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"Music and Interculturality"

Antenor Ferreira Corrêa and Maria Westvall (Guest editors)

Music, Dance and Ethnic Elasticity in a Kurdish Cultural Association: The Complexity of Intercultural Experience

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to examine how young people have engaged in a Kurdish cultural association in Stockholm, Sweden, making their ethnic heritage socially relevant through dance and music. It stresses the importance of taking people's complex life-worlds into account, to avoid simplified connections between their performance of expressive cultural forms and their everyday lives. The fieldwork consisted of participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The first analysis concerns how the members relate dancing to Kurdish music to memories and life experiences. The second analysis focuses on the multi-modal qualities of music and dance as key-symbols, and the embodiment of ethnic belonging. The third concentrates on the shifting relevance of ethnicity, depending on current contexts and political changes. For the members, the relevance of developing a Kurdish identity had increased. They were (i) in a formative identity phase in their lower twenties. As ethnic minority members, (ii) it was important be recognized as equal Swedish citizens. They were (iii) affected by what happened in the diaspora and the ongoing war in Kurdistan. The multi-modal qualities of music and dance enabled the members to mold a unique and inclusive ethnicity.

Keywords: Ethnicity, diaspora, Kurdish, music, dance

Música, danza y elasticidad étnica en una asociación cultural kurda: la complejidad de la experiencia intercultural

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es examinar cómo un grupo de jóvenes se involucraron en una



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asociación cultural kurda en Estocolmo (Suecia), haciendo su herencia étnica socialmente relevante a través de la danza y la música. Se resalta la importancia de tener en cuenta la complejidad de la vida de las personas, para evitar establecer conexiones simplificadas entre las puestas en escena de sus formas expresivas y sus vidas cotidianas. El trabajo de campo incluyó la observación participante y la realización de entrevistas semi-estructuradas. El primer análisis se refiere a cómo los miembros de la asociación relacionan el baile de la música kurda con los recuerdos y las experiencias de la vida. El segundo análisis se centra en las cualidades multimodales de la música y la danza, como símbolos clave, y en la corporeización de la pertenencia étnica. El tercero se concentra en la relevancia cambiante de la etnicidad, la cual depende de los contextos actuales y de los cambios políticos. Para los miembros de la asociación la relevancia de desarrollar una identidad kurda ha aumentado. En sus veinte y pocos años se encontraban (i) en una fase de identidad formativa. Como miembros de una minoría étnica, (ii) era importante ser reconocido como ciudadanos suecos. Fueron (iii) afectados por lo que sucedió en la diáspora y la guerra en curso en Kurdistán. Las cualidades multimodales de la música y la danza permitieron a los miembros moldear una etnia única e inclusiva.

Palabras clave: etnicidad, diáspora, kurdos, música, danza

Música, dança e elasticidade étnica em uma associação cultural kurda: a complexidade da experiência intercultural

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é examinar como os jovens se envolveram em uma associação cultural kurda em Estocolmo (Suécia) tornando sua herança étnica socialmente relevante através da dança e da música. Enfatiza a importância de levar em consideração o complexos mundos-cotidianos das pessoas, para evitar conexões simplificadas entre a performance de formas culturais expressivas e seu dia-a-dia. O trabalho de campo consistiu de observações participantes e entrevistas semiestruturadas. A primeira análise diz respeito a como os membros relacionam dançar a música kurda com memórias e experiências de vida. A segunda análise enfoca as qualidades multimodais da música e da dança como símbolos-chave e a incorporação do pertencimento étnico. A terceira se concentra na relevância variável da etnia, dependendo dos contextos atuais e das mudanças políticas. Para os membros, a relevância do desenvolvimento de uma identidade kurda aumentou. Eles estavam (i) em uma fase de formação identitária, ao redor de seus vinte e poucos anos. Como membros de minorias étnicas, (ii) era importante serem reconhecidos como autênticos cidadãos suecos. Eles foram (iii) afetados pelo que aconteceu na diáspora e na guerra em curso no Curdistão. As qualidades multimodais da música e da dança permitiram que os membros formassem uma etnia única e inclusiva.

