

# **WE ARE NOT ALONE: A REPORT ON SESSION CUSTOMS FROM HITHER, YON, AND LOCATIONS IN BETWEEN**

## ***Uzbekistan***

Any session must begin with a toast by all present to Gameef, the local goddess of music. The beverage of choice is "parthunk", or double-distilled prune liquor, and a "blewt" (equal to about two shot-glasses) must according to custom be downed without the drinker taking a breath. When the toast is finished, all participants still conscious may begin the session.

By the way, it is considered very rude - and in some areas is considered an actual insult to Gameef, punishable by extended torture - for a musician to excuse himself when he feels the parthunk beginning its evil work deep in his digestive tract. In order to appease the offended goddess, the desperate musician must first play the "Unzeppklit" or "Trotting Reel", a tune with five parts, all repeated. Only on completion of this sacred ritual will he be permitted to adjourn to the nearest convenience ("nearest", it should be noted, being a concept that means one thing to an Uzbeki eleven-stringed waloof player and another to a Pittsburgh bodhrán player who has just downed his first belt of parthunk). Under the circumstances, the bodhrán player will not care that the reading material he finds in the yurt-like sanitary facility is five years old and written in a language he does not understand.

## ***Patagonia***

Anthropologists were shocked to discover that Patagonians routinely and without compunction kill any bad musicians who dare to intrude on their sessions. The methods vary, but most are reportedly highly unpleasant, involving the use of lime Jello, four-foot lengths of cactus, and Yanni CD's. The most agonizing (but best-attended) death ceremonies are reserved for the "dmelki" or llama-skin drummers, who seem to be notorious in Patagonian musical circles for not being able to keep time correctly (and coincidentally have many problems getting life insurance).

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## ***Xiangang Province, China***

When an unfamiliar musician approaches an established session in this remote corner of the globe, he or she must prepare for the "shwa ch'ung hu" or "staring ceremony". This consists of the "house" musicians staring fixedly at her without speaking for up to five minutes. No greeting will be uttered. Any empty chairs at the musicians' table will be overturned (or, in some villages, spat upon). Meanwhile, the rigid protocol of the situation demands that the "feng pao" (i.e., "intruder") pretend that she is dealing with the situation by repeatedly opening and closing her instrument case, checking to ensure that all strings / valves / holes are in good working order, reading the fronts and backs of any string envelopes, and so forth. She must not sweat, but idle and tuneless humming is permissible. If beverages are for sale nearby, she may purchase one (unless of course the individual in charge of beverages is also part of the ceremony, in which case she will be ignored).

The ceremony is considered at an end when the "yuk ma kui" (hard to translate, something between "lead musicians" and "alpha males") blink their eyes five times and begin playing, at which point the "feng pao" may approach the musicians table - on her knees, with head bowed - and humbly request permission to "besmirch the fringes of such an august assembly of heavenly musicians". If permission is granted - by no means a certainty - she must pay the session leader ten yuan for rental of a chair, which regardless of where it is originally located gets quickly and quietly moved to the most distant corner of the musicians' area. Removal of saliva and/or playing better than the alpha males is considered disrespectful.

## ***Puna-Puna, Micronesia***

Researchers have discovered that the residents of this tiny coral atoll hundred of miles from anywhere consider musicians to be descendants of an ancient clan that provided many victims for cannibalistic practices in centuries past. Although cannibalism is long departed, the tradition of musician-as-victim remains a strong one on the island, and those few brave souls who try to gather for what we

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would call a "session" often find themselves besieged by various varieties of local oaf as they try to make their music.

Curiously, the behavior of these antagonists is also rooted in local tradition, which considers them descendants of the clans that ritually dined on the musicians' ancestors. Relying on this tradition, the clans take great pride in their annoying specialties: the "uvavas", for example, always ask the musicians to play tunes that they don't want to play, then threaten to bombard the hapless musicians with coconuts when they refuse. "Maki-maki" are trained from birth to blow long loud horrible notes on conch shells for no other purpose than to disrupt the sessions. "Ka-uka-ukas" - perhaps the most insidious of all - are a clan that somehow came into possession of a piano accordion, possibly during World War II. The instrument - glistening with rhinestones and mother-of-pearl, and unhappily still playable - is treated as an object of worship by the Ka-uka-uka clan members, and great "medicine" is attributed to it, not the least example of which is the uncanny power it has to make musicians disappear when it is brought forth.

From the musical standpoint, by far the most interesting of the Oaf Clans is the "lapu-lapu". The members of this clan are trained - if that's the proper term - in what might be called approximate knowledge of the island's folk music. The great hope among young lapu-lapu clansmen is that they will learn enough of the notes to be mistaken for a musician by the real musicians, who will of course eventually discover after two or three disastrous sessions that they have been victimized once again by the wily lapu-lapu.

The clan oath requires the young lapu-lapu musician never to aspire to anything more than mediocrity. Any lapu-lapu who forgets this oath and learns even one whole tune correctly is subject to terrible recrimination, even death.

