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History and Theory of the Adyghian Clappers

I could write at length about the Adyghian clappers. I have written a book about this instrument. However, this paper will first introduce the instrument, and then discuss some basic matters as well as some questions to which Russian researchers have, in the meantime, partly found answers.

What are the Adyghian clappers? In the Adyghian language they are referred to as *pkhachich* – “*pkha*” is tree and “*chich*” is onomatopoeia. According to the systematization of Ernst Moritz von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs¹, *pkhachich* refers to the group of simultaneously struck idiophones (111.12: clappers).



Figures 1: *Pkhachich*. (Photo: Alla Sokolova.)

Pkhachich consists of 7 to 9 small (palm-size) simultaneously struck wooden plates that are fastened together by a leather attached to a handle. Comparable instruments exist in many cultures of the Caucasus: Abasin clappers are referred to as “*pkharchak*”, Abkhazian - “*ainkyaga*”, Osetian - “*karzganag*”, Chechenian - “*gemansh*”, Karachaevs - “*satrazialo*”, Balkarian - “*khars*”. Co-

¹ Hornbostel, Erich M. von; Sachs, Curt: *Classification of Musical Instruments: Translated from the Original German by Anthony Baines and Klaus P. Wachsmann*. The Galpin Society 14, 1961: 3-29. [Zeitschrift für Ethnologie 46, 1914 (4-5): 553-590]

struck idiophones occur among the Chuvashs - "satarma", Tatars - "shaltyrma", Mordwian - "shavoma", Maris - "lochirtysht". Chinese "pai-pai" and Japanese "kiokiriko". Neapolitan "trikkabolakka" and Greek "kroupalon" belong to the same group as well.



Figures 2: Another Adyghian clapper. (Photo: Alla Sokolova.)

Samples from prehistoric periods, such as, for instance, the ancient Egyptian clappers, show slight differences from those used in the modern Adyghian culture.

These demonstrate a striking similarity with the human hand. But the majority of

them are merely stylized as hands. These samples specify that ancient Adyghian clappers were substituting usual human palms. We may therefore, prove that ancient Adyghian clappers are similar to human palms. These wooden "palms" do not get tired of knocking, and the sounds they produce are strong, sonorous and powerful.



Figures 3-5: Various historical phkachichs

During the 20th century, changes were observed in the construction of clappers. Clappers with wider plates increasingly became more narrow. *Pkhachich* with wide plates consisted of 3 to 4 plates. The number of narrow plates increased up to 7 - 9. Why did this occur? The size, the form and the instrumental settings of the plates in ensembles correlate with their number. An ancient *phkachich* played with the Adyghian violin in an ensemble. Such ensembles

sounded in small premises and special rooms where friends gathered together and visitors were welcomed. A modern *pkhachich*, on the other hand, plays with a harmonica in an ensemble that has a bright, strong and sonorous timbre. Here the *pkhachich* should sound stronger for competing with the accordion.

The earliest sources about Adyghian clappers are found in Nart epos². In Adyghian mythologies the invention of the *pkachich* is attributed to nart Ashamez. Old men told me about the meaning. They remind of a young man who went to the forest and found some wooden pieces. He picked them up and started to play with them, knocking them against each other. Sometimes the invention of the clapper may be seen as a reminiscence of a horsman's most beloved sound – of the horse hoofs on the ground. The clapper can return this sound. The horse moves in a quiet step one leg after the other; at a fast tempo the sound changes. Accordingly each plate of the clappers should sound separately as well.

In this picture is shown where Russian Adyghians reside between the Black and the Caspian seas. Adyghian people, living in the Adyghian Republic and in the territory of Krasnodar, call us Western Adyghians. In the territory of the Kabardino-Balkariyan Republic live the Eastern Adyghians-Kabardians. Clappers are widespread among the Western Adyghians, and they are popular and possess a high aesthetic value. Men and women, adults and children play them on public holidays and at home to accompany dances and songs.

Certainly, the performances of men differ strongly from those of the women. The performances of laymen cannot be compared with those of professional musicians. You may watch a performance of women holding hand in hand at the level of the upper body and playing the clappers synchronously and accurately.

Professional musicians play masterfully. Their movements can be compared with a dance. The skill of rattling the clappers must be learnt. During a music performance, a group of rattlers, along with their ensemble leader, create a very interesting instrumental theatre, performing various playing patterns. In doing so they are a great attraction to the audience as well as to the leading musicians and dancers. Generally their activity requires a very special and experienced skill. At times the rattlers lift their hands high upwards and by the time they bend their bodies downwards they rattle their *pkhachich* synchronously close to the accordion player. The techniques of playing differ considerably from those of amateurs. Professional musicians play *pkhachich* with different numbers of plates. A right-hander would take a *pkhachich* with two or more plates in the right hand. To play the clapper, it is necessary that each plate produces its own sound.

