

How Musical Is God? A Pantheon and Its Music in Bastar, Central India

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Introduction

A relationship between music and religion has been observed in many rituals from around the world. More precisely, ethnographic studies on rituals of possession have often pointed to the existence of musical motifs or tunes corresponding to different deities or spirits (Rouget, 1980¹). While anthropologists probably lack the technical know-how to explore the musical structure in relation to its meaning, even ethnomusicologists seem to have given up with this perspective, surprisingly contenting themselves with these scheming observations². This paper is an attempt to go beyond these findings by the analysis of a case-study.

In Bastar (central India), the music of the sacrificial rituals is made of series of tunes dedicated to the village deities and played on a shawm and a pair of kettle drums in front of the mediums possessed by them. Starting from this observation, I hypothesised that the structure of the musical repertoire could help understand the complex or-

¹ In his book *La musique et la transe* (1980), Rouget analyses the role of such “de-vises” (in French) in the process of possession, gathering lots of data collected by many anthropologists, mostly in Africa, Brazil and Europe.

² As a counter-example, see Emoff (2002) about the Eastern coast of Madagascar.

ganization of the divine local world. I shall thus compare here³ the musical structure of this religious repertoire with the organization of the local pantheon in order to clarify the precise nature of their relationship.⁴

A ritual in Bastar

One of the last princely states of India, Bastar became the largest district of Madhya Pradesh after the independence; it was subsequently subdivided and today it is a much smaller district in the new State of Chhattisgarh. Although Bastar is known today as a “tribal” area, the Gond majority seems to have always mixed with local castes. In fact, the so-called *tribes* and *castes* often live in the same villages, share broadly the same values and representations and sometimes even the same clans and ancestors⁵. They certainly don’t share the same mother

³ The argument exposed in this paper has been developed in a PhD dissertation presented at the University of Paris X – Nanterre, France, in 2005. I am very grateful to Christopher Gregory, Philippe Erikson and Reinhard Hoffmann for their precious remarks and for having coped with my clumsy English.

⁴ As far as I know, very few studies analysed the musical system itself in its relation with the organisation of the pantheon: see Desroches (1996) about Tamil rituals in Martinique and Wolf (2006) about the Kota-s of South India.

⁵ The terms tribe and caste, first used by the British rulers in their attempt to classify and understand the Indian population, are still used by the Indian Government who maintained and carried on with this classification (“Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes”) in order to undertake positive actions in favor of the socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Differentiating “tribes” and “castes” in India is all but simple, especially in Bastar where the so called “castes” seem to have emerged from the “tribal” population by specializing into specific occupations and thus were probably kept in closer contact with other groups. From the second half of the nineteenth century on, some other casts encouraged by the British to colonize this “wild” area, migrated from different regions of India and settled in Bastar as merchants, cultivators or administrative workers.

tongue, but each group knows the language of his neighbour. Halbi⁶ is used as a lingua franca and has become a mother tongue for many groups.

The ritual I will focus on concerns all of them, castes or tribes, and gathers their gods and ancestors together several times a year during a weekly market when one of the village gods is honored by a sacrifice; all the gods and spirits of the neighborhood are invited to join the festival. This *dev bajar*, literally “gods-market”, is very popular in all the villages of Bastar where a weekly market is held⁷. Music is an essential element of the ritual, especially during the “play of gods” (*dev khel*). This marks the climax of the ritual. Musicians become central actors of the event as men, possessed by different gods, ask for their tune to be played so they can participate in the play of the gods. One after the other, the possessed men shout, gesticulate, dance and hit themselves with all kinds of instruments: wooden sticks, whips, nailed chains or axes (according to their divine identity). While embodied by men, the same gods and ancestors also animate diverse sacred objects (bamboo poles, wooden frames, litters, palanquins, etc.) which, carried by villagers, manifest their power by trembling, rocking, moving in all directions.

The musicians please and entertain the deities – in the shape of men or in the shape of objects – by playing their respective tune(s)

⁶ Halbi is an Indo-European language, originally the language of the Halba tribe. In this article, all the vernacular terms are in Halbi. The retroflex consonants are indicated with block letters.

