



A Study on the Structure and Techniques of Khasi Indigenous Vocal Music

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Abstract: This is a study on the techniques of singing Khasi indigenous vocal music by first understanding its structure. This study is also an attempt to compile and document the different techniques involve in singing Khasi indigenous songs right from the songs that has been sung for generations altogether to the songs of contemporary composition which are however based on a similar structural pattern. This endeavor of documenting Khasi indigenous vocal music is part of the conservation of Khasi music which thus aims at conserving the musical identity of the Khasi people. The key-finding in this research is the melismatic nature of Khasi indigenous vocal music. Though there are differences in the geographical settlement, the dialect spoken, the intonation in speech as well as in singing, yet the melismatic structure of the melody in these study area binds them in one accord of Khasi indigenous music. Melismatic singing in Khasi indigenous vocal music is described as kyriah. How to sing them? or how to kyriah?, of course require different other techniques which has been defined in this study.

Index Terms – Khasi Indigenous Vocal Music, Melisma, Kyriah, Glottal stop, Yodelling, Twang

I. INTRODUCTION

Music throughout the ages has had its own place to stay in the society. It has its own role and importance in each and every society and also in individual's life. Music is considered to be the oldest form of expression (Menuhin, et.al, 1979) perhaps as old as the human race itself. Music impacted a lot on the life of an individual and the society. It changes with changing time and develops along with the development of the society.

Music has been defined by many writers as the universal language and as one writer writes, music is a universal language of the soul having three assertions as being universal, as a language and as having something to do with the soul (Francis, 1992). Music has become an important element in the history of mankind; it also a prominent feature of the Khasi. Music is imbibed in the Khasi society.

II. OBJECTIVES

- To analyze the structure of Khasi indigenous vocal music.
- To classify Khasi indigenous vocal music on the basis of the structure.
- To define the technique of Khasi indigenous vocal music.
- To notate the technique of Khasi indigenous vocal music.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study is based on qualitative method with non-traditional format. This study was conducted in East Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and West Jaintia Hills Districts of Meghalaya, India. Participants were selected purposively and through snow ball sampling as the availability of resources are concentrated only in certain areas and are not widespread. In-depth interview and questionnaire methods were conducted to gather information regarding the subject from composers, songwriters, singers and music students. The data collected is presented in text and audio-visual format.

Khasi Songs with indigenous elements and character were recorded in audio-visual format and notated in Staff Music notation system and Tonic Sol-fa Music notation system. The structure of these songs was analyzed from the melodic and rhythmic perspective as well the thematic aspect and the technique of singing. Through the analyses certain melodic patterns and stylistic nature of singing was captured. These techniques of singing and melodic patterns were defined and notated in text format and demonstrated in audio-visual format.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since ancient times, vocal music has been one of the most important facets of the social life of the people. Remains in cuneiform writings, tablets and ancient inscriptions have shed some light to the place of vocal music in the form of temple music, hymns, myths, lamentations and incantations. Though not much is known about the music and how they are sung or played, however, the few remains that are still left have provided a glimpse of the type of music and musical instruments used. Vocal music has had its place in the society from the ancient Sumerian to the Phoenician Music, music in Ireland, the ancient Greeks and the Romans and the early Christian era either in the form of entertainment and worship. Amongst the ancient Greeks and Romans, singing with stringed accompaniment is a common trait (Iyer, 2004).

Rama (1989) mentions that singing, playing musical instruments and dancing are ways in which man creatively express his emotions and of these three forms of music, singing is considered to be the most significant. He also added that music and in particular, singing also play a pivotal role in the science of speech therapy in ancient India. He also mentions of the importance of voice training, practice and patience as important factors in learning to sing Indian Classical Music. The human voice can produce a variety of renditions to even just a single melody, which is why it was considered to be a musical instrument. Different variations can be created depending on the artistry of the vocalists. Although, improvisation characterise Indian Music; in ancient times, throaty style of singing was preferred to that of nasal style (Basham, 1959).

The Khasi are people living in the six districts of Meghalaya, India; East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, South West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi District, West Jaintia Hills and East Jaintia Hills. Collectively, these districts are called Khasi and Jaintia Hills (Mawrie, 2009).

