

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The "Sobbing" Quality in a Hupa Brush Dance Song

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/05z6s9k6>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 6(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Keeling, Richard

Publication Date

1982

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The "Sobbing" Quality in a Hupa Brush Dance Song¹

RICHARD KEELING

ETHNOGRAPHIC INTRODUCTION

In the years before 1850 the Indians who lived along the lower reaches of the Klamath and Trinity Rivers in Northwestern California enjoyed a fantastic wealth of natural resources. Salmon and acorns were so plentiful that subsistence needs could be met by working no more than a few months out of the year. These Indians—the Yurok, Hupa, and Karok—lived in permanent villages in stout semi-subterranean houses made of cedar planks or thick redwood boards.²

Among these three groups there was great focus on symbols of wealth, also. The main type of money was dentalium shells, but other classes of objects were also recognized as treasures. These included scarlet-colored woodpecker scalps, large flaked blades of obsidian, unusually colored deerskins, and other objects that were precious for their significance in religious ceremonies. Men had their forearms tattooed as a means of calculating the value of strings of shell money, and each could precisely figure the worth of his redwood canoe or the bride price he could demand when his daughter was ready for marriage.

Ironically, there was no central authority among these peoples. Rather, affairs in a given small village were settled informally among a relatively few of the richest males. They were known in Yurok as *pergerk*, "real men" or "real people," and it was believed that their wealth and power accrued from their spiritual superiority over lesser individuals.

These aristocrats slept in the sweathouse apart from their women and children. The sweathouse was also the center of their personal medicine making. This practice meant general avoidance of females and sex and virtually phobic avoidance of females in menstruation. It meant periods of ascetic abstinence from food and water, also, and personal withdrawal to places such as Doctor Rock or Red Mountain, where the men would pray for luck. They prayed individually for money or for the ability to kill game, but more than anything else as a means of spiritual purification.

These practices were based upon a complex of religious beliefs centering around what the Yurok called *wahgey*. The *wahgey* were a race of pre-human beings who were believed to have inhabited the Klamath and Trinity River watersheds before there were people (Indians). When humans arrived on the scene, the *wahgey* did not disappear but rather were thought to have turned into trees, acorns, fish, deer, lizards, and all other elements of the landscape. Thus pre-contact Indians seem to have viewed their forest and river environment as totally invested with the spirits of *wahgey*.³

Aristocratic Yuroks spoke embellished, idiosyncratic versions of that tongue which would come to be called "wahgey language" in Yurok (Kroeber, 1960), and the spiritual practices, abstentions, and special code of manners that they embraced were evidently an attempt to identify themselves with the *wahgey*—and by extension, with the landscape in which they were manifest.

Thus, the Yurok aristocrat sought to purge himself from the contaminating elements of his human-ness through the spiritual practices which would be called "training" in English. This formed the basis of Erik Erikson's psychological interpretation of Yurok culture in *Childhood and Society*, in which the author writes:

The Yurok speak of "clean" living, not of "strong" living as do the Sioux. Purity consists of continuous avoidance of impure contacts and contaminations, and of constant purification from possible contaminations (Erikson, 1963: 143).

There is, however, a considerable gap in meaning between the English word "clean" and the Yurok word *merwerksergerh* which it displaced (Robins, 1958: 225). The special flavor of the indigenous concept is evident in the following quotation from

Florence Shaughnessy, a Yurok woman who currently resides down at the mouth of the Klamath at Requa.

You come upon a place you've never seen before, and it has awesome beauty. Everything above you, below you, and around you is so pure—that is the beauty we call *merwerksergerh*, and the pure person is also *merwerksergerh* (Matthiessen, 1978: 62).

Nowadays they say that a person "trains" to be clean, but to train meant more than avoiding sex or drinking; it also meant praying and being at some special place—the object of it being to escape from the human condition and to have *wahgey* experience. Abstention and removal signified commitment to this escape and marked a threshold between the profane and the sacred.

