therefore, the very much like the tradition of polyphony, older autochthonous population survives in geographically isolated and hard-to-reach regions (see also Nettl, 2005: 324; Sachs, 1940: 63-64).

It is the combination of these two factors that results in distribution (more precisely – surviving) of both polyphony and the older population in geographically isolated regions.

Therefore, if any of my colleague attempts to discover polyphony in a monophonic country, I would suggest first to study the physical map of the country, and search for the hard-to-access geographic regions, like mountain ranges, or forest massifs, or an island. If such regions are found, I would suggest to organize a fieldwork in such a region. Biggest chance of discovering polyphony as a rule is connected to such isolated and hard-to-reach regions.

Natural tendency of survival of autochthonous populations and polyphonic traditions in the most geographically isolated regions leads to another interesting phenomenon, and now I want to discuss this issue. I am talking here about the policy of establishing state borders. I

propose that the historically established border policy is somehow “unfair” towards the interests of autochthonous peoples and national minorities.

(3) Polyphony, National Minorities and State Borders

Before discussing this issue let us recall the process of infiltration of new Indo-European populations on the territory of Europe, populated by pre-Indo-European populations. Despite the fact that this was an extremely long and complex process, with very little hard evidence to make clear conclusions, we can still agree on the presence of several general stages of the interaction of the old and new populations.

- (1) Newcomers put pressure on the older population, forcing them to vacate the easier-to-access and more fertile territories. Part of the older autochthonous population gradually mixed with the newcomers. Another part of the older population, who moved to the less fertile and more geographically isolated territories, stayed out of extensive mixture with the new population. Such isolated and hard-to-access territories in Europe, are for example, mountain ranges in the Balkans, Pyrenees and Caucasus, islands – Sardinia, Sicily, Corsica, islands of the North Europe, or the largest forest massifs of the Europe, Polesie.
- (2) The new ethnic map of the Europe has gradually been established. Descendants of the older population live in harder-to-access and more isolated mountain, island and forest regions of the continent, and the descendants of the newcomers (and the mixed populations between from older and new populations) occupy open spaces. Populations that live in the geographically isolated from each other regions are genetically and culturally related, although these ancient relationships might not be conscious. Most of the representatives of the older populations gradually lose their language, which is replaced by the language of the newcomers, but they retain longer their singing traditions, as music shows bigger stability in such situations than language. These two staged of mixing of old and new populations (substrate and superstrata) are more or less known in historical sciences. Now let us pay attention to a third stage, which, as far as I know, has never been discussed in the historical literature.
- (3) Later, when the process of formation of contemporary nation-states gains momentum, a new interesting process enters the scene. For the normal functioning of the newly established nation-states obtaining of the official and stable state borders becomes imperative. The most natural places of putting such borders between the nation-states are logically chosen the hard-to-access and isolated regions between the countries. Such regions are, for example, mountain ranges and large forest massifs. These are the regions, as we remember, that are often populated by the descendants of

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the older, autochthonous populations of the continent. So as state borders run on the top of the mountain ranges and the middle of the forest massifs, the older, culturally and ethnically related populations are split into different states.

We can have a look at couple of concrete results of this historical process. When France and Spain put a border between these two states, the border went through the Pyrenees, the natural living space of the Basques. As a result, today Basques live both in France and in Spain. The same processes were active in Alps. Neighbouring Germany, Italy, Austria and France divided the mountainous range, and the once ethnically and culturally closer population found themselves in different countries. This is the reason why populations of southern Germany and the north Italy are culturally and ethnically closer to each other, that the populations of northern and southern Italy. Similar processes were in place in the Caucasus as well. It is not an accidental that various peoples of the Caucasus, who often talk in different languages, follow different religions, live in different states and sometimes even organizing military sessions against neighbours, still call each other “brothers.” The same has happened in the largest forest region of the Europe, Polesie, which is today a buffer zone between the Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and Russia.

(4) The Need for Wide Regional Studies of the Traditions of Vocal Polyphony

I am not going to start discussing the political ramifications of the historical processes that lead to the establishment of the existing stated borders, but I do want to mention the importance of the above-mentioned processes in the study of the phenomenon of traditional polyphony.

Promoting national interest and supporting the idea of unique features of the national culture is a very natural desire of national scholars and artists. The presence of vocal polyphony has more than once been at the centre of such sentiments. Vasil Stoin, for example, was considering Bulgarian polyphony a unique phenomenon (Stoin, 1925), although later it became apparent that similar polyphony was present among most of the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula. Georgian musicology for decades was championing the idea that Georgia was a polyphonic island in the sea of monophonic traditions (see, for example, Javakhishvili, 1938). It turned out that virtually all the peoples of North Caucasus, (includingTurkic language speaker Balkarians and Karachaevis) have vocal polyphonic traditions that are stylistically similar to Georgian polyphony.

It is easy to see that the distribution of vocal polyphony often crosses boundaries between the states and represents a wider international and regional phenomenon. Therefore, if we want to study a vocal polyphony of a certain culture, we should not restrict ourselves with the research of traditional polyphony of one region or even one country. We need to check the neighbouring countries, check the possibility of the presence of vocal polyphony in these

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countries, and incorporate the study of other neighbouring traditions of vocal polyphony of the whole region, despite the existing state borders.

We should not forget that polyphony is an international phenomenon, and its deep study requires similarly wide international approach, thoroughly based on comparative method.

Now allow me to make some conclusions:

- Major part of vocal polyphonic traditions are distributed among national minorities;
- Polyphonic traditions of national minorities are often neglected, as the cultural traditions of the main ethnicity are usually in the centre of scholarly attention;
- Pleasant exception from this general tendency is China, where the study of polyphonic traditional of national minorities attracts a great deal of interest of Chinese scholars;
- As polyphony is a very archaic phenomenon that is gradually lost all over the world, big part of vocal polyphonic traditions are surviving in the most geographically isolated regions of the world;
- Study of traditional polyphony within one country is very important, but is not enough for deep understanding of this phenomenon. It is necessary to take into account singing traditions of the neighbouring countries, where similar forms of polyphony are often spread among national minorities;
- Historically widely practiced policy of putting state borders between the countries did not take into account the existing relationships between the peoples living on different sides of the mountain ranges. State borders are usually put on the top of the mountain ranges, thus separating the related population and placing them in different states. Of course, in my papers I do not suggest to revise the existing state borders, but taking this factor when studying the vocal polyphonic traditions is absolutely necessary.

And finally, let me mention a welcome tendency that I noticed in the dynamics of our polyphonic symposia. Regular guests of our symposia probably remember that we first decided to have a central topic for each symposium starting from the fifth symposium. The first central topic was the polyphonic traditions of Asia. After the fifth symposium, papers and discussions about the polyphonic traditions in Asian countries has not disappeared. On the contrary, they grow louder. This year, for example, separate paper is dedicated to the unique polyphony of Nuristan (eastern Afghanistan), and symposium participants can hear live performance of the extremely interesting polyphonic traditions from Taiwan. The same way, after the comparative method was selected as the central topic of the sixth symposium, this topic occupied an important place not only in the schedule of the sixth, but current seventh symposium as well. I hope that very similarly the topic of polyphony in the music of national

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minorities, central topic of our symposium, will get more of our colleagues interested in this relatively neglected topic.

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