

Traditional Ladakhi Songs: A Study in Textual, Melodic, and Rhythmic Hybridity

Noe Dinnerstein

John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, USA

This paper examines traditional song from the former Himalayan kingdom of Ladakh, which meld characteristics from Tibet, India, Central and Western Asia. My analysis will illustrate these cultural/musical different threads, and show how they combined in a number of Ladakhi song types. Congregational songs (*zhung lu*) and related genres originated in the old royal court in Leh. According to informants, the texts for these songs were composed by aristocratic and Buddhist monastic literati based on rules of Tibetan prosody. These texts were then set to music, most likely by palace musicians who sang and played the *surna* and *daman* (double reed and kettledrum), imports from Western Asia. These melodies were composed in isometric rhythms that, while not closely reflecting the text prosody, do reflect phrase structures in those texts. Local discussion of rhythmic types and performance practice reveal implied theory regarding rhythms, including concepts of common rhythmic landmarks. Diverging from more Tibetan-style pentatonic melodies used in nomadic songs (*zhabro*), court-centered genres utilize display differential features in ascent and descent, attributes to border conditions, i.e., mixing of pentatonic ascent with hepta- and hexatonic descent. Further analysis examines melodic contour, both general characteristics, and how this may relate to singing pitch set by the *surna*.