Palavras-chave: etnia, diáspora, curdos, música, dança

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Introduction

During the last decades, intercultural perspectives have increased in popularity in Sweden as well as in other countries all over the world. The intercultural notion has developed to an umbrella concept, yet with roots in classical cultural relativism from the anthropology of the 1950s, but also spiced with influences from present-day perspectives of inclusion and social justice (Dahlén 1997, Goldstein-Kyaga, Borgström & Hübinette 2012, EU 2017: 15ff.). Despite the influences of contemporary theories, in Sweden the old relativist view is still prevalent in the intercultural field of education. For example, intercultural approaches are often understood as “management of cultural dissimilarities and encounters”. Interculturalists often fall into cultural relativistic explanations and solutions, even when they have identified exclusion as an effect of social inequality and power relations (Eriksen 2001, Goldstein-Kyaga & Borgström 2012, Lahdenperä 2010, Lahdenperä & Sandström 2011, Pripp 2018a).

However, in the sector of aesthetic culture and arts, today there is a wide variation of perspectives under the intercultural label. Official documents like the EU report *How Culture and Arts can Promote Intercultural Dialogue* (EU 2017), often encourage and promote more unprejudiced socially oriented perspectives but also have to balance this approach towards culturalist perspectives¹ about individuals belonging to certain ethnic or national cultures and cultural heritages (cf. EU 2017: 15-17).

The problem with a cultural relativistic approach is that it is based on an understanding that people belong to ethnic groups with certain cultures that determine the members' actions and ways of understanding the world. It promotes an emic perspective on a multicultural society, constituted by a mosaic of distinct and separate ethnicities. It defines cultural encounters as exchange of cultural traits and objects rather than peoples' complex social interactions. The main problem with such approaches is that they do not fit into a world with cultural hybridity and global creolization processes (Appadurai 1996, Eriksen 2001, Hannerz 1993). Further, culture relativism has problems coping with the reality for children and youth of transnational families. Parents and family members might be of different ethnicities, and the relatives may be settled in different places all over the world (Gustavsson 2007: 17ff., 2004, Woube 2014). In addition, in each one of these places, ethnicity gets its unique shape and meaning (Barth 1969: 14f, Devereux 1996: 397-406). Migration is not necessarily a movement from one location to another, to an endpoint, but a process where people continue migrating or commuting between at least two locations (Hübinette & Pripp 2017, Gustavsson 2004: 67, 2007: 17ff., Ong 1999, Povrzanović-Frykman 2004, 2007, Studemeyer 2015, Woube 2014). Ethno-nationalist models of the necessity of belonging to only one nation and cultural heritage have thus been contested by transnational and diaspora scholars' pointing to how people today develop multiple loyalties and occupy complex and pragmatic approaches (Breier 2017, Lundberg 2009, Olsson 2007, Vertovec 2007, Woube 2014).

¹ Culturalistic means simplified understanding, from cultural templates about ethnic groups and nationalities, which lacks social dimensions.

In this article, I wish to keep to this “pragmatic” tradition, scrutinizing how young adults of Kurdish origin born in Sweden relate to their belonging to a Kurdish culture when forming their lives in relation to different contexts and life-worlds. Traditional intercultural perspectives often have difficulties converting larger culture patterns into individual actions and people’s complex life worlds (Hastrup 2010). As economists Sunil Venaik and Paul Brewer have shown, there is no clear correlation between global national culture models, such as the relativist model of Gert Hofstede, and how people from these different cultural spheres actually act and form their work and everyday lives (Brewer & Venaik 2012, Venaik & Brewer 2013). There is no intercultural crystal ball to look into to predict people’s cultural behavior. There are too many interplaying circumstances when culture or ethnicity are made socially relevant. Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen shows, in line with Brewer and Venaik, how intercultural initiatives in UNESCO that promote inclusion are based too much on assumptions of peoples’ different ethnic cultures, leaving out the biggest part of the every-day lives of the target groups (Eriksen 2001: 129-134, Pripp 2018a).

The aim of this article is to point to navigable ways of taking complex life-worlds into account when exploring how second generation Kurds make their ethnic heritage socially relevant through performing dance and understanding music.

A complex understanding of ethnicity and culture, as depicted above, is also important to stress when it comes to the relationship between culture as a way of living –culture in an anthropological sense– and culture in an aesthetic sense, like music and dance. There are of course no clear lines between people’s everyday lives and values as well as for example, their practicing of ethnic representations in the form of dance and music. In addition, the multi-modal character of music and dance also opens for complexity. Music and dance are multi-modal and function as multivalent key-symbols, with the embodiment of feelings, activation of senses like hearing, eyesight, voice/singing and touching/moving, and arouse memories and link individual life experiences to common cultural narratives and memories (Pripp 2018b, Lundberg, Malm & Ronström 2000). In the following, I wish to examine such complexities by scrutinizing how young Kurdish descendants practice, express and give meaning to their ethnic musicking in relation to their life histories and everyday lives (Small 1998).

