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by Marius Barbeau (1883-1969)

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Citation

[Barbeau 1942] Marius Barbeau (1883-1969). "Asiatic Survivals in Indian Songs", *The Scientific Monthly*, Volume 54, Number 4 (whole number 319), published by the Science Press for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, D.C., April 1942, pages 303-307.

[Barbeau 1934] Marius Barbeau (1883-1969). "Asiatic Survivals in Indian Songs", *The Musical Quarterly*, Volume 20, Number 1, published by the Oxford University Press, New York, January 1934, pages 106-116, doi: 10.1093/mq/XX.1.107.



ASIATIC SURVIVALS IN INDIAN SONGS

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THE Siberian origin of our northwestern natives can no longer be doubted. Abundant evidence, gathered for the National Museum of Canada in the last twenty years, shows how the Athapascan nomads, after they had crossed Bering Strait into America, spread in various directions over a large part of our continent. Some of their roving bands, following the game, journeyed south along the Rockies, or down the northwest coast, where salmon was plentiful. Many of them scattered over the vast swamps of the far north almost as far as Hudson Bay, while others ascended the Mackenzie into the grasslands of the prairies. Once they had discovered the buffalo, they vied in the hunt with the earlier prairie occupants, eventually displacing some of them with hammerblows. For they were of the breed of the Tartars. They penetrated as far south as Arizona, and were only prevented by the white man from invading Mexico, as the Aztecs had done a millennium before.

The recent recording of the songs of the northwestern Indians has provided an opportunity for a study of their relationship to Asiatic songs. The results have been startling. Some of the songs, from both sides of Bering, have proved so strikingly akin to each other that an intensive study of our museum collections of phonographic records, with the object of ascertaining whether the songs had a common origin, was bound to follow. Indeed, it is under way, and is likely to continue. A few conclusions, even at this early stage, may be of general interest.

Among Europeans, there is an ample supply of religious and ceremonial songs that are more than a thousand years old,

e.g., the Ambrosian music of the Catholic church which adheres to the musical language of the ancients. The innate conservatism displayed in the Ambrosian chants may be observed also in the rituals of other creeds. Songs, in set forms, do not readily change. Handed down from generation to generation, they naturally hark back to the past, sometimes a very remote past. Their tunes and words linger on and on and, often deformed, travel far from their birthplace. Indian ceremonial-songs, in this respect, do not differ from others.

But, curiously enough, the idea of comparing Indian songs with those of Siberia or China as a means of discovering the origin of the former, did not occur to me until recently. Still, plenty of material has been ready at hand for years. Nearly one thousand native songs of British Columbia and Alaska were recorded in the past thirty years for the National Museum of Canada, and many others are conserved in collections of the United States and Germany. Many ancient Chinese and Japanese songs have been marketed by the phonograph companies. Besides, over a hundred Siberian songs were taken down about forty years ago for the Jesup Expedition, and the records have long been stored away at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. They are now in the keeping of Columbia University (Anthropology).

When studying the Indian tribes of the Nass River on the Alaskan border some years ago, I heard on the phonograph a Japanese tune that arrested my attention. It closely resembled some of the songs of the Yukon and northern

British Columbia, which I had been recording among the natives.

The tune at the beginning scaled a high curve, touched a top note, then dropped over wide intervals to the bottom, where it droned leisurely, just as do the tunes of a number of typical Indian songs. The melodic resemblance between the Japanese and Indian songs reminded me of other things: the nearness of Alaska to Japan; the Mongolian features of both natives and Japanese; the fan-like migrations of the Indians away from Bering, which I had been probing; and the cultural stamp of Asia noticeable on the whole northwest coast.

Incessant contacts tended to reunite the related peoples on both sides of Bering, long after they had parted and those on our continent had strayed away to farther districts. Bering is only forty miles wide. It is dotted with islands, freezes over in winter and can be crossed in a day or two. The American and Siberian natives kept in close touch with each other for barter. A trade route extended, since prehistoric times, from Siberia into Alaska, and almost as far as Hudson Bay. The strait was navigated in skinboats during summer, and it could be crossed, over the ice, in winter. No real barrier ever interfered with those widely scattered people, who sought each other seasonally for the exchange of commodities essential to life. Customs and culture passed back and forth also, slowly but surely. There was no complete break.

Ancient traditions accompanied the early migrators in their trek eastward into the Alaskan tundras. It may be easily surmised that, together with other things, some of the ancient songs survived among them, at least in type or melodic pattern. Or else, newer songs might have spread from one end to another along the trade routes. Traders were wont to sing during the barter, to impress would-be purchasers with the

excellence of their wares. Asia had much to furnish. She was like a large container overflowing with riches into a still uncultivated and hungry America.

The little Japanese song I heard on the phonograph at the Arrandale cannery of the Nass was enough to remind me of all this. But to what use? To compare Indian customs and songs with those of northeastern Asia is not an easy undertaking, since materials must be secured at first hand.

