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**(EN)CHANTED WORDS IN AN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGIN AND
TWO CHINESE TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS SONGS**

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***Abstract:** This paper is based on a work done in the seminar *Classical and Traditional Religions in the Integrated Master in Theology of the Portuguese Catholic University*. It focuses on indirectly exploring the words sung in traditional religious ceremonies of Australian aborigines and in those of three Chinese main ones: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Being difficult the treatment of different cultural contexts and different languages and not being able to handle the original texts, this work is based on documents that have a legitimate translation into a known language. Once verified the existence of these reliable sources that had translated the lyrics, the texts of the three songs treated were translated from English to Portuguese. This work concludes that although the philosophical and linguistic "abyss" between Chinese and Aboriginal culture is clear, one may notice that most of the lyrics sung serve the same purpose: to teach younger generations how to behave in order to have a pleasant life, using language in parables or proverbs causing the message to be scrutinized throughout life. Words seem to resonate in the thoughts of the musicians themselves*

***Keywords:** Chinese ritual music, aborigine ritual music, human migration, intercultural context, communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme and title of this work appeared as suggestion by watching the documentary titled *Palavra (En)cantada* (Vasconcellos *et al.*, 2008), which deals with the poetry of Brazilian music and the intimate relationship between them. I wanted to make this exploration about the meaning of the word that is sung and accompanied by instruments, also looking for the reason of music presence in celebrations of these religions, in the rite or other religious expression. I sought to explore the word that is sung in traditional religious ceremonies, particularly in the Aboriginal religion and the three main Chinese, since the latter coincide plenty culturally and musically. The difficulty of treating not only different cultural contexts but also different languages required recourse to documents that have an accurate translation into another language I know and therefore I cannot treat the original texts.

2. MUSIC IN RELIGIONS

2.1 Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian Chinese cultural and religious reality is quite syncretic.

Many elements of these realities came to Chinese villages by those crossing trade routes, such as the “silk route” where they did not merely exchange goods. They could emerge from foreign countries or even other Chinese villages for the Chinese topography allows a great isolation allowing that within a province there are several languages and therefore disparate cultural traditions and rituals when it comes to music (cf. Miller & Shahriari, 2012:183).

Stephen Jones tells us that “basic tenet of ethnomusicology [is] that musical culture is intimately related to the society which nourishes it” (Jones, 1999:27). Traditional Chinese music is all connected with religion and even today

folk religion still practiced by these village associations is an age-old synthesis of Buddhism and Daoism, whereby the protection of a range of gods is sought in order to guarantee abundant harvests, good health, and proper relations with the ancestors (Jones, 1999:28-30).

Today we can study the traditional Chinese music because it was preserved by associations known as “Music Associations” and “Buddhist Affairs Associations” which, resisting many dictatorial regimes, wars and attacks, “these ritual

associations have remained intrinsically conservative, maintaining their social and musical core - in context, instrumentation, and repertory. We may observe a certain “impoverishment” (Nettl, 1983:349-54), and some temporary adaptive strategies, but little innovation” (Jones, 1999:32).

It's some of these associations that perform some religious celebrations, especially in the villages where there remains a popular religion that is a Buddhist and Taoist syncretism, since “though some associations claim “Buddhist” or “Daoist” transmission, their pantheons are syncretic, and even the names Fo (“Buddha”) and Dao are often used interchangeably” (Jones, 1999:28-30). Most public religious celebrations held today, with or without cleric, are especially funerals, rituals scheduled to the gods and the Chinese New Year and all of them are celebrated with liturgical music, regional folk songs and / or narrative theater which is always set to music (cf. Miller, Shahriari, 2012:190).

