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Ritual and Gender Harmony in Jiarong Tibetan Weddings:Music, Tradition, and Women's Agency

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Abstract. This work analyzes the wedding traditions of Jiarong Tibetans as a focus of the intertwining of ritual, music, gender, and cultural heritage maintenance, introducing a new concept of dynamic harmony. The study rejects portraying the wedding ceremony as a cultural tradition frozen in time or as a purely patriarchal event, arguing that space remains for the intersection of tradition and modernization, women's roles, and cultural development in the performance of the wedding. Combining the theory of rites of passage with ritualization, feminist ethnomusicology, and gender performance in the context of Sino-Tibetan borderland discourse, the article shows that guozhuang circle dancing and antiphonal singing can serve as methods of memory transmission, whereas a form of family exchange may reinforce the patriarchal order. The work therefore pays special attention to gender-responsive cultural heritage maintenance as a path to women's empowerment.

Keywords: Jiarong Tibetan, wedding ritual, guozhuang, ethnomusicology, dynamic harmony

1. Introduction

Of all collective ceremonies, marriage rites are among the most complex in terms of organization, as they connect individual transition with family values, religion, property, memory, and performance. Jiarong Tibetan communities, covering most of today's western Sichuan region (notably in Aba and Ganzi Prefectures), have unique identities developed through rich interactions within the Sino-Tibetan area [1-4]. Published studies indicate that Jiarong ceremonies are performed with correlations with Tibetan Buddhist practices, Bon practices, gift exchange, circle dance, and antiphonal singing. However, these elements should not be seen as permanent and constant as they change due to migration, state policy, tourism, and generational transfer.

The paper raises two crucial issues. How can the major ritual and musical elements of Jiarong weddings be interpreted through the lens of ritual studies and ethnomusicology? How can gender equality be ensured without treating cultural protection as the preservation of all forms of social relationships known from the past? These issues are important for anthropology, gender studies, musical studies, Tibetan studies, and heritage studies, as public expressions of minority culture can help to stabilize certain practices that are not settled fully by locals themselves. Studies in the area of tourism in borderlands show how cultural visibility, economic development, and recognition from the state affect local identity or culture [5, 6].

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Originality of the article is based on the idea of dynamic harmony. This idea creates a difference between cultural phenomenon (for example, a dance, genre of songs, ceremonial act, or ritual phrase) and the potential power and material consequences of this phenomenon. As a result, harmony is considered from the perspective of an evolving ethical relation, but not as a point of view that ritual order and gender equality coincide. The framework has four issues to discuss: which forms are capable of preserving valued memory; who allows interpretation and realization of forms; what gender consequences are involved in the performance; and whether participants are able to contest these consequences.

The remainder of this paper is organized into five sections. The theoretical, evidential, and ethical context is described in section 2. Section 3 discusses the wedding process both as a rite of passage and a musical-social phenomenon. Section 4 discusses the coexistence of the institution of kinship exchange and women's agency as the performers. Section 5 covers dynamic harmony as the approach to protection that is responsive to gender issues. Finally, Section 6 sums up achievements and limitations of the study.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework

2.1. Weddings as social transformation

Van Gennep's [7] tripartite scheme suggests a three-stage manner of rites of passage consisting of the separation phase, transition phase (or liminality), and incorporation phase. A bride's departure from her family, her ambiguous status during the wedding ceremony, and her reception into another family can be explained within the boundaries of this theory. Turner [8] focuses on liminality and communitas as situations of enhanced social bonding. Bell [9] developed the notion of ritualization, which implies that the attention should be drawn not only to the meaning of the ritual's particular actions but also to the ways some actions are differentiated from others formally. In more recent work, researchers argue against using only traditional symbolic measures of the community; ritual is not only an idea, but also an idea transferred into reality [10]. Rituals can produce social effects even when they seem to have standard meanings; thus, analyzing the modern wedding requires embracing the presence of both traditional and altered ritual meanings.

