

"MY MUSIC IS MY LIFE":

THE IDENTIFICATION OF STYLE AND PERFORMANCE

IN GĀINE MUSIC

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"All of my life I have been playing and singing with the people. Within this *sāraṅgi* is my entire life. And when I die, this whole instrument will go with me."

Ram Saran Nepali, 1994

"Style is the man; but we can say: style is, at least, two men, or more precisely, man and his social grouping, incarnated by its accredited representative, the listener, who participates actively in the internal and external speech of the first."

Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1926¹

Styles are engraved and ingrained in cultures the way grooves are engraved and ingrained in record discs."

Steven Feld, 1988²

On May 25, 1996, Ram Saran Nepali died. Present at the cremation ceremony by the banks of the Bagmati River, at Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu, were his closest family, his two wives and children from both marriages. There were also many others, including friends and well known Nepalese artists, musicians, poets and official cultural representatives. Radio FM 100, a newly established radio station serving the Kathmandu Valley, aired a special programme in honour of his memory, which was broadcast the day after the ceremony. Everyone interviewed during that event felt that Nepal had lost a very great artist.

¹Todorov (1984:62). From V.N. Voloshinov, "Slovo v zhizni i slovo v poezii." *Zvezda* 6 (1926), 244 - 67. Eng. trans. Wlad Godzich.

²Reprinted in Feld/Keil (1994:111).

Musical performance inheres in style as well as in patterns of culturally acclaimed interpretations of style. Styles are ingrained in cultures, not only as discourses of—and within—certain traditions of style but, also as individual utterances and idiosyncratic expressions within what Bakhtin described as the dialogic³ nature of communicative practices. Moreover, style is a means of communication in which individual expression may come to challenge the ordinary and collectively accepted. As argued by Steven Feld, “Style is an emergence, the means by which newly creative knowledge is developed from playful, rote or ordinary participatory experience.”⁴ As I shall discuss, the music performance of Ram Saran Nepali in particular challenged the ordinary. At the same time, his performance was culturally contextualized and deeply embedded in what he conceived as the ‘truth’ of the Gāine tradition of performance.

In Nepal, the term *lok gīt* (folk or people’s song) commonly covers several categories of style associated with local performance traditions. While the Damāi are a caste of tailors and musicians, the Gāine traditionally have been the only occupational caste of singers in the country. In addition to vocal performance, their playing of the four-stringed fiddle, the *sāraṅgi*, has been their hallmark. As outlined by the ethnomusicologist Mireille Helffer, the Gāine repertoire might be divided into three main stylistic categories: *jhyāure* (lyrical songs or folk songs), *stuti* and *maṅgal* (religious songs), and *karkhā* (songs of great historical events and heroism).⁵ Other categories are also to be found. In particular are the Gāine musicians renowned for their *lāhure gīt*, songs in which they render the narratives and emotional experiences of the Nepalese Gurkha soldiers going abroad. In Nepalese everyday life, Gāine performances also serve certain ritual and time constitutive functions, as for instance in their obligatory performances of the *Mālsiri*

³Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue is complex in the sense that it is seen as one of the founding principles of Being itself. Cf. Bakhtin, 1981 and 1993. As summarised by Morson & Emerson: “For people, the most important activity is dialogue. Thus, for any individual or social entity, we cannot properly separate existence from the ongoing process of communication. ‘To be means to communicate.’” Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 50.

⁴Feld/Keil (1994:150).

⁵Helffer, 1968 and 1969.

hymn in honour of the goddess Durga, performed during the observance of *Dasaī* in the month of *āśvin* (September-October).

