

The Baluchi Zahirig music, Introduction to Professional Baluchi Music

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Abstract

In ancient times, the Baluchis dwelt in the north and center of Iran. From the 10th century onwards, they slowly moved towards the south until they reached the border of India. They now occupy a vast territory covering the western part of Pakistan, southeastern Iran.. More recently, they spread along the Arabian coast of the Persian Gulf. During this long process of migration, they met other ethnic groups such as the Brahu'is, the Sindis, and the Lasis. Among them were some tribal groups who distinguished themselves by their skill in handicrafts (jewelry and ironwork) and music making. These groups belong to the social category of the *osta* (masters) and mainly to the Rend and Zangeshahi tribes. They may be the descendants of the Luli or Gypsy nomads whose existence is attested to as far back as 2000 years ago.

The outstanding role of these hereditary professional musicians in Baluchi cultural life, brings forth the question of the “purity” concerning the origin of Baluchi music, mainly that of the South (Makran province). It seems at first glance that the old Iranian strata which is attested to by some modes (Qeble, Salat) and rhythms (6/8, 7/8) have been dominated by the Eastern strata which provides the Baluchi music with a specific flavor whose provenance is between Iran's *maqam* and India's *raga*. This impression relies on the centrality of the fundamental degree (sa in India) in all the tunes or modal structures, on the chromatic basic scale system and on some modes unknown in the Iranian-Arabic traditions, not to mention the use of sympathetic strings, the rhythmic drone of the *tanburag* lute, etc.

Rhythmic specificities (“syncopated” accentuations, swing and groove, great flexibility, ambiguity between 4 and 7 beat rhythms, 3 and 5, 5 and 7)—as well as some unusual hexatonic modes—may be traced back to the local traditions handed over by the *osta*. In any case, all these layers are not clearly separated and constitute the compact ground of the professional Makran musical tradition, the cradle of which is the Dashtiyari region and the urban centers of Kulwa, Rask and the harbors of Chabahar, Gwadar and Pasni in Iran and Pakistan. It is only in this area that what the Baluchi consider the highest musical form is found, namely the *shervandi*³, or the art of the minstrels. This genre stands out above

all the other professional or folk genres such as the song repertory (sowt, nazink, ghazal) or the trance repertory (guati damali).

I. The Zahirig as a Genre and Mode

The shervandi combines vocal compositions and non-measured sections in a virtuoso melismatic style called alhan, comparable to the Persian avaz. This both vocal and instrumental genre—performed on the fiddle sorud, the double flute doneli, and the dulcimer benju—uses a set of modes called the zahirig.⁴ Zahirig has two meanings: 1) A non-metric melismatic genre; 2) The Baluchi equivalent of the Arabic-Iranian-Turkish concept of maqam or the Indian concept of raga.

In a shervandi session, the singer (sha'er), generally accompanied by the fiddle sorud, starts with a non-measured melismatic section alhan in a specific mode (zahirig) developed between 30 seconds to 4-5 minutes. In an instrumental performance, one is free to develop the zahirig or to link several of them together. After a measured piece (zimol),⁵ one often concludes with a short zahirig motive in the same mode. Almost all the instrumentalists perform the introducing alhan in the same mode (zahirig) as the zimol, the relationship between zahirig and zimol being identical to the one between the Indian alap and thumri. Yet strangely enough, the singers generally start with an alhan in one mode and continue with a zimol in another mode, without caring for the modal consistency of the performance.

All the professional Makran musicians know at least two or three basic non-measured melodic types corresponding to specific zahirig, yet quite often they don't even know the names of these types. This may be the reason why even the concept of zahirig as a modal form (similar to the maqam) has remained unnoticed by the rare scholars dealing with Baluchi-Makrani music. Only the shervandi fiddle performers, (that is, perhaps only a dozen persons) have an extended and clear view of the zahirig-s as modal types. A significant point is that in the same way that knowledge of the zahirig-s as modes serves to increase the competence of a singer or instrumentalist at the height of one's mastery, the zahirig-s are considered as the essence of Baluchi music, i.e. its very principle (asil), the matrices of all the melodies, tunes or songs. This means that any Baluchi melody follows this or that zahirig like any Turkish classical melody "is" in a specific maqam.

A zahirig can be identified immediately thanks to a few modal features such as its initial note(s) in relation to the fundamental, a very small characteristic motif of 2 or 3 notes, or its general scale.⁶

Each zahirig has a very specific structure, with initialis, finalis, profile (one could say a sayr), modulations and obligatory motives. In this respect, each zahirig is more or less a composition that allows for a great margin of interpretation.

