
MAIN PROBLEMS OF STABILITY AND CHANGE IN TRADITION

by

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There should be no need to belabour the fact of change in these days of world ferment, or the importance of understanding the mechanisms of cultural change. Whether we hope to control the future course of development, or only to anticipate it so that we can be prepared to adjust to it, an understanding of the manner in which change takes place is required. The consequences may be less serious in music than in the field of politics, but change is no less apparent, with mass media affecting what had long been remote and isolated parts of the world. It is my belief that we would better understand change in political beliefs if we knew more about the way in which music, the dance, or any other forms of traditional behaviour develop, and of how they are modified by the outside influences with which they are brought into contact.

With the effects of acculturation to be seen in all parts of the world, we may have to be reminded how recently its importance has been recognized. The twentieth century has brought us face to face with change, but the fact about culture which was most obvious in the last century was its stability. Some cultures had existed with little change over many centuries, and others had been spread through colonization to new parts of the world where they persisted despite considerable geographical differences. There was a tendency to take cultural stability for granted, though it was recognized that changes could result from migrations and conquests. The Tylorian theory of cultural evolution, developed only toward the end of the century, held that societies progressed from one stage to another as the result of internal change, but the manner in which these changes came about was almost mystical and inevitable. Other scholars seriously maintained that primitive peoples lived in "cultural straight jackets" which prevented change and, indeed, even individual variation in behaviour. It was widely believed that human behaviour was biologically determined, and that certain people were musical or amusical, or rhythmical and incapable of harmony, by virtue of their race. Learning as a means of cultural change had little place in these theories, and in the light of what we know today the important mechanism of cultural borrowing was completely underrated. It is sometimes hard to realize that the fact that folktales can and do diffuse from one place to another, without the agency of migration, had to be proved within the last hundred years.

It has not been scientific observation or experiment as much as the course of history which has disproved these earlier ideas. Instances of cultural borrowing are to be seen on all sides, the spread of musical forms has shown little respect for racial differences, and the so-called "primitive" peoples themselves have shown how rapidly they can change through learning. I trust I can assume that these earlier theories are not seriously held by anyone present, but we should not make the mistake of discarding one of the main points on which they were based. In stressing the importance of cultural change, in view of what we see about us today, we should not neglect the undeniable evidence of cultural stability. Cultures, though they change constantly, have continuity. The introduction of industrialization produces marked changes in some institutions of a society, but others are not altered beyond recognition. And while it causes change, the spread of industrialization can be viewed as an instance of the continuity of Western

culture. Continuity and change are two sides of the same coin; we cannot understand one without an understanding of the other.

As music in particular demonstrates, acculturation is not confined to situations of face to face contacts. Records and the radio, in particular, are spreading European music in Africa, the islands of the Pacific, and elsewhere. The written, and particularly the printed word, have long been a medium of cultural interchange capable of bridging the gap of distances, but, in the case of music, recordings and broadcasts have proved far more effective than written scores. Written and unwritten music have influenced each other in earlier times, as is shown by the composition of symphonies based on folk themes and the passing of written songs like "Way Down Upon the Swanee River" into the American folk tradition. But the impact of art and popular music on folk music has been greatly intensified by recordings of music. These have produced amusing novelties, such as the aspiring young jazz musician memorizing a solo improvisation from a record, or an African dance band calling the next number as "H.M.V. 62", and in some cases they have further complicated the already tangled skeins of cultural traditions. The so-called "Spanish records" which are so popular in Nigeria are mainly Afro-Cuban, and their West African heritage in large part accounts for their popularity. Through the medium of records manufactured in Europe and America, African-derived music from Cuba has been reintroduced into Africa, where it is undergoing re-Africanization by local dance bands.

Africa also affords numerous instances of culture contact distinct from westernization. In all parts of the continent, the end of warfare, the expansion of local trade, and the introduction of bicycles, automobiles, railways and airplanes, have markedly increased contacts and interchange between peoples of different cultural backgrounds. The spectacular growth of mining and urban centres has brought together, in more permanent contact, Africans who were formerly separated by distance or hostility. Here Africans are learning customs, magic, dances and music from each other perhaps even more quickly than they are learning European ways. New forms of music and the dance are developing which draw on several African traditions, as well as manifesting some European influence.

