

## ***Constructing Identities in a Women's Balkan Folklore Ensemble***

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In this paper the author examines the Balkan performing group Sveti Ivan from different identity perspectives, and shows how performances of music and dance can play important roles in how individuals perceive themselves and others. The experiences of the performers in Sveti Ivan are discussed, with particular reference to the significance of singing, dancing, and costuming as they relate to perceptions of Balkan identities, as well as "outside" identities.

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"The Canadian dream," "A musical melting pot." These were the words used to introduce Sveti Ivan, Newfoundland's first Balkan folksong and dance group in a piece by Katie Nicholson aired on CBC television's provincial news broadcast, "Here and Now." Indeed, the seventeen women brought together in St. John's by Balkan music were "from all walks of life," as Nicholson stated. The mix of cultural backgrounds included eleven Canadians, two Americans, and a Bulgarian, a Romanian, and an Argentinean. The program revealed how, after only eight weeks, a performance of Balkan music and dance brought a group of "random people" together, giving them something more than just music.

Folklore ensembles such as Sveti Ivan are growing in number and gaining more visibility through performance within the St. John's community. Local groups such as "Dzolali" (African drumming and dance) and "Encuentro Flamenco" (Spanish Flamenco music and dance) are often showcased at events such as the multicultural fairs held at The Rooms, the city's newest art gallery and museum. In addition to organising their own concerts, these ensembles are also often invited to perform at established local festivals such as the Sound Symposium, Festival of New Dance, and The Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Festival. What is the importance of these ensembles and what value do they have for both the participants and audiences?

The belief that folklore ensembles provide a highly enjoyable and enriching musical and dance experience for both participants and audiences is widespread. They are often hailed as positive vehicles for cross-cultural learning and understanding and, as the CBC program reiterated, they have the power to unite people of many different backgrounds. Nicholson ended her piece saying, "Several centuries, cultures and an ocean away from its roots, Balkan dance is still doing what it always has: bringing women together in harmony and friendship." However, music and dance are more than just a means to entertain, provide enjoyment and self-enrichment and bring people together in peace and friendship; they also play a role in revealing boundaries, and identifying distinctions between nations, regions, and individuals. As Martin Stokes states, music is socially meaningful because "it provides a means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them" (Stokes 5).

What impact did the rehearsal and performance of Balkan music and dance have on Sveti Ivan's members in terms of their own personal identities and their perceptions of a Balkan female identity? To explore this question I will draw on material from interviews I had with twelve of Sveti Ivan's members, highlighting their experiences and thoughts on preparing for and performing in the group's first major concert. This was given on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006 at Memorial University's Petro Canada Hall. As a member of the ensemble, I will also incorporate my perspective as a participant. Following a brief introduction to the concept of identity, and to the ensemble itself, I will examine how singing, dancing, and

costuming play a significant role in how Sveti Ivan members perceive their own identities and those of Balkan women.

### A “beast” of a concept

Identity, that “beast” of a concept (Bauman 471), is a pervasive but problematic concept in contemporary studies across many disciplines including ethnomusicology. While some question its overuse, others have described it as the most important key term in the vocabulary of cultural discussions (Abrahams 198). Perhaps it is such a pervasive concept because virtually anything can be interpreted in terms of identity. Berger and Del Negro state: “because all conduct emerges in a social context and all expressive culture draws on stocks of cultural knowledge, any expressive act may potentially be interpreted as a statement of identity” (142).

However, despite the recent “veritable discursive explosion” (Hall 1) around the concept, a theory of identity is difficult to come by. Similar to the notion of “culture,” discussions on identity often tread on slippery ground due to its complexity and wide range of meanings and uses. Is a person’s identity a “given” and “non-negligible legacy” arising from tribal, family, national, linguistic or religious obligations into which they are born? Or, is it a choice, a “life project” each individual has to confront and negotiate (Bauman 473)?

These questions reflect how difficult it can be when trying to locate oneself within the infinite number of social groupings in the world. To use myself as an example, whenever I have to fill out a document or questionnaire with personal information, I am still baffled when I reach the section on ethnic or cultural background. Born in Canada, I am the child of a second-generation Chinese-Canadian father and an American mother with Welsh, German and distant Native American roots. I always feel somewhat like an impostor when I check off “Chinese-Canadian,” “Asian mix” or the incredibly ambiguous category “visible minority”- mostly out of guilt for not even being able to utter a word in Chinese. I often question whether emphasizing my Chinese heritage is accurate and, in this world of “equal opportunities,” could I be accused of trying to capitalize on a cultural background from which in reality I feel very much disconnected? On the other hand, something feels wrong and incomplete when I identify myself only as Canadian especially when other options are available. These personal deliberations prove how complex it can be when trying to identify oneself.

