

Analysis of the Inuit Katajjaq in Popular Culture: The Canadian Throat-Singer Superstar Tanya Tagaq

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Abstract. Inuit throat-singing is together a dialogue, an entertainment and a competition between two women executing rhythmic patterns answering to one another, the goal being holding on as long as possible. Unlike other traditional throat-singing techniques (such as Overtone-Singing, for example), the throat is used here in a rhythmic fashion and does not create harmonics. Furthermore, and despite some discussions on the matter (Nattiez, 2004b), Inuit throat-singing also seems to have a religious, magical or ritual meaning. Originally from Nunavut, singer Tanya Tagaq renews Inuit throat-singing by performing it alone and by blending it into electronic music. What has she brought to the traditional katajjaq technique, and what value does she convey through her music? By developing her own style centered on an “organic”, “instinctive” and “emotional” conception of Inuit throat-singing, the artist uses a large variety of voice treatment and katajjaq techniques, but in a radically new way: by elaborating the roughness of that singing into a more defined structure (something more sophisticated). By doing this, she breaks free from the traditional conception of Inuit throat-singing and creates her own style, following the path of contemporary preoccupations about voice and its expression, most particularly the ones concerning the “new vocality” (Stoianova, 1985).

Keywords. Tanya Tagaq, throat-singing, katajjaq, Canadian popular music.

Resumen. El canto de garganta Inuit es a la vez un diálogo, un entretenimiento y una competición entre dos mujeres quienes, mediante la ejecución de patrones rítmicos, responden la una a la otra; el objetivo: aguantar el mayor tiempo posible. A diferencia de otras técnicas tradicionales de canto de garganta (como el canto sobretono, por ejemplo), la garganta se utiliza aquí de manera rítmica y no genera armónicos. Por otra parte, y a pesar de comentarios sobre el tema (Nattiez, 2004b), el canto de garganta Inuit también parece tener un significado mágico, religioso o ritual. Originaria de Nunavut, la cantante Inuit Tanya Tagaq retoma el canto de garganta en solitario o mezclándolo con música electrónica. ¿Qué ha aportado a la técnica tradicional katajjaq, y qué valor transmite a través de su música? Al desarrollar su propio estilo Inuit, basado en una concepción “orgánica”, “instintiva” y “emocional” de la garganta, la artista utiliza una gran variedad de tratamientos y técnicas de voz katajjaq, pero de un modo radicalmente nuevo: utilizando la rugosidad del canto en una estructura más definida (algo más sofisticado). De esta manera, se libera de la

concepción tradicional de los cantos de garganta Inuit y crea su propio estilo, parejo a las preocupaciones contemporáneas sobre la voz y su expresión, muy especialmente a las relativas a la “*New Vocality*” (nueva vocalidad). (Stoianova, 1985).

Palabras clave. Tanya Tagaq, throat-singing, katajjaq, música popular canadiense.

Introduction

Each group of people develops its own musical identification strategies based on its ancestral cultural inheritance and environmental conditions. In this regard, the state of throat-singing and its contemporary use by Tanya Tagaq offers a typical example of the integration of this tradition (reflecting the Inuit collective way of life) in a context of musical expression and experimentation. We witness an integration and aesthetisation phenomenon when katajjaq is separated from its original function (the throat games between two women in particular circumstances) to be inserted in pop-electronic music. What values are transmitted by Tanya Tagaq through her music, meaning the traditional Inuit throat games that she practices alone and that reflect her personal musical choices and her life experiences? Can we extract affective, expressive, imaginative, referential or cultural significations that the musician has attached to the music? In other words, what are the semantical representations (or what is left of those ancestral semantical representations?) linked to her singing, when integrated in a pop-electronical music context?

The objective of this article is to illustrate the musical expression method used by Tagaq in three “a priori” contrasting contexts:

1. Inuit throat singing , a traditional vocal game opposing the virtuosity of 2 women
2. contemporary music vocal research from the serious music tradition
3. sounds and pop electronic music tools

These three musical situations bring out the following elements:

1. The internal power of the musical tradition in the creative process (or improvisation)
2. Voice considered as raw material
3. technological input that enables the capture of voice subtleties, which brings a “sophistication” of the voice (by sophistication, it is question of an avant-garde aesthetical research on the voice, a complexification of the throat game technique and of human voice possibilities integrated in an aesthetical context)

Methodologically, we will take into consideration what Tanya Tagaq herself has to say about her practice : I use transcriptions of interviews with the musician,

analysis of audio, visual and oral documentation as well as musical research on voice, in a pop music context, such as Bjork's (who in fact collaborated with – and even discovered, in a way, Tanya Tagaq) and musical research on voice in the “serious music” domain, in particular by composers such as Luciano Berio or Maurice Ohana with whom, as early as the 1960's, we talk about “new vocality”. We need to observe the katajjaq phenomenon according to Tagaq to describe and interpret it. We will also express our own observations.

