

*THE MUSIC AT MANAKĀMANĀ TEMPLE: ESSAY ON THE  
STYLE OF THE RITUAL MUSIC OF DAMĀI MUSICIANS*

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The music of the *nagarā bānā* ensemble of Nepal's Damāi musicians<sup>1</sup> is a valuable source for the study of the idea of style as well as the notion of a musical piece in the context of traditional ritual music. In this context, a recognizable collective style is manifest since the same musical constraints can be found throughout performances by different ensembles. Yet some elements are specifically regional or even individual. The musical material of a specific piece will never be exactly identical from one performance to another, even if it is considered to be the same by the musicians playing. The musical style seems to allow every performance of a piece to be unique.

Through the changing performances of ritual music, how can we explain the notion of a musical piece? What are the different stylistic elements of its constitution that link the different performances to a specific piece? Is the identity of a piece of ritual music strictly musical or does it borrow its identity from the circumstances in which it takes place?

In order to develop a better understanding of what a piece of ritual music is in the context of the music of the Damāi musicians, we will examine the musical style of the *nagarā bānā* ensembles. To illustrate our comments, we will turn to the specific characteristics of the musical style of the *nagarā bānā* ensemble at the temple of *Manakāmanā* in Gorkha District. This particular example will also serve to measure the impact of the socio-cultural context on the style and identity of the musical piece. Our analysis is based on the observation of performances as well as the discourse of the musicians involved. Although musical theory and philosophy are not articulated among the Damāi musicians, it is still possible to deduce a non-explicit conception of

<sup>1</sup>The Damāi people belong to an occupational caste of the hills of Nepal. They have the double profession of tailor-musicians. Serving most of the population, they are hired for family celebrations, community festivities and ceremonies, processions, as well as for religious ritual music.

music from their discourse and their music. Our observation focuses on the whole musical event from an external point of view supported by the comments of musicians and villagers.

### *The idea of style*

An examination of the idea of musical style will contribute to a better understanding of the musical piece in the context of the ritual music of the *damāi*. Generally speaking, the idea of style involves musical constants or permanent features and allows choices among variables that distinguish the specific interpretations. As a broad definition of style we will refer to the one given by Meyer in his book *Style and Music: Theory, History and Ideology* :

"Style is a replication of patterning, whether in human behavior or in artifacts produced by human behavior, that results from a series of choices made within some set of constraints." (1989:3)

In musical style, the set of constraints will be less imposing at the general level and more detailed at the level of a specific piece. This is why we can speak of a collective style and an individual style. The notion of collective style is useful in two ways. First of all, it is a classification tool that allows for the differentiation of a variety of pieces in the same genre. Secondly, it can be used as a model to which the musicians refer. In this sense, the style becomes normative. With regard to the musical tradition of the *Damāi*, as in many oral traditions, the collective musical style is normative. It imposes limits on innovation, especially in the field of ritual music. But the nature of the musical style of the *nagarā bānā* ensembles of the *Damāi* offers an openness that allows each piece and each interpretation to vary, especially at the level of form. The specific performance of a piece will present characteristics that are brought on by the individual style of the musicians involved.

To measure the scale and the importance of the variations involved in a specific musical piece, it is essential to understand the musical style of the corpus to which it relates and the rules that govern it.

### *Musical style of the nagarā bānā ensembles*

The *nagarā bānā* ensembles of the *Damāi* play ritual music, mostly at temples and occasionally during processions. Their performances are the

musical offering that accompanies the daily *pūjā*<sup>2</sup> and special religious ceremonies. These ensembles are found predominantly at temples devoted to goddesses, although some can be found at those devoted to *Siva* or *Bisnu*. From one temple to another, the overall sound of the ensemble varies. This depends largely on the instruments available and the musicians who are playing. But in all cases, the music of the *nagarā bānā* is distinguished by the beating of the *nagarā* drum. This large kettledrum gives its name to the ensemble and is the essential element of the musical formation. Frequently, the *nagarā* will be the only instrument played to accompany the *pūjā*. Its particular sound and symbolic meaning are associated with worship. The *nagarā* is not only the basis of the musical formation; its rhythmic phrases, called *murrā* are also the main musical element on which the form relies. Tingey describes them in the following way: "These phrases each in turn accelerate the *nagarā* beat until it becomes a drum roll and decelerate out of it to a new tempo (usually faster than the preceding one), but they vary in terms of length of phrase, tempi, and of rate of acceleration, ..." (1994:197) These rhythmic phrases and the sequence they create become the framework of the musical piece. A certain number of *murrā* must be played for the piece to be complete. As Tingey mentions, the length of these phrases will vary, thereby changing the progression of the piece.