II. Zahirig as “Classical Baluchi Music”

A. From Practice to Theoretical Concepts

If each zahirig follows rigorous rules, there is no modal abstract representation of the maqam/raga type in Baluchi music.

The Baluchi masters refer also to the position of the fingers on the sorud string. In discussions with a shervandi master, the Indian concept of tat appeared, i.e. the basic modal scale. It seems that some shervandi masters make a distinction between basic zahirig and derived zahirig. The symmetry of the finger positions between the A and E strings is emphasized in such a way that the symmetrical modes were considered as basic tat, such as the scale : A B C D / E F# G A (zahirig Manage) or A Bb C# D / E F G# A (zahirig Kara).

B. Zahirig as a Criterion of Competence

In musical hierarchy, the zahirig as a maqam or raga system occupies the most eminent position. It works as the basis, the substance of music as well as its abstract essence, the knowledge of which defines mastery. Master Karimbakhsh often stated with some exaltation that zahirig was “the classical Baluchi music” (klasik baluchi musiqi) in the same way that he used to compare music to an unlimited ocean of science (‘elm) : “As much as you learn it, you still are nothing, nothing.” Actually these zahirig—unlike the measured compositions—are difficult to play (they demand a very good technique) and difficult to memorize. On another level, they reveal the creative capacity of the performer, being much less the case with the other tunes which leave smaller room for improvisation.

Almost all the masters of minor genre (sowt, damali-guati) do not even know the name of the zahirig-s and can rarely play more than fragments of two or three of them in a reduced form.⁷

Once one of these musicians played a zahirig, and an elder asked him what was its name. He said first parsi zahirig (Persian), a statement which makes no sense, except that South-Iranian-Baluchi style can be opposed to the Karachitrend which makes no use of the zahirig. Then the elder mocked him arguing: “it has a name but you did not learn it.” The musician felt aggrieved but maintained that these zahirig have no names, or that perhaps they did have names in the past but they had since become lost. By asking the name of the zahirig, the elder wanted to demonstrate that music was a science, one that every musician does not know.

C. The Zahirig as a Unifying Concept

The very concept of “Baluchi music” (not as a linguistic but as a musical entity) implies the intention to encompass virtually the totality of Baluchi forms. This is however, not possible just by the mere collection of individual pieces, a task which would anyway be impossible to accomplish considering the repertory’s extent and the infinity in its variants. This can only be achieved by the reduction of all of this multiplicity to a modal essence, something that is precisely expressed by the zahirig. In addition to its function of conceptualization, the zahirig possesses the emblematic advantages of sophistication, of expression of a fundamental effect such as nostalgia, as well as a plasticity which confers to it the substantiality of a *materia prima* out of which all the forms are generated.

The idea that the infinity of measured pieces comes out from a limited modal type does not correspond in itself to a historical reality or an attested practice, in a way that it is impossible to demonstrate that the zahirig is anterior to the measured zimol. One could even contest the originality of such an idea, perhaps borrowed from the Indian or Persian concepts of raga and maqam (which in folk music often means a simple melodic type or “a tune”). Taking into account the impossibility of demonstrating the phylogenetic or ontogenetic anteriority of the zahirig over other forms, we can assume that elevating it to the level of the modal equivalent, such as the raga, may reflect the intention of the Baluchis to systematize their music which is scattered over a very large territory. Similar to any tribal, nomadic and oral culture, the organization of this music is rather blurred. It is therefore not surprising that, in conjunction with the rise of national identity, the idea of collecting the scales and modal structures arose among literate musicians in great cities like Karachi or Zahedan.

D. Maqam and Topos: The Zahirig as a Baluchi Modal Landscape

Several zahirig have precise local origins attested to by their names. In each region, folk music runs mainly on one or two modes. Reciprocally, many zahirig-s connote a specific region in Baluchistan. About Kordi, now a common zahirig, Karimbakhsh says: “In the past, it was only sung by old women, and not in the shervand style. It had been introduced later on and went along with Persian poems”. Rasulbakhsh, the most famous sorud player, explains that, before him, the set of zahirig was more limited among shervandi masters. He enlarged the repertory by borrowing from folk music from all over Baluchistan. Musicians like him are always traveling around the country, unlike minor musicians whose cultural environment is restricted to a small area. He says that he sometimes met some of these musicians who played nice old folk melodies; he picked them up and performed them in an artistic and sophisticated style. This is also a way of unification.

