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Radifi - The Main Framework of Ta'ziye (Passion Play) Music*

Introduction

There is no denial of the fact that the art of ta'ziye (passion play) has drawn the interest and attention of many research scholars, inspiring them to ponder upon the cultural, artistic, social, and even anthropological aspects of this art; particularly due to the fact that in a short span of time, this art that is one of the most intricate of Iranian arts, has gained considerable popularity among the Iranians in most parts of the country. This article presents a research on the musical aspect of the ta'zīye.

All evidences indicate that from its very inception as a musical performance, the art of ta'ziye and its main musical framework are based on the popular melodies of the radifi or the dastgāhi music of Iran. The manner in which this particular style of music came to be classified as one of the three basic parts of the structure of the ta'ziye is a commonly accepted fact for all research scholars in the field of music.

A contemporaneous gathering of the most prominent vocalists of

Iran in the country's capital¹, who had come together with the prime objective of organizing and classifying Iranian music, coincided with the growth, perfection, and popularity of ta'ziye providing a justified reason for the ta'ziye artists to benefit from this style of music. The very few available sources bear testimony to the fact that the best vocalists of the country have initially performed in ta'ziyes.²

The extensive use of singing in religious ceremonies as well as the religious background of ta'ziye is another justified reasons for inspiring the ta'ziye vocalists to pay more attention to music and singing in the early stages of the evolution of this art.

It must be mentioned that more than benefiting from the theatrical characteristics and effects, the dialogues in the ta'ziyes were expressed in the form of poetry and singing. A glance at the history of Shiite ceremonies, particularly the Iranian religious singing delivered at these ceremonies in various places, bears testimony to the earlier claim. The artists who recited roze, nohe, and marsiye as well as the wandering dervishes were the first of their kind to have entertained people in public places by performing recitations in praise of the holy Prophet of Islam (PBUH), the Imams (PBUT) and the Oliyā'ollāh (lit. the "Friends of God"), without the accompaniment of musical instruments. Na'tkhāni³ was prevalent in Afghanistan, Khorāsān, and parts of Hormozgān.

A review of old texts reveals that in the early stages of development, prominent vocalists would stand facing one another, reciting the poems and dialogues in the ta'ziyes. In the beginning stages of the development of the art of ta'ziye, and before the creation of more intricate forms, this method seemed to be quite appealing and effective.

One could perhaps relate the ta'ziye music to some of the oral traditional singings of the various Iranian communities. Certain types of duets that are still in practice in some regions of Iran are a proof that in order to make romantic dialogues more sentimental and effective, Iranians would sing them in the form of duets.⁴ These

types of innovations have also been found in the deliverance of songs of mourning and lamentation. In this form of singing, usually, poetry verses of a single particular theme were sung by two or more male or female artists. The decisive effectiveness of this method was because of the fact that various and mixed colors and vocal characteristics would be employed during the delivery of these songs - rendering the themes of the poems more understandable and making the audience more receptive. Despite the religious restrictions regarding the singing of women (in public), and, in spite of having embraced Islam, in many tribes that followed their own traditional tribal customs men and women performed duets (even in public). In some regions of Iran the chorus form of singing has had a long history and the repetition of refrains has been a prevalent part of their customs and traditions.⁵ Therefore, the chorus form of singing in the pishkhāni of ta'ziyes has enjoyed a long history in the traditional music of Iranian communities.

The foregoing discussion was important from the view point of knowing that prior to emerging into existence as a classified form of, and before the performers began to rely on musical question and answer, some styles of question answer and chorus singing was prevalent in some regions of Iran and in certain forms of community music. In other words the bilateral or multilateral musical dialogues were of national and native importance, which should be further researched into, with more precision, in the future.

A deep study of the earliest available texts on ta'ziye, written in story form, like the Roatoshefā reveal that the poems composed for these stories were basically marked for poetry and musical conversations rather than theatrical purposes. The lengths of the older copies clearly reveal that not only would it not be possible to put such poems into performance in their entirety but also the time required would make it rather impossible. A Kāshāni version of the life story of Hazrat 'Abbās comprises six hundred verses of poetry, only the non musical performance of which would require a considerable amount of time. Taking into consideration that the vocal

recitation of each verse would take about thirty seconds, it would not be difficult to realize that only the vocal recitation of a ta'ziye performance, including the pishkhāni (the preliminary recitations) and the poetry that the performers usually recite spontaneously, would take up to five hours. Now, if the vocal recitation of such a ta'ziye is combined with theatrical performance, the time required for a full ta'ziye would exceed ten hours⁶, since the natural pauses, movements, and other theatrical requirements considerably affect the speed of a ta'ziye performance.