First of all, from Tanya Tagaq's songs through her two albums, *Sinaa* (2005) and *Auk/Blood* (2008), we will describe the throat game technique and its symbolic significations to better understand what Tagaq retains or rejects of the Inuit tradition. The components that can emerge from the analysis are enunciated, according to Jean-Jacques Nattiez's anthropological interpretation of throat games (1987), in terms of unfunctionality and symbolic/multifunctionality. These components permit an analysis of Tagaq's practice as surpassing these two throat-game categories by making it a musical style of its own, a starting point for artistic creation.

Thus, we are looking to go deeper into the analysis of throat singing, as performed by Tanya Tagaq. Even though Nattiez (2002)¹ demonstrated that musical semantical research allows for a better understanding of the links between music and culture, the general goal of this communication will be mostly to question the throat game (or rather “throat singing” as it is not a game anymore) as per Tagaq. We will also seek to comprehend her stylistic (description of her own characteristics) and her aesthetic approach (we mean her thoughts on katajjaq, its extent and its worth).

Tanya Tagaq Gillis: A Brief Biography

Tanya Tagaq Gillis was born in 1977 and raised in the remote Inuit community of Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, where she had only passing exposure to throat singing. At the age of 15 she left home for the city to study visual arts but, during her final year of art school, she became increasingly homesick, and, as a way of re-connecting with the Inuit culture she had left behind, she began teaching herself throat singing from tapes sent to her by her mother.

Inuit throat singing is an unaccompanied pattern of improvised vocalization, usually sung in harmony by two women and emulating the sounds of nature (the crash of breaking ice, for example). Coming south in the 1990's to study visual arts at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, she was heading, she believed, for a career as an artist and art teacher. While living in Halifax, Tagaq was exposed to a whole new world of music, including electronic, dance music and rave. With this tradition as a starting point, she has reinvented a world in which her vocal expression mingles with the sounds and tools of electronic music.

¹ NATTIEZ, Jean-Jacques: “Musica e significato”, in *Enciclopedia della Musica*, vol. II, “Il sapere musicale”, Turin, Einaudi, p. 206-238 ; trad. fr. « La signification comme paramètre musical », *Musiques. Une Encyclopédie pour le XXIe siècle*, vol. II, « Les savoirs musicaux », Actes Sud/Cité de la musique, Arles, 2004, pp. 256-289.

Tanya Tagaq is both singer and composer of most of her songs: she has two albums to her credit: the first called *Sinaa*, in 2005 (almost completely a *Capella* in which she sings a duet with Bjork, *Ancestors* with piano) and the second album, from 2008, called “Auk / Blood” in which electronic sounds dominate.

The Throat-Game Technique

Because of her origins, Tanya Tagaq’s art is often associated exclusively with throat singing practice. This is only partly true. She explains herself: “katajjaq remains my main influence, and the depth of my voice reflects it well, but what I do has nothing to do with tradition, most of the time I improvise”². Inuits from Northern Canada living in the Hudson Bay area, have a very spectacular throat game called katajjaq. It is a real competition, although it remains friendly, where the final goal is to make the opponent lose rhythm and run out of breath. In katajjaq, traditionally, two women use their voices to imitate landscapes, animals, whatever surrounds them. This friendly game is to last as long as possible without making mistakes. The two women stand face to face holding each other’s arms or shoulders. They use the opponent’s mouth as a resonator. With a fast and continuous rhythm, each of them will produce a sound that will be imitated, completed or modified by the other. The sounds and formulas used, generally low and throaty, can be the imitation of animal cries, laughs, rattles, sighs, or grunts. They can also be on a precise pitch. The general effect is a melody, in which the rhythm comes from the slight movement of the women’s bodies. This vivacious alternation will be broken when one of the women makes a mistake or can no longer follow the beat. Thus, the high pressure, generally increasing, is suddenly broken by the woman who loses bursting into laughter. The game comes to an end for various reasons: physical (loss of breath), emotional (laughter) or creative (incapacity to follow the pattern suggested by the opponent, or inability to create another one)³.

