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Peacock Motifs in Rig Vedic Hymns and Hungarian Folksongs

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Abstract. Comparative musicology can link together the musical traditions of distant people. For example, Kodály found interesting melodic similarities between Hungarian and Mari folksongs. Although he found no melodic similarities between Hungarian and Indian folksongs, Kodály also believed that the *peacock motif* in Hungarian folksongs had an Indian origin. That would imply that texts with certain motifs are preserved even more than the melodies in folksongs. In this paper we show that it is indeed the case by describing a possible Rig Vedic origin of various Hungarian folksong texts with the peacock motif.

1 Introduction

People have a remarkable tendency to repeat songs without much attention to the exact meaning of its words. That remarkable tendency is probably due to two reasons. First, the primary goal of singing is to evoke an emotional effect rather than to convey some knowledge. This emotional effect can be achieved by a somewhat cryptic text with the same ease as a clearer text. Second, changing the text of a song is difficult while preserving the rhythm and the melody of the song. Hence the text of folksongs can preserve some phrases even more precisely than folk tales and folk ballads can preserve. Nevertheless, it is usually difficult to tell whether in an individual folksong a particular phrase is ancient. Distinguishing between ancient and later phrases becomes easier when an original song survives in several variations because the variations can be compared with each other. In general, the commonalities can be presumed to be ancient, while the disparities can be presumed to be later additions.

We can use textual comparison in combination with word etymology developed by linguists and music history developed by musicologists to deduce the hypothetical original forms of folksongs. Using this combination method, we deduce below the hypothetical original forms of three Hungarian folksongs. While such reconstructions cannot be expected to be precise, the reconstructed forms can be assumed to be close to the true originals. Moreover, the reconstructed forms allow an interpretation of the original songs in terms of pagan mythology and religion.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the data sources, including references to the studied motifs and folksongs. Section 3 presents the results of our analysis of the folksongs in terms of the motifs. Section 4 provides related works. Finally, Section 5 gives some conclusions and directions for future work.

2 Data sources

The peacock is a native to India, which seems to be the source of most peacock motifs. Section 2.1 describes the peacock motifs that we found by consulting the literature on peacocks in the myths and art of India. Section 2.2

presents four Hungarian folksongs with English translations that contain some peacock motif.

2.1 Peacock and related motifs

Our literature search of the role of peacocks in the art and myths of India and neighboring cultures reveals that the peacock motifs can be categorized into four groups as follows:

1. Peacock is a *god* or symbol of a god.
The name of the god is:
 - a. Murugan's mount *Paravani* (Tamil)
 - b. *Tammuz* (Sumerian)
 - c. *Malik-i-Ta'us* (Yezidi)
 - d. *Tari* (Khond)
2. Peacock is the *ancestor* of a people and/or the *name* of a people derives from peacock.
 - a. *Mayura*, *Mayurbhanja* (India)
 - b. *Magyar* (Hungarian)
3. Peacock is a *lover*.
4. Peacock is a *carrier of souls* of the dead.
5. The name of heaven is:
 - a. Abode of the 33 devas (Hindu)
 - b. *Trayastrīṃśa* (Buddhist)
6. The name of some important gods:
 - a. Yama, god of death (Hindu/Buddhist)
 - b. Yima, god of death (Zoroastrianism)
 - c. Juma, god of sky (Finno-Permic)
 - d. Juno, wife of sky god Jove (Latin)

Motif 1 occurs in southern India among the Tamils who consider their supreme god, Murugan, a deified peacock according to Nair [8]. In Sumer, a peacock was associated with Tammuz, a life-death-rebirth deity. Finally, this motif also occurs among the Yezidis whose high god is Malik-i-Ta'us, which can be translated as "king peacock" [8]. It can be found also among the Khonds, a tribal people in India, who represent the Earth-Goddess, called Tari, as a peacock [17].

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Table 1. Four different Hungarian folksongs with peacock motifs. The first three numbered items are from Kodály [5].