“Chinese music is primarily based on melodies that can exist in any number of guises and contexts, be they vocal or instrumental, solo or ensemble. Most have programmatic titles that allude to nature (e.g., “Autumn Moon and Lake Scenery”), literature or myth (e.g., “*Su Wu* the Shepherd”), a mood (e.g., “Joyous Feelings”), or even musical structure (e.g., “Old Six Beats”). Whether a composer’s name is known or not—most are anonymous—the tune exists at an almost conceptual level, ready to be performed as an unaccompanied or accompanied instrumental solo, an ensemble piece, a song with or without accompaniment, an orchestral piece arranged for modern ensemble, or even as an operatic aria or modern popular song” (Miller, Shahriari, 2012:191).

Thus, there is a great connection of Taoist rituals to wonder and contemplation of nature (cf. Allen, Hsiao-Lan, 2005:54-55) and Buddhist rituals in the search for spiritual elevation by stimulation of every individual in the Five *Skandhas* (cf. Adler, J., 2002:77).

However, in Buddhism, the various forms of worship that emerged from the various schisms allowed greater emphasizing in some rites. The Pure Land Buddhism, which gained a large popular expression, is rite based on intonation of the name of the Buddha *Amitabha*.

In Chinese, the song is simply *Nanwu Amitufo* (“Homage to the Buddha *Amitabha*”). It can be done silently or aloud, individually or in groups, without any change to each normal lifestyle¹.

Thus, the sung words are especially faithful invocation of Buddha *Amitabha*'s name, which would make reborn as a human “instantly reaching Buddhahood”², one who has faith in him. Thus, singing practice chanting the Buddha's name also “became (...) part of what in medieval China, meant to be Buddhist”³.

The music of Confucian rituals has a much more rigid structure because Confucius was explicit in his teachings to give to music a very important and close relationship with moral values, so that even the contemporary Confucians tend to seek the fulfillment of the moral capacity in music, especially singing the writings of Confucius or Mencius (cf. Taylor, 2004:94).

Besides this vast body of instrumental and vocal music, there is also the now rarely heard but once vibrant narrative tradition in which singers combined speaking and singing to tell long tales, accompanied by one or more instruments. More prevalent today are the nearly countless regional forms of theater, all of which have music and singing as integral parts (Miller, Shahriari, 2012:191).

2.2 Aborigines Traditional Aboriginal religion is closely linked to nature through animist complex spiritual and totemic systems, through the close relationship with the ancestral spirits (*wondjina*) and through its cosmogonic myths (cf. Miller & Shahriari, 2012:68). All Aboriginal knowledge has been preserved to this day from generation to generation by oral tradition through music and dance. Thus, “a child who does not hear the stories literally grows uncivilized and uncultured”⁴.

The music is mainly linked to the ritual dimension which, according to Aboriginal belief, was bequeathed by ancestral spirits and remains unchanged to this the present day (cf. Miller & Shahriari, 2012:68). Aboriginal cosmological belief, *Dreaming*, states that were these songs that ancestral spirits performed to form the earth, for the earth was flat and lifeless, but began to gain relief when spirits began to name the mountains and by name, came into existence. The names began to have rhythm and melody and became songs, thus becoming the creation to be “sung” (cf. Bahr, 2005:68).

grupo, sem qualquer alteração do estilo normal de vida de cada um” (Adler, J., 2002:84)

² “alcançando instantaneamente o estado de Buda” (Adler, J., 2002:84)

³ “tornou-se (...) parte daquilo que, na China medieval, significava ser budista” (Adler, J., 2002:84)

⁴ “uma criança que não ouve as histórias cresce literalmente incivilizada e inculta” (Bahr, 2005:66)

¹ “Em chinês, o cântico é simplesmente *Nanwu Amitufo* («Homenagem ao Buda *Amitabha*»). Pode ser feito em silêncio ou em voz alta, individualmente ou em

Today traditional Aboriginal music can still be heard in initiation rituals or burial rituals and night *corroboree* that combine music, dance and stories but interdicted to the uninitiated. Also in these rituals the songs tell stories, for they have the belief that

through the correct performance of these [history-songs], the Aborigines are able to tap into this ancient and creative power left behind by the ancestral spirits (Miller & Shahriari, 2012:68).