In my fieldwork in Nepal (1988, 1991, 1993 and 1994), I took into consideration the extensive stylistic variety of their repertoire. In my doctoral dissertation, "The Performance of Everyday Life: The Gāine of Nepal"—to be published by the University of Oslo by the end of this year—I focus in particular on musical aesthetic perspectives and performance aspects, as these are conceptualized amongst the musicians themselves and their society. In this context, Ram Saran Nepali was undoubtedly one of the most idiosyncratic and stylistically innovative of all the Gāine musicians I came to know in Nepal. Like most Gāine, Ram started out at an early age going from 'village to village' with his father. These experiences laid the foundation for his views on music and performance. After he had stopped going from 'village to village' he became nationally recognized through the recording of cassettes, and through performances on Radio Nepal and at the Nepalese National Theater. Although his life consisted of playing and singing 'with the people'—either in the village or through other media—he always viewed his abilities to perform as his own. Hence, as he told me his whole life was carried "within his *sāraṅgi*" and at his death "his whole instrument would go with him"⁶.

Ram Saran Nepali's life and identity was inseparably linked to his music. However, more than many other men among his fellow caste, he became totally devoted to his instrument and musical performance. Based on my fieldwork and personal knowledge, I was never in doubt that Ram Saran Nepali possessed a view of and way life unquestionably his own. What I experienced among the Gāine is that they do indeed have theories about their performances and aesthetic concepts through which they aim to describe their music. The central task, however, has been to recognize that these theories emanate from their concepts and world views (which are also apparent in myth), and that these theories in fact are quite different from 'music theory' as I have learned to know it through my own education. To a large extent, I found that their

⁶From interview, 8.12.94.

aesthetic theories may also be conceived as utterances of identity⁷; as renditions of life histories in which their own views and conceptions of musical performance come to function as a reworking of memory and narrative of individual life. In many instances, these narratives seem to contrast the narratives of dominant Hindu world views and local community life; sometimes they also seem to refute the most common views of fellow caste members, in turn bringing forth a sense that music performance is an arena in which style, and hence identity, is openly contested. As I have observed, some of their utterances concerning aesthetic experiences and their own music performances do not conform to—and sometimes even contradict—central cultural narratives and conceptions of history, myth and religion.

In this context, I view Steven Feld's conceptualization of 'theory' as crucial, as the individual's dialogue within culture—and with himself in the sense of Bakhtin—especially may be revealed within the aesthetic arena of performance. For Feld, aesthetics concerns the emotional relationship established between participants and that which is conceived as an 'affecting presence'⁸ in culture. 'Theory', in this context, concerns the use of language as a verbal means for the expression of musical experience and metaphorical thought:

"By theory I mean a social articulation of systematic knowledge organized in such a way that it is applicable to a wide variety of circumstances. While it may derive from any number of

⁷The conceptualization of 'identity' and its relation to individual 'narrative history' is innately complex. In my work, I have conceived of 'identity' as an individual and cultural process rather than a substance of coherence and reference. Like Ricœur, anthropologists going for a 'critical anthropology of selfhood' will think of the 'self' as a 'self in process'. As described by Debora Battaglia: "From this position there is no selfhood apart from the collaborative practice of its figuration. The 'self' is a representational economy: a reification continually defeated by mutable entanglements with other subjects' histories, experiences, self-representations; with their texts, conduct, gestures, objectifications...". (Battaglia, 1995: 2.)

⁸A term he has borrowed from Robert Plant Armstrong. In Armstrong's definition a symbol and an 'affecting presence' differ one from the other in that the former represents while bearing no necessary physical similarity to what it represents, whereas the 'affecting presence' presents and is physically identical to what it presents, and, following Armstrong, by metaphor also is identical to the emotions transferred in the affecting 'transaction'. (Armstrong, 1975: 13.)

activities in the realms of contemplation and observation, the major character of a theory is the systematic organization of thought."⁹

In Feld's view, musical sound is not only made, it is also "socially formulated, as theory."¹⁰ From an anthropological point of view, this is an extremely important refiguration of the notion of 'music theory'.