These situations, and others in other parts of the world provide innumerable opportunities for the study of cultural change while it is taking place, opportunities from which anthropology and musicology can benefit to their mutual, as well as individual, advantage. For as what we learn about change in music will contribute to our understanding of change in culture as a whole, so what we learn about change in other aspects of culture will aid in our understanding of change in music.

In these studies, anthropologists can do more than make occasional recordings, collect musical instruments, and analyze song texts. They can record native categories of musical forms, the social, religious, and economic activities with which they are associated, and their place in the life cycle and the yearly round of activities. Here they have an advantage over the musicologist in that their field work usually calls for longer periods of residence in the given community, so that they have a better opportunity of learning the occasions on which music is employed. They can also analyze the social position of the musician, his economic rewards, and even his training, as they do for craftsmen, priests, or chiefs. While this in particular has been sadly neglected in the past, anthropological techniques are adequate to make a contribution here without a knowledge of the special skills of musicology. It is regrettable that more has not been done along all these lines in the past, but it is possible that anthropological interest in music may be renewed by the tape recorder. It cannot be too often stressed that it is not enough to make recordings, but the chance to do so may stimulate an interest in the other facts which it is necessary to know.

Most anthropologists have neither the skills nor the time for an intensive study of music, since they are concerned with many other things. Their main contribution will probably continue to be that of providing the general outlines of a culture into which its music can be fitted, though they could do far more in tracing the ramifications of music in other aspects of culture, and the situations in which it is employed. Anthropologists, perhaps, have been concerned with acculturation longer than musicologists, and have gone farther in developing a theory of cultural change, limited as this may still be. But rather than elaborate on the potential contribution of anthropology, since this is a conference on folk music, let me turn to the important ones musicologists can make to the study of cultural change.

The first contribution is obvious. Musicologists have specialized techniques which few anthropologists acquire, and without which one of the important facets of man's cultural tradition cannot be analyzed or compared. The study of any culture, and the study of cultural change in any society, are incomplete to the extent that its music is not considered. Some anthropologists, it is true, have shown little concern for the study of music, and others have disregarded it completely. Yet even among the social anthropologists in Britain, who have deliberately specialized in social structure in the past, a broadening of interest is to be noted, particularly in the remarkable number of recent papers dealing with ritual. It is still too soon to predict that this will lead to an interest in music, but even if it should not, there are other anthropologists who consider music and the contributions of musicologists important to their own field of study.

Secondly, I believe that music provides especially fruitful materials for the study of cultural change. In contrast to social institutions, to which an individual is expected to conform, a degree of creativity is expected in music, the dance, the graphic and plastic arts, and in that portion of folklore which I have called verbal art. This is not to say, of course, that everything new is accepted or preferred to the old, nor is it to deny that there are certain forms of art in which rigid adherence to the past is demanded. Certain wood carvings call for no originality; certain songs and dance steps must be performed in a prescribed manner; and certain incantations and curses must be recited verbatim if they are to be effective. One can argue as to whether these forms are art or whether they are ritual, but I do not wish to continue the argument about ritual origins here, while arguments about definitions, particularly of art, are seldom fruitful. Nevertheless, the rigid standards of repetition that are demanded in some forms of religious music, whether written or unwritten, contrast strikingly with the improvisation that is permitted, and even expected, in some secular music.

To the degree that originality is prized in music and other forms of aesthetic expression, they are especially important for the study of internal innovation. Changes arising within a society are difficult to study if only because they are never easy to anticipate, while the effects of culture contact can be studied almost anywhere today. Neither of these facts, however, diminish the importance of internal innovation in cultural change, since without invention neither acculturation nor diffusion could take place. Every idea had its origin, ultimately, with some individual living at some time in some society, even though we may never know who, when, or where. In that creativity rather than conformity is expected, the forms of aesthetic expression differ basically from social, economic, political and even religious institutions. In this difference may lie the basis for their main contribution to the understanding of cultural change.