E. The Process of “Classicization”

At the antipodes of this science, lies the empirical *savoir-faire* which is devoid of concepts and names : “Youngsters do not care about knowing what is what. They play the music and that is it. Look at Omar who came here: he plays the doholak well, but he does not mind about the name of the rhythms. This is Baluchistan.” Science is knowing the names and the origin of things. During the years that he spent in Europe, a young refugee Baluchi Master overcame his illiteracy by learning Latin script. With this new intellectual tool, he wrote what can be considered the first “theoretical” or “musicological treatise” on Baluchi music. He took a thick hard-covered notebook and divided the pages into a few chapters of one or two pages each, yet leaving 10 to 20 pages free for further discoveries. It contains chapters such as : “Names of Baluchi poets” (oral tradition), “Names of masters of sorud,” “Names of great singers,” “The great sorud makers (osta),” “List of the zahirig,” “List of ancient tunes” (sowt, etc.) and so on. He learned elements of Indian and Western solfeggio, eventually able to give the scale of some zahirig-s and even of some basic Persian modes (Shur, Mahur). He always carries this notebook with him when he travels to Pakistan as he may expand his knowledge.

One day I discovered that his own master, Karimbakhsh Nuri, who lives in Karachi, had a similar book which contains not only listings but also some poems that he composed or collected, tales, anecdotes on great musicians he had met, some clues on the tuning of the sound dedicated to his son, etc. In one chapter, he denies the claim of a musician saying that his father knew 300 zahirig : “He is a liar since there are not more than 20 zahirig or so.

” He also mentioned the visit of a French musicologist in 1993...

Anyone who knows a little bit about the history of Arabic, Persian or Azeri music could not help but feel great respect for such naive writings since it is precisely through that kind of intellectual process that folk, tribal and popular traditions were raised to the status of art music, and learned music.

What was Arabic music like, during the Ummayyad or the early ‘Abbasid periods? Would ethnomusicologists have labeled it “art music” if the chronicle Kitab al-Aghani or al-Kindi’s treatises were not written? What was Azerbaijani music in the early XIXth century like: folk, classical or “professional” (the ashyq) ? It is by collecting and writing, that music becomes “art.” Classicism is basically nothing else than classification, listing and inventory, after having collected what was scattered over a large area. Inventory is also the writing of a history, a memory, a chronology and a filiation (gharana or schools, a concept also used among professional Baluchi musicians).

III. Looking for Patronage

After all these discoveries and discussions with a few great masters, I became convinced that Baluchi professional music provides a living example of the intermediate status between folk music and art music or, in other words, “small music” and “great music.” Relying upon the opinion of these masters, I also brought in some other arguments: 1) Like with any art music, it takes no less than ten years to become a professional and twenty-five years to become a master; 2) Shervandi is “learned music” dealing with learned (although basically oral) poetry which can be opposed to damali-guati (trance music), another professional form which is independent from poetry and addresses itself to the average people.

Nevertheless, I was not entirely satisfied with these arguments. One or two things were still lacking: a unified theory of Baluchi music and official recognition. I thought about writing this theory in collaboration with young and old masters. But, instead of passing from the “orally” cultural historical phase to the “literal” one, I found it more efficient to skip the literacy and to jump directly to the “mediatic” cultural phase. This meant producing a videotape explaining “klasik baluchi musiqi” to Baluchis (not to Western musicologists). With the help of a young master, we started shooting as much video documents as we could for that purpose. Then we understood that the last step in this promotion of Baluchi “classical” music was to find a sponsor or a patronage. Musicians used to say: “In old times, there were khans and emirs who patronized singers and poets. Nowadays, nobody understands this music and in a city like Karachi⁹, we are reduced to playing in trance sessions for peanuts.”

It is only in West Makran or in Dubai that there are some possibilities for shervand musicians to make their living. Baluchi musicians are convinced that there is nothing to expect from the Pakistani or Iranian government. None of the Makranis have even heard of Lok Virsa, the powerful Center of Folk Culture who promotes traditional music. On the other side, the best shervandi, remain unknown by the Iranian institutions, or if they happen to be discovered, they do not accept to cooperate. They never performed in Tehran and don't want to visit this place. However someone like Karimbakhsh in Karachi used to say, “If only at least they gave me a room where I could receive disciples and teach this music.” (He was living in two rooms with a family of ten people.) I suggested : “Let's find a rich Baluchi who would be proud to have music sessions and sponsor some traditional masters.” Eventually, we found such a wealthy merchant and we introduced three masters to him and his distinguished hosts. I offered him the CD published by Radio-France. The musicians looked very smart and showed themselves relaxed and mundane doing their best to forget and make forget the atavic social gap between these poor Luli (gypsies) and these bourgeois officials and aristocrats. It is doubtful that all these attempts will be decisive in the evolution of Baluchi art music, but what is sure is that more than once, things have happened more or less like this during the history of “great music.

Reference

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