

*GURUNG CULTURAL MODELS  
IN THE GHATU MUSIC AND DANCE*

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For almost twenty years, I have tried to understand what the Gurung mountain villagers of Nepal<sup>1</sup> do with music and how they think musically. In this article, I will focus on one particular performance of the Gurungs, the *Ghāntu*, in an attempt to demonstrate how the musical and kinetic processes relate to the cognitive models of culture.

Theoretically, the study builds on the tradition of cognitive ethnomusicology (e.g. Blacking 1971 and 1973; Herndon 1971; Rice 1980; Herndon and McLeod 1981; Kippen 1987; Baily 1985 and 1988; and Koskoff 1992), performance studies of ethnomusicology (Herndon and Brunyate 1975; Blacking 1981a and 1981b; and Behague 1984) as well as on the basic premises of cognitive anthropology. It is proposed that culture-bound musical cognition cannot be studied from within music and musical perception - which have been the objects of computational simulations of music and experimental studies of musical cognition, respectively - but by focusing on musical practices

<sup>1</sup>The people calling themselves Gurung consist of a variety of different kinds of cultural groups. There are close to 200 000 Gurungs living in Nepal according to the 1991 census. Some Gurungs living in the capital have completely given up their ethnic traditions. The Gurungs living in the different areas of Nepal, in the Terai in the south, as well as the so-called eastern and western Gurungs, all have their own distinctive cultural features. Due to difficult transportation (the distances between mountain villages must be walked) and oral tradition, cultural traditions even vary from one village to another. Thus, I do not claim to make any generalizations about the Gurungs. My interpretations are based only on the data collected in a mountain village which is located in the main area of Gurung inhabitation of central Nepal, a distance of two-to-three-days' walk to the northeast of the city of Pokhara.

which are made public and shared through social behaviour, its products and speech, that is, on musical practice as social process in performance (see also Moisala 1991 and 1993).

Cognition as a mental activity, including musical cognition, is a process involving biological capacity, bodily experiences and social interaction. The human mind makes representations, maps of its environment in its brain. Each individual relates through the enculturation process to some cultural symbol system. But a society can react also as an integrated entity, whose members share experiences collectively and whose roles and relationships change in response to shared experiences.

Anthropology has, since the beginning of this century, recognised that each culture may be characterised by a set of general beliefs called collective representations which regulate the thought processes of the individuals of that group (Levy-Bruhl, 1910:23). Later on, the same phenomena has been referred to as standardised social experiences, schemes necessary and adequate for survival and acceptable behaviour for everyday life within the culture in question (Neisser, 1976:153), and cognitive models which are presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared by the members of a society and that play an essential role in their understanding of that world and their behaviour in it (Quinn and Holland, 1987:4). The cognitive map (and/or model) of a culture represents the world of a social entity, an integrated group of people, who store information, among other things, on the arts (Laszlo et al., 1993:1-14).

Cultural models may guide behaviour and decision-making, but they may also be formed through action. The existence of models does not require awareness of them; conversely, the actors most probably are not able to verbalise them. The models are reflected widely in many layers of human action; they influence (and are influenced by) the ways of behaving, interacting, reasoning, arguing, evaluating and making decisions. The concept of model seems to imply a stable structure, but that is not so. Cognitive models inform both thought and action. They refer to the processes within the human mind which change with time.

The challenge of cognitive ethnomusicology is to study how these cognitive models of culture appear in and form musical processes (or vice versa). The aim of this article is to demonstrate how the cognitive models of culture relate to musical practice in performance with the help of several methods, ethnography of musical performance, an analysis of the native judgements of music and dance, transcription, and music analysis as well as a description of dance as a movement system.

### *The Ghāntu as Musical Practice in Performance*

I had been living in a Gurung mountain village for just over two months in 1975 when, in the midst of the breathtaking Himalayan scenery, I got to see a *bāhramāse* Ghāntu performance for the first time. The small yard of a house was densely packed by crowds of people sitting, joking, chatting and enjoying the respite from their farming labours and economic hardships. In the middle of the yard was a small dancing area on one side of which twelve middle-aged and older male singers and four madal drum players were sitting. Three teenaged girls dressed in long multilayered dresses of deep purple and adorned with big, golden earrings and bracelets were dancing.

