

**MULTI-PART VOCAL TRADITION IN EASTERN FLORES
(INDONESIA), BULGARIA AND MANUS PROVINCE (PNG)****A Comparison**

While working on my dissertation (Messner, 1980) for Prof. emeritus Dr. Franz Födermayr about a traditional polyphonic style in Middle West Bulgaria, I was amazed to find a corresponding tradition existed in Eastern Flores and in Papua New Guinea. I was later able to carry out field research in these two areas and would here like to present my findings and discuss the details of the resemblances and differences between three related polyphonic traditions, which belong to a special kind of multi-part singing that I have called *Schwebungsdiaphonie* (Messner, 1980: 67-68). Although this phenomenon can be encountered in many different parts of the world, I am going to concentrate on the three regions in which I have personally carried out field-studies.

The term *Schwebungsdiaphonie* (Födermayr now suggests the English translation: Roughness Diaphony) was first introduced by me to describe a polyphonic structure that I investigated in the village of Bistritsa near Sofia in Bulgaria in which this polyphonic tradition is still alive and thriving to this day. The ancient term dia-phonia, “split singing” or “to sing apart” was already used by Vasil Stoï n, a Bulgarian musicologist, in the 1920s but I added the German term *Schwebung* to indicate the intentional use of the acoustical feature of “interference” or “beat”. This was done to identify the frequent occurrence of a peculiar [by Western standards] “roughness” in the “narrow harmonies” in the songs of the Bistritsa singers. In psychoacoustic terms this can be described as an interval of “maximal roughness” between 80 and 165 Cent, corresponding to 15-30 Hz. The sonagrams show that the frequential range of these songs in their characteristic absolute pitch below 500 Hz is restricted to a bandwidth of approximately a 100 Hz. This, however, corresponds exactly to the critical bandwidth as defined by Zwicker and Feldtkeller (Zwicker, 1967: 248pp) for this frequency range. According to Plomp and Terhardt, “maximal roughness” and “critical bandwidth” (Terhardt, 1974:201-13) are always found together within the above mentioned interval ratio, as is evident in the vocal style of Bistritsa, Flores and Baluan Island.

It is important to note that for the performers of this tradition these frequently occurring intervals do not represent a discord but are regarded as smooth and particularly beautiful.

The voice production with its typical concentration of sound energy, mainly on the 2nd, 4th, and 6th harmonics within a short range amplified spectrum of approximately 2000 Hz is also a typical feature of this vocal tradition (Sonagrams 1,2). It represents an indispensable prerequisite for audibility during an outdoor performance and for the execution and perception of micro embellishments and narrow simultaneous intervals.

Flores Island

After the distinguished Dutch ethnomusicologist Jaap Kunst published his book “Music in Flores” in 1942, the island of Flores in the Nusa Tenggara Timur province of Indonesia, became known among ethnomusicologists as *the* island of vocal multi-part traditions. Having completed my work in Bulgaria, I undertook study trips to Papua Niugini between 1977 and 1981 and to Eastern Flores between November 1988 and February 1989.

The name Flores is a short form of the Portuguese expression *Cabo da Flores* (Cape of Flores), which the sailors used for the cape at the eastern end of this island with its colorful coral reef formations known as “underwater gardens”. One of the outstanding personalities of Flores is the well known and respected Pater Piet Petu also known as Pater Sareng Orin Bao. a renowned archaeologist, paleontologist and anthropologist. He found evidence that the original name of this island was most probably *Nusa Nipa* or in English: Snake or Dragon Island (Bao, 1969).

The Underlying Pre-Christian Magico-Religious Stratum in the Three Research Areas

Eastern Flores

Erich Vatter (1932) and Paul Arndt (1951) who have studied the magico-religious belief systems of Eastern Flores and the adjacent Solor islands gave it the name *Solor* culture. They observed a fusion of animism, proto-Hinduism and Catholicism, where the Catholic element forms the thin surface layer since it was only introduced in 1565 by the Portuguese colonizers. Much of the magico-spiritual terminology can be traced back to Sanskrit. The Hinduist concept of Shiva or Siva is much older here than in Bali or Java.