In pre-contact times, wealth and welfare were equated with absorption in these practices, and the commoners who could not attain to sweathouse society were viewed, generally, as degenerates for whom bad luck and sickness were congenital. Living correctly not only implied scrupulous involvement in purification rituals, but also it called for a multitude of avoidance customs or prohibitions. To have sex after having deer, for example, was considered grossly corrupt. This was the kind of negligence that could result in sickness or bad luck sooner or later.

Interestingly, however, such penalties might not befall the offending individual himself; often, it was thought, they were inherited by the violator's children.

THE BRUSH DANCE AND ITS MUSIC

Traditionally the Brush Dance was a curing ritual held for just such a child. It was performed for one who was feverish, sickly, delicate, moody—or even for a child who had no evident problems, especially if the parents had lost other children and felt they needed to insure the welfare of the one.

In the center of a Brush Dance pit, a medicine woman and her helper work on the baby. They hold it in the steam produced by certain herbs, massage it, and wave burning sticks of pitchwood over it. While these things are done, men and younger girls sing as a means of assisting in the ritual therapy. The singer is supposed to concentrate on the well-being of the child, and

the music as a whole may be viewed as an effort to magnify the attention of the group and to focus it on the single goal of "helping" the baby.

All of these songs are short, generally a minute or two in length, and there are two types: heavy songs and light songs. The heavy songs tend to be more religious in nature and slower in tempo than the light songs.

Among the many unusual stylistic characteristics of Brush Dance singing (the glottalized ostinato accompaniment, the curious "sighing" stop patterns, and occasional use of a complex multi-part texture), one aspect that impresses many listeners concerns vocal quality or vocal production techniques in the solo part. There is a pervasive soulful or tragic quality in these songs. Frequently, in the heavy songs sung by men, the soloist sounds as if he were sobbing, crying, or choked with emotion.

This expressive quality can be equated with specific musical parameters. Example One provides a transcription of a Heavy Song sung by Herman Sherman, Sr., a respected Hupa traditionalist who lives in Hoopa Valley.⁴ We first note that there is great rhythmic freedom in this solo part, which employs irregular metric groupings and much rubato. Tempo is rather changeable.

As one can see from the scalar analysis (See Example One, "Tonal Material"), intonation is quite inconsistent or non-specific. The two lowest scale tones *e* (165 cps) and *f#* (185 cps) occur both as focused pitches and as unfocused, speech-like tones (indicated by *x*'s). Each of the other scale tones is intoned in variants that differ as much as a minor second, and in other examples this variability may be more extreme. Thus it is perhaps more reasonable to speak of "scale tone areas" rather than scale tones, *per se*.

In Example Two, staff notations of the first eighteen seconds of this song are supplemented by tracings of sound registrations produced by a melograph.⁵ Here the upper graph indicates frequency and the lower one, amplitude.

In Mr. Sherman's Heavy Song there is distinct or even exaggerated vocal pulsation. Nearly all the sung tones could be notated with the wavy line indicating tremolo. The sound registrations make it evident that this pulsation consists basically in oscillation of pitch rather than loudness.

The extremely wide tremolo of the opening motive (0" through 2") narrows considerably into the more focused, true vibrato

Example 1. HEAVY SONG sung by Herman Sherman, Sr.

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 100-110$

Rh¹

I

a *b* *c* $\frac{1}{2}$ step flat

Rh¹ *Rh²*

h(ə)ey — ya hu wæg) w(ə)a — (ow) hey na 'a yay yo — ha ya ya he yo

b¹ *b²* *sffz* *sffz*

ə-a hey ya 'e 'oh hey na ho wə ya 'ew wægə 'heydn 'wæ gə

sffz *sffz*

'heydn 'wæ gə

II

a¹ *b*

'ə ah — 'ə-ah 'ah 'ah yay yo —

b *b²*

'a 'a 'a yay yo — ə ah ah ya yay yo —

Rh¹ *Rh²* *sffz* *sffz*

hey na ho wə yo — wæ gə heytn 'ow wə heytn wæ gə

III *Rh³* *sffz* *Rh⁴*

hey na ho wə he wə wæ gə

Example 1. (Continued)

IV b^3 b^4

lah 'a hey ya 'ah ha(a) 'a hay yo - 'owwe

hiytn ho we hiytn wa ge heytn ho we

V b^5 b^6

a-a - 'a hay ya - 'a ha 'a'ey ya 'e

hiytn ho we hiytn ho we hiytn

VI Closing "flourish"

(a - ah - ha - ha - ha.