After having transcribed for publication nearly one hundred British Columbia and Yukon songs, I recently showed about twenty of them to Professor Kiang Kang-hu, an eminent Chinese authority, then on the staff of McGill University at Montreal. The results of his inspection far exceeded my expectation, particularly when we came to dirge or funeral songs. I shall recount here two or three examples of these results.

A funeral song, the Dirge of Raven-drum, is the exclusive family property of Kweenu, a Raven chief of the Kitwinkul tribe, on the Grease-Trail between the Skeena and the Nass, in northern British Columbia. The ancestors of this family in the recent past migrated down from the north. Their traditional dirges, of which the following is one, were used only at the death of chiefs, and during the incineration of the body on a pyre.

The Raven drum now has come back. We can hear nothing but its large voice. It is like a great brightness.

The great voice of the Raven, the cawing Raven all covered with pearls, is ahead of me. We can hear nothing but its large voice. . . .

Professor Kiang said that this Indian song quite resembled a Buddhist chant for funeral services, used among the nomads of Mongolia. I had not told him, at the moment, that it was a funeral song of a family of Indians whose home stands in the Canadian Rockies, on the Grease-Trail, running southwards.

His statement led me to look for other significant similarities between the mortuary rituals and songs of Asia and the northwest coast. How startling a turn my comparison would take if the resemblance were to change to identity in such things as ritual forms (in the use, for instance, of similar drums to mark the rhythm), or the appearance of Asiatic words—perhaps Chinese words—in the songs! Buddhism, though in eastern Asia typically Chinese, has traveled far to the north, among the primitive Siberian tribes. It is familiar among the present Siberian tribes of Kamchatka, close to Bering. Who knows but it might have been there early enough to cross the strait with the ancient Siberian ancestors of the present natives of the Canadian Rockies!

The next song examined, the Dirge of the Eagles, was one that is found exclusively in a branch of the Eagle clan of the Kitwanga tribe, in northern British Columbia. This clan partook in the most recent invasion from the north. It has belonged to this district for less than two hundred years.

I looked up to the sky. Daylight came down early from the East.

This funeral chant reminded Professor Kiang "very much" of a Chinese ceremonial song he had heard coffin-carriers sing in the streets of Peking. So, from Mongolia we had proceeded a step farther into China to find further similarities with Indian songs. But the next song, a second Dirge of the Eagles, brought us a real surprise. The very refrain was the same as that used in Chinese funeral songs.

Alas! alas! alas! alas! . . . (Hayu, hayu) The chiefs mourn the last survivors of Gyetanraet. Alas! alas! . . . Now that the great chief has died, it is as if the sun were eclipsed. Alas! alas! . . .

My heart is full of grief, because the burial boxes of the other chiefs (unlike ours) are quite empty. Alas! alas! alas! . . .

The words of the main section of this song were in a local dialect, and referred to a fairly recent tribal event. But, to the singer, the refrain *Hayu, hayu, hayu!* was unintelligible, meaningless.

Not so to Professor Kiang, who was amazed. *Hayu* means "Alas!" in Chinese, and is exactly what dirge-singers in China are accustomed to exclaim in frequent repetition. It forms an habitual part of familiar Buddhist rituals. The Indians of the northwest coast were unaware that they were singing a Chinese religious refrain. This was indeed a significant and startling discovery.

Looking over a number of other songs, I find that the refrain *Hayu* (alas!), wherever it appears, is used with the right context, i.e., in songs of mourning over the death of a relative, and that, in every instance, it is employed by members of the Eagle and the Wolf clans, both of which were recent invaders from the far north.

The sing-song-like way of moaning because of the death of relatives and friends, familiar among those Indians, suggested other striking resemblances in mortuary customs. While I was at the Arrandale cannery, on the Nass River, close to the Alaska border, during the fishing season of 1928, a tragedy brought grief to the natives stationed there. Several of them died of poisoning, after eating decayed salmon roe. Dirges broke out early one morning, and throughout the following days women could be heard moaning in the woods.

As soon as the news of the misfortune broke out in the summer village, old women began to wail pitifully. Crouching on the ground in front of their houses, they tore their hair and beat the ground with their foreheads. For once in their lives, those Indians cast restraint to the winds and gave vent to grief. Professional mourners, like those of ancient Greece, rent the air with their

lament, and sprinkled ashes on their heads.

"Just as it would happen in China!" Professor Kiang added after I reported the occurrence to him. "There also mourners pound the ground with their foreheads, and they are paid for it. Quite typical!"

From the dirges, quoted above, Professor Kiang and I passed on to others. One of the most striking, because of its strange melody, was *Hano!* (a funeral song belonging to a leading Wolf clan of Gitlarhdams on the Upper Nass.) Somehow it seemed quite familiar to Professor Kiang, "It sounds very much like a Buddhist chant in a funeral service," he declared. "This chant comes from Hindu music." Another link in the long chain of origins: from Alaska, we pass on to Siberia, to China, to India.