In most *nagarā bānā* ensembles, horns and/or trumpets are played. The choice of instrumentation is determined by the instruments available and the different musicians playing. Among the horns and trumpets played are the *karnāl*, *kāhal*, *bijuli bānā* (also known as *nāg-beli bājā*), *dhop bānā*, *sikhār* and *bheri*. They are used in a variety of combinations, playing two or three-note motifs at sporadic intervals. Their powerful sounds and peculiar timbre<sup>3</sup> create a temporary intensification of the volume and the texture. There is no fixed strategy involved as the musicians enter at random, as they feel. The beating of the *nagarā* and the sporadic entries of the horns are the fundamental elements of this music. At certain temples, however, the *rāsa*

<sup>2</sup> *pūjā*: worship and offerings ritual.

<sup>3</sup> Their timbre and motifs can be compared to the sound of the conch, also used to accompany the *pūjā* in many circumstances and not considered by the Nepalese to be a musical instrument.

(shawm) is played, adding a melodic dimension to the music. The *rāsa* plays and varies motifs based on a specific scale in a free rhythmic style and in an ornamented, exploratory and sinuous manner. The different sound qualities of the instrument are enhanced by the contours of the melody. This is especially noticeable when the musician uses vibrato or chooses a straight (non-vibrato) sound for sustained notes. The process of melodic development used by the *rāsa* player is one of combination and variation of the motifs. As a basis for his melodic line, the musician has a bank of motifs that are specific to the piece. From these motifs he will choose to sustain some notes, without necessarily sustaining the same notes at the next occurrence of the motif. These motifs can be strung together in a variety of combinations, changing at every occurrence of the piece.

In contrast to the repetitive and cyclical characteristics of the entertainment music of *pañcai bājā* or *naumati bājā* ensembles of the *damāi*, the music of the *nagarā bānā* might appear to have linear and progressive melody. But the features of the different motifs are recognizable at every occurrence so it might be more appropriate to consider the progression of the melody to be cyclical in a spiral manner: the motifs will recur, but in different combinations and with some variation. In their own independent spheres of free non-measured rhythm, the different instruments of the *nagarā bānā* play in a type of stratification where relations between instruments and occurrences of different motifs become purely coincidental. The musical result is the product of coincidence thus creating interesting musical combinations. This absence of synchrony is the source of the distinctive texture of the *nagarā bānā* ensembles. The texture of this music, although very constant, progresses in small waves of density in a morphing continuity. An intensification of the texture can be heard as a drum roll is played on the *nagarā*, as the horns or trumpets interject or as the *rāsa* rises to a very high pitch. Other than these small fluctuations, the texture remains even and creates the sound with which the *nagarā bānā* ensemble is associated. The openness of the style allows for multiple combinations and a variety of unfoldings, but for the *Damāi* musician the piece remains the same. He follows rules and does not call upon innovation. These rules *do* offer some choice in deciding the moments of the horn entries and in the variations of the melody, but essentially, the musician

makes his choices in a mechanical way, obeying the tradition he has learned from his ancestors.

In our description of the constant elements found in the collective musical style of the *nagarā bānā*, it is important to emphasise that the instrumentation, form and duration, as well as the unfolding of the piece are all elements that are not fixed. What *is* fixed is the occasion, the intention, the type of rhythmic phrases of the *nagarā*, the texture, the coincidental encounters and most importantly, the process behind the performance.

*Individuating specificities: the music of Manakāmanā's nagarā bānā ensemble*

The temple of *Manakāmanā*, situated at the hilltop of a mountain in the district of Gorkha, is a very popular site for the Nepalese. As part of a family of temples devoted to goddesses in Central Nepal, *Manakāmanā* is dedicated to *Bhagwati* who, when she is worshipped, is believed to grant wishes. The ritual music of the *nagarā bānā* ensemble is heard twice daily at the temple. Every morning and at every sunset (*ārati*), the musicians accompany the *pūjā*. At special religious events and ceremonies, the *nagarā bānā* ensemble will play all day long, accompanying the different stages of the ritual, as it is customary on the day of *kartik pañcāmi* at *Manakāmanā* temple, for example. The intention of the musicians is to contribute to the ritual event. Their personal intention and subjective viewpoint is not involved in the performance, since the musical expression has a social and religious function. Through the sound of their music, they assist in the *pūjā* and invoke the presence of the Goddess. As the musicians play, the temple's bells are rung by the public. Although their intention is not of a musical nature, the sounds of the bells seemingly become part of the musical event.