The context

Sweden has a strong tradition of civic influence and participation through popular movements and popular adult education since the beginning of the 20th century. The popular adult education concerned foremost the working classes, as a tool for decreasing class-distinction and also as a governmental means of disciplining the members of the society (Lidskog, Pripp & Westvall 2018). When migration to Sweden started to increase, during the 1960s and 1970s, the immigrants were requested to organize themselves in associations within the tradition of the adult education movement. They were expected to learn about democratic processes, to participate and integrate into the Swedish society. By subsidies and cultural policies, the state supported immigrant and ethnic associations. The authorities also encouraged the associations and their members to cultivate their “original” ethnic identities and belongingness through cultural

activities, such as playing music and dancing (Pripp 2007: 262-282).

Today, nearly one third of the Swedish population of 10.1 million has foreign background². The immigrant associations are still flourishing even though the financial support from the state has decreased (SCB 2018). The Swedish integration policies have changed from supporting immigrant's identity work, to stricter demands on the associations to favor activities that strengthen participants' Swedish language skills and their social integration (Lidskog, Pripp & Westvall 2018).

The culture association Komciwan is located in central Stockholm in a community center. It is a politically and religiously independent branch of Komkar (the Swedish-Kurdish Labour Association), that was established during the 1970s. The founders were Kurdish students who had fled Turkey because of the military coup. Komkar was also established at the time in other countries where Kurdish refugees settled. During the decades that follow until today, many Kurds have fled oppression to Sweden and other parts of the world. Today the Kurdish diaspora is worldwide and approximately 60.000-70.000 Kurds live in Sweden (Khayati 2012: 6, Khayati & Dahlstedt 2014: 57-58). Kurds in Sweden organize a big part of the cultural and political initiatives and activities within the diaspora (Alinia 2007 and 2014).

In the years of 2014 and 2015, I conducted fieldwork in a Kurdish cultural association for children and youth located in the center of Stockholm, Sweden. The purpose was to examine how expressive forms of music and dance were practiced and what they symbolized and meant to the members. And also, to find out the meaning of ethnic identity for the members, when playing and dancing in the association, as well as in other social contexts in their lives. A basic question was if, when and how ethnicity became relevant to them (Barth 1969). One follow up question was what part music and dance played in their identification processes, negotiating and molding an ethnic identity, socially relevant in the Swedish context. The study was a part of the multi-disciplinary research project "Music, identity and multicultural", where a team of researchers examined the function and meaning of music to participants in seven ethnic-based associations, located in the three largest cities in Sweden, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. My method was participant observation in meetings, events and rehearsals, documented by video-recording and semi-structured interviews with musicians, dance leaders and other members.

In the following parts, I will focus on three themes, each revealing the relationship between the performance of ethnic labeled music and dance on one side, and the making of meaning and the relevance of ethnicity on the other. I will begin with an analysis of how the members of the association relate dancing to Kurdish music to memories and life experiences. The second theme focuses on an analysis of the multi-modal qualities of music and dance as key-symbols, and the embodiment of ethnic belonging. The third theme concentrates on the shifting relevance of ethnicity, and the meaning of music and dance, according to current contexts and political changes in the surrounding world.

² In Swedish statistics, Foreign background includes people born abroad or born in Sweden with at least one parent born abroad.

Ethnic maturing – individual and collective memories

The individual making of meaning, through music and dance, connects a “person’s sense of self to a larger community”, to collective memories, narratives and identification processes (Adjam 2017, Assman 1995, van Dijk 2006, Halbwachs 1992, Volgsten & Pripp 2016: 145f). Jan Assman points to how “memory is what allows us to construe an image or narrative of the past and, by the same process, to develop an image and narrative of our selves” (Assman 2011: 15). The symbolic and multi-modal character of music and dance makes it possible to connect the senses and modes of emotions to these individual and collective memories. Playing and dancing in a cultural association is in that sense, a social practice, a “lived remembrance processes” in the present, more than activities arousing old memories (Adjam 2017: 22-26, Halbwachs 1992: 46-51, Hyltén-Cavallius 2005: 41f, Ronström 1992: 25-29).