The fact that music in Aboriginal religion is essentially vocal, its complexity is dependent on the Aboriginal language and “thus effective research on music traditions often requires specialized linguistic study” (Miller & Shahriari, 2012:62). The simple structure of Aboriginal language makes the language of the songs simple (cf. Elkin, *Notes*, 1953:2-7). Unlike the Chinese tradition, in which the teachings were written, oral tradition allows greater simplicity of the sung texts for they can immediately be explained about their implied meaning in the fabulous and parabolic style with no misinterpretations of the stories.

3. MUSICAL STRUCTURE

3.1 Music for *Qin* or *Khin* This chordophone consisting of a wooden resonance box and originally seven silk strings is considered the oldest zither in the world and is now agreed that the instrument maintains the structure for nearly three thousand years (cf. Thompson, *Origins of the Qin*, 2013). It is easy to notice that there is a great melodic and symbolic richness for Chinese music (cf. Courant, 1913:93) and for *Qin*, is no different (cf. Thompson, *Qin Tunings, Some Theoretical Concepts*, 2013). Played in the form of melodic fingering, melodic-rhythmic or played by chords, the *Qin* is in most of the sung parts an accompaniment of the melody in unison or with melodic chords, but never in polyphony.

To complete the idea of the *Qin* music, it should be noted that the rhythm is irregular; it follows the poetic rhythm [in which each note corresponds to a syllable, thus being marked by the sung lyrics (cf. Courant, 1913:134)]; however it is common, not constant, that one word match to a main note, the secondary notes, glissandos and other ornaments remain without verbal exchange; sometimes two words match to a single note⁵.

This melodic structure is widely used in singing poetic literature and in the chant of Confucius' and his philosophy disciples' teachings, existing testimonies claiming that Confucius himself traveled with his own *Qin* and did his "preaching" and greatness of soul teachings (cf. Courant, 1913:164; cf. Thompson, *Qin songs and Confucius*, 2013). Also for Buddhism and Taoism are found works to *Qin* in the book “Paired Music for Three Religions (*Sanjiao Tongsheng*, 1592), a *Qin* handbook with a melody from each of China's great religions (or ways of thought), Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism” (Thompson, *Canon of Purity and Tranquility*, 2013) and from this book will be used the Confucian and Taoist chants to analyze.

Music for *Qin* is then widely used as a communication method of a lyrical or poetic message and many of the titles of ancient music and arias for *Qin* are attributed to Confucius (cf. Courant, 1913:165), amongst other well-known authors. So each song that sing his words are a way of praying and can be a moment of life confrontation with religious teachings. In fact,

as the Confucian tradition evolved, the title of “sage” comes out of antiquity and begins to be applied to any appropriate individual. The Neo-Confucians in large part sought a form of personal education that would help one become a sage, not simply a form of learning that venerated the sages of antiquity. Thus, for the Neo-Confucians, Confucius and Mencius were sages, and they had heard the Way of *T'ien*. As such, their teachings contained the wisdom of the Way of Heaven and could be used by others who wanted to learn how to become sages, too (Taylor, 2004:42).

The traditional musical writing for *Qin*, a bit like the Chinese writing is by tablature. In Thompson's we can see the illustrations of the gestures of the hands and realize that being taught to those who want to learn to play the instrument, the musicians should know the meaning of each position. Therefore also composers such as Confucius, played with this interpretation accuracy and tablatures, which were written by the disciples observe the master playing, have this information (cf. Thompson, *Rhythm in Early Ming Qin Tablature*, 2013).

3.2 Didgeridoo and wooden clapsticks The didgeridoo is for aborigines a sacred object (*Tjurunga*) (cf. Bahr, 2005:72) that establishes a connection between “various levels of the cosmos—that is, they connect the ordinary world to the *Dreaming*” (Bahr, 2005:72).

