

Songs of the Amis

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One of the most amazing things about the music of the Taiwanese aborigines is the diversity of their singing styles. Each aboriginal tribe in Taiwan has its unique way of singing, and even the subgroups within a tribe sing differently. The Amis are no exception.

Geographically and culturally, the Amis, who live on the east coast of Taiwan, can be divided into three subgroups of northern, middle, and southern. Northern Amis live in villages in northern Hualien county, southern in Taitung county, while middle Amis, like those in Tavalong, the village in this film, live between the two.

Musically the three subgroups differ in their ways of singing call and response. In the songs of the northern Amis the call is longer and more florid; the response is much shorter (often only one or two notes) and is sung by the chorus in unison. The southern Amis, in contrast, are famous for their complex polyphonic singing, with the chorus joining the leader in the response by octave doubling, imitating, or developing an independent melody; this results in the so-called free counterpoint, with the number of parts ranging from two to as many as five. Besides polyphonic singing, the southern Amis differ from the northern in that their call and response are usually of equal length, although sometimes the response is longer than the call. As for the middle Amis, their songs exhibit an interesting mixture of northern and southern singing styles.

Despite their differences, the songs of each subgroup share common features that set Amis songs apart from those of other aboriginal tribes. Most importantly, the majority of Amis songs are pentatonic, and the male voice is often sung in high falsetto and with ornaments. The Amis consider the ability to add ornaments to vary a melody such an important singing technique that it serves as an aesthetic principle for judging the artistry of a singer.

Amis songs are also distinctive from those of other tribes (except for the Puyuma, who also live in the Taitung county as the southern Amis) in that they are mostly sung in non-lexical vocables such as ho, hay, yan, etc. The use of such vocables makes communal singing easier. It also gives Amis the freedom to occasionally improvise lyrics that express their thoughts and emotions.

Singing is an integral part of Amis life. Amis sing while alone in the fields, or when logging in the mountains as a team. Amis sing when friends and family get together. And singing is indispensable in their many rituals and festivals.

The harvest festival, commonly known as Ilisin, is probably the most important annual event for the Amis, a time when the male age-grade system is solidified, a time for Amis to connect to ancestral spirits and deities, and a time for courtship among boys and girls. The most conspicuous feature of the Ilisin costume is the tall, feathered headdresses the young men wear. The singing and dancing of the Ilisin of the northern Amis were so spectacular that they became an icon of the Taiwanese aborigines during Japan's colonial rule (1895-1945). Starting in the late 1920s, the Japanese combined the Amis harvest festival with the Japanese Shinto shrine in hopes of turning the Amis into "civilized" Japanese farmers. By the early 1930s, the Hualien county

government was promoting the Amis harvest festival as a tourist attraction and advertising it as such in the newspapers.

After 1945, the Amis founded the Amis Cultural Village to continue selling Amis music and dance to tourists. In the 1960s and '70s, Amis songs were widely distributed on records and appropriated by other aboriginal tribes as well as by Han Chinese. In 1994, the voices of Difang and his wife, two leading singers of the southern Amis, were sampled by the German pop group Enigma in their song "Return to the Innocence," which was later used in a television commercial for the 1996 Summer Olympics; this led to a lawsuit and heightened Taiwanese awareness of the music.

Today, the Amis harvest festival and their culture in general continue to experience changes from government intervention and the effects of tourism as well as the influence of mass media and modern lifestyles. As we see from the film, however, there is a rising consciousness among their younger generation of the need to revive Amis cultural traditions. Their music and dance are at the core of such efforts.