

A brief introduction to the contents and contexts of *La Ye* Songs in Amdo

mGonbo Tshering

Introduction

Throughout Tibet, regional songs and dances hold a special place in the life of local people and communities. Under the general field of local songs in Amdo is a variety of sub-genres, including songs for celebratory occasions (*ka mtshar*), call and response riddles (*srid pa*), participatory group song-dances (*rtsed rigs*) and songs which question the nature of the world (*srid pa 'dri ba*). All of these songs embody long historical traditions and remain popular among Tibetan people throughout Amdo. Certain genres are prominent in particular areas. For example, while music of the Tibetan lute (*rdung len*) is most popular in the Labrang region, the Trika region is the most famous place for *La Ye*. The custom of *La Ye* (meaning “melodic songs”) is especially favoured among gatherings of young men and women. This summary paper briefly outlines the definition, longitudinal development and the content and contexts of *La Ye* songs in Amdo Tibetan communities.

La Ye and the life of Amdo Tibetan people

The tradition of singing *La Ye* as an annual competition takes place almost everywhere in Amdo, particularly in rural areas. The songs present a space in which the theme of love in all its aspects and guises may be discussed by its principal protagonists; the young people of a given place. Gatherings are held during the two-to-three day “Festival of the Gods” (*lha rtse dus chen*) which falls in the sixth Tibetan lunar month (roughly corresponding with July in the western calendar). After the dancing of the afternoons has died down, the *La Ye* performances may begin.

Context and content of La Ye

A single singer’s welcome initiates *La Ye*. This preamble is a signal to the prospective performers’ older acquaintances or opposite sex relations to leave, for fear of being ashamed by the songs’ candid content. Children are allowed to remain, as they are not considered able to understand the full significance of the songs. Thereafter, different kinds of *La Ye* follow in a conventional order. Yet while certain sections of the sequence may be omitted, the opening preamble (*rtse mgo*), love songs (*rogs mthun*) and farewell (*bde mo*) must not be overlooked. Each singer must rely on his or her individual creativity, knowledge of the medium and wit in composing the impromptu and/or pre-prepared exchanges that make up each performance. Diverse ideas and emotions may be aired in these “song discussions”. During the love songs proper, singers weave in messages expressing love, the missing of a cherished partner and the bidding of a farewell. The fact that *La Ye* are

sung in pairs of men and women, whose status in life makes them potential mates, adds a extra *frisson* to the proceedings. The songs are composed using different melodies, though the tempo is frequently upbeat. Performers must skilfully manage an assortment of variables – timing, manner of singing, tune, evaluating the audience’s preference and mood etc. – and be evaluated by the expectant onlookers accordingly.

The changing social nature and musical structure of La Ye

During the 1980s and 90s, a highly entertaining form of *La Ye* (the sarcastic/mocking *kla shags*) emerged. This new genre perhaps constitutes an innovative form of the long-established non-amorous sarcastic songs (*glu shags*). The new form of sarcastic/mocking song is similar in musical form, but differs in content, from the older song type. *Kla shags* is becoming popular at contemporary young people’s gatherings. For example:

My song is like a Gesar song . . .
Even if you wanted to answer me,
You would be too ashamed!
(*Meaning: I have so many songs, and you have so few.*)

The older-form of *La Ye* (which has seven word-per-line stanzas) is currently being replaced by a present-day form which uses stanzas of nine words-per-line. Once the metaphor, and then content, were expressed in separate stanzas. However, this convention is being replaced in approximately 20–30% of cases by verses which combine analogy and a moral.

Significance of La Ye for the audience and participants

La Ye is an important social event, marking a much-welcomed moment of entertainment and recreation after the demanding winter period has abated, and before the hard graft of harvest-time begins. People from many walks of life gather together from the surrounding locale. The Festival of the Gods, and the *La Ye* performances within it, presents a time when community bonds may be strengthened or renewed, barring an occasional beer-fuelled disagreement. Participants often undertake a period of preparation prior to performing, which may involve the study of specialised texts and/or the gaining of advice and suggestions from respected family elders. *La Ye* may thus constitute one way in which the transmission of traditional knowledge is continuing today. The messages promulgated within *La Ye* performances are also considered to be a source of moral guidance for local people. Certain people may be persuaded to mend their errant ways on the strength of realising the legitimacy of a song’s message.

Conclusion

The information presented in this abstract is based on first-hand research, which has been undertaken by the author over a three-year period, to date. The material suggests

that *La Ye* continues to constitute an important social phenomenon for younger generations in Amdo society today. As a social practice, gifted singers are able to draw on the long-running social and textual legacies of *La Ye*, while selectively integrating contemporary features. The on-going popularity of the song-gatherings throughout Amdo indicates that *La Ye* is still considered relevant and constructive for rural societies in today's so-called "modern" world. *La Ye* constitutes a progressive, living tradition, which simultaneously shows traces of a rich cultural heritage. As such, *La Ye* is a regionally distinctive, social expression of cultural continuity and social innovation.