Acculturation and Deculturation Processes in Music: Cultural Interaction

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Abstract

This article investigates the processes of acculturation, deculturation, and métissage (cultural hybridization) in music, particularly between Western and non-Western traditions. Drawing upon anthropological and sociological frameworks, we examine the implications of sustained cultural contact and the aesthetic consequences in musical expression. The study highlights the roles of linguistic erosion, identity reformation, and the complex dynamics between cultural preservation and innovation. Through the lens of musical métissage, this work argues for an inclusive approach that values cultural diversity while critically addressing the risks of cultural imbalance and deculturation. The analysis is grounded in current academic discourse and historical interactions, particularly across the Mediterranean and postcolonial contexts.

Humanity has experienced acculturation phenomena for centuries, particularly between the two shores of the Mediterranean (Europe; Andalusia, Turkey; the East, Egypt, Lebanon, and North Africa). This interaction has given rise to a unique artistic and musical product.

The Concept of Acculturation

This concept has been the subject of research in both sociology and anthropology. The term "acculturation" was coined by North American anthropologists and appears throughout European and Anglo-Saxon[1] literature under different names, depending on intellectual traditions:

- Cultural change (in English contexts) ;
- Transculturation (in Spanish contexts) ;
- Interpenetration of civilizations (in French contexts)[2].

The concept is also at the heart of scholarly debate. Below are some significant approaches that delve into the inherent meaning of acculturation:

- A set of phenomena resulting from direct and continuous contact between groups of individuals of different cultures, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of one or both groups[3];
- Anthropologist S. Abou identifies three modalities of acculturation: spontaneous acculturation (occasional cultural contact through trade), forced acculturation (geographical proximity), and imposed acculturation (as in colonization)[4];

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[1] Wachtel, N. (1974). "Acculturation." In Faire l'Histoire, Vol. 1, edited by J. Le Goff and P. Nora, p. 174. Paris: Gallimard.

[2] Encyclopaedia Universalis (1985), Paris, p. 104.

[3] Herskovits, Melville J. (1938). Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact. New York: J. J. Augustin.

[4] Abou, Selim. (1986). L'identité culturelle : relations interethniques et problèmes d'acculturation. Paris: Anthropos.

- In Asian traditions, acculturation is defined by Tran Van Khe as "adopting a culture[5] different from one's own."

This latter definition closely aligns with the focus of our research.

In this sense, acculturation refers to the ongoing transformation among the cultures of different peoples—encompassing all phenomena resulting from direct and sustained contact between groups of individuals from differing cultures, leading to shifts in the original cultural structures of one or both parties[6]. Central to these hybrid processes are:

- Integration[7] ;
- Cultural dissonance ;
- Resistance.

It is important to note that acculturation involves a process of reinterpretation, in which the individual adopts a practice rooted in another culture and incorporates it into their own value system. However, acculturation can also signify deculturation—that is, the disqualification or reorganization of certain cultural elements. The concept thus fragments into multiple sub-concepts—transculturation, endoculturation, deculturation, syncretism—rendering acculturation a dynamic process with distinct phases. It is therefore necessary to examine both the phenomena of cultural loss (deculturation) and of transformation (transculturation), which are inherent to the acculturative process.

Furthermore, contemporary research emphasizes the affective dimension of acculturation, including feelings of nostalgia for one's former culture. This sometimes leads to attempts to return to an identity perceived as more "authentic" at the end of the acculturative journey[8]. In short, the pathology of acculturation can be expressed through disorganizing effects on behavior—where contradictory cultural codes coexist—producing psychological consequences such as fear, diminished self-worth, and inner turmoil[9].

Culture and Civilization

To study the process of acculturation—this encounter of cultures shaped by waves of civilization and the transformations they bring—it is essential to distinguish between the concepts of culture and civilization.

Culture: The notion of culture is complex and ambiguous, which makes it difficult to define. Culture evolves as individuals come into contact with cultural systems different from their own. As culture influences consumption behavior, cultural change can alter patterns of consumption as well. According to Edward B. Tylor[10], culture is a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs, and other capacities acquired by humans as members of society. Culture can be recognized through

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[5] Tran Van Khe. (1973). "Acculturation in Asian Traditions." International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music, Vol. 5, Zagreb, p. 190.

[6] G. Vinsonneau (1997), Culture and Behavior, Paris, A. Colin, p. 177.

[7] One may also refer in this context to the term "imprégnation" ["imprinting" or "cultural saturation"], which refers to the ensemble of symbolic and cognitive elements that constitute the heritage of a tradition.

[8] N. Wachtel, op. cit., pp. 174–202

[9] H. E. Stork (1999), Introduction to Anthropological Psychology, Paris, A. Colin, p. 193.