The Khasi are known to be a musical race that can pick up any tune or melody and handle musical instruments with ease (Chowdhury, 1978). It is present in almost all walks of life, whether in working hours or leisure; rituals or festivities; whether in times of joy or sorrow (Chowdhury, 1978 ; Mawrie, 2009).

Syiem (2005), mentions that musical instruments are symbolic of the philosophy and tradition of a society. She has classified musical instruments into membrane instruments, string instruments and wind instruments. The Khasi have a variety of musical instruments which include *Ka Bom*, *Ka Ksing Shynrang*, *Ka Ksing Kynthei*, *Ka Padiah*, *Ka Dymphong*, *Ka Singphong*, *Ka Duitara*, *Ka Maryngod*, *Ka Marynthing*, *Ka Saitar*, *Ka Besli*, *Ka Tanglod*, *Ka Shawiang*, *Ka Mieng* and *Ka Tangmuri*. These instruments are played in different occasions and festivities (Syiem, 2005 ; Mawrie, 2009).

Another feature of Khasi music is vocal music which are *Phawar*, lamentation songs or dirges and also story songs (Kyndiah, 1978 ; Khongwir, 1994).

Vocal music also forms an integral part of the Khasi society. They can be heard in the form of *phawar* or chants, folk songs and ballads based on different themes. Khasi vocal music has a beauty and uniqueness of its own that can be differentiated from other vocal music of the world. One interesting feature of the Khasi vocal music is that it includes not only those with lyrical content but also those without the lyrical content at all and sung only by humming the tune.

With time, vocal music of the Khasi developed from a simplified form to a more sophisticated one. So also with acculturation, new styles and ornamentation were incorporated adding more variety to Khasi vocal music. And in today's generation we can hear a variety of Khasi songs that fit into the different genre of western music and bollywood music whether pop, rock, hip-hop and others. This study however will include only vocal music of the Khasi having indigenous tune.

Musicologists have opined that vocal music can be considered as the oldest of all music in the world as it involves the human voice (Menuhin, et. al., 1979). Perhaps it will not be misleading to say that vocal music of the Khasi is older than other types of Khasi music.

V. EVOLUTION OF KHASI INDIGENOUS VOCAL MUSIC

For ages, man has been inspired by nature to create music. The beautiful sound of the rivers and springs, waterfalls, birds chirping and insects immersed in nature are what inspires man to replicate and reproduce them in the form of cheerful tune, melancholy tune (Passah, 2001- Giri Ed.). The Khasi laureates are inspired by Mother Nature to write their songs and ballads and their songs reflect songs about Mother Nature (Mawrie, 2009).

It cannot be said where Khasi Music originated, however, it is believed that it is as old as the Khasi race itself and passed down from one generation to the next orally (Wanswett, 2001). Wanswett (2001) further adds that oral tradition has been part of the process of living for the Khasi race. Although Khasi music has been influenced by various kinds of music, however there is continuity of its music, it still exist and flourishes and new performing art have not replaced the traditional ones (Wanswett, 2001).

Singing has been an age old tradition of the Khasi community. Apart from the sound of percussion instruments during dances and rituals, songs are also sung in different occasions. Singing is not only a leisure activity but has also been part and parcel of the daily life of the people. Songs are sung while doing chores at home and they are also sung during festivities.

Vocal music begins with the birth of a child, where the mother has the privilege of giving the child a tune rather a regular name. This is a common practice known as *Sur Iawbei* which is still prevalent today in some areas of East Khasi Hills district.

Parents and elders in a family would lull a child to sleep with a song. Values and traditions are also taught by the older generation to the younger ones through songs with the accompaniment of musical instruments particularly the *Duitara*. Songs are sung while working in the fields. To celebrate the joyful occasion of entering a new house, *phawar* are sung. Singing is there even while mourning the death of a person

Although most of these vocal music practices are almost unheard of at present yet this was what has been practiced by our fore fathers. It can thus be derived that singing is the lifeblood of the Khasi people.

Though the origin of Khasi indigenous vocal music cannot be traced yet from what has been told and what has been studied there are traces of development. Originally Khasi songs are sung without harmony, however at present, Khasi Indigenous Vocal Music are also heard sung by choirs in multiple parts arrangement.

