

Minorities' Music and Dance Traditions on the Vietnamese Stage

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‘All ethnic minority groups have the rights to freedom in developing their own languages and writings, maintaining or improving their traditional customs, and to religious freedom, and are supported by the Government in political, economic, social, and cultural fields.’

Decree 229/ SL signed by the President Ho Chi Minh on 29 April 1955.

In 2010, the international symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Music and Minorities was held in Hanoi, Vietnam, where the participants enjoyed rich cultural social programmes. Music performed onstage offered a glimpse at diverse minority cultures and the pearls of Vietnamese traditions. As temporary visitors, even with some anthropological and sociological understanding, many could not recognise the degree of ‘authenticity’ being presented. Unfamiliar with the background, most just sat back and enjoyed the colourful programme.

This chapter is a continuation of the paper that was presented during the symposium (Jähnichen 2012). It intensifies the theoretical framework connected to observation principles and the many efforts undertaken in order to rescue and preserve Vietnam’s ethnic minorities’ musical identities (To Ngoc Thanh 2010). Through a critical review of ethnomusicological approaches, as described for the last decade of the twentieth century (Nettl 2008), further insights into the social dynamics that reflect the strong impact of an expected ‘globality’ (Yergin and Stanislaw 2002) can be made. This study is based on personal observation and audio-visual archive materials that were collected by the author between 1988 and 2014 in Vietnam.

1. Authenticity and Its Many Meanings

‘Authenticity’ is one of the keywords that plays a role both in representing diversity and in achieving the desired image of interrelationships, which are the two ultimate goals of staging minorities’ music and dance traditions. The term ‘authenticity’ is broadly discussed from various perspectives in ethnomusicology, anthropology, and sociology (Handler 2014). Here, I apply some supplementary perspectives that place authenticity in the context of representing minority culture as seen a) from the perspective of the majority and its various agents, b) from the perspective of the minority that is represented, and c) from the perspectives of other minorities that are not represented.

Looking at authenticity from these perspectives may yield a better understanding of the function of stereotyping and how stage events are thought to work in the actual situation of twenty-first century Vietnam.

If authenticity is taken as a sum of features belonging to an item, an intangible or tangible item that stands for the locally-rooted culture being displayed, then these features can be hierarchised in order of their significance (McCarthy 2009: 243–244; Theodossopoulos 2013). Examining all possible perspectives, the hierarchical order of features marking authenticity in stage performances can be determined by observing the sequence in which they are surrendered for the sake of feasibility and onstage effects:

- place and time (performance space, time setting, light, sound environment);
- movements (choreography, dance patterns, steps, turns, gestures, facial expressions);
- outer appearance (clothing design, makeup, typicality in stature, symbolic beauty accessories);
- musical quality (scales, structures, vocal timbre, instruments);
- language (native speakers, dialect, intonation, ‘unspoiled’ vocabulary).

The feature last waived seems to be the language used; however, music and dance performances are widely produced without using language, which makes them even more flexible in the gaze of the majority’s cultural policy leaders (Jähnichen 2006).¹⁾

Whereas language is not part of the authenticity package for display, an overwhelming emphasis is placed on musical scales and structures, which are the domain of early ethnomusicologists such as Tran Van Khe (2000). Not always benefitting a deeper understanding, this approach is a simple reduction of cultural diversity with regard to interval schemes, as experienced through local musicological literature (Vu Nhat Thang 1993; To Ngoc Thanh 1997) and among less culturally informed musicians (Pham Dinh Sau 1992) travelling the area or attending staged performances.

While outward appearances and the movements of each performance type can still be maintained to a certain degree, at least in an effort to paint the ‘picture’ of diversity and indicate distinctiveness from the existing state of global normalisation, places and times that imply an occasion of familiar importance to the cultural bearers cannot be staged at any time (Price 2007). To help in this situation, cultural documentaries are ‘staged’. Quasi-authentic events in quasi-authentic clothes with quasi-authentic music and dance come with a well-curated selection of ethnographic information, some of which is presented as if talking about an alien species; however, it is most common to introduce a minority or a group of minorities in symbolic patterns of behaviour and belongings.