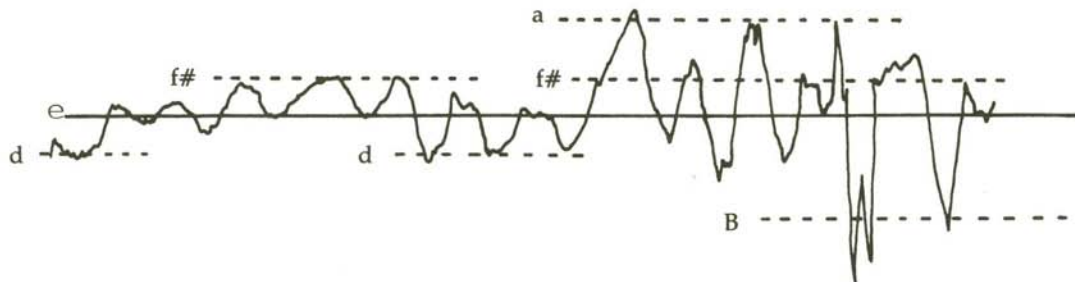
Tonal Material

Example 2. Tracings of sound registrations of the first eighteen seconds of the previous example.

0"

1"

2"



8 $h(\partial)e - e - e - ey$ ya hu $w\partial - (g)$

Example 2. (Continued)

3" 4" 5" 6"

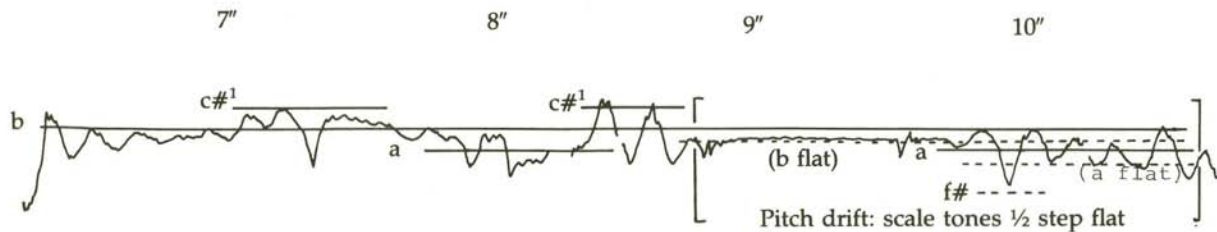


[—]



8 w(a) - a _____ (aw)

Example 2. (Continued)



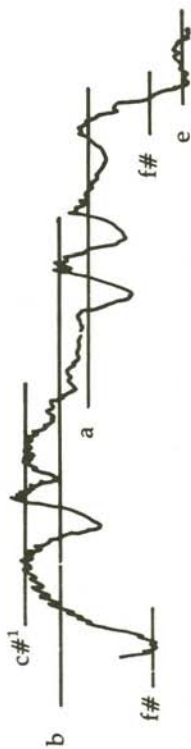
8 hey na 'a yay yo ha ya ya ha yo

3 3

(b.) (b.) (b.) (b.)

Example 2. (Continued)

11" 12" 13"



[—] [—]



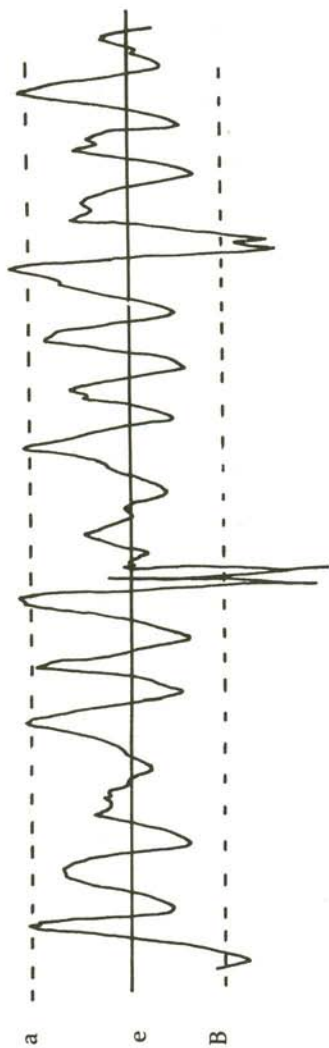
8 2-'a hey-(i)ya 'ə oh

Example 2. (Continued)