There is no doubt that Ram Saran Nepali conceived of himself as a stylistic innovator within the tradition of Gāine performance, and that he was recognized as a most significant performer and innovator also by other Gāine and the Nepalese public in general. Concerning musical sound, one significant change was due to his changing the strings of his *sāraṅgi* from traditional goat gut to metal strings. Concerning his individual world view, a more dramatic change is found in that Ram—in contradistinction to most Gāines, including the well-known radio performer Jhalakman Gandharva—never claimed that the sound of his *sāraṅgi* was secured thorough the annual ritual sacrifice of blood to Sarasvati, the goddess of art and knowledge. According to Ram, the sound of the *sāraṅgi* seemed to be so important that it needed some improvement in order to mediate what he termed as the 'true' experiences of the local "place-world". Culturally speaking, he thus distanced himself from the common belief that musical sound is ritually initiated.

At this point a clarification of the concept of 'tradition' might be useful. 'Tradition' is, according to Ram Saran Nepali, the Gāine 'way of life'. As he told me again and again, "that is why we are a caste, the Gāine, to go from house to house to perform the music". Moreover, as he claimed, "Gāine is not really a folk singer. Rather we are a travelling newspaper."¹¹ This view of 'tradition' is in particular linked to the Gāine's own rendering of their myth of origin. In the most commonly heard version of this myth, their origin is related to the creation of the *Gandharva Rishi* of Vedic mythology, also known as the heavenly

musicians of the Hindu god Indra. Socially, however, this myth has a very ambiguous relation to their determination as one of the very lowest caste (*pāni nacalnyā choi chiṭo hālnuparnyā*), "untouchables and from whom water is unacceptable"¹², as described in the Nepalese legal code, the *Muluki Ain*.¹³ The theme of fate or *karma* is also central to the repertoire of most Gāine, as it is central to everyday life in Nepal in general, even after the abolition of caste as a legislative system in Nepal. The theme of fate is also the focus of Ram Saran Nepali's song, *Mero Karma*, which I recorded in 1993:

mero karma bigreko dekhera
mero karma bigreko dekhera
duniyāle duniyāle bolāūchhan hepera
ho pāni āirahne
jāl māyā kahā cha kahā jhalko lāirahne
jāl māyā kahā cha kahā jhalko lāirahne

ho nīra haru
ma dukhī jā gaye pani
ma dukhī jā gaye pani
āphnai thāuko āphnai gaūko jhaljhalko āirahne
ho pāni āirahne
jāl māyā kahā cha kahā jhalko lāirahne
jāl māyā kahā cha kahā jhalko lāirahne

pāni nera aa
paradeśmā mai mare bhane
paradeśmā mai mare bhane
pāune chhaina, pāune chhaina ek thopā sunpāni
ho pāni āirahne
jāl māyā kahā cha kahā jhalko lāirahne
jāl māyā kahā cha kahā jhalko lāirahne

sabai mānchhe janmera mamu cha
sabai mānchhe janmera mamu cha
tara maile tara maile sāhūko rin timu cha
ho pāni āirahne
jāl māyā kahā cha kahā jhalko lāirahne

¹²The term caste is here used synonymously with the Nepalese term *jāt*.

¹³Cf. the study of the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 made by Höfer, 1979.

⁹Feld, 1981:23.

¹⁰Ibid.:45.

¹¹From my interview 22.3.91.

mero karma bigreko dekhera
dāju bhāile bolāūchan hepera
ho pānī āirahne
jāl māyā kahā chha kahā jhalko lāirahne
jhalko lāira, jhalko lāira, jhalko lāira...

Translation

seeing my miserable karma (my broken fate)
the world (the brothers of the world) call me insultingly
rain keeps on coming
where is the web (trap) of love (from) somewhere (her) image
keeps coming
(*jhalko āirahne*, lit. means that *jhalko*, the feeling of
presence/image, keeps coming by itself)
my love is very far away, but I feel her presence (lit.: the
image continues to be brought)
(*jhalko lāirahne*, lit.: a transmission of *jhalko*: the feeling of
presence/image is casual; it is caused to come, from him or
her)

I the sad one, wherever I go
I got the reflection of my place, of my village, again and
again
rain keeps on coming