Folksong 1	English Translation
Leszállott a páva vármegye házára. De nem ám a rabok szabadulására.	The peacock flew down to the courthouse. But not to free the prisoners.
Folksong 95	
Szomorú fűzfának harminchárom ága Arra reá szállott harminchárom páva Ki zöldbe, ki kékbe, ki földig fehérbe, Csak az én édesem tiszta feketébe. Szólítottam volna, szántam búsítani Egy ilyen efiát megszorítani.	A weeping willow tree has thirty-three branches Thirty-three peacocks flew onto it Some are dressed in green, some in blue, some in white to the ground Only my beloved is completely black I would have called him, but I felt sorry to tell him And sadden such a man.
Folksong 101	
Leszállott a páva vármegye házára, Szájába visz vizet a rabok számára.	The peacock flew down to the courthouse. In its beak takes water for the prisoners.
Folksong D	
Zöld erdőben, zöld mezőben sétálgat egy páva Kék a lába, zöld a szárnya, aranyos a tolla. Hívott engem útítársnak, el is megyek véle, Vásárhelyen nincsen olyan legény, sejt, aki nekem kéne. Édesanyám, kedves anyám, menjen az erdőbe, Keresse meg azt a pávát, kérdezze meg tőle, Nem látta-e a kedvesem abban az erdőben, Kiért fáj a, fáj a gyöngye szívem, sejt meg is halok érte.	In a green forest, on a green meadow walks a peacock He has blue legs, green wings, and golden feathers He called me as a travel companion. I'll go with him I cannot find any lad whom I like at Vásárhely Mother, my mother, go to the forest Find that peacock and ask him Whether he saw my beloved in that forest For whom my weak heart aches, hejt, I will die for her

Motif 2 occurred in Mayurbhanja, India, where the chiefs claimed their lineage from a peacock [6]. The Sanskrit name of peacock is *mayura*. The name *mayura* may have some connection with *magyar*, which is the self-name of the Hungarians. This self-name originally referred to only the tribe of Hungarians from which came the House of Árpád, an early medieval ruling dynasty. In Hungarian myths, the ancestor of the Hungarians is a magical bird called *Turul*, which seems to derive from a Turkish name for hawk [22]. It is possible that the name of *mayura* was replaced by *turul* under Turkish influence in the ancestor myths, while the self-designation modified only slightly to *magyar*. That is a reasonable assumption given that whatever name people had, they usually were assumed to have had an eponymous ancestor.

Motif 3 occurs in a folksong in Gujarat, where the wife of a prince falls in love with a peacock (Lal [6], p. 32).

Motif 4 was apparently believed in the Indus Valley Civilization because a peacock is shown carrying a dead body in its stomach on a Harappan pottery [6].

Motif 5 the second heaven in Buddhist cosmology is called *Trāyastriṃśa*, which derives from an adjective formed from the numeral 33 and can be translated in English as "belonging to the thirty-three [devas]" described in ancient Vedic literature [21].

Motif 6, *Yama*, the god of death of Hindu and Buddhist religion, may have some connection to the common Finno-Ugric name of the chief god, Jumala, according to Steblin-Kamenskij [18].

2.2 Hungarian folksongs with peacock motifs

The peacock motif survives only in a few Hungarian folksongs. Table 1 presents four folksongs. The first three folksongs are from Kodály [5], while the fourth folksong is another popular song. We omit the scores of these folksongs and present only their texts, which is the subject of analysis in this paper. On the right side of

Table 1, we also give our English translations of these folksongs. In our translations we aimed to be faithful to the words of the original texts.

3 Analyses of the Motifs

3.1 The motifs contained in the folksongs

Below we give a brief interpretation of each folksong and identify the motifs that occur in them. It needs to be remembered that these songs spread by oral traditions that kept modifying the text over centuries. In addition, references to pagan religious concepts had to be veiled in a dominant Christian culture. Many times the veiled references became unintelligible to the singers too. Therefore, many of the original details were lost.

Folksong 1 in its present form is extremely cryptic. It helps to remember the historical context that prisoners were often executed. Therefore, when the peacock appears, then it appears to await the execution of the prisoners and then carrying their souls to heaven. Such an appearance of the peacock is not for the physical release of the prisoners, which is the reason the song says that the peacock did not come to free the prisoners. The text of this song as Kodály [5] recorded seems more original than the apparently later versions where the first line urges the peacock to fly, or second line claims that the peacock came to free the prisoners. The latter small change in text with opposite meaning could have occurred at some revolutionary period of history, when the people's sympathies were with the prisoners. In summary, Folksong 1 contains peacock motifs 1 and 4.

