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## The Study of Indian Music: Insiders and Outsiders, An Essay

CHARLOTTE HETH

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In recent years, Indian musicians have been accessible to scholars, students, and younger Indian people because many of the singers speak English as first or second languages. This linguistic change does not correlate exactly with musical change or acculturation because many of the most traditional musicians and religious leaders have learned English in order to hold jobs or to interact in other ways with the dominant society, while also retaining their important cultural roles. Although many Indian people today do not speak their own tribal languages, they may be skilled in another type of language—the language of the insider. Teaching and transmitting information by example, parable, symbolism, and understatement is the norm in Indian discourse. A lifetime of sharing (and suffering) jokes about color, degree of Indian blood, blame for rain, and designations of “civilized” or “wild” has prepared Indian students and scholars for a type of field work that goes beyond participant-observation. Sometimes an Indian person who has a great deal of knowledge will give an easy answer (or a throw-away answer) to an outsider to test him or to get rid of him when the answer he might give an Indian person would be different. For example, an elderly Pawnee woman once told an enthusiastic graduate student that she “didn’t know any stories in Pawnee” because the younger woman had asked her to tell them in the summer time while the two were working in a kitchen. Both the time and place were inappropriate, hence the “throwaway answer.” It would seem clear that members of the same Indian societies as the musicians would understand the music and the process of music-making better than outsiders. Of course, when a scholar is a native speaker of the Indian language he has a

tremendous asset. Even when an Indian researcher is studying a tribe other than his own, he generally has easier initial access to community people and musicians than a non-Indian would. Some outdoor ceremonies that appear to be public are even restricted to Indians only.

The arguments against Indian scholars studying their own music has always been expressed in terms of possible lack of objectivity. Why then is the bulk of the educational system in Europe and America centered around "White Studies," in the guise of humanities, philosophy, world civilization, music history, etc.? If a scholar has a good research design and a well-thought-out project, he or she should be able to do a good job. And, subjectivity is not always bad. Indeed, an inside view may help the researcher by providing a set of aesthetic criteria to judge quality in the music and truthfulness in the interviews with performers.

While there are dangers inherent in studying one's own culture, they are not based on the argument of objectivity vs. non-objectivity. Rather, they are contingent on such matters as jealousy, sex and role status, age, closeness to a particular person of power, misunderstanding of motives, initiation requirements, religious membership, and, occasionally, witchcraft. It is not enough just to be a tribal member by blood or enrollment.

I would like to use my own tribe, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, to illustrate some of the problems one might encounter. The tribal or traditional Cherokees in Oklahoma are pretty well split into two religious groups. The first group attend Cherokee community churches, for the most part Southern Baptist. These church services are conducted in the Cherokee language; the songs are in Cherokee, as well as the prayers and announcements. It is a total Cherokee community experience. Although Christianity was a non-Indian religion imposed on the Cherokees one hundred fifty years ago, it has been so "Cherokeeized" since then that one would hardly identify a Cherokee hymn as the same Western hymn that would be equivalent to it.

The second Cherokee group is made up of the people who attend Stomp Dances. A Stomp Dance is not just a dance, but a ceremonial event generally lasting all day and all night. The Stomp Dance religion is the old native religion, and these ceremonies are all conducted in Cherokee, too. There would be no speeches in English except for possible interpretations of

speeches so that outsider attending could understand what was going on.

Because there are two cultural streams operating there, a Cherokee could be an insider in the Baptist Church and be an outsider at the Stomp Dance, and vice versa. The two do not mix. There are express prohibitions by each group to keep people from belonging to both. It is not enough just to be a member of a tribe; frequently one has to be a member of a particular group, or, at times, even of a particular local community.

Tribes have political factions. Again in using the Cherokee example one sometimes finds mixed bloods opposing full bloods. Just because a person is a full blood does not mean that he speaks the language, belongs to the church, or the Stomp Grounds. Generally, though, the full bloods have resisted the temptations of Western Civilization, are poorer, and have different expectations from the tribal government than the mixed bloods who are eager to have education, economic development, and progress on a general level. The full blood people generally want something more personal such as their plumbing fixed (or installed) or their houses winterized, while the mixed bloods are looking for something like a factory on tribal lands. Access to voting, and awareness of the electoral process is more prevalent among mixed bloods, and they dominate the offices in the tribal government.

Clan membership, whether inherited or initiated, still controls access to power and privilege in many tribes. An Indian researcher cannot change his clan any easier than a non-Indian researcher can change his race. Sex and age are equally hard to change, although one can easily grow older. Because the overwhelming majority of Indian musicians are male, a female researcher, Indian or non-Indian, may encounter difficulties. A woman who spends a great deal of time with her collaborator is bound to engender jealousy in his wife or sweetheart. The interchange, while on an intellectual basis, nevertheless uses up time he could be spending with his wife and family.

Jealousy, whether romantic, intellectual, economic, or talent related, can lead to witchcraft, suspicion of witchcraft, along with disease and death. An Indian researcher might be more aware of the repercussions involved in singling out societal members for elevation to a particular status than an outsider would be. The dangers inherent in changing roles or status both for the researcher and the collaborator are extreme.