Both communicative and cultural memory are collective and connect the past with the present. *Communicative memory* “is based on everyday communication within relatively small groups. It is colloquial and thus non-specialized, non-formalized and reciprocal” (Volgsten & Pripp 2016: 146, cf. Assman 1995 and 2011). People could share memories of situations and course of events, back in time, that bind them together and become parts of their identification in the present (Fröhlig 2017). What characterizes *cultural memory* is that it is institutionalized and canonized in a group’s imaginations of a common past. These kinds of memories are stored in stable symbolic forms and are situation-transcendent. “They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another” (Assman 2011: 17). Their symbolic forms must be circulated and re-embodied in a society, in order to function as memories, Assman claims (Assman 2011: 17, Volgsten & Pripp 2016: 146). This definition of cultural memory should not be understood as essentialist, but as a component in the construction of collective identity, how cultural memories are re-embodied and connected to people’s individual life trajectories and the making of meaning. The meaning and relevance of such collective identities also fluctuates depending on what context one actually finds oneself in, and on political and social changes in the society and the surrounding world. In that sense the meaning of cultural symbols is not fixed but dependent on the current situation. Communicative and cultural memories are often interrelated. Such relations surface when communicative memories of everyday episodes are re-interpreted and connected to master narratives and cultural memories. I will come back to how these kinds of processes are taking place in the empirical examples below.

A general example of how meaning shifts depending on context; a dance or a piece of music could symbolize the same common cultural memories for a Kurdish old person in Kurdistan and a young Kurd born and raised in Sweden. But they connect this symbolic group destiny to their different everyday lives respectively, how and to what extent the multivalent symbol becomes relevant to them in their particular contexts. In both cases their communicative memories of their lives are activated to be parts of common cultural memories. Nevertheless, from a diasporic perspective these contexts are also interrelated and affect each other, as we will see in the empirical part below. What happens among Kurds in Kurdistan affects people in the diaspora. And what happens in the diaspora affects people in Kurdistan (Alinia 2014, Povrazanovic Frykman 2004).

The association’s three dance teachers are all in their lower twenties and born in Sweden to

Kurdish parents. They were raised in different housing areas in greater Stockholm, inhabited by majority Swedes, with few Kurds or others with foreign backgrounds. In the interviews, they were asked about music memories from their childhood. All of the three dance teachers, Dilda, Evîn and Rojîn, associate Kurdish music with individual –but also communal– memories of how their parents always played Kurdish music when cleaning the house or receiving visitors. “It was never quiet in our home”, Dilda says. “The music was always there, mostly in the background... at home, in the car, everywhere”. Her father’s favorites were Ciwan Haco (pronounced “Johan Hadjo”) and Sivan Perwer. Her mother used to play classic Kurdish music and love songs. But Dilda herself never played Kurdish music, but rather Hits for kids-records and popular music on the radio, often with Swedish or English lyrics. One of the other teachers, Evîn, says she liked different kinds of music as a child, depending on her mood. Her favorite band was, and still is, Metallica. However, she also liked Kurdish music, especially from Syria and Turkey where her parents are from.

Another aspect of how music functions as individual as well as communal memory emerged in the interviewees’ stories about how clearly they still remember how they, as children, got affected by the music and stories of their parent’s moods and remembrances when playing particular artists or genres. Transmitted individual and communal memories, from one generation to another, are shaped and coloured by the specific transfer contexts and situations. Rojîn spoke about her mother who had grown up in a peaceful Syrian part of Kurdistan and who loved joyful Kurdish dance music. She played dance tunes that reminded her of “preferable parts” of her childhood, playing games with her sisters and brothers, dancing at weddings and other celebrations. One of her mother’s favourites was the singer Aynur Dogan, who “is coming here” [to Sweden], says Rojîn, “and my mother is so happy about that, and me too, because it’s a part of my childhood too”. Rojîn compares her mother’s with her father’s memories and moods. The father had been a guerrilla soldier in different locations all over the Kurdish region. She remembers how he used to play the singer Ahmet Kaya, who had great impact on him and Kurds in general:

His music, it is a bit more sad music, so to speak. Then he has other types of songs, a little more dance, and a little more joy. But we didn’t grow up with those. It was a bit more the sad... that was dad. ... I think his songs say a lot, maybe how it is to live as a Kurd ... in Turkey. I think dad and almost all Kurds can identify with such a situation, but I also think my dad became extra affected because he had some sort of longing also to the home country, so he put on these songs when he was in Sweden.