The musical piece played is always the same. According to the musicians, the title is *bhagwatiko laya* or the 'melody of Bhagwati'. Others will simply call it *pūjāko dhūn* (tune of the *pūjā*.) Its melodic motifs are recognizable, but its structure varies from one performance to another. Through the analysis of two versions of this piece, its constant and variable constituents become evident. This also allows us to have an example of the individuating style of *damāi* ritual music.

In the two musical examples we have chosen<sup>4</sup>, the instrumentation is that of a full *nagarā bānā* ensemble composed of four instruments. The *nagarā* drum, the *karnāl* and *bijuli-bānā* horns constitute the basis of the ensemble.<sup>5</sup> The *rāsa* (shawm) adds the melodic dimension to the music. For the purpose of comparison, it is important to note that in both of our examples, the same musicians are playing. The *nagarā* drum's rhythmic sequence, called *murrā*, and the playing of the *bijuli-bānā* and the *karnāl* are not distinctive to the style of this particular ensemble. We must, however, consider the chosen moments of the playing of the horns and the length of their phrases as being specific to each performance. The element that allows more uniqueness to this piece is the melody of the *rāsa* (shawm). The melody of this piece is based on the *kafī that* (scale type)<sup>6</sup>. The third and the seventh are usually minor although they happen to be major in some cadential figures. The use of chromatic intervals involving the major third, augmented fourth and major seventh are characteristic and add to the sinuous quality of the melody. In the following example, presenting the scale type used, the modal center is A.



Musical example 1: scale type

Listening to this melody for the first time, one might hear a pentatonic quality. This impression results from the stable notes of the melody which are

<sup>4</sup>The first one was the second performance of the *nagarā bānā* ensemble on the morning of 11th November, 1995, and the second was recorded on the morning of the 12th as a regular daily *pūjā*, although that day was *kārtik pañcāmi* a very important day at *Manakāmanā* as hundreds of people come for the *pūjā* and *jātrā* (festivities).

<sup>5</sup>On some occasions they are the only instruments played.

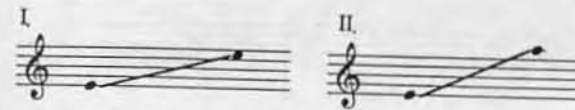
<sup>6</sup>The Damāi musicians consulted did not identify in theoretical terms the nature of the scale used. *That* are scale types used in the classification of *rāga* in North Indian musical theory. The *kafī that* has the same features as the Dorian mode: the third and the seventh are minor.

itches that the musician chooses to sustain or the ending notes of motifs. These stable notes form a scale with a pentatonic character.



Musical example 2: stable notes

The range of pitches that the musician chooses to explore varies considerably from one version to the other. In the second version, the *rāsa* player exploits the higher register going up to A4, a fourth higher than the first version, and thus creates a much wider contour to the melody.



Musical example 3: comparison of the range of the two versions analysed

Besides the mode, another feature that is constant between the two examples is the melodic motifs used. In both versions, the musician assembles motifs freely by juxtaposition. He chooses to sustain some of the pitches or to play others with a wide vibrato. The juxtaposition and the choice of sustained notes will vary, but the motifs are the same and recognizable. Below, in musical example 4, the motifs found in this piece are listed. Although the rhythm is free, the examples present a rhythmic contour that often occurs. The whole note represents a sustained note with vibrato.

A

A1

A2

B

C

C1

C2

D

D1

E

*Musical example 4: melodic motifs*

As we mentioned earlier, these motifs are assembled freely by juxtaposition. Musical example 5, an excerpt from the second version, illustrates this characteristic. Since the rhythm is free and unmeasured, in the following musical example the eighth note represents a short rhythmic value, the half note a sustained note without vibrato, and the whole note a sustained note with vibrato.

A

C

D

B

C1

D1

C2

cadence

*Musical example 5: sequence illustrating the juxtaposition of motifs*

The structure of the piece is not only based on the number of *murrā* of the *nagarā* but also on the progression of the melodic motifs. The first version we analysed gives the impression of a more linear melody in which motifs are recurrent without making the sequence altogether cyclical. The second version demonstrates a much clearer form in which long sections are repeated almost unvaried and a unique section resembling a modulation occurs as the *rāsa* player, for a short moment, resorts to another mode.

