



Paper Type: Original Article

A Brief Introduction to the Life and Music of the Oroqen People in China's Northeastern Frontier

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Abstract

The life and music of the Oroqen people are not only treasures of their ethnic culture but also an important component of the diverse and unified cultural pattern of the Chinese nation. They carry the historical memory, emotional expression, and cultural identity of the Oroqen people, bearing profound cultural significance. In modern society, the lifestyle and musical culture of the Oroqen have received more attention and protection, serving as a bridge between the past and the future, and between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Oroqen, Music, Life, Ethnicity

I. The Life of the Oroqen People

The Oroqen people are one of the less populous ethnic groups residing in Northeast China, primarily distributed in the Oroqen Autonomous Banner, Butheha Banner, Morin Dawa Daur Autonomous Banner of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and in the northern counties of Huma, Xunke, Aihui, and Jiayin in Heilongjiang Province. In Heilongjiang Province, there are 3,871 Oroqen people, accounting for 47% of the total Oroqen population; Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has 3,573 people [1], making up 44%. This distribution area is primarily located in the Greater and Lesser Khingan Range, where the complex terrain, dense forests, and crisscrossing rivers provide the Oroqen with abundant natural resources and a unique living environment. Although the population of the Oroqen is relatively small, their unique ethnic

culture is richly varied and holds great value for research and preservation.

Historically, the Oroqen were a typical hunting ethnicity, with their way of life closely tied to hunting activities. They relied on a horse, a gun, and a hunting dog to hunt across vast forests, leading a nomadic life. However, with social development and progress, the Oroqen's mode of production and lifestyle have significantly changed. Nowadays, many Oroqen have turned to agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry, while still preserving some traditional hunting and gathering activities. The Oroqen have a long history, and the meaning of their ethnic name has changed over different historical periods, but has always been closely associated with "people of the mountains" or "people who use reindeer." Historically, the Oroqen mainly subsisted on hunting, roaming the vast forests of the Greater and Lesser Khingan Ranges, which fostered a unique hunting culture and ethnic character.

The traditional dwelling of the Oroqen is the "Xierenzhu" (also known as "Xieren Pillar"), a rudimentary house made by constructing a conical framework of wooden poles covered with animal skins or birch bark. Its structure is simple and easy to assemble and disassemble, making it highly suitable for the nomadic and hunting lifestyle of the Oroqen. However, with the spread of settled living, many Oroqen now live in spacious and bright brick-and-tile [2] houses or earth-wood structured homes. Currently, the state has also built new villages for Oroqen hunters, providing more comfortable and modern living environments.

The Oroqen people celebrate many traditional festivals, among which the most important is the Spring Festival. The Spring Festival is an auspicious day for the Oroqen to bid farewell to the old and welcome the new. They prepare for the festival in advance, wearing new clothes and engaging in various sacrificial activities. On New Year's Eve, the Oroqen light bonfires, symbolizing not only a more prosperous life but also serving to repel mosquitoes and ward off evil. Additionally, the Oroqen have traditional festivals such as sun worship, moon worship, worship of the Big Dipper, Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, Tomb Sweeping Day, Sending off the Fire God, Miter Festival, and Black Face Smearing. During these festivals, the Oroqen hold various celebrations, such as horse racing, wrestling, archery competitions, and song and dance performances.

Oroqen attire varies in style to meet the needs of different genders, ages, and occasions. Main styles include robes, horse jackets, shoulder cloaks, fur hats, and leather boots. Robes: Worn by men, women, and children of all ages, though styles vary slightly. Men's robes are loose, knee-length, with side slits, a round collar on the right, and a large lapel reaching the knees with narrow cuffs; women's robes are relatively fitted, without slits, with a round collar on the right, a large lapel reaching the ankles, and wider cuffs. Horse jackets and shoulder cloaks: Worn by men for horseback riding, horse jackets are tight and short for ease of movement; shoulder cloaks are sleeveless and fitted, suitable for riding and hunting. Fur hats and leather boots: Essential for winter warmth. Fur hats are made from deer or roe deer skin and vary in shape, providing warmth and practicality; leather boots are made from cowhide or deer skin, with thick, non-slip,