One of the other dance teachers, Evîn, says that she did not know much about the artists when she was little. Nevertheless, she recognized which ones of the songs and instruments were Kurdish, tunes that gave her a feeling of security. Her mother used to play tapes and records with Kurdish music to make her happy when she was sad. Her parents also used to dance with her, as soon as there was Kurdish music. Today she is doing the same with her nephews, especially with upbeat Kurdish music. She still associates Kurdish music with these kinds of tunes, and still gets affected by them; “it could be an awful day or that I don’t feel well, but listening to the music, I get happy again”.

The process, how individual and communal “musical” memories connect to cultural (ethnic) memories, was also noticeable in the interviewees’ descriptions of how Kurdish culture, music and

dance, had been more like an un-reflected and played down part of their everyday lives during childhood and adolescence. The need to develop their Kurdishness, and re-interpret their childhood and early teenage memories as pieces of a cultural memory, had occurred in later days. Dilda joined Komciwan in high school:

I didn't even know the names of the songs that I have heard since I was little. The songs just popped up on YouTube and here in the association. And they reminded me of my childhood. So I decided to find out the names of all these songs. Sometimes I just remembered a part of a lyric, which I wrote down and searched for on Google, and then it came up. And now I have all these songs in my mobile phone.

Evîn, who had only a few Kurdish friends during childhood, spoke Swedish to her parents who used to answer in Kurdish. Her grandmother was the one who kept family and relatives together in Sweden. When she passed, Evîn felt she had lost the last Kurdish part of herself. That is why she joined Komciwan, to explore and develop her “Kurdish identity”, as she puts it. She thought she had fostered a Swedish identity, useful for a university student and in various parts of her daily life. However, she wanted to host both. In Komciwan she met other young Kurds in similar situations, and with similar trajectories and experiences, who also wished to develop their “Kurdish parts”, in her words, by learning Kurdish dances.

To sum up, how people in intercultural situations give meaning to “ethnic” music and dance is closely dependent on the current context as well as individual life trajectories, memories and experiences. Intercultural situations with cultural transmission exist but have to be understood as complex and unpredictable.

Identification via senses and other bodily experiences

In the interviews, the musicians, leaders and other members talked about what Kurdish music and dance meant to them and what they considered typically Kurdish traits in these expressions. There were three recurrent master narratives, or collective cultural agreements, about the Kurdish and how to *be* a Kurd, that could be discerned in the stories (cf. Hall 1993, Pripp 2018c: 53ff., White 1981, Widdershoven 1993). The Kurdish was described in terms of (i) *certain instruments, sounds, tones or genres from different parts of Kurdistan or the diaspora*. Another feature was (ii) *a certain set of singing and storytelling traditions and choice of subjects*. The third recurrent collective narrative was about (iii) *music and dance as the lifeblood for Kurds*, for community feelings and solidarity, for mobilization and resistance and as a basic characteristic of “being” a real Kurd (Lidskog, Westvall & Pripp 2018: 12f, cf. Hall 1993, Pripp 2018c: 53ff., Widdershoven 1993).

In accordance with my analysis, these basic criteria for Kurdish music and dance served as cultural key symbols for the members. Genres, sounds and instruments often function as key symbols in a groups' identity constructions (Bryngelsson 2017, Hammarlund 1990, Moore 2005: 266, Pripp 2018b). Sound symbols are central to social relations and the binding of scattered local cultural practices to larger social categories. As multivalent key symbols, they have the capacity to garner several and contradictive meanings. They are activated in power relations, being central

to dominance as well as to resistance; they are often used to draw attention to something important, to a group of people regards as being silenced, thrown in the background or having dropped its contours (Moore 2005: 266). The multi-modal character of sound and music also makes it possible to feel and express through the different the senses, what cannot be said in words (Lundberg, Malm & Ronström 2000).

In the Kurdish case, all these key symbolic characteristics of music and dance are relevant. In the following, I want to show how the practice of music and dance, partly was a sensed Kurdishness, functioning as “glue”, binding together Kurds in Kurdistan and in the diaspora. I also want to indicate how playing music and dancing were symbolic means to inner mobilization and making the surrounding world aware of the oppression of Kurds (Alinia 2007, Hammarlund 1990). In addition, the music and dance performances had key symbolic qualities in giving the members opportunities to express their wishes and ideal pictures of inner Kurdish solidarity and of a desirable position in the world (Fredriksson 2018: 157, Small 1998: 50). In that sense music and dance became a medium to give shape to a “fantasy” about an ideal future society, a fantasmatic logic, that often permeated the members’ explanations as to why they played and danced (Glynos & Howarth 2007: 145-152).