Determining a person’s or group’s identity is also challenging because sometimes distinctions among geographical or linguistic associations and lifestyles are made by the identified groups themselves, and sometimes by those in power over others within their boundaries. A significant example within Canada is the criteria set out by the Federal government as to who may and may not claim status as an Indian under the Indian Act. This clearly has political implications surrounding Native identity and the rights of individuals. In contrast, identity constructions from within identified groups have powerfully contributed to a sense of community and belonging and have represented a central element of pride in various social movements such as women’s liberation and gay rights. As Berger and Del Negro state, “Reconfirming, nuancing, adumbrating, resisting, or overturning previous visions, the interpretation of identity is one of the prime battlegrounds upon which ideological struggles are played out” (142).

Musical activity is just one of the media through which identities can be promoted; it can often have powerful political and ideological implications. For instance, Donna Buchanan argues that Bulgarian “svatbarski orkestri” (wedding orchestras) were vehicles of democratization during the nation’s period of political transition from the mid-1980s through to the post-socialist era. Bulgarian wedding music, a style which merged elements of Greek, Macedonian, Serbian, Romanian, Turkish, Rom (Gypsy), and

American rock and jazz, became the most popular musical genre in the nation because it challenged attempts made by the socialist government to assert its monoethnic policies (Buchanan 2003). Because of the government's strong anti-wedding music campaign, the performance of this music became a form of resistance for the people involved and a way to preserve some self-respect in the face of humiliation and discrimination (225). Buchanan's article is just one example proving how musical activity can become a battleground in promoting certain identities and, therefore, a very important channel through which humans define themselves and others.

As demonstrated above, the notion of identity can be conceptualised and applied in many different ways. For the purposes of this paper, identity is conceived as a dynamic process involving social interactions across time and place (Diamond 15-16). As Berger and Del Negro state "One's sense of one's own identity is constructed in interaction with the other and at least partially defined in relation to one's image of that other" (131). I also argue that each of us is a mix of multiple identities (for example gender, region, socio-economic class) and that dependent on the situation, we choose to emphasize or play down certain aspects of not only our own identities but also those of others. By using the concept of identity as a theoretical framework for analysis, I hope to show how various identities are reinforced, challenged, and invented for the members of Sveti Ivan.

### **Women who sing with "gusto"**

I remember being captured by the poster I saw as I was leaving one of the coffee shops in downtown St. John's - a picture of three women in traditional looking dress and the caption: "Folklore Ensemble 'Sveti Ivan' (Balkan Women's Folk song and dance ensemble) Holding Auditions." Shortly afterwards, I received an email from a fellow member of a local African drumming and dance group encouraging everyone to audition for this exciting new folklore ensemble. My curiosity was piqued, and thus began my own journey with Sveti Ivan.

"Sveti Ivan" meaning "St. John," is the name of a Saint important to many nations of Central and Eastern Europe. It is also a fitting name for an ensemble based in a city sharing that name. The group was founded in January of 2006 by Kati Wiens, a Mennonite from Manitoba doing graduate studies in ethnomusicology at Memorial University. Kati's passion for Croatian music, prior experience leading ensembles, and a desire to provide musical opportunities for others, created the perfect mix for the makings of the province's first Balkan folksong and dance group. Even radio host Ted Blades, from CBC's "On the Go," was so intrigued by the audition notices posted around town that he invited Kati on his show. When asked what kind of women she was looking for, Kati recalls saying, "Well, Ted, we're looking for women who sing with gusto."<sup>1</sup>

Auditions were held on January 19<sup>th</sup> 2006. Just a week later the group had its first rehearsal, with the date for a final concert already confirmed two short months away. There we were: a group with a name, a leader, seventeen members and three gigs already lined up. All we had to do was learn eleven songs and dances from Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, Russia, Bulgaria and Greece.<sup>2</sup> The group met weekly for two-hour rehearsals every Thursday evening. From day one, we were provided with a practice CD

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<sup>1</sup> Author interview with Kati Wiens, April 16, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Sveti Ivan performed the following pieces: Lađarke (Croatia), Po Polju (Russia), Prochu se moma (Bulgaria), Majko mila (Croatia), Kroz planine barda I gore (Croatia), Ražanac Kolo (Croatia), I vreme mi dojde (Bulgaria), Oj Savice (Croatia), Zaspo janko (Croatia), Požega Kolo (Croatia), Slavonska Poskočica (Croatia), Zapevala (Macedonia), Mana mou ke Panagia (Greece).

