Giving form to an origin

An ethnomusicological study of dancing and music-making among Yugoslavs in Stockholm
By Owe Ronström (1992)

Summary

1 Introduction and aim of the study

In Stockholm County at the end of the 1980s there were more than 8,000 Yugoslav citizens, from all parts of Yugoslavia, and in addition 3,000-4,000 Swedish citizens "of Yugoslav origin" (born in Yugoslavia or born in Sweden with at least one parent born in Yugoslavia). The aim of this thesis is to study the significance of dancing and music-making in the attempts of the Yugoslavs in Stockholm to create and maintain a world of their own. The Yugoslav organizations arrange two types of dance and music events: *folklor*, rehearsals and displays of choreographed folk dances performed on stage by specially trained dancers, and *zabava*, parties with songs, dance, and music in which everyone is expected to take part. In both *folklor* and *zabava* people highlight phenomena and behaviors which they regard as characteristically Yugoslavian. In both of them music-making and dancing are simultaneously the goal and the means for the interaction.

One category of questions which I have asked concerns the forms of dancing and music performed by Yugoslavs in Stockholm. Which of these have been brought from the homeland? How have they changed? Have completely new forms also developed? Which forms do the Yugoslavs in Sweden regard as their own? What characterizes them? How is the dancing and music-making organized socially, over time and in space? How are the forms of music and dance among Yugoslavs in Stockholm related to each other and to music and dance practised in Yugoslavia?

Another category of question concerns the role of dancing and music-making in culture-building: What is their role in the formation of groups, in the socialization of new group members, and for the shaping of an ethnic identity?

2 Methodological and theoretical considerations

The primary material consists of audio-visual recordings done during fieldwork at Yugoslav dance and music events in Stockholm, during 1984-1988, and in Yugoslavia in 1986. The material also includes written field-notes and interviews with people in and around the Yugoslavian associations. The analysis also draws on my own experiences with music-making and dancing.

The study belongs to the ethnomusciological research tradition. Theoretical points of departure are Erving Goffman's analyses of human encounters,
American performance studies (especially by Richard Bauman, Dan Ben-Amos, and Roger Abrahams), and Alfred Schutz's analyses of interaction. I have also been inspired by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's studies on flow and Anthony P. Cohen's work on the social construction of communities. Important concepts are frame (the organizational principles which guide the way social interaction is perceived), key (metacommunicative messages with instructions concerning how other messages should be understood), performance (a type of communication which implies taking responsibility in front of an audience for the way the communication is carried out), and "sam-spel" (literally "playing together", cf interaction) an umbrella term for all the forms of interaction that develop during and around music-making and dancing.

The theoretical reasoning concerns music and dance as objectives, as symbols for individuals and groups, and as means for communication and socialization. Music and dancing are activities that contain their own objectives, in that they give rise to heightened emotional and social intensity; this is an important explanation for the willingness of people to invest time, energy, and money in dance and music events of various kinds. Music and dance are also non-verbal expressive systems which communicate messages effectively through many simultaneous and interacting channels. The meanings that are invested at each level can interact to form very simple and powerful messages. Yet they can also be different, counteracting or contrasting, and still exert an equally powerful effect. Highly complex messages can thus be generated, stored, and communicated simultaneously, and these may be largely impossible to translate into other forms of expression.

In many societies, music-making and dancing have been assigned a central role as symbols of emotional states, individual traits, and social hierarchies. But symbols are multivalent. Not only do they express meaning, they also give their users the capacity to create meaning. This makes music and dance particularly effective in shaping a sense of community. By dancing and singing together, people can experience a strong feeling of identity and fellowship without ever needing to be confronted with the question of whether they have anything else in common besides these experiences.

The abundance of music and dance of radically different kinds has enabled individuals as well as groups to express the finest nuances of existing social and cultural differences, and also to create differences and new social boundaries and hence create new contexts of meaning. What is decisive in these processes is not so much differences in tunes and dances as the way sound and movement are produced. This production of sounds and movements generates specific sound and movement style patterns, which are often ascribed status as national or ethnic symbols or a kind of "trade marks".