The above discussion emphasizes that the earliest ta'ziye scriptwriters and performers attached greater importance to the vocal aspect of ta'ziye rather than other aspects of it. As is evident, the theatrical aspects of ta'ziyes were rather "not so significant" to the early ta'ziye scriptwriters and were only included to add some spice to certain scenes in the performance.

The gathering of the most prominent vocalists of the country in the capital and the move to persuade them to perform ta'ziyes is yet another evidence of the fact that in the initial stages of its development, good vocal performances had priority over the theatrical aspect of ta'ziye. In the course of its evolution, the art of ta'ziye gradually became enriched by the finer aspects of performing arts. The point to be mentioned here is that no sources are available to give us a clear picture of the earliest theatrical and musical forms of ta'ziye as well as the types of vocals recited in the Shiite mourning sessions during the Safavid period. Even the memoirs of some travelers have only brief mentions of mourning groups and processions⁷ and have somehow never directly referred to what we today call ta'ziye and shabihkhāni.⁸

There are historical evidences that the period between the fall of the Safavid dynasty, at the hands of the Afghans, until the rise and the establishment of the Qajar dynasty (except for a short period of Karim Khān's rule), was a period of stagnation in the official and public forms of mourning of any kind. The rise of the Qajar dynasty and their relative dominance over the entire country resulted in

the revival of arts as well as mourning sessions and ta'ziyes. Although during this period many branches of art could not catch up with the levels of performance of the earlier generations of artists, the presence of a large group of musicians and vocalists in the Qajar court led to a considerable elevation of the art of ta'ziye.

The patronage received by these artists at the royal court in performing ta'ziye, besides adding to the influence of such mourning sessions on the public, also added to a distinguished music structuring of ta'ziyes. The knowledge possessed by these artists regarding official musical melodies, tunes and notes and the manner in which they were involved in the ta'ziyes as well as the penetrating power of their voices not only helped spread and establish ta'ziye to a great extent, but also had a considerable effect on the generalization of divisions and figures of the newly formed Radifi music⁹ of Iran. Mention should also be made of the influence of musical divisions and figures that the early ta'ziye vocalists resorted to skillfully and appropriately as and when required, depending on the meaning and connotation of each ta'ziye performance¹⁰, showing their invaluable expertise and experience. With great precision and applaudable efforts, they made use of melodies in the ta'ziyes to create emotional appeal for their audiences. Their years of practice and experience had made these artists master the skillful use of musical divisions and figures in each ta'ziye, so as to make it more effective and acceptable.

Thus, as time passed by, it became more and more clear as to what type of melody each ta'ziye performance had to be opened and ended with. Nevertheless, it was not considered as the "final word" by expert ta'ziye vocalists of various regions of the country. Therefore, once the people of these regions developed their art of ta'ziye, instead of waiting for the wandering ta'ziye reciters, they made interesting innovations in ta'ziye recitations and adapted to the sentimental appeal of their own regional cultures. By combining and mixing the known styles of a number of ta'ziyes, each community or region managed to intelligently develop its own

style, by including such musical divisions in ta'ziyes that rather conformed to their regional music.

This added to the sentimental influence of the ta'ziye music of the different regions and resulted in the acceptance of this art by the masses. As a result of this development, many regional musical maghāms (modes) and melodies found their way into ta'ziye music. Although we shall discuss regional melodies in greater details later on, it is worth mentioning that these innovations resulted each region developing its own unique style. As a matter of fact, such innovations and influences exerted by the regional ta'ziye vocalists led to the creation of a variety of styles and exquisite forms in the ta'ziye music of their respective regions. These innovations and influences in the ta'ziye music and the replacement of similar musical divisions with one another by the regional ta'ziye vocalists also led to the smooth acceptance of the divisions and figures of the radifi music by the regional people for the simple reason that they were emotionally commensurate and in harmony with their regional musical maghāms.

It is also important to note that the regional ta'ziye vocalists never resorted to extremism in bringing change in ta'ziye musical divisions and figures and their traditional structure. Rather, they made it a point to benefit from the expertise of the earlier maestros in selecting ta'ziye singing and paid respect to the achievements of their predecessors. Thus, almost in all oshtoloms¹¹ and rajazkhānis¹² (lit. Declamatory Defiance of the Enemy) the status of chāhārgāh, segāh, and epical figures of other divisions have remained intact and unchanged. So much so that in most regional ta'ziye performances they used to resort to undeniable effects of the melancholic dashti and bayāt e tork, in order to depict the oppression faced by Oliyā¹³, in order to impact their audiences.