Another Indian dirge of northern British Columbia, that of Small-Raven of Kitwanga, "sounds like a night-watchman's song in Pekin," said Professor Kiang. "The watchman goes out and shouts: 'Be careful of your fire and your doors! Beware of thieves!'" Drum-beats accompany the night-calls. The rhythm of the Indian dirge, Small-Raven (*Hlkwaq*), also is marked by drum-beats.

Hohaleanagwah, I bemoan the small human-like Raven of my sorrowful heart. . . .

The Raven here is the principal emblem of the singer's clan, which passes on to a new holder after the death of the head-chief. The song also includes the words: "I am left alone. Broken-hearted am I when I take his place, for I remember all my ancestors."

Other native songs from British Columbia likewise resemble Asiatic songs. For instance, a lyric tune of the Yukon and the Northwest, often called a "love" or a "mountain" song, "*Honekone*," was "like a harvest song of China. Girls

sing it while working in the fields and picking tea leaves." Like many Asiatic songs, its melody is in the pentatonic scale.

Another, a lullaby of the Nass (that of Nampks) "resembles a Chinese shepherd song. It is very much like it."

A "peace song" of the Haidas and the Nass people, the works of which are in a foreign language not understood by the singers, is reminiscent of "a Chinese sacrificial song." It was learnt by a Nass River Indian, the old singer's father, from Haida Indians on Queen Charlotte Islands. The Nass people had fought the Haidas long before, and peace had been restored after prolonged enmity. Nine canoes of the Nass tribes went to Tlawaq, on an island, and a feast was held. The Haida chief sang the peace-song during the ceremony. The guests from the coast of the mainland stayed there for three weeks and learned some of the songs of their hosts. After that time the Haidas and Nass people intermarried. The learning of the "peace song" by the singer's father shows how songs often travel from tribe to tribe. Many Nass River songs are in foreign languages, mostly those of northern tribes.

A lyric melody of the uplands, the "Fireweed" song of the Skeena headwaters, resembles a "Chinese street-tune." Its first part certainly sounds exotic, almost European, if heard among other Indian songs.

The Fireweed people will drink fermented juice with the Wolf and the Raven tribes. Why think you that we know not how to brew it! We walk about proudly, because we have made it for a long time.

Another song, a lullaby, reminds Professor Kiang of a Japanese lullaby, to the accompaniment of which Nipponese mothers, and Indian mothers also, gently sway the children wrapped upon their shoulders.

The use of the drum in the Indian

songs is an important element to consider in tracing their origin. The Indian drum of Alaska and the Canadian Rockies consists of a tanned skin dried and stretched over only one side of a closed circular band of wood. It is exactly similar to the instrument which the Koriak tribes of northeastern Siberia use in funeral rituals. Siberian drums, according to Jochelson,¹ are "covered on both sides with hide, like those found among the American Indians. . . . Together with drums covered on but one side" they "are used in Siberia only by the Buddhists," in "their divine services." Even in size the Siberian and Alaskan skin-drums are much alike, as our photographs show. In northwestern America, the drums were used not only in "divine services" but in rituals of incineration. For dead bodies, as in Siberia, were burnt on a pyre surrounded by dirge-singers and mourners.

In the light of these discoveries, a new field for investigations lies open before us. Theorists for many years have endeavored to explain the independent origin in America of cultural features known elsewhere. Primitive men were supposed to find within themselves the faculty of recreating the same processes over and over again wherever they might chance to be. For lack of historical records, it was impossible to check the application of the theory to features that refused to reveal their origins to investigators, and were accordingly swamped under a deluge of vague, if not sentimental, assumptions. But things may now take another turn, should the comparison of native songs on both sides of Bering prove that they go back to common Asiatic sources.

The new evidence under observation may turn out to be of a historical na-

ture, should it be finally established that an early derivative form of Buddhism long prevailed, as now seems practically certain, in the mortuary rituals of the northwest-coast Indians. Things like Buddhism and the Chinese mortuary rituals can not be considered essential to human nature. They are a culture growth, largely accidental, like all other such growths. Besides, there is explicit evidence of the migrations from Asia of the people themselves.

Once this is generally taken into account, many other so-called independent creations of prehistoric America are bound to prove derivations. Professor Kiang, impelled by the new drift of things, is already working upon a series of striking similarities, if not identities, between Mexican and Chinese civilizations. His work may be the beginning of the end for native American "insularity" in culture.

A thorough analysis of northwestern American and Siberian songs and rituals is an unavoidable step in the right direction. It is fortunate that it is now being undertaken. Over a hundred wax records of Siberian songs have been preserved, unpublished, for about forty years at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. They were recorded for the Jesup North Pacific Expedition to the Northwest Coast and Siberia. Their usefulness in the present investigation can hardly be exaggerated. I was startled, when I studied them early in January, 1933, with the definite evidence they yielded in a number of unforeseen directions. What was only conjecture without them, now becomes something demonstrable. Unexpected relations, of a semi-historical nature, are brought out between people on both sides of Bering—some of them far removed from each other—such as we had not even thought of before.

¹ "The Jesup North Pacific Expedition,"
IV.