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**VOICING BALKAN IMAGINARIES: IDENTITY METAPHORS OF
KUMPANIA ALGAZARRA IN LISBON**

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***Abstract:** This article addresses the relationship between music and identity in a collective of bands that perform Balkan music in Lisbon. Supported by a theoretical and methodological framework based on Ethnomusicology studies on music and identity, I proceed to analyse the emergence of the founding group of this collective – Kumpania Algazarra. I particularly aim to understand why Balkan music is chosen; what are the sound elements used in its representation; which are the processes of musical signification; and how the Balkan phenomenon is reflected in the lifestyle of the performers under study. The results of my participant observation and fieldwork analysis confirm the existence of an identity construction based on the Balkan’s imaginary that the musicians aim to reproduce. I trace hypotheses that lead me to consider this collective as a musically imagined community, based on the sharing of autonomous symbols, verifying that music’s evocation of imagined identities can lead to the transformation of both individual and collective identities. I conclude by proposing the studied music as a metaphor of a specific social identity, sustained by a musically imagined collective.*

***Keywords:** Balkan music, identity, musically imagined community*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I analyze identity relationships of a group of bands that play Balkan music in Lisbon, trying to substantiate their appearance, the representation of the music they perform, and the ways in which they build a musical identity based on Balkan imaginaries. My investigation involved ethnographic work with the group Kumpania Algazarra in Lisbon between 2013 and 2014. I tried to understand the reason for the growing appearance, in the last years, of youth groups playing Balkan music in Portugal. Did the performers frame their music as a representation of Balkanism? If so, how does this representation mirror itself in the musics that are played, and what sound characteristics make us listen and relate it to Balkan music? Furthermore, could this universe of bands be a musical community and - in a final analysis – does it create a specific social identity?

Theoretically, my research is mainly based on the connections between music and identity, with a particular focus on the role of music in understanding societies in transition in central and Western Europe from the 1970s to the

revolutionary period of 1989/90. As main references, I cite authors like Donna Buchanan (2006) and (2007), Mark Slobin (1996), Martin Stokes (1994), Timothy Rice (2001), (2003) and (2007) and Georgina Born (2000).

2. B OF BOOM, B OF BALKANIC

The large number of broadcasts of Balkan sounds, especially in the last two decades, has given rise to a trans-Balkan musical phenomenon that has hugely impacted Eastern Europe. All over the continent, important names associated to Balkan music have received international acclaim, such as Emir Kusturica, Fanfare Ciocarlia, Gorán Bregovic and Ivo Papazov, all of whom, in their shows, have utilized musical elements that lead back to this region. Portugal has been no exception with the rise (in Lisbon) of bands, made up mainly of young people that have tried to reproduce a model characteristic of the Balkans in the last ten years. Kumpania Algazarra, founded in 2004, was the first band in Lisbon to receive popular attention. Afterwards, other groups formed by Portuguese musicians that identified themselves

with Balkan music emerged, such as *Farra Fanfarra*, *Original Bandalheira*, *Peña Kalimotxo*, *Bizu Coolective*, *Gapura*, *Pás de Problème* and *Marco i Blacky*.

The end of the communist period created space for the appearance of a new category within world music - *Balkan music*. The wide circulation of this new market label increasingly incited appetite for Balkan sonorities, leading to the proliferation of musical ensembles that started playing this type of music all over Europe. In this same period, a common representation of the Balkan imaginary began to assert itself, strongly marked by Kusturica films and their soundtracks. Speeches about Balkanism, its sonorities and ways of living became more and more common, recreating commonly shared symbolologies, wrapped up in a Kustirican imaginary, of an explicit Romani universe, connected to rurality, festivity and music.

In my case study, a young musician named Francisco Amorim (or Kiko) was very important in the appearance of this phenomenon in Portugal. Kiko experienced musical contact with the Balkans, which led him to incorporate, recreate and reinterpret related musical practices and ideas as groundbreaker in pioneering bands of Balkan music in Lisbon. In the summer of 2000, during a cultural exchange in Bosnia to reconstruct a church destroyed during the war, Kiko got familiar with a musical universe that was strikingly similar to his proper profile as a musician. He went back to the Balkan region in the following years to do community work, establishing connections with different Bosnian, Serbian, Hungarian and Romanian musicians. In 2004, he then founded Kumpania Algazarra with four befriended musicians.