There is absolutely no denial of the fact that the exertion of such precision and subtlety in adapting and harmonizing the emotional melodies with the contents of the ta'ziye performances could not have been accidental. As a matter of fact, this trend, during its long

process and the continuous shifting of melodies, eventually led to a logical form of ta'ziye music. It would be very interesting to know more about the performance of ta'ziye by the ta'ziye vocalists of the earlier generations and their musical "questions and answers". This type of vocal poetical debates was the fruit of years of experience and repetition, which in turn resulted in the evolution of excellent and exquisite forms of chorus singing.

The most exquisite forms of chorus singing in the first ten days of the month of Moharram and the *Shām e Gharibān Ta'ziye* indicate the artistic expertise and the intelligence of the ta'ziye performers in the alternate deployment of various divisions in their conversations and the precise application of melodies. A review of the one hundred and seventy five ta'ziye performances recorded in thirteen different regions of Iran reveals that almost all divisions, figures and songs of the Iranian radifi music as well as the earliest types of ditties, in the form of preliminary singing, *nohe* and *marsiye*, have been deployed in them. The study has also revealed that the changes made in the melodies and figures of a division, like the shortening of the figures in order to adapt them to the ta'ziye sentiments, shed light on the extensive influence of the traditional music in ta'ziye singing and the fact that almost all the sections of the Iranian traditional music have a decisive presence in ta'ziye. Nevertheless, certain divisions and forms of singing have a more prominent presence, due to their simplicity and emotional adaptation with ta'ziyes. For instance, the presence of *bayāt e tork* and *shoor e dashtestāni* can be observed in over seventy percent of the ta'ziyes, although in varying degrees. Whereas *homāyoon* can only be heard in a limited number of ta'ziye singings and in fact is the least used in ta'ziye music. The extensive use of the *shoor* and *dashti* and the *bayāt e tork* in ta'ziye singing is primarily due to their sentimental appeal, so vital to the nature of ta'ziyes, on the one hand, and the similarities that exist in the music of the different regions of Iran with these two divisions, on the other. Thus, there is a common past between them and the musical culture of many Iranian regions. It would not be an exaggeration to emphasize that

the presence of all the divisions and figures of the Iranian traditional music in ta'ziye singing is indicative of the fact that the ta'ziye vocalists did not confine themselves to any particular division or figure in order to convey their sentiments and feelings. Rather, they tried to employ all kinds of styles and combinations, as and when appropriate. In other words, they continuously availed of the overall achievements of Iranian music. Similarly, these artists did not even shun from using non conventional styles like the rajazkhāni that was borrowed from the Arabs.

Some ta'ziyes are famous for the use of the naghghāli methods - used in the recitation of epics like the Shāhnāmeḥ - as well as other methods of combining singing and conversation that had their roots in the ancient Iranian culture. The skillful and artistic application of such methods, reflect the extensive horizons of the art of ta'ziye and the expertise of the artists.

The attention given to the various musical aspects of the ta'ziye, for the first time after the emergence of this art, acquainted the peoples of the many regions of Iran¹⁴ with the radifi music of Iran as well as other older versions of Iranian music. This re acquaintance, in turn, resulted in considerable changes in the people's understanding and perception of music. These changes and developments were of a different nature, and brought the regional people face to face with great variety of music that was different from their regional music in form, intervals, color, type, moods, etc. As a result of this acquaintance, the ground was prepared for a marriage between the ta'ziye music and the regional music, which shall be dealt with later.

The Religious and Ceremonial Music in the Iranian Ta'ziye

Although most types of religious music that are used in ta'ziye are the natural derivations from the traditional or regional music of Iran, their accepted forms and framework as well as the people's sentiments prompted the ta'ziye artists to tirelessly devote themselves to rediscovering these melodies and using them in their ta'ziye

sessions.

These melodies are older than the history of ta'ziye, and in the musical culture of many regions they have intermingled with religious customs and ceremonies, and due to their historical background are deeply endearing to the masses.

