

The musician as a cultural-aesthetic broker

By Owe Ronström, Published in: *The musician as a cultural-aesthetic broker*. In: Åke Daun, Billy Ehn, Barbro Klein (eds.) *To Make the World Safe for Diversity*. Botkyrka 1992: Invandraminnesarkivet Serie A:5. ss. 163-174 (12p)

In ethnology, anthropology, and related fields, one of the main approaches to the problem of social and cultural organization of diversity has been to look for systems and structures at a macro-level, to explain forms of social life with reference to such broad and abstract concepts as culture, class, race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Another important approach has been to focus upon when, how and why such systems become meaningful at the micro-level. Studies of this kind have emphasized the complexity of human interaction and convincingly showed how in specific situations the abstract systems and structures at the macro-level can be played with, overruled, replaced, and strategically used for many different purposes.

A third type of approach is to go even further into the complexity of social interaction, and to consider also such elusive but strongly cohesive forces as "interests", "taste", and "aesthetics". In this essay I will discuss the role of music and dance in the formation of social groups, and I will argue that the aesthetic quality of musical performance under certain circumstances can become an important factor in the organization of social life at the level of face to face interaction. I do not believe that there is a universal language of music which everybody could understand. But, as I will propose, there is something that could be called "the power of music", which not only can make existing social boundaries and categories irrelevant, but also help to create new and different social bonds between people. Thereby, talented musicians can come to play a crucial role as a type of cultural-aesthetic broker, mediating between diverse groups. This "power of music", the whole aesthetic dimension of the social world, may be elusive and difficult to analyze, but undeniably it has a great impact on human behaviour, on the ways in which people organize and give meaning to their lives, individually and collectively.

In Sweden, as in many other immigrant countries, it is common for ethnic groups to gather around such expressive forms that have to do with ears, eyes, nose, body, and stomach (see for example Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1992, Klein 1988, Klymasz

1972, Ronström 1992a, 1992b, Slobin 1984, Slobin & Ronström 1989). Very often music, dance, and food are the concrete reasons for people to come together with their peers at all, and the motivation for them to want to continue to meet. It is also very common among groups of all kinds to use a specific form of dance and music as a kind of "brand-name", a symbol of the group to show to others (Dahlig 1987, Hirshberg 1989, Ling & Ramsten 1990, Trimillos 1986). We need only to think of the many different youth groups, for whom music is not only a most powerful symbol, but sometimes also their whole *raison d'être* as a group. For this reason musicians and dancers often become bearers of the group's most important symbols. Their special skills, their expressive competence, make them particularly well-suited to represent the group as a whole, and they may in some cases even come to personify the community.

Partly, the importance of music and dance in the formation of groups in society has to do with the overwhelming and ever-growing number of musics and ways of dancing that have become available through modern technology. This has greatly increased the possibilities of expressing even the subtlest shades and nuances of existing social and cultural differences. But the main reason behind the use of music and dance in contemporary multicultural Sweden is not the number of available forms and genres, but the special features of music and dance as essentially non-verbal expressive systems.

An expressive system may be described as a kind of vessel that can be filled with different kinds of meaning and significance, at many different levels. The meanings that are invested at the different levels may well work synergistically, to form a highly potent "power-pack". But the meanings can also be different or conflicting, even totally contrasting, and still be no less potent. Specific forms of music and dance can thus be effectively used as symbols of and for a group, even if the members have nothing more in common than these symbols. Even more important than the possibility of expressing existing social and cultural differences symbolically through music and dance, is the potential to create meaning, to establish differences and new social borders (cf Cohen 1985).

Folk music and the ethnic ideology

While many groups are organized around a few occupational interests or leisure activities, others have a more all-compassing claim and occupy a much bigger part of their members' lives. Groups that aspire to status as minorities or ethnic groups, with their own identity, their own culture, clearly belong to this second type. To be seen and treated not only as some kind of interest group, but as an ethnic group in its own right, which of course in most cases is politically, economically, and socially extremely important for the people involved, a group must try to take its place in the same kind of arenas, on the the same kind of stages, as the already recognized ethnic groups. No less important, to become visible they will have to express their claims through basically the same kind of activities as the others. In short, the aspirations of the group to become recognized and treated as an ethnic group must be expressed through appropriate activities and symbols, at the appropriate types of sites. Thus it is of utmost importance for the group to have access to expressive specialists competent in such activities and forms of behaviour.