Seen from the cultural bearers’ perspective, the production of a documentary is a sign of arrival in civilisation.²⁾ Being on television is seemingly admirable, for which other shortcomings can be tolerated. Nevertheless, documentaries are critically viewed by those who are not represented. Opposing comments, as observed in online blogs and readers’ letters, address the ‘incorrectness’ of authenticity and, motivated by a competitive spirit, claim to possess a more correct knowledge concerning the displayed cultural features. Thus, another hierarchical layer is constructed as a result of the selection of one

minority over others for various reasons, such as easy access, available infrastructure, and personal relationships between performers and documentary producers. Hence, representativeness is dependent on the level of knowledge that has already been gained through personal contact between representing and represented groups.

Despite the order of authenticity levels with regard to stage performances, the concept of authenticity itself is in question, since it derives from essentialist conditioning in ethnomusicology and has already (i.e., twenty years ago) been critically discussed and examined:

The term 'authenticity' is used in so many different contexts that it may well resist definition. Yet, the most significant difficulty that arises in attempting to define it lies in the philosophical nature of its meaning. Even to speak of 'the nature of its meaning' is misleading, since it implies a kind of essentialism, a perspective of objectivity which is foreign to authenticity. (Golomb 1995: 5).

Critical voices other than the philosophical are followed by a number of ethnomusicologists. Among the many within and beyond this field, two contributions are remarkable: Simone Krüger (2013) summarises previous debates from the perspective of pedagogical perception, and Rajko Muršič (2015) analyses the relationship between authenticity, racism, and culturalism (nationalism) in music.

Going further, authenticity, if taken as the key to truthfulness in performance, implies a static view on the past and a supposedly objective conditionality with respect to traditions. The affirmative action of representing minority music and dance cultures is an attempt to lead cultural features that are alien to the culture of the performers and stage administrators into another scheme of compatibility with a self-imposed imagination of what could be a good truth about the state of a minority culture. Therefore, correctness in representing authenticity has to be addressed because it concerns aiming at the temporary message of representativeness. However, striving for the correct imagination requires authority to make decisions about it.

This authority is a system for processing and approving the comments of village elders or officials who are affiliated with different state agencies as well as the strategic deliberations released by cultural departments. Guidelines to be followed in this process are not always based on solid information on the subject matter (Salemink 2013: 162).

Through the repeated approval of event managers who cast shows (Figure 1), their intellectual guides, and the culturally-distanced audience, the imagination attains a certain degree of 'truth'; it becomes an authentic fake, as it were.

In summary of the different views on authenticity that have been explained above, the question of what justifies the term at all recurs, with the definite claim that everything that happens might be authentic, or at least authentically represented, according to the guiding management. This applies to stage performances as well as to documentaries that are viewed by the country's majority audience.



Figure 1 The first show showcasing minority cultures in 2011 in Hanoi. Models from the Viet majority display traditional minority costumes, while minority musicians and singers decorate the backdrop. This design indicates that even models have to undergo a standardising civilisation process in order to become ‘successful’. (Photo: Trình diễn Trang phục truyền thông các dân tộc Việt Nam 2011) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHXTuRjOVK8> (accessed: 9 August 2017)

2. Two Cases for Discussion

A fitting example is a dance piece performed by the Việt Bắc Folk Song and Dance Company called ‘Moon Above the Mountain Peak’ [Trăng trên đầu núi], representing the Dao minority of North Vietnam. It is an audio-visual recording made by Supreme Master TV under the general title *Traditional Folk Dance: Music of the Aulacese (Vietnamese) Ethnic Groups* in 2012. The song underlying the dance rhythms is performed in the Dao language, which is read from a transcript with Vietnamese letters.

The host introduced the dance as follows:

Under the dreamy moon of the mountain area, let us sing and dance together to pray for a bountiful harvest, for people’s happiness and well-being. The friendly invitation of the gentle Dao ethnic people will be conveyed through the dance ‘Moon Above the Mountain Peak’. This dance will be performed by artists from the Việt Bắc Folk Song and Dance Company.

The dance starts as a night show in the meadow, surrounded by mountains. The scene is set in the light of a campfire—the stereotypical image of a wild, adventurous life far away from civilisation. The imagination of an authentic place and time is marred by the far too uniform outfits, which feature shiny material and the same cut for everybody. Uniformity seems to be counterproductive for an authentic imagination from the viewpoint of the represented people. However, the majority aesthetics promote uniformity; a uniform appearance is taken as a symbol of modernity and progress, as can

be understood from personal discussions with members of the television production team (Kieu Van Tan 1999).

