Kam Singing

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1. Origin

Once upon a time, there was a singing Banyan tree at the edge of a village. Its fruit was eaten by birds and as a result, many kinds of birds were able to sing. The thrush and the woodpecker were the most gifted. Beside the tree, however, lived an old woman named Sà Yáng (萨阳). She really disliked the tree, with its constant singing—singing by day, singing by night. To her, it was a terrible nuisance, so one day she cut it down and pushed it into the river.

A passing fish happened to eat some of the fruit from the tree and its whole belly was filled with songs. Further down the river, a man named Xì Yá (细崖) caught the fish and cut it open. He was startled to see a belly full of songs and quickly shoved them all in a bamboo basket and locked it in a barn. Later, he decided to carry the songs to Lóngtú (龙图, with 700 families) and Guànhòng (贯洞, with 900 families), to entertain friends there. All of a sudden, as he was crossing the bridge at Lánhòng (兰洞) and switching his carrying pole from one shoulder to another, the pole snapped in two and all the songs in the basket spilled out. They landed everywhere, in the water and on the river bank, and although Xì Yá tried frantically to collect them again, he could only manage to grab a handful. With these, he became a famous song teacher, but the other scattered songs spread far and wide. Ever since, the sound of singing has filled Kam villages, by the rivers and mountains.

2. Southern and northern Kam

The Kam language has two dialects, southern and northern. The dialect boundary is taken as a line through Jǐnpíng (锦屏) county in Guìzhōu (贵州) province. The 2.5 million Kam people are divided into approximately 75% who live in the southern dialect area and 25% who live in the northern dialect area. About 68% of all Kam people speak the Kam language; with a greater percentage in the south than in the north. Southern Kam is generally less influenced by the Chinese language, and a smaller proportion of southern Kam people are bilingual in Chinese, than northern Kam.
Singing in the southern Kam area is different in several ways from singing in the northern area. In the south, people often sing at home, near to one another, with low or moderate volume. In the north, they are used to singing on the mountains, at a distance from one another, with very high volume. In the south, songs are usually sung using only the Kam language. In the north, Kam and Chinese are often used together in the same songs; or perhaps one song uses Kam and the next uses Chinese. In the south, songs can be very long, lasting up to forty minutes. In the north, they follow the pattern for Chinese songs and are typically four lines long. In the south, choirs of men usually sing to choirs of women. In the north, men can sing to men and women to women. Singing tends to be more regulated in the south and more spontaneous in the north. In the south, love songs are sung mostly in the evening, in the north often by day. Melodies in the south tend to be more level, those in the north more fluctuating.

In other respects, however, the Kam singing culture is a unified one. Whether south or north, singing is used as a major tool in social relationships. Through singing, Kam people test one another's wit and character, remember and uphold accepted morals in society, compete with one another, appeal to and express thanks to their gods, give vent to their frustrations, and relax! As the Kam saying goes, just as rice is food for the body, so singing is food for the spirit.

Singing is a source of pride. There is a village in Cōngjiāng (从江) county named Xiǎohuáng (小黄), famous out of proportion to its size for its prowess in singing. It might be called the current capital of Kam singing and its inhabitants are naturally proud of its exalted position in Kam society.

Finding a life-partner is often a matter of singing. Singing for your supper is subsumed by singing for your husband or wife. Groups of young people visit one another in "teams." Eight young men of the same age from one village, for example, may visit a neighbouring village and sing to a group of about eight young women. Not all the men will be equally intelligent or equally good at singing. But there is an inbuilt community spirit, reinforced by the elders of the respective villages. The less gifted are helped and compensated for by their more gifted companions. It is assumed that eventually, the good talkers will match up with the good talkers, those who don’t talk much will match up with those who don’t talk much, those who can’t really sing will match up with those who can’t really sing, and so on. The whole courtship process will often take several years.