As I referred above, Kumpania Algazarra is arguably the first band in Lisbon (and in Portugal) to affirm a series of characteristics and musical elements that refer to Balkan music. According to its members, the group was born "*in a street in Sintra on a normal day, during a chat among befriended musicians in a good mood*". Since its foundation the band has presented itself in several types of performances that go beyond the usual stage concert, thanks to its acoustic and mobile component: street entertainment, demonstrations, weddings, and private parties. During these performances, band members play, sing and dance, always with a festive humor, together with the audience, and accompanied by a megaphone, through which Trinta (vocals and saxophone) sings and interacts with the audience. This megaphone has been the band's trademark since its first performances, and band members consider it one of their key instruments. Kumpania Algazarra has

already traveled the country from north to south and has also done several international performances.

In 2012, the band experienced a *momentum* in their history: they went to *Guca*, a folk festival that takes place in the Serbian village of Guca, considered to be one of the greatest music festivals worldwide by ethnic music lovers. *Guca* occurs on an annual basis and lasts seven days. Within the festival there is a brass band competition, in which "the best worldwide instrumentalists" are selected.¹ The bands that intend to compete here must send a recording of one of their performances to the festival organization and, after a triage, only twelve groups are selected. In my case study, Kumpania Algazarra's participation in what is considered the biggest and most important festival of Balkan music celebration is established as an interesting phenomenon. This was the first time a Portuguese band took part in the festival, asserting itself as Balkan music performer, especially for its participation in the contest. However, the musicians indicate that locals perceived a Portuguese band playing Balkan music as something rather exotic, as they appropriated and reinterpreted music in their own way. Nevertheless, for the band, the fact that they were, in a way, "assessed" as Balkan music performers was an important challenge and, above all, implied a growing consciousness of a bridge between their Balkan imaginary and what they saw and heard in Serbia.

Kumpania Algazarra normally plays original compositions; street entertainments are the only time when the band plays covers in acoustic format. On stage, the repertory has always consisted of original music and lyrics, created by the members of the band. During their twelve years of existence, Algazarra has produced four recorded albums: *Kumpania Algazarra* (2008), *Kumpania Algazarra Remixed* (2010), *Ao Vivo FMM2011* (2011) (Live FMM2011), *Kumpania Algazarra - A Festa Continua* (2013) (The Party Goes On) and *Acoustic Express* (2015).

Nowadays, there are at least ten bands in Lisbon with similar characteristics as Kumpania Algazarra that equally performs Balkan sonorities. This leads to the question: what sound characteristics make us listen to these bands and relate them to Balkan music? And how is this sonic Balkan imaginary mirrored in the music?

The first element that meets the ear is pitch. Pitch refers to an idea of Balkanism, especially regarding group instrumentation. There is a predominance of brass (trumpets, trombones, tuba and sousaphone) as well as saxophone, and

¹Interview with Pedro, May 26th 2014, Sagrada Família, Lisbon.

sometimes clarinet and percussions. This composition model is very common for brass bands of the Balkan region. It is also the model that Kusturica presents in his films, and the model that appeared in Portugal, first with Kumpania Algazarra and in the bands that were founded later.

To the pitch element, one can add musical rhythms, generally additive rhythms, or uneven ones, rather characteristic of Balkan music (5/8, 7/8, for example), usually repeated in continuous patterns or by alternation of long and short length. Regarding the harmonic-melodic system, music is generally modal, with the melodies prevailing on the harmonies. The chords take an ornamental function, while the melodies are complex and masterful. We can also notice augmented second interval, generally used between the second and the third degree of the scale (which, since the half of the XIX century, was used to represent the "other", as, for example, in Hungarian, gypsy, Turkish and Arabic music). The musical sentences frequently have irregular and uneven lengths and in their performances (especially mobile performances), musicians spontaneously prolong the themes *ad libitum*, linking different melodies without separation, and building long sections of improvisation.

