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Article

The Uzbek Doira and the Frame Drums of Neighbouring Peoples: A Comparative Organological and Functional Analysis of the Doira, Ghaval, Daf and Riq

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Abstract: This article presents a comparative study of the Uzbek doira and three related frame drums of neighbouring musical cultures: the Azerbaijani ghaval, the Persian daf and the Arabic riq. The instruments are compared along three dimensions: organological characteristics (construction, size, jingles, drumhead), sound-production technique, and functional role within the classical ensemble. The study shows that, despite a shared ancient origin and a common membership in the frame-drum family, each instrument has developed distinct organological and stylistic features. At the same time, a striking functional parallel emerges: in several of these traditions the frame-drum player acts as the rhythmic leader of the ensemble, a role that the doira occupies in Uzbek maqom performance.

Keywords: Doira, ghaval, daf, riq, frame drum, organology, usul, iqa‘, maqom, mugham, comparative musicology, percussion.

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Introduction

The frame drum is among the oldest and most widely distributed percussion instruments of the world, with depictions found in ancient Near Eastern art dating back several millennia [1]. Across the broad cultural region stretching from the Arab world through Iran and the Caucasus to Central Asia, the frame drum became a central rhythmic instrument in both folk and classical art-music traditions. In Uzbek music this instrument is known as the doira, where it serves as the principal carrier of the usul — the rhythmic formula that underpins maqom performance [2].

Although the doira, the Azerbaijani ghaval, the Persian daf and the Arabic riq all belong to the same organological family and share a common historical root, they are by no means identical [3]. Differences in construction, playing technique and ensemble function reflect the distinct development of each musical culture. The aim of this article is to compare these four instruments systematically and to identify both their shared features and their culture-specific characteristics. The study employs comparative-typological and organological methods, drawing on both regional musicological literature and contemporary instrument studies [4].

Method

All four instruments are single-headed frame drums: a membrane stretched over a shallow circular wooden frame whose depth is small relative to its diameter. This basic structure distinguishes them from goblet-shaped drums such as the Arabic darbuka or the Persian tonbak. Historically, the riq is understood to have evolved from the larger daf, and the family as a whole is connected to the ancient frame drums of the Near East [5]. The

Central Asian doira and the Persian dayereh are themselves closely related forms, the doira being generally the larger and heavier of the two [6].

A further shared feature is the frequent presence of metal jingles or rings, which add a characteristic shimmering resonance to the drum strokes. However, the way these jingles are arranged — loose rings on the inner frame, or paired cymbals set into the frame — varies significantly between the instruments and is one of the principal points of organological difference, as discussed below [7].

Results and Discussion

Organological comparison. The Uzbek doira. The doira is a comparatively large and robust frame drum, typically 40–51 cm in diameter, with a frame made of walnut or beech and a head of goat, calf or horse skin. Its most distinctive feature is the large number of small metal rings — often ranging from around twenty to over a hundred — attached to the inner side of the frame [8]. Before performance the head is commonly warmed to tighten the skin and brighten the tone. This construction gives the doira a powerful, resonant sound suited to leading large ensembles.

The Azerbaijani ghaval. The ghaval (also spelled gaval) is the Azerbaijani frame drum, of medium-to-large size — larger than the Western tambourine but smaller than the daf. Its wooden frame carries a head of goat or fish skin, though modern instruments increasingly use synthetic membranes that are less sensitive to humidity [9]. Metal rings set into the frame provide the jingle effect. The ghaval is closely associated with the singer in Azerbaijani art music and is emblematic of national identity.

The Persian daf. The daf is a large frame drum, generally around 50 cm (about 18–20 inches) in diameter, with a wooden shell and a head of goat or fish skin. Rather than cymbals, it characteristically carries numerous metal rings or chains on the inner side of the frame, which are activated by shaking as well as striking [10]. The daf is strongly associated with Persian classical music and, historically, with Sufi devotional ceremonies, where its sound supports states of spiritual ecstasy.