[10] Edward Burnett Tylor (October 2, 1832 – January 2, 1917) was an English anthropologist, considered one of the founding figures of cultural anthropology.

language and practices such as dress, food, and lifestyle. It is acquired (not innate), transmitted across generations, and ever-evolving. Gutmann[11] adds that culture is not limited by time or space[12].

Civilization: A civilization is a legacy of beliefs, knowledge, and customs gradually accumulated over centuries—difficult to justify through pure logic but self-justified by the paths they open toward inner human development. Western civilization traditionally refers to a cultural domain shaped by Greek civilization (science and thought), Roman civilization (Latin alphabet, law), and Western Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism). After a period of decline in the Middle Ages, Western civilization reached its maturity with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, freeing itself from ecclesiastical influence, and reached its zenith with the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, European colonization, and 20th-century political revolutions establishing secularism and parliamentary democracy.

Consequently, the concept of culture has been widely debated. Sometimes it overlaps with, is opposed to, or is treated as synonymous with civilization. These concepts emerged almost simultaneously in the modern world—particularly during the transition from despotism to anthropocentrism in the mid-18th century, within social enclaves already marked by aspirations for freedom. Originally, culture was seen—alongside civilization—as a means of intellectual development, education, the pursuit of higher values, and the adoption of refined social practices within the civitas (city)[13].

Acculturation and Deculturation Reconsidered

Acculturation is a dynamic process characterized by a constant interplay between deculturation and cultural reorganization. Can we oppose the West, which has brought globalization, digitization, and modern communication tools? Certainly not. A return to the past is virtually impossible, even though several factors threaten our cultural identity. Among these is the dominance of Western languages over local ones, which has been repeatedly criticized. Its most immediate consequence is a disruption in spoken language—a particularly alarming issue given the oral tradition of Arab culture. Language is the cornerstone of cultural authenticity. Thus, the deterioration of local linguistic expression can undermine the originality of musical discourse and the internal rhythmic movement of poetry.

Humans draw essential knowledge from their natural environments—forests, villages, fields, rivers. Cultural knowledge is often acquired through activities such as fishing, hunting, or farming. Importantly, access to this ancestral heritage—transmitted orally—depends on mastery of the local mother tongue. Ultimately, a culture—defined as the set of elements characterizing the relationship of a human group with its environment and with each other—disappears when the language that conveys it vanishes.

In our view, we must approach Western cultural expansion with caution. If Europe, with its rich and unrivaled cultural legacy, feels the need to protect itself against excessive American cultural and media influence, then cultures with fewer resources and less dynamism must be granted policies of active support against the inevitable risk of cultural destruction. Despite the consensus among experts that communication channel expansion stems from cultural diversity—a source of human wealth—such diversity must be protected.

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[11] Allen Guttmann, born in Chicago on October 13, 1932, is a historian specializing in modern sports and cultural imperialism. His seminal work is From Ritual to Record.

[12] Ben Abdallah, Mounira. The Influence of Acculturation on Consumer Behavior According to the Subculture of Origin: A Case Study of Algerian Immigrants. Doctoral dissertation in Management Science, University of Grenoble, 2011, pp. 28–29.

[13] CONTOGEORGIS, Georges " –Culture and Civilization: Images and Representations of Concepts," in Estudos do Século XX, no. 08 (2008), pp. 15–26.

In the case of musical métissage (cultural hybridization), there is no need to resist deculturation. The hybrid discourse often values both ingredients—the modal discourse and the Western tonal language—within the same musical piece. Artistic and musical métissage reflects openness to the other and the transcendence of culturally "pure" boundaries. The notion of opposing or dominating cultures is out of place here. Rather, métissage posits cultural equality: all cultures are meaningful and valuable, as they represent distinct paths of human expression. It advocates for the recognition of difference and diversity. This is the true appeal of musical métissage in today's societies—it enhances our collective humanity by embracing pluralism.

However, in many hybrid musical works, we observe imbalances in the integration of both musical traditions. This is often due to poor stabilization in the compositional process, resulting in the erosion of the modal identity of one of the musical systems. Such imbalance is a hallmark of deculturation

Conclusion

The processes of acculturation and musical hybridization reveal profound tensions between transformation and preservation. In a globalized world, where cultural flows are asymmetrical, it is vital to promote practices that encourage cultural reciprocity rather than domination. Music—perhaps more than any other art form—embodies the complexities of identity, memory, and dialogue. Its potential for hybridization must be approached with aesthetic rigor and cultural sensitivity. The aim should not be to resist change but to manage it in ways that foster creative equity and pluralistic values.

As we navigate the 21st century, the stakes of musical hybridization are both aesthetic and political. They challenge us to rethink the role of music as a vehicle for ethical encounter and shared humanity.