16"

15"

14"

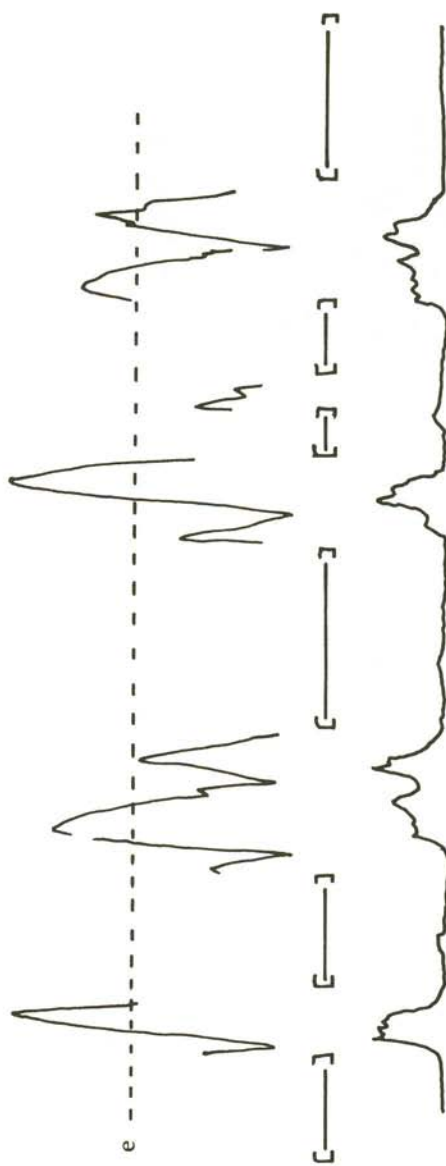


Example 2. (Continued)

16"

17"

18"



Musical score for the word "heydn". The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 8/8 time. It features a forte dynamic (*sfz*) and includes accents over the notes. The lyrics "heydn" and "wæ gə" are written below the notes. The score includes a fermata at the end.

shown on the following page (3" through 6"). In the next pages (7" through 10" and 11" through 13") one can see that articulations in Mr. Sherman's singing are extremely slurred rather than clearly enunciated.

On the penultimate page (14" through 16") there is little pitch focus in the frequency graph. Here the singer articulates the vocables orally while producing a steady, reverberating nasal resonance at the same time. On the last page of this example (16" through 18"), the amplitude graph indicates how the rhythmic pulse becomes more pronounced as Mr. Sherman uses the explosive, glottalized delivery that the accompanists would also be using in an ostinato fashion if the song were actually being performed in context.

SONG AND SPEECH IN ORAL-EXPRESSIVE MAGIC

This singing style fits into an overall philosophy that was dominated by the use of music in magic. Songs and spoken formulas alike were employed (traditionally) as a necessary part of subsistence activities and a wide range of other personal pursuits.

Indeed, a list of song types collected by Alfred Kroeber in the early 1900s reads like an inventory of indigenous pastimes and institutions. Among others, the following song-types were found:⁶

1. Money medicine song
2. Deer hunting song
3. Medicine for easy delivery of child
4. Medicine for childless woman to have a child
5. Song sung if fox cries at one
6. Medicine song used in boat when water is rough
7. Medicine from Buzzard for stomach sickness
8. Song sung by person wishing to meet and succeed in killing enemy
9. Song sung by murderer to enable him to escape when pursued by relatives of his victim
10. Song to purify money paid in exchange for life of murder victim
11. Lucky song for gathering acorns
12. Medicine song to dissolve anger
13. Song for doctoring a sick dog.

Many other types of songs of this general sort (i.e., those which were identified only through their function) could be added and listed here. Naturally enough, this pervasive use of song in what may be called "oral-expressive magic" had a formative influence on the most basic aspects of song-performance style.