Certainly, this popular appeal to the religious sentiments of the people has been the main reason behind the attention paid by ta'ziye vocalists to such types of melodies. Although the purpose of this article is not to review the history of the formation, establishment and popularity of religious singings, it is important to highlight the special role played by these types of singing in the ta'ziyes. Studies show that the share of such melodies in the sum total of ta'ziye melodies is not significant. However, the sacred background enjoyed by them has made their impact qualitative rather than quantitative. The religious and ceremonial singings used in ta'ziye music are broadly categorized into the following two groups:

The first group comprises a limited number of melodies that are of national reputation due to the fact that they have been repeatedly used in the different regions of the country and because the masses are well acquainted with them. As regards their structures, intervals, themes and other specific characteristics, the performance of these melodies are very similar and the differences in the various regions do not negatively impact their nature and originality. The various types of *chāvooshi* or *chāvooshkhāni*¹⁵ as well as the recitation of the Azān with national music and the bayāt e tork mode are the most prominent examples of such melodies. The *chāvooshi* which was recited by a *chāvooshikhān* among pilgrims, on the way to places of pilgrimage, is considered to be one of the vocal traditions of the Iranians.¹⁶ As per historical texts, prior to being considered as Shiite religious singing, *chāvooshi* was a type of religious and appealing melodious supplication that was recited for kings in order to appeal for their good wishes, and was considered as a vocal supplication. For example, in his book *Rostamottavārikh*, Mohammad Hāshem Āsef describes the majesty of a king in these

words:

"He mounted his horse like Nāder and on his left and right many chāvooshis, holding gold and silver sticks, were busy remembering and praising Allah and saying 'Almolkoellāh al Vāhedolqahhār'."

These evidences refer to the historical and military application of these singings, which later on came to be used in ta'ziyes in order to praise the grandeur of the Oliyā.

In some ta'ziye sessions and particularly those pertaining to the martyrdom of Imam Rezā (AS), the chāvooshkhāni was rendered in its traditional form. By studying and listening to a few chāvooshkhānis one can easily distinguish between the differences in the impact of this type of melody with other melodies, on the audiences. The Azān recited at Imam Rezā's (AS) ta'ziye and at the mourning sessions held for Hazrat Zeynab (SA), in the various regions of Iran, have a bayāt e tork theme. These instances are the only religious musical melodies pertaining to the Islamic and Shiite ta'ziyes of Iran.

A review of various ta'ziye sessions would bring us face to face with other beautiful melodies of religious music such as darvishkhāni. Besides the dervishes who melodiously sang poems from books like Rūmī's Masnavi, there were those who vocalized religious poems, some of whom were outstanding and prominent singers and musicians of Iran.¹⁷ Even today, one sometimes comes across popular and famous singers and musicians who also render traditional religious songs. While singing, the dervishes often resorted to melodies that were derived from melodies in khānqāh (dervish convent) style or in the style of moloodkhāni (birthday songs for holy persons). These types of melodies can be found in the ta'ziye sessions of the desert dervishes. Although these types of singings have somewhat mingled with the Iranian dastgāhī music, they cannot be included in it and should be classified and studied under ta'ziye melodies.¹⁸ The second group of religious singing comprises melodies that are part of the regional music and are gradually coming to be classified under native music. Since these

types of singing are commensurate with the contents and subject matter of religious poems they were treated as sacred, and in certain regions they received a separate identity derived from their religious and "wise" contents. These types of melodies that found their way into ta'ziye music because of the ta'ziye vocalists, outnumber the first group. Some examples of these melodies include the Haqqānis of Dāmghān and Sabzevār, the Amiris of Gilān and Māzandarān, the Moloodkhānis of Hormozgān and the Beytkhānis of Khorāsān.

* Translated by Mohsen Shojakhani

¹ Refers to the period starting in the mid Qajar era.

² The prominent vocalists of Nāseroddin Shāh's period were very fond of reciting ta'ziye singing.

³ Na'tkhān is a person who recites poems in praise of Oliyā without being accompanied by musical instruments. Na'tkhāni is more prevalent in the small towns and villages of Iran. Quoted from *She'r va moosighi dar iran*, p. 29.

⁴ Another type of such songs, known as the gali-gali, was popular in the northern parts of Alborz. Similarly, the Shirreh of Booshehr, the Ze'iriik and the Likoo of Baloochestān, and the Biyābāni and the Ghorbati of Kahnooj in the Kermān Province are in the form of duets.

⁵ Radif and nahme of Bandar Kang are based on the chorus form of singing. In Khorāsān, Baloochestān, Māzandarān, and Gilān, in many songs that end in tarji'band (Refrains), the audience begins to sing in a chorus. Similarly, some zekr repetitions, too, are accompanied by chorus singing. In the musical traditions of the people of North Alborz there is a certain type of singing called gali-gali that is sung and played at celebrations and/or working in the paddy fields, which are in the form of chorus. The Zār and Nobān songs of south Iran, too, are sung in the form of chorus.

