Music and Ethnicity in Barcelona

Josep Martí

Abstract
The musical practices of a given place do not always correspond with the idea people might have about the "musical culture" of that place. That lack of correspondence produces clear contradictions in the ways in which reality is interpreted. Sometimes the problem resides in ideologized ethnic interpretations and sometimes in the use of conceptual categories that perhaps, in an unconscious manner, are also deeply influenced by ethnic ideologies. Huntington's thesis, for instance, serves to illustrate the ease with which people today politically instrumentalize the idea of "culture."

The musical life of every city that can be considered modern, complex and fully integrated in the globalized world, constitutes a valuable and useful field of analysis of all these ethnic narratives. This article focuses on this subject and attempts to give some critical views about such categories through the example of Barcelona.

Barcelona, the Catalan Mediterranean city, is an especially good point to observe the question of music and its relationship to ethnicity and multiculturalism. It can be seen, that while there are strong feelings regarding Catalan nationalism in Barcelona—today Catalonia enjoys a political autonomy within the Spanish state—there is also a steady immigration of non-Catalan people from other parts of Spain to the city. Nowadays, non-European immigration from Latin America, as well as from Morocco, the Philippines, and many other countries has increased. Because of Catalan nationalism, the political scene of Catalonia is significantly different from the rest of the state; this fact is evidenced in the different balance of political forces or parties. All this also finds its concrete expression in the musical life of Barcelona.

Today, when we speak about the culture of a given community, such as a country or town, it is actually difficult to separate this idea of culture from ethnic presumptions. Up to what point is clearly shown, for instance, by the theses formulated by Samuel P. Huntington in the bestseller that he published under the title The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order. The central thesis of the book is that "culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world" (Huntington 1998: 20). The author divides the planet into eight different "civilizations." In fact, he understands his "civilizations" in a way which is not so
far removed from views of anthropologist who looked at the tribes they were discover-
ering as a social system with its own cultural dynamic, completely independent from
other groups or societies. According to Huntington's own words, "Civilizations are
the ultimate human tribes, and the clash of civilizations is tribal conflict on a global
scale" (Huntington 1998: 207).

This idea of culture has a clear ethnocentric character. This ethnocentric idea of cul-
ture brings about deterministic and homogenizing traits. For Huntington, "cultural
identity is what is most meaningful to most people" (Huntington 1998: 20), and "glob­
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he does not seem to be aware that culture is actually what people live day by day,
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rhetoric device promoted by and serving policy. Huntington—along with other poli-
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that provokes the "clash of civilizations" or military struggles but that the causative
factor for the conﬂict is the ethnocentric idea of culture as an instrument of politics.
Therefore, we have to speak of ideology from here on.

Huntington's book shows not only an essentialist and very ideologized view of
the concept of "culture" but also a very ethnocentric position where it seems that all
centers on the dichotomy The West and the Rest. Precisely, one of the main conclu-
sions of the book is that the rulers of the Western countries have to watch for purity
of Western values with exclusively European roots. Western culture is threatened
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If I have chosen the example of Huntington, it is not because this author may show a high degree of originality in this concrete manner of understanding culture. In
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Huntington because his book reﬂects a very widespread social perception of the idea
of culture; moreover, Huntington's thesis serves to illustrate the easiness with which
people today politically instrumentalize the idea of culture. This can be very easily observed on the musical scene.

If the musical culture of a given country would be limited to the production made
strictly within its borders—supposing it would be possible—this culture would be,
without any doubt, very poor. The musical culture of a given city, region or country
is, fortunately, not restricted in this way but is much more varied. It seems trivial to
declare that the musical culture of a given human group is not the same as the cre-
ative potential of that group but goes much further. Musics with wide social rele-
ance do not necessarily have to have been created within the borders of this group.
A concrete music has social relevance when it possesses in the collectivity certain
meanings, uses and functions.

This reality, nevertheless, clashes with the essentialist view of culture which Huntington holds. The musical life of any modern and complex town or city that is
fully integrated in the current globalization world constitutes a valuable and useful area
of analysis for all these narratives of an ethnic nature which center around the musi-
cal ﬁeld. The case of the city of Barcelona in Spain will serve as an example.

