

# Sounds of Speech and the Tiger's Roar: Two Ways of Perceiving Vocal Music in Tibet in the 13<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> Centuries<sup>1</sup>

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**M**usic has to be perceived and interpreted by the human mind in order to make it a part of the mental world. Due to differences in their cultural background, people from different cultures understand and describe musical sounds differently. Among the factors that influence the manner in which any melody is perceived are everyday experiences of surrounding sounds, the historical development of a given society, mythology and religious beliefs, philosophical discourse, systems of thought, and education. From the 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Tibetans documented their understanding of music and sound; hence enabling modern scholarship to trace distinctive features of the perception of music shared by Tibetan scholars at that time.

For my research I have used five well-known treatises and encyclopedias written by Tibetan authors in the 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries concerning the vocal music field:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> To denote the scope of "vocal music," a term widely used in this article, I will list a number of Tibetan terms, which I consider as pertaining to this category: 1) *glu* (a song), with the verb *len pa* (to sing); 2) *dbyangs* (a melody; also, a type of ritual chant); 3) *don* (to recite; a recitation); 4) *gyer* (to sing; also, a type of ritual chant); 5) *rta* (a melody; also, a type of ritual chant). There is also a special Tibetan term for "vocal music"—*lhan cig skyes pa'i rol mo* (simultaneously-produced music), but it is not widely used nowadays. There has been much discussion about these Tibetan terms: about the change of their meaning through the times, about their use in various contexts, in different monasteries and regions of Tibet, see Ellingson 1979a: 211–220; Ellingson 1979b; Helffer 1998; Canzio 1986; Henrion-Dourcy 2017; Liu Cuilan 2018. I used these Tibetan terms during the research to outline the area of my interest.

1. *Treatise on Music*<sup>3</sup> by Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251);
2. The commentary on the above treatise<sup>4</sup> by A mes zhabs Ngag dbang kun dga' bsod noms (1597–1659);
3. *Explanation of the [Ritual] Items, Garments, Ornaments and Music—the Wealth of the Ocean of Vajrayana Vidyadharas of Early Translations—the Ornamenting Flower of a Mantradhara*<sup>5</sup> by Bkra shis rgya mtsho<sup>6</sup> (15<sup>th</sup> century);
4. *Achieving Selflessness after Mastering All Sciences*<sup>7</sup> by Stag tshang lo tsā ba Shes rab rin chen (1405–1477);

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<sup>3</sup> *Rol mo'i bstan bcos*. There are several editions of the treatise: in *A Book of Medicine, One of the Five Outer Subjects*, by Sakya-pandit (Dharamsala 1969), in *Bod ljongs zhib 'jug* (1983 no. 2), in *Rol mo'i bstan bcos* (Beijing 1986), in the *Gsung 'bum* of Sa skya Paṇḍita (Lhasa 1992), in *Sa skya bka' 'bum* (to name just a few recent publications: Dehradun 1993; Kathmandu 2006); in *Zlos gar dang mkhas 'jug* (Beijing 2004), in a condensed version of the *Gsung 'bum* of Sa skya Paṇḍita (Beijing 2007). There are also some old manuscripts of the treatise, preserved and digitized by the Buddhist Digital Resource Center. All these versions of the treatise vary insignificantly. For this article I have used the first version, published in 1969 in Dharamsala.

<sup>4</sup> The full name in Tibetan reads: *Rig pa'i gnas lnga las bzo rig pa'i bye brag rol mo'i bstan bcos kyi rnam par bshad pa 'jam dbyangs bla ma dgyes pa'i snyan pa'i sgra dbyangs blo gsal yid 'phrog 'phrin las yongs khyab*. There is a number of publications of this commentary: in *A Book of Medicine, One of the Five Outer Subjects*, by Sakya-pandit (Dharamsala 1969), in *Rol mo'i bstan bcos* (Beijing 1986), in *Bod ljongs sgyu rtsal zhib 'jug* (1988 no. 2, 1989 no. 3), in the *Gsung 'bum* of A mes zhabs ngag dbang kun dga' bsod noms (Kathmandu 2000), in *Zlos gar dang mkhas 'jug* (Beijing 2004). There are also manuscripts and xylographs of this commentary. The versions of the commentary listed above vary significantly. More spelling errors and even omissions of some passages were found in the *Gsung 'bum* of A mes zhabs published in Kathmandu in 2000. For the present article I used the publication of 1969 (Dharamsala).

<sup>5</sup> *Snga 'gyur rdo rje theg pa'i rigs 'dzin rgya mtsho'i longspyod chas gos rgyan dang rol mo'i rnam bshad sngags 'chang rgyan gyi me tog*. To my knowledge, only one publication of this work is accessible now, that is in *Gsang rnying rgyan dang rol mo'i bstan bcos* (Lhasa 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Little information is known about the author. The preface to the *Gsang rnying rgyan dang rol mo'i bstan bcos* states that he was a disciple of Zhang mkhar ba bsod noms bzang po and a holder of the *Rnying ma smin grol gling* tradition of early translations. His name is mentioned in the *Blue Annals* by 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal, but no precise date of his birth or death is given in this historical work. The author of the preface, Bu byung dbang 'dus, presumes that Bkra shis rgya mtsho lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century (*Gsang rnying rgyan* [Treatises on the Ornaments] 1996: 1–2).

<sup>7</sup> *Rig gnas kun shes nas bdag med grub pa zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos*. This treatise is included into the *Gsung 'bum* of Stag tshang lo tsā ba. Two recent editions of the *Gsung 'bum* were printed by Sachen International (Kathmandu 2007) and by the Dpal brtsegs Research Institute of Old Tibetan manuscripts (Beijing 2007). For the present article I use the latter one, printed in Beijing.

