Songs, Cultural Representation and Hybridity in Ladakh

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Abstract

Songs and cultural representation in Ladakh. This article examines how Ladakhi songs represent cultural self-images through associated musical, textual, and visual tropes. Many songs of the past, both from the old royal house and the rural Buddhist populations, reflect the socio-political structure of Ladakhi society. Some songs, past and present, reflect a pan-Tibetan identity, both in connecting the former Namgyal dynasty to the legendary King Gesar, as well as Nyatri Tsangpo, the historical founder of the Tibetan Yarlung Dynasty. Nevertheless, a distinct Ladakhi identity is consistently asserted. A number contain texts that evoke a mandala or symbolic representation of the world according to Vajrayana Buddhist iconography, ritual and meditative visualization practices. Situated as it was on the caravan routes between India, Tibet, China, and Central Asia, Ladakhi culture developed distinctive hybrid characteristics, including in its musical styles. The article discusses this tradition of hybridity from the 17th Century to the present day. Ladakhi music has moved into modern media space, variously portrayed through scholarly works, concerts, mass media, and the internet. The discussion continues with an examination of various contemporary representations of "tradition" and ethnic identity in both traditional and popular music. Looking at Ladakhi popular music, we see further hybridity based on media influences from Nepali popular music, Bollywood, and from Western popular styles, revealing how they interact with concepts of modernity in 21st Century Ladakh.

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