

And the cattle follow her, for they know her voice ...

On communication between women and cattle in Scandinavian pastures

by

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Abstract:

In some Scandinavian regions, livestock (cows, goats and sheep) are taken up to mountain and forest pastures for summer grazing. Ever since at least the Middle Ages, such periodic settlements have been of vital importance in these barren regions, where the cultivated land around the villages was far too limited and meagre to feed even the human beings. This particular type of herding culture reached its apex in the 19th century. After a continuous decline today only a few of these settlements are in use.

This paper mainly concentrates on the particular musical tradition of these pastures - music as communication over long distances. The music is both vocal (with a distinctive singing technique) and instrumental (using long wooden lurs and animal horns). Since herding is women's work in these settlements, the music is women's music - this in contrast to most other herding cultures of the world. It belongs to a quite extensive soundscape and forms part of a specific ecological system, involving close interaction between populations of human beings, tame livestock and predatory animals. The music has several, and in some ways quite polaristic functions. The herding girl summons her herd by means of distinctive calls and songs, and she frightens the bear and wolf away with intimidating blasts on the horn or lur. Using commonly recognized, fixed melodic formulae, these women are also able to transmit messages from one settlement to another. The music also had the important magical function of guarding the cattle against attacks by predators and against the supernatural denizens of the forests. Thus the music of the pastures forms part of a stable, autonomous communicative system.

The musical structure, especially that of the vocal music, is flexible and well adapted to its functions. It consists of phrases of varying length freely combined into chains, the length of which reflect the demands of the actual herding situation. Since the grazing areas are vast, the music has to be heard over extremely long distances. And so it is. The vocal style is singular, totally different from any other type of Scandinavian folk music. This song as well as the sound of the horns and lurs can be heard up to three/four kilometers through the deep forests, echoing between the mountain slopes.

“The sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will follow him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” (The Gospel according to St. John 10:3-5)

This parable from the Gospel according to St. John shows the importance of pecus and of herding in the Middle East two thousand years ago - but also the importance of the relation and vocal communication

between the shepherd and his flock. They were devoted to a “good” shepherd, they knew his voice and followed him safely.

Such a metaphor could however be relevant for other continents and epochs as well. The organisation of sheep- or stockbreeding and of grazing varies, according to geographical and climatic conditions. But the herdsman's tasks have always been the same: to keep the animals together, to protect them from predators and others dangers, and to take them to grass and water. Whatever the grazing procedure, viable communication between human beings and animals has been essential. And for this purpose a majority of pastoral cultures have depended on the human voice and wind instruments of different kinds. Being able to communicate in various ways with animals – calling, driving, frightening away etc – must originally have been one of the most critical requirements of human survival. Efficient communication was certainly an essential prerequisite of prehistoric domestication as well.

In this paper I will concentrate on a particular herding culture in the far-flung mountain and forest regions of Scandinavia. Different forms of extensive cattle-farming occur in many parts of the world, especially in mountain regions. In Europe, various kinds of transhumance have existed, for example, in the Alps, the Pyrenees and the Balkans. The Scandinavian shieling system once covered large parts of Sweden, Norway and Iceland.¹ In these barren regions the cultivated land around the villages was far too limited and infertile to feed even the human population. For this reason cows, goats and sheep were taken up into the mountains every summer to the rich grazing of the forests. Simple log-houses and byres were erected there – for human beings and for cattle – so that the pastures could be grazed all summer. Every spring they moved up to these summer farms with the light, warmth and vegetation and stayed there late into the autumn. There the livestock were taken to lush grazing after the meagre rations of the winter, and there the family's store of food was stocked up with well-salted golden-yellow butter, and different types

of cheeses. These settlements were relatively enclosed units, where a special culture and way of living developed. The women spent a great deal of their time there - 3-4 months every year - and an appreciable share of the annual work of the farm was done there.

Norwegian and Icelandic sources bear witness to an advanced shieling system in these regions during the medieval period and possibly already during the Viking era. However, a more detailed picture of the extent and organisation of shielings in Sweden does not really emerge until the 16th century. Occasional references in medieval sources do show, however, that various forms of transhumance also occurred in Sweden during the medieval period. This form of cattle herding culminated during the 18th, 19th and beginning of the 20th century. But then the thorough-going transformation of agriculture and cattle raising have brought about a steady recession and now only few of the shielings are in operation. Consequently the distinctive music associated with this pastoral culture - a music which has survived by an uninterrupted tradition through centuries right down to our own time - is now in a process of dissolution - but also of revival.