In Sweden folk music and folk dance are among the most commonly used genres for displaying in public that "we are an ethnic group (or a folk) with our own culture" (Einarsson 1990, Hammarlund 1990, Ling & Ramsten 1990, Ronström 1990b). This is one of reasons why folk musicians so often have come to play an especially crucial role in the life of ethnic groups. First of all, as just noted, they are important for the groups to be recognized and treated by others as " a true ethnic group". But they are also often given central positions within the groups, as the people who make the group members want to come together to sing, dance, and socialize over and over again. Moreover, their special competence in the folk music that is considered specific to the group is necessary for creating and maintaining a frame that gives the group's communal events plausibility as "real ethnic events", true manifestations of the group's specific culture or identity.¹

For some groups it is not at all difficult to find suitable forms of dance and music to serve all these functions. Others may find themselves confronted with serious problems. As an example of this, the Assyrians in Sweden have had access to few musical forms that others might identify as Assyrian "ethnic music" or "folk music", as they themselves most often song and dance to either Arabic or Turkish traditional music, or forms adapted from modern Oriental or Western popular

music. A specifically "Assyrian" secular music sung in Suryoyo had thus to be invented in order to enable them to be recognized as an ethnic group in Sweden. This has been done by some talented musicians only in the last decades (Hammarlund 1990).

Another problem is to find musicians who are able to perform the required types of music well enough. All kinds of groups in Sweden from time to time have problems in finding their specific type of expressive specialists. A simple explanation for this may be that the number of groups is large, while the total possible population of each group is, in most cases, very limited. In Sweden as a whole there are simply not enough musicians to perform all the different kinds of desired music. For this reason many groups have to make do with records and cassettes, while others have to spend large sums of money bringing musicians from abroad for important events and ceremonies.

A third solution is of course to find musicians outside the group, who are willing to serve the interests of the group. But this is problematic, since it conflicts with a strong and widespread idea that you have to be born X to play X music. A central component of the ideology that makes ethnic groups different from most other groups is that ethnically specific cultural competence can be achieved only through birth and heritage. A person whose activities serve as focus for the ethnic group, who represents the group by performing its specific type of folk music, and thereby even sometimes comes to personify the group, simply has to be perceived as arising from within the group.²

This ideology is especially strong in the field of folk music and folk dance, while in other fields it may have very little relevance. For example, it is of no great importance if, as recently have been the case, Sweden is represented in the Olympic games by young black boxers, immigrants from Ghana and Gambia. As long as they win, they will be treated as good Swedish sportsmen, since boxing has no strong connection to notions of cultural heritage or ethnic identity. But when the association of folk fiddlers in Dalarna (Dalecarlia) some years ago organized a competition among composers of traditional tunes, and the winner turned out to be a young American without any connection at all to Sweden who never even had been here before, tensions and conflicts arose among the fiddlers. For many of them, as well as for many others in Sweden, it is astonishing that he could learn to

play and compose perfectly in the local style without being born here, without the legitimation of a Dalecarlian and Swedish cultural heritage. His tunes, although undeniably "Swedish" in form and style, somehow cannot be taken seriously as expressions of an "authentic Swedish folk music tradition".

Thus, it would seem that this ideology of ethnicity as a form of cultural heritage may create certain problems for ethnic groups when they for some reason or another choose to look for musicians outside the group to serve their specific interests. In order to continue the discussion on this point a little further, I now would like to describe the situation of a musician named Ziya Aytakin.³ Originally from Savaş in the Artvin region of northeastern Turkey, Ziya came to Sweden in 1979 to give a few concerts. However, he decided to stay, and since the mid 80s he has been living in Alby, Botkyrka, a suburb in the Stockholm region.

Ziya's music is strong in every sense of the word, his main instrument being the *zurna*, a very loud and shrill shawm. He also plays many other instruments, such as simple clarinets, flutes and drums. As an ethnomusicologist and fellow musician I have been following his career since he first came to Stockholm. During this time he has become a prominent person among immigrants from all over the Near East, in Stockholm, Copenhagen and some big cities in Germany. He is one of the very few folk musicians in Sweden that can make a living from his music only. Due to his special skills and great talent, he is able to play the role of an expressive specialist and a cultural-aesthetic broker for many different ethnic groups. To grasp Ziya's complex role, let me describe how he performs in a variety of performing situations.