⁷ In the biggest villages, a larger version of this festival occurs once a year, a kind of big *dev bajar* called *maRay* (*mela* in hindi) where the market becomes a fair. It lasts three days and celebrates together all the gods of the village and its surroundings. This study is based on fieldwork conducted from March to May 2000 and from December 2001 to November 2002 in several villages of Bastar, more precisely with the GanDa musicians of a village called Barkay.

(called *paR*). The result is an unbroken line of melodies played on the shawm, using a circular breathing technique, and accompanied by specific rhythmic patterns on the kettledrums. Whereas the most popular tunes are easily identified by any villager since they represent and belong to the most popular gods, it took me a very long time before I could distinguish one tune from another, or simply hear when one ended and the other started. As an ethnomusicologist I still find it difficult to define precisely what a *paR* is. Basically, it amounts to a succession of extremely variable motifs evoking for the listeners one god or another, one phase of the ritual or another.



Illustration 1: GanDa musicians playing *nagoRa* and *mohri* at Dantewara, Nicolas Prévôt, 2001.

Considering the complexity of their repertoire, the musicians must be specialists⁸ whose musical and ritual knowledge is transmitted orally along family lines. As in other parts of India, ritual musicians belong exclusively to a very low and depreciated caste despite their great knowledge and their essential role. Even if agriculture has become their main source of income, the GanDa-s of Bastar are characterized by several traditional occupations found among other comparable castes of India: weaving (progressively replaced by tailoring), cattle grazing, village watching and music making. Known as *devta mohri*, the ensembles playing for such events as *dev bajar*, are composed of two or three GanDa musicians: the leader, often the elder, plays a shawm called *mohri* and is accompanied by a pair of kettledrums called *nagoRa*, and an optional smaller kettledrum called *tuRbuli*. During a ritual, several ensembles may play one next to the other. The impression of sonic abundance produced by different tunes played simultaneously but independantly⁹ by different ensembles can be seen as a musical offering to the gods along with the many other kinds of offerings people make.

⁸ Considering their specific knowledge and the fact that they are not paid but receive what is rather considered as a compensation in grain for their service, I use the term “specialist” rather than “professional” to qualify these musicians.

⁹ Dana Rappoport calls this principle “polymusic”: “By this term I mean that two or more groups simultaneously perform different tunes (that could also be played separately), deriving from the same or different genres, but without temporal/rhythmic coordination (that is, they do not follow a shared pulse, and they do not begin and end together), and without the intention to make a single piece of music together but rather to play separately, side-by-side. Musics are juxtaposed in this fashion not only for their sound but also for their ritual implications” (Rappoport 2004: 383); « l’exécution de plusieurs musiques à la fois sur le même espace et simultanément (dans un même temps rituel mais non dans un même temps musical) est nommé “polymusique”. Le terme désigne des musiques indépendantes et non coordonnées par une même temporalité musicale, ne se référant pas à une pulsation commune » (Rappoport 1999: 160).

A structural link between music and the pantheon?

Though virtually anybody can be possessed unexpectedly at any moment during the ritual, the mediums are male specialists called *sirha*. Unlike the musicians, they might belong to any caste of the village. Their status of specialists and recognition as *sirha*-s stems from their election by one or more gods, and from their capacity to control their possession and to spread the voice of these gods. On the other hand, the most common spirits (*bhut* or *duma*) can possess (*cagto*, “climb”) anybody, especially drunk men¹⁰ who are then not considered as *sirha*-s but as mere villagers (*sada manuk*).

In Bastar, different terms apply to the invisible world. It is composed of departed, ancestors, gods and goddesses who form a kind of divine continuum:

- *Bhut*¹¹ are spirits of the recently departed, wandering in the nature and around the village, agitated, violent and dangerous.
- *Duma*, the “ancient”, is a kind of generic deity honoured as an indefinite ancestor, rather violent, still uncontrolled and dangerous. The cult of a specific ancestor *duma* can transform his negative power in a positive one which may eventually and progressively give him a divine status.
- *Anga* is a very complex entity, materialised as a wooden frame, also linked with the ancestors and the lineages, combining sometimes several gods of different kinds in one. Used domestically to solve many problems and conflicts, it is very popular in Bastar and each village worships several different *Anga*-s.