The components of the model have different significance degrees and should not be integrated into one model. In this regard, Van Gennep [7] indicates the stages of the process that involve changes of status. Turner [8] concentrates on the experiences obtained through the process, while Bell [9] claims that some rites become authoritative compared to others. Therefore, the model developed by Van Gennep [7] helps identify the ceremonial outline, while the research conducted by Turner [8] makes it possible to study social consequences connected to any rite. Weddings help brides become part of families, but they often bring no clarity in regard to real estate and place of residence. At the same time, ritual events may provide participants with fresh perspectives towards their positions.

2.2. Music as a social action with a defined pattern

Merriam [11] connects musical sound, ideas about music, and behavior in connection with the performance. Thus, music is not merely background but social action with a definite arrangement. Similar to Merriam, Blacking [12] suggests that music may acquire sense only due to social relations that shape different music forms. Scheidegger [13] presents the data about Tibetan ritual music, thus providing a regional comparison, but it should not be interpreted as an unbiased

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description of all Jiarong wedding music genres. Modern ethnomusicology pays attention to such issues as inequality of access, power, and ethical problems. It also raises such important questions as who is heard and who is authorized to interpret the performance [14-16].

A performance-centered approach eliminates the possibility of equating participation and equality. Both men and women may be present at the circle together, but it does not mean that both genders have the same freedom to start a song, choose a text, or improvise the performance. Musical authority may be divided into different tasks: a person who started the melody, the singer in charge of improvisation, the elder who gives the green light to a certain repertoire, a person organizing the performance, and an organization that registers or sells the rite. Although some functions may overlap, they should be analyzed individually. Listening is also political, as it decides which voice is funny, authoritative, embarrassing, sacred, or attractive. Therefore, an ethnomusicological study must go beyond the simple description of musical styles and give an insight into how music organizes attention.

2.3. Gender and kinship: exchange, performativity, agency

Ortner [17] analyzes gender and kinship as recurrent symbolic relations linking the images of women, nature, and home, while Rubin [18] interprets the exchange of women as a political and economic process. Gender in Butler's [19] account is no longer a fixed quality but turns out to be the result of repeated performances. The combination of these theoretical frameworks allows two interpretations of weddings to emerge: the material economy behind weddings and the embodied performance of gender. The study of Moso families by Shih [20] serves as a similar case but does not create an alternative region for comparison with Jiarong practices. The point of comparison consists in destabilizing the idea of the naturalness of these practices rather than their complete identification.

The definition of agency should also be specified and not understood in opposition to subordination. Agency can be interpreted through the lenses of different types – expressive (for example, the singer attracts people by the ability to sing), procedural (the elder knows what should be performed first), interpretive (the woman explains the meaning of the song), economic (the performer is able to obtain compensation for the performance), and institutional (the practitioner has power over archives, heritage, or school programs). Each of these forms of agency allows for its own acquisition of force; in other words, being strong in one area does not mean being strong in another area. For example, a well-known singer can have no authority in property or residence matters, while a woman may have power at home, but no public recognition as an expert in culture. Dynamic harmony needs attention to these multiple domains since performance can coexist with the absence of material power.

2.4. Tibetan studies and sino-tibetan borderlands

Jiarong communities should not be understood as a stereotype of one Tibet. The borderland studies show the existence of many layers obtained due to different events in history; in other words, at the borderlands, language and religion changed along with the ethnic identifiers of the people [1-3, 5, 21-23]. Recent attempts to define space in relation to Jiarong culture also show that the modern states may not represent administrative boundaries of the Jiarong cultural space, which points to the necessity of approaching the concept of weddings from a processual perspective and understanding that weddings today are neither an archive representation of history nor a recent creation.