The video excerpts

The first context is a folk music festival in Falun, Dalarna, 1986. A crowd of people is dancing to the *zurna* and *davul* (a big two-headed drum). It is a kind of night-time jam session in which anyone may take part. The music is Turkish and the dance is of a type known all over Europe and the Middle East. Most of the dancers are Swedish, among them people who have been studying Turkish folk dancing for more than ten years. The *davul* player is Swedish, and the *zurnadja*, the *zurna* player, is Ziya Aytakin.

In the second context we find Ziya playing at a dance event in a northern suburb of Stockholm, organized by the local Swedish-Turkish women's association. The dance is known as *ciftetelli*, a popular dance all over the Balkans and the Middle East. The musicians are Turks, Swedes and a Hungarian. The people dancing are mostly Turkish, from Istanbul, Ankara and other big cities, but there are also some Kurds and some Swedes. As a whole the audience can be described as belonging to an urban and fairly well-educated middle-class. Here the focus is upon socializing, through food, dance and music. Later the same evening there is a performance by a folk dance group. Ziya is playing the zurna and his friend Halit the davul. The dancers are dressed in the folk costumes of the Adiyaman region, and they also perform a choreographic suite the call "Adiyaman".

The next excerpt was taken a few months before, at the second Kurdish folk dance festival in Stockholm. This was a major cultural and political event for the Kurds in Sweden and also for the Kurdish diaspora as a whole. The aim was to show the richness of Kurdish traditional culture to Kurds, as well as to the Swedes and other immigrant groups. For this reason the organizers had invited many prominent Swedish politicians and artists, and the show was videotaped for broadcast. The event was framed by extensive references to "authentic Kurdish folklore" and the resulting program was followed by a discussion with a prominent Kurdish leader about the importance of folk dancing in the life of Kurds in Sweden in general, and in the struggle for independence in particular.

Again we find Ziya playing his zurna, and we also find the same folk dance group as in the previous example, dancing the same "Adiyaman" choreographic suite, in the same folk costumes. Most of the participants in the dance groups in this festival are Kurds, many of them born in Sweden, but in the best groups we also find Swedish women who specialized in this type of dance. They, as well as almost all the other dancers, have learnt the dances from the same source, the talented Turkish dancer and choreographer Memus Öncü, here playing the davul.

In the following excerpts we first find Ziya playing at an Assyrian wedding in Södertälje, a town not far from Stockholm. Thereupon he performs at a circumcision celebration held at a restaurant in central Stockholm. The owner of the restaurant is a Turk from Kulu in central Anatolia, and it is his son who has been circumcised. Most of the guests, relatives and friends are from the Kulu area,

descendants of unlettered peasants. Here Ziya performs in an ad hoc constellation, consisting of two Turkish musicians, Moussa playing the *saz*, a long-necked lute, and Edip, the *darbuka*, a drum. A second *saz* is played by a young Assyrian, an apprentice of Moussa's. At the end of the event, Ziya and his fellow-musicians are accompanying one of the guests, a woman from Morocco, in popular Arabic songs.

The last example is from a small pizzeria in a Stockholm suburb. Here Ziya is playing together with three Turkish musicians, one of them Moussa, the *saz*-player, who is also the owner of the establishment. The girl who comes to join them in a song is a former employee. She is Assyrian, from Lebanon, and speaks Arabic, Suryoyo, Swedish, English, a little Greek, but understands no Turkish at all. Here they perform an Arabic hit-song in front of a very mixed audience; there are Fins, Swedes, Turks, Assyrians, both young and old, men and women, workers and intellectuals, those who have come to eat and drink and those who have come to watch belly dancing and listen to music, those who claim "oriental" music is among the worst types of music and those who love it.