In most of the world's pastoral cultures, animals at pasture are tended by professional herdsmen or by children. On the Scandinavian summer farms, however, herding and all other work are done by women. The men stay down in the villages to tend the fields. The basis for this was the traditional division of labour practised in the countryside, where male and female areas of responsibility were - of necessity - clearly laid down. Since at least the Viking Age women were responsible for all work "inside the threshold" and the byres, for the care of children and cattle. The heavy labour in the fields, timber cutting in the woods etc. were male duties. For a man it was an awful shame to have to milk a cow or to work in the barn. The stable was man's world and the horse was his work-mate. Consequently the particular culture of these summer farms is women's culture and the music is women's music. As such it is one of the oldest, richest and most distinctive female music traditions in Europe.²

The music of the recurrent ceremonies and festivities in rural life were - in accordance with these gender roles - the task of male musicians with fiddle, bagpipe, keyed fiddle and accordion, the special male instruments. The fiddlers assisted at weddings and funerals, at feasts and dances. They were the official musicians of the village, "professional" in the sense that they were the trained music specialists of their community and usually received some kind of compensation for their performances.

In contrast to this, the pastoral music was closely connected to daily labour, music with practical functions. It was not a music for individual specialists, but music for every woman in these mountain shielings. The basic function of the herding song is that of communication over long distances between the woman and her animals, but also between human beings. During the daily wanderings over the expanses of the grazing grounds, the voice and the special instruments of the summer

farm - the horns of cows, oxen or goats, and long lurs of wood or birch bark - were the women's most important working tools. Sound signals were effective means of communication in dense forest terrain. "The plain land has eyes, the forest has ears", says an old proverb.

These summer farms could be relatively large agglomerates and herding was a common concern of all the households at the shieling. The animals were kept together in one big flock, which was grazed all day and taken home to the byre every evening for milking, but also to be protected from predatory animals. The women took it in turns to escort the cattle. Usually two women would go together, the most experienced or the one with the most beautiful voice going ahead of the animals, calling them, while the other would drive them from behind, keeping them together. The task of driving was often given to the young girls and was excellent training for them. By listening and imitating, they learned the music, the special vocal technique and the use of the instruments. In this way the music was handed down from one generation to the other over the centuries. And with the tending work organised like this, herding song was something which every woman had to master.

During the summer months the forests resounded with the women's herding calls. The sounds of the forest itself - the rustle of the wind in the trees, the bubbling of streams, the birdsong and the persistent whine of the mosquitoes - mostly constitute a subdued soundscape. Against this background the sharp noises of the shielings - horn and herding calls, lur signals, cow bells, the lowing of cattle and the bleating of goats - stood out in prominent relief. These were sounds to which both human beings and animals responded.

Herding might therefore be seen as an all-day musical event, where the singing was varied according to the different situations occurring in the course of the herding. Usually the animals grazed peacefully and a few short calling notes were sufficient to keep them together. But sometimes they went wandering off on their own and the women called them back by fast, shrill calls or by names - just as Jesus said in the parable, quoted above: "he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out". These were the times, when the domestic animals were members of the family and given individual names to which they reacted. Not as today, just numbers with labels in the ears.

Through the centuries, a very special singing technique has been developed in the Scandinavian summer farms - a calling song with an instrumental timbre, a sharp attack and a piercing, almost vibrato-free sound in a high register. If the cattle were far away, the woman coax them in with long, drawn-out phrases - producing an arc of sound with a few strong notes, embellish them with whatever rich ornamentation tradition and her own musical fantasy offered. This vocal technique - *kula*, *köla*, *köuka*, there are many dialect terms - gives a sound, which carries up to 3-4 kilometres through the forest.³

These herding calls do not have the firm, self-contained musical form otherwise so commonly associated with both art music and folk music in the western world. Instead the phrases are knit together by improvised, functionally related addition, into longer or shorter dynamic musical processes. In this way the woman can vary her singing all through the day's work, constantly adapting it to the demands of the situation, giving it maximum efficacy as well as musical variety.

Small animals – goats in particular – are often lively, obstinate and difficult to control. For them special calls are needed; highly distinctive phrases, playfully taunting, and sometimes imitating the sounds of the animals themselves.

The most difficult and critical of the women's duties was that of defending the cattle from the assaults of predatory animals. Right down to the end of the 19th century there were large numbers of predators in these areas and the danger of attack was ever-present. An encounter with a bear or a wolf could mean economic disaster. The animals were the most precious possessions of the farms and it was the women's duty to return the entire flock intact to the village in autumn. The loss of a cow often led to starvation for the family. In the Scandinavian forests the women had no support of shepherd's dogs, nor did they carry arms. Their sole weapon against predators were the wind instruments. By making as fearful noises as possible with their horns and lurs they tried to frighten off attackers. In a situation like this sound instruments were, literary, of vital importance, a question of life or death.

