

Tibetan Folk Songs and Dances in Diebu – The Musical Characteristics of Gerba (Gar Pa)

Chenghai Yang*

Academy of Arts, Tibet University, Lhasa 850000, China

*Corresponding author: Chenghai Yang, 276006481@qq.com

Abstract: Folk songs and dances originated from people's sacrificial activities in the struggle against nature in the primitive society. Their origins are related to the ideology and living environment of the people at that period of time. These activities were expressed in the form of primitive songs and dances, and gradually evolved into folk songs and dances. The gar pa song and dance from Diebu, in Gannan region, is a unique song and dance of a Tibetan region on the eastern edge of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Its content and form are unique. It still retains the original trinity feature which includes poem, music, and dance. The production of songs and dances contains rich cultural connotations and unique local characteristics. This article elaborates the characteristics of Diebu's gar pa song and dance in terms of its music and performance form.

Keywords: Gar pa song and dance; Musical characteristics; Intangible cultural heritage

Publication date: August 2021; **Online publication:** August 30, 2021

1. Origin of song and dance music as well as Gerba (gar pa)

1.1. Origin of song and dance music

Song and dance music refers to folk song and dance. Folk song and dance is a general term for all kinds of song and dance formed based on folk art. It includes music, dance, poetry, and other art forms.

Folk song and dance is an integral part of China's traditional music. It does not only have its own distinctive artistic characteristics, but also a certain relationship with the artistic forms of other genres, such as folk song, opera, dance, and instrumental music, which integrate and learn from each other. Therefore, folk song and dance contains a variety of artistic forms.

Song and dance music is rich in content, tone, and emotions. In addition, it is lyrical, narrative, unique and diverse in style, as well as easily understood. It is able to express in detail all kinds of complex thoughts and feelings. It has a wide range of life content and has a strong artistic expression.

The earliest song and dance music in China can be traced back to the primitive society in ancient times. There are also records of song and dance music in ancient manuscripts.

In the music chapter of the ancient Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals, there is such a passage that goes, "in ancient times, in Ge Tian's family, three people would dance in slow steps, holding oxtails while singing eight songs."

According to the content of the text, the music during Ge Tian's time includes two art forms: "dance" and "singing eight songs," which express people's praise and awe for totems, vegetation, grain, emperor, people, and all things in heaven and on earth.

The earliest type of Tibetan music was primarily song and dance.

The earliest Tibetan song and dance music can be traced back to the third century A.D. According to Tibetan historical material, Ladakh King's lineage, folk song and dance became popular during the Deshore Zanpu period.

In Tibetan, “folk song” means “song,” and “dance” means “dance.” Deshore was the 11th generation of Zanpu from the Yalong tribe before the Tubo Dynasty, around the third century A.D. This shows that song and dance is one of the early art forms in the Tibetan society.

Around the eighth century, many written Tibetan documents recorded a large spread of lyrics at that time. With the development of the society, folk song and dance gradually developed, and the integration of this music culture has formed a unique artistic charm.

1.2. Origin of Gerba (gar pa)

According to Bon classics and Tibetan historical records, celebration song and dance music, “shon” and “gor,” have appeared in Ali area as early as during the Zhang Xiong period.

The folk songs and dances, gar pa and gar, in southern Gansu, both mean singing and dancing, but there is a difference between Weizang and Anduo dialects. The “gar” in gar pa originally means singing and dancing, “pa” refers to the person who dances, and gar pa refers to the dancer.

Gerba (gar pa) dance is popular in Wangzang, Niao and Kaba villages in Diebu, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, as well as Gansu Province. Diebu is located at the eastern edge of Qinghai Tibet Plateau. Its regional culture is obviously different from other Tibetan areas, but it still has the general characteristics of the Tibetan culture.

Diebu Tibetan dialect, which is a form of dialect in Kang district, belongs to Bailongjiang sub-dialect area. It is also located at Anduo area at the junction of Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan. Influenced by the Anduo dialect, the Diebu dialect becomes more unique. Therefore, their songs and dances are also more unique under the influence of the dialect.