Bistritsa

Bulgaria has embraced orthodox Christianity since the 8th century AD. and the wide-spread, deeply rooted local Pagan customs were increasingly adopted by Christianity and are still present. The pre-Slavonic Bulgarian language gradually vanished becoming absorbed by the Slavonic speaking majority. But many traditional songs for specific functions still reflect sturdy pre-Christian customs and concepts (Messner, 1980:196-202). This is particularly the case in regions such as Bistritsa that were considered to be remote before the construction of modern road systems.

Baluan Island

Baluan’s original socio-religious system was based on animistic concepts but already in the late 19th century the islanders were coerced to adopt Christianity which still paints the surface layer of this island culture. When I visited this place with its approx 350 inhabitants in the late 70s and early 80s, I noticed 7 different religious congregations (6 Christian and 1 Baha’i) competing with each other and in addition a

constant vacillation between one denomination and the next.

Due to the introduction of an extreme Cargo Cult by its leader Paliau during the late 40s until the early 50s, Baluan Island had been exposed to many radical changes. These events interrupted the continuation of traditional cultural activities for approximately 10 years. The radical Paliau movement, unique in Melanesia, subsequently attracted extensive research by renowned anthropologists such as e. g. Theodore Schwartz and Margaret Mead (1981:433-46; Schwartz, 1962). The disrupted traditional island culture gradually started to recover after the Paliau movement faded out in 1954. This process accelerated after Niugini became independent in 1975. It should be mentioned that several aspects of the vocal performance practices on this Island may have changed and been simplified.

Cultural Time Organization in the Three Cultural Regions Discussed Here

According to E. T. Hall one can apply the term P-Time meaning Polychronic Time (Hall, 1984:44-58) to the time concept of the Bulgarian village of Bistritsa, Baluan Island in PNG and Eastern Flores that underlies these cultures on a primary, subliminal level. It means many things are handled and processed simultaneously and the adherence to a schedule is loose and is easily readjusted in favour of the degree of closeness and importance of relationships.

This is very much in opposition to M-Time, the monochronic time organization adopted by the Euro-American culture in which one thing comes after another: schedule plays the dominant role and relationships are subject to it. In reality, of course, this is not an exclusive dichotomy.

It is imperative to keep this in mind when working with differently perceived cultural realities on a liminal, secondary cultural level (Hall, 1984), because commonly observed psycho-acoustic features are here used and perceived in many different ways.

For me it was, therefore, important to recognise that within the framework of the cultures under discussion musical functions cannot be easily abstracted from the individual performing them but need to be identified with her/him. It means that the person is, in practice, given the name of the function. The function of specialised singers or instrumentalists who have been accepted officially are completely integrated into the socio-cultural fabric. The musical pieces performed by them are sometimes given the same name, particularly in Eastern Flores. It becomes obvious that this makes it very difficult for outsiders to identify the structural elements underlying this interactive socio-cultural matrix. Vice versa, it is equally difficult for the individual participants in such a culture to explain their complex concepts to outsiders, who, relying on their M-time (mono-chronic time construct) remain locked in their own realm of experience. What for the P-Time people seems to be absolutely clear and normal, namely that function, the performing individual and the performed music are perceived as a unity, becomes for the outsider an incomprehensible entanglement of names, people, functions and music.

The artificial division of processes, episodes, functions and paraphernalia, and the distinction made between performers and onlookers during rituals is unknown in

most orally transmitted cultures. All participants have functions that are perceived as being equally valuable for the creation of the event. This does not mean that people are incapable of making distinctions. On the contrary, it shows that they are much more “in the moment” and thus are able to use altered states of consciousness at will. Strangely enough, this shows that they are very close to our contemporary scientific paradigm of reality as demonstrated in ‘Super-String Theory’ with its nonlinearity of happenings.