The drum players drummed a few beats and one of the men, called the guru, started to sing. The other singers joined in after a while. Soon after, the dancers began to dance, as well. The dancers rotated slowly and fluidly in place, simultaneously bowing down and rising again. The voices of the men undulated, overlapping and interlacing heterophonically in a pentatonic melody. Occasionally, the singers made their lower jaws vibrate creating a wavering sound. The singers moved around, left the "stage" and returned again. Some singers seemed to sing confidently and others, instead, echoed them.

The singing and dancing was accompanied by the slow beating of drums. Although the beats came slowly and relatively evenly, the rhythm could not be followed in accurate regular meter. It "breathed" and lived according to the dance and

decelerated at the end of the singing. The music was mixed not only with human sounds but also with the crowing of cocks, the clucking of chickens, and the heavy snorts of water buffaloes. The singing and dancing continued without any breaks for almost three minutes. Then the group had a short rest after which the guru commenced singing again.

After one and a half hours, the normal duration of a western concert, I began to anticipate the end of the performance. However, the singing, dancing, and drumming continued from hour to hour through the night. The performance which had begun at 9 p.m. did not end before 10 a.m. At night, the performers had a longer rest only for a rice meal. During the shorter breaks they drank buffalo milk tea and rice wine. Most of the audience stayed awake with the performers, chatting and joking, but some slept on rice mats. In a way, the music created an auditive space in which social gathering and interaction, a creation of the feeling of unity, and an enforcing of the traditional Gurung ways and beliefs could take place.

In these kinds of *bāhramāse* Ghāntu performances, which can take place to welcome a visitor, at weddings and for other celebrations, only parts of the complete Ghāntu story, called *satī* Ghāntu are performed. Each of the parts has a special theme: the *melbā* part describes flowers, the *mñ rucba* growing rice, the *pha laba* hunting, the *jalā khelne* fishing, the *biyā laba* weddings, the *mñ pribā* battle, the *jogī* living as a hermit and a part called *Kusundā* describes the visiting of the *Kusundā* gods. Different elements of the Gurung life and world view are featured. For example, the rice farming chapter recounts the process of farming in chronological order from how the field is prepared and rice planted to the point when the rice has been eaten and it is time to brush one's teeth.

The complete Ghāntu performance, *satī* Ghāntu takes place only once a year at the time of the full moon in mid-May during the Baisākh Purne festival. At that festival, the whole story of the Ghāntu which tells about the life of King Pashurām (alternatively, Pasrām), Queen Yāmāvātī and their son Balkriṣṇa (Balrām) is

performed. The story ends with a description of the burning of the Queen alive with her deceased husband, the tradition called *sati*. In Baisākh Purne, which is the festival of Lord Buddha's incarnation, there is continuous dancing for three days and three nights. After that, the rice is planted. The performance of the Ghāntu is given in order to please the gods of the Himalayas. It is believed that if they are pleased, they will give a good rice crop.

The language in which the Ghāntu is sung is unidentified; it is neither Nepali nor Gurung. It is also unfamiliar to the ordinary performers; they cannot understand the words of the song but can only explain the approximate meaning of single sentences. Only the leader of the musical group, called *guru*, can explain the meaning of single words. The villagers in the audience are only able to describe the approximate content of each part. In a performance, they follow the proceeding of the story: keeping in mind the story, they observe other factors relating to it, such as changes in melodies, rhythmic patterns, and in the paraphernalia used.

The Ghāntu also includes dimensions which westerners call supernatural; in the beginning of each Ghāntu performance, the singers intone a blessing and invite the Himalayan gods to attend the performance. When the gods and spirits enter, some sensitive people may begin to tremble. The trembling does not cease until the gods leave. In the Kusundā part of the Ghāntu, the dancers become possessed by spirits. The supernatural dimensions set special requirements on the performers: The male performers should be mature enough, at least 18-years-old, and at the time when the female dancers are selected for the dance, they should be of premenstrual age, virgins and skillful dancers. According to one belief, only such virgin girls can become "touched by the gods", *devatāle cundacha bhacra*, i.e., possessed by the spirits.

Ghāntu music and dance do not exist as domains separate from the performance occasion, but learning and rehearsing take place in performances. Remembering the words of the song and the rhythmic patterns of the drumming outside the performance

situation is possible only for a few members of the musical group. It is also possible that there can be no rehearsals due to the esoteric, formerly possibly even more sacred, nature of the performance event.