This throat game is, first and foremost, a playful experience, involving winners and losers. The “game” aspect is therefore the most important, but the players are nevertheless appreciated for their endurance and the sounds that they produce. The goal is to win, but with dignity: certain sounds are considered to be more difficult to produce than others. It is the variety of sounds that determines the complexity and, therefore, the value of the game.

We find sophisticated sounds that are elaborated with patterns that alternate head, chest and throat voice. We also note an alternation of audible inhalation and exhalation, and the ranges may change suddenly and cover as much as two or three octaves. As such, we can say that katajjaq is the repetition of a design based on the alternation of many combined techniques such as: voiced or

² « Il est certain que le katajjaq demeure ma principale influence, et la profondeur qui se dégage de la voix le reflète bien, mais ce que je fais n'a rien de traditionnel et, la plupart du temps, j'improvise », Tanya Tagaq, quoted by Yves Bernard, « Festival Pop Montréal - Le chant profond du Nord de Tanya Tagaq », *Le Devoir*, Montréal, 4 octobre 2007. Our Translation.

³ Cf. BEAUDRY, Nicole : « Le Katajjaq, un jeu inuit traditionnel », in *Études Inuit/ Inuit Studies*, Vol. 2, n°1, 1978, pp. 35-53.

unvoiced sounds (a sound is called “voiced” when its production is accompanied by a vibration of the vocal cords, and “unvoiced” if not, we also use the terms “high sounding” and “dull” to describe this opposition); inhaled or exhaled sounds ; sounds placed in the chest, the throat, the mouth or the nose; singing with the mouth opened or closed, etc.; changes in range, speed or rhythm. Tanya Tagaq uses all of these techniques. Let’s listen “Surge”, for example, from her album *Sinaa*: we notice that she sculpts the rhythm with continuous alternation between powerful inhalation and expiration. She also alternates strong accents and softer ones. Her voice appears to be in multiple layers. She can also alternate soft voice and guttural sounds (such as growls, gasps, cries...). She uses katajjaq techniques, but what, then, can we say about the meaning of the sounds?

Significations

In religious music, in an animist society context for example, music (or what we call music in the West) is used to influence animals (hens, seagulls, dogs, seals) or nature’s elements (wind, waves). Jean-Jacques Nattiez has shown in 1999⁴, in his comparative study between Inuit katajjaq and Siberian throat games, that in the shamanic era, the Inuit throat games were used by women as a magical technique to influence the animal spirit and some of nature’s elements, to ensure their husbands a good hunt. By doing this, they contributed to the survival of the community, taking charge of the symbolic aspect of the work distribution. According to Nattiez, katajjaq is essentially imitations⁵. However, if, in katajjaq, some of the patterns are essentially imitations⁶, the musical expression of what is imitated can also include an arbitrary component⁷, with paralinguistic sounds that have no linguistic content (a desired meaning) but that are the result of an unconscious choice of glossary related to the speaker, as with the onomatopoeia in natural languages: these onomatopoeias have a real sounding link with the imitated animal growl, however they differ from one language to another. Thus, “A katajjaq tells a story, the words are suggestive of meaning but not explicit. This helps to develop the imagination and reasoning powers of children”⁸.

We isolate two tendencies in anthropological interpretation of throat games: 1) unifunctional and 2) symbolic / multifunctional.

⁴ NATTIEZ, Jean-Jacques: “Inuit Throat-Games and Siberian Throat-Singing: A Comparative, Historical and Semiological Approach”, in *Ethnomusicology* 43/3, 1999, pp. 399-418.

⁵ NATTIEZ, Jean-Jacques: “Comparisons within a Culture: The Example of the Katajjaq of the Inuit”, in Falck, R., and Rice, T. (ed.), *Cross-cultural perspectives on music*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, p. 134.

⁶ This is several musical figures can thus bring to mind :

The sound of a puppy: <http://www.museevirtuel.ca/Exhibitions/Nunavik/f-nunavik-0302a.html>

The sound of geese: <http://www.museevirtuel.ca/Exhibitions/Nunavik/f-nunavik-0302.html>

The sound of a mosquito: <http://www.museevirtuel.ca/Exhibitions/Nunavik/f-nunavik-0302c.html>

⁷ Nattiez, p. 63

⁸ Cavanagh, 1976, p. 46-47, quoted in Nattiez, “Comparisons withing a Culture: The Example of the Katajjaq of the Inuit”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 135.