If I die in a foreign land
I will not be able to get a drop of *sunpāni* (water touched to
gold, holy water, for instance used to rinse after having
touched or given food to an untouchable)
rain keeps on coming

everyone who is born must die
but I have to pay the loan of the moneylender (meaning that
even after his death he will also be in debt; the state of bad
karma/misfortune will also be passed on to the next life)
rain keeps on coming

seeing my miserable karma (my broken fate)
the world (the brothers of the world) call me insultingly
rain keeps on coming¹⁴

In the Nepalese cultural context, the fate of life and the fate of being born into a particular caste is represented by one and the same word, *karma*. In this sense, the *karma* of life is identical to that of caste pre-determination. Hence, it is easy to see how this song could be taken as a lament portraying the fate of the Gāine singer himself, condemned to a life where the world calls him insultingly, where he is always away from his "home-place", and where his debt is so great that—as expressed in the song—it may even be passed on to his next life. The text contains several metaphors essential to the everyday lives both of the Gāine and of most Nepalese people. The emotional aspect of the traveller's fate is focused especially in the wordplay *jhalko āirahne* and *jhalko lāirahne*. In these words, the feeling of the presence or the image of a lover and a "home" 'keeps coming', just as it also may be 'caused to come' from him or her; in other words, the experience of a journey is always also the experience of being away from familiar people and places. The most central cultural metaphor of the song text is that of *sunpāni*, meaning 'water touched by gold'. As known, *sunpāni* is the essential symbolic means employed in rituals that clarify the difference between 'high' and 'low', 'pure' and 'impure', in everyday ritual life. 'Gold water' is used to purify food and to wash hands when food is given to or some contact has occurred with a person of an 'impure' caste, such as the Gāine. The theme of the journey has to be seen in relation to the situation where the Gāine have conceived their fate: as continual travelling from place to place in order to perform their music for all kinds of people, including high as well as low castes.

However, the story of Ram Saran Nepali's relation to the concept of caste is not simply one of acceptance, as he had great problems in accepting some of the social expectations and premises ascribed to the Gāine role; or more precisely, of accepting the view of the Gāine as socially stigmatized.

"As I was walking from village to village with my father, people would always say: do not come close, do not touch me, you are a Gāine. All of my life I have lived with this.

¹⁴This version of the song was recorded in Ram Saran's house in Kathmandu 3.12.93. Cf. CD.

That is also why I married my [second] wife. All of my life I have been linked to this caste. I want to change my life, my whole life..."¹⁵

In my work I have observed several examples of subversive acts, of acts demonstrating how Ram tried to get away from his position as a 'low caste' Gāine. As he remarked above, his second wife was of high Newar descent. There are also many other examples of acts in Ram's life which must be considered uncommon for a Gāine. At the same time his musical practice was entirely embedded in his ideas of continuing the Gāine musical tradition, although in Ram's view, the social practice of caste discrimination should be condemned. On several occasions he also claimed that he thought that belief in caste was simply some kind of superstition and a system wholly 'made up' by high caste Brahmins:

"I think there is no caste. Only people started to make this system for themselves. They would say, he is only a singer this man. And people would look at this as a very low caste. There is no caste, I think. But people have made up caste."¹⁶

As I have documented in my study, Ram Saran Nepali wanted to 'break away' from the common beliefs of his society. His musical performance as well as his personal life were the results of individual acts embedded in tradition while at the same time breaking with certain aspects of traditional beliefs. Central to these problems is the question of fate. In general, Ram thus claimed that the song *Mero Karma* concerned the theme of bad *karma*. Yet, as he told me, no matter how hard he tried to go the 'good way' and forget about his bad fate, just thinking that he should be respected as a good musician, people would humiliate him and show their disrespect because of his Gāine identity:

¹⁵From interview, 8.12.94

¹⁶Ibid.

