

The forms of diversity: Folk art in multicultural Sweden

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Hardly anyone can have failed to notice that the diversity of people and lifestyles in Sweden is growing. Expressions of this increasing heterogeneity can be found everywhere, in all spheres of life; affecting all our senses: in food, clothing, housing, language, music, dance, pictures, ornaments, as well as behavior, rituals, and opinions. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the reasons for the diversity, and some of the forms through which it is expressed, with the emphasis on forms that may be designated as "folk art" or traditional art.

Let me begin by looking at some of the more obvious reasons for the diversity. One is the dramatic increase in travel. Of all the objects that Swedes bring home from distant countries, a sizable proportion consists of folk art of various kinds. Hanging on a wall in my home is a carpet bought at a market in southern Yugoslavia. Above it is painted pottery from Hungary and Romania. On a shelf, there are exquisitely painted eggs, souvenirs of a stay among the Sorbs of southeastern Germany. Besides these things, the room is packed with records, toys, musical instruments, and textiles, all brought back from trips in different parts of Europe.

Many of the articles sold at souvenir markets look like utilitarian objects, but they are scarcely intended for practical use. Their most important function is to be hung on walls and displayed on shelves, where they help to memorialize and organize diverse experiences in a multitude of places. The growing flow of tourists, all eager to take home objects from foreign countries, has had the effect that there is more emphasis now on forms that are not only distinctive and typical of the region, but also easy to manufacture, transport, store, and display. This trend is at the expense of bulkier, more complicated objects.

What Swedes bring home with them, of course, is more than just artifacts. They also bring ideas, customs, and - not least - expressive behavior of various kinds. Some of these, such as samba carnivals, belly dancing, and rapping, not only have attracted many practitioners among Swedes in a short time, but also have attained a position as symbolic expressions of "multicultural Sweden," whether this is seen as a threat or a promise.

Another reason for increased diversity in Sweden is that international commerce and technical advances have now made it possible to send pictures, sounds, and objects around the globe, at lightning speed and low cost. More and more Swedes have thereby been given a chance to develop their own lifestyles and create new, highly personal forms of expression, not infrequently by combining elements from foreign repertoires in unexpected ways. The international flow of commodities and modern electronics is also important for immigrants who want to live their lives as they used to do in their home countries. In most large towns, there are now shops selling "foreign specialties," mostly foodstuffs, but also clothes, newspapers, records, films, ornaments, and various products of folk craft.

In his apartment in Alby outside Stockholm, the Turkish folk musician Ziya Aytakin has collected Turkish *kilim* carpets, Arabian *hookahs*, gilded Azerbaijani slippers, and many other articles from the Middle East. He has brought some of them from his native district in Turkey, while others have been acquired in tourist style on journeys near and far. Many of the objects

have also been bought at the door from itinerant salesmen, or in one of the burgeoning number of shops in Stockholm that are geared to a growing "ethnic" market. It is not just with the aid of these "typical" objects that Ziya manifests his origin and communicates with his native Turkey. With the large quantity of modern equipment available for sound and picture transmission – especially telephone, television, video, and satellite dish - he finds it easier now to follow political and cultural developments in Istanbul and Ankara than it was when he lived in the village of his birth in north-eastern Turkey. The combination of technologically transmitted nearness and physical distance has also allowed him to maintain and develop his music, in a way that would hardly have been possible for him in Turkey.

The most obvious reason for cultural diversity in Sweden today is the increase in immigrants. They have brought with them a multitude of new forms of popular expression, not only existing artifacts, narratives, dances, and songs, but also the motifs, styles, and techniques they need to go on creating in their new country.

Vladimir Beck from Zagreb in Croatia is one such immigrant. He came to Stockholm in 1965 and has learned on his own the art of oil painting on glass, a demanding technique developed by peasants and painters in the village of Hlebine in eastern Croatia. For a long time, he was content to paint the same kind of Pannonian village scenes, in the same colors and styles as Mijo Kovacic and Ivan Generalic, the Croatian peasant painters who set the pattern. After a while in Sweden, however, Vladimir Beck began to paint other kinds of motifs - for example, scenes of old streets in Stockholm - in the unmistakable style and technique that he brought with him from Croatia.

We also see a desire to portray folklife in the pictures of the Turkish artist Ihsan Aydin. He moved from Turkey to Sweden in 1953 to train as a drawing teacher and artist. Many of his paintings depict scenes of village life in Anatolia or the Balkans, often with people in folk costume working, dancing, or making music. These colorful and powerful paintings have become very popular, and some of them have been widely distributed in large editions on posters, record sleeves, and book jackets.

"NAIVISTS"

Both Vladimir Beck and Ihsan Aydin have chosen to express themselves through one of the central mediums of the Western European artistic world: drawings and paintings in tempera and oil, on paper, glass, or canvas. They work with motifs, colors, and techniques that we can easily take to be "folk," sometimes even "naivist." Yet, both of them have found an audience for quite different kinds of pictures that cannot be so simply described as "folk art," but rather belong to categories such as political poster art, nonfigurative art, or just art. They have thereby managed to escape falling into the same trap as many immigrant artists; namely, to be regarded more as anonymous representatives of the folk traditions of their immigrant or ethnic groups than as independently creating artists.