The form is the most significant variable element and creates the most striking difference between two performances of the same piece by the same musicians. Among other variables, the range of the *rāsa*, the duration of the melodic and rhythmic phrases, the length of the piece, and the aleatoric occurrences of the horns must all be considered. The variability of the musical material is limited by the imposed process and constant elements such as the mode, the melodic motifs, the playing of the *nagarā* and the horns as well as the texture. Another important element that remains constant is that the intention of the musicians is always the same. The expression doesn't vary from one version to the other. The unfolding of the piece, the moment of its performance and the individuals playing are the elements that create the individual style of the performance.

#### *Cultural parameters of style*

Our comments thus far have been limited mostly to the musical dimension of the ritual music of the *nagarā bānā* ensemble, with only a few references to the cultural aspects. But it is important to consider the cultural parameters<sup>7</sup> involved in the style of the musical event, especially in a ritual context that grants symbolic meaning to the music. Such parameters allow for a better understanding of the musical piece. The cultural parameters are extra-artistic but they are part of the performers' and listeners' perception of the music. In the context of the ritual music of the *nagarā bānā* ensemble, four important qualities of the musical piece that relate to the cultural context are its magico-religious quality, enhanced aesthetic qualities related to the divinity's appreciation, mechanical characteristics borrowed from the ritual, and the focusing purpose of the music. There is a magico-religious quality that clings to ritual music. Like worship, the music is an invocation and a plea for the presence of the divinity. Invisible and powerful, the presence manifested through the musical invocation gives the music a mysterious and compelling quality. The auspiciousness of this music is an intrinsic quality even if it is imposed by the cultural and immediate context. Since the *nagarā bānā* ritual music is played for a divinity, aiming to please and to obtain favours, one must come to the conclusion that a non-explicit idea of beauty is

<sup>7</sup>This expression is borrowed from Meyer (1989:9).

attached to it. In writing about *rol mo* (Tibetan ritual music), Ter Ellingson notes that it :

is indeed performed in a ritual context, in order to make a sensually pleasing offering (*mchod pa*) to the Buddhist "gods" (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Protectors, *Yi dam*). For precisely this reason, it must be both skillfully executed (*mkhas pa*) and aurally pleasant (*snyan pa*). If such considerations suggest an "esthetic of the alien", designed to please the ears of the gods rather than of men, it must be remembered that the "gods" themselves are visualized by Tibetans as idealized representations of human qualities. *Rol mo* esthetics simply represent human esthetics in an extreme form." (1979:225)

In the same way, it seems that the qualities of the Damāi ritual music are elevated to a higher level because the musical event is directed toward the divinity. So, the ritual and religious context and beliefs give the musical piece enhanced aesthetic qualities such as a certain beauty that pleases the divinity. Pleasing and worshipping the divinity is the objective of the ritual *pūjā*. There are set actions that are clearly determined for the proper realisation of the *pūjā*. Gestures are regulated by the ritual and are executed in a routine manner towards a set goal. Similarly, the action of playing ritual music is quite mechanical. Observing the rules of the traditional style, the musician plays, without involving himself, as his ancestors have done and as he has learned, seeking the successful outcome of the ritual. In this way, the music takes on the mechanical characteristics of the ritual. The last significant quality relating to context is that the music draws attention to the ceremonial event and the presence of the divinity. Wegner mentions that, in the context of newari musical traditions, "musical structure can channel mental processes in a specific direction." (1992:129) In this sense, musical invocation serves a focusing purpose (Wegner 1992: 128). In the same way, because the presence of the divinity is linked in this context to the sounding of the instruments, the music becomes the vehicle (or medium) for the focusing of the attention on the ritual and on the present moment.

Beyond the qualities imparted by the cultural aspects, the ritual context has a direct impact on the musical piece itself. The choice of the melodic motifs and the mode are related to the divinity that is being worshipped, to the

occasion of the worship and to the place (in our examples, the temple of *Manakāmanā*). The duration of the piece and in some circumstances its formal structure are directly linked to the process of the *pūjā*. Its beginning and ending are determined by the actions of the *pūjāri* (priest) and some elements must be played or omitted in specific stages of the ritual. For example, the *pūjāri* rings a bell (*ghaṅṭā*) giving the musicians the signal to begin. Depending on the process of the *pūjā*, the musical piece will be modified.