To the villagers, the Ghāntu is not only music-making and/or dancing, but the wholeness of a social occasion in which the essential legends of the Gurung history are sung, central values, beliefs, and other criteria of "Gurungness" are confirmed and for which the music, singing, and playing - elaborated in a flexible and collective manner - create an auditive and spiritual space. And, in addition, the movements of the dance visualise the spirit of the Ghāntu and Gurung culture.

#### The Unique Features and Aesthetics of the Ghāntu Song and Dance

The special sound character of the Ghāntu is created by heterophonic group singing which is a deliberate stylistic signifier; each singer varies his singing as he likes within the style. The more skillful the singer is, the more variations he can produce. An analysis of the recorded performances revealed how the ways to vary the melody are limited. There are only five ways of varying the melody: embellishing certain pitches in specific ways, prolonging a pitch while others proceed to the third above, singing in undulating glissando with other singers, adding a pure fifth above the tonal centre or a minor third below the tonal centre. When ten singers constantly vary the melody individually in these ways occasionally adding colour to the sound by vibrating their lower jaw, the result is a complex sounding texture.

The ceaseless flow of the heterophonic singing is another central feature of the Ghāntu. Each verse is sung continuously without breaks. The singers breathe intentionally at different times, filling the gaps left by others' breathing. They also have the freedom to retire from singing and join in again as they wish.

The Ghāntu music includes a great deal of repetition. One part of the Ghāntu consists of several repetitions of song sections



(the musical example on the CD includes two song sections of the Ghāntu, each lasting less than three minutes (Table 1). Song sections include an introduction and two to three repetitions of the basic melody. One part of the Ghāntu for instance, the one which describes hunting, the Pha Laba, includes four different basic melodies (such as in Ex. 1.), which are varied throughout the heterophonic singing techniques. The same rhythmic pattern – with the addition of the starting, ending and mediating rhythmic beats related to it – accompanies the singing throughout the section. In the performance of the Pha Laba, four different rhythmic patterns varied throughout the performance were played (see Table 1 and Ex. 1).

The striking feature of the Ghāntu dance is the fluidity of the movement. The slow rotation in place as the dancers bow down and raise their bodies up again takes place in a smooth continuous movement (Fig. 1). An interesting feature of the dance is the co-movement of the two dancers. The dancers perform the same rotation, the same bendings and the same whole arm movements one after the other. It can be said that the style of dance visualises the heterophonic style of Ghāntu singing.

It was by chance that I learned how to esthetically evaluate the Ghāntu performances. I had always greatly admired the special kind of fluid flow of the Ghāntu dance which was unique among all the other dances I had ever seen before. The choreometrical analysis of the Ghāntu had revealed that the dance employed postures typical of the activities of the mountain people: the body attitude of the dancers – in which the trunk is used like a solid block and no movements or twist at the waist occur – is exactly the same as that which is used when carrying loads in a basket placed on the back and supported on the forehead by a carrying rope. However, dance is more than just an imitation of daily movements, it is also an esthetic visualization of culture and its main values. According to Adrienne Kaeppler, "movement is a surface manifestation of the underlying structures of a society" (1992:153).

I learned about Gurung aesthetics when walking back with a couple of Gurung friends from a neighbouring village where we had attended a Ghāntu performance. My companions greatly admired the dancing style of one of the dancers describing her dancing as "flowing like the water", *sallala pāni bage jastai*. I began to test on other occasions, if this judgement was how the Ghāntu singing and dancing should be. It turned out that fluidity, "flowing like the water", was the esthetic aim of the performance.

According to Simon Strickland (1982:89), who has thoroughly and deeply studied ancient Gurung narrations, the symbolism surrounding water is also strongly involved in Gurung narrations. Admiration of water and its flow among people who live high up in the mountains is not surprising. Villages used to be established on the very top of the mountains because, from there, it was easier to see an approaching enemy and to defend the village. Still today, most of the villages stand in their ancient places. Therefore, many Gurung villages, such as the village where I stayed, lack water. For instance, in "my" village - before the water pipe was built in the beginning of this decade - all villagers, approximately 1500 of them and their livestock, got their water from a modest well. From the village, the return journey to the nearest mountain stream takes hours. Thus, what could be a more esthetically desirable vision to the villagers than a stream forming whirls as it flows down the hill?

