

Bödra: A Song Genre

Bödra (བོད་རྒྱུ་), which literally means Tibetan sound, is a name given to a popular genre of Bhutanese songs. It is not clear when exactly the term was coined but many people argue that the term refers to a certain type of vocal music which originated in Tibet and later spread across Bhutan. It is one of the two main traditional vocal music, which can be found across Bhutan. The other one is *zhungdra* (ཀླུང་རྒྱུ་), which is a music associated with western Bhutan, the center of government in Bhutan. Unlike *zhungdra*, *bödra* songs are performed across the country and at almost all celebratory events.

There are two accounts of how the term *bödra* came to be used to refer to this type of songs. Some Bhutanese elders claim that *bödra* was originally performed by the *bögarp* (བོད་ལྟོ་ལྟོ་ལྟོ་) officials of the government. Because the first government of Bhutan was formed by Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel (1594-1651) and his followers many of whom were *böpa* (བོད་པ་) or Tibetans, and the Zhapdrung's political domination of Bhutan started from his temporary *gar* (གར་) or encampment, the government officials were referred to as *bögarp*. The songs which these officials commonly performed are said to have been called *bödra*. However, some contemporary *bödra* experts such as Tsheten Dorji assert that the genre is called *bödra* because the first songs of this genre originated in Tibet and were spread in Bhutan through cultural exchanges with the Tibetans. The cultural exchanges between Bhutan and Tibet often took place through the trade marts at the border, and through migration of people or pilgrimages going both ways. Vocal pieces, which were later composed in Bhutan but following the similar musical style as the earlier Tibetan imports, were also called *bödra* for reasons of style although they have nothing to do with Tibet and its musical tradition. A vast majority of songs of the *bödra* genre would belong to this second category of songs which are considered *bödra* but are fully Bhutanese in terms of origin, content and performance.

The *bödra* songs have shorter and faster tunes compared to *zhungdra*. They are sung with a very vibrant dance which is commonly performed in a *gorgom* (གོར་གོར་) circle. There are many lyrics which are performed with the long tune and slow dance of a *zhungdra* style and also with the fast, short tune and circular dance of *bödra*. Thus, it is not mainly the lyrics which distinguish *zhungdra* and *bödra* songs but the tune and vocal style with which the lyrics are sung. The *bödra*

genre is easier to perform and also easier take part in as its tunes are not as difficult as *zhungdra* and its choreographic movements are more exciting. *Bödra* performances often have a lead singer who sings the main lyrics and the rest of the dancers join to sing the chorus. The words used for chorus are normally cryptic mantra like sounds such as *om̄u om̄u maṇi padme huṃ*, *om̄ sang la maṇi padme huṃ*, *au sa le au*, *nangla jungse yo yo* and *sungyang sungyang sungyang*. However, most *bödra* songs are performed without a chorus and the dancers all join in after the leader singer starts it. The lead singer also controls the rhythm and speed of the song and the movements of the dance.

The *bödra* songs cover a wide range of themes and subjects. Many songs are based on the environmental imageries such as the sky and sun (དགུང་དང་ཁྲི་གདུགས་), the snow mountain and snow lion (གངས་དང་ལྷོ་མོ་), the meadows and the deer (ཐང་དང་ཤ་བ་), the lake and the fish (མཚོ་དང་ཉ་མོ་), the temple and the lama (དགོན་བཟང་དང་ལྷ་མ་), and the village and parents (ཡུལ་དང་པ་མ་). They also cover natural processes such as the heat of the sun, the light of the moon, the melting of glaciers, the flow of rivers, the flight of birds, the growth of trees, the blossoming of flowers, etc. Many of the *bödra* songs also deal with the tripartite world of the celestial heavens (སྒྲིབ་རྒྱ), the middle earth of *tseen* spirits (བར་བཅོན་) and the subterranean *nāga* world (འོག་ལྷ).

A large number of *bödra* songs contain religious content evoking singers to aspire for higher spiritual ideals and practices. Some songs are about specific religious figures such as Nangsa Obum. Many *bödra* songs make reference to holy sites in Bhutan or Tibet and to the various religious figures. *Bödra* songs with romantic themes are rare but there are many songs expressing nostalgia and melancholy about travel, familial relationships and spiritual longing. Most *bödra* songs deal with positive messages, happy moments and auspicious omens although some are sad songs. It is important to choose the song, which is appropriate for the event and the audience.

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