2.1 Balkan musical identity: the beginning of a new musical community. The boom of Balkan bands in Portugal occurred in a period in which people started hearing about the economic crisis, which enabled interpretations of music as a form of manifesto, political protest, and cultural resistance. During my fieldwork, musicians in fact stated that their music follows a protest trend in search for an alternative to mainstream culture. They also indicated that they tried to promote their ideas through their music's original lyrics with a social purpose that, to my understanding, is based on three goals: political protest, cultural resistance and incentive to social change. In other words, the musicians proclaim a better society, with better living conditions, based on the ideals of freedom and equality for all. In this respect, the presence in political demonstrations has always been a distinctive feature of Kumpania Algazarra: they have already taken part in demonstrations all over the country, from the typical demonstrations of the 25th of April, to demonstrations of JCP (Communist Party Youth), and their frequent presence in Festas do Avante (Avante Festivals), among several other cultural actions. In this light, music is claimed as a social metaphor, in that musicians identify as a "musical minority" in society, given that they started in street performances and keep on being marked by this particularity. The interviewed musicians recognize

they are socially considered as of "lower importance"², whether by their posture or by the way they represent their type of music and repertory. The representations themselves, built around the Balkanism, easily slide towards the "cliché" of the gypsy musician, virtuoso, but who plays on the streets and is socially diminished. These performers adopt music as a way of marking difference in a society with a poor political and economic state of affairs, in which they feel unstructured and unidentified.

I contend that the Balkan music acts that I have presented act as expression and symbol of a specific group, on the one hand, and as integral part of a process that generates, changes and supports a collective, on the other. From my fieldwork, a series of factors emerges that announce the presence of a musical community. This collective self-understanding is evoked not only in music, but also in tastes, attitude, speech, vocabulary, and costumes. Socially, the majority of these young people are in a similar situation of work precariousness, as they gain their income mainly through music, and share an interventionist political and cultural position. In addition, they also share a similar value system; I have noticed, for example, a strong involvement in voluntary projects, social solidarity, environment preservation and animal defense.

A community is based on the sharing of specific symbols, such as musical performance in this case. Music is a form of communication, not only because it enables a way of successful and shared interaction among its members, but also because of expectations of a self-reflexive attitude towards the shared symbology that comes with performing in these bands. This self-reflexive attitude consists in the learning process of the particularities of the music that is performed: the Balkan music these musicians (re)present covers a series of characteristics that had to be learned and assimilated, as, for example, the diatonic melodies, the arpeggios of top extension to the eighth, the frequent use of chromaticism, uneven rhythms and exaggeration in vibrato and staccato. This means that they are expected to organize their own narrative and produce symbolic orientations that community members can easily recognize. They create emotional connections, taste and interest in a type of music that was "exotic" or different at the beginning, developing an imaginary reconstruction of music and the surrounding musical environment (the so called Kusturikan Romani ruralism), which eventually gave rise to their own identities. The identity constructions recreated by the musicians

² Kiko's interview, May the 15th 2014, Fontanelas.

therefore constitute experiences of their cultural imaginary. Using the term developed by Georgina Born, I call this collective "musical-imagined community" (Born, 2000:14).

Kumpania Algazarra, apart from being groundbreaking in its typology in Portugal, is still a strong pillar in the musical community mentioned above, through the organization of several initiatives with a view to promote the development of the music they perform. The Festival Brass de Ferro (Iron Brass Festival), first held in 2013, is perhaps the best example of this. According to the musicians, the festival's purpose is to promote the brass band culture and create a bond among the different bands. The *Brass de Ferro* features an annual band contest in which the majority of the groups I contemplate in this musical community has participated. It is the first huge event of Balkan music in Portugal, made up only of Portuguese bands. To my understanding, *Brass de Ferro* can be considered as the medium of a musical style that goes against mainstream cultural order, while also expressing the search for a collective identity.

The social order and formal identity of the groups themselves is temporarily suspended so that a communitarian feeling may arise. The soundscape for the festival night (which I witnessed) includes a series of stylistic musical characteristics that support the Balkan sonic imaginary while also evoking a specific musical identity. *Brass de Ferro* promotes a specific social identity, both conveyed and structured through the meaning that Balkan music carries for the members of this musical community.

3. CONCLUSIONS

I conclude that the Balkan music acts in this case study stand out as both an expression and symbol of a specific group. In addition, a number of factors announce the presence of a musical community, based on the sharing of featured symbols with a narrative organized by the community. To my understanding, musical collective has created an imaginary reconstruction of Balkan music, leading musicians both to the exploration of their individual identities and the assimilation of a collective identity. Music appears in this universe as a metaphor of a specific social identity, voiced by a musically imagined community that voices Balkan imaginaries in Lisbon.

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