of the repertoire that we would be learning along with musical transcriptions, lyrics, translations, and a pronunciation guide. The CD featured vocal ensembles from the United States and Canada including Village Harmony, Kitka, The Zvonimir Choir, and Klapa Montreal. The only recording on the CD featuring an ensemble known to be based in the Balkan region was “Majko mila,” performed by Klapa Dišpet, an all-female group based in Zagreb, Croatia. Each of us brought varying degrees of confidence and experience with music and dance and, for many, the ensemble constituted the principal, if not only, point of contact with Balkan culture. It was through a combination of listening religiously to our practice CDs, plunking out notes on the piano, and studying the lyrics, translations, and pronunciation guides, that we managed to pull it all together just in time to perform to a sold-out audience.

Similar to many of my fellow Sveti members, I have always been drawn to non-Western music for which the eclectic mix of genres in my personal music collection is evidence. However, much as I enjoy listening to and watching others create and move to those unfamiliar sounds, I now also study – and crave – the sensations involved in actually participating in the music-making and/or dancing of another culture. When the opportunities arose in St. John’s to join a Native, an African, and most recently a Balkan music and dance group, I jumped in enthusiastically, eager to broaden my musical horizons and cultivate what I later learned is sometimes called “bimusicality.”<sup>3</sup> These ensemble experiences were wonderful spaces for learning different forms of expression and sharing with others an enthusiasm for, and perspective on, Native, African and Balkan culture. However, my experience in the African and Balkan ensembles differed from the Native group in one very important respect: they both involved public performances.

Although I had always been aware of my non-Native status in relation to all of these groups, it was never more intensely felt than during public performances. I questioned my ability (or more accurately, inability) to present to audiences music and dance from regions of the world I had never visited and knew very little about. Was it appropriate for me to be singing, in performance, a song that I had literally just learned, had grasped only phonetically and in some cases had absolutely no understanding of what it meant? Since I knew I could never be African or Balkan, was I doing justice to their music and dance traditions? Even if I could successfully imitate a particular sound or movement, was this really getting at the heart of the tradition or was it merely a technically accurate rendition? Embedded within these types of personal deliberations are issues surrounding the emic-etic dichotomy, also known as the insider-outsider dichotomy.

### **The insider versus outsider debate**

The most commonly applied meaning of “emic” is “native” or insider’s point of view, with “etic” meaning “non-native” or outsider’s point of view (Headland, Pike and Harris: 21). Within any world music ensemble, the distinction between who is an insider or outsider is in the foreground, and how individuals conceive of this distinction plays a key role in the construction of identities. On the surface it might appear as though

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<sup>3</sup> An approach advocated by Mantle Hood in the 1960s in which students of ethnomusicology acquired some practical experience of the non-Western music they were studying in order to better comprehend it. See Sumarsam, “Opportunity and Interaction: The Gamelan from Java to Wesleyan,” in Ted Solis, ed., *Performing Ethnomusicology: Teaching and Representation in World Music Ensembles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 73.

defining who is an insider and who is an outsider would be a straightforward task: the former clearly belongs to a particular group and the latter does not. However, as with most classification systems, the insider-outsider dichotomy cannot be viewed as two distinct parts. It is just too simplistic to categorize individuals as either "insiders" or "outsiders" since there is such a strong continuum between the two poles.

If we apply the insider-outsider dichotomy to Sveti Ivan according to the ethnic group one is born into and then divide the members into two groups, Balkan and non-Balkan, there would only be two Balkan women: Iliana Dimitrova from Bulgaria and Alina Stetco from Northern Romania. However, even this seemingly straightforward division is problematic if we take into consideration the fact that Romania is not always included in the list of Balkan countries. Furthermore, some countries including Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, and Greece sometimes prefer not to even be called "Balkan countries."

Using birthplace as the only factor to determine who in Sveti Ivan is an insider in Balkan culture is also problematic in that it excludes cultural knowledge as another potentially important criterion. For instance, how does Kati's knowledge of Croatian culture, acquired through her travels and studies, influence her status as an insider to Balkan music and dance within the context of Sveti Ivan? This leads us to questions surrounding what defines a reliable culture bearer, or a person who has the authority to accurately present aspects of a particular culture. Inevitably the native teacher will bring different elements of the tradition to the ensemble compared to the non-native teacher, but is one superior to the other?