Three important features of Khasi Indigenous Vocal Music are the singing with proper lyrics, without lyrics and those with a combination of singing with and without lyrics. Those without lyrics are sung with meaningless syllables such la la la la i le le le.

VI. DEVELOPMENT OF KHASI INDIGENOUS VOCAL MUSIC

Syiem (2005), writes about the different stages of state formation process and how this also play a part in shaping Khasi music. She mentioned on how music became more refined and takes shape at different levels such as the Village level or Sur Shnong, the level of the Raid or Sur Raid and at the level of the Native State or Sur Hima.

The continuity of indigenous singers in delivering Khasi indigenous tune is one of the reasons whereby these tunes can still be heard till date. Although there have been some changes owing to oral transmission, yet their exquisiteness have not receded (Budon, 2001- Giri Ed.).

The introduction of the Tonic Sol-fa by Rev Robert Evans to Khasi Hills in between 1880 and early 1990 (Jenkins, 1995) has been a great help in putting down Khasi music in writing and later staff notation was also introduced. The establishment of the All India Radio, Shillong in 1948 and Doordarshan, Laitkor in 1993, the advent of L.P's, cassettes, audios and videos have opened doors for exposure of Khasi indigenous music to the outside world (Wanswett, 2001).

VII. STRUCTURE OF KHASI INDIGENOUS VOCAL MUSIC

In this study songs analyzed consists of those that have been passed down from generations as well as modern contemporary compositions however which are composed based on the indigenous elements of melody and rhythm. The atonal nature of songs particularly folk songs sung at the convenience of the singers can be observed which very much represent the folk element of the song.

Melody and rhythm are the basic element of music; they are also the key element in Khasi indigenous vocal music. KIVM also include in its realm those with and without lyrics; text therefore in KIVM is secondary. However, the thematic aspect cannot be omitted from the gamut of KIVM.

There is a relation between the melody, rhythm and theme in KIVM. Each of these element, inter-connect with each other and thus have an effect on the structure of KIVM. A modification or alteration in one of these elements can change the entire structure of KIVM.

The melodic structure of a number of KIVM is often defined as following the pentatonic scale. The music notes used in most of the songs are d, r, m, s and l. Pentatonic scale refers to the type of scale with five notes and is also a type of scale that is a common feature of non-western music such as Chinese, Japanese, Africa and European folk music (Latham, 2003). However, the type of scale depends from songs to songs. Through the analyses of the notated songs, it was found that each and every song compiled has a variety of melodic structure so also the scale.

There songs are in the pentatonic scale, the major scale as well as the minor scale. It can thus be pointed out that KIVM is not confined to the pentatonic scale though the other scales are not commonly used.

KIVM is also melodic rather than harmonic. However with the introduction of the music system, the influence of modern music and the dominance of choral music especially in Christian worship, songs with indigenous elements are composed with choral arrangement. This however does not change the melodic structure of such songs in sung in the pentatonic scale but the elements of a diatonic scale are seen. Diatonic scale is scale with seven notes that adds up to an octave which can be represented by the white keys of the piano keyboard (Latham, 2003). Two of the popular contemporary compositions with Khasi indigenous music are "*Mynsiem Bashynrang*" and "*Tiar Put Tiar Tem Khasi*". *Mynsiem Bashynrang* was composed and performed with harmony by Mr. E. W. Kharsahnoh. This song was published in a songbook and was also featured in the album produced by the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP). The song *Tiar Put Tiar Tem* was composed by Ms Darilin Masharing and this song was produced in the music album by St. Anthony's College.

KIVM is melismatic in nature. Melisma is defined by the term *kyriah* in KIVM. With the variety of dialects, that can be found in Khasi, Ri Bhoi and West Jaintia Hills Districts of Meghalaya, the term *kyriah* seem to have found a place as a term that is used in singing KIVM. Melisma is a technique used in plainchant where two or more notes are sung to one syllable (Latham, 2003). This style is prevalent even today in popular music. Whitney Houston is known to be the master of melisma where her rendition of the love song by Dolly Parton that has put this technique in the limelight during the 90s (Everitt, 2012).