Remembering performances that were staged for the administration in Nghia Lo in 1995, Mr. Quyet, the village elder of Cau Thia, said that he disliked having 'all been put in the same dress, since that is not important. Actually the outfits are all different in how they are embroidered. That is important to us. But for the TV, from "above", the village has to look like [we are] in uniform, like "soldiers."³⁾ The dance moves are kept quite flexible. It matters little if the result looks a bit choreographed since the dancers are obviously well-trained. Moreover, the musical structure is entirely detached from the physical and temporal setting, which resembles the represented people in only a handful of moments and as such refers to a part of the Dao's repertoire that is usually played for rituals rather than for entertainment dances. Again, the adaptation of just a melodic outline embedded into a supposedly global mainstream sound and enriched with some percussive patterns derived from ritual ensembles consisting of a small double-headed frame drum, a set of gongs, and an oboe is thought to be modern, progressive, and promising in terms of the countrywide recognition of cultural achievements (Ó Briain 2014).

In the dance patterns performed by the young boys, each dancer uses a frame drum as a prop. Consequently, some authentic movements and dance patterns are covered with a layer of superficial symbols.

The general tendency to use instruments or working tools to illustrate minority culture shows that performances do not aim at authenticity but rather at stereotyping cultural items. Intangible culture is thus seemingly commodified and semantically shrunken to associative gadgets.

Lastly, the text is produced in the Dao language. Nevertheless, the content of the text appears to be weakly rooted in the Dao people's practices; instead, it is extricated with sharp edges and wittiness, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

Boys: You're so beautiful, so pretty in the colours of our people. Would you like to go with me?

Girls: Under the glistening moon, would you sing and dance with me?

Boys: Would you stay here with me tonight?

Girls: Come join us in a merry festival!

Boys: Please join us!

Girls: We'll sing and dance together!

Boys: Please join us! We'll sing and dance together!

Girls: Please join us! We'll sing and dance together!

Boys: Please join us! We'll sing and dance together!

Girls: Please join us! We'll sing and dance together!

Boys: You're so beautiful, so pretty in the colours of our people. Would you like to go with me?

Girls: Under the glistening moon, would you sing and dance with me?

Boys: Would you stay here with me tonight?

Girls: Come join us in a merry festival!

In the preface of *Notes from Indochina on Ethnic Minority Cultures*, Marilyn Gregerson and Dorothy Thomas (1980: xi) published a quite precise map showing the territorial distribution of minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. All these minorities use gongs in their local musical practice. However, many minority groups migrated to areas in which the Viet majority is culturally dominant. Nevertheless, representation schemes are applied in the same way in both cases, with the audio-visually represented dance scene of the Dao and the gong culture in the Central Highlands. However, the type of representation is similar, and the communities benefit economically from this ‘pretended authenticity’.

Similar analyses could be made with regard to many other examples, such as anything representing the many different peoples of the Tay Nguyen (Western Highland) (Jähnichen 2013). The gong culture of these people recently appeared on UNESCO’s World Heritage List. However, very little differentiation is made between the various distinct peoples who use gong sets in their musical practice.

The documentary that accompanied the UNESCO application is worded in very general terms, and people are described rather more ‘zoologically’ than as humans. It is said that the space of gongs ‘covers several provinces and 17 Austro-Asian and Austronesian ethno-linguistic communities’ and that ‘Their belief systems form a mystical world where the gongs produce a privileged language between men, divinities and the supernatural world. Behind every gong hides a god or goddess.’⁴⁾ The Central Highlands minorities are portrayed as bearers of an ancestral culture that is connected to the Dong Son culture. Therefore, the many minorities that practise gong playing are defended for their ability to prove Vietnam’s political claim as a nation that is culturally based on a state founded as early as 3,500 years ago (Salemink 2013: 162).

Historical developments and changes in use and meaning are non-existent in descriptive audio-visual and stage products. People are depicted as though they wear traditional garb all day and also as if they are obsessed with spirits. The video that accompanied the UNESCO application is the result of a carefully arranged ‘authenticity’ in terms of outward appearance, movements, and choreography (Figures 2 and 3). Traditional features in the categories of household items and ritual activities are exhibited as both typical and part of the preservation efforts.



Figures 2 and 3 The two stills show the final shooting⁵⁾ and the earlier version in new clothes that were not ‘typical’ enough (Kieu Van Tan 1999).