5. *Treasury of Explanations—A Wish-Fulfilling Jewel*<sup>8</sup> by Don dam smra ba'i seng ge<sup>9</sup> (15<sup>th</sup> century).

In the process of analyzing the texts listed above, I searched for special expressions, epithets, and logic schemes that, to some extent, could reveal the author's position in understanding vocal music. On the basis of these written sources, I have distinguished two principal ways of perceiving vocal music sounds: one in relation to human speech and language and one that draws similarities to the sounds of the surrounding world or mythical phenomena. In the present article, I will describe these positions in more detail and will provide a number of examples from the above-mentioned Tibetan texts.

### 1. Vocal Music and the Sounds of Speech

Vocal music is sometimes considered the oldest form of music. The creation of vocal music does not require any musical instrument except the human body. It only requires the vocal apparatus, which is also used for oral communication and speech. In terms of theory, this fact predisposed the creation of logical and terminological correlations between phonology and vocal music theory. These correlations are clearly observed in some of the texts, which will be analyzed in the present article.

In Sa skya Paṅḍita's *Treatise on Music*, one can find evidence that the author perceived vocal music as closely associated with language and speech. According to the text, the main components of vocal melody (*dbyangs*) are the four types of intonational contours (*nga ro*):<sup>10</sup> *'dren pa* "sustaining," *bkug pa* "bending," *bsgyur ba* "changing,"

<sup>8</sup> *Bshad mdzod yid bzhin nor bu* (another version of the title: *Bshad mdzod chen mo*). Two editions of this work are available: by Lokesh Chandra (New Delhi 1969, with an introduction by E. Gene Smith) and by Kunsang Topgey (Thimphu 1976).

<sup>9</sup> The author is said to be a member of a princely family of Gru shul or a household priest of this family. His encyclopedic work is said to have been written after 1457. For more information about the author, see E. Gene Smith's *Introduction to the New Delhi edition*.

<sup>10</sup> Several translations of the term have been proposed by researchers of Tibetan music: 1) "melodic type" (Canzio 1978: 56); 2) "intonational contours" or "intonational components of melody" (Ellingson 1979a: 420, 422); 3) "inflexion mélodique" or "l'intonation prolongée des chants" (Helffer 1998: 146, 155); 4) *yindiao* 音调 "tone" (*Yue lun* 乐论 [Treatise on Music] 1989: 23). The concept of *nga ro* is complex and has been studied by several scholars including M. Helffer, T. Ellingson and R. Canzio. Yet, they have not come to a consensus on the actual meaning of this term, but it seems clear that *nga ro* is understood by Sa skya Paṅḍita as a basic musical component, which includes such characteristics as pitch,

*ltengs pa* “weakened-strengthened.”<sup>11</sup> Sa skya Paṇḍita wrote:

There are four kinds of intonational contours  
 In simultaneously-produced music:<sup>12</sup>  
 Sustaining, bending,  
 Changing and weakened-strengthened.  
 I will explain how [they] become different  
 Because of the distinction [between the ways of their] uttering.  
 One should utter sustaining with straight,  
 Raised, curved, high, and low intonational contours.  
 The bending [intonational contour] can be either single or multiple,  
 And if so, double, triple, quadruple, and so on.  
 The changing [intonational contour] can be guttural, lingual, or nasal,  
 [All of] them may be of two [kinds]—long or short.  
 The weakened-strengthened [intonational contour] can be long or short,  
 There is a specific feature of this [type]—it is coarse in the beginning  
 and in the end.<sup>13</sup>

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loudness, timbre, tongue position, resonance cavity used and the vowel sung. Since there was not any notion of discrete pitches, intervals, scales or modes in Tibet in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, theoretical description of music necessitated the introduction or coining of adequate terms in order to explain musical phenomena. *Nga ro* is one of these early terms; its meaning remains rather obscure, but the core of its concept is evidently based on the manner of voice production and the timbre of voice, rather than the pitch characteristics of melody. The sequence of different *nga ro* constitutes a “melodic” line of a song (Ellingson 1979a: 419). Since the focus of Sa skya Paṇḍita’s attention was rather on the timbre of the sound and not on the pitch, I prefer to define the sequence of *nga ro* as a “timbre-acoustic” aspect of a song. A “timbre-acoustic” dimension can be understood as a sequence of the timbre changes of the voice, not necessarily accompanied by the pitch changes.

<sup>11</sup> The term *ltengs pa* was translated by Ellingson as “rises” (1979a: 422–423), the “ascending” melodic type by Canzio (1978: 56), and as the “mouvement ascendant,” by Helffer (1998: 151). I propose to translate *ltengs pa* as “weakened-strengthened,” because it cannot be judged from the texts of the treatise and of the commentary if an ascending movement of the melodic line is indeed implied. Sa skya Paṇḍita stated that *ltengs pa* is “coarse” (*rags pa*) in the beginning and in the end, but at the same time it is “weak in the center” (*dbus zhan*) (Sa skya Paṇḍita 1969: 3, 13). According to this description, Canzio suggests that a melodic feature of the type “low-high-low” is meant by *ltengs pa* (1978: 106). This suggestion is worth considering, but, as we are not able to reconstruct the melody that was described in the treatise, a translation closer to the original text seems to be more reasonable.

<sup>12</sup> *lhan cig skyes pa'i rol mo*. It is translated as “simultaneously-produced music” by Ellingson (1979a: 393), and “music, produced together with the body” by Canzio (1978: 35). In a broad sense it can stand for any sound produced by the human body (including the sounds of clapping of hands, whistling, etc.). In the *Treatise on Music* this term denotes vocal music.