"This is the way people think. Even my brother, even my father, and all my friends tell me—people tell me I am very bad. I am Gāine. I am low. I want to go a good way, and people want to think in another way. I want to go the true way. I do not want the artificial things."¹⁷

In this sense, Ram claimed the text *Mero Karma* is also related to the fact that "everyone has to make his own country" and "everyone is always alone on their path of life with their feelings of loss and remembrance of their home-place."¹⁸ The essential point made about fate, is that the individual belongs to a place, and is subject to the beliefs and experiences to be associated with that place.¹⁹ In this sense, life is seen as a journey away from place and that which is known, a never-ending journey where the remembrance and experiences of home will be the reference point in the individual course of life. In summary, this reflects Ram's own ambiguous sense of being a Gāine, going the 'good way' as a Gāine musician, however, yet never escaping from the cultural processes of caste stigmatization.

Belonging to place, and experiencing the emotional intensity of specific places in the local world, was Ram Saran Nepali's most persistent theme. His style of performance emerged from this theme, which was linked to his own individual concept of 'truth' in performance. For Ram, musical 'truth' concerned the experience of going from 'place to place' as a Gāine:

"In my caste, one musician must always go from place to place. So what happens if he goes to those places and sings the same song every time, ta, da, da... (sings). What happens? People will get bored. They do not want to listen any more. So my caste of musicians must always learn new songs, we must always make new songs. We have to learn from the village. And when we hear something, we will learn from that.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹The significance of place is from an epistemological point of view in particular discussed in the recent works by the Western phenomenologist Edward S. Casey.

When we sing about what happens in one particular village, people may start to cry. They will show their tears. And we may learn something from that place, some new melodies or some new histories. Later on we will remember what we have seen. This is the meaning of folk song. It is the remembrance of what we have seen. When I close my eyes and play this melody I will remember. I will see this village, this place. This is the true meaning of the folk songs. To understand a folk song you must first go to the village. Then you will understand the true meaning of it."²⁰

In this sense, Ram's stylistic material was entirely linked to the experiences of the local "place-world". The principal idea expressed here is that music—and thus 'truth'—must be 'learned from the village'. As he often claimed: "To perform music, we need to see the true things."²¹ In my interviews he gave several examples of what this concept of 'truth' implies. The general idea is that the feelings and experiences of particular places, villages, and landscapes must be somehow captured in sound. In his view, people of particular places will use their voices in specific ways, in speech and song. The travelling Gāine must capture these qualities in such a way that the specific local voice/sound qualities will be recognized in Gāine performances and associated with experiences of the local "place-world". Ram often gave examples of specific local ways of using the voice, and in our conversations he often made claims such as "this is typically from Jumsun (sings)" or "this is really truth (he sings) this is close to the border of India."²² As such, the aesthetic experience inherent in the listeners makes sense of the musical sound, as these sounds are, precisely, 'inscribed in culture'. Without this local 'sound knowledge', the musical sounds would not produce this kind of locational and associational moves of local participatory experience.²³

Furthermore, for Ram Saran Nepali, the concept of 'truth' implied something far more specific and encompassing than an idea of

²⁰From interview, Kathmandu, 2.12.94.

²¹From interview, 22.3.91.

²²From interview, 4.12.94.

²³Cf. Feld's concept of 'interpretive moves'. (Keil/Feld, 1994.)

'collecting' or 'learning' songs from various places. The idea is rather that the performer is thought to be able to capture the 'spirit'—or ethos in anthropological terms—of the local "place-world". However, in order to do this, the performer has to 'go deep'. In Ram's theory, the ability to 'go deep' is also the decisive factor with regards to whether a performance is conceived as good or not. The only way to make folk music is to 'learn from the village'; and the musical 'sound' is thought to emanate directly from the experience of being 'touched' or moved by the experience of place:

"I am a musician. What kind of musician? If I go to the village, what do I want? I touch the people, I sleep there. I am listening with people. I am playing with children. I am looking at flowers. I will watch the butterflies flying. I may see some waters and rivers. All touch you... you feel there. And people may experience happiness (he imitates laughter)... there may be laughter. It is all there. Then everything comes here... (he takes a long breath). Then these things comes to melody, to sound. There may also come some words. It [the 'true' music/Gāine music] does not come from beating [rhythm]...(he indicates a rhythm with his fingers)... If no touch [experience] here (he points to himself): no sound... That is why I collect music. This type of different things, you know."²⁴