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2.5. Limits, research basis, and moral position

Unlike a systematic review, which offers a complete overview of the issue, this article implements a critical selective review method. The evidence used in this review is a combination of (1) classical and contemporary studies of ritual, music, gender, and heritage; (2) ethnographic and historical studies of Gyalrong/Jiarong and Sino-Tibetan borderlands; and (3) audiovisual records of the CNRS Pangloss Rgyalrong (Qiaoqi) corpus [24], including wedding stories, songs, and a described first wedding dance. All this material indicates that wedding speeches, songs, and dances happen as a documented practice; however, what cannot be claimed is that each local tradition or interpretation is universal in its character. Therefore, those assumptions with no direct Jiarong sources are treated like possibilities or regional parallels rather than truths about Jiarong people.

The study makes no new recordings or observations, thus opening the way for ethical approval. However, this area of concern is still important to mention. The article does not pretend to be speaking on behalf of all Jiarong people; it differentiates direct evidence from regional comparisons and treats opinions as ideas to be verified by members of the community. Any future empirical phase will need ethical approval prior to the recruitment stage as well as consider the issues of informed consent, translation and ownership of data, recording and publication of results, including local women performers and ritual specialists, in the process of interpretation [25, 26].

The hierarchy of sources has also affected the degree of validity of the conclusions. Documented wedding performances give direct evidence of their occurrence but do not show how they were perceived by their participants. Geo-ethnographies bring much more interesting stories regarding identity, tourism, and social changes; however, the results are not automatically applicable to all the Jiarong-speaking community. Theories provide tools for analytical understanding of practices but do not bring evidence. Therefore, the language used in the article is modal, indicating uncertainty in the process of turning documented practices into interpretations, which makes sense, thus being intentional.

3. The Jiarong wedding seen as ritual and musical expression

3.1. Separation, transition, and incorporation

The storytelling elements in wedding processions and other wedding-related cultural materials documented in the CNRS Pangloss Rgyalrong (Qiaoqi) corpus [24] can be examined through Van Gennep's [7] framework. Preparatory activities, as well as departure from a location, might indicate separation. Movement from one household to another is indicative of liminality. Reception, celebration, or recognition might represent incorporation. Such comparisons are far from claiming that all Jiarong communities observe identical processes and practices. The concept of ritualization introduced by Bell [9] points out that one should focus on determining who has the authoritative voice in this context, while Grimes [27] proposes an analysis of space and objects where performance takes place in addition to symbolism.

3.2. Guozhuang and the sound articulation of the wedding

Dance and song can constitute an effective approach to understanding the matter of sound signaling participation. The CNRS Pangloss Rgyalrong (Qiaoqi) corpus mentions Boyegeyegela as the first folk dance in the wedding ceremony, which includes explanations for the ceremony and music materials. This archival evidence confirms that song and dance were performed together in the

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Qiaoqi area, but this does not prove a universal repertoire or justify the claim about the uniformity of the term guozhuang across all communities. Therefore, solemn and light-hearted performances of the Tibetan people may serve as references and not the inflexible way of categorizing Jiarong music.

Traditional circle dance involves some aspects of listening that are proved using Merriam's [11] definitions of musical meaning as a combination of sound, cultural understanding and behavior. Blacking [12] points out that the arrangement of music performances provides insights into the social organization of the group. However, the circular pattern should not be automatically interpreted as social equality. What matters in this case is the understanding of who starts the songs, whose repertoire is known, who is allowed to improvise, whose voice is recorded, and who interprets the tradition after the wedding practice. All these issues link the music analysis with gender questions [14, 16].

To summarize, music analysis should consider five aspects. First, the temporal organization relates to the questions of the time of starting the song and duration of exchanges. Second, spatial organization is concerned with determining who is at the center of the circle, how male and female performers are arranged, and whether mobility is allowed. Third, vocal organization involves the understanding of who leads, who responds, and how different tones are interpreted. Fourth, textual organization suggests whether the lyrics contain praise, advice, grief, jokes, memories of ancestors and thoughts about marriage. Fifth, circulation points out who records, edits, uploads, teaches, or sells.