<sup>13</sup> *de la lhan cig skyes pa yi// nga ro rnam pa bzhi yin tel// 'dren pa dang ni bkug pa dang// bsgyur ba dang ni ltengs nyid dol// de dag 'dren pa'i dbye ba yis// tha dad 'gyur ba'ang bshad par bya// drang po bsgreng dang bkug pa dang// bstod dang smad pa'i nga ros drang // khugs la rkyang dang brtsegs pa stel// de la gnyis gsum bzhi sogs so// bsgyur la mgrin lce sna ldan tel// de la ring dang thung gnyis sbyar// ltengs la ring dang thung ba stel// de la khyad par thog mtha' rags//* (Sa skya Paṇḍita 1969: 2–3).

Sa skya Paṇḍita's system could be summarized in the following way:

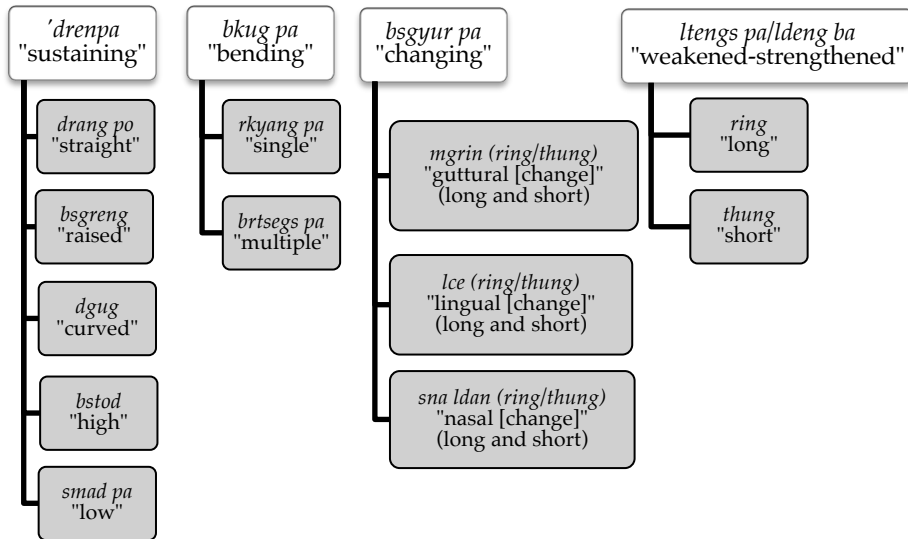


Fig. 1 – Different types of nga ro

As explained in the commentary by A mes zhabs, the first intonational contour (*'dren pa*) is divided into five types according to the vowel sung: the “straight” type is sung on the vowel “a”; “raised” on the vowel “e”; “curved” on the vowel “i”; “high” on the vowel “o”; and “low” on the vowel “u.”<sup>14</sup> This system demonstrates a strong resemblance to the explanation of phonemes in other Tibetan treatises on phonology from the same time period. For example, Bsod nam rtse mo's *An Easy Introduction to Reading for Beginners* (*Yi ge'i bklag thabs byis pa bde blag tu 'jug pa*) uses a similar terminology for describing Sanskrit vowels:

It is said, that “a” is straight, “i” is curved,  
 And “u” is low.  
 [...]  
 It is said, that “e” is a raised *nga ro*,  
 “ai” is raised and curved,  
 “o” is high.

<sup>14</sup> A mes zhabs 1969: 36.

It is said, that “au” is high and low,  
“am” has a nasalization.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, I conclude that Sa skya Paṇḍita, having borrowed some elements from phonetic analysis, brought this into the field of music theory and used these concepts for his research on vocal melody.<sup>16</sup>

The structure of melody is presented in the *Treatise on Music* as a line of consecutive *nga ro*. They are repeated or alternated in a particular order so that they construct a melodic “layer” of a song. As for the text that is sung, Sa skya Paṇḍita makes a distinction between words (*tshig*, or meaningful syllables) and intercalary syllables (*dbyangs*, or syllables without any meaning).<sup>17</sup> The type of singing, in which the syllables of actual text are intermingled with the meaningless ones is now as widespread as it was several centuries ago and is used in the ritual practice of Sa skya monasteries. For example, in the chant manual (*dbyangs yig*)<sup>18</sup> entitled “The Notation of the Chants to the Glorious Vajrakīla—The Sound of the Brahma Voice” (*Dpal rdo rje phur pa’i dbyangs yig tshangs pa’i dbyangs kyi nga ro*) one can find many verses with intercalary syllables, such as “yā,” “a’i,” or “yāyā,” as can be seen in the following example (see Fig. 2):

*namma/ mkha’iyi/ mtha’wa/ dangnga’a/ mnyam/ mā/ ’a’i/ māma’a/ pa’i/*  
*yā/ ’a’i/ yā/ ya’a’i/ yāyā/ dkyil/ li’iyi/ ’i’a/ līlī/ ’khor/ rā/ wāyā/ yāyā/ nas/*  
*g.ya’ya’/ ’a’i/ yāyā/*

*zhiyi/ khrowo/ rabba/ ’byamsma/ lha’a/ yā/ ’a’i/ yāyā/ tshogs/ yā/ ’a’i/ yā/*  
*ya’a’i/ yāyā/ byin/ ne’iyi/ ’enā/ nīnī/ rlabs// ba/ wāya/ yāyā/ can/ na’ayā/ ’a’i/*  
*yāyā/*<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *a ni drang po i bkug pa// u ni smad pa zhes bya ste// [...] e ni bsgreng pa’i nga ro ste// ai bsgreng zhing bkug pa yin// o ni bstod pa zhes bya ste// au ni bstod de smad pa yin// aṅ ni sna ldan zhes bya ste//* (Bsod nams rtse mo 2007: 506).