⁵ “Pour compléter l'idée de la musique de khin, il faut noter que le rythme est irrégulier; il suit le rythme poétique un peu sur le modèle des hymnes pp. 131 et 134; toutefois il est fréquent, non constant, qu'un mot réponde à une note

principale, les notes secondaires des glissés et autres ornements restant sans contrepartie verbale; parfois deux mots sont pour une seule note.”, (Courant, 1913:173); (cf. Thompson, *Qin songs: pairing lyrics and music*, 2013).

While the didgeridoo makes a basso continuo sound, a vocalist tells the story “shouting his words to all who would listen, including ancestral spirits”, (Miller & Shahriari, 2012:64) and uses the wooden clapsticks to mark a rhythm that the didgeridoo can follow (cf. Nasman, n.d.: bars 5, 8, 7 and 11). This *Tjurunga* can only be played by men, being taboo for women (cf. Miller & Shahriari, 2012:69).

Aboriginal chant also has, as well as the language, a simple structure (Elkin, *Notes*, 1953:5-6): only the intuition of a consonance with the tones of the didgeridoo give him the notes to sing. Because of the “yelled” register that the singer uses the outline of the vocal melody line is usually descending (cf. Miller, Shahriari, 2012:66), as can be seen in Nasman’s transcription of an Aborigine chant to music staff (Nasman, n.d.:7).

Each descent may be thought of as being in two parts (Image 1). If we take the didgeridoo note as C, the first part of the descent explores the five notes descending from B a seventh above the drone through A, G and F# to E, while the second part explores the series descending from E to the lower C (the singer frequently concludes the descent on D) (Marret, Barwick, 1993:19).

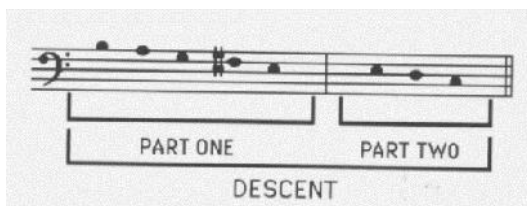


Fig.1 Melodic composition of vocal subsection (Marret & Barwick, 1993:20)

4. STUDY CASES

4.1 *Mingde Yin / Kongsheng Jing* (a musical setting of Confucius' Great Learning)

The lyrics for the short *Qin* melody *Mingde Yin* [Bright Virtue Prelude] are extracted from the commentary by the neo-Confucian scholar *Zhu Xi* (1130-1200) on the *Da Xue* (Great Learning), attributed to Confucius. *Mingde Yin* serves as a musical prelude to the longer *Kongsheng Jing* [Sacred Confucian Canon], the lyrics of which are the canonical text of the *Da Xue* itself (Thompson, *Bright Virtue Prelude / Sacred Confucian Canon*, 2013).

In the quoted Thompson’s page we can follow the music and the translation of this song’s lyrics, which is taken from the book *Paired Music for Three Religions* and understand its message. *Mingde Yin* begins by emphasizing the importance of *Da Xue*, for it advises to look into where the elders were instructed because it will be somewhat

a safer way. The basic ideas of the excerpt sung of *Da Xue* has to do with the will of the human being to change all that is evil in the earth, to change the world, to change “all below Heaven” (Thompson, *Bright Virtue Prelude / Sacred Confucian Canon*, 2013). For it is then necessary to change the scale and change smaller things that are within the reach of every human being. Thus, by instruction and education, one can change his own heart, and from there, change the smallest community that is the family and, as a result, his village/town/state and the world, “for the root to be in disorder but the branches to be orderly: this has never been the case” (Thompson, *Bright Virtue Prelude / Sacred Confucian Canon*, 2013).

4.2 *Qingjing Jing* (a Daoist morning chant)

It heavily quotes and paraphrases the *Dao De Jing* (sometimes called the Book of *Laozi*), which is the great philosophical text of Daoism. Other parts of the *Qingjing Jing* text also have strong Buddhist influence, for example, the emphasis on tranquility of mind and freedom from desire. *Qingjing Jing* might thus be seen as a meeting between so-called philosophical and religious Daoism (Thompson, *Canon of Purity and Tranquility*, 2013)

This chant also taken from the book *Paired Music for Three Religions* has as its text a song that was important during the Northern *Song* Dynasty in their prayer services of the school of Taoism *Quanzhen* (Complete Perfection) (cf. Thompson, *Canon of Purity and Tranquility*, 2013).

