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What constitutes a rich field of study for ethnomusicology?

The question, which I ask, does not concern the limits/borderlines between what is viewed as 'Traditional' and what is called 'Folklore'. Playing with such definitions does not really interest me. I think it more important to turn my attention to 'the musical object for ethnomusicologists'. This has already been widely debated, but what I want to do here is to shed some new light on this debate.

The object of the study of ethnomusicology is "all the musics of the world"; it has often been said that ethnomusicology is more about method than object.

However, is it not illusory to aspire to study all the musics played by million of inhabitants living on the planet, who, in different ways, share in the happiness of performing music? Musics which moreover are constantly changing? A whole army of ethnomusicologists - if one could raise one - would have no chance of accomplishing this task. Hence the idea I am putting forward here: there now is an imperative to make choices and I would like to discuss these choices with you here. Some of you may think that the question asked above is a little 'politically incorrect'. In fact I am not sure that this debate can take place peacefully on the other side of the Atlantic. But it's for this very reason that I'm interested in such a question. A question too rarely asked, and often considered when it's already too late.

I emphasise, however, that I do not wish my position to be exaggerated. I do not want to be labelled as someone who is stating that "this musical culture is good and it must be studied" or conversely that "this one is worth nothing, don't go there!". The question I ask concerns scientific strategy. What should we study? How do we make choices? According to what criteria

can we pragmatically orientate our choices? In other words: What constitutes a rich field of study for ethnomusicology? The question is of course scientific but it is also practical: it is of interest to both academics and very young researchers – I meet them every year – who have to work on how to increase our knowledge in ethnomusicology. So, what shall we do and how shall we do it?

The question is also up to date. Should we study, as it has been suggested [Molino 2006], the music that housewives listen to in their kitchen? Or the whistling of painters while at work? This can be done as long as a cognitive approach is taken but, from the ethnomusicologist's point of view, these suggestions are not very interesting.

Of course, that said, the responses which I bring to the table here reflect my own experiences –and therefore my own choices. By now, I am quite familiar with three or four fields, which have 'grown inside me' during the last years of my research activities. At a certain time during my research (40 years already!!), I had to "choose" between them. If these choices have been fruitful I owe it less to my own talent than to the people who guided me and trained my ears: I refer here to the rural, Mediterranean societies which welcomed me with great generosity. To those with whom I conceived and created some knowledge – the results have long since been published.

In order to define what I have identified as *les beaux terrains* (a rich field) - and I wish to apologize again for the reductive effect of this expression - I will talk about four criteria.

1. *Ancestral cultures*

I purposely do not use the term 'traditional': I consider this an overused term which has led to abuses - we are reminded of this issue by Pascal Boyer in *Barricades mystérieuses*. The concept of 'tradition' was first linked to the idea of the 'action of transmitting' (as is shown by the suffix *-tion*) but has now more or less become synonymous with 'heritage'. This notion excludes the idea of action, as heritage is lifeless. For this reason 'traditional' music, when it exists, does not interest me.

It interests me even less when it is 'patrimonialised' [cf. concept of 'patrimonialisation'].

To be precise the 'ancestral cultures' which have guided my work, do not necessarily practice the cult of the ancestors. Let's say however that they enter into a dialogue with ancestors. I would have never thought of studying cultures that do not pay respect to their dead, who do not mourn. Mourning, as we all know, is, in appearance only, a nuisance for the ethnomusicologist. When a singer is mourning... he stops singing (this also, but to a lesser extent, is true of the players, professional or semi-professional). The ethnomusicologist arrives and has to put his tape recorder away. Everywhere I have been it has been like that (among the Berbers in Morocco, the Touaregs, Sardinians, Romanians...).

So it seems that mourning is a handicap for the researcher - it represents an obstacle - but this handicap cannot be avoided and is absolutely necessary: death, and respect towards it, is an essential part of cultural life. This is an anthropological rule: rejecting or minimising the respect paid to death is the same as threatening life itself; showing respect towards death is a strong indicator of a culture's vitality.

2. *Noi cultures*

What does this expression mean? In Sardinia, the pronoun 'Us' (*Noi*, in Italian) is the one, which is most often used. Every conversation, whether it is about fishing, olives, wine, sense of honour, rules of hospitality - and music of course - is always interspaced with the pronoun *noi*. This *noi* is emphasised, it always starts a sentence. Some would talk of a "Sardinian identity". Let us say, more simply, that in Sardinia people know who they are.

Of course this *noi* has a variable dimension. It is the *Noi, Sardi* (Us, Sardinians) when one is in a foreign country, but it can also be the *Noi* 'barbaricino' which defines a micro regional entity within Sardinia. Or it can also be the *Noi* between members of a brotherhood in a village such as Castelsardo - *Noi* here concerns only about a hundred people; the pronoun can be attributed to an even smaller number of people (a *greffa*, a group of friends meeting for one or several evenings).