During the cold and snowy winters cattle were kept indoors in the byres down in the village. Before the grazing season began, certain magical rites were performed to protect the cattle from evil forces. Early in spring, before the animals were let out to grass, the pastures were cleansed by the light of large bonfires, and predators and evil spirits were chased off by the noise of lurs, horns and cow-bells. Thereby the summer grazing lands were blessed and the animals protected.⁴

Relations with supernatural beings were an inevitable, exciting and sometimes frightening part in the life of the old agrarian community. Quite understandably, supernatural experiences were intensified in the seclusion of the shielings. The forests were supposed to be populated with *troll*, who lived in the mountains, by *vitrör*, small subterranean people, and by the beautiful *skogsrå*, a siren of the woods. In the shieling regions these supernatural beings were often imagined as cattle owners, whose cows were unusually fine, with large milk yields. Like human beings they migrated every summer to their shielings, where they grazed their animals on the same pastures as the humans. Myths tell about the sound of their wondrously beautiful herding calls and about the bells of invisible flocks of cattle. About unusually ornate herding calls is sometimes said, that women had learnt them from the siren of the woods or the small subterranean. The relationship between human and supernatural beings was ambivalent. They could very well be

good neighbours, helping each other. But the amity was fragile and people tried to protect their cattle by certain magical signs and prophylactic rites.

Voices and instruments were furthermore used for signals between human beings. The distances were long in the road-less forests and the women were extremely cut off in difficult situations. The lurs and horns were the only efficient means of communication they had to send messages between pastures and shielings. It might be veritable SOS signals from a herdsman being attacked by a bear or needing help in searching for an animal which had escaped. For all these occasions there were specific, meaning-loaded melodic signals, which everyone knew and understood well. It must certainly have been a great relief, when a woman who had lost a cow, could hear an answering signal: "Don't search any longer – the cow is here".

In all its functional flexibility the music of the summer pastures obviously formed a rather complex communication system with quite contrary functions in the contact between human beings and animals – on the one hand that of attracting and gathering the cattle, on the other that of frightening away the predators. In these far-flung forest regions predatory animals, tame livestock and human beings have lived together over the centuries in close interaction, systematically utilising nature and its benefits. You may also see these grazing grounds of the summer farms as an extensive ecological system, where human beings intruded into the territory of wild animals, and where women and predators constantly battled with each other for the domestic animals.

It is interesting to see that in such ecological system the herding music of human beings had the same basic functions as the sounds of animals. Acoustic signals are to be found among most species for calling their flock, their partner or young, or for chasing off rivals or attacking predators. In just the same way, the women of the summer farms marked out the territory of the grazing cattle with their sound signals.

All these practical functions do not, however, exclude aesthetic values for listeners as well as singers. Just as the everyday working tools – churns, cheese tubs, rakes, etc – are decorated with beautiful ornaments, so the women adorned their labour music with rich embellishments. To hear at a great distance their singing and horn signals resounding between the mountains was an experience of rare beauty: "She *kulade* so beautifully that men would lean on their scythe handles and women on their rakes – just listening. They were so enchanted by the grace of her trills that they couldn't work."⁵

The last century has been a period of inexorable decline for the shieling system. Rationalisation of agriculture has made transhumance and forest grazing superfluous and today very few of these summer farms are still in use. And indeed, the dissolution of the shieling system has changed the music. As predatory animals were exterminated at the end of the 19th century, the herding instruments became less common. Everywhere they disappeared before the singing, which can still be

heard resounding between the mountains around a few summer farms.

During the last decades the Scandinavian herding music has however undergone a remarkable revival. While leaving the forest pastures it has instead moved over to folk music festivals and concert stages. Many Swedish composers have built various compositions on the particular *kulning* sound and its music material. In Tarkovskij's last film *The Sacrifice* we can hear subdued pastoral calls shimmering over the waste land. At official celebrations the impressive tone of the wooden lurs often resounds as opening fanfares, but then usually played by men. Thereby this women's labour tool has changed into a public mail instrument.

The vocal pastoral music - so strongly adapted to the female voice - is however still a women's music and has during the last decades undergone a manifold, almost explosive revival. Young girls are eager to learn the particular *kulning* technique and thereby enrich their means of vocal expression. With its unique timbre it gives a characteristic sound to Scandinavian folk music and jazz groups on their tours all over the world. The once so secluded pastoral music of the Nordic mountains has truly crossed both geographic and genre borders. But in this process it has totally lost its basic function as communication between human beings and animals.

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¹ A thorough overview of the Scandinavian shieling system, its history, organisation and geographic extension is presented by Michel Cabouret in his magistral, seven volume dissertation (1980). The first thorough study of Swedish herding music was presented by professor Carl-Allan Moberg in two articles 'Om vallåtar', 1955-59, published in German translation in Moberg 1971. Very little is published in English about Scandinavian pastoral culture and its music. For an introduction, see for instance the English Summary in my dissertation [Ivarsdotter]-Johnson 1986, or my booklet text [Ivarsdotter]-Johnson 1995. In his dissertation (1975) Paul Helmer draws interesting connections between pastoral calls and Gregorian chant.

² For some aspects of gender roles in Swedish folk music, see my article [Ivarsdotter]-Johnson 1990.

³ Investigations of the particular vocal technique and the acoustic qualities of the pastoral song are published in my article [Ivarsdotter]-Johnson 1984.

⁴ The cow-bell played an important role in magic rites in order to protect the cattle. For interesting information about this, see Emsheimer 1977.

⁵ Quoted from [Ivarsdotter]-Johnson 1986, 198.

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