Ricardo Trimillos discusses the kinds of factors influencing ensemble leaders' credibility. He addresses the issue by discussing his own reservations about being a Japanese Koto ensemble instructor at the University of Hawaii due to his own lack of Japanese ancestry and inability to speak or read fluently in the language. He states that "these shortcomings" were overlooked because he was fluent in English, had status as an academic and had an Asian physical appearance, all criteria for credibility which were "external to the domain of Japanese music and represented incursions from a Western hegemon" (37). According to Trimillos, the ethnomusicologist's credibility is a constructed form different from that of the native teacher. He states, "Authority for the music devolves less from the lineage of the teacher and the student and more from the academic degree and its research exercise, the dissertation, supplemented by performance competence" (41).

These factors which Trimillos discusses also seem to contribute significantly to how members of Sveti Ivan regard their leader. Kati's ability to teach us Balkan songs and dances was largely based on the fact that she had been to Croatia, had been involved in other Croatian music ensembles and, most importantly, was a Master's student in ethnomusicology focusing on Croatian music. Therefore, Kati's status as an insider to Balkan music traditions had very little to do with her identity as a Mennonite from Manitoba and much more to do with the fact that she was doing ethnomusicology research. However, is passion for another's culture combined with extensive research of that culture enough to constitute a credible cultural bearer? Or is it necessary to have lived and breathed a certain culture from birth in order to be considered a true insider? According to Bruno Nettl, even if we are able to appreciate the differences a Native and non-Native bring to their students, "the question of the outsider's intellectually meaningful and valid contribution has been muddied by political issues, by the guilt the industrialised nations have to bear for colonising the other, and whites for enslaving other populations" (263).

The difficulty in trying to categorize individuals as either insiders or outsiders emerges from the fact that these categories often appear to be tightly defined and distinct from one another rather than on a spectrum or continuum. It is easy to fall into the trap of

talking and thinking about nationality and identity as if it were a contained and unchanging object. However, the notion of bounded and unchanging individual and group identities needs to be problematized, just as anthropologist Eric Wolf has challenged the assumption that nations are separate and bounded entities (6). In his seminal work *Europe and the People Without History*, Wolf argues that in a world full of connections, we have a persistent habit of disconnecting those things by “treating named entities such as Iroquois, Greece, Persia, or the United States as fixed entities opposed to one another by stable internal architecture and external boundaries” (7). He states that this habit disables us from seeing things as dynamic and interconnected:

By turning names into things we create false models of reality. By endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls. Thus it becomes easy to sort the world into differently colored balls, to declare that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” (6-7)

Another drawback to categorizing people into distinct groups is that it does not account for the negotiations and changes that occur in an individual's identity. The following excerpt from a conversation with Iliana Dimitrova illustrates how an individual's sense of her or his own commitment to national identity can change:

When we left Bulgaria eight years ago and we moved here, I left with such bad impressions, such bad memories and I said “I'm not going to go back to this country ever again”... and I kind of turned my back to everything from there...Not my parents, not my friends and relatives but just the system, the whole government and all that and for a while, I just didn't want to deal with that stuff.<sup>4</sup>

This quote exemplifies the great influence socio-political circumstances can have on identity formation; in Iliana's case, living in a Socialist state had a negative impact on her feelings toward Bulgaria. So what changed in Iliana to make her want to be a part of a group that was closely connected to a country and region which, only eight years earlier, she had wanted to have nothing to do with? She states:

Maybe it took me a while and now I'm turning back...seeing the things that I left, kind of rediscover. It is very pleasing to see everybody else appreciating that music. All of you, I mean sixteen girls ... who have nothing in common with this music, to appreciate it. It is amazing...especially to sing something in a foreign language. ... I've been feeling kind of foreign and different for so long here, for eight years. But at the same time if I go back to Bulgaria, I feel foreign there too because I think more Canadian now than Bulgarian.<sup>5</sup>

Iliana's words show how a person's relationship with her/his cultural ancestry inevitably changes in a foreign context. The “me” Iliana feels in the context of a Balkan folklore ensemble in Newfoundland emphasizes the Bulgarian part of her identity while her newer Canadian identity becomes stronger if she goes back to Bulgaria. It is clear that, while her Bulgarian and Canadian identities are always present, context determines which one is in the foreground at any particular moment.