Another example is a *sao* Hmong (a Hmong flute, which is free reed pipe with finger holes) performance on stage in the tourist destination of Sapa in 2001. The stage is small and makeshift, and the performance takes place in the evening. Among the various dance numbers and songs, a young man plays an instrumental piece, well-arranged, with a Vietnamese standard folk music orchestra as background sound, which is playing from a compact disc. This performance ignored nearly all sense of authenticity. However, the performance seemed real to urban and global tourists who travelled from distant places to attend cultural performances in real time in real places, as opposed to watching documentaries or even the same performance in an urban setting on a colourfully-illuminated professional show stage. It seems that this is a further indicator that the representation of minority culture can be viewed as involving considerable effort on the audience's part to attend a performance. Watching a performance in Sapa is somehow more authentic and truer than watching one in Hanoi or aboard a cruise ship anchored in Haiphong. The people represented are also more satisfied, since the visitors are not only interested in culture; they need service and products. In the eyes of the people being represented, cultural promotion efforts contribute to economic growth in the immediate area, thus encouraging the young generation to remain in their home villages and small towns.

3. Economic Forces and the Political Layout in the Representation of Minority Cultures

In 2009, the radio broadcaster the Voice of Vietnam broadcasted some statements on minority policies under the title 'Vietnam wants to improve ethnic minorities' lives: Special attention will be placed on the development of education, training, healthcare, culture, and society in disadvantaged mountain areas inhabited by ethnic minorities' (VOV 30 July 2009 10:57:41 AM).⁶⁾ The degrees of civilisation follow a simple order, from obtaining electricity and transportation facilities to the monetary development that is concomitant with the successful trading of goods (Swinkels and Turk 2006). The next step is social infrastructure, including access to schools, hospitals, and employment, thus creating the precondition for cultural infrastructure such as nurturing the performing arts, co-curricula for schools and organisations, the visual arts, exhibitions, and other events. Achievements in all these areas contribute to a prospering tourism industry and other regional business involving primary products (Figure 4).

The following is another statement from the Voice of Vietnam:⁷⁾

The Vietnamese State has been implementing policies to support production and human resources training to improve ethnic minority people's living conditions, especially in extremely disadvantaged and mountainous regions. To date, most of the communes where the groups live are accessible by roads and have access to electricity, clean water, and educational, healthcare, and postal services. 85% of the ethnic minority population watch television programmes and 92% listen to radio programmes. (VOV 11 August 2013, 9:26:01 AM, originally in English).

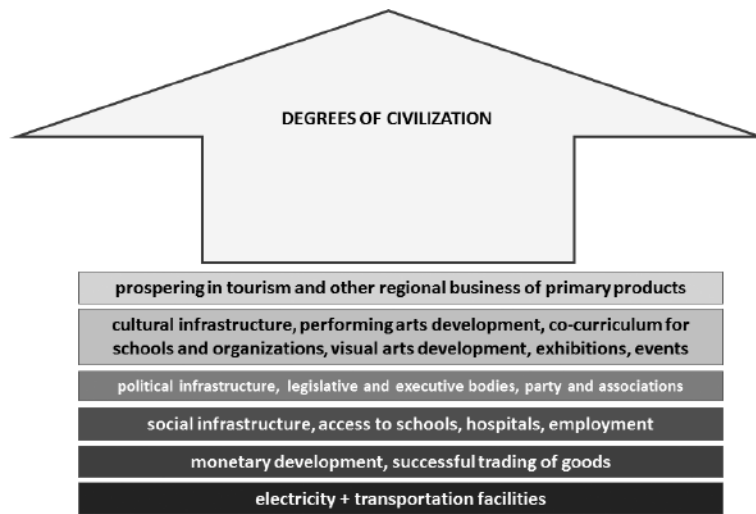


Figure 4 A scheme showing minority development levels, as seen from the majority perspective (Scheme by the author, using sources: VLSS, VHLSS, Minot 2003; Le Trong Cuc 1999).

Most of the aesthetics and effects involved in performing minority culture are introduced primarily through the media, mainly television. A live show watched in the Central Highlands or in Sapa will therefore not be much different from a show in the large cities, far away from the minorities' region. The only difference is that the audience is critical enough to ignore stereotyping and uniform choreographies in a space that is connected to the people being represented. Even if the performer is not a member of the community but rather an imported Vietnamese musician, the show seems to be better appreciated and more economically successful for the people being represented.

Tan Sooi Beng raises another important point that plays a role in minority cultures' self-understanding. She writes about *ronggeng*, an artificially maintained, or rather, an invented folkdance tradition: 'While it is true that *ronggeng* has been recreated and disseminated by the Malaysian State through its media and institutions to convey a particular political agenda and to legitimize itself, such reconstructions of heritage are also responses to a Western universalizing modernity' (Tan 2005: 290).