The first accentuates relationships between throat games and some particular phenomenon that, to our knowledge, can only be related to games on some occasions. According to Saladin D'Anglure, katajjaq should therefore be understood as a sort of in between language, made of language and women's music.

As for the second tendency (which is Jean-Jacques Nattiez's), it suggests a symbolic interpretation of throat games and multifunctional form. First of all, as a musical form, katajjaq allows several ways to use the voice: a combination of voiced sounds, mute sounds, exhaled or inhaled sounds, rhythmic patterns, melodies, etc. These components (constituents of throat games) are not only their formal characteristics but also symbolic forms: thus, as per its meaning, katajjaq is a kind of "welcoming structure", which allows a lot of sounding possibilities: meaningless syllables (or syllables for which we no longer understand the meaning), archaic words, ancestral or elder's names, animal names, words for common objects that surround us at the time of the improvisation, animal cries, natural sounds or aqausiq melodies (lullabies), religious song, etc.

This is why throat games have multiple functions: it is impossible to reduce them simply to the entertainment dimension, or to animal imitation or to any other isolated event for that matter. Thus, taking into consideration that we find these characteristics in Tanya Tagaq's work, we could imagine that her practice reinforces the multifunctional approach of throat games by making it a musical style, a starting point for creation.

Tanya Tagaq's Style

In the press review by the Remusat Management agency, Tagaq explains: "I am a painter, I love to express myself, it is the reason for which my singing style became what it is [...] If I had to describe my work, I would say that I am interested in instinct and raw emotion".⁹ She takes it away from its traditional understanding and puts it in an aesthetical, emotion-oriented context, towards the raw element, the most vivid expression. It is the most primitive side of katajjaq that interest her, the one close to the growl, the cry, the animal itself that she will insert into a creative context¹⁰. Thus, the primal dimension evoked by Tanya Tagaq's throat singing sometimes alternates with quite sensuous passages... reflecting the shift from a social practice to music that is "interpreted", stylised.

⁹ Tanya Tagaq, quoted by BERNARD, Yves : « Festival Pop Montréal - Le chant profond du Nord de Tanya Tagaq », in *Le Devoir*, 4 octobre 2007 (<http://www.ledevoir.com/culture/actualites-culturelles/159333/festival-pop-montreal-le-chant-profond-du-nord-de-tanya-tagaq>) : « Je suis un peintre, j'aime m'exprimer... c'est la raison pour laquelle mon style de chant est devenu ainsi [...] Si je devais décrire mon travail, je dirais que je m'intéresse à l'instinct et l'émotion brute ». Our Translation.

¹⁰ See <http://vids.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=vids.individual&videoid=61880706#>. Tanya Tagaq improvises from her song *Force* at the Colors of Ostrava festival, Czech Republic, in July 2008.

The vocal duet and the friendly competition between two women are modified in virtuosic demonstration – which is not gratuitous but rather applied in creative ways by Tagaq. Therefore, she has an organic conception of throat singing. To her, katajjaq is both a creative technique and an inspiration: “What inspires me is the music that is the most vibrant, melancholy, cry of the heart, pure emotion, the beauty and the ugliness of Nunavut, my native land, the wonder of blood on the Tundra snow as well as the atrocious killing of animals. All of that is reflected in my music”¹¹.

She seems to use sophistication as a counterpart to the ruggedness of the singing, roughness of the voice: she wraps these cries and growls in musical arrangements that blur the ties with tradition. Tanya Tagaq’s work is inspired by katajjaq techniques, but she moves beyond it to create her own music. This relationship with tradition that could represent a heavy load and be limiting, is tinged not with rebellion, but with flexibility and creativity. Her music is entirely oriented towards a form of liberation, sensuous ecstasy and very little preoccupation with the past. We have to say that Tagaq, although originally from Nunavut, has had little direct contact with vocal traditions from her region. She learned kattaajjaq by herself during her studies in Halifax, in the early 1990’s, to ease her homesickness. It was only later that she concentrated on her tradition to finally elaborate her own singing style. While throat singing tradition requires the presence of two women facing each other, Tagaq has developed a solo variation, mixing ancient techniques with musical and vocal experimentation. It could be compared with contemporary art music (for example Luciano Berio’s research on the voice, in *Sequenza III*) and with more experimental music such as Björk (who has in fact invited Tagaq for her tour *Vespertine*, and for the album *Medulla*).