In the past, Kam women expressed their feelings of injustice through song. The custom of having a Kam girl marry her cousin—her mother’s brother’s son—or at least, giving her uncle first say in whom she should marry, led to much opposition from the women. They frequently sang against the custom, with some measure of
success. According to Kam women in Húnán province, they also fought a successful campaign through song to gain women a share in their parents’ land, to be granted after they married and gave birth to a child. Their share would be used for planting cotton. There is a tendency to view boys as “more important” than girls, even today, and there is still often an air of suffering and pain in the women’s songs, reflecting a feeling that their lot in life is unfair. Slowly their lot improves.

At every major life-event and at every major festivity observed by the Kam people, singing features highly in the celebrations or commiserations. The exception to this rule is when someone “dies young,” before the age of seventy.

Singing has preserved Kam history and legend down through the ages. There was no Kam script until the late 1950s and song became the unwritten Kam literature, the link between ancestors and descendants.

In 1988, a choir of Kam girls made a trip to Paris and took part in an Autumn Art Festival there, receiving wide acclaim from reviewers. The truth is, however, that Kam singing is not an art that transfers easily to the public stage. The girls were trained to sing several songs. In the villages, however, there are hundreds of songs that might be sung, on a variety of themes that might leave the Western listener nonplussed. The Paris-type songs were judged mainly according to their musical appeal and quality. The village-type songs may not always be as good in musical terms, but in function and atmosphere, they are richer by far. There will probably never be a Kam Spice Girls or a Kam Elton John, because what makes Kam singing so special is not so much its musical quality (though it has a special quality), as its functions and associations, things which are not readily reproduced on the stage.

Karaoke is currently very popular in China. In some respects it is an attempt to do what Kam singing has been doing for generations at the heart of Kam culture: to help people enjoy one another’s company and understand one another better. But karaoke does not enjoy massive support from society at large, it does not have the roots that make Kam singing so special. Among the Kam, singing lies at the heart of much communication. It is not so much entertainment as food for the spirit, of which entertainment is only one of many elements.

3. Kam songs

There are many types of song, used in different contexts in Kam society. Chinese New Year is the occasion for some of the most celebrated.
In the southern Kam area, it is common at New Year for a whole village to receive an invitation from a neighbouring village to go and spend the New Year holiday there. Such invitations reflect warm relations between the two villages and it is in the context of warm relations that singing competitions between the two villages are entered into.

On the day before leaving home, the guest-villagers meet near the altar to the goddess Sà (蔴). Each village has someone responsible for looking after Sà’s altar and this lady (or man—if it is a man, he dresses up in lady’s clothing), carrying a half-open umbrella, leads a procession of ladies in a circle near the altar. The lady represents Sà and does not say anything. A different lady, a good singer, leads the others in a song to Sà. She sings one line and the others sing it after her. Each line of the song ends with the phrase “Yee ya ye,” which has no particular meaning of its own. The song typically explains to Sà that the villagers are going to visit their neighbours. Would she please go with them? If so, she could guarantee their safety and give them a good chance of winning the singing competition. This “singing to Sà” might last about half an hour.

The next day, the first competition takes place at the entrance to the host village, where the hosts have a singing group of young ladies ready to block the way. The ladies block the entrance to their village with a variety of articles. Before entry is granted, the ladies test the singing ability of the visiting village’s male-voice choir. The host ladies sing first, the visiting men reply. One by one, the articles blocking the way are removed, until eventually the way is clear. In the course of the singing, both teams size up the others’ ability, preparing for the activities of the evening. If the visitors have come from a long way, the blocking songs may only last twenty minutes; but if the visitors are near-neighbours, the songs may last up to five hours.

In the evening, the two choirs re-convene over a meal, and then at the village drum-tower. In addition, a choir of men from the host village “does battle” with a choir of ladies from the visiting village, at another location in the host village. These singing events actually last the whole night through. Women sing questions, men sing answers. At the outset, these questions and answers typically follow a predictable pattern, and the choirs can sing in turn, songs that they have memorised. After a while, the elements of surprise and spontaneity come more into play. When this happens, one member of each choir may take up the baton in words, while his or her colleagues sing only the tune. The songs on these occasions are choral songs, so called because they involve singing in parts.

While the young adults sing, the older folk and children retire to various homes in the host village, as organised by host elders. During the next day, the singers and revellers find a place to get some rest in preparation for the next night’s