What matters here is to understand that, particularly in Sardinia, the *Noi* is only important as far as it is a term which is in opposition to another. It can only exist in relation to a sort of 'non-*noi*' who can be a stranger or more importantly a rival. Collective Sardinian thinking is not traditional. It is first and foremost 'contradictional'. People always think of themselves in dual terms.

Therefore a group of dancers, singers, members of a brotherhood, etc., by its birth, brings about the birth of a rival group. Sardinian society always creates divisions (mitoses). Friendly rivalries, challenges, conflicts whether real or not, and even vendetta with homicide, are an integral part of this very fascinating society and give it dynamism.

This *Noi* is fundamentally political (i.e.: Maoism or Troskysm often refer to the *Noi - Noi*, comrades - a *Noi* which had disastrous consequences in history!).

But the Sardinian *Noi* is more democratic, it implies a copy of oneself (mitosis: a division) which in order to affirm itself, demands constant negotiation. This *Noi* exists through an internal fracture - like a mitosis -, it generates constant actions 1) within what I would call 'mitotic cells' (since one always thinks of oneself as in two parts always really or virtually sectioned) and 2) towards the exterior, the other, the one who is not oneself - in other words: the 'stranger'.

The *Noi* has therefore two realities: 'inclusive' (us, we are together even if it takes two of us to form a single unit); 'exclusive' [you, the others: "try to copy us"]. And this *Noi* has to be always affirmed, proclaimed as if to convince oneself that it exists.

This particular social energy feeds into music, or rather the musics, of Sardinia (*tenore*, songs with guitar accompaniment, dance music, polyphonic choir, etc.). It exists in all the challenges contained in Sardinian society; such as horse races, rituals of all sorts, fighting games, *morra*, rounds of drinks in bars, etc.

Of course there are other micro-sociological factors, which generate social dynamism, but in Sardinia, these are particularly efficient, therefore Sardinia is 'a rich field' of studies for ethnomusicologists.

3. *Uncomfortable cultures*

I am not talking here about the uncomfortable situations in which the ethnomusicologist can find himself (nights without sleep, too much alcohol - which are an integral part of musical practice in northern Mediterranean countries as they are in most parts of the world). I am not talking about the taste for danger, for example, in Albania where wearing a seat belt in a car shows a lack of social skills and may cause offence to the driver!

I want to talk about a more fundamental issue, that of 'discomfort' so familiar to small rural Mediterranean societies and which puts them miles away from those timorous traditional and conservative societies that folklorists have imagined - probably in their own image.

Aside from work, masculinity is, organically, always in conflict with family life. Everything to do with leisure (music, having a few drinks in a bar) is not compatible with a western bourgeois way of life. However, all leisure activities (it. *divertimento*) represent first and foremost an intense social exercise. They create or re-create links. So that, contrary to appearances, it is a commitment to be in *cumpania bedda* (in good company) and to comment on the world with friends. It is difficult to give the impression that you are doing nothing when in fact everything is happening in this nothing.

To live in this kind of culture means that in fact one must reject all forms of individualism, that could consist, for instance, in renouncing to see a friend in hospital, or also to enjoy a selfish pleasure, or even to abandon the marginal satisfaction of watching television (except football which has a specific status). The most important is to remain oneself, that is to say, to be always moved by the *Noi*, to which I referred earlier on.

4. *Voracious cultures*

We often refer to 'living cultures' but what does this mean? As opposed to what? Are all cultures not alive?

"Voracious culture" is a lot clearer and refers to predators and big open spaces. The best example of a voracious culture is Western elitist culture, which has an extraordinary capacity to

swallow everything up, in particular as far as the musics of the world are concerned. It loots them and folds them up to the size of its wallet. But this predatory capacity is not only typical of Western modern societies. Others, if not all, tend to see themselves as hegemonic and - whether they want it or not - engage in predatory in-fighting, similar to these fights that one can see on BBC wildlife programs.

Every heron knows that it can swallow a fish depending on its size, not because of its appetite but according to the chances it has of swallowing it up in one gulp. If the carp weighs more than 350 grams, the heron will not be able to swallow it up and is in danger of choking.

Musics in contact are full of carp and heron stories, and though in ethnomusicology we like to say that all musics can be assimilated and hybridised, we are well aware that many carps have killed herons and that musical cultures run the risk of disappearing by being swallowed up. As in natural selection, the ones that survive are the herons with a large throat and a supple neck. And in my opinion, these musics offer the best field of study.

This reference to a certain musical 'vitalism' does not solve all the problems of our field, which suffer from a trauma: not really global warming, but a kind of freezing of local traditions and a loss of self confidence. But that is another story.

The end of this presentation will consist of a few examples from different societies (South America, Martinique, High Atlas, Sardinia, Albania, etc.).

The conclusion will offer an opportunity for discussion.

Translation: Geneviève and Desi Wilkinson