Finally, among the cultural parameters of the style, we must not forget the flexibility of the meaning and the multiple functions of the ritual musical piece. Since there are many viewpoints from which the different people involved in a ritual event consider the situation, there is undoubtedly a variety of meanings and functions. The cultural context allows the ritual music to have many meanings and many functions. The variety of perspectives leads to what Qureshi identifies as the multi-specificity of the music.<sup>8</sup> Summing up the impact of the cultural and immediate context on the style of ritual music, three points are worth noting. The context adds extra-artistic qualities to the musical event. The immediate context determines some musical constituents such as the melodic mode or the duration of the piece. And the socio-cultural context gives the piece a multi-specific character as it allows a variety of interpretations from the different viewpoints of the people involved.

#### *Understanding the piece of ritual music through its many levels*

Observation of performances and collected comments of musicians lead to an understanding of the musical piece in a ritual context on its different levels: from the more general level of style to the specific moment of a unique performance. On a more general level, the musical piece belongs to a collective style that prescribes a sound through a specific instrumentation and also a musical process that determines the texture and the actions of the musicians. As we turn to the idea of a piece of ritual music, we notice that in its abstract and unrealised state, it is similar to the idea of style. In the context

<sup>8</sup>Qureshi writes of *qawwali* music: "This leads me to speculate whether the generally assumed "non-specificity" or "connotative" nature of musical meaning might not more accurately be identified as "multi-specificity". In other words, this analysis suggests that music might be seen to operate as an open-ended semantic code which allows both the performer and listener to choose from among, or combine, several meanings, each of which is itself quite specific." (1987:80)

of the ritual music of the *Damāi*, the musical piece imposes musical constraints yet gives the possibility of making many choices affecting its outcome, as does a collective style. In a sense, the abstract idea of the piece is collective because it is shared by different people and it has a multiplicity of realisations. The musical piece becomes a shared reference that is to be re-created at every performance. The uniqueness of the performance is determined by the specific time and place in which the piece is played. The whole musical event has an ephemeral quality since the configuration of the musical and the circumstantial elements will never occur again. The moment of the performance not only determines the choice of the piece but also gives the musical piece its special significance. The sacred place where the piece of ritual music is performed also imposes musical characteristics and cultural meaning. The abstract idea or the model<sup>9</sup> of a specific piece of ritual music is in accordance with the style and offers additional constraints to the process. Among the specifications of a musical piece, there will be the melodic mode and some melodic motifs. During the performance, the musicians involved will contribute an individual style through their musical choices and the sound of their instruments. From this perspective, we can understand the musical piece as being both an aural and a procedural reference as well as a unique musical object resulting from the specific performance of the piece.

To sum up, a piece of ritual music belonging to a collective style and played in an individual style is a unique product of an original proposition (the model), resulting from the configuration of musical and cultural elements in a set time and place.

#### *Style as process and music as a result*

Ritual is often understood to be strict in nature, as a series of imposed actions having a goal. Although the ritual music of the *Damāi* does follow certain rules, it is at the same time quite free and exploratory. The strictness is most apparent at the level of the style. In this context, musical style is a determined process that is almost mechanical. The musicians' set actions, affecting their way of playing, aim to bring auspiciousness to the ritual and to please the divinity. This strictness is complemented by an open quality which

<sup>9</sup>Lortat-Jacob defines the model as a stable and permanent reference that allows the emergence of infinite realizations. (1987:45-46).

allows for a variety of outcomes. The openness in question refers to the prevalence of coincidental events occurring at each performance. The coincidental relations of the different instruments' individual phrases create an infinite number of possible realisations. The presence of coincidence and the impact of the immediate context leads to understanding the piece of Damāi ritual music as being the result of the different musical and cultural elements intertwined at the moment of performance.

Is this model of ritual music specific to the tradition of the Damāi musicians? The sound of the *nagarā bānā* ensembles of the Damāi musicians is distinctive, but the openness of the musical piece and the impact of the ritual context on the music is not. Research on the ritual music of other socio-cultural groups of Nepal have shown characteristics that lead towards this interpretation. But more fieldwork and inquiry must be undertaken from the perspective of aesthetics before any conclusions can be made on the whole of ritual music traditions of Nepal.

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*Ghāntu dancing in the village of Klinu*  
(photo P. Moisala)

*Ram Saran Nepali, Gaine*  
(photo G. Wegner)



*The caryā dance 'Pañcabuddha'  
performed by Dance Mandal  
(photo R. Widdess)*

*Hani woman playing the gobe (Yuanyang district)  
(photo P. Bouchery)*