

From Vocal Game to Protest Song

The Complexities of Katajjaq

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This paper discusses the Inuit vocal game *Katajjaq* in relation to its musical components and political importance. *Katajjaq* shows much musicality specifically through its use of interlocking. This complexity is deconstructed in this paper and compared to hocketing prominent in other cultures. In recent years, female Inuit artists (such as Tanya Tagaq) have reclaimed *Katajjaq* as a musical technique in its own right. In their music, it has been used both as a tool for creating intricate, engaging music and as a means to push back against past and present oppression faced by the Inuit.

Keywords: *Katajjaq*, Inuit, music, identity, interlocking, hocketing, vocal games, Indigenous protest

While the song of the drum dance is perhaps what Inuit culture is most often associated with (Nattiez, 1999:400), it is the use of voice in ‘vocal games’ that is particularly striking, and also unique to the Canadian Arctic. Because of this classification by ethnomusicologists (Nattiez, 1983:495) and players alike, *Katajjaq* (one of three types of vocal games) is often overlooked in an academic musical setting. It is undeniable that it is, in itself, incredibly musical and therefore has unsurprisingly made its way into the commercial music of today. Furthermore, it is important to pay attention to Inuit throat singing because, counter to the vastly popular and traditionally male Tuvan throat singing, it is an exclusively female practice.

It is unclear when exactly *Katajjaq* came about; the first publicly accessible recording of a vocal game dates to 1955 (Boulton, 1955: track 108). Naturally, however, it can be inferred that it has existed for much longer (as is the case with

many aural traditions, where documentation is irrelevant because the tradition is alive). Predominantly unique to Northern Quebec and South Baffin Island, Katajjaq is one of three vocal games belonging to Inuit culture.⁸ While the men were out hunting, women would play this game in friendly competition to pass the time. It was, and still is, also used to soothe babies strapped to their mother's front or back to help them sleep, using the comforting vibrations and meditative rhythms of the throat singing (Rowan, 2014:81). Often, the sounds in Katajjaq are inspired by the natural world, from wind to geese and countless things in between, but what gives Katajjaq its distinctive, full bodied, and exciting sound is its complex use of *interlocking*.

Culture and Context

The Game of Katajjaq: Interlocking and Hocketting

Katajjaq is a two-player game and, although a competition, is focused on the players working together to create tight interlocking so as to keep the game going. Two women will stand face to face, sometimes holding each other by the elbows or shoulders and always making eye contact. This is when the interlocking begins: the first person to laugh or run out of breath loses, meaning that most recordings end, delightfully, with laughter. The interlocking itself is a more complex affair and, without being heard, requires detailed explanation. Both players repeat the same short phrase and this phrase consists of two parts. Part A is usually a pitched vocable made with the true vocal folds (known as a voiced sound). Its syllables might be *qeh* (the *q* being a sound made at the back of one's throat), *hm*, *hup*, or *ay'* to name just a few. The second half, Part B, is made by using the false vocal folds to create a pitchless throat singing sound that is more rhythmic (known as a voiceless sound). The phrases are usually either in 2/4 or 6/8 at a fast tempo, with parts A and B lasting half a bar each. Once player 1 starts, player 2 will join in half a bar later, and they will continue in this way until one of the players changes the phrase and the other must quickly follow suit. This might be by adding another note (A1, B, A2 ,B) or by changing the rhythm, and they will speed up until one player is outperformed. There is much musicality in Katajjaq and the aim is to win, not just by outlasting one's partner, but by making the most 'beautiful sounds' (Nattiez, 1983:461). While a good-humoured competition, the overall aim is a collaborative effort to achieve 'homogeneity of sound' (Waterman, 2006:126) where the two lines are completely interwoven and the audience cannot ascertain who is doing which part.

⁸ The remaining two vocal games are *Pirkusirtuk*, from North Baffin Island, and *Nipaquhiit*, from the areas of Caribou and Netsilik Inuits (Nattiez 1983:459).

The effect of this interlocking technique is a back and forth *hocketting* which sits atop a driving rhythmic cushioning, aptly described by Waterman as being like two ‘separate chain[s]’ (2006:126). The combination of a hocketted melody alongside the rhythmic throat singing is ‘two-part polyphony’ (Shelemay, 2006:27) and creates a highly complex and exciting effect. Hocketting is a technique whereby two or more performers take it in turns to sing or play notes of a larger melody, and it is seen in countless different cultures. Writing about the layered music of Balinese Gamelan, McPhee (1949:272) describes the successful end result as one of ‘unbroken continuity’.⁹ Having a detailed vertical texture, there can be up to six players on each part (with each part doubled for a larger sound), and ‘the interplay of two opposing rhythmic currents’ (McPhee, 1949:274) results in an extremely fast and thick-sounding, unified melody. The texture of Katajjaq, on the other hand, is much more horizontal, consisting of only two unified voices. Where the effect of numerous people playing Balinese Gamelan is that of one group playing exceptionally quickly, Katajjaq uses interlocking to create the sound of many parts at once. In this way, Inuit women utilise hocketting in Katajjaq incredibly effectively, working together to create music that is both fast and intricate.