wear-resistant soles. Traditional fabrics are primarily animal skins and cotton cloth. Animal skins include deer, roe deer, and fox skins, which after special treatment provide warmth, waterproofing, and wind resistance; cotton is soft, comfortable, and breathable. The primary color of attire is red, symbolizing passion, festivity, and auspiciousness. Combined with white, black, blue, and other colors, it forms a vivid contrast and unique beauty. Red represents passion, festivity, happiness, and luck; white represents purity, nobility, and freshness; black represents solemnity, mystery, and stability; blue represents calm, gentleness, and freshness. Oroqen attire is not only practical but also carries deep cultural significance. In the cold northeastern region, these clothes provide necessary warmth and protection for the Oroqen people; at the same time, the patterns and motifs on the clothing represent the ethnic group's reverence and awe for nature, as well as their aspirations and pursuit of a good life. With the development of the times and changes in lifestyle, Oroqen clothing is gradually incorporating modern elements. Modern Oroqen attire, while retaining traditional features, has undergone innovation and improvement, making the clothing more in line with modern aesthetics and wearing needs. However, regardless of changes, the unique charm and cultural value of Oroqen attire have always been preserved and promoted.

II. The Music of the Oroqen People

A primary characteristic of Oroqen music is its unique folk song form known as "Zandaren." In the Oroqen language, "Zandaren" means "mountain song," which is the main form of the Oroqen people's singing art. The tune is high and clear, accompanied by elongated notes and trills, with a melodious and fluctuating melody that displays the strong cultural characteristics of a nomadic hunting people. Zandaren is sung in various styles, including duets, choruses, solos, and group singing, often interspersed with filler words like "Nayiye" and "Xinaye," making the songs sound more melodious and moving. Additionally, Zandaren can be divided into two types: those with lyrics and those without words, where filler words are used to enhance the melody, which is loud and spacious with a free rhythm. The singing styles vary, including duet, chorus, solo, and ensemble, often enhanced with characteristic filler words to increase the song's appeal.

The main feature of Oroqen music is its unique folk song form "Zandaren" as a core feature. Its high, melodious tune combines elongated notes and trills, and its melody rises and falls, presenting a distinct nomadic cultural flavor. Zandaren not only has beautiful melodies but also rich lyrical content, covering ethnic history, hunting life, praise of the natural environment, and love and rituals, embodying Oroqen cultural heritage and emotional expression. Representative works of Oroqen Zandaren include "Don't Get Drunk," "I Grew Up in the Khingan Mountains," "Hunting Farewell," and "Why Don't You Love Me." These works, with their unique tunes, rich lyrics, and profound content, have won widespread praise and affection. They not only reflect the history, beliefs, and lifestyle of the Oroqen people but are also important carriers of the nation's cultural heritage and development.

Folk Songs Oroqen folk songs are the most important part of their folk music, covering almost every aspect of the nation's life [6], including reflections on ethnic history, hunting life, praise of the natural environment, new life, and content related to love and rituals. Depending on the genre, Oroqen folk songs can be divided into the following categories:

1. *Mountain Songs (Zandale): In Oroqen, "Zandale" refers to a type of mountain song, broadly referring to all folk songs other than dance songs. It has two forms, one without words, using only filler words to fill the melody, with a free rhythm and a robust high pitch; the other with words, with a regular rhythm and symmetric structure, often used for narrative content [7].*
2. *Narrative Songs (Mosukun): These songs are usually performed by one person without musical accompaniment, alternating between speaking and singing, combining narration and song. Their content often narrates the heroic stories of "Morjigen," with variable tunes, characteristic of some narrative music. Representative songs include "Hero Gepaqian," "Baby Nendaygen," "Kunmabuku Nendaygen," etc. [8].*
3. *Dance Songs (Lürigren): This is a traditional group dance form of the Oroqen people, with a square rhythm, vigorous calls, and a bright and bold tune. People hold hands, sway back and forth to the rhythm of the song, step in place or along a circle, singing and dancing, reflecting the optimistic spirit of the Oroqen people.*

Ethnic Instruments The Oroqen have relatively few ethnic instruments, mainly including mouth harps, roe deer whistles, deer flutes, hand drums, etc. These instruments play an important role in the accompaniment of folk songs and dances, adding diversity and expressiveness to the music.