Generally, for example, short and repetitive forms predominate as is especially evident in the earlier recordings collected by Kroeber and Goddard between 1900 and 1910. In these types, melodic material is quite simple; one or two motives are simply repeated *ad libitum*. Correspondingly, texts of songs were either highly repetitive or non-existent, the voice being used in an instrumental manner.

Little premium was placed on exactitude in musical performance. Conversely, indigenous conceptions of music as a vehicle for willing, wishing, or prayer placed great emphasis on emotional expressivity. The songs seem to have employed as a form of auto-suggestion and manifest a distinct hypnotic quality. Stylistically, this quality included a very tense vocal style with much slurring rather than distinct articulations. Tremolo, glottalization, and a pervasive nasal quality were also quite evident, and these features may perhaps be explained in still greater detail.

THE "SOBBING" QUALITY

At the outset of this paper I noted the personal rituals that aristocratic males went through as an effort to purify themselves. Abstaining from sex, food, and water—and withdrawing to some private spot, the individual would work himself up into an emotional and intense state that bordered on hysteria. He hoped, in this manner, to provoke some vision.

The earliest White observers to record their impressions of these practices—Carl Meyer in 1850 (Heizer and Whipple, 1951: 269), Stephen Powers in the 1870s (Powers, 1877:25), and Alfred Kroeber in the early 1900s (Kroeber, 1925:41)—were each struck by the fact that this training involved such a pitch of ecstatic abandon. Powers, in particular, describes seeing individuals wandering about seemingly dazed and incoherently weeping. Apparently, this was viewed as an appropriate state to attain during ritual sweat-house activities and other modes of training.

These reports are confirmed by the seemingly emotional quality evident in archival recordings of songs connected with these early practices. Many of these recordings⁷ would be most difficult to render in conventional staff notations for various reasons. The pitches employed are quite slurred and unfocused, and rhythmic patterns are undefined or inconsistent. Motives tend to be descending in contour, by microtonal increments, and delivered in a very tense and nasal voice that gives the impression of sobbing or crying.

CONCLUSIONS

It was Alan Lomax who posed the question for which this paper is intended as an answer. We had been listening to a series of Brush Dance songs and discussing how they should be coded within the system known as Cantometrics. At one point, Lomax seemed to focus on one in particular, and then—playing the beginning of it over and over again—he asked me what I thought the singer was trying to convey. "The important thing," I seem to recall him saying, "is what that singer means by that."

It was a difficult question to answer in few words, but as time went by the subject stuck with me, and it seemed more possible to make a plausible response.

In this paper I have tried to relate subjective emotional quality with specific vocal production techniques. Expressivity and stylistic mannerism are equated in terms of a phonology that is common to both.

The tragic or sobbing quality originally noted in heavy songs of the Brush Dance (and also even more evident in early recordings of sweathouse songs) can also be found in other genres of ritual importance—especially those involving purification or renewal. These would include Jump Dance songs, Deerskin Dance songs, and many other types. Generally speaking, it is not a feature of female performance style, except where there is institutionalized reversal of sexual roles, which may be said to occur in some of the songs sung by women who are Indian Doctors.

Stylistically, it is equated with a specific complex of vocal production techniques or mannerisms, namely those associated with crying or sobbing itself:

1. Extreme vocal tension
2. Descending (or sometimes undulating) contours with microtonal movement
3. Pervasive nasality and glottalization
4. Vocal pulsation consisting of tremolo or marked pitch oscillation.

The vocal style would seem to reflect a culturally valued emotional state directly related to purification rituals of the pre-contact period. Indeed, among these peoples this "sobbing" vocal quality seems to have had significant aesthetic value in and of itself, since it represents transcendence of the normal human condition and validation of an individual's heightened religious experience.

NOTES

1. A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology for 1981 at Honolulu, Hawaii.

2. Parallels between the lifestyles of these three groups have led to their being grouped together in this manner since the publication of Kroeber's "Types of Indian Culture in California" in 1904. There are, however, real differences among the three tribes in specific expressions of religious beliefs and in their song performance styles, and the reader should bear this in mind even though this paper focuses on broader outlines of the cultural configuration and vocal style.

