

OBSERVATIONS ON MEANINGLESS PEYOTE SONG TEXTS

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THE MEANINGLESS SYLLABLE TEXTS of the songs of the Peyote Cult among many North American Indian tribes offer interesting material to study the relationship between text and music. The musical style of peyote songs is, on the whole, distinct from the general tribal styles of peyote users. My Arapaho and Shawnee material supplements D. P. McAllester's study, *Peyote Music* (New York, 1949).

Approximately one-half of the peyote songs have texts of only meaningless syllables. The proportion varies from tribe to tribe. For example, most of the Comanche peyote songs have meaningful texts, whereas most of the Arapaho do not. The meaningless syllables of peyote songs are distinguished from the meaningless syllables of other songs in the same repertoires by the use of additional consonants and by their peculiar organization into wordlike patterns or sequences.

The peyote songs and the other songs of the Arapaho and the Shawnee make much use of the consonants, *y*, *w*, and *h*. In addition, *c*, *k*, *t*, *x*, and *n* are frequently found in the peyote songs and rarely, if at all, in the others. A meaningless peyote syllable consists generally of one of these consonants and a vowel. The syllables are then grouped into sequences which resemble words (although they are meaningless), and recur in songs sung by speakers of several unrelated languages. McAllester (p. 43) cites *heyowicinayo* as the most characteristic. Typical Arapaho syllabic sequences are: *yo wi ci ni;/ he yo wi ci;/ wi ci hay;/ yo wa ni;/ ye no wi ci.*

An Arapaho example of a meaningless Peyote text in its entirety follows: *ye no wi ci hay/ yo wi hay/ wi ci hay/ yo wi ci no/ wi ci ni/;* repeated; *wi ni wi ci hay/ yo wi hay/ wi ci hay/ yo wi ci ni hay/ yo wi ci ni hay/ yo wi how/ wi ci hay/ yo wi ci no/ wi hi no wa.*

The relationship of these meaningless text sequences to the musical structure is illuminating. Many melodies exhibit an isorhythmic structure: a single rhythmic pattern is repeated throughout the song. Deviation from this pattern usually occurs at the end of the song, and sometimes at the end of major subdivisions. Other songs, while not entirely isorhythmic, contain isorhythmic sections: a rhythmic pattern is repeated several times, but it does not dominate the entire melody. Still other songs use several (often three or four) rhythmic patterns which are alternated or repeated; each is likely to recur several times within the song.

In many of the songs, the sequences of the meaningless syllables follow rather closely this rhythmic construction. An isorhythmic song is likely to employ the same syllabic sequence for each repetition of the rhythmic pattern. If several rhythmic patterns are used in the melody, the syllabic sequence differs for each pattern; but the same syllables usually accompany each recurrence of one pattern.

An almost universal feature in Peyote songs is the closing formula (frequently *heneyowa*), which is sung on four long notes, or three long and one short note, on the tonic. A closing formula with the tonic or final tone repeated is not limited to peyote songs, but the form above (with some variations) is characteristic of them. Interesting observations can be made concerning the modifications of the syllables of the peyote closing formula. Consonants other than those in *heneyowa* may be used. The vowels may be changed in quality, but their mutual relationship in regard to their articulatory position remains constant. Thus, the vowels of the first and second syllables are identical; they are usually higher than, or identical with, the fourth vowel. The first, second, and fourth vowels are front vowels, the third is a back vowel. The following Arapaho and Shawnee varieties of the closing formula fit these prescriptions: *he ne yo wE*; / *he te no wE*; / *ni wi no wi*; / *hi wi yo we*; / *hi ti no wa*; / *ni wi yo wE*.

Although some of the peyote syllabic sequences possibly derive from originally meaningful words in the language of one of the tribes from which the cult spread, there is no evidence for this assumption at present. The complexity of these meaningless song texts appears to be rather uncommon in North American Indian music, and their relationship to the rhythmic structure of the songs is highly illuminating.

Three transcriptions of recordings of peyote songs from different tribes illustrate the observations above on ways in which the meaningless syllabic sequences and the rhythmic patterns coincide. I transcribed the first two examples; the third is quoted from McAllester's publication. The rhythmic patterns coincide in these songs with the units separated by bar lines.

The first example, an Arapaho peyote song, has three different patterns and one partial pattern. With each pattern recurs the same syllabic sequence (with some very minor modifications). Z. Salzmänn recorded it.

$\text{♩} = 148 \text{ M.M.}$

Drum & rattle etc. 38 beats Introduction ya na yo wi ci ne ya na yo wi ci ne

ya na yo wi ci ne ya na yo wi ci ne hi ya no ha wa

yo wi ci ne hi ya no ha wa yo wi ci ne hi ya na he ne yo we

ha na yo wi ci ne ya na yo wi ci ne hi ya no ha wa

yo wi ci ne ni ya no ha wa yo wi ci ne hi ya na he ne yo we

The second example, a Shawnee peyote song, has a musical structure more complex than that of the Arapaho song. With each of the five rhythmic units the same syllabic sequence recurs. The vowels and consonants are less stable than in the first example and the rhythmic patterns vary. Still, both the syllabic sequences and the rhythmic patterns preserve their identity and remain distinct from each other. C. F. and E. W. Voegelin recorded it.

♩ : 102 M.M.

ya na wi no ya wi ya no ho ya no wi ya ne
ya no wi ya ne ya ho wi ya ha he ne ya na wi yo wa
na wi ya no ho ya no wi ya na he ne ya na wi yo wa
na hi ya no - o ya no wi ya na he ne yo we *Fine*
ya no wi ya na he ne ka ma wi tu wa ha wi ya no ho
ya ho wi ya ne ha no wi ya he ya no wi ya na
he ne ya na wi no wa ya hi wa no ho
ya no wi ya ha he ne ya na wi yo wa
ha wi ya no ho ha no wi ya na he ne ne we

The third example, a Comanche song, has four rhythmic patterns. The first three occur in the same order five times; this combination could be designated as a

unit of isorhythmic structure. Variation from this pattern occurs only at the end of the song. Each isorhythmic unit is accompanied by the same sequence of syllables. This peyote song is quoted from McAllester, transcription number 5.

♩ - 126 M.M.

Introduction *♩* *♩* *♩* hi no wa na ka ya ti na ka ya ti na yo

hi no wa na ka ya ti na ka ya ti na yo

hi no wa na ka ya ti na ka ya ti na yo

he yo wa na ka yo ti ne ka yo ti na ya

he yo wa na ka yo ti ne ha yo ti na ya *Fine*

he yo wa na ka ya ti na ka ya ti na he ne yo wa *Da Capo*

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