On the musical level, the ethnic conception of culture finds its expression in two
very concrete aspects. On the one hand, there occurs a selection process through
which only a very little part of the musics that are relevant for Barcelona become also
representative for the city. On the other hand, what we discover throughout our anal-
"German culture," "Catalan culture," or, in the case of Huntington, of "West-
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thropological technical sense. When within anthropology we speak of the "culture"
of a certain society, we are referring to the totality of cultural elements that belong
to this society. However, in the case of the representative culture, it is a question of
cultural elements that have been selected according to the criteria of concrete narratives
and which, to a large extent, are based on criteria not only of declared cultural pater-
nity—that which has been created by autochthonous populations or what proceeds
from a blurred antiquity and is supposed to have been created by our forbears—but
also marked by value and exclusivity criteria. It is a question of cultural elements,
which can belong to the so-called "high culture" and also to the popular one. Still,
in any society, behind these elements with representative value, there are also many
more which are simply ignored or which are even denied, as was the case in the ex-
ample of Huntington. He denies the validity of the idea of "American culture" for
those cultural elements that are brought in by immigration from non-Western coun-
tries in spite of the fact that many of these elements, obviously, had already taken
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then in Europe" (Huntington 1998: 309) and consequently, "The preservation of
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It is evident that the real culture of any community goes much further than the
poor and instrumentalized idea of culture supported by Huntington. Put another way,
the social relevance of many cultural elements such as they appear in communities,
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This idea of culture has a clear ethnocentric character. This ethnocentric idea of culture brings about deterministic and homogenizing traits. For Huntington, "cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people" (Huntington 1998: 20), and "global politics began to be reconceived along cultural lines" (Huntington 1998: 19). But he does not seem to be aware that culture is actually what people live every day, day in and day out while "cultural identity," to which he refers, has to be understood as a rhetoric device promoted by and serving policy. Huntington—along with other politicians—supports the idea that future conflicts will be sparked by cultural factors rather than economics or ideology (Huntington 1998: 28), and that the most important distinctions among peoples in the post-Cold War world are not ideological, political, or economical but cultural (Huntington 1998:21). However, he does not understand that, actually, it is not "culture," as this term is understood in anthropology, that provokes the "clash of civilizations" or military struggles but that the causative factor for the conflict is the ethnocentric idea of culture as an instrument of politics. Therefore, we have to speak of ideology from here on.

Huntington's book shows not only an essentialist and very ideologized view of the concept of "culture" but also a very ethnocentric position where it seems that all centers on the dichotomy The West and the Rest. Precisely, one of the main conclusions of the book is that the rulers of the Western countries have to watch for purit of Western values with exclusively European roots. Western culture is threatened through immigration and, with regard to the United States, Huntington attacks multicultural policy because of its danger to American national identity. According to him, this identity historically has always been defined by the legacy of Western civilization (Huntington 1998: 304-305).

If I have chosen the example of Huntington, it is not because this author may show a high degree of originality in this concrete manner of understanding culture. In fact, this idea can be traced back to earlier views in anthropology. I have mentioned Huntington because his book reflects a very widespread social perception of the idea of culture; moreover, Huntington's thesis serves to illustrate the easiness with which people today politically instrumentalize the idea of culture. These ideas are very often found—in an implicit manner—in the way in which ethnomusicologists understand musical landscapes as well. There is the idea that while a society may participate in many kinds of musics, there may be one music that is properly the music of the culture. Music is understood as a cultural emblem. However, in this manner, we ethnomusicologists also collaborate in maintaining this false idea of culture.

Within this context, we may speak of "representative culture." The idea of representative culture is narrowly related to the ethnicity phenomenon and to those cultural products that have to do with the expression of ethnicity. When people are talking about "German culture," "Catalan culture," or, in the case of Huntington, of "Western and the Rest," for example, they do not mean, generally, the idea of "culture" in its anthropological technical sense. When within anthropology we speak of the "culture" of a certain society, we are referring to the totality of cultural elements that belong to this society. However, in the case of the representative culture, it is a question of cultural elements that have been selected according to the criteria of concrete narratives and which, to a large extent, are based on criteria not only of declared cultural paternity—that which has been created by autochthonous populations or what proceeds from a blurred antiquity and is supposed to have been created by our forbears—but also marked by value and exclusivity criteria. It is a question of cultural elements, which can belong to the so-called "high culture" and also to the popular one. Still, in any society, behind these elements with representative value, there are also many more which are simply ignored or which are even denied, as was the case in the example of Huntington. He denies the validity of the idea of "American culture" for those cultural elements that are brought in by immigration from non-Western countries in spite of the fact that many of these elements, obviously, had already taken root. According to him, "When Americans look for their cultural roots, they find them in Europe" (Huntington 1998: 309) and consequently, "The preservation of the United States and the West requires the renewal of Western identity" (Huntington 1998: 318).

It is evident that the real culture of any community goes much further than the poor and instrumentalized idea of culture supported by Huntington. Put another way, the social relevance of many cultural elements such as they appear in communities, configured by countries or cities, clearly contradicts this idea of culture. This can be very easily observed on the musical scene.