⁶ Even today, one can find ta'ziye sessions that are based on older scripts and their performances exceed five hours that are rather dull and boring for the modern audiences. Thus, during the last two or three decades some scriptwriters have come forward and re written the old lengthy ver-

sions with a view to shortening the duration of their performances. The scriptwriters of Ghazvin are quite skilled in the art of re writing the older ta'ziye versions.

⁷ Pietro della Valle of Holland and Antonio de Goa, the Polish priest, were two famous foreign tourists who had visited Iran during the Safavid period and have given detailed accounts of the mourning ceremonies held during the months of Moharram including nohekhāni, traditional breast beating, and other mourning rituals and processions in their travel memoirs. However, they have not mentioned anything about ta'ziye and shabihkhāni.

⁸ Fifty three travel memoirs and historical references pertaining to the Safavid period through the end of Nāder Shāh's period were consulted in order to study the emergence of ta'ziye in Iran. None of the travel memoirs have mentioned anything about ta'ziye or shabihkhāni during the Safavid era.

⁹ Radif is a collection of melodies, figures, and pieces composed in the Iranian music. When melodies (or what is technically called a "figure") are rendered in a particular arranged sequence, they are called radif. The sequences of the melodies depend on a number of factors in the absence of which the concept of radif is meaningless. These factors are harmony between intervals, the cycle in which the tune is played, the rhythm of the tune, the artistic insight of the performer, and the criteria that define Iranian aesthetics -Haft orang (taken from the preface of the book *Jostojoo ye dobāre va chand yādāvāri* by Mohammad Rezā Darvishi).

¹⁰ The main script copy of the poem given to ta'ziye performers, with details regarding their roles and dialogues, is called the fard. Each ta'ziye session, its performers and their roles have their own copies of the fard, that are placed at the disposal of the performers by the ta'ziye manager (called the mo'inolbokā), at the beginning of each session.

¹¹ Oshtolom literally means "force", "oppression", "aggression", "turmoil", "shouts", and "cries". However, in ta'ziye, it refers to the cries. The contemporary veteran vocalists are Abolhasan Eghbāl Āzar, Gholikhān Shāhi, Āghājān Sāve'i, Ziyā'oddin Ghorāb Kāshāni, popularly known as Ghorāb Hoseyn 'Ali Nakisā, Hājikhān Santori (Tāleghāni), Mirzā Rahim Kamānche'i, and Abdolvahhāb Shahidi. Moreover, most regional ta'ziye performers and ta'ziye vocalists like Tootikhān Astarābādi, Seyyed Abdolbāghi Bakhtiyāri, Mollā Hoseyn Mehrāni

Tāleghāni were well versed with Radifi music.

¹² Rajazkhāni refers to a kind of poetry that was recited by the opposing warriors at the battlefronts, eulogizing themselves and their armies, with a view to challenging the enemy.

¹³ In ta'ziye sessions, the term oliyā is used for the family members and relatives of the Shiite Imams (AS).

¹⁴ The ta'ziye in Iran is a Shiite performing art and thus the influence of ta'ziye music is only limited to those regions that are predominantly followers of Shiism. The influence of Iranian dastgāhi music on Kurdish music should be searched for in other factors. Therefore, in this article the term "various regions of Iran" refers to the predominantly Shiite regions of Iran, particularly the towns and villages in which the art of ta'ziye continues to exist.

¹⁵ According to the Dehkhodā Persian to Persian Dictionary, the term chāvoosh is originally a Turkish word meaning "one who orders the troops to attack the enemy and continues to encourage them through the entire course of the battle". Chāvooshkhāni refers to the vocal recitations of the leaders of pilgrimage caravans, mainly rendered in order to mourn the Shiite Imams (AS) or to pay respect and homage to places of pilgrimage (Dehkhodā, Persian to Persian Dictionary, vol. 16, p. 79).

¹⁶ The term chāvoosh was found in the sources belonging to the Safavid era. Keeping in view the definition given by Ali Akbar Dehkhodā of this Turkish word, in all probability the word chāvoosh entered the Persian language through the Qizilbāsh Turks.

¹⁷ *Mūsīqī ye mazhabī ye īrān* (Religious Music of Iran), p. 4.

¹⁸ A certain class of Iranians who are called dervishes, travel and wander about throughout their entire lifetimes. Their simple travel belongings usually comprise a box, a woolen cloak, and a drinking bowl (kashkool). With these meager belongings they travel throughout the country and narrate their observations and experiences for people. The people of the East and particularly the Iranians are very fond of listening to them and gather around them wherever they go, offering the dervishes money, according to their financial status.