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The excerpts described above show Ziya Aytakin in action at different types of events. The Kurdish folk dance festival was formal and highly representative in character, whereas the evening at the pizzeria was geared towards socializing and having fun. Some of the events were public and, at last theoretically, open to anybody who wanted to join in. Others, such as the wedding and the circumcision, were private and closed. But in reality, of course, even the most public of the events was mainly accessible to members of a certain group, be it an ethnic group or an interest group. On the other hand, even at the wedding some people who were not invited were allowed inside and treated to food and drink.

Some of the events were announced as "ethnic events" (the folk dance festival), while others were not at all framed as "ethnic" (the evening in the pizzeria). In all cases ethnic categories and boundaries were important in one way or another, but also many other categories, such as class, age, sex, religion etc, became relevant in the interaction. The events fall into a few rather well-defined types, such as "restaurant evening", "folklore performance" and "dance evening". Common to all of them is the central role given to music and dance. Much of what happened flows

directly from the focused activities, the music-making and dancing; for example, a boundary highly relevant at all the events was that between participants and on-lookers, between those who took part in the dancing, singing and music-making, and those who did not.

As a musician Ziya appears in many different roles. In the first example he performed his music as a representative of the Turkish immigrants of Sweden at a Swedish folk music festival. In the second he played for urban, middle-class people of Turkish or Kurdish origin. In the third he was presented to the audience as a Kurd, playing "authentic Kurdish folk music". In the fourth he appeared among Assyrians, playing popular dance music of Arabic or common "Middle Eastern" origin. In the fifth context he was again among Turks, but this time Turks with a background in Central Anatolian village life. Here he played the ritual music for circumcision, folk dances and folk songs from the Kulu area and popular Arabic music. In the last example we found him in a type of "oriental" band, accompanying belly-dancing, which has recently become a craze in Stockholm restaurants. At all these events Ziya chose tunes from a large and varied repertoire of traditional and popular music from Turkey and the near East. In his own eyes, it is a mark of good craftsmanship to be able to perform the appropriate type of music for any situation, for any kind of audience. Except for his own aesthetic values, what he thinks is "good music", Ziya has no great concerns about what kind of music or whose music he is playing.

At all these events Ziya is a very important person, in some even the most important person. In fact, it is most likely that some of the events would not have taken place at all, were it not for Ziya. For example, when the first and second Kurdish folk dance festivals were organized, the Kurdish Association of Sweden (Kurdiska Riksförbundet) first made an agreement with Ziya and his friend Mehmet Öncü, the dancer, before they started to call participants and search for suitable theatres for the show. When the time came for the third Kurdish folk dance festival, Ziya was touring in Germany. Although the organizers could have tried to bring a Kurdish zurna player from Turkey, they nevertheless decided to postpone the whole event until Ziya came back to Sweden. Considering the great social, political and cultural importance of this event for the Kurds, this cannot have been an easy decision. It is also common among Kurds, Turks, Assyrians, and some other groups, in Stockholm as well as in some other cities in Denmark and

Germany, to arrange weddings according to Ziya's calendar. In several cases big weddings have been cancelled on just a few days notice because Ziya couldn't come, as promised.

Five of the six events were arranged by groups which in general do not have much interaction with other segments of the Swedish society. A partial explanation for the fact that the Turkish folk musician Ziya Aytekin has come to play such an important role at events of all these groups is, of course, that there are very few subcultural musicians. But, in this case, I think that the scarcity of musicians is of little importance. The main reason that the organizers ask Ziya to play is not a lack of other musicians, but the simple fact that they cannot think of a better musician. In other words, it seems that Ziya's importance has to do with his unique competence as an expressive specialist, that he, through his abilities as a musician, has access to a kind of "magic flute" that opens all sorts of doors for him, that allows him to cross borders, to float between ethnic groups, as if through some kind of social osmosis.

It is probably fairly common that musicians, as well as some other types of professionals, are given special license to permeate social borders that for others would be totally impermeable. But Ziya's case is especially interesting, considering the strong ideology that connects ethnicity with cultural heritage and the importance of folk music and dance for displaying such a cultural heritage in public. Folk musicians like Ziya simply do not fit into the models built upon the ethnic ideology of descent. This creates special problems for him, for the groups which want to make use of his services, and also for the student of groups and boundaries.