¹⁰ Alcohol is another essential element of the ritual; see Prévôt, “Music, Spirit & Spirits in Bastar, Central India”, in Otten Tina & Uwe Skoda (ed.), *Dialogues with Gods*, Berlin (to be published).

¹¹ A pan Indian concept: frequently *bhuta* in North India, *bhutam* in South India.

- *Devi*, *dev*, or *devi-devta* are generic terms for a god, a spirit, or for the gods in general; *devi* is feminine and *dev* masculine but the divine gender is often very indefinite.
- *Mata* defines more precisely the mother goddesses, or *the Mother Goddess*¹² who includes all in one. Though the most powerful deity, she is rather benevolent, calm and fixed in the temple of the village.

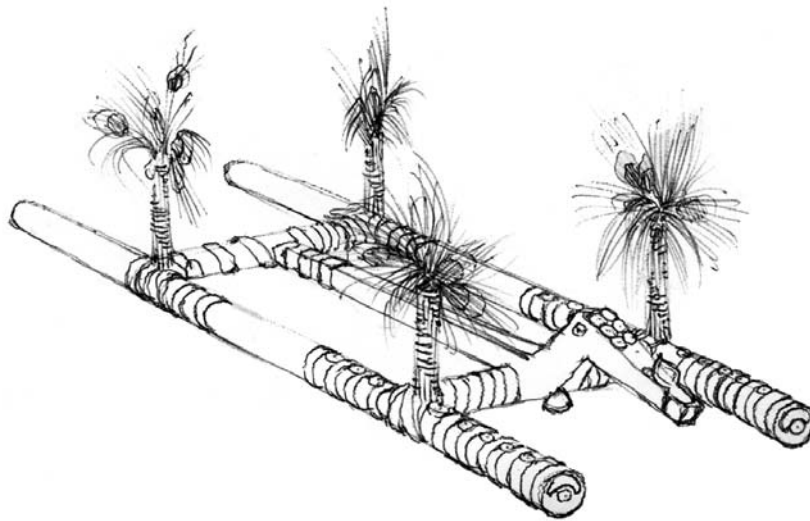


Illustration 2: Wooden frame materializing the deity Anga, Nicolas Prévôt, 2001.

Yet the divine categories formed by these terms are so flexible and porous that they are difficult to define and delimit: one particular god is qualified sometimes with one term, sometimes with another. Broadly speaking, the pantheon encompasses from the quite undefined spirits of the departed to some deified ancestors, up to some more specific mother goddesses. The recent ancestors are reputed to be violent and dangerous spirits and to wander in the forest (*jungle*) around the village; mother goddesses, on the other hand, are calm and benevolent and protect the village from the inside.

¹² Known as Danteshwari Mata, or Maoli Mata.



Illustration 3: Medium *sirha* hitting himself with nailed chains while being possessed at Barkay, Nicolas Prévôt, 2002.

The researcher's need for rationality would be fulfilled if he could reveal the existence – inside the musical structure – of musical categories reflecting or creating divine categories. The obscure pantheon, its terminology blurred by the contradictory information given by different ritual participants, would be clear if, for example, one could show that all the gods sharing the same musical feature (metrical structure, rhythmical pattern, melodic motif or scale, etc.) formed a divine category (*bhut*, *anga*, *duma*, *devi*, *mata*, etc). But an analysis of the musical structure reveals no clear categories of tunes that ethnography or the villagers themselves would identify with categories of deities. If some

tunes do share a musical feature, this is not sufficient to form a relevant ensemble of deities since they have nothing else in common (such as common features in their mythology, in their visual representation, in their place of worship, etc).

My first conclusion, then, is that the pantheon cannot be compared to an abstract table in the mind of people. Rather it takes shape in the very moment of the ritual, according to the context and depending on who perceives it. Nevertheless, even if the concept of category does not fit, the structure of the musical repertoire does reflect the organization of the pantheon: it is also multiform, extremely flexible, almost fluid, and based on the Indic fundamental principle of “the one and the many”.