KIVM are based on the rhythmic pattern of the Khasi, though not necessarily that they follow strictly the beat pattern. The syncopated feature of Khasi rhythmic pattern can be heard in rhythmic flow of the KIVM as well. The Khasi rhythmic aspect is therefore inter-twined with KIVM. The most common are *Dum dum*, *Nalai*, *Padiah ardieng* and *shadwait*.

Each of the KIVM whether those that have been practiced for generations and even contemporary compositions have specific purposes and use. They cannot be rendered haphazardly at just about any time. There are themes involved in KIVM. These themes also associated with mood in music. Mood explains the character of music (Taylor, 1989).

Tempo is also a factor that can change the mood of the music. Change in the tempo can also change the mood of a song. This relationship between mood and tempo are interchangeable and so are the melodic structure, rhythmic structure and theme. Mood is also affected by the combination of musical notes (Mahajan, n.d.)

VIII. CLASSIFICATION OF KHASI INDIGENOUS VOCAL MUSIC

Jyrwa (1981) have broadly classified Khasi music on the basis of themes into Devotional or thanksgiving, music of nature, story songs or ballads, lullaby, Chants, melancholy songs, laments or dirges and dance music. His classification of Khasi music can also be applied as the basis for classification of KIVM from the perspective of theme. However, since mood have an adverse effect on the structure of KIVM, therefore, KIVM can be classified as follows:

Sur shad or *sur kmen* means dance or happy song. This category would include songs sung and performed during joyous and festive occasions. It is observed that dance songs not only relate to songs sung during dance festivals but also during weddings as well also popularly known as *Sur bia* in Jaintia Hills. These songs can have a faster tempo with vibrant instrumental accompaniment.

Sur iam or *sur tym pang* are melancholy songs which expresses grief and sadness. Mourning songs, lamentations or dirges can also be categorized here since they have the same mood. Such type of song, if accompanied, should be accompanied with mellow type of instrumental accompaniment so as to enhance the emotive feature of such songs.

Sur biria refers to humorous songs. This category covers songs with humor in them. These types of songs have been sung within the Khasi community since ages and can be heard till date even in contemporary compositions.

Sur kyntang refers to sacred songs expressed in the state of solemnity. This category includes songs that are sung during rituals as an invocation to God. To adhere to the solemnity, sophisticate music and musical instruments should not be used or played.

IX. TECHNIQUES OF KHASI INDIGENOUS VOCAL MUSIC

Singing KIVM involve certain techniques that do share some similarities with vocal music of different cultures. However, at the same time they do hold certain qualities and character that define its uniqueness and differentiate it from others.

Through the songs collected, observed, listened to, performed and analyzed, a number of techniques have been derived. These techniques are defined in comparison with varied vocal music culture.

Kyriah

KIVM involve a melodic pattern of having multiple notes (notes or musical notes such as C D E F G A B C or d r m f s l t d¹) sung to one syllable. There is a repetitive use of this pattern in singing different songs of varied themes and rhythmic patterns and in varied mood. There is not just one pattern but multiple patterns and the extent of these patterns also differ. These patterns when sung create a definitive technique known as *kyriah*.

Kyriah means to cut at short intervals (Singh, 1906). This term has been used to mean melisma in KIVM. This is not just a single type of melisma. There are a number and multiple combinations of note patterns in KIVM. In this technique, a principal note which is the main music note is decorated or graced with an additional or multiple notes. The most common note decoration in KIVM is the single-note decoration and the two-note decoration. A single-note decoration is a form of melisma where one extra note is added to the principal note and the two-note means two extra notes are added (Combs & Bowker, 1995). These note patterns can be sung used numerous times in a song. Multiple note decoration which refers to melisma having more than two notes added to the principal note (Combs & Bowker, 1995) is also a pattern used in KIVM. However, this pattern is not used frequently in a song but sung usually at cadences. Cadence is a section in a song or a piece of music for rest or relaxation (Taylor, 1989).

These note patterns or note decorations can be defined in KIVM as *kyriah shi kyrwoh*, *kyriah ar kyrwoh*, and *kyriah kyndup*.