Thirdly, music in particular is susceptible of precise measurement in terms of pitch and intervals, tempo and duration. Some features of music can be measured quantitatively and, as Merriam has shown, can be treated statistically. It is possible to measure the degree of individual variability that exists within various forms of secular music, as contrasted with those of sacred music, for example, or of new and old songs. This com-

parison in itself should shed welcome light on the kind and amount of creativity that exists in non-literate and folk societies, a point that is still disputed. But more significant, if carried further, it may be possible to show how change develops out of the variations which coexist on the same time plane.

Statistics and quantitative measurements will never teach us all that we want to know about music. Even if it were possible to reduce each song to a mathematical equation, this would neither answer all the questions nor solve all the problems. But statistical techniques are most useful in comparative studies, including studies of change, because they can distinguish between accidental and significant differences. Quantitative measurement is possible in the study of the dance and of folktales and myths, but of all the forms of aesthetic expression it is in the study of music that greatest precision can be achieved at present. Statistical techniques have been applied profitably to the study of individual behaviour in social, economic, and political fields, but again it is in the fields where creativity is expected that one can hope to learn most about internal innovation.

The conventions of language force us to speak of the impact of art and popular music on folk music, and of the influence of one musical style on another. From the point of view of musicological analysis perhaps the human individual can be forgotten in describing musical change and development. But these are always the result of human interaction, and if we are to study change while it is actually taking place, individuals become the focal point of concentration. Internal innovation must involve the study of individual variations, not only in a song as sung by different individuals, but between the renditions of the same song by the same individual over a period of time. Individuals, also, are the agents of introducing external innovations, whether it is a trader who brings back a song from his travels, a houseboy who repeats what his master sings in the bathtub, or those who hum or play a melody they have heard on a record or the radio.

If one could but follow the course of a single innovation, whether internal or external from this point on, through its repetitions and its spread, acceptance, and adaptation within a community! To do so would present many difficulties, but how much more difficult it would be to follow the spread of a new idea or belief, and to measure its modifications. Records and the radio, with the continuous introduction of new songs, provide repeated opportunities for studies of this kind, or they could be artificially contrived to give even greater experimental control. Here is a fourth real advantage of music in the study of cultural change, for one cannot so easily experiment by the introduction of new forms of marriage, economy, or government at will. One can, to be sure, study the results of such changes where they have occurred, and can even observe them in process through luck or through a foreknowledge of governmental reform, but rarely under conditions that are subject to strict experimental control.

Again, however, I have lapsed into speaking of the spread, acceptance, and adaptation of music, when at each of these points individuals and individual interaction provide the focus of study. This is equally true in the transmission of old and new elements from one generation to another, again through the process of individual learning. These points are elementary, and perhaps obvious, but they are fundamental. There is nothing mysterious about the development and transmission of melodies or narratives simply because they are unwritten and the individuals involved are unknown. Because a series of anonymous individuals introduce their own reinterpretations and modifications of a new song or tale it acquires its "folk" character and is regarded as a "folk product", but this again is best regarded as nothing more than a convention of speech.

Finally, although we have been mainly concerned with the acceptance of innovations, the alternative of rejection is actually significant. Any innovation, whether internal or external, presents a choice between these alternatives and, if it is to survive and spread,

a succession of individuals must make similar choices. Though rejection operates in a negative fashion, it has a profound effect on the course of cultural change and development. To be able to predict what will be accepted we must know what will be rejected, and to anticipate the course of a culture's development, it is more important to know why certain things will be rejected than to know what will happen to those that are accepted.

The rules that govern this process of selectivity are not fully known, but it has been pointed out that innovations which are incompatible with the pre-existing patterns are usually rejected. Again this is not a mystical process of culture which operates independently of individuals, but the result of the fact that individuals judge everything in terms of their previous experience. As a result they are more apt to reject innovations which are markedly different, strange, or incongruous with what they have known before, than those which seem familiar and compatible. It is this aspect of the selective process which gives to culture its character of continuity, enabling it to retain recognizable features despite changes which, viewed in themselves, seem revolutionary.