Folksong 95 is about a wife dying. As she dies, her soul is taken to the heaven by peacocks. The thirty-three references the thirty-three divines of Hindu mythology, which are mentioned in the Rig Veda, and from which *Trāyastriṃśa*, the name of the second heaven of Buddhist mythology, derives. As her soul flies over the village

where she lives, she sees the people dressed in various colors except her husband, who is dressed in black as a sign of mourning. She would like to tell him something, but she is afraid to scare him. In summary, Folksong 95 contains the following motifs: 1 because peacocks symbolize the thirty-three divines, 4 because peacocks carry the wife to heaven, 5 because the number thirty-three also references heaven.

Folksong 101 is clearly just a corrupted version of folksong 1. The original understanding of what the peacock symbolizes was completely lost. Hence a new function of the peacock was found, that is, to carry water for the prisoners. Rational thinking would disallow this as a good reason. First, peacock cannot carry water in their beaks, especially enough for a group of prisoners. Second, there surely were some mean wardens in the past. However, any warden who prematurely killed the prisoners by not giving them water would have incurred the wrath of the authorities. The authorities intended the prisoners' executions to be public events as a deterrent to the people. The premature death of the prisoners would have prevented the show. Therefore, Folksong 101 can be assumed to be a corrupted version of Folksong 1 and originally also contained motifs 1 and 4.

Folksong D is about a woman falling in love with a peacock. The peacock is very special, far better than anyone she could find in her village. The peacock asks the woman to come with him, and the woman agrees. The earthy lover of the woman misses her and asks his mother to inquire from the peacock about the woman. He is so heartbroken that he almost dies from sorrow. In summary, Folksong D contains the following motifs: 1 is hinted at because of the magic qualities of the peacock, 3 because of the woman falls in love with the peacock, 4 because the journey's destination is heaven, that is, the woman has to die to accompany the peacock on their journey.

Table 2 summarizes the motifs distribution in the four folksongs. We call the motif similarity of two songs A, and B, denoted $\text{sim}(A, B)$, the number of motifs on which they agree. For example, $\text{sim}(95, 101) = 2$.

3.2 Text parallelism in folksongs 95 and D

As we saw, folksong 101 is likely a modified version of folksong 1. Here we show that folksongs 95 and D are also closely related by showing that they have significant line-by-line text parallelisms.

Table 2. The distribution of the six motifs in the four Hungarian folksongs and in the Rig Vedic hymn (V)

Folksong	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	✓			✓		
95	✓			✓	✓	
101	✓			✓		
D	✓		✓	✓		
V	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Tables 3 and 4 below show the parallelism in Hungarian and English, respectively. Some lines were broken into parts A and B. The parallelism is most obvious when the same words are used, like "peacock" in both line 2 of folksong 95 and line 1B in folksong D, or the words "blue" and "green" in line 3 of folksong 95 and line 2 of folksong D. The parallelism is also clear when only synonym words are used, such as the two synonym words for "call" in line 5A of folksong 95 and line 3 of folksong D. The willow tree with thirty-three branches in line 1 of folksong 95 can be also recognized to parallel the forest in line 1A of folksong D. The other parallels in Tables 3 and 4 are similarly plausible.

3.3 Reconstruction of the common original form of folksongs 95 and D

There are enough variations between folksongs 95 and D to make it unlikely that one is a simply a later version of the other. There would be no real reason to change the text from one synonym word to another synonym word. Instead, the situation seems to be more likely to have resulted from two different translations of the same original song into Hungarian. The hypothetical original song probably contained some version of all six parallel elements of the lines and half lines shown in Table 3. For each parallel element, the reconstruction needs to decide whether to prefer the version in folksong 95, the version in folksong D or some combination.

For the first parallel element in Table 1, line 1 of folksong 95 seems more original because "willow tree" is more concrete than "green forest" and the occurrence of the number thirty-three seems an archaic feature as a reference to *Trayastrimśā*.