Beck and Aydin are thus members of the group of immigrant artists who do not gear their work primarily to an audience of their fellow countrymen, but instead, aspire to be part of the public cultural sphere in Sweden. Their success in this has led to a significant growth in the diversity of forms of expression in recent decades. Moreover, they have made this diversity more visible.

However, it is not just in the arenas of public culture - among painters, sculptors, and stage artists - that we should look for the most prominent expressions of ethnic diversity. The overwhelming majority of these expressions are not primarily intended as art, but as ways to make distinctive ethnic and cultural features visible. The Jerusalem Restaurant on Hornsgatan in Stockholm serves kebab, falafel, and other exotic food, on premises where every available space is decorated with objects reminiscent of Jerusalem and Palestine. There are chased scimitars and daggers, old copper kettles, carpets, Oriental cage birds, and a jungle of plastic flowers, corncocks, and vines. There is a waterfall with flashing colored bulbs, a wishing well, and beside it, a little scene with an Arab and a camel (made of plaster of paris and chicken wire) surrounded by carpets, drums, lutes, and copper objects, against a background of sand and pyramids painted on the wall. An entire little "museum" has been set up in a corner on the second floor, an Arabian interior with a table laid for coffee, among hookahs and musical instruments.

The aesthetic that prevails at the Jerusalem Restaurant hardly belongs to the mainstream established culture. Artifacts are used here as ethnic badges, as trademarks and advertising props in the manner of the commercial market. It is not difficult to describe the furnishing as a kind of folk art and analyze it in aesthetic terms, but it is definitely not the kind of folk art that would be exhibited in any museum - either in the Middle East or in Sweden.

What the example of the Jerusalem Restaurant illustrates is that immigrants do not always choose to express themselves artistically in the same spheres or through the same media and genres that Swedes would choose. It is in this encounter of different cultural value systems that a number of important questions arise: Who has the power to define what is art or not art, what is beautiful or ugly, what is high or low? A problem for some immigrant groups, for example, is that they fondly indulge in forms of expression that totally lack counterparts in Sweden. What is great art for them might attract no attention whatever from Swedes, except perhaps when it is seen as strange behavior. A closely related problem is when the art practiced by immigrants takes on forms that we consider typically "folk." Among the Kurdish immigrants, for example, there are not many authors, painters, sculptors, or directors, but there are many poets, singers, musicians, and dancers. Very little of their work can be collected and exhibited in museums, which means that the products of their art cannot be treated on the same level or presented in the same way as our artistic treasures.

Yet another variant, which is the fate especially of art practitioners from former colonies in Africa and Asia, is that what is reckoned as high art in their countries of origin is classified in the West as folk or primitive art. The master of the sitar, Ravi Shankar, who is among the elite of classical musicians on the Indian subcontinent, has often protested vehemently about not being treated on a par with other classical musicians in Europe and the United States but, instead, is put in a second - or third-class pigeonhole for "non-European, ethnic, and primitive music."

SILENCE AND INVISIBILITY

To put it generally, the problem is that the people with the biggest sticks are the people with the best chance of forcing through their own definitions of reality. Minorities are often cast in the mold provided by a majority. For immigrants who have chosen to stick to genres that both sides can see as traditional, ethnic, folk, and so on, the problems are small. Perhaps it is even easier for them to find an audience in Sweden than it would have been in their native country.

But for those who are unwilling to be shaped in the mold provided by the majority, there are some typical alternatives. One is to be forced into silence and invisibility, simply by being denied public space; this has been the fate of some Latin American theatrical groups in Sweden. Another alternative is to be wholly or partly transferred, like Vladimir Beck and Ihsan Aydin, to a category of "ordinary artists," a category in which the question of national or ethnic origin is not so relevant. Being considered a Swede, an immigrant, or a foreigner is thus not just a question of origin, but also a matter of when, how, and with what one makes this origin visible and communicates it.

Some expressions of the growing ethnic diversity are so plain to see and smell that we cannot miss them. It is these that are most commonly discussed in the public debate. Yet, it is worth noting that the publicly proclaimed and dramatized diversity in Sweden has a very low profile as compared with many other countries. Although there are large numbers of immigrants in cities such as Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö, their public profile in those cities is still very low. Despite the Jerusalem Restaurant and similar examples, ethnic diversity has generally far less visible expression.

The most noticeable thing about places outside Stockholm, like Fittja, Norsborg, and Alby, where the proportion of immigrants is highest, is that their presence has scarcely made any impact on the publically visible environment. The predominant form of ornamentation there, as in most other residential areas, is graffiti, whether it appears in the form of quickly executed "tags" or large mural "pieces."