Fig 1. Inuit women throat singing (Photo: www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/inuit.htm)

⁹ McPhee (1949) praises Balinese gamelan’s sophisticated use of the ‘primitive’ technique of hocketting. This is a poor choice of words. Hocketting is prevalent in the traditional music of many cultures (examples of which can be found in the very same paragraph) which does imply that it has existed for a long time. However, to call it ‘primitive’ is about as redundant as labelling any rhythmic technique as such.

Indigenous Experience: Colonisation, Loss, and Genocide

Worryingly, the effect of colonisation on Inuit culture largely goes unacknowledged in academic writing on Katajait. Where it is acknowledged, it is often all too brief; Nattiez, for example, expands on a vague statement that ‘missionaries exerted their influence’ (1999:405) in a mere footnote, where he states that vocal games were forbidden by Anglican missionaries (1999:417). However, this does not come close to scratching the surface of the oppression suffered by the Aboriginal people of Canada as a result of cultural and physical genocide. In 2008, the Canadian government finally apologised for committing cultural genocide and launched a national inquiry, carried out by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. The report was released in 2015 and sourced its damning information from more than six thousand witnesses over the course of six years (Government of Canada, 2015b:V). After forcibly seizing much of the Aboriginal people’s land, a system of ‘so-called residential schools’ (Ling, 2019) was put in place in 1883 (Government of Canada, 2015b:2) and in the century these schools existed, 150,000 children were taken from their parents and passed through this system (Government of Canada, 2015b:3). These schools were a ploy by the Canadian government to alienate Indigenous people from their families and cultures, and in many cases, students were physically and sexually abused. At least 3,200 children died in these schools (Government of Canada, 2015a:1) although poor, unreliable documentation of these deaths means the number could be as high as 6000 (Ling, 2019). The scope of these findings (six volumes) is truly chilling. However, there is still a genocide of Indigenous women happening even today.

Raphael Lemkin first coined the term *genocide* in 1933 and defines it as the ‘destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves’ (Lemkin, 2005 [1944]:79), along with a list of the key factors that define treatment of a group as genocide. These consist of political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical, religious, and moral factors. In 1948, a legal definition of genocide was integrated into international law with the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. It defines as genocide those acts with intent to destroy such as murder, serious physical/mental harm, deliberately imposing conditions that bring about the destruction of a group, preventing women from giving birth, and forcibly moving children to a different group (United Nations, 1951:Article 2). In 2019, the report for the Canadian government’s National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NIMMIWG) was released, documenting the continuous genocide of Indigenous women in great detail. It outlines the disproportionate hardships Indigenous women face that correspond directly with both of these definitions, including:

Deaths of women in police custody; the failure to protect Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA [Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual] people from exploitation and

trafficking, as well as from known killers; the crisis of child welfare; physical, sexual, and mental abuse inflicted on Indigenous women and girls in state institutions; the denial of status and membership for First Nations; the removal of children; forced relocation and its impacts; purposeful, chronic underfunding of essential human services; coerced sterilizations; and more. (Government of Canada 2019:53)

The NIMMIWG is full of shocking statistics, such as that ‘indigenous women and girls are twelve times more likely to be murdered or missing than any other women in Canada’ (Government of Canada, 2019:7). Between 1980 and 2012, there were 1,017 homicides and 164 disappearances of Indigenous women identified by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. However, continuous ‘inconsistent data collection practises’ (Ling, 2019) have led to a gross undercount (Monet, 2019). Furthermore, the report contains nearly 750 statements, many of which detail personal accounts of everyday racism, sexism, and classism suffered by Indigenous women in Canada, not only from everyday citizens but also from the police and government representatives. Encounters with the police and government officials can be ‘humiliating’ (Government of Canada, 2019:97, 384) and several witnesses recount being plainly ignored and dismissed (Government of Canada, 2019:96, 101, 256). The result of continual hostility from the police is a reluctance to turn to them for protection or help. This reluctance is then consolidated by often devastatingly lax approaches to missing persons investigations, which prolongs and amplifies the trauma suffered by families left behind for years or even indefinitely (Government of Canada, 2019:20, 22, 23, 53, 56). Thus, communities are often forced to take initiative: a group of volunteers periodically search the Red River, for example, finding seven bodies in 2014 (Puxley, 2015). The relentlessness of these harmful experiences create a culture of active distrust between Indigenous women and the police, meaning Indigenous women do not always feel safe enough to report missing persons cases or to go to police for help. The genocide of Indigenous women is not only under-recorded by the police; it is exacerbated by them.