Yet another important aspect of dance and music in culture-building is that social dancing and music-making channels and structures the interaction and
establishes specific forms of order. As they perform, the musicians and dancers establish a series of relations with one another and with their audience. They tune their bodies and minds into communication with each other, with previous performers, and with the other people present in a social relation based on a shared experience of living through several temporal dimensions at the same time. Yet one neither can nor need suppose that the coordination of bodies and minds in time and space leads to the integration of values, experiences, or meaning. This is probably an important explanation for the fact that Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Bosnians, and Hungarians - people who in other contexts perhaps regard themselves as dissimilar rather than alike - so easily can interact as Yugoslavs in the contexts I have studied.

3 The Yugoslavs and their institutions
Despite fairly extensive research, there is still little reliable data available about Yugoslavs in Sweden, where they came from, what languages they speak, which ethnic groups they belong to, or what religions they practise. About half of them are Serbs. It is also largely immigrants from Serbia who have been the most active in forming the Yugoslavian institutions, and it is therefore they who have defined the content of the term "Yugoslav" in Stockholm. In other places in Sweden Slovenes, Macedonians, Albanians, and Croats have formed separate organizations, each with its own linguistic and ethnic profile. But the system of boundaries which they have sought to erect has been used, until the late 1980s, primarily among the Yugoslavs themselves. For most Swedes and others they have been simply "Yugoslavs", a term often used as a simplified label for a complex amalgam of national and ethnic designations. Although the term "Yugoslav" lacks the historical depth and the emotive charge inherent in "Serb", "Croat", "Bosnian", etc., in Sweden it has greater scope, relevance, and effect in social interaction.

Like most immigrants in Sweden, the Yugoslavs are generally young; two-thirds of them are under forty, about one-third are children and adolescents of school age who were born and have grown up here. A majority understand and speak both Serbo-Croat and Swedish, irrespective of mother tongue. The Yugoslavs work chiefly in the manufacturing industries and the service sector. Their average income is lower than for the general population, though higher than the average for immigrants as a whole.

The Yugoslavian institutions are restaurants, churches, some schools, newspapers, and above all the Yugoslav associations or clubs. There has been no intention to build up a complete "mini-Yugoslavia" in Stockholm; rather to supplement the institutions available for the general population in Sweden. The first Yugoslav association in Stockholm was founded in 1969. In 1985 there were about fifteen associations, with a total of some 3,600 members. The associations developed in a tension between Yugoslavian and Swedish
institutional praxis. A uniquely Swedish version of "Yugoslavianness", has developed, without a direct counterpart in Yugoslavia, but with much in common with Yugoslav associations in other western European countries and with other immigrant associations in Sweden. The activities and events arranged by the associations are substitutes for a variety of events to which the emigrants from Yugoslavia no longer have continuous access. These activities and events from the beginning have centred around socializing through the performance of music, dance, and sport.

4 Folklor

Folklor is the Yugoslav version of a modern international scenic dance genre, based on local folk dance traditions. In folklor the intention is to perform a representation of something existing beyond the here and now of the stage. With the aid of a plethora of conventions, symbols, and extensive rhetoric, attention is turned away from the performers themselves towards the people they represent. Two of the most important words in the rhetoric of the genre are tradition and authenticity. Tradition is a concept that sums up a mass of knowledge and ideas about the life of the people in the past; this forms the background and the yardstick against which all the performances on the stage are interpreted and judged. Authenticity refers to how closely the performance corresponds to this yardstick. This is not primarily a question for the audience to judge. Rather, the judgement is enthrusted to specially authorized persons, such as dance scholars, musicologists, and ethnologists.

Folklor is a very widespread activity in Yugoslavia. In Stockholm too, most Yugoslav associations have or have had folklor groups. The express aim is to organize and activate Yugoslavs of all ages, to instil in the children an important part of their Yugoslavian cultural heritage, and to socialize them into a specifically Yugoslav world in Sweden.

Folklor in Stockholm is directly derived from Yugoslavia. Choreographers, dancers and musicians work with largely identical means of expression, with the same basic aesthetics and the same rules for performance. However, a significant part of the work is devoted to achieving a frame which can make the folklor appear credible and meaningful against the new horizon in Stockholm/Sweden, as well as against the old one in Yugoslavia. Consequently, there are important differences between folklor in Yugoslavia and in Stockholm.