3.3. Gender-based roles in rituals: participants, elders, and exchange

Narratives describing women's preparations and life-cycle rituals make the picture of a bride too simple. Women who are elders can pass down knowledge about the clothing and its wearing, the songs and ceremonial principles and thus show a kind of authority that is not limited to political leadership. Of course, knowledge about rituals alone would not help women overcome inequalities. If marriages are arranged such that bride price or dowry appears to transfer women's reproductive and domestic roles across generations, Rubin's [18] idea of women being objects can be said to still hold true. This means that weddings often demonstrate both actions of women, but unequal relations. Subordination and agency can coexist, but they should not be conflated.

4. Gender, tradition, and the politics of contemporary change

4.1. The wedding as exchange and performance

Using ideas of Rubin [18] and Butler [19], a wedding can be understood as neither merely another example of oppression nor simply one of freedom. The transfers of household property, the residence requirements and certain obligations make marriages work through the differences based on gender. At the same time, the use of clothes, gestures, songs, and the role of women can demonstrate to the audience that women are not only participants of a festival, but also show such concepts as bride, mother, singer, etc. One of the challenges here would be to differentiate between position and the ability to do something: a certain form of appearance does not mean that a person would be able to exert power.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38499

4.2. Song as a situated form of women's agency

Antiphonal singing can provide local forms of women's agency as these songs help women demonstrate natural musical ability, memory, verbal skills, cosmological knowledge, and become the animators of the event. At the same time, it should be noted that this agency is relational and requires societal conventions. Turner's [8] communitas theory illustrates well the fact that sometimes hierarchy is not respected by everyone, but freedom should not be understood as equality. An important question here is whether the status obtained from a wedding performance has any meaning for women in later situations when they teach, participate in the heritage committee, take part in cultural activities at home, and record the songs.

In interpreting harmony, it is crucial to distinguish between fleeting voice and lasting authority. A performance may leave a strong sense of reciprocity through the alternating performances of women and men in song or their simultaneous movements, but the effects of the reciprocal act may stop after the end of the ritual. Evidence of lasting change includes women deciding on their repertoire, teaching young performers, controlling the reuse of the recordings, receiving remuneration, and being involved in the decisions about heritage. At the same time, women may see value in the roles of the ceremony that may appear restrictive to an observer.

As a result, analysis should involve the mixing of evidence about power exercised with individuals' own evaluations. Dynamic harmony is most effective if it includes recognition, material rights, and interpretive authority, but it is weakest when women are celebrated symbolically in the cultural performance, while being excluded from decisions about how culture is represented and who benefits from it.

4.3. Heritage, tourism, and gender equity

Cultural sustainability and tourism can contribute to the creation of possibilities for transmission and signify them through the selection of picturesque, commercially successful, or bureaucratically clear manifestations of culture. Borderland studies point out that constructions are not a neutral recording of the traditions, but rather participate in the politics of identity [2, 3, 5]. The same applies for heritage studies that also warn that the authority of narratives can privilege institutions and experts over practitioners [6, 28, 29]. Thus, gender equity requires not only the counting of women performing, but also the analysis of the power over repertoire, payment, traveling, representing, recording, and deciding what can be transmitted.

5. Dynamic harmony: gender considerate preservation framework

Dynamic harmony is an evolving relationship where community keeps cherished rituals while authority, participation, and social outcomes keep changing. Unlike the idealized view of harmony that might hide the disagreements, dynamic harmony recognizes that dissent is part of culture. The framework consists of four dimensions: form, authority, outcome, and process. The first dimension refers to the definition and understanding of the songs, dances, things, and many elements of certain performances. The second dimension refers to teachers, interpreters, performers and those who record the performance. The third dimension refers to the effects of the performance regarding the place of residence, property, job, movement and physical autonomy of people. The fourth dimension refers to whether change is a result of inclusive, knowledgeable, and revisable community participation.