Social Status and Performance

This preliminary account already shows the complexity of music-making as an interactive function of socio-cultural processes. In the three cultures under discussion, the singers obtain the right to perform their particular parts with due regard for their musical capabilities but the part itself bestows a distinct social status on the performer. Thus the singer of the *oka* part, for example, enjoys the position of a respected elder in the community.

Performance Organization

In Flores there still exist more than 20 different musical cultures. The part singing tradition that roused my attention is practiced mainly in the so called *Head Region* of Eastern Flores (Messner, 1989 3-51). Here, similar to the performance organization in Bistritsa, the number of performed vocal parts in the polyphonic songs is not identical with the number of objectively perceived musical pitches in simultaneous “harmonies”. From a musical point of view, therefore, the two-part organization of the polyphonic song material prevails, although the performers consider some of their songs as being three or four part songs since three or four people perform different complementary parts. Each of these has been given a distinctive name despite the fact that only two (rarely three) simultaneous tones in a “narrow” chord can actually be “heard” and seen on sonagrams.

In this short presentation I can only hint at the truly complex, interactive song cycles and their performance peculiarities in Eastern Flores. In order to give an idea of the multifaceted terminology, I would like briefly to describe some major performance peculiarities and their part organization.

The majority of the songs in the Eastern Flores villages Tengahdei, Keka and Rianguhuo which form a cultural unity as well as in Bistritsa but not in Baluan show either a responsorial or antiphonal performance mode. A distinct exclusive tradition of polyphonic songs exists for both genders but on certain occasions some songs are also sung by a mixed group.

The following formations are the most common in the polyphonic performances that I have studied:

- 2 soloists,
- 2 choral groups,
- 1 soloist and a choral group or groups and sometimes instrumentalists.

I observed two to three main categories of polyphonic songs.

In Flores:

1. *Opak marang* (songs of descent),

2. *Berasi kremet* (work songs).

In Bistritsa:

1. Customary songs,

2. Recreation songs.

On Baluan island:

1. *Kolorai* (male epic songs),

2. *Wei'i* (female epic songs, work songs for man and women),

3. *Polpolot* (recreation songs).

Group – Structures and Designations

I. In Eastern Flores

i. In the category of *opak marang* (songs of descent)

there are three performing groups involved:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1st group: <i>opak maran(g)</i> | 1 st part opak
2 nd part marang |
| 2nd group: <i>hode ana</i> | 1 st part node ana (“classifier,”
explainer of the epic language
of the opak)
2 nd part nuku
gilik, the ghost or spirit caller
(female), performing high trills
close to the end of a song
(collective, male singers) |
| 3rd group: <i>orong</i> | |

The singing order in performance of *opak* songs is:

opak / maran(g) / nuku / node + gilik and orong

ii. In the category of *berasi* (work) songs

there are also three groups involved:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1st group: <i>hode ana</i> | 1 st part node ana (gilik)
2 nd part nuku |
| 2nd group: <i>tepok</i> | 1 st part node (gilik)
2 nd part nuku |
| 3rd group: <i>orong</i> | (if involved) |

The singing order in performance of *berasi* songs is:

nuku / node / nuku / node

For an appropriate performance the singers (either standing or sitting) lean slightly towards each other as they do in all the other cultures where this kind of multipart singing is performed.

II. In Bistritsa/Bulgaria

The polyphonic folk tradition in Bistritsa has now been performed for a considerable time by women only. I was told that long ago men may also have sung these kinds of songs. The distance from Bistritsa to Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, is only 15 km and with industrialisation, the changing job situation kept them more and more away from the communal and cultural life of the village. Men may have stopped performing it because this polyphonic tradition requires such a high degree of synchronisation.