A significant organizational principle is summed up in the word komplet "complete", which refers to specific ideals about the number, age, and competence of the actors, the way they are organized, and the content and performance of the repertoire. In Stockholm there is not a single complete folklor group. Nevertheless, all the groups strive to become sufficiently complete to be able to represent the music and dance tradition of Yugoslavia in general and that of their own association in particular. This aspiration has to be
reconciled with another bearing principle of interactional praxis in Yugoslav associations as a whole: that all those who so wish can take part.

Folklor is a genre created for young adult men and women. In Stockholm, however, it is performed almost exclusively by girls of school age. Folklor thus becomes a safe domain for the girls during a period when their lives are increasingly circumscribed and monitored by their parents. The low age of the dancers makes it virtually impossible to stage the most difficult and most spectacular choreographies. Since it is so difficult to get boys to take part, dances with special sections for men have to be changed or omitted. To achieve completeness, some choreographers have the girls dress up and perform as young men; but this has provoked heated discussion among leaders and parents.

During the performance of folklor, hierarchical relations are established as a direct consequence of the way the genre is structured. The dances and tunes are treated as material which must be given artistic form in a choreographic suite, according to principles of unity, contrast, and intensification. The suite (splet) is the basic artistic unit and is regarded by the performers and the audience as objectively existing outside the actual performance. The artist of the genre and the most important person is consequently the choreographer, followed by the musical director and finally the dancers and other musicians.

Folklor is a well defined genre with a codified repertoire of tunes and dances, all cast in a relatively uniform stylistic mould. The sound and movement style of the genre are based on traditional folk music and dance, but contain several specific features. By learning the specific sound and movement style of the genre, which can be defined as "ours" by the performers and as "Yugoslav" by the onlookers, it becomes possible for the participants to perform as Yugoslavs. In a sense they thereby become Yugoslavs, regardless of what they call themselves and feel themselves to be.

The meanings of folklor are numerous and complex. A frame which is always available and sometimes explicitly foregrounded is theatre. In groups which contain both boys and girls in their late teens, there is yet another given frame: “courtship” or “boy meets girl”. A third frame, more intensive and explicitly foregrounded than theatre and courtship, is sport. Yet the most important frame is without doubt the national. This frame refers to specific historical, social, and cultural conditions in the Balkans. The references are explicit on many levels, clothes, artefacts and symbols. Closely connected to the national representation is the view of folklor as an expression of inherited ethnic/cultural competence and identity. It is thus only a Yugoslav who can credibly represent Yugoslavia in folk dance and music. This idea is vigorously asserted in the many rhetorical formulas which are part of folklor. But in practice the important thing is not to be a Yugoslav but to acquire the competence to perform as a Yugoslav.

Folklor is an activity which seeks to communicate and bring to life the cultural heritage of the peoples in Yugoslavia. Yet folklor is just as much about
something happening here and now, in present-day Stockholm: meeting friends and having fun, performing on a stage, getting physical exercise, learning how to cooperate, practising Serbo-Croat, and being socialized into a world which might otherwise be closed. Much of what the parents regard as Yugoslav behaviour, which they learnt through a wide variety of activities over a long period in Yugoslavia, must now be passed on to their children in Sweden through a limited repertoire of activities. One of the most widespread of these is folklore.

5 Zabava

Zabava (pl. zabave) means party, entertainment, fun. The word applies to a variety of events. For the Yugoslav associations in Stockholm, as for the social world of the Yugoslavs in general, these events play an important role. Through interaction in and around the zabave, the continuity of the specific social construction can be maintained, made credible and subjectively real to the members.

There are no direct models for the zabave. Their form and structure have developed out of a variety of public Yugoslavian entertainments, from urban restaurants and dancehalls to "houses of culture" in small towns and villages. Zabave also share many features with the events arranged by other immigrant associations in Stockholm, which is largely due to the fact that they have been developed under the powerful influence of Swedish bureaucratic regulations governing associations. A majority of the audience consists of Serbs, immigrants, or persons of the second or third generation. About half of the 11,000-12,000 people of Yugoslav origin rarely or never participate in the meetings and zabave of the associations. Quite a few dissociate themselves from them completely. The zabave focus upon singing and dancing to live music. An important principle is that everyone is expected to be able to take part. The aim is to create heightened emotional and social intensity. This can only be achieved if the musicians address the entire audience, regardless of origin, age, or sex.