Katajjaq as Protest and Celebration

In light of this, musician Tanya Tagaq leads the way in championing Inuit culture and female identity while also bringing the rhythmic and expressive qualities of Katajjaq to more mainstream music. This can be heard in Björk’s 2004 album, *Medúlla*; Tagaq’s collaboration with rap artist Shad (Tagaq, 2016a: track 5); and her cover of Nirvana’s ‘Rape Me’ (2016a: track 10). Tagaq covers ‘Rape Me’ in order to protest against the genocide of Indigenous women. On the album *Retribution Commentary*, Tagaq talks about championing feminism in her work and being fed up with the stigma surrounding it (2016b: track 10). She explains that she also wanted to take Cobain’s message out of the empathizing in the third person and into the first-person survivor of abuse (2016b: track 10, 2:48). Tagaq uses

Cobain's anti-rape song to convey the message that although they may be abused and murdered, Indigenous women and girls (and indeed women everywhere) will not be defeated.

Tagaq champions the Inuit perception of femininity; in an interview with The Open University (Tagaq 2010), she explains that because life in the Canadian Arctic is strenuous, a strong partner is vital. Katajjaq is not only an embodiment of this strength but also a beautiful means of connection between women: as she jokes, they sometimes call it 'uterus singing'. Furthermore, Tagaq uses her platform as a means to give her culture a voice. During her performance at the 2014 Polaris Award ceremony, she had the names of 1,200 missing and murdered Indigenous women displayed on a screen behind her. While she was not able to go into the topic in her acceptance speech for fear of scaring her 10-year-old daughter, who was present at the time, she decided to defend Inuit culture's hunting of seals. In an interview following the ceremony, she highlighted her deep concern that people were still 'losing their mind over seals' (CBC News, 2014, at 00:39) in the midst of a genocide. Tagaq uses Katajjaq in her music to champion her culture as well as defend it. She began throat singing after she moved away from her village to Halifax for university, as a way to help ease the resulting 'culture clash', explaining in an interview that throat singing felt like 'a piece of home' (Q on CBC, 2014, at 01:17). She adapts Katajjaq and implements it beautifully in her music, not only rhythmically but also expressively, and describes her first time hearing it after moving to the city as 'being punched in the gut' (Q on CBC, 2014, at 02:20). While it is her own adaptation of Inuit throat singing, her music remains true to her connection with the land that she grew up on in Nunavut, the vast Indigenous territory in Northern Canada: 'My culture and the land is carried forever around in my heart.... [T]hat's what's coming out in the singing' (Tagaq, 2010:1).

Katajjaq is not always overtly politicised or altered in modern music. In a live show put on by the Weimar University of Music as part of their programme in Transcultural Music Studies, Karen Flaherty and Kiah Hachey combine traditional Katajjaq with live sound art (*Katajjacoustic*, 2015). Between each song they explain what Katajjaq is, how it works, and what the songs mean. They perform songs that are imitations of nature, for example birds, the wind, and the river (2015, at 09:36) as well as lullabies and friendly competition songs. Although Katajjaq would have traditionally been performed outdoors, in a tent or an igloo, Flaherty and Hachey bring Katajjaq onto the stage. Performing something in the setting of a concert not only shifts the acoustics and atmosphere of an art form but also creates a new dynamic between the performer and the listener. Where the soundscape of the Canadian Arctic landscape was lost, sound art was used to help recreate this feeling while at the same time transforming the game into music by performing it and not playing it. This was consolidated by putting Katajjaq on a stage to reinforce the artist/audience dynamic. Flaherty and Hachey speak of a revival of Inuit throat singing, telling the audience that the art form skipped a generation as a result of

colonisation and Christian missionaries banning anything to do with shamanism (2015, at 37:20). In the present day, where moving between villages is much more possible, they were able to spend six years learning the different types of vocal games from people all over the Canadian Arctic (2015, at 33:57). This presents a new identity of Inuit culture as not just the sounds and ways of one village but a people unified in reviving their culture against the devastating effects of oppression.

Conclusion

Katajjaq reflects a championing of Inuit women's strength. An exclusively female form of expression, it allows Inuit women to connect with and revive a threatened cultural past. Furthermore, Katajjaq provides a defined space for solidarity and bonding between women at a time when Indigenous women and girls are facing genocide in addition to processing intergenerational trauma. Because of its use of complex interlocking, which allows for both rhythm and melody, Katajjaq lends itself to many types of music. This interlocking also gives Katajjaq an incredibly distinctive sound which is used today as a voice for a deeply rich culture speaking out against oppression. This is seen overtly through Tagaq's music and also through Flaherty and Hachey's live show, whereby education and exposure become positive resistance. Once a simple game to pass the time, Katajjaq has been transformed into a fierce and striking stealing-back of voice and culture.

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