² Adyghian version of Nartiada, dated 1 millenium B.C.

Two “*pkhachiches*” are beaten against each other. When the *pkhachich* in the right hand drops down, the *pkhachich* in the left hand goes upwards. In a fast tempo the sparkling clicking sound appears very attractive and beautiful to Adyghian people. Probably, in ancient times similar sounds served for apotropeic magic rites. People were frightened of malicious spirits, and they did not go to the dwellings of dangerous animals. So these sounds gradually received symbolic values. The *pkhachich*'s sounds began to mark holidays and significant ritual acts. People's noise designated the space which was protected and preserved against an evilness. This tradition has been maintained among the Adyghians till the present time. For example, when someone fractures his hand or a leg he/she is visited by relatives, neighbors and friends. Everyone entering the room has to knock with a hammer on an anvil in order to make sure that malicious spirits have not entered along with the visitor. The impact is a form of introduction in relation with a transcendental world.



Figure 6: Playing techniques; Figure 7: Two kinds of pkhachichs (Photos: Alla Sokolova)



Figure 8-9: Practising pkhachich (photos: Alla Sokolova)

So, what is magic about the *pkhachich*? At first sight this instrument looks and sounds very simple, but during its manufacturing there are many secrets.

First secret: The instrument does not have set standards. Each master produces *pkhachich* by hand, making it convenient for holding the plates relaxed when moving them up and down.

Second secret: The choice of the variety of a tree from which to construct a *pkhachich*. Usually *pkhachiches* are constructed of maple and ash-tree, but the best material is boxwood. This wood is so heavy that it cannot swim on water. Moreover, it is difficult to process on account of its fragility.

Third secret: Primary processing of a material. Plates are cut in rough by an axe, then preparations pass through processing in water to which ash is usually added. Different masters use also various technologies. One boils the plates, the other simply keeps them in hot water. Through these procedures the chemical structure of the wood may change, but we have not yet investigated this. After the water procedure a plate appears best with a coherent surface, on which heavy weights are placed. Under such conditions they are dried in the shade.

Fourth secret: The dried preparations are processed by glass and a skin (emery paper). The bottom part of the plate is shaped narrower and thin. Such design allows plates to be separated easily from each other. Here two apertures (holes) are made through which leather laces are passed. Usually the apertures are fixed with a calcinated iron rod. It is important to burn a pin hole, instead of punching one. The plate can break when it is beaten with a hammer. When burnt, the edges of the pin hole become equal and smooth. And that is very important, since sharp edges would cause wounds on the palm when played. The burning of a pin hole is also important from a mythological point of view. The object that has been processed by water and fire, becomes tempered, impregnable. Such a training was passed through by the Greek hero Ahill and the legendary Adyghian nart Sausyriko.

Fifth secret: the adjustment of the instrument. All plates are attached to a handle. Then the master makes some "adjustment" of the instrument. He puts the handle under an inclination and looks to see at which distance the plates are separated from each other. If these distances show large deviations, the necessary adjustments should be made accordingly. Such a procedure can take place repeatedly.

All these secrets are transmitted roughly in a traditional way as each master wishes to keep his clients and tries to keep his secret of construction for the sake of the trade.

The study of the phonology of clappers is a very significant matter. It is important not only in itself, but also, and first of all, as a problem of ethno-hearing and ethno-psychology. For example, the sound of clappers makes an indelible impression on the bearers of the tradition. It pleases, inspires, amuses,

invigorates, influences the individual mood almost the same as does alcohol in small quantities.

Another problem is how to suppress *pkhachich* as sound carriers while transcribing music? The sound of clappers blocks any other instrument. In our republic we use matchboxes instead of clappers during sound recordings. The sound is very similar to the clappers themselves. Executors, as a rule, do not start to play at once. In the beginning they listen attentively to the melody of a folk tune. Then, "having caught" the pulse of the melody, the *pkachichao*³ starts sounding its main reference points synchronously.

In Russian musicology, essential acoustics of the *pkhachich* are still not yet studied seriously. I would like to draw the attention of both Russian, and European scholars to the given problem, but for the present we can only dream, that such projects will be worked out.

So, the *pkhachich* as a musical instrument is multifunctional. Its most important functions are: apotropeic, magic, rhythmic, symbolic-semantic, artistically-shaped, audio-visually-aesthetic.

³ Pair of *pkhachichs*.