Music and dance as embodied and “felt” “Kurdishness” was a characteristic trait of the interviewees’ stories, which showed how the symbolic qualities of music enabled connections between the individual and the group, between the senses and the cultural memories and master narratives. A recurrent subject in their stories was the power of dance, evoking embodied feelings of affinity and security. For Dilda, the dance is one of the strongest things Kurds have in common. “Despite all the suffering Kurds have gone through, we are still dancing”, she says. Her colleague Rojîn stresses how the dance provides security and community. She thinks that people must learn to dance, if they really want to be Kurds. Evîn, the third dance leader, recalls how she could not dance one step of Kurdish dances before she joined Komciwan. Today, after five years, she says her body starts to move and dances by itself when hearing the music. In Kurdish dance, she explains, one has to move the whole body all the time, and to swing, and one must shake the shoulders. It is important to synchronize with the others’ shoulders and their swing:

Because you stand together, in circles, that’s a community feeling. And you are dancing with the people next to you. You have to move if they move. It becomes like a community. [...] It feels safe. Perhaps that sounds strange. But that is what Kurdish dance always has been to me. If you stand between two people you have them as security. You can relax so much more because you are with others.

The interviewees often come back to this subject, why they get community feelings and feel safe when dancing. Their stories consist of a complex weave of bodily experiences, memories and interpretations. It is about the impact from their parents’ approach to Kurdish music and dance, as a means to fight worries and manage longing and belonging to Kurdistan. It is about how they, since they were children, became happy and secure when listening and dancing to the music. Moreover, it is about how their personal memories and practices are intertwined with collectively oriented narratives about the symbolic meaning of Kurdish peoples playing, singing and dancing together.

Discussing the meaning of the singing and the lyrics, Evîn says she does not listen so much to the words when dancing. It is partly due to her weak language. She mentions how lots of second generation Kurds in Europe cannot speak Kurdish. When the members of Komciwan in a camp met other Kurdish youth associations from Europe, they had to communicate in English. But, she adds, “they knew dances that we didn’t know. [...] And we taught them dances from us. So, though unaware of it, there was a bonding: that we are Kurdish youth from Europe. The dance brought us together”.

Compared to Evîn, the language and lyrics mean much more to Dilda. She is affected by Kurdish songs because of their strong lyrics about things that matter, like how Kurds continue fighting despite of what they have been through. And she gets emotional at strong Kurdish love songs, and songs about the sad and the bad; often written by Kurds in the diaspora, “about how far away you are from Kurdistan, from people at home and about those who have been killed in war”. She has also noticed how second generation Kurds in the diaspora cherish this tradition, writing urgent and important lyrics about belonging. Evîn identifies with lyrics that weave together issues about the “home country”, the diaspora and the marginalized positions in European host countries:

In recent years I have noticed that there has come a lot of music also with Kurds born abroad who have become artists. They write many songs that are about, well you know, where am I at home? Am I at home in Sweden, for instance, or in Kurdistan? You are born elsewhere but have strong bonds to Kurdistan. In these kinds of songs, you can recognize yourself. I get hypnotized. There are rappers, both in Kurdish and in Swedish, which I’ve heard.

To sum up, when members express and give meaning to Kurdish music and dance, they use properties from a common container filled with cultural memories, master narratives and a certain set of dances, sounds, genres and instruments, common in different regions of Kurdistan and the diaspora. These agreements of *being* Kurds were changed and creolized when adopted to their unique experiences and lives in Stockholm and to being socially relevant in a Swedish context (Hall 1993). However, the members had their own individual relations to dances, sounds and lyrics. They sometimes mixed the folk dances with other dance genres, like street dance. They experimented with traditional as well as popular music searching for socially relevant expressions, in other words, they were molding ethnicity, *becoming* Kurds by practicing and performing, as part of identification processes in relation to different contexts (Hall 1993, Khayati & Dahlstedt 2014). Consequently, “becoming Kurds”, is an unpredictable and relational process dependent on individual preferences and life experiences. It is not a simple repetition of cultural traditions with fixed meanings and forms. It is an ongoing production of culture, both in an aesthetic sense, and as production of meaning. Culture is not something people have, but a result of what they actually do.