#### *Cultural Models of Thinking and Ghāntu Music*

In the study of the Gurung cultural models of thinking, I have chosen, methodologically, to define the shared ways of thinking, the models of thought which could be found in many aspects and in much of the behaviour of the Gurungs as *cultural premises*. A premise in the context of cultural analysis "is a generalised statement of a particular assumption or implication recognizable in a number of details of cultural behaviour" (Bateson 1958:24). Premises are abstract assumptions and implications which act as the basis for different kinds of behaviour.

I have earlier interpreted the cultural characteristics of those Gurung villagers with whom I worked in Nepal, and reduced them into four cultural premises which are relevant to Gurung music (see Moisala 1991:116-132). No attempt was made to identify all the Gurung cultural premises, but only those related to music.

The essential feature of Gurung culture and thinking is that it is based on orality. Although nowadays an increasing number of young people have acquired a modest ability to read and write, the transmission of old Gurung heritage and traditions, such as the Ghāntu, takes place purely orally. As an oral tradition, Ghāntu singing is based on a small number of melodic core formulas. The variation of these formulas develops from slight changes made in the melodic progression, but the character of the formula remains recognizable. Paradigmatic analysis of a recording of the Pha Laba Ghāntu of 1.5 hours revealed seven basic formulas (Ex. 2.) out of which the four melodies used in the performance are formed (Ex. 3).

Another central feature in the thinking of the Gurung villagers is the emphasis on collectivity (ibid., 124-126) which was demonstrated in their decision-making, as well as in all other aspects and activities of the villagers. The collectivity controlled and directed individual lives: an individual was placed within the structure of the village community and into the Gurung internal caste hierarchy by birth. Social expectations sanctioned by moral pressures were placed upon everybody and individuals were expected to put their efforts into shared activities. The social interaction was based on mutual concern, reciprocity, and solidarity. Some property, such as forests, also used to be owned collectively by the villagers.

The emphasis on collectivity plays a part in the conceptualization of music. In order to be conceptualised as "music"<sup>2</sup> by the Gurung villagers, singing and/or playing has to be

<sup>2</sup> When speaking about music, the villagers used words such as *git* (literally a song), *bajā* (playing), *git gāune bajāune* (to sing play a song) or, more seldom, *saṅgit* (music).

done in groups for an audience in a public situation. Singing alone or together with others when working, cutting rice, or carrying fire wood, was not considered as music. For instance, in 1994, when I visited a new village and asked a man who was introduced to me as a skillful performer to sing and demonstrate parts of the Ghāntu of that village, he insisted that it was impossible to sing without other singers. He refused to sing at all before collecting together his peers. Finally, the Ghāntu was demonstrated but not before midnight when all the singers were gathered from the village and its neighbourhood.

The singing of the Ghāntu concomitates also with the emphasis on collectivity among the Gurung villagers. It creates a flowing complex texture, as illustrated in the Figure 2. The singing is not unified but heterophonic and the singers must carefully observe each other in order not to breathe at the same time, and as they embellish certain pitches as well as make decorative additions to the melodic core. This kind of texture cannot be created only by one singer, but there must always be a group of singers to perform it — as it is always done in practice.

People living mainly in a barter economy and in close relationship with nature, such as the Gurungs, are generally assumed to conceptualise time in relation to the yearly and daily cycle of natural phenomena. This conceptualization is called, as the opposite of continuous and linear conceptualization of time, cyclical and nonlinear. According to my observations (see Moisala 1991:121-124), the Gurung villagers also perceived time as a kind of continuous, nonlinear space in which movement is cyclic in nature: the present time was related to the course of the sun and daily actions and the same agricultural tasks and festivals were known to take place in the yearly cycle of nature and sky (Gurung astrology is highly developed<sup>3</sup>).

Because of the cyclical conceptualization of time, we cannot expect the Ghāntu singers to think about the progression of the

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Jagman Gurung, a scholar from Tribhuvan University, who studies Gurung astrology (personal communication).



melody as a linear line as we would transcribe it. To the listener, the Ghāntu music also gives the impression of circulation: the musical ingredients are few in relation to the long duration of the performance involving a great deal of repetition. Figure 3 shows the melodic material analyzed with the help of the paradigmatic method and arranged according to the way formulas relate to each other. Thus, Ghāntu singing is not a single lineal and linear progression but a complex texture which repeatedly and continuously circulates within a small number of melodic formulas. The repetitive musical material establishes a special circular sphere, like whirls in the flowing water of a stream.