The most elaborate songs in Bistritsa are the harvest songs and songs on the way to or from work. They show the following performance structure:

1st part: *oka* [~to call out] performed by one singer. This is the leading part performing the so called main melody.

2nd part: *buchi krivo* [crooked roarer] performed by one singer only.

This is the functional part that, besides serving other purposes, signals the conclusion of a song.

3rd part: *buchi pravo* [straight roarer] performed by the collective.

It is a strong central drone representing the ever present tonic as a compact domineering sound matrix that fuses the other two parts. The outsider then hears a rich condensed flow of sound that is internally patterned by much weaker fluctuating solo parts, thus generating the impression that the leading part is crossing the drone. But this is definitely an acoustic illusion as I can prove through an analytical recording and the diagram below. The *oka* part sings right down to the tonic which is the drone pitch and the *buchi krivo* part performs the subtonic interval (see Schema in appendix).

The only exception is the performance of songs with *tressene* (a throat trill performed by the *oka*). With this particular trill the *oka* singer crosses the drone and trills fast and repetitively below the tonic as can be seen in the sonagram 1 above.

From a musical point of view the polyphonic structures in Eastern Flores, in Bistritsa/Bulgaria and on Baluan Island in Niugini show two-component intervals. But in Bistritsa as well as in Eastern Flores, sometimes, three and four different individual- or group-parts, each with a distinct name, create and constitute the whole song.

III. On Baluan Island, Papua Niugini

The structures in Baluan/Niugini are less complex and the songs are mainly performed by two individuals.

The male *kolorai*- as well as in the female *wei'i*- and the recreational *polpolot* songs share the same performance structure and part-names. In regard to their musical forms and song texts, however, they are quite different. *Kolorais* and female *wei'is* are more elaborate and emphatic with epic texts, introduced by preludes and interspersed with interludes performed by a Baluan slit gong ensemble.

1st part of the lead singer: *isiol*

2nd part: *yaret*

(Messner, 1989:17-18, see also 1981:433-46, 1998:603-4).

Song Types

In all the three village cultures of Bistritsa, Flores and Baluan we encounter polyphonic and solo songs. In Flores and Baluan a distinct exclusive tradition of polyphonic songs exists for both genders but on certain occasions some songs are also sung by a mixed group. In these two cultures magic solo songs are still performed in order to curse or to put an evil spell on somebody or to counteract against evil spells. In Bistritsa this tradition may have faded out and polyphonic songs are now exclusively performed by women.

Conclusion

The three polyphonic traditions under discussion belong undoubtedly to the category of “drone polyphony” according to the classification of Joseph Jordania (2006) and to the subcategory of *Schwebungsdiaphonie* or “Roughness Diaphony”(Messner, 1980).

The striking similarity of many features of these three traditions that still exist resiliently in areas thousands of kilometers apart, rises the question: “is there a common origin, an ancestral form that we could discover in a particular region or do these forms have a spontaneous genesis among different peoples at different geographical locations and at different times?” Jaap Kunst has already put forward a hypothesis that has been ferociously criticized and which I have discussed in my dissertation. Since then I came to the conclusion that every hypothesis that tries to explain the origin of this phenomenon in a speculative manner remains mere fantasy until it can be based on indubitable evidence.

The comparison presented here definitely shows striking similarities in voice production, pitch range, exclamatory patterns, and performance structures. In the area of socio-cultural embodiment and interactive terminology the Solor culture of Eastern Flores still adheres to old complex interactive patterns of function – terminology – performance and performers, while in Bistritsa and on Baluan Island these patterns have already been acculturated and therefore altered. However, all three cultures display strong similarities in their time organization and repertory and in all three cultures enduring traces of animistic-shamanistic features can still be observed. This points to an older tradition and thus supports the notion of Jordania (2006: vol.2) that “the idea of the late evolution of polyphony from monophony, that has been dominating the musicological and ethnomusicological literature for more than a century, is totally unsupported by existing facts and must be discarded”.