For the second parallel element in Table 1, the two folksongs agree that the peacock appears. However, the folksongs disagree about the way the appearance occurs.

Table 3. Textual parallelisms of two Hungarian folksongs highlighted by different colors.

#	Folksong 95	Folksong D	#
1	Szomorú fűzfának harminchárom ága	Zöld erdőben, zöld mezőben	1A
2	Arra reá szállott harminchárom páva	sétálgat egy páva	1B
3	Ki zöldbe, ki kékbe, ki földig fehérbe,	Kék a lába, zöld a szárnya, aranyos a tolla.	2
5A	Szólítottam volna,	Hívott engem útitársnak, el is megyek véle,	3
5B	szántam búsítani	Kiért fáj a, fáj a gyöngye szívem,	8A
6	Egy ilyen efiát megszorítani.	sej meg is halok érte.	8B

Table 4. An English summary of the parallel elements in the two folksongs

#95	#1	#95 element	#D element	Explanation
1	1A	willow tree	forest	forest substitutes for tree with many branches
2	1B	peacock	peacock	
3	2	blue, green, white	blue, green, gold	white substitutes for gold
5A	3	call	call	two synonym words for "call"
5B	8A	feel sorry [for someone]	heart aches	feelings of sorrow is common element
6	8B	husband mourns wife	lover mourns beloved	mourning is common element

Folksong 95 claims that the peacock flew onto the previously mentioned willow tree, which we already chose as more likely to be the original element. In contrast, folksong D claims that the peacock was walking in the “green meadow” that seems to be only an added phrase after “green forest” perhaps as a replacement of the number thirty-three. Hence “flew onto it” seems the original form.

For the third parallel element in Table 3, several colors are mentioned. The colors refer to people’s clothes in folksong 95, and to the leg, the wing and the feathers of the peacock in folksong D. It seems that the reference to the peacock’s feathers is the original reference, while the other references are later additions. Although there is a superficial agreement on the blue and the green colors, their order is different and they refer to different things. In addition, blue and green are natural associations with peacocks that could be added at any later stage and contain no surprise element for the listeners. The differences in the details and the lack of a surprise element suggest that the blue and green references were not part of the original song. It seems that white in folksong 95 substitutes for gold in folksong D, and reference to clothes substitutes for feathers. Hence in our reconstruction, we kept the reference to the golden feathers of the peacock.

For the fourth parallel element in Table 3, it makes more sense for the peacock to call rather than the singer to call her husband. However, the peacock calling the woman simply for a journey (implicitly to heaven) is more likely than calling for a travel companion. The phrase “útítárs” (travel companion) likely developed out of “út” (journey) after the awareness that this journey is a journey to heaven was lost.

For the fifth parallel element in Table 3, in folksong 95 the phrase “fáj a szívem” (my heart aches) seems original but curiously the word “fáj” (ache) is repeated. In folksong D, the words “szán” (feel sorrow for someone, pity) and “búsul” (feel sorrowful) are synonyms for heartache. Hence it seems likely that the original song, like folksong D, contained two different synonym words for sorrow. As a compromise approach, in our reconstruction, we picked once both “búsul” from folksong D and “fáj a szívem” from folksong 95.

For the sixth parallel element in Table 3, the death of the singer is common. Folksong 95 implies that the husband would also die of sorrow if he would know about the death of his wife (that’s why the wife is afraid to call him). That is more indirect and contrived than folksong D’s statement of “meg is halok” (I will die). Therefore folksong D’s phrasing is chosen for the reconstruction.

Based on the above arguments, we reconstruct the original song as follows:

Szomorú fűzfának harminchárom ága,
 Arra reá szállott arany tollú páva
 Hívott engem útra, el is megyek véle,
 Búsul, fáj a szívem, meg is halok érte.

The English translation of the reconstructed song is the following:

A weeping willow tree has thirty-three branches.
 A golden-feathered peacock flew onto it.
 He called me to a journey. I’ll go with him.
 My heart aches from sadness. I’ll die for him.