A musical picture of the pantheon

The study of the repertoire *devta mohri* led me to reconsider the pantheon without the concept of musical category because this is too fixed and too static to apprehend such a fluid and dynamic system. In my search for musicological criteria of a flexible and concrete kind which could express some tendencies of the different deities during the ritual, I studied the links between music and the pantheon at two levels: the global structure of the repertoire (or macro structure, i.e the organization of the tunes among themselves) and the inner structure of each tune (or micro structure).

Macro structure:

First, I observed that the succession of tunes (which is not fixed in advance and changes according to the context) played during the ritual expresses a certain hierarchy among the gods: for instance, the main mother goddess is always played first, at any phase of the ritual. The

most important deities are honoured first and their positive energy, spread out through the shawm, makes time and space auspicious.

I also observed that some tunes are exclusive and concern the most important and distinct goddesses, whereas others are shared by less well defined gods, minor spirits or ancestors. Here, one could compare this musical principle with the myths and representations which follow the same logic. Thus, the most important gods have their own specific tune, are embodied in a specific *sirha*, have distinctive attributes in terms of clothing, ornaments and jewellery, and have precise and elaborated myths. On the other hand, the spirits of ancestors have neither a precise mythology nor specific representations, are embodied by anyone, share the same generic tune and the same ritual accessory (all of them hit themselves with an axe).

This general principle seems to be the work of time and memory. Unlike ghosts and recent ancestors who still belong to the indistinct masses, gods and goddesses have a long history: their mythology, their cults, and their sonic and visual representations have been able to develop generation after generation. Among the mass of the departed, collective memory recalls only extraordinary people, extraordinary deaths and the most ritually effective ancestors. Ghosts and gods thus form a historical continuum in a process of deification.¹³

Finally, another practice I observed among GanDa musicians was that a tune belonging to one god and evoking its particular nature, can be played in front of another deity in order to influence him. For example, in order to calm down a violent spirit-ancestor, musicians would sometimes play the tune of a mother goddess. This principle, which still requires further research on my part, corroborates a con-

¹³ One can even hypothesise that their human origin has often been forgotten.

ception of ritual sound as embodying the divine, its nature and power, a conception of sound as effective towards its environment.¹⁴

Micro-structure:

Each tune is a combination of different musical motifs. More or less flexibility in the combination of these motifs can be observed: significantly, the tunes dedicated to the minor spirits tend to be more flexible, whereas the most important deities sound more fixed (for example, they have systematic beginnings whereas the others don't). Here again, the musical structure parallels the socio-religious logic: the spirits whose tune is generic and whose musical structure is flexible correspond to the ones whose cult is not established, to the undefined departed still wandering in the jungle around the village. On the contrary, the deities (mostly mother goddesses) with exclusive and more fixed tunes are offered a regular cult and have been assigned a specific place, a temple built inside the village.

Tempo (slow or fast) and sound intensity (soft or loud), two other important musical criteria, are not defined in advance for each tune. They are introduced by the musicians according to the ritual context and seem to give to each deity its mood at the moment of the ritual. Even if a mother goddess has the reputation of a calm and benevolent deity who does not need to demonstrate her great power and whose *paR* is generally played soft and slow, she can sometimes remind her strength to the audience or show her anger for any reason. In this case, the violence of the medium hitting his back with heavy nailed chains is accompanied by a fast and loud music. As a divine element, music is also a source of power in itself and if the medium takes a

¹⁴ A *paR* is altogether an offering to a god, a representation of this god and even a sonic form of the deity itself endowed with its power.

long time “playing”, the spirit or deity needs to be provoked by interpreting its *paR* suddenly faster or more loudly.

Conclusion

Although the analysis revealed that the musical repertoire of the ritual *dev bajar* was not organized in categories of tunes matching up categories of deities, it allowed us to understand that, beyond the mere concept of category, the musical system does reflect and to some extent create the pantheon to which it is dedicated. Music and pantheon are completely linked to the time of the ritual and do not take shape out of it. The two systems, musical as well as religious, work less in terms of category than according to some dynamic principles: more or less flexibility or rigidity constitutive of each element (tune or deity), the possibility for an element to gain distinction with time, a behaviour changing according to the context, elements influencing each other, a flexible hierarchy of the elements. Rather than an ensemble of distinct categories, the pantheon is a continuum between the ancestors and the mother goddesses perfectly in tune with a very flexible musical system.

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