Is Ziya then actually strategically using his "magic flute" in order to be able to penetrate the sometimes rather rigid boundaries between the different ethnic groups? Or is this way of describing what is happening, the whole problem, a consequence of a specific way of looking at the world, a kind of rhetoric based on an ideology of ethnicity as a basic, primordial identity? When analyzing these events more carefully, it seems to me that Ziya does not in fact float or jump in between groups. The "osmosis" metaphor may seem adequate at an abstract macro-level, when discussing groups and events in general, but it is very hard to apply when studying the actual interaction during events.

It is a well-known fact that abstract and all-compassing systems and ideologies for categorisation, such as class and ethnicity, often are suspended in actual everyday face-to-face interaction and replaced by systems of smaller scope and of totally different types.⁴ At the events just described, dancing and music-making were central activities. A great deal of what happened, the kind of interaction that took place, the kind of relations that were established, can be understood only by taking the music-making and dancing itself into consideration. The specific forms of music and dance that were cultivated were the primary sources for the framing and interpretation of these events. If the musicians and dancers were not competent enough it may have been explained by reference to ethnic distinctions, differences in cultural heritage and so on. On the other hand, if the central actors were competent enough, nothing much would have to be explained at all. However, as is the case here, if the musicians have competence that reaches far beyond what is required, when their technical and artistic abilities are extremely well developed, the result can not only be that the huge abstract systems for categorisation and organization become temporarily suspended and replaced by other existing systems, but also that totally new interactional patterns, new systems of organization, new meanings, may develop.

Many unforeseeable things happen at events when musicians like Ziya Aytekin play. When he at his best, his playing can make ethnic categories irrelevant, even when they are an important part of the frame of the event, as in the case of the Kurdish folk dance festival. In the pizzeria it was his playing that created an inclusive and friendly atmosphere, that made differences in age, class, language and so on. much less significant, so that at the end of the evening even those who at first expressed strong disapproval of the type of music began to dance with great enthusiasm. It is likely that much of what is established during an evening such as that in the pizzeria is particular to that specific event, that it will disappear the minute the event itself ends. It is, however, also possible that new interactional patterns develop, that can also be introduced in other types of events, affecting the whole system of group organization and inter-group relations (Ronström 1990a).

Conclusion

Music and dance are forms of artistic expression that are closely related to culture and society. But it is not a one-way relation, as in a Marxist metaphor of the "base-superstructure" type, but a dialectical relation. From this it follows that music and dance must not be reduced to being explained in terms of such concepts as cultural heritage or ethnicity. Ziya's music can be interpreted as Kurdish, Turkish, Assyrian, Arabic, or Middle Eastern, depending on the frame of the event. At the same time the framing of the event as Kurdish, Turkish, etc to a large extent depends on the music he is playing, and how he is playing it.

To conclude, the reason that it is possible for Ziya to play a role as an important expressive specialist for all these groups and at all these types of events may be explained by pointing to the scarcity of other competent musicians, or a special ability or Ziya's to float between existing groups. Or it may be that an abstract ideology, such as ethnicity, can be replaced by lesser ones in actual face-to-face interaction. But for a fuller understanding of what takes place when people meet to make music, sing, and dance, it is necessary to consider also the aesthetic dimension of these activities. In the end, Ziya's rather unique position as a musician can only be explained with reference to the qualities of his music and his way of playing. What I have called "the power of music" is something of the same nature as a religious experience, or falling in love. Such experiences range from weak to strong, from brief to lifelong. Weak or strong, short or long, they have a great potential to create new types of social bonds between people, bonds that may cut totally across existing categories and systems for the organization of diversity, however powerful those may be.

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¹. Here I use "frame" following Goffman 1974.

². My use of "ethnic ideology" is based on Aronson 1976. On folk and traditional music as expressions of ethnic or cultural identity and heritage, see for example Ling & Ramsten 1990, Ronström 1989

³. In the oral presentation of this paper, at the conference "Organization of Diversity", in Botkyrka, Stockholm, 13-16/6 1990, these examples were shown on videotape and analyzed.

⁴. One such typical case is: "I don't like X's. But this X is another kind of X, since he is my friend." This is probably what is going when, as recently happened, people in a small Swedish village publican expressed their strong animosity towards immigrants, especially from Muslim countries, but at the same time continued their friendly interaction with the Turkish Muslim family that runs the only hamburger bar in the village.