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in Barcelona, there is also a Catalan jazz expressed in Catalan. But this is not the case for the two
music styles of flamenco or tango which, in Barcelona, are very strongly identified
in any case, the bilingual character of Barcelona’s population does not require a Cata­
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in the Italian language. Conversely, in Barcelona this Catalana­
tion process is necessary for expressing social identification.
The above examples show then the direct consequences that perception of culture (in
this case musical culture) from an ethnic perspective has for musical practices. For
many inhabitants of Barcelona, tango or flamenco do not have a representational
value for the city in spite of their undeniable social relevance. But what is also inter­
esting to observe, as said above, is the fact that the music which have a representa­
tional value can also possess a polysemanticity which is systematically ignored by
y is that even these musics with representative value do not have a unique meaning regarding this given representative value, they have, in fact, multiple meanings which sometimes can even be contradictory among themselves. This polysemy is ignored by most essentialist views of culture.

In the concrete case of Barcelona there is a very clear mark for the degree of identification from the ethnic perspective which a given music attains: that of the language which is used in the words or, in the case of instrumental music, in titles. Barcelona is a bilingual city where Catalan and Spanish are spoken. It is without doubt that language is the most important identity mark in the Catalan case. In this way, the Catalan language besides its merely instrumental communicative functions also has a very important symbolic value. Hence it is not too difficult to realize that the use of Catalan in different music manifestations of the city constitutes an excellent sign for the social absorption of a given musical style as one's own. There are a lot of examples of imported musical genres or styles which show their assimilation by Catalan society through the adoption of Catalan as a linguistic register. For instance, the great acceptance which zarzuela (Spanish operetta) found in Barcelona, especially in the last third of the 19th century, led to the creation of the Teatre Líric Catalá which was also zarzuela but with librettos in Catalan (Maffany 1987:100; Aviló 1985: 287-310). Throughout the 20th century, a great part of musics in fashion expressed its identification with Catalan society through the adoption of Catalan as the mode of linguistic expression. It does not mean that—with some exceptions—Catalan was chiefly used as a linguistic register in these musics. Actually, for very concrete socio-linguistic reasons, Spanish in the 20th century always had more importance. But it is indicative that certain sectors of the population of Barcelona found it interesting to introduce Catalan to the musical scene of the city. A clear and relatively recent example is “Catalan rock” which emerged with a certain vigor in the eighties. What characterized the numerous bands which identified themselves with this movement was the musical peculiarity of the rock which they played but the fact of using Catalan in the songs they composed. It is very clear that the linguistic option means to limit the diffusion of its musics but, actually, the ideological component of these bands is very important. As this movement emerged, people understood Catalan rock as an act of resistance. And so as Maria van Lieuw wrote, “In fact a rock band producing popular music in the Catalan language within Spanish borders in and of itself constitutes a political statement” (Van Lieuw 1993: 245).

But not all musics which possess wide social relevance in the city of Barcelona have become seduced by Catalan idiom as a vehicle of expression. The clearest example is, without any doubt, that of flamenco. Actually, nobody today would consider Barcelona a flamenco town. When people speak of flamenco, they think especially of Andalusia or perhaps of Madrid as well. But the reality is that flamenco also has a long tradition in the Catalan city of Barcelona, a tradition which goes back to the end of the 19th century when flamenco was offered in cafés. Currently, there are important cultivators of flamenco who were born in the area of Barcelona. But as has already been said, it is difficult to see flamenco as a musical style that belongs also to...
the most essentialist views of culture. In order to illustrate this phenomenon, the discussion will now center on the special case of the sardana.

The sardana is a circular collective dance of rural origins, today enjoying a clearly urban character. It is spread throughout Catalonia and also danced in Barcelona by people of all ages and social segments. Currently, the sardana constitutes one of the most characteristic elements of the so-called "representative culture" of Catalonia. Not only does the sardana enjoy social relevance but it has also clearly become a symbol of Catalaness. Its representative value, for instance, is very evident in the fact that we can easily find comments or explanations about the sardana in publications regarding Catalan culture in general. We also find reproductions of this dance in souvenir shops. Performances of sardana are very often part of public celebrations where Catalan symbols have to be expressed as, for instance, in the ceremonies of the Olympic Games of Barcelona in 1992, where the sardana had a designated place.

The importance of sardana for Catalan representative culture is indicated by the high level of institutionalization of the dance. Very significant is the existence of the so-called "cobla" (music band which plays sardana (cobla) and some sardana composers in several localities of Catalonia; the autonomous government of Catalonia even has an official cobla and the public administration subsidizes the teaching of cobla instruments.