Conclusion: Voice as acoustic potential

Tanya Tagaq’s art is a musical commentary between the singer, her instrument, her fellow musician on stage when there is one, and the public. We can talk about virtuosity because Tagaq applies general rules of virtuosity such as the technical qualities of throat games, her personality as an artist and her own stylistic components (meaning: organic and primitive vision of the voice, strength of expression and crossbreeding with electronic sounds).

With these elements, Tagaq discovers gesture, both of the day-to-day and natural, but also of tradition, of game-related singing and of surpassing oneself. For her, as well as for a whole generation of musicians, the voice is thought of as having an acoustical potential for exploring beyond conventions and the hierarchy of values. Her song, which is no longer a *game*, contains an

¹¹ Tanya Tagaq, quoted by BERNARD, Yves: “Festival Pop Montréal...” *Op. Cit.* (<http://www.ledevoir.com/culture/actualites-culturelles/159333/festival-pop-montreal-le-chant-profond-du-nord-de-tanya-tagaq>): « Ce qui m’inspire, c’est la musique la plus vibrante, la mélancolie, le cri du cœur, l’émotion pure, le Nunavut d’où je viens, la plus grande beauté ou la plus grande laideur de sa nature, la merveille du sang sur la neige dans la toundra aussi bien que l’atrocité des animaux qui se tuent tout le temps. Tout cela se reflète dans ma musique ». Our Translation.

accumulation of timbres and game modes added together. Several research endeavours have preceded her in illustrating the potential of these vocal timbres. We have already referred to Berio's *Sequenza III*, but we can also mention *Nuits* by Xenakis (1966) or *Cris* by Ohana (1968), without neglecting Ligeti's *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1963-1965): these works give substance to the return to the natural sonority of the human voice, far removed from the Classical aesthetic. These works are getting closer to the song genre and even to traditional songs, which in a way, had gone farther, and for a longer time, with a real diversification of the vocal work, because not only did they consider control and strength of the voice, but also took a deeper look at human language. The inclusion of language embedded meaning in a deeply personal vocal art. In the art domain, it was perhaps the only one to get close to a real primitivism so dear to Picasso and Stravinsky, and certainly one of the greatest concepts of the twentieth century. It is quite natural that in this "new vocality", Cathy Berberian wrote *Stripsody* (1966) for unaccompanied voice that includes sounding popular evocations, intonations of everyday life¹².

We talk about "new vocality" as having emerged at the end of the 1960's, at a time when the voice was being reimagined according to its expressive and emotional capacities. "To understand the new vocality, it is essential that the art represent its period, and by reflecting its past, bear the weight of history. It must also, while seeming to break with the past, suggest a continuation that belongs to today, and at the same time leave the door open. It is the use of different styles, different uses of the voice...singing, talking, stuttering, and even using extra-musical sounds: cough, cries, grunting, laugh"¹³.

If the goal, with the new vocality, was to reunite the timbered, or sung, voice and the natural human voice (whispers, rough voice, words, laughter, body sounds) also including the different stages of vocal expression in the individual's development (gurgling, whine, grunt, cries), Tanya Tagaq adds to this research on *new vocality* the sounds of throat singing, themselves combined with electronic sounds.

By reinventing throat singing as a language of personal expression, Tanya Tagaq promotes the traditional guttural singing of the Inuit beyond of its aesthetic and geographic boundaries. There is in fact a search for roots, but also a clear desire to be a part of modern music, as were several famous traditional singers such as Sainkho Namtchylak, in a Siberian context, or Sussan Deyhim revisiting the great classics of the Soufi repertoire.

¹² See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT9K1eG53zU>

¹³ Cathy Berberian, quoted by STOĀANOVA, Ivanka : «Luciano Berio, Chemin en musique », in *La Revue musicale*, n°375-376-377, Paris, Richard Masse, 1985, p. 392 : « Pour comprendre la nouvelle vocalité, il est essentiel que l'art s'inscrive et exprime son époque, et tout en reflétant le passé, accepter le poids de l'histoire. Il doit, alors même qu'il crée apparemment une rupture, proposer une continuation qui appartient à aujourd'hui, et en même temps laisser la porte ouverte. C'est l'emploi des différents styles, des différentes émissions de la voix... en chantant, en parlant, en bégayant et même, en l'utilisant pour des sons extra-musicaux : la toux, les pleurs, les gémissements, le rire... ». Our translation.