<sup>16</sup> Ellingson 1979a: 387–389.

<sup>17</sup> In other written sources, alternative terms for the meaningless syllables are used: *gyer lhad* (Bkra shis rgya mtsho 1996: 167), *tshig lhad* (Don dam 1969: 468).

<sup>18</sup> Music notation in Sa skya school of Tibetan Buddhism consists of wavy lines placed above or below the words or syllables of the text. These lines are called “snake strokes” (*sbrul shad*), because the shape of these lines resemble moving snakes or serpents (Helffer 1994: 150–152; Egyed 2000: 106). There are six “snake strokes” in this type of notation—upper left, upper middle, upper right, lower left, lower middle, and lower right. The actual meaning of these lines is interpreted differently by the scholars. Helffer writes in her book *Mchod-rol: Les instruments de la musique tibétaine* that these lines correspond to the movements of the drumstick (1994: 149). Egyed argues in her MA thesis that these lines are “the main melodic components for Sa skya pa chant manuals” (2000: 108). The meaning of these six lines is also explained in the introductory part of the chant manual *The Notation of the Chants to the Glorious Vajrakīla—The Sound of the Brahma Voice* (*Dpal rdo rje phur pa’i dbyangs yig tshangs pa’i dbyangs kyi nga ro*), see Bsod nams dbang po 1977: 3.

<sup>19</sup> Bsod nams dbang po 1977: 7–8.

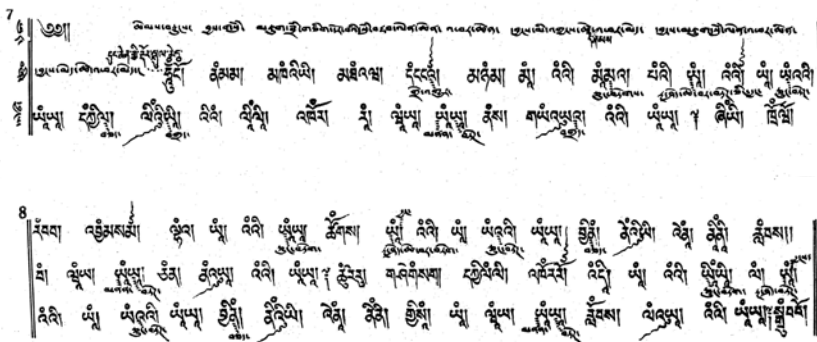


Fig. 2 — Pages seven and eight from the chant manual *The Notation of the Chants to the Glorious Vajrakīla—The Sound of the Brahma Voice*

I have marked the syllables of the main text with bold, leaving all intercalary ones unchanged. If written without intercalary syllables, these two lines would look as follows:

*nam mkha'i mtha' dang mnyam pa'i dkyil 'khor nas//*

*zhi khro rab 'byams lha tshogs byin rlabs can//*

The blessed group of the countless deities, both peaceful and wrathful,

[Which arose] from the mandala equal to the reaches of space...

Intercalary syllables, inserted into the text, are mainly the syllables *a*, *ya*, *wa*, and their modifications. They are put into correlation with the vowel and the last consonant of the previous syllable of the main text. Intercalary syllables make the actual text obscure and hidden, creating a distinctive type of singing.<sup>20</sup>

According to the *Treatise on Music*, two types of syllables (i.e., the meaningful and the meaningless) are combined during the actual performance and are sung with the help of different *nga ros* (i.e., intonational contours). In chapter one, Sa skya Paṇḍita introduces a number of “conditions” (*rkyen*)<sup>21</sup> that regulate the process of choosing a certain type of the intonational contour (see Table 1). These “conditions” for “intonational contours” are the vowels, sonorants,

<sup>20</sup> For more information about intercalary syllables, see Canzio 1978: 72–73, Ellingson 1979a: 417–419, Helffer 1998: 152, Egyed 2000: 116–126.

<sup>21</sup> Canzio translates this term as “context for the occurrence” of a certain type of *nga ro* or “circumstances” (1978: 72), Ellingson translates it as “occasion” (1979a: 417).

and semivowels of the text sung (including both meaningful and meaningless syllables). “Conditions” act as indicators for a certain type of intonational contour and can be conceived as a connecting link between the text and the vocal melody.

<i>nga ro</i> “intonation contour”	<i>rkyen</i> “conditions”
<i>'dren pa</i> sustaining	<i>a a</i>
<i>bsgyur ba</i> changing	<i>la lo</i>
<i>bkug pa</i> bending	<i>ai (a yi)</i>
<i>ltengs pa</i> weakened-strengthened	<i>a a</i>

Table 1 — Types of *nga ro* and their respective “conditions”

The precise rules for the correlation of intonational contours with the phonetic shape of text were not explained in detail in the treatise. If these rules were strict, there would be a vocal melody dependent entirely on the phonetic structure of the text. For example, if we have two syllables with the vowel *a*, like *nam mkha'*, or with the vowel *i*, like intercalary syllables *li'i* given in the example above (Fig. 2), then we should apply the sustaining (*'dren pa*) intonational contour for these syllables. If there is combination of the suffix *pa* with a joined genitive marker *'i*, then one should use a bending (*bkug pa*) intonational contour to create a melody. In this way, the following pattern of the vocal melody structure for “*nam ma mkha'i yi*” (the first syllables of the first line in Fig. 2) can be drawn:



	<i>nam</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>mkha'i</i>		<i>yi</i>
Lexically significant aspect	<i>tshig</i> (meaningful)	<i>dbyangs</i> (meaningless)	<i>tshig</i> (meaningful)		<i>dbyangs</i> (meaningless)
<i>rkyen</i> "conditions"	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>nga ro</i> "timbre-acoustic aspect"	' <i>dren pa</i> (sustaining)	' <i>dren pa</i> (sustaining)	<i>bkug pa</i> (bending)	' <i>dren pa</i> (sustaining)	

Fig. 3 – The correlations between different aspects of a song

In this pattern, the first line stands for the lexically significant aspect of a song—a sequence of the meaningful syllables of the text and intercalary meaningless syllables inserted between them. In order to give an illustrative example of this aspect of a song, I have written the first five syllables of the chant from the manual (Fig. 2): *nam ma mkha'i yi*. The first, third and fourth syllables are meaningful (*tshig*), while the second and the fifth are meaningless (*dbyangs*). The second line stands for the "conditions" that include the vowels of *tshig* and *dbyangs*: *a, a, a, i, i*. The third line is a timbre-acoustic aspect of the song. This aspect consists of the intonational contours, chosen according to the "conditions." Every pair of vowels in line two gives an intonational contour in line three. Therefore, the first two intonational contours in our case are the sustaining (*'dren pa*) ones (*a-a, a-a*), the third is the changing (*bkug pa nga ro a-i*), and the fourth is also sustaining (*i-i*).

According to the treatise, this aspect of a song corresponds with (and, perhaps, is constructed in accordance with) the vowel/sonorant/semivowel sequence of the second line. The sound of the vocal melody is thus represented as a clear reflection of the phonetic characteristics of the text line. If the phonetic shape is changed, the sound also changes. As Ellingson states in his thesis, "the theory of 'Four Occasions' may once have constituted a system of vowel-generated melody, with each new text vowel introducing a specific melodic development."<sup>22</sup> This kind of strong dependence, described in the treatise, suggests the conclusion that the sound of vocal music with the entirety of its acoustic characteristics was perceived by Sa skya Paṇḍita as inseparable from the phonetic shape

<sup>22</sup> Ellingson 1979a: 417.

of a text.

There is another interesting fact which provides additional specifics of Sa skya Paṇḍita's view on vocal music: he refuses to give a detailed description of classical Indian music in his treatise because the Tibetan language differs from Sanskrit in terms of phonetics (*sgra*).<sup>23</sup>

In his commentary on this treatise, A mes zhabs explains Sa skya Paṇḍita's position on vocal music by referring to the place music occupied in the system of traditional Indo-Tibetan sciences (*rig pa'i gnas lnga*). According to the encyclopedia by Stag tshang lo tsā ba, the five traditional sciences include arts and crafts (*bzo rig pa*) medicine (*gso rig pa*), phonology (*sgra rig pa*), logic (*tshad ma*), and "inner" science (*nang rig pa*).<sup>24</sup>

Arts and crafts are grouped into six categories according to the following criteria: 1) main (*gtso*) or ordinary (*phal pa*), depending on the area of application; 2) the arts of body (*lus*), speech (*ngag*) and mind (*yid*), depending on the "gate" (*sgo*) which is predominant in a particular art type. As a result, there are main and ordinary arts of body; main and ordinary arts of speech; main and ordinary arts of mind (see Fig. 4).

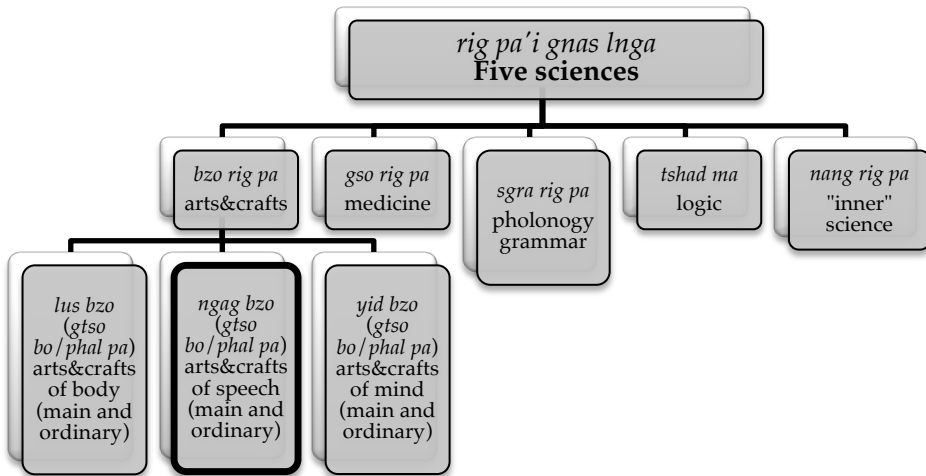


Fig. 4 — The system of traditional Tibetan sciences

In this system presented by Stag tshang lo tsā ba, vocal music is

<sup>23</sup> *drug las skyes sogs glu'i sbyor ba// rgyal bas gsungs pa du ma mthong // gal te khyod kyang glu'i sbyor ba// de nyid 'chad par rigs zhe na// skad dang gdangs kyi khyad par gyis// bod kyi sgra la 'jug pa dka'//* (Sa skya Paṇḍita 1969: 15).