Sardanisme has made a symbol of the dance and this strong symbolic ethnic load leads to an inevitable process of mythologization of the sardana as a Catalan cultural element. In spite of this, it is not possible to say that the sardana has not become a fossilized or museistic product. People do not dance sardana only to pay homage to tradition or for nationalistic purposes but above all because people find it enjoyable, not only as a dance in itself but also as a useful means for cultivating social relations. That is to say, the sardana possesses a wider social relevance than the relevance it would have if it were only a question of folklorism.

As already said, it is beyond any doubt that the sardana has an important ethnic signification. However, reality is always more complex, and we would never understand the sardana if we would only consider this single semantic component. Anthropological analysis of today's sardana dancing shows that this dance has more than one signification. Furthermore, the different associations which it awakens can even be contradictory, given that one of the characteristics of our society is precisely its heterogeneity.

The sardana has one nationalistic interpretation. This interpretation is accompanied by a group of narratives which not only relate the nature of the dance to the essentialist vision of Catalaness but even consider its practice as an act of resistance to the repression, in former times, of the Catalan people and culture by the Spanish state. Thus, for instance, people very often underscore with a certain victimism the attacks on the sardana made by Spanish dictators such as Primo de Rivera in the time after World War I or, later, Franco. Although it is true that sardana dancing was repressed on some occasions, the repression was never so strong and absolute as people often think. In fact, Francoism incorporated the sardana and viewed it as an example of a folkloristic regionalism not dangerous for the political regime. That is why in Catalonia there are radical nationalists who look down on the sardana precisely because they consider it an exponent of lukewarm nationalism, weakly coeval and too adapted to the circumstances. This view contrasts strongly with that which considers the sardana a genuine nationalistic expression.

The sardana is a collective dance and not too difficult to master. In the public performances of the dance, everyone who likes to dance is always welcome. The only condition for participation is that the person knows the choreographic steps. That is why within sardanisme people have very often praised the democratic character of the dance. Yet if for the people who are involved with sardanisme, the sardana is popular and highly democratic because everybody can participate within the margins of sex, age, social or ethnic provenance; for others who have nothing to do with this movement it is a dance of people with very concrete political ideas of a nationalistic nature, not shared by a great part of the population. This becomes more evident when considering that today about half of the Catalan population are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from other Spanish regions.

Sardana is not exactly folklorism; nevertheless, the reality of the sardana has a lot to do with the ideological basis of folklorism, especially regarding all that concerns ethnicity. Yet ethnicity is not the only semantic connotation of folklorism. Beyond the distorted folkloristic view of tradition, folklorism also implies values such as rurality, simplicity and morality. The sardana inherited these elements of folklorism, in particular those of morality. Before sardana was discovered in the 19th century by city dwellers, it was often criticized by the priesthood for its immorality, a charge brought against many dances throughout their history. However, after the sardana received the label of folklore, it automatically joined that group of dances which were judged to be morality perfect. The fact that it was not primarily a pair dance but rather a collective dance also helped the sardana to be regarded as a dance that was a model of morality. This resulted in its being taken over by reactionary and socially conservative people. At the beginning of this century, the dance was looked upon as a tool to fight new dances and other musical fashions that were regarded as immoral and, on top of that, foreign in a pejorative sense (Marti 1996: 62).

This connotation of the sardana is currently still a reality. However, if before an explicitly moral connotation referred to the soul, today it refers rather to the body. People contrast the "healthy" character of a dance, one that is performed in open air and without alcohol consumption, with dancing in discoteques, closed spaces with a ratified ambience of smoking and consumption of alcohol and today's fashionable
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The importance of sardana for Catalan representative culture is indicated by the
high level of institutionalization of the dance. Very significant is the existence of
the concept “sardanisme” (sardanism) which alludes to the presence of a social
movement around the practice, significations and values of the dance. This implies a
solid associative movement weaving around the sardana in order not only to dance
but also to promote it and which supports periodical publications devoted exclusive-
ly to the dance. Also a good example for this institutionalization of the sardana is the
fact that a day of the sardana was established in 1959, the so called “diada de la sar-
dana” which takes place once a year. On this day, people organize different activities
as an homage to the dance. There are monuments for the sardana, the specialized
music band which plays sardana (cobla) and some sardana composers in several lo-
calities of Catalonia; the autonomous government of Catalonia even has an official
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Sardanism has made a symbol of the dance and this strong symbolic ethnic load
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rarefied ambience of smoking and consumption of alcohol and today’s fashionable
designer drugs. This perception of the *sardana* causes many young people to consider it rather square and far removed from the moral ideas and leisure practices of current youth.