3.3 Comparison with the Rig Veda hymn of Vena

Some Indian song was the likely common origin of both

folksong 95 and folksong D because of the Hindu mythological elements found in the latter two. In particular, a possible original may be the Vedic hymn of the *Vena* bird (Rig Veda book 10, hymn 123). We present some lines of that hymn using the translation of Griffith [3]:

Performing sacrifice they reached the river:
 for the Gandharva found the immortal waters.
 The Apsaras, the Lady, sweetly smiling,
 supports her Lover in sublimest heaven.
 In his Friend's dwelling as a Friend he wanders:
 he, Vena, rests him on his golden pinion.
 They gaze on thee with longing in their spirit,
 as on a strong-winged bird that mounteth skyward;
 On thee with wings of gold, Varuna's envoy,
 the Bird that hasteneth to the home of Yama.

In the above, Vena is implied to bring the heavenly singer Gandharva and his wife Apsaras to the heaven, where they become immortal. They gaze longingly at Vena. That is similar to the reconstructed folksong where the singer is clearly attracted like a lover to the peacock.

In Hindu mythology Yama, the god of death, may be related to the Finno-Permic Juma, the god of the sky (see motif 6). Therefore, the Vena hymn’s phrase “hasteneth to the home of Yama” recalls the singer in the reconstructed folksong saying that she will die for him.

The Vena bird flies all the way to the heaven like the peacock does as suggested by the symbolism of the number thirty-three (see motif 5). In addition, both the Vena bird and the peacock in the reconstructed folksong are described as golden in color.

Finally, while the *Vena* bird is not described as a peacock, its name may have some connection with *Paravani*, the peacock mount of the god Murunga.

4 Related works

Uralic linguistics identified a set of words that reflect borrowings between various branches of the Uralic [4] and the Indo-European language families [10]. As we saw earlier, these borrowing may include the Finno-Permic Juma from Yama (see motif 6). Hungarian words apparently borrowed from the languages in the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family include *tehén* (cow) and *vár* (fort) [22]. The people who brought these words with them and merged with the Proto-Hungarians at some point in history also may have brought with them the peacock motifs and part of the Rig Vedic oral tradition, including some version of the Vena bird hymn.

According to the author’s recent work on the Minoan language based on translations of the Phaistos Disk [12], and the Cretan Hieroglyphic [13, 14], and the Linear A scripts [15], the Minoan language can also be classified together with Proto-Hungarian as a West-Ugric branch within the Ugric branch of the Uralic language family.

The cultural links between Proto-Hungarian and Minoan include some remarkable similarities of the Linear A script to the Old Hungarian script [11], which is also called *rovásírás* in Hungarian (often translated as *Rovas* in English language publications). Recently, additional links were found among Old Hungarian, Linear A and the Indus Valley Script in a joint work with Shrutí Daggumati, the author’s Ph.D. student [1, 2].

Another interesting triple connection appears among the Rig Vedic Vena bird, the peacock in Hungarian folksongs, as we saw above, and the Greek

phoenix bird, which was written in the syllabic Linear B script, the writing of the Mycenaean Greeks, as po-ni-ke [20]. The existence of this name in Linear B poses the question whether it also existed even earlier in Linear A, that is, in Minoan times.

In addition, there were many connections between the Sumerians and Dravidian speakers from India, including some language connections [7]. Motif 1b shows that the Sumerian Tammuz, or its earlier name Dumuzi, was associated with the peacock motif that originates from India. This may reflect also an Indian connection. Sumerian may be connected to the Uralic language family [9], possibly via a substrate language called Euphratic [19]. Revesz [16] shows regular sound changes and grammatical similarities between the Hungarian and Sumerian languages, strengthening the case of classifying Euphratic and/or Sumerian as a member of the West-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family.

5 Conclusions and future work

The peacock motif already caught the attention of Kodály as something special in Hungarian folk music [5]. The present work traced the origin of peacock motifs back to some Rig Vedic hymns. It remains to be seen whether other ancient motifs in Hungarian folksongs can be traced back to Rig Vedic hymns too.

It would be interesting to study also the peacock motifs in Hungarian folk ballads, folktales and folk art in relation to Indian parallels.

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