In sum, music is viewed as a medium expressing experience, and in particular the experiences of local village life. In Ram Saran Nepali's aesthetic theory, the meaning of 'folk song' is entirely connected to the emotional experience of place, and the musician is thought of as the mediator who may transform the experiences of place into performance. While he was performing, instrumentally or vocally, Ram would always also close his eyes in order to capture the right mood or 'feeling' for the place or event remembered and recreated in the musical performance.

²⁴From interview, 2.12.94.

In his view, the listeners or participants would be 'touched' or engaged in the performance only so far as they might recognize something related to their own experiences in life.

One example of a performance Ram said he had learned 'from place' is the piece which he named *The Butterflies of Jumla*.²⁵ The tune came about when he was visiting the district of Jumla, which lays in the Karnali Zone in the inner Himalayan range in mid-western Nepal. In fact Ram claimed this piece was a direct revelation of 'nature':

[sic] "I am born in Nepal. My nature—where I am born. All the way [everywhere there is] nature, the forest, the birds, and so many butterflies, great rivers and mountains. This is music. What you need to find out is that this is music. Sometimes birds are dancing, sometimes there is fog, sometimes it is clouded: This is all music. I have a small piece of wood. I prepare it myself [the *sāraṅgi*; I put strings on it. Then I play music. In that way all these things [the nature] is in my heart."²⁶

According to Ram, if the musician 'goes deep' he will find that the real 'truth' is represented in nature. *The Butterflies of Jumla* is a typical example of how the musician sees himself as a mediator between nature and culture. As argued by Ram, butterflies have no language. Still, he claims that butterflies have feelings and emotions and that they would like to communicate with us if they only could. On the other hand we—as human beings—have language and brains, but do not communicate with each other as much as we fight with each other.²⁷

The role ascribed to the musician here—conceived as a mediator between the 'truth' of nature and the experiences of human life—is more complex than some kind of romantic idea about transformation of 'aesthetic beauty' from nature to musical performance. Rather than simply being a "sonic" representation of the 'nature', the 'truth' which underlies Ram's conceptualization is one of antagonism: between natural 'truth' and cultural experience. As Ram argued, the essential motif around which he constructed the melodic movements of *The Butterflies of Jumla* is thought to symbolize fight: "Now I play for fight... This note is not from *sāraṅgi*. It is from the *karnāl* from the *Damāi*."²⁸ The *karnāl* is a straight conical-bore natural trumpet played in pairs, an instrument which has a long history of use for military purposes.²⁹ Inasmuch as Ram claimed that the performance of this piece was inspired by this instrument, it also seems probable that what he sought to imitate was the sound of the *karnāl* played in pairs. In listening to the performance, one may hear how Ram Saran typically intermingles various pitches to generate characteristics which especially endure in variations of sound qualities and timbre.

Musically and stylistically Ram's aesthetic search for 'truth' was a thoroughly individualistic project, as his combinations of sounds from 'nature' and the cultural traits of the local "place-world" sounded very different from the performances of most other Gāines. In conclusion, Ram Saran Nepali's performance represented a very original reworking of style based on local tradition and experience. The idiosyncrasies of his performance were undoubtedly his own; however, his musical style and life was also inherently linked to the cultural traits of the Gāine as the travelling messengers of Nepalese society. In this sense, his performance personified—as expressed by Bakhtin—the style of the man as well as his social grouping.

²⁵This piece is featured in the accompanying CD, and is also to be found in my own CD release: "The Real Folk Music of Nepal", Travelling Rec. 1997 (cf. advertisement in this issue), featuring several performances by Ram Saran Nepali and other Gāine musicians.

²⁶From interview, 17.12.94.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸From interview, 22.3.91.

²⁹Cf. Tingey, 1990.

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