The synchronization of performers - singers, drummers and dancers - also takes place in a continuous rotation. No one actually directs the Ghāntu performance, although the guru, the selected leader of the group whose responsibility it is to maintain the tradition, is the main supporter of the melody. The synchronization of the different artistic elements evolves from the active and aware participation of every performer and his/her intensive adjustment to other performers. Due to the loudness of the drumming, the drummers act as the central producers of the rhythmic coordination. However, they do not create the pulsation to be followed by the others; instead, they closely follow the movements of the dancers in order to fit and synchronise the drumming with the dance. Usually the singing synchronises at regular intervals with certain drum beats and the dancers follow the melodic line. Only hand movements take place to the rhythm of the drumming.

Thus, synchronization takes place in a circular spiral process: the dancers listen to the singers, the drummers follow the movements of the dancers, and at certain points, the singers synchronise with the drumming (Fig. 4.).

### *Cultural Models, Music, and Change*

Cultural models of thinking transform themselves with time, because the character of human cultural cognition, both acquired

by an individual and an integrated group of people, is not stable but dynamic. Like all human cultures, Gurung culture and cognition are also continuously changing.

These above analysis of the concomitance of the Gurung cultural models with the Ghāntu music was based on the material I collected, in 1975-76, when the the changes in the cyclic conceptualization of time and the decline of collective emphasis were not yet major factors in the village life. Due to the nation-building and modernization of Nepal, radical changes are taking place in the Gurung culture and thinking. School, preindustrial enterprises such as state-run weaving mills, the use of watches, Radio Nepal, and other means of mass communication for the purposes of nation-building and modernization have introduced a more exact and linear, chronological time. Furthermore, economic hardships caused primarily by increased population and land erosion have produced a decline in the desire for collective activities and goals. Instead of being arranged according to Gurung internal clan hierarchy, social control is now more a matter of wealth and financial dominance, and individual survival has eroded the favourable view toward the benefits of collective action. The school system which emphasises work for the development of the nation and ignores the needs of the locality has provided a route for personal gain.

These tendencies of change in Gurung cultural thinking have had an influence on their music. Due to the changed cultural models of thinking, the performance practice of the Ghāntu has changed. The Ghāntu performers with whom I have collaborated had, before 1985, decided to give up repetitions of the verses. Nowadays, they sing them only once in order to save time. The shortening has been done on the basis of current values: time used for "development" advocated by the state, such as for the schooling of children, was considered more important than the traditional Ghāntu supporting an animistic world view.

The norms concerning the Ghāntu have also been loosened: nowadays, the dancers can be mature women and a drum player a youngster. The singing technique lacks the undulation created by

the vibration of the lower jaw and includes fewer embellishments of the pitches. Group singing is still heterophonic but the voices do not blend together in such an overlapping manner as earlier. The singing is more unified: especially at faster tempos, the breathing of the singers tends to take place simultaneously. To make a representation of the "new" Ghāntu, however, would be a subject for another article. In this context, I only wish to point out that cognitive models of culture and music change in time.

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Appendix

Fig.1. Illustration of the rotation of the dancers as they bow down and raise their bodies up again.





Fig.2. Core formulas of the Pha Laba Ghāntu arranged according to the way they relate to each other demonstrating the circular movement of the mental mapping.

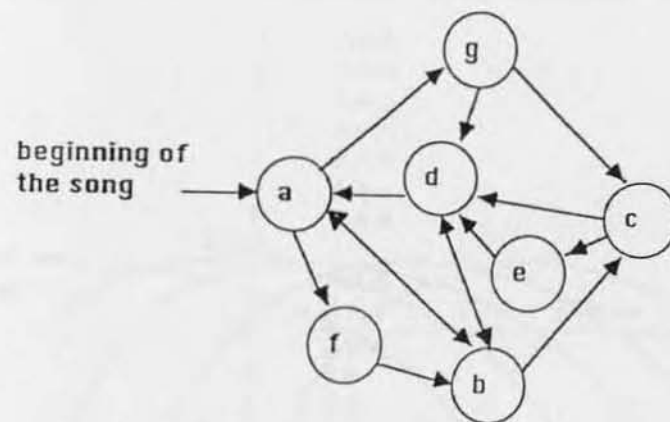
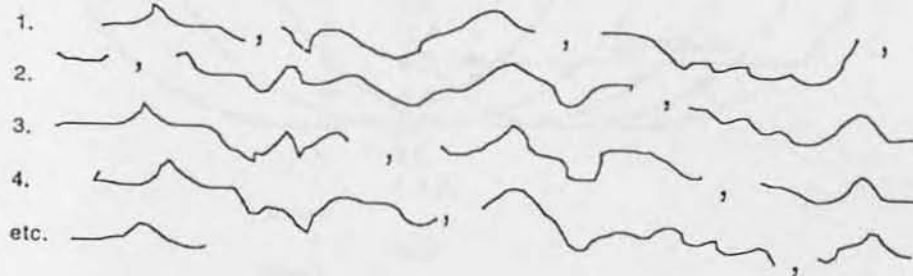


Fig.3. Complex texture created by the heterophonic singing.