There is a legend about the origin of Gerba (gar pa) in Diebu: it has been said that Chisong Dezan’s son was ill for a long time during the thirty-seventh generation of Zanpu during the Tubo Dynasty. According to the traditional Tibetan method, divination would be performed first, and exorcism or medical treatment would then be carried out based on the divination signs. However, the divinatory symbols were extremely complex at that time with associations to the Nian god, Lu god, Zan god, demons, and ghosts. Finally, it was suggested that a huge “Gto” ritual should be held to worship the gods, other various gods, and the undead all over. All kinds of singing and dancing were held during this ceremony.

With the “Gto” ritual, the prince finally recovered from his sickness. In order to celebrate the prince’s salvation, people sang and danced. Eventually, these songs and dances gradually became part of “Gto.” The songs and dances in “Gto” had ritual and entertainment functions. Gerba (gar pa) was the ritual song and dance at that time. “Gto” ritual is an ancient method of understanding in Tibetan society. It is one of the “four causes” in the “Nine Multiplication of Bon,” which include divination, calculation, avert by prayers, and treatment. The “Gto” ritual during the Chisong Dezan period is different from other types of “Gto.” After being passed down, it gradually became an annual large-scale ritual activity with fixed time and content. The complete ritual of “Gto” is still being preserved in Diebu area of southern Gansu.

The Gerba song and dance gradually developed and changed in the process of history; however, at present, it still retains the basic characteristics of the trinity, which includes poetry, music, and dance in the basic form of the original song and dance. It has rich content, diverse forms, and certain dramatic factors. From the perspective of its performance form, Gerba has different opening songs, connecting songs, and performances. In an overall perspective, there is an ending or finale, where “dmag” is the end of the whole “Gto.”

Gerba (gar pa) does not only reflect legends, cultural traditions, and religious beliefs of the whole local society, but also includes social economy, artistic aesthetics, and humanistic thoughts, thus reflecting the overall reality of Diebu from the aspects of economy, culture, religious beliefs, and folk customs.

2. Features of Gerba (gar pa) song and dance music

“Music makes people’s minds noble and pure. When there is singing or the sound of songs, there will be no sadness and pain. The wonders of music are really worthy of praise,” pointed out in the famous music treatise by Sakya Banzhida Gonggajianzan, an outstanding Buddhist and literary artist in China in the early 13th century.

This sentence shows that music gives people a happy and positive side. It is a spiritual product for humans and has an important function in the society. Whether it is for self-entertainment or entertaining God, it means to purify people’s spiritual realm and soul.

By having the correct understanding of the function of music, humans should consciously learn and master this art as well as contribute to the development of music.

In the premise of having the correct understanding and positive progress, Tibetan song and dance music has developed proudly. It combines singing and dancing as well as integrates poetry, music, and dance. All the dialects and expressions of Tibetan music accurately and vividly shape its unique music image, with smooth tunes, strong folk color, and regular rhythm. Singing and dancing complement each other, just like the combination of water and milk to form a unified whole. Through wisdom and the passionate creation of Tibetan people, their music has the characteristics of regional folk song melody and a unique charming dance style; it has become a unique form of art expression through music among the Tibetan people.

3. Origin and development of gar pa song and dance

Gar pa in Tibetan means dancer. Garba (gar pa) dance is popular in Wangzang, Niao and Kaba villages in Diebu, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and Gansu Province. Diebu is located at the eastern edge of Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Its regional culture is obviously different from other Tibetan areas, but it still has the general characteristics of the Tibetan culture. Diebu Tibetan dialect belongs to the Kangba dialect, and it is located at Anduo area of Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan. Influenced by the Andua dialect, the dialect is unique along with its songs and dances.

In the late Tang Dynasty, in order to expand the territory and Tubo regime, they conquered the aborigines, intermarried with the local indigenous people, and lived a life of semi-herds and semi-peasants. Based on the primitive sacrificial dance among the Qiang people, the gar pa dance combines the movement style of the Tibetan religious dance and the Tubo form of military and civilian get-together when they return from war with victory in order to form the now unique styles of gar pa, “dmag,” Zeman, and so on.