A large proportion of the Yugoslavs live in a state of "migrationism", a "permanent temporariness" (Ålund 1985:19). They have built up a life-world of two parts, separated in time and space, but still closely intertwined through travel and intensive use of audiovisual media. Also the musicians are important as links, both to the life once lived in Yugoslavia and to the life that is now taking place. In 1984 three bands in the Stockholm region regularly played at events organized by the Yugoslav associations. By the end of the 1980s, all had ceased to exist. The associations have instead had to rely more and more on importing artistes from Yugoslavia.

At the zabave the participants temporarily assume a set of hierarchically ordered roles. The primary organizing force is the music. The musicians are thus the most important actors at the zabave. The most important parameter of
the music is the melody, so it is the first accordion player who acts as leader of
the band and primus motor of the zabave. The leader of the dance, kolovodja, is
also a social institution of great importance. In Stockholm it has been taken over
by middle-aged or younger women with great experience of dance. It is
primarily also the women who organize the activities of the Yugoslav
associations (except for sport) and who are responsible for the specific content
of the Yugoslav world in Stockholm as a whole.

The most frequently performed dances are chain dances of Serbian or
Macedonian origin, all consisting of a basic step and a number of variations.
Attention is concentrated on footwork and movements in space, whereas
postures and movement styles are treated as constants. The music is classified
into a number of relatively well defined categories. There is a dividing line
between old traditional tunes and newly composed folk music (novokomponovana narodna muzika), and another between songs and
instrumental dance tunes. Most of the songs are sung for and along with a
seated audience, but there is also a growing repertoire of dance-songs. Dance
tunes and songs are often combined in suites or medleys, according to aesthetic
principles of unity, contrast, and intensification. Just as in folklor, the suite is
the basic artistic unit. However, whereas the folklor suites are regarded as
objectively existing apart from the performance, the dance suites at a zabava are
seen as the result of a process of sam-spel taking place here and now, and which
is therefore inevitably different from one occasion to another.

Zabave have a number of frames enclosed within one another. This makes it
possible for the participants to switch from one frame to another and thereby
emphasize different meanings. The most important frame is without doubt the
Yugoslav one. This is established through the specific sound of the music and
the gestalt of bodies moving together in chains across the floor. The very loud
volume makes it easy for the participants to focus on the music, at the same time
as it obstructs and distorts verbal communication. This gives a greater
importance to the body and to the non-verbal communication. Another frame is
“modernity“. It is emphasized through the latest fashions, the newest songs and
dance tunes, the most advanced electronic instruments, and so on.

Collective chain dances require bodily coordination in time and space. The
dances performed at zabave consist of a small number of simple, formulaic
motives and phrases, which can be infinitely varied without the basic structure
being changed. This means that beginners and experienced improvisers can
dance side by side with the same pleasure. The coordination and
synchronization of bodies and senses in time and space make it possible to
establish specific forms of order which in turn makes it possible for the actors to
share perspectives on a limited part of the social world. Through the emphasis
on the body and its movements, experiences of the “I can“-type are stressed at
the expense of the “I know“-kind. The body becomes the most important
channel for communication of information. Social values such as unity and group solidarity are conveyed through the body. This makes social competence largely a question of bodily competence.

6 Conclusion and discussion
One conclusion of the study is that dancing and music-making play an important role for Yugoslavs in Stockholm in their attempts to create and maintain their own institutions, for the socialization of new group members, and for the feeling of “being a Yugoslav“.

The forms of dance and music that are performed are brought directly and continuously from Yugoslavia. On the whole, however, folklor and zabava in Stockholm are easy to distinguish from their counterparts in Yugoslavia. The folklor has been simplified and standardized. There are other changes that suggest that folklor in Stockholm is not the same kind of activity as in Yugoslavia. Through creative adaption to a new context, the genre as a whole has become something qualitatively new and has assumed new meanings. The performers are much younger, and there are virtually no male dancers. This means that the demands for technical competence have been relaxed and the standards of performance are lower. It also means that choreographies have to be modified to suit all-female dance groups, and that young boys and girls can perform in public as grown men, and girls in their early teens are allowed to perform dances with highly erotic undertones.

The most important change in the dancing and music-making, as in life of the Yugoslav diaspora as a whole, has to do with the position of the women. Yugoslav women in Stockholm have enlarged their social space not only on the dance floor but also at work and community life at large. Yet another change is “re-ethnification“. As we have seen, it is mostly the Serbs who have defined the special version of Yugoslavianness that has developed in Stockholm. This applies particularly to the dance and music repertoire at the zabave. The non-Serbs have adapted to the prevailing situation and learned songs and dances which are not counted as their own in Yugoslavia.