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As a result, each dimension can translate into more practical indicators for researching and preserving the cultural context. For the dimension of form, it is important to understand through research what elements are important for practitioners and what already differs between villages, families, and generations. The dimension of authority concerns not only how many women are there, but also who is leading the process, as a teacher and interpreter. The dimension of the outcome considers the connections of the activities with proceedings in everyday life concerning labor, property, income, and mobility. The dimension of process means that participating people should be able to express their disagreement without being labeled as hostile to tradition. Thus, dynamic harmony does not provide evidence of its presence, meaning that a cultural process needs to be followed according to the determining factors of its presence.

This framework has much practical applicability to Jiarong weddings. Documentation and safeguarding initiatives should be jointly created and led by women singers, elder women, brides, and younger women when feasible, instead of relying exclusively on male religious or administrative figures. In keeping with archival principles, records must indicate who is performing something and specify what and how one gets permission to have access to something in the future. Public cultural initiatives should address women's expertise and establish links between having participated in rituals and acting in the capacity of teachers and curators. Families and communities can keep guozhuang, antiphonal singing, blessings, and exchanges, albeit modifying the practices in terms of language or some other aspects that connote the bride's ownership not forgetting about local discussion of this issue.

The framework also prevents glorification of agency. Making women present in performances is not enough if nothing is done in regard to such issues as patrilocality, unequal ownership of properties, unpaid work in the cultural field, and mercantile control over recordings in the same manner. In contrast, legal or political changes that fail to take musical awareness and ritual authority into consideration can alienate the practitioners and hamper the transmission. Thus, dynamic harmony evaluates both cultural persistence and gender justice issues, without assuming that harmony exists already or that lack of agreement equals failure.

A safeguarding initiative based on the framework would be collaborative in nature. During mapping, in addition to all the female performers, men would have to be involved as well as senior family members, specialists in the given rituals, and local culture representatives. The second step would entail documentation, that is, indicating where something comes from, how and to whom it should be attributed, as well as stating consent for future access to the recording. The next stage would focus on interpretation, in which different stakeholders would have to state where they consider continuity, tension or change to be present instead of sticking to only one final account. Finally, during the review stage, it would be possible to modify procedures according to the changes in conditions.

6. Conclusion

Jiarong Tibetan weddings can be interpreted as rites of passage whose social force is organized through movement, exchange, dance, song, and public recognition. Classical ritual theory illuminates separation, liminality, incorporation, and ritualization; ethnomusicology reveals music as patterned social action; gender and kinship theory identifies the coexistence of women's performative competence with potentially unequal household relations; and borderland and heritage scholarship situates the wedding within continuing political, economic, and representational change.

The article's principal contribution is the framework of dynamic harmony. It shifts the debate from whether tradition should be preserved or rejected to the more precise questions of which forms

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are valued, who controls them, what consequences they produce, and how practices change over time. Ritual and gender harmony, on this account, does not mean suppressing contradiction; it describes an evolving relationship in which cultural continuity, women's ritual and musical authority, and gender justice can interact and be revised. This framework supports gender-responsive safeguarding in which women are not simply visible performers but authoritative interpreters, teachers, decision-makers, and rights-bearing participants. Because the present analysis is based on published and archived sources and because direct ethnographic evidence on locally diverse Jiarong wedding practices remains limited, these conclusions should be treated as a theoretically grounded agenda rather than a definitive account. Future research should compare communities, generations, and performance contexts through ethically approved, collaborative fieldwork.

A future empirical test of the framework should combine event-centered observation with life-history interviews and follow-up beyond the wedding itself. Researchers could compare how brides, grooms, female elders, male ritual authorities, singers, and younger spectators interpret the same performance; trace whether musical prestige affects later teaching or decision-making; and examine how recordings circulate through tourism, schools, social media, and family archives. Comparison across localities would clarify which practices are widely shared and which are specific to particular communities. Most importantly, locally based researchers and practitioners should participate in defining the questions and evaluating the conclusions. Only such collaborative evidence can determine whether dynamic harmony accurately describes community priorities or remains an external analytical proposal.

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