4. Performance and music characteristics of gar pa song and dance

Gar pa performances include gar pa dance, marriage by capture dance, Ma, bear climbing trees, Ga Mu, and so on. The music is brief, and their musical materials are refined with unique tune and various singing styles, such as solo, duet, etc. Mostly, the performances are impromptu, but with a set tune. The performance form of gar pa is in the form of singing and dancing, in addition to poetry and music as a whole. With alternating singing and dancing, this unique art, is a musical art expression with the characteristics of Diebu Tibetan song and dance.

is the beginning of the gar pa dance and the tune is specific. Its lyrics express the origins of gar pa dance, and its structure is short and refined. The tune consists of two phrases with five tones. The first half of the phrase has a free rhythm, with distinctive drawl and vibrato, while the second half has a regular rhythm, with questions and answers. From the lyrics, it can be appreciated that gar pa music originates from India. Gar mo is only sung during gar pa performance and is banned in other festive occasions. The gar pa performance is usually performed by tsho ba (family) in turn for three days during the festival. The performers of gar mo are all men. When the performance is held, the audience would say, “Amyes levu is

the Buddha’s donor, Aaniah is the soul catcher, and Amyes Sngags pa is the exorcist. What is gar pa for?” The performer would then respond, “You have a mound festival here. We are here to see this. The ghosts are still alive. We are here to deal with this.” Then, the audience would ask, “What were you thinking when you came from so far away? What were you thinking when you came from so far up above?” The performer would then reply, “When I was coming from the low altitude, I thought that the old man, who wants to dance the gar pa dance, would dance nine times, and when I was coming from the high altitude, I thought that the young man, who wants to dance the gar pa dance, would dance fast.” Singing and dancing with the sound from cowskin drums and gongs are people’s expression of praise for a peaceful life in addition to their feelings of awe and enjoyment for nature, Buddha, and the cycle of life.



Figure 1.

Gar pa is a song and dance performed in Wangzang, Niao, and Kapa during the food festival in October of the lunar calendar, known as “tuk” in Tibetan language. This food festival is a unique traditional festival in the three regions, which is also known as the harvest festival.

The Garba performance always begins with the same order: Garm as the beginning and Xiaqiong the next. According to the local legend, Xiaqiong, an eagle’s name in the Tibetan language, is a mountain god that is worshiped by the local people in Diebu. During the Duoje festival, people would celebrate with all kinds of rituals. Xiaqiong is a dance with complicated rhythm and movements, similar to Qiangmu. As people always say, “Qiangmu is performed in temples whereas Xiaqiong is performed among the people.” In a glance, it is very easy to notice that Xiaqiong and Qiangmu are closely related; in fact, they originate from the rituals of Bon – an ancient Tibetan religion. The only difference is that Xiaqiong is more popular, in which Xiaqiong is not only a ritual ceremony, but also has high aesthetic value as an art. In fact, all cultic dances nowadays are the evolvement from ancient religion and witchcraft ceremonies, alike modern Tibetan dances, which assimilate Xiaqiong. Although only drums and cymbals are used, the music rhythm varies, in which it is complicated but orderly composed.

References

- [1] Yang Minkang. Chinese folk song and dance music [M]. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 1996.
- [2] Geller. Early Tibetan History and Culture [M]. Beijing: Commercial Printing Museum, 2006.
- [3] Li Shenggui. Gannan Tibetan Traditional Music [M]. Lanzhou: Gansu People's Publishing House, 2012.
- [4] Compiled by Diebu County Chronicles Compilation Committee: Diebu County Chronicles [M]. Lanzhou: Lanzhou University Press. 1989.
- [5] Gao Huifang. Artistic and Aesthetic Features of the Traditional Festival "Dao" and its Festival Dance in Diebu Tibetan Regions [J]. Journal of Tibet University.