There are great formal and structural similarities between the folklor and zabava repertoires, some songs and dances even being the same. Yet competence in one genre cannot be automatically be transferred into competence in the other. Folklor is a stage genre intended to represent selected parts of the music and dance of Balkan peasants in an undefined past. Tradition and authenticity are the key concepts of the genre. As a whole, the genre has a metonymic relationship to the homeland or nation. The zabave, on the other hand, emphasize the "here and now", they present rather than re-present. They have a metonymic relationship to modernity. The musical repertoire of the zabave is constantly being renewed; the word "old" refers to a decade, scarcely more. The dances are built up of short, repetitive formulas which invite
improvisation and constant renewal. As a whole the interaction at the zabave is characterized by improvisation and variation. They concentrate on the emergent, what is currently being enacted in the concrete situation. Their function in the Yugoslav world in Stockholm is to maintain and reinforce social relations of various kinds.

However, a closer comparison of the forms of interaction of folklor and zabava, including a comparison of how tones and steps are produced, of how they are strung together, and of how complete performances are constructed, shows that something which can be described as a symbolic inversion has taken place. Folklor, intended to be an authentic representation of an ancient folk tradition, is a modern scenic artistic dance genre. The keyword for the entire genre is "together for the sake of the whole". This applies not least to the sound and movement styles of the genre. The important thing is the result; dances are danced, tunes are played, choreographic suites are presented. These are objectified products which are judged according to criteria that mostly lie outside the actual performance situation. On the other hand, dancing and music-making at the zabave may be associated with novelty and modernity. Nevertheless, they are closely related to the ways of dancing, singing, and playing among the rural population in former times. The keyword here is “simultaneously but individually”. At the zabave it is the interaction which is important, as well as the atmosphere created. The results are not evaluated in terms of art, and there can be no formal competition. The dancing and music are primarily assessed in relation to criteria concerned with the social interaction in the actual performance situation.

Dancing at zabava and folklor are important for learning a body language which can be perceived as specific for Yugoslavs in Sweden. Bodily awareness becomes a means to uphold the boundary between Yugoslav and Swedish. Dance is also of great importance for the learning of ethnically specific gender roles; this is particularly pronounced in folklor. By learning the basic components of a movement style with two distinctly complementary versions, one male and one female, young girls and boys, most of whom were born and bred in Stockholm, have an opportunity to perform successfully as Yugoslav men and women.

In addition, the specific ways of performing music and dance help to establish and maintain a Yugoslavian frame in a non-Yugoslav surrounding. The expressive specialists in the field of music and dance thereby assume a prominent role among the Yugoslavs as a whole. The important question about the groups prospects for survival becomes closely linked to the opportunity and ability for these persons to continue to perform their art.

For the individual, folklor and zabava means joy, pleasure through the performance of music and dance. It means physical activity, competition, the chance to show off and play roles on stage. It is also a way to make new
acquaintances and meet friends. Through *folklor* and *zabava*, new generations are led into the specifically Yugoslav social world which has been built up around the Yugoslav associations and certain other institutions in Stockholm. Here they acquire skills in Serbo-Croat and knowledge of Yugoslavian history and geography. Through dance and music they learn how to behave as young women and men, more specifically, as young Yugoslav women and men.

For the *Yugoslavs in Stockholm as a whole*, the *folklor* and *zabava* are central activities. They play a major role for the survival of the associations, as they once played a major role when they were formed. Through their associations, the Yugoslavs deliberately create small islands of “Yugoslavianness” in non-Yugoslav surroundings. At associations meetings, *folklor* rehearsals and performances, *zabave* - at all the events that make up the core of the finite province of meaning which they seek to build - dancing and music-making are significant activities. The specific ways of producing sound and movement styles help to establish and maintain the necessary frame, by functioning as keys to how the events are to be interpreted. At the same time, the participants are bound to the audience through a multitude of social, temporal, and spatial relations which make it possible for them to have concordant perspectives on what happens. By enjoying the singing, dancing, and music at these Yugoslavian events, participants continuously re-establish themselves as Yugoslavs in Stockholm.

*Translated by Alan Crozier*