The Arabic riq. The riq (also riqq, riq) is the smallest of the four — a tambourine-like frame drum with a wooden shell typically around 20–25 cm in diameter, a head of goat or fish skin, and, distinctively, several pairs of small brass cymbals set into the frame [11]. The combination of a sensitive membrane with tuned cymbal pairs gives the riq an exceptional sonic versatility, allowing it to produce both clear drum tones and bright metallic colour. The frame is often decorated with wood, ivory or mother-of-pearl inlay.

Sound-production technique. A remarkable point of convergence among these traditions is the shared underlying logic of two principal strokes: a deep, low bass tone struck near the centre of the head, and a higher, sharp tone struck at the rim. In Uzbek practice these are voiced as “bum” and “bak”; in the Arabic tradition the equivalent strokes are termed “dum” and “tak” [12]. This common two-tone foundation reflects a deep structural kinship across the region’s frame-drum cultures, even though the resulting rhythmic vocabularies differ.

Beyond these basic strokes, each tradition has cultivated its own techniques. The riq is celebrated for intricate finger rolls and the coordinated activation of its cymbal pairs, earning its reputation as a “one-person rhythm section” [13]. The daf employs broad hand strikes combined with shaking techniques that set its rings ringing, suited to its devotional and classical contexts. The doira, with its many rings and large head, combines finger and palm strokes with shaking to achieve a wide dynamic range, from a delicate rustle to a thunderous accent.

Functional role within the ensemble. Perhaps the most significant finding of this comparison lies in the functional role of the frame drum within the classical ensemble. In Uzbek maqom performance the doira player serves as the de facto leader of the ensemble, sounding the usul, governing tempo and signalling transitions between sections [14]. A

closely parallel role is found in the Arabic takht ensemble, where the riq player is traditionally the "dabit al-iqa" — the rhythm-keeper who locks the ensemble together, shapes dynamics and leads transitions through the iqa'at (rhythmic cycles).

In Azerbaijani art music the ghaval is intimately bound to the mugham singer (khananda), who frequently plays the instrument themselves while leading the performance; the typical ensemble pairs the singer-drummer with tar and kamancheh. The Persian daf, by contrast, while central to Sufi ceremony and increasingly prominent in classical and fusion settings, has historically functioned more as a colouristic and pulse-defining instrument than as the principal conductor of an art-music ensemble. Thus, the comparison reveals a spectrum: from the strong leadership role of the doira and the riq to the more accompanimental or devotional emphasis of the daf.

Synthesis: shared roots and distinct identities. The comparative evidence can be summarised along the three dimensions examined. Organologically, all four are jingle-bearing frame drums, yet they differ in size (riq smallest, daf and doira largest), in jingle type (loose rings in the doira and daf versus paired cymbals in the riq), and in typical drumhead material. Technically, they share the fundamental bass-and-rim two-tone logic while diverging in their developed vocabularies. Functionally, the doira and the riq both occupy a leadership role within their respective classical ensembles, the ghaval is bound to the singer, and the daf carries strong devotional associations.

These parallels are not coincidental. They point to a shared historical and cultural matrix — the broad Islamicate musical world in which frame drums circulated for centuries — within which each people elaborated its own instrument, technique and aesthetic. The similarity of names across the region (daf, dayereh, doira, ghaval) likewise testifies to this common ancestry, even as it cautions against assuming that similarly named drums are played in the same style [15].

Conclusion

Conclusion. This comparative analysis demonstrates that the Uzbek doira, the Azerbaijani ghaval, the Persian daf and the Arabic riq are members of a single organological family that nevertheless display distinct organological, technical and functional identities. Their shared two-tone sound logic and, in several cases, their shared role as rhythmic leader of the ensemble reveal a deep regional kinship, while differences in size, jingle construction and performance context express the individuality of each musical culture.

Viewing these instruments comparatively enriches our understanding of the Uzbek doira itself, situating it within a wider regional network rather than in isolation. Such comparison is most fruitful when each instrument is studied within its own cultural context rather than measured against a single external standard. Future research might extend the comparison to include rhythmic-cycle systems (usul and iqa'at) in greater analytical detail, and to incorporate field recordings and quantitative rhythmic analysis across these neighbouring traditions.

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