Major sources for the present ethnographic summary are the chapters of the Yurok in Kroeber's *Handbook of the Indians of California* (Kroeber, 1925: 1-97), Goddard's *Life and Culture of the Hupa* (Goddard, 1903-4: 1-88), and the chapters by Pilling (pp. 137-154), Wallace, (pp. 164-179), and Bright (pp. 180-189) in the *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 8: California* (1978).

3. The palpability of this world-view seems to have disintegrated soon after 1850. White prospectors had flooded into the area after gold was discovered on the upper Trinity River around that time, and they thoroughly disrupted the economic basis of Indian life. The secularization of indigenous religious conceptions that occurred between ca. 1850 and the middle of the twentieth century is treated in Keeling (1980: 55-83).

4. At this point the recording (duration: 55 seconds) was played twice. It was originally recorded by the author at Mr. Sherman's house on May 9, 1979.

5. Tracings of sound registrations produced by the melograph *Mona* (Institute for Musicology, Uppsala University) were used extensively in the dissertation from which the present example was drawn. This technique proved very useful for depicting various aspects of the performance style. Thus, there was graphic portrayal of characteristic vocal mannerisms and of the pervasive microtonality which would otherwise have been treated more subjectively.

6. These types were identified from field recordings in the Archive of Ethnographic Sound Recordings at Lowie Museum of Anthropology (University of California at Berkeley). These and other titles are also listed in a catalogue prepared by Richard Keeling (1979).

7. At this point, two examples were played: (1) Song used when gathering wood for the sweathouse (50 seconds), sung by Umiits of Kepel (Yurok) and recorded by Alfred Kroeber in 1906; and (2) Medicine song for money (50 seconds), sung by Tom Hill (Hupa) and recorded by Pliny Earle Goddard in 1903. These were also obtained from the Lowie Museum and are among the titles listed in Keeling (1979).

REFERENCES

- Bright, William. Karok. In *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 8: California*, edited by Robert Heizer (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), pp. 80–89.
- Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc.), 1963.
- Goddard, Pliny Earle. Life and Culture of the Hupa. *University of California Publications in American Archeology and Ethnology* 1(1): 1–88. Berkeley, 1903–4.
- Heizer, Robert F. and M. A. Whipple. *The California Indians: A Source Book* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press). Second edition, revised and enlarged, 1971.
- Keeling, Richard. *Catalogue of a Collection of Sound Recordings Made from 1902 to 1975, Representing Songs of the Yurok, Tolowa, Hupa, Karok, K!onomihu, Wiyot, and Chilula Indians*. Unpublished manuscript (70 pages), 1979.
- The Secularization of the Modern Brush Dance: Cultural Devastation in Northwestern California. *American Indian Research and Culture Journal*, Volume 4, Number 4 (1980), pp. 55–83.
- Songs of the Brush Dance and their Basis in Oral-Expressive Magic: Music and Culture of the Yurok, Hupa and Karok Indians of Northwestern California* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation in Music, University of California at Los Angeles).
- Kroeber, Alfred L. Types of Indian Culture in California. *University of California Publications in American Archeology and Ethnology* 2 (3): 81–103. Berkeley, 1904.
- Handbook of the Indians of California*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 78. Washington, 1925.
- The Yurok Culture. In *The Structure of Twana Culture*, by William Elmenendorf. *Research Studies: A Quarterly Publication of Washington State University* 28 (3), Monographic Supplement 2. Pullman, 1960, pp. 567–569.
- Matthiessen, Peter. Stop the GO Road. *Audubon Magazine* 1: 1, (1979), pp. 48–65.
- Pilling, Arnold. Yurok. In the *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 8: California*, edited by Robert Heizer (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), pp. 137–154.
- Powers, Stephen. Tribes of California. *Contributions to North American Ethnology* 3 (Washington: United States Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region), 1877.
- Wallace, William J. Hupa, Chilula, and Whilkut. In *Handbook of the North American Indians, Volume 8: California*, edited by Robert Heizer (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), pp. 164–179.