If we envisage a scale from the visible and publicly presented to the invisible and private, then it is toward the latter end of this scale that most expressions of multicultural Sweden can be found. This applies not least to religion, one of the areas where the diversity has increased most. Just as the immigrants of earlier days built their churches, so today's immigrants build their places of worship. Sweden now has small Buddhist temples, Muslim prayer rooms, and a wide range of churches for different Christian denominations: Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Nestorian, Uniat; and these, in turn can have many national or ethnic variants, such as Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, Serbian, Greek, Russian. A few congregations have been able to build their own, beautifully decorated churches - one example being Saint Ephraim's Church, built for and by the Syrian Orthodox congregation in Södertälje - but more often, they are provisionally housed in apartments and basements.

The Serbian Orthodox congregation of Sveti Sava in Stockholm met at several such provisional venues until 1983, when it was able to take over a small church at Enskede Gård in Stockholm, originally built for a Swedenborg congregation. In their first years, the Serbs toiled hard to reshape it from a Swedenborgian to a Serbian Orthodox church. External appearance and decoration are of great importance in the practice of Orthodox religion, especially with regard to icons and other kinds of pictures. To solve the problem, they employed the prominent Serbian church painter Marko Ilic. During a few years in the mid-1980s, he decorated the church with saints' images and biblical motifs in traditional Serbian Orthodox style, with vivid colors and impressive quantities of gold, collected by the members of the congregation. Ilic, however, was unable to complete his work. Having contracted a severe illness, he returned to Serbia, where he died shortly afterward. Some time later, serious damage from mold and damp was noticed in the church, which had to be demolished. Now a new church is being built on the same site, the first in Sweden to be erected wholly in

traditional Balkan style. Here, Marko Ilic's preserved paintings will be displayed in a proper context.

Ilic's pictures are still largely unknown to anyone outside the congregation, as are the saints' images, iconostases, carpets, censers, and similar objects that decorate many other new places of worship in Sweden. These are often products of a traditional craft with a history going back hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years, which have never before existed in Sweden except in museums but which are now a living part of an increasingly multifaceted religious life. Some of this may disappear within a generation or two, but some will survive as important ingredients in the blend that is Sweden's future cultural heritage.

ETHNIC DIVERSITY

While a considerable part of the expression of ethnic diversity in Sweden is displayed in churches, clubhouses, and the like, even more remains in the homes, out of view from everyone except the immediate family circle. Today, there is greater variation than ever before regarding what a home is and how it should be used and decorated.. Ziya Aytakin's home in Alby, with its mixture of traditional carpets and modern appliances, is just one example of a way of furnishing and using a home that differs greatly from what is usually counted as "Swedish homemaking culture." Paradoxically, the variation in home decoration appears to be greatest where the physical conditions for it are the worst, in areas such as Fittja, Rinkeby, Rosengård, or Angered, where the housing appears to have been punched out on a conveyor belt following highly standardized templates.

Worth particular attention among all the things that a home can contain is a class of symbolically charged objects that have taken on special positions as markers of an origin. This is of ten the same kind of ornament that is sold in the home country to tourists as an example of "old folk craft traditions." For example, hanging on the wall of many homes of people from the former Yugoslavia, there is a gusle, a one-stringed instrument used to accompany magnificent epic narratives about the deeds of bygone heroes. It is also popular among Turks, Greeks, and people from the former Yugoslavia to hang up extra-large (over three feet in length) salad servers of olive wood; small, woven, multicolored shoulderbags; painted wooden spoons; flutes of various kinds; chased samovars; and small, copper coffeepots with companion pieces for serving Turkish coffee. The objects have acquired a function that is at least as important as their intended use. They are repositories of memories with emotional value, for emigrants and tourists alike.

The expansion in tourism and travel, the international flow of commodities, the new technological advances, and the many immigrants and refugees are thus among the important reasons for Sweden's rapid change from a supposed relatively uniform to a multicultural society. But there are other reasons. In less than three decades, Sweden has undergone an ideological reorientation, in which a new type of cultural relativism, emphasizing that people are different, is now competing in more and more contexts against the earlier emphasis on uniformity. As a result of the new concepts, attitudes, and perspectives, this reorientation has given rise to the emergence of a new Sweden: "multicultural Sweden" or "mixed Sweden." In this light, the factors discussed above are not the causes of the increasing diversity in Sweden, but rather the preconditions for it and the results of the changes in perspectives. Travel, the flow of goods, technology, and immigration have meant that more and more channels, media, forms, colors, and techniques are available. This, in turn, has made it possible to communicate

an increasing number of nuances in aesthetic and emotional values, social status, and identities of various kinds.

Folk art is a reservoir of styles, forms, and techniques for people to draw on, especially when communicating identity. There is, therefore, little reason to believe, as some culture critics do, that traditional arts are doomed to blend into a single gray, indefinable mass, or to be erased, disappearing among the mass-produced articles of the world market. On the contrary: With the emergence of a more consciously emphasized multiculturalism, we may be sure that folk forms of expression from both past and present will have new and important functions to fulfill.