The response to global modernity and to its promise of economic prosperity is often underestimated in discussions about minority representation by majority agents. Tan stresses the significance of economic forces and economic pressure on the majority as driving motivation for cultural policies within a nation that has to bring local diversity in line with a joint strategy in order to achieve win-win outcomes (Tan 2005; also Kahn 1992). Focusing on nation building as such is a response to globality. The pressure that is placed on the state through global economic movements is replicated in the need for state support for the modernisation of minority communities. Moreover, in order to achieve a respected status among the competitive economies that surround Vietnam, cultural pressure is applied to all aspects of life. Consumerism, superficiality, historical

memory loss, and cultural pragmatism are the outcomes of this, and they do not always contradict the general self-perception (Swinkels and Turk 2006).

4. Final Thoughts

Contradictions between agents who are concerned with cultural knowledge and traditional identity features and the 'majority' among all the minorities that are striving to forge a connection to the national and global comfort zones have to be negotiated within the communities in the years to come. Cultural policy in any country with postcolonial structures is mainly driven by economic developments (Swinkels and Turk 2006; VLSS 1993, 1998; VHLSS 2002, 2004). As a result, the minorities' specific cultural features are usurped through economic means, political bribes, and the privileging of selected agents. Essential differences might be purposefully ignored in order to achieve a down-levelled peace, since the loss of political privileges is more harmful than the loss of cultural independence. Reading between the lines, Olsen (2008) describes the effect of this development on the individual in his portrayals of minority pop singers.

The future of minority cultures, nevertheless, depends heavily on how they are represented in both a national and global context. In order to better understand and balance minority–majority relationships through stage performances and media representations, much more must be learnt about the many particularities of each minority culture and its historical flexibility.

Notes

- 1) Out of the twenty-one stage shows incorporating Vietnam's minority cultures during the period 1992–1998, eighteen were largely dedicated to instrumental music featuring the *to' rung* (a tube idiophone), the *klong put* (an aerophone that is played by clapping one's hands into large bamboo tubes), the *sao* Hmong (a free reed aerophone with finger holes), the *khen* Hmong (a mouth organ with a long wind chest), and the *k-ny* (a one-string lute with a coin attached to the end of the string, which is taken into the mouth; hence the mouth is used as a resonator), various gong sets, and a *tinj tau* (a plucked spike lute played in a formation of three to six instruments). The author's originally-recorded data on a typical stage repertoire can be found in the Berlin Phonogram Archive under the code numbers M28066–M28500.

Another, more recent example is a documentary made by Supreme Master TV, which operates from Los Angeles and used official Vietnamese sources for the production. The documentary's introduction states that Vietnam (Aulac) 'is a nation with a long-standing traditional culture. Aulacese musical heritage is bountiful; since ancient times, many soul-stirring musical instruments have been created with diverse sounds like those of the copper drum, gong, lithophone, bamboo xylophone, cymbals, and panpipe.' This is an explanation for why only a very few songs are included. Accessible via: http://www.suprememastertv.com/niska/?wr_id=405&page=8 (accessed: 1 April 2015).

- 2) Interviews with Tran Van Bang and Pham Thi Tien (both performers in Van Yen, Nghia Lo) as

- well as the performances themselves can be found in the collection Vietnam, VN9507 (1:29–1:54) and VN9508 (0:00–1:15), recorded by the author.
- 3) The author's originally-recorded interview data can be found in the Berlin Phonogram Archive under the code number M28066–M28500. The citation is in the DAT Collection Vietnam in the ethnomusicological section in the Museum of Ethnology, Berlin, code number M28449. The interviews were translated from Thai-Dam into Vietnamese by Xuan Ninh and Long, and from Vietnamese into English by the author, 14 June 1995.
 - 4) https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=I90_bPVujKc (accessed: 31 March 2015)
 - 5) Still on the left side: Official video recording for the application to UNESCO to be included on the List of Masterpieces of the World. Accessible via: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=I90_bPVujKc; last visited 31 March 2015. Still on the right side: Video recorded by the author.
 - 6) <http://english.vov.vn/Society/Vietnam-wants-to-improve-ethnic-minorities-life/106355.vov> (accessed: 30 March 2015)
 - 7) <http://english.vov.vn/CultureSports/Ethnic-minority/Equal-development-for-ethnic-minorities-in-Vietnam/266900.vov>. Accessible via: <http://www.vietnambreakingnews.com/2013/11/social-highlights-for-november-9/> (accessed: 30 March 2015)

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