<sup>24</sup> Stag tshang 2007.

included into the arts of speech (*ngag bzo*) and as such is considered connected with speech and language. The passage dedicated to the arts of speech in the encyclopedia of Stag tshang lo tsā ba is rather small and describes only the “main arts of speech”:

As for the arts of speech, the chants of praise [sung during] the offering to the Victorious One and other [chants] pertain to the main [arts of speech]. They should be performed in a state of faith, without insolence and inattention. The way of chanting<sup>25</sup> praises, veneration chants, and Tripartite Tridaṇḍaka is explained in detail in sutras and tantras. Therefore, in order to remain steadfast on the medicine, examination, and manner of the method in which a loud and pleasant voice resounds, as well as avoiding the opposite, after acquiring mastery in the [performance of melodies], which have six [qualities]—changes, bends, raises, interruptions, broad and subtle [sounds]—and [mastery in the performance] of many other manifestations of the melody, it is necessary in accordance with the oral tradition of knowledgeable [lamas] to study properly the chants of the Sutra tradition that were previously renowned in Tibet, yoga chants—which were distributed by great and lesser translators—praises and exhortations for the peaceful and wrathful protectors of the Dharma, and other [chants].<sup>26</sup>

This type of classification has influenced the way in which music was represented and described in Tibetan encyclopedias and other theoretical texts. For example, in the *Treasury of Explanations—A Wish-Fulfilling Jewel* (*Bshad mdzod yid bzhin nor bu*) written by Don dam smra ba'i seng ge, the art of reciting sacred scriptures with the help of melody (*dbyangs*) is included in chapter eleven entitled “Treatise on Grammar and Phonology.”<sup>27</sup> The same tendency is apparent in the works of Klong rdol bla ma Ngag dbang blo bzang (1729–1794) and 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899). Some modern Tibetan authors are also predisposed to use this classification in their works.<sup>28</sup>

The tendency of Tibetan scholars to perceive vocal music as being connected to speech and language finds a vivid manifestation in vocal

<sup>25</sup> *dbyangs kyi nga ro bya ba.*

<sup>26</sup> *ngag bzo ni/ rgyal ba mchod pa'i bstod dbyangs sogs ni gtso bo ste/ rgod bag med par dad pas bya dgos par/ bstod phyag dang rgyun chags gsum kyi dbyangs kyi nga ro bya bar mdo lung dang rgyud sder rgyas par gsungs so/| des na skad gdangs che zhing snyan pa 'byung ba'i thabs kyi sman dang dpyad dang spyod lam bsten cing zlog phyogs spang la/ 'gyur dang khugs dang 'degs dang 'jog sbom dang phra ba ste sgrug ldan la sogs pa'i gdangs kyi rnam 'gyur du ma la byang bar byas nas bod snga ma la grags pa'i mdo lugs kyi dbyangs dang / lo chen lo chung gis spel ba'i yo ga'i dbyangs dang / chos skyong zhi drag gi bstod bskul la sogs pa yang mkhas pa'i ngag rgyun las legs par bslab dgos la/ (Stag tshang 2007: 42–43).*

<sup>27</sup> Don dam 1969: 491–506.

<sup>28</sup> 'Jam dpal skal ldan 2005: 6–7.

music terminology. This subject was discussed in detail by M. Helffer in her article entitled "Du son au chant vocalisé: La terminologie tibétaine à travers les âges (VIIe au XXe siècle) [From Sound to Vocal Chant: Tibetan Terminology through the Ages (7<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)]."<sup>29</sup> I would like to provide here just a few examples of terminological homonyms which indicate related but not identical phenomena in phonetics and vocal music and which occur in the analyzed texts:

- 1) The term *dbyangs* in the Tibetan grammatical tradition means "vowel," while in music it stands for a special type of ritual song which is based on the minute variations of tone, timbre, articulation and loudness and is characterized by its slow tempo and prolonged vowels. The term *dbyangs* can also stand for intercalary syllables that are inserted into the main text of a chant.
- 2) *Nga ro* generally denotes "a sound/roar." In phonetics (*sgra rig pa*), it stands for a sound of speech, while in vocal music theory, it can be used to indicate a way of singing, a type of sound production, that can be defined as timbre-articulation unit of melody. It has distinct acoustic characteristics that include a phoneme sung, resonance cavity used, the corresponding way of articulation, as well as loudness, tessitura, melody movement, etc.
- 3) In the Tibetan grammatical tradition, phonemes are sometimes divided into masculine (*pho*), feminine (*mo*) and neutral (*ma ning*).<sup>30</sup> In vocal theory, though, these terms stand for three registers (*sgra*) of the human voice with respective differences in timbre and sound quality.

Research in Tibetan music generally agrees that the predisposition of Tibetan scholars to consider music as being connected to speech is based on the Indian tradition. As Ellingson states in his thesis:

[M]usical theory derived from articulatory phonetic concepts originating in India and developed further in Tibet; and melodic theory is based on a systematic analysis of vowel articulation and vocal intonation.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, it can be assumed that the correlations drawn by Tibetan authors between vocal music and phonology were deeply rooted in the Indian scholastic tradition and were brought to Tibet with the adoption of Buddhism.

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<sup>29</sup> Helffer 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Lung du ston pa rtags kyi 'jug pa 2004: 402.

<sup>31</sup> Ellingson 1979a: 391.

## 2. *The Tiger's Roar: Deriving Inspiration from Nature and Myths*

In any society, music in the early stages of its development was not based on the notion of discreet pitches. It was rather conceived as timbre variations, different from ordinary oral communication.<sup>32</sup> People imitated the sounds of nature—animal noises, voices of birds, or the whistle of the wind. Nature was their first music teacher and gave people their inspiration to create music.

In Tibet, this earliest stage of music development left a rich heritage of expressions, phrases and terminology preserved in written sources until today. The earliest views on music are reflected in the texts of the Bon tradition and the Rnying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>33</sup> Although the Gsar ma schools differ from the Rnying ma, one can still find some traces of ancient heritage in the works of the Gsar ma scholars.