Kyriah shi kyrwoh will refer to single-note decoration. *Shi* is a prefix meaning one (Singh, 1906) and *kyrwoh* means a tie (Kharkongor, 2002). In western music two, or three or many notes are tied together to extend the length of a note or syllable (Brown, 1987). The tied note can move in a step or a leap for example, movement from the notes C to D or in Tonic Sol-fa Music Notation System (TSMNS) d to r is a step whereas C to E (TSMNS is d to m) is a leap. The most common leap movement is at the interval of a third and step simply interval of a second. From the previous example, C to D is interval of a second and C to E is interval of a third and likewise, D to E is the interval of a second and D to F is interval of a third.

The added or the grace note precedes the principal note and when singing the grace note is touched very fast and momentarily. However, at times the grace note is added following the principal note. This type of melismatic singing is also present in Indian Classical Music (ICM) which is known as *kana*. *Kana* refers to slightly singing or playing a grace note which either precedes or follow after the main note (Rama, 1989).

Kyriah ar kyrwoh is a type of melisma where two notes are added to the main note and *ar* here means two (Singh, 1906). In this technique of singing melisma, the most common of this type of *kyriah* in KIVM is when a main note is followed by a grace note in a step movement, which then instantly resolves to the main note. This transition is sung rapidly and it oscillates between two notes.

This type of *kyriah* is quite similar to *gamaka* in ICM. There are a variety of *gamaka* in ICM and it refers to the technique of connecting notes that precedes and follows a main note (Mahajan, n. d.). Mahajan (n. d.) further writes that *gamakas* are an essential element of ICM; they are the vertebrae which are rendered with varied extent of intensity, tempo and range in different ragas.

Kyriah kyndup is a technique of adding multiple notes to the main note of a syllable. The term *kyndup* means over-hanging or a handful (Singh, 1906). Unlike *kyriah shi kyrwoh* and *kyriah ar kyrwoh*, this type of *kyriah* usually appears at the cadences and rarely used throughout the song.

Melismatic singing is not only about hitting the right notes but it also means singing them articulately. Singing melisma in an articulate manner can be described as *kyriah jlih*, *kyriah kynthah* and *kyriah tuid*.

Kyriah jlih refers to a smooth rendition of melisma whether it is a single-note, two-note or a multi-note decoration. *Kyriah kynthah* means a detached technique of melismatic singing. *Kyriah tuid* refers to a technique of *kyriah* which glide from one note to the other. The word *tuid* means flow or glide (Singh, 1906 ; Blah, 2008).

Kyoh

Kyoh and *kyroh* are terms which have an almost a similar meaning in them. These terms have been used in some areas to signify a particular technique of singing. These two terms means a concave cut at the head of an arrow to fit the bowstring or a concave cut at the head of an arrow (Singh, 1906). The part of the larynx which is made up of the vocal cord and the concave slit-like opening is called the glottis (Soanes, et. al, 2005). These terms can therefore indicate techniques of singing similar to the glottal stop and yodeling in western music.

Glottal relates to the glottis and glottal stop refers to sound formed by the release of the airstream after the glottis completely close (Soanes, et. al., 2005). It is a type of sound produced due to the opening and closure of the glottis (New York Vocal Coaching, 2013, February 15). Furthermore, it is part of the natural speech and a way of communicating and expressing words. Being a part of the natural way of speaking, the glottal stop is not constantly used in each and every word spoken. Certain words require the glottal stop to convey meaning. This technique of is prevalent in the Khasi language and it is also a feature of KIVM which can be heard in almost every song.

The glottal stop can therefore be defined as *kyoh rit*. *Rit* means small or less (Singh, 1906 ; Kharkongor, 2002). This technique is rendered manifold times in a song, however does not appear entirely throughout the song.

Yodeling on the other hand, is a technique of singing which is described by the frequent alteration between the voice registers. There are two main categories that the voice can produce; the head voice register and the chest voice register (Combs & Bowker, 1995). The head voice if the light resonance produced when singing high notes and chest voice is the heavy resonance produced when singing low notes. Yodeling is also a technique that helps in flexibility of the voice, achieving higher range and agility in singing (New York Vocal Coaching, 2012, August 10).