Qingjing Jing presents much of his philosophy in the form of sayings and proverbs, with dense of meaning short sentences, to be reflected and confronted with life itself and then used as a philosophical principle or culminating in the application of a line of thought. Thus proverbs may be prone to confront more man's ontology: “The human spirit is fond of purity, but feelings disturb it” (cf. Thompson, *Canon of Purity and Tranquility*, 2013) and “Observe emptiness using emptiness, and see there is no emptiness” (cf. Thompson, *Canon of Purity and Tranquility*, 2013); indicate a method that Tao, by Buddhist influence, can serve as an “ejaculatory prayer” or “aspiration” repeating it throughout the day: “Cleanse the mind, and the spirit clears itself” (cf. Thompson, *Canon of Purity and Tranquility*, 2013); but also, more concretely, as proverb about the man's actions: “The highest gentleman does not fight; the lesser gentleman loves to fight” (cf. Thompson, *Canon of Purity and Tranquility*, 2013).

4.3 *Djerag* (a sung Aboriginal history)

Although it is not the recording (Elkin, 1953) whose lyrics are more noticeable, this *Djerag* song has one of the biggest stories of this album Tribal

Music of Australia, translating it. In the album's notes we can notice that it's told the story of a shark hunting two fish and their flight (cf. Elkin, *Notes*, 1953:5-6). As has already been said, the aboriginal language structure is very simple which means that much of the language is not only verbal but also visual and auditory, as is natural in a culture of oral tradition. In this example it isn't noticeable but most animals are called by the sounds they make, as in the case of the *kookaburra* bird that in various tribes has earned names like *akkaburra*, *googooburra*, *gurgara*, *gingara* e *arkooburra*.

The story features a fable whose moral needs a context to be understood but in oral tradition, especially in the celebrations initiated confined to men and women, this context exists and therefore the story does not need to be clearer. However, being *Djerag* the story of a fishing people in northeastern Arnhem Land coast, it appears to teach to the younger fish behavior in order to teach to be a better fisherman, knowing the dangers of the sea and also seems to teach to recognize in the relationship fish the relationship between men. It is not possible know without more information if this story has any direct connection to the *Dreaming* and if it represents the direct action of ancestral spirits, but one may believe that it does, since

it belongs to the ceremonial "half" of the community which is traditionally responsible for indigenous subjects and object (Elkin, *Notes*, 1953:5).

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear the role that language has in music. The texts of Chinese philosophers, which allows that there is a concern that they're read by someone outside that religious context, have a very complex philosophical thought which can be seen in the ideas of the annihilation of thing's ontology and the objectification of nothing in *Qingjing Jing*'s text. Such words will not be possible to find in an Aboriginal song and probably, neither in any other religious text as a liturgical chant. Nevertheless, although it is clear the "abyss" of philosophical baggage and language between these two traditions, we can see that most of the lyrics sung serve the same purpose: to teach younger generations how to behave in order to have a good life using a language in parables or proverbs causing the message to be scrutinized throughout life.

Furthermore, also the idea that singing and music help the universe to maintain its order and run its natural flow is present in these religions, whether by a more philosophical way or a more animistic and totemic mode.

So it seems to me that the music in these religions has the role of emphasize the importance of words which are transmitted from generation to generation as essential to the life of the listener and by putting them into practice one will follow the same path as those that have already traveled it. This emphasis that music seeks to give to the words is common in these religions, just like Confucius himself points out: "For what is substantial to be slighted, or what is slight to be given substance: this has never happened" (Thompson, *Bright Virtue Prelude / Sacred Confucian Canon*, 2013).

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