Singers No



the progression of the singing

, break for breathing

Fig.4. The flow of the performance and synchronization in it : drummers follow the movements of the dancers, singers synchronize with the drumming and dancers with the melodic line.

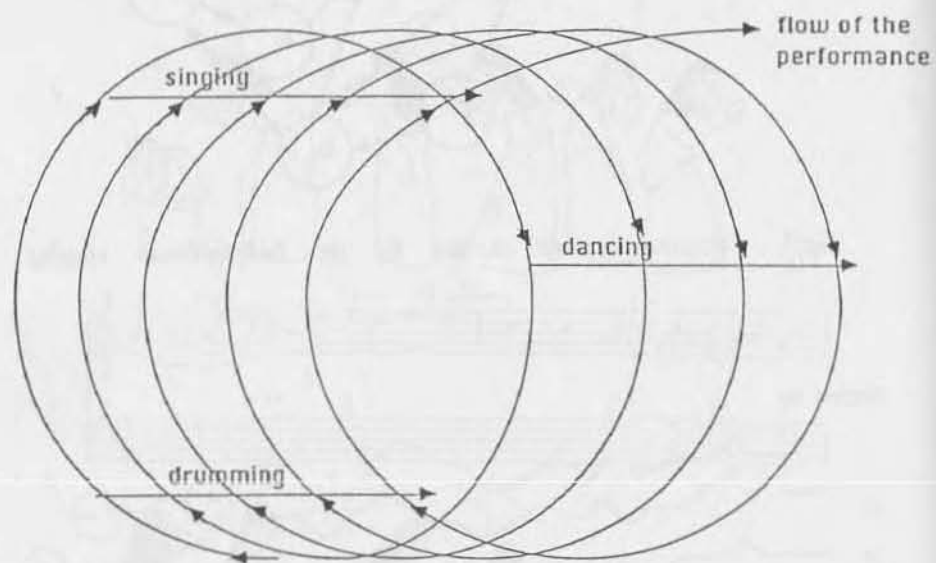


Table 1. Melodic organization of the Paha Laba Ghantu.

Intro	Melody
I	AAA
I	AAA
I	AAA
I	AAA
I	AAA
I	AAA
I	AAA
I	AAA
Break	
I	AAA
I	AAA
I	AAA
I	BB
I	BB
Break	
	D
	DD
Break	
I	BB
I	BB
I	BB
I	BB
D-	AA
D-	AA
D-	AA
I	BB
I	BB
I	AAA
Break	
I	CCC
Break	
I	CCC
I	BBB
I	BBB
	D
	DD
	D
	D
	BB
Break	
I	BB
I	BBB

Ex. I. A melody of the Ghāntu.

A4 = 210 Hz in appr.  
♩ = 70 in average

Solo

Voice

Drum

-ye a - a - - a po - ti - e

Chorus

ma ye-e e ta-a-a ya a - a po-ri-e

ra ti - e pa-a-a a - - a - a - a yo-o-

ya ye te a - a - a - a - l pa ro-o-o

ra ye-e cho ro-o ve - e ma-a ta-a-a -

ra ye-e cho ro-o ve - e ma-a ra yo - o

ya ye ke - ma ya ye ke - ma

a - a - a - i pa ro-o-o ra ye-e-e cho-ro-o-o

ve - e ma-a ta-a-a - ra ye-e cho ro-o-o

ve - e ma-a ra yo-o ya ye ke



Ex. 2. Core formulas of the Pha Laba Ghāntu and their variations revealed by paradigmatic analysis.

Ex. 3. The formulaic construction of the Pha Laba Ghāntu melodies.

Melody	Formulas	Melody	Formulas
A	abcd bc e <u>    d</u>	D	ab d b a f
B	abcd bc e d ab <u>ab</u>		b ab a g cd
C	abc e d ab ab		ab a g d ab