Religious Music Oroqen religious music mainly consists of shamanic tunes, sung during religious activities such as invoking and jumping gods, consisting of prayers and spells. This type of music is generally led by a chief shaman who beats the drum and sings, assisted by a secondary shaman or the crowd, creating a mystical atmosphere. Shamanic tunes vary in rhythm, have special filler words, and are rich in expressive tones, to some extent preserving the rustic style of Oroqen folk songs [9].

Representative Works The representative works of Heilongjiang Oroqen music are diverse, including songs reflecting ethnic life and tunes expressing deep emotions. Here are some representative works:

1. *"Leaves Fluttering on the Khingan Mountains": Sung by Meng Jinhong, this song depicts the hunting and living scenes of the Oroqen people on the Khingan Mountains, expressing their longing and praise for new life.*
2. *"Shamanic Tune": Sung during shamanic rituals by Nei Sumei. Its rhythm varies, the tune is rustic, filled with mystery and religious colors.*
3. *"Oroqen Little Songs": A song reflecting the new life of the Oroqen people, it has won the hearts of the masses with its cheerful melody and sincere lyrics.*

鄂伦春小唱

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黑 龙 江 的	流 水 哗 啦 啦 啦 的	滚,	兴 安 岭 的	森 林	黑 龙 江 的	流 水 哗 啦 啦 啦 的	滚,	兴 安 岭 的	森 林
3 3 2	1 1	2 -	1 3 3	3 3	3 3	3 5 5	2 5	5 -	
勇 敢 的 鄂 伦 春	一 (呀) 一 匹 猎 马	一 (呀) 一 杆 枪	翻 (呀 么) 翻 了 身	一 (呀) 一 杆 红 旗	空 (呀) 空 中 飘	根 (呀 么) 根 连 根	谁 (呀) 谁 不 想 念	咱 们 的 毛 主 席	活
都 (呀 么) 都 有 根	咱 们 日 子 美 好	又 (呀) 又 快							
2 3	2 3	5 6	5 2	3 3	2	3 2	1 -		
獐 狍 野 鹿	满 山 满 岭	打 (呀 么) 打 不 尽	民 族 平 等	自 由 幸 福	当 (呀) 当 主 人	毛 主 席 是 年	鄂 伦 春 福	最 亲 的 人	心
千 年 万 年	我 们 也 要	记 (呀) 记 在							

Oroqen instruments may be few, but each has its unique playing style and tonal characteristics. Their only instrument is a mouth harp called "Pengnuha" or "Kamuskhan," which, although low in volume, can play various tunes. Additionally, there are "Pengnuhua" (a type of iron mouth harp), "Wentuwen" (hand drum), and other instruments [10]. These instruments play an important role in the daily life and celebratory activities of the Oroqen, often combined with singing and dancing, creating a rich ethnic atmosphere.

Oroqen dances are closely linked to music, generally involving simultaneous singing and dancing. Their dances can generally be divided into ritual dances, entertainment dances, and religious dances, all characterized by movements that accelerate from slow to fast, culminating in a climax. Representative dances include "Yihenen," "Yihanen," and "Black Bear Wrestling Dance," among others [11]. These dances, derived from the Oroqen's life and hunting activities, express ethnic emotions and cultural connotations by mimicking animal postures and scenes.

In the world of music, the Oroqen stand out with their unique "Zandaren" folk songs, singing praises of life and conveying sincere emotions and the soul of the nation. These songs not only realistically depict the lives of the Oroqen people but are also valuable carriers of their history, culture, and spirit. The addition of the "Pengnuhua" mouth harp and "Wentuwen" hand drum adds depth and unique charm to Oroqen music, showcasing its profound musical heritage and regional characteristics.