Regarding the current social perception of the *sardana*, it is interesting to note that people very often link the *sardana* with traditional music and dance. Frequently, people speak about it as if it belongs to the same category as stick dances, old-fashioned rural dances, traditional music players etc. In short, they consider the *sardana* "folklore" (see for instance: Morgades 1986:914; *Guia del Sardanista* 1947: 15). Nevertheless, very often we also find affirmations such as “A Barcelona, l’organització d’una ballada de sardanes no és mai un acte folklòric” (“In Barcelona *sardana* dancing is never a folklore act”; Morgades 1986:915) or “La sardana és un ball popular, però no una ballada folklòrica” (“The *sardana* is a popular dance but not a folklore one; Casals 1992: 32). While for some people—mostly people who are at the margin of the *sardana* world—the *sardana* is simply folklore, not a small part of the *sardana* dancers will deny this fact. Interestingly, this contradiction—partially due to the many connotations of the word “folklore”—also reflects on the attitudes of Catalan ethnomusicology about the dance. In general accounts of ethnic music regarding Catalonia, chapters devoted to dance always start with the *sardana*. Yet ethnomusicology, still very fixated on research of only oral traditions, does not know very well how to deal with the *sardana* because the *sardana*, in spite of its origins in the rural milieu, underlies now more urban influences. Its musical compositions share some characteristics with the high or modern popular music, such as written transmission or authorship, which collide with the classical idea about traditional music. In fact, people have written a lot about the *sardana* in general, but within musicology or ethnomusicology the dance constitutes a seldom treated subject. For historical musicologists, the *sardana* does not belong to high music, and therefore awakes no interest. For ethnomusicologists the dance does not fit with the idea of orally transmitted music, so they prefer to devote their research to other more “traditional” subjects.

The *sardana* is a complex phenomenon; and thus, the whole of its significations for Catalan society is also complex. If the *sardana* has survived until now, it is because it could afford to play with all those different significations. But today its future is quite uncertain. The strong institutionalization of the dance and tightening due to the fact of becoming a symbolic object diminishes its attractiveness for the current youth. In Barcelona, fewer young people dance the *sardana* today than twenty years ago. In fact, the type of participation of this important segment of the population gives us a good index of the reality surrounding the *sardana*. According to an inquiry made in Barcelona 1995, 71.1% of youth think that the *sardana* is good for representing Catalonia, and 37.6% say they can dance *sardanas*. This is undoubtedly a very high ratio. Still, if we compare this percentage with the habit of *sardana* dancing things are quite different. Only a minimal segment of this youth dances the *sardana* with a certain regularity (5.1%). It is quite indicative that more than half (52.5%) of the young people of Barcelona have learnt *sardana* dancing at school, a logical consequence of the high level of institutionalization of the dance. If in former times people learnt the dance, above all, on the street from relatives or friends, today it is chiefly due to public administration that people learn the *sardana*. Currently, we have the paradox that although the *sardana* milieu never had as good an infrastructural support as now, the desertion of *sardana* dancing by young people, especially in big cities, is higher than ever.

The concrete case of the *sardana* constitutes a good example of the paradoxes which arise when people see the reality through narratives of an ethnic kind. The *sardana* possesses for Barcelona a high representative value, although its real social relevance is rather limited. The fact is that, in spite of this representative value as already seen, the whole realm of significations that are associated with this dance can be quite varied and even contradictory. An essentialist and ethnic view of culture, as that of Huntington, would clearly understand *sardana* as part of Barcelona’s culture but it would ignore the semantic contradictions which the practice of this dance in Barcelona implies. Furthermore, this view of culture consequently implies that other musical styles like flamenco or tango, in spite of their firm implantation in Barcelona, are always seen as imported musics, an aspect which is clearly underscored through the linguistic register in which they are expressed. All of this constitutes a complex of apparent paradoxes which have their origin in attempts to understand reality through clearly ideologized schemes.

Notes:

1 While in the rest of the state, the two main political parties of the state, the right-wing “Partido Popular” and the Socialists (PSOE) predominate (with the exception of the Basque Country where the Basque Nationalist Party is also very important), in Catalonia, the two principal parties which come into play are “Convergencia i Unió”-party with an autonomist orientation—and the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC) which is federated with the Spanish PSOE.

2 Sinic (Chinese), Japanese, Hindu, Muslim, African, Latin American, Orthodox (Russia and other countries with Christian-Orthodox religion), and Western civilizations.

3 That is jazzistic songs or, in the case of instrumental music, titles are given in Catalan.

4 About this dance, see for instance Martí 1994.

5 Música i Sociedad, Departament de Musicultura, CSIC.

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