To give some examples, I will return to the discussion of the *Treatise on Music* by Sa skya Paṇḍita. In Chapter 3 of the treatise, the author lists examples (*dpe*) of the application of melody (*dbyangs*):

[Singing] in the middle of the gathering [can be called] the roaring of the lion.

[Singing] in a secluded place [is like] the humming of the bee.

[Singing] in front of the experts [is like] the song of the parrot.

[Singing] among the ignorant [can be called] the charming beauty of the peacock.<sup>34</sup>

In this excerpt, to illustrate the way in which a song should be performed depending on the situation, Sa skya Paṇḍita provides several epithets for different songs. Although they are not explicit, these examples show the notion of animal voices used as patterns for the vocal sound production.

In the commentary on the treatise, one can also find the usage of animal noises in describing the sounds of the human voice and the composition of vocal melody. In Chapter 3, there is a number of similes used by A mes zhabs to characterize the voices of people from different regions of Tibet:

The voice tone of the people from Dbus is mostly thundering and

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<sup>32</sup> Sisauri 2008: 29.

<sup>33</sup> Ellingson 1979a: 97–108. On the basis of the written sources of Bon tradition, Ellingson gives a list of animal voices used by Bon musicians as models for voice production: tiger, dog, horse, *khyung* (the “King of birds”), parrot, lion, lark, dragon, and cuckoo.

<sup>34</sup> *shogs su seng ge'i nga ro stel// dben par bung ba rol pa'i tshul// mkhas pa'i mdun sar ne tso'i dbyangs// rma bya'i 'jo sgeg rmongs nang du//* (Sa skya Paṇḍita 1969: 13).

fluctuating, and [thus] is similar to the voices of geese and bees; the voices of the people from Gtsang are mostly clear and brilliant, and [thus they] are similar to the voices of the domestic fowl or horse; similarly, since the [voices] of the people from Stod mnga' ris are squeezed and jerky, and those of the people from Khams are thick and inflexible, they all are bright and coarse, and [thus] are similar to the voice of a donkey.<sup>35</sup>

In the end of Chapter 3, A mes zhabs recounts a story that explains the origins of some ritual chants (*dbyang*s) composed by Rin chen bzang po (958–1055) and is well-known in the Sa skya school of Tibetan Buddhism. This story was masterly translated by Ellingson, Canzio, and Egyed.<sup>36</sup> A mes zhabs cites the biography of the translator, where it is stated that Rin chen bzang po used the tiger's roar, the swaying of three branches as the wind whistled through them, and the movements of the waves of a river as the basis for composing chants (*dbyang*s). Thus, one could see that not only animal sounds served as models for describing the characteristics of vocal music, but also the sounds and visual patterns of surrounding natural phenomena.

I will now proceed with the analysis of the next Tibetan scholarly work on music, the *Explanation of the [Ritual] Items, Garments, Ornaments and Music—the Wealth of the Ocean of Vajrayana Vidyadharas of Early Translations—the Ornamenting Flower of a Mantradhara*. The author of this work was a follower of the Rnying ma Smin grol ling tradition.<sup>37</sup> In the section dedicated to ritual chant (*dbyang*s *kyi sa bcad*), he explains three kinds of chant: (1) those of the preliminary part of a ritual (*sngon 'gro*), (2) those of the main part (*dngos gzhi'i dbyang*s), and (3) those of the final part (*rjes kyi dbyang*s). Describing different styles of performing the chants of the main part of a ritual, Bkra shis rgya mtsho gives the following examples (*dpe*):

When performing the three kinds of *samādhi*, your voice should be like the King of birds who is overcoming mountain ridges; when singing gradually layered elements, you should pile them up like constructing a wall of a stronghold; in the “inestimable mansion” your voice should sound like two oceans—mother and son—mingling together. [...] While worshipping the deity, your voice should resemble that of a wolf fallen in a snare; when performing a chant of offering, you should sing by the voice of a small bird during outer offerings, and by the sound of

<sup>35</sup> *dbus pa rnams skad gdangs ldir zhing 'gyur ba ngang pa dang bung ba'i skad 'dra ba shas che la/ gtsang pa rnams kyi skad gdangs gsal zhing mtsher ba khyim bya'am rta skad 'dra ba shas che ba yin zhing / de bzhin du btsir zhing 'dur ba stod mnga' ris pa'i dang / khams pa rnams kyi sbom cing mi khugs pas brjid cing gyong ba bong bu'i skad 'dra ba 'byung la/ (A mes zhabs 1969: 66).*

<sup>36</sup> Canzio 1978: 141–145; Ellingson 1979a: 239–241; Egyed 2000: 60–63.

<sup>37</sup> Bkra shis rgya mtsho 1996: 170.

a bee during inner offerings. [...] When making an offering of *amṛta* medicine, your voice should be like the waves of the ocean; when singing the chant of *rakta*<sup>38</sup> it should be like an ocean storm; when making *gtor ma* offering, you should perform “mother [*dbyangs*]” in the manner of a lion posing with a majestic air, and “son [*dbyangs*]” like a roar of a tigress; the peaceful chant of praise [should be sung] in the voice of cuckoo; the wrathful chant of praise [should be sung] in the voice of the raven that saw the food; the chant of praise to lamas is like a big flag swaying in the wind; the chant of praise to the *yi dam* is like beating the “law drum” of the king.<sup>39</sup>

As one can see from this quote, the author gives various examples of the mode of voice production, explaining how one should sing different chants (*dbyangs*) according to the part of the ritual in which they appear. In this text, not only animal noises and visual characteristics of natural phenomena serve as patterns for singing, but also the sounds of musical instruments. The section about three types of chants is rather extensive and other examples are mentioned as well, including the turquoise dragon, fox, jackal, black bear, and wild yak. There is also a number of references to some real-life situations and mythical creatures.