III. Cultural Significance

As an ancient ethnic group on the northeastern frontier of China, the Oroqen people's culture carries rich historical information. Through the culture of the Oroqen people, we can learn about the historical lifestyle, social organizational structures[13], and economic forms of this ethnic group, which holds significant value for the study of the history of northern ethnic groups in China. Oroqen culture is an important marker of the ethnic identity of the Oroqen people. Common language, clothing, food, and customs form the unique ethnic cultural characteristics of the Oroqen people, enhancing the sense of belonging and cohesion among members of the ethnicity.

The Oroqen people have long lived in virgin forests, developing a way of life that coexists harmoniously with nature. They revere and rely on nature, obtaining materials for living through hunting and gathering. This lifestyle reflects the Oroqen people's profound understanding and respect for the ecological environment, providing valuable lessons for today's ecological civilization construction.

During their long history of nomadic hunting, the Oroqen people accumulated a wealth of survival skills. They are proficient in making hunting tools, building houses, and crafting garments, skills that not only meet their basic needs but also form an important part of their cultural heritage.

Oroqen music and dance represent significant aspects of their cultural art. Their folk songs, represented by "Zandaren," are melodious and beautiful; their dances are characterized by vigorous movements that combine singing and dancing. These art forms not only enrich the spiritual life of the Oroqen people but also showcase their unique ethnic style and aesthetic pursuits. Oroqen handicrafts, such as birch bark and leather products, attract global attention with their exquisite craftsmanship and unique designs. These crafts not only demonstrate the Oroqen's high level of skill but also reflect their unique aesthetic views and artistic creativity.

Oroqen culture is an important component of the diverse culture of the Chinese nation. By inheriting and promoting Oroqen culture, we can better protect the diversity of ethnic cultures, promote cultural exchanges and integration among ethnic groups. As society develops and times change[12], Oroqen culture is also continuously evolving and innovating. By exploring and organizing Oroqen cultural resources, we can inject new vitality into local economic and social development and promote the heritage and development of ethnic culture.

Strengthening the inheritance and protection of Oroqen culture helps enhance understanding and respect among different ethnic groups, promoting ethnic unity and social harmony[3]. In the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, the unique charm of Oroqen culture can become an important resource to promote rural tourism development, driving comprehensive

local economic and social development.

The Oroqen culture of Northeast China has profound historical significance, ecological wisdom, artistic value, heritage value, and practical significance. It is a shining gem in the treasure trove of China's diverse cultures, deserving our utmost cherish and inheritance.

IV. Conclusion

The life and music of the Oroqen people are closely intertwined, together forming a unique and rich cultural system. Amidst the alternation of hunting and settling, the Oroqen people have created a distinctive lifestyle and musical art. These cultural and artistic forms not only showcase the wisdom and creativity of the Oroqen people but also provide us with valuable cultural heritage and spiritual wealth.

The life and music of the Oroqen people, like warp and weft, weave together a vibrant cultural tapestry. Throughout history, they have preserved ancient hunting traditions while gradually integrating into a diverse lifestyle of agriculture and animal husbandry, demonstrating the ethnic group's resilience and adaptability to change. From "Xieren Pillar" to wooden brick houses, from hunting gear to exquisite embroidery, every detail reveals the Oroqen's deep understanding of nature and the wisdom of coexisting harmoniously, as well as their relentless pursuit of a better life.

The life and music of the Oroqen people are not only a steadfast preservation and inheritance of their own cultural traditions but also a bright landscape in the diverse and unified cultural pattern of the Chinese nation. They provide us with a deep insight into the history, culture, and spirit of the Oroqen people, representing a shared cultural heritage and spiritual wealth of all humanity. In the days to come, let us together cherish this precious cultural heritage, allowing the life and music of the Oroqen people to continue shining in the constellation of human civilization.

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