Jordania (2006) is also convinced that we need to acknowledge that deep regional study is the “backbone” of ethnomusicology, because regional studies can certainly exist without comparative studies, whereas comparative studies totally depend on the number and quality of regional studies.

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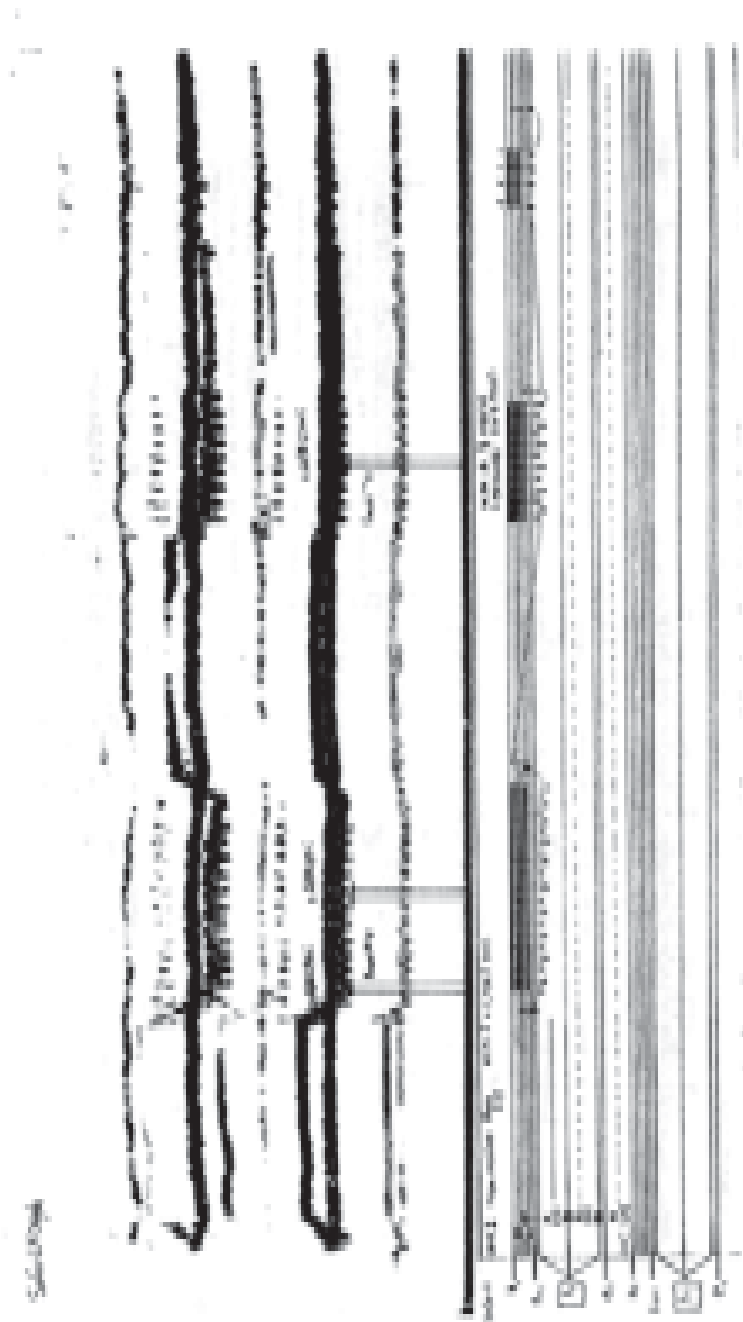
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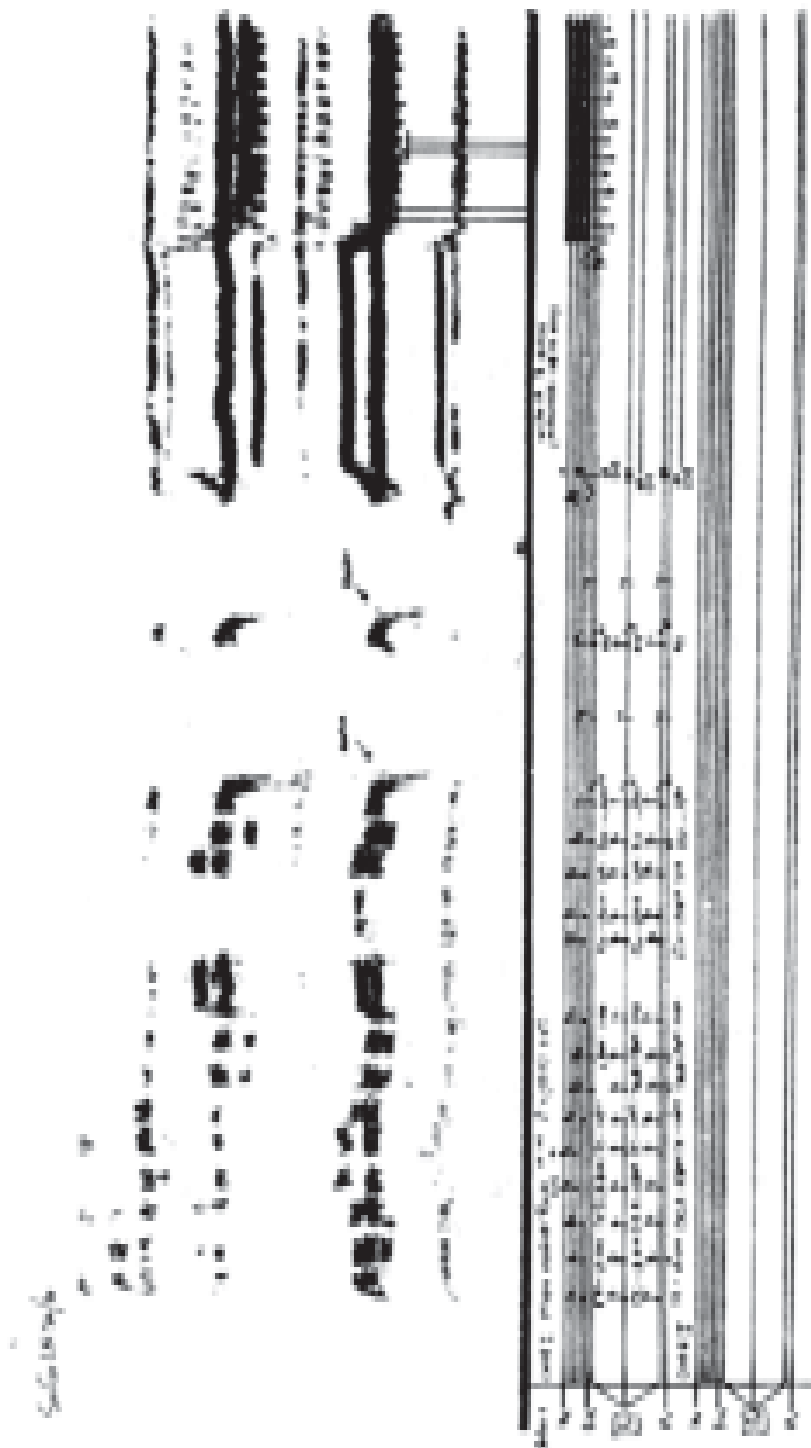
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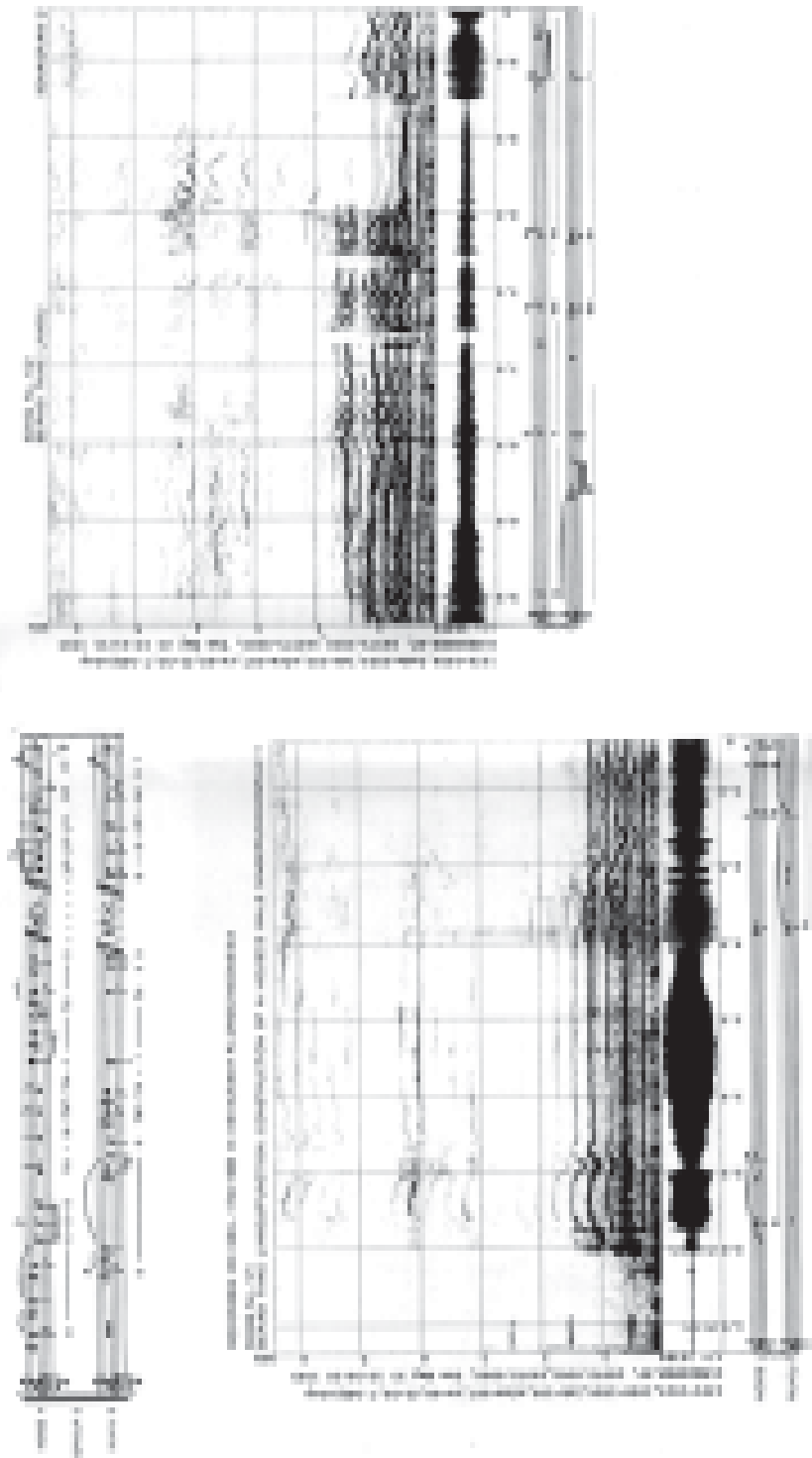
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სონოგრამა 1. ბისტრიცა, სიმღერა ყელის ტრელით, სამუშაოდ წასვლისა და მოსვლის სიმღერა.
Sonaogram 1. Bistrisa, Song with *tressene* (throat trill) on the way to or from work.





სონოგრამა 2. კუნძული ფლორესი, ბერასი ტაკე ლონგი, კაცების შრომის სიმღერა.
Sonagram 2. Flores, Berasi Take Longu male work song



სქემა
Schema