Molding belonging in different contexts – political engagement and the elasticity of ethnicity

Ethnic identity is a social product –an identification process– of the relations between minorities as well as of their relationships with majority groups (Barth 1969). Self-presentations and cultural expression do not only mirror power-relations, how minorities are positioned and eventually marginalized, they also express, often in a subtle way, how people wish to be

positioned. Above I mentioned as an example, how music and dance performances, as multivalent, being key-symbols, are ways to give form to such wishes of inclusion and desirable future scenarios (cf. Small 1998: 58).

The meaning of being of a certain kind of ethnicity depends on and shifts with political, cultural and social changes. There were at least three different but interrelated contexts where such changes affected the members' identity processes and their presentations of themselves and the association; what happened in Sweden and Stockholm, in the diaspora, and among Kurds in Kurdish regions (Khayati & Dahlstedt 2014). These contexts and changes affected the relevance they gave the ethnic identity, and formed the ways they were practicing and performing music and dance, and not least what meaning they gave the activities.

The picture of the members' self-presentations, of themselves as well as of the association, reveals how they have molded their own version of *becoming* Kurds in Stockholm/Sweden. Their stories and the information on the official website highlight mutual meta-norms and values. Many of these values do not have so much to do with culture in an aesthetic sense but rather with values important to stress in a Kurdish community, displayed and embedded in the Swedish civil society. It is stressed how the association is independent, and politically and religiously unbounded. They emphasize how Swedish is the default language in everyday activities, and how all kinds of people are welcome to join. In addition, gender and equality issues are stressed on the association's agenda. Both men and women should be representatives of the board and constitute the mix of leaders and other members. Religious blazing and dealing with Kurdish or Swedish party politics is avoided. Nevertheless, members may discuss political or religious issues, if they feel comfortable with it, says Nedim, the association's organizer. However, he also recalls the over-all rule; never allow claims that prohibit individuals' rights and free will. The aim of the activities is to mold a bridging, open minded and permissive Kurdishness, he adds.

In line with these over-arching ambitions, the interviewees refer to how they grew up with parents and relatives from different parts of Kurdistan. Therefore, they want Komciwan to represent many Kurdish regions and (dance and music) genres, wanting the culture expressions to function as a uniting force between Kurds. Through this broad and inclusive Kurdishness they also want to be an intermediary of Kurdish issues, between Kurds and the host society. In these political strivings, it is apparent how the members try to separate different kinds of engagement. They want to avoid party politics and group interests but stress a common cultural identity. Nevertheless, "claiming cultural identity, to be a Kurd, has always had political dimensions", says Nedim. As an example, he mentions the misconception to see Kurds and the Swedes as two opposed identities and loyalties. He continues: "Instead the Kurds should be seen as Swedish citizens, and the society should take care of them as fully adequate citizens. But at the same time they should never forget that they also are Kurds". This deep engagement in Kurds' inclusion into the host society, in combination with cultivation of a cultural identity, is also typical for other Kurdish culture institutions in the diaspora³.

³ For example the Kurdish Institute in Paris, the Kurdish Institute in Brussels and the Kurdish Library in Stockholm.

Rojîn thinks that the initiatives to help people in Kurdistan are not something political, because it does not have anything to do with party politics. Jinda has a similar approach, describing how they perform at Kurdish celebrations, events and even at private parties. But they have always declined invitations to perform at events organized by political parties, associations and interest groups, regardless of whether they are based in Sweden, Kurdistan or the diaspora. She knows little about Kurdish party politics but has been interested in Swedish politics since childhood. “But I stay away from Kurdish politics”, she says. “We are already so shattered and politics has divided us (in Sweden and elsewhere) even more. So I stay away from it”. Her aim is to conduct Kurdish music and dance as a wish and a way to keep the Kurdish group together, and keep the Kurdish issue, and contacts with the world, alive. She would like to volunteer in other Kurdish associations, but in the meantime, she does not want to sacrifice other parts of her everyday life to do that. And just like Rojîn, most of the members of Komciwan were busy with their everyday-lives, as students or with professional careers. They also had other hobbies, interests, and most of them were involved in other parts of the Swedish civil society. A Kurdish identity became not socially relevant or accentuated in most of these other social contexts. In other words, there were no obvious and simple connections between the cultivation of Kurdish culture and identity, being active in the association once a week, and how the members otherwise identified themselves and lived their everyday lives, being included parts of a Swedish big city culture (cf. Fock 2001).