Similar statements concerning the *glu* songs can be found in the encyclopedia of Don dam smra ba'i seng ge:

There are six modes of singing:

A song of the Great Garuda,

Which is sung before the eyes of the king, the owner of land;

A song of the great lion standing on snow,

Which is sung in the place where men, boys and elders are gathered;

A song of the lake Manosarowar with its waters swirling,

Which is sung among rejoicing mothers and aunts;

A song of pouring into *tagunaḍ*,<sup>40</sup>

Which is sung in the place where father's debts are arranged in lines  
[like] ribs;

A song of a goose going around the lake,

<sup>38</sup> Skt. *rakta* “blood.” It is unclear, what is the meaning of the “*rakta* chant” (*rakta'i dbyangs*) in this passage.

<sup>39</sup> *ting 'dzin rnam gsum la bya rgyal ri rtsibs gcod pa lta bu/ 'byung ba rim brtsigs la gyad mkhar brtsigs pa lta bu/ gzhal yas khang la rgya mtsho ma bu 'dres pa lta bu/ [...] phyang 'tshal la spyang gal gyis zin pa lta bu/ mchod pa'i dbyangs la'ang phyi mchod co ka'i 'gyur skad lta bu/ nang mchod bung ba'i tshang skad lta bu/ [...] bdud rtsi sman mchod rgya mtsho'i rba rlabs lta bu/ rakta'i dbyangs rgya mtsho dkrug pa lta bu/ gtor ma'i mchod pa la ma seng ges 'gying ba la/ bu stag mon gar ba lta bu/ zhi ba'i bstod dbyangs khu byug gi skad lta bu/ khro bo bstod bstod dbyangs pho rog gzan mthong ba'i skad lta bu/ bla ma'i bstod bstod dbyangs dar po che rlung gis bskyod pa lta bu/ yi dam bstod dbyangs rgyal po'i khrims rnga brdung ba lta bu/ (Bkra shis rgya mtsho 1996: 163).*

<sup>40</sup> The meaning of the word *tagunaḍ* is not clear.

Which is sung among young men and women;  
 A song of a fox searching for food in the midnight,  
 Which is sung between mothers, aunts and daughters-in-law.<sup>41</sup>

In Chapter 10, the author gives a list of the four animal voices used to create a melody:

In the chants of spiritual activities, four models of animal voices [are needed]: the overpowering [voice] of the lion, the roar of the tiger, the catching cry of the hawk, and the grunting of the hog.<sup>42</sup>

In the *Don dam smra ba'i seng ge's* encyclopedia, as well as in the treatise by *Bkra shis rgya mtsho*, the sounds of voice are always compared with different sounds of surrounding natural phenomena (e.g., wind, thunder, waterfall, etc.), with various animal voices (e.g., tiger, birds, wolf, fox, pig, etc.), and musical-instrument sounds (e.g., flute, drum, trumpet, etc.). In most cases, prescriptions concerning the performance of special vocal genres use examples of sounds or situations that the reader can easily recall in his mind.

Such examples can also be found in earlier texts describing Bon priests' worshipping practices in the Tibetan Empire (7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the texts praising *Padmasambhava's* vocal skills.<sup>43</sup> The tradition of comparing sounds of music with different natural sounds, imagined situations, or voices of mythical creatures is rooted in ancient Tibetan history. After the dissemination of Buddhism, this tradition gradually changed and lost its predominant position in the theoretic thought.

### 3. Conclusion

As one can see from the written Tibetan sources, there were two main ways of perceiving music sounds in Tibet. While the first one is connected to the sounds of speech, the second one is similar to the sounds of the surrounding world or mythical phenomena. The first way was influenced by the predominant role of Sanskrit grammar and phonology studies in the traditional Tibetan curriculum during the

<sup>41</sup> *glu la blangs pa'i thabs drug yod/ khyung chen nam mkha' lding pa'i glu/ sa bdag rgyal po'i spyan mngar blangs/ seng chen gangs la 'ging pa'i glu/ pha bu rgan rim tshogs sar blang / mtsho mo ma phang khyil ba'i glu/ ma srung skyid pa'i seb tu blang / ta gu nad la phyo ba'i glu/ pha bun rtsib ma gshig sar blang / ngar bur mtsho mtha' bskor ba'i glu/ pho gzhon mo gzhon tshogs sar blangs/ mtshan gung wa mo zas tshon glu/ ma sru rna ma'i seb du blangs/ (Don dam 1969: 525–526).*

<sup>42</sup> *'phrin las dbyangs la dud 'gro'i skad kyi dpe bzhi ni/ seng ge'i zil non dgos/ stag gi nga ro dgos/ khra'i gzung skad dgos/ phag pa'i ngur sgra/ (Don dam 1969: 484).*

<sup>43</sup> For more information see Ellingson 1979a: 101–103; Egyed 2000: 49–55.



“later [stage of] dissemination” (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet. The second way seems to be rooted in the ancient pre-Buddhist tradition dating back to the period of the Tibetan Empire.<sup>44</sup> As some researchers point out, the religious Tibetan chant as a distinctive style of singing was created on the basis of previous Bon practices and Indian Buddhist vocal genres borrowed during the dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the perception of music, the “ideal sound,” vocal techniques and their theoretical explanation of these two ways were also intermingled. Further study of written sources is required to determine the exact relationship between these two ways of interpreting and perceiving vocal music in Tibet.

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<sup>44</sup> Jackson 1987: 165 and Gold 2007: 14–16.

<sup>45</sup> Ellingson 1979a: 219–220 and Egyed 2000: 68–80.

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