Yodeling in KIVM is audible in songs like *phawar*, *rwai rep*, *sur shoh kba* and even in *ki sur shad*. This technique can be described in KIVM as *kyoh jlan*. *Jlan* means long or lengthy (Singh, 1906). This technique can be sung throughout the song or either elongated to larger phrase of a song.

Kyan Iam

Kyan iam is a technique that is widely used in mourning songs and melancholy songs in the context of KIVM. *Kyan* means to bear down or to strain and *iam* means to weep or to cry (Singh, 1906). Even though this technique is applied to mourning songs yet it can be applied to different songs in order to more colour and embellish the music. In the non- western classical singing, the crying technique is also one of the very prominent techniques of singing.

Rwai shapaid

KIVM is also defined by a style of singing known as *rwai shapaid* which is equivalent to the western style called the *twang*.

Rwai Khutia

Yodeling is a technique that not only confines to the voice and voice registers but also to the lyrical content where vowels are sung instead of words (Latham, 2002). KIVM involves a great deal of singing with syllables and sometimes with a combination of words. This technique of singing is also known as non-lexical vocable (Wikipedia, 2019, April 3). The syllables sung are usually meaningless.

In the Khasi language, there is a term known as *kren khutia* which means speaking about unnecessary and insignificant things for time pass (Singh, 1906; Kharkongor, 2002). This term can be used and adopted in signifying singing with meaningless syllables or a combination of these syllables with words.

However, since *kren* is Khasi word for speech there this term will be replaced with *rwai* meaning sing. Therefore *rwai khutia* will mean singing with syllables in KIVM.

Intonation

The Khasi language include within its realm different dialects which are spoken by the Khasi people. These dialects differ with the difference in geographical settlement and sub-group. For instance the people who reside in Ri Bhoi speak a different dialect as compared to those who reside in Khasi and Jaintia hills. Even amongst Khasi who reside in Khasi hills, it is observed that different dialects are spoken. Each dialect are spoken with different intonation. Perhaps the influence of the neighboring tribes and communities has also had some effect on the intonation in speech of the different Khasi community.

This diversity in the intonation of speech has also impacted intonation in singing. The major difference can be observed between the style of singing in the Jaintia hills compared to Ri Bhoi and East Khasi Hills Districts. From the analyses of the songs

notated, audio-visuals and observation, the melodic pattern of vocal music is similar to that of those in Ri Bhoi and Khasi hills, however there is a major difference when it comes to the intonation.

X. CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be said that Khasi indigenous music has formed a very intricate part of the musical life of the Khasi community. Be it from the personal life of the people to the social life. Songs are sung to celebrate the life and to mourn the dead of the people of the community.

Each song is rendered artistically and differs in the technique of singing from one another. From this research it was found that KIVM involve in it several techniques though have some similarities with the vocal music culture of the world yet stand apart in its own unique way. The Khasi people are not the only people in the world whose singing accounts to melismatic singing, however, the patterns of melisma is what makes this kind of singing unique and differentiates KIVM from the rest of the world.

Kyriah is the most significant and dominating technique in KIVM. KIVM will not sound excellent without the *kyriah*, however over singing them will destroy the beauty of a song. It is important to know when and where to use them. The techniques involve in singing KIVM requires practice to achieve precision in singing.

Kyriah is also the basic element that defines the melodic structure of the Khasi. This technique has been used in songs with non- khasi texts by some singers-songwriters-composers. Examples of these songs are the famous rendition of “*Hoi Kiw*” performed by Summersalt where sections of the song with hindi lyrics was performed by Usha Uthup and was debut in the Bollywood movie Rock on 2 (2017, April 5) and another two songs “*Jar ka Bhah*” and “*Nature’s Crying*” from the album *Ha Jylli Ki Khriang* (2018). Perhaps it can be said that the structure of KIVM first and foremost lies in the melodic structure, then the rhythmic structure, the theme and lastly the text.

However, it is also a bitter truth that KIVM such as *sur shoh kba*, *rwai rep* and other similar songs sung as a community have become a dying art with the last generation who still know how to sing these songs though they no longer practice them in the field. There are only a few places that still practice singing these songs. These therefore require be retaining and sustaining lest the originality of KIVM be lost.

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