However, to keep the inception between different types of politics was not always easy for the members. In real life, it was hard to keep the line to be politically unbounded. Nedim tells how it is impossible not to be engaged in Kurdish issues. He mentions the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq at the time of the interview, and the Kurdish fight against the Islamic State (IS). For second generation Kurds, the ethnic identity is not a thing of the past and earlier generations, says Nedim and continues:

We are living very close to Kurds in the Kurdish region anyway. We are aware of what happens right now, and what happened two seconds ago, in Kobane. It's like it happens here and now. And it touches you. It isn't just that it is another person, it could be my cousin, and it could be my uncle. It's not like before, when people called each other once a month, or once a week. Now it is an ongoing interaction, second by second, watching what is happening over there. And in that moment I feel that I am a Kurd and that I am here because of being a Kurd. I could be the killed person and he could be alive if he was me, taking my place here in Sweden.

Because of the current situation in Kurdistan, in the autumn of 2015, the members decided for the first time to take part in a demonstration in Stockholm against the ongoing war and to organize a cultural event, a fund-raiser to support refugees in the region. The event took place one evening with volunteers preparing and selling food and with music and dance performances with Kurdish artists. Most visitors were Kurds from greater Stockholm but there were also other people of different origins. The crowd danced and listened to speeches about the horrible things afflicting Kurds and other peoples. The head of the association, one of the female dance leaders, said that “we all” have to support the victims and never stop fighting evil forces like the IS. There were also songs and music celebrating love between people, to Kurdistan, and to the brave Peshmerga soldiers fighting IS and protecting all the peoples. A few days after the event, three young female

members travelled to a refugee camp in Syria. They spent the surplus from the event on food and clothes on a market close to the border between Syria and Turkey. They could also double the amount because of an unexpected contribution from a Kurdish culture association in the United States that got to know about the initiative and had a similar fundraiser in the US.

Conclusion

In this article, I have suggested a perspective, scrutinizing people's shifting and pragmatic approaches to ethnic belonging and culture. By doing this, I wanted to carry on a controversy to the cultural relativistic bias in intercultural understanding of people in diverse contexts; it makes the individuals culturally one-dimensional and neglects how their identifications are affected by complex and ever changing social circumstances. The path that I suggest is to apply a perspective taking people's complex meaning making, life experiences and life-worlds into account. My aim was to show the benefit from such approach by exploring how second generation Kurds make their ethnic heritage socially relevant through performing dance and understanding music.

For the dance leaders the development of their identities as Kurds had become important (i) in the formative period of the lower twenties, becoming adults, as well as being (ii) aware of not being categorized and recognized as equal Swedish citizens, and because of (iii) what was going on in Kurdistan. These circumstances affected the way they practiced and performed music and dance, their making of meaning and not least their intentions behind and how they experienced social relations with people of other ethnicities or nationalities. People with different backgrounds meet, exchange experiences and perspectives, perform, convey and mix dance and music genres and styles. However, music and dance traditions and genres often exceed national and ethnic borders. They go beyond, as the musicians do in our research project. They do not always care about their own belonging when they play in other genres and ethnic orchestras.

The relevance of intercultural approaches depends on how we define culture, categorize people and not the least, what we expect from cultural encounters. This study shows how peoples' every-day cultures are not necessarily the same as the representations of their "ethnic cultures", they are parts of larger cultural complexities. At the same time, the study reveals how music and dance are essential to people. The practicing and performing of music and dance, at an association's premises in a community center in Stockholm are symbolically dense situations (Pripp 2016, Pripp & Kamara 2010). We can never predict how the participants will experience these moments in relation to their everyday lives outside the premises. The multi-modality of music and dance enabled the members to *become* Kurds by swinging and synchronizing body movements, listening, feeling and sounding. By doing so they also made meaning of becoming Kurds through invoking memories and former individual life experiences. Thereby, the connection between aesthetical and anthropological culture became something merged with the individuals, their individualities, preferences and life trajectories. Despite their individual dissimilarities, together they could construct a collective identity by connecting their unique experiences to key-symbols, in the shapes of cultural memories, master narratives, recognizable songs and dance movements.

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Biography / Biografía / Biografia

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