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<sup>4</sup> Author interview with Iliana Dimitrova, April 23, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Iliana also highlights the element of choice in constructions of identity and the way we rediscover or choose to emphasize certain aspects of our identity at different points in our lives, in different contexts and for different purposes. One of the ways Iliana's Bulgarian identity was rediscovered was through participating in Sveti Ivan and seeing others enjoying the music and dance of her homeland and region. Therefore, Iliana's reconstruction of her own Bulgarian identity was driven by a pre-existing identity. Born and Hesmondhalgh state that musical constructions of identity can also be experiences of the cultural imaginary: "an identification that only ever exists in collective or individual fantasy, and thus acts surreptitiously but powerfully to inscribe and reinscribe existing boundaries of self and other, as well as the hierarchies and stratifications between those categories" (35). I would argue that for the rest of Sveti Ivan's members, Balkan music and dance worked to create a "purely imaginary identification" of Balkan female identity since no real cultural transformations of self took place and our intention was never to actualize the Balkan identities we were presenting.

This type of imagined musical figuration of identity has also been described as "a kind of psychic tourism through music" (Born and Hesmondhalgh 35), a view shared by a number of Sveti Ivan's members including Sol Porta who said, "It's travelling without travelling, because you are more close to a culture if you are rehearsing their music. The following sections will examine how our imagined identifications of Balkan female identity were constructed and presented in performance and the meanings that were generated through musical sound, physical movement, and costuming.

### **Strong and hardworking women: Interpretations of Balkan female identity**

The two favourite songs from Sveti Ivan's repertoire selected by those I interviewed were a Croatian piece "Lađarke," and a Bulgarian piece "I vreme mi dojde," both of which were described as "powerful" and "gutsy" by Sveti Ivan's members. What was it about these two pieces that we found so captivating and impressive? It is unlikely that our initial affinity for these pieces was as a result of the text, given that most of us do not understand Croatian or Bulgarian. Although it is possible that singing in a foreign language may in fact contribute to one's ability to "pour their hearts into the songs without reservation" (Laušević 55), I would argue that, for many of us, the power came from the quality of the voice production. Our recordings of these pieces featured singers using a hearty, full-throated and straight-toned singing style which, at times, had an almost shouting quality to it. The singers also employed a sort of glottal vocal technique throughout, further contributing to the guttural sound production both unusual and fascinating to us.

Other factors may have also contributed to our shared emotional response to, and physical enjoyment of, singing these two particular pieces. These factors are highlighted in Mirjana Laušević's recent book, *Balkan Fascination: Creating an Alternative Music Culture in America*. In exploring the reasons why "Balkanites"<sup>6</sup> are drawn to the repertoire, Laušević emphasises the "anthemic qualities" of these songs. She states: "The melodies are very singable, sitting comfortably in the average person's register, allowing for easy harmonisation and responding well to being sung full voice in a noisy room" (55).

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<sup>6</sup> Mirjana Laušević uses the term "Balkanites" to refer to American Balkan music enthusiasts. For an in depth discussion of who are the Balkanites, see Mirjana Laušević *Balkan Fascination: Creating an Alternative Music Culture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Judith Cohen's review of *Balkan Fascination: Creating an Alternative Music Culture in America* in this volume of the Journal (Editor's Note).

From an early age I was trained in the Western classical singing style, also referred to as “bel canto” style (beautiful singing), in which the ideal sound model for a soprano was an effortless, clear sound quality produced by singing predominantly in the head voice. Therefore, trying to imitate the throaty, deep and guttural sounds I heard on the practice CD, I had to use vocal techniques that were in many respects opposite to what I had been taught. However, rather than feeling frustrated in trying to create this new sound, I felt empowered and liberated through using my voice in a new way. The qualities of strength and power that I associated with the recorded sounds and my personal sensations contributed to my constructions of a powerful and confident female Balkan identity. This raises interesting questions about how the human voice is culturally constructed.

In their introduction to *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, Dunn and Jones discuss how cultural constructions of gender play a central role in the differences between male and female voices. They state that the differences are not due to vocal qualities that are intrinsically masculine or feminine but rather because the human voice, in all of its manifestations including speaking, singing, crying and laughing, is shaped by an individual’s cultural formation and not wholly determined by linguistic content. For example in Western culture, social meanings, and particularly specific kinds of power or authority, have been attached to the belief that women’s voices are “high and shrill or breathy while men’s are low and quiet or harsh” (3). Dunn and Jones argue that these myths of vocal gender have served to reinforce patriarchal constructions of the feminine in Western culture, illustrating how the audible female voice has been a site of women’s silencing (1).

On the other hand, the female voice has also been viewed as an instrument of empowerment and a way to “escape containment by the dominant ideology” (Dunn and Jones 10). In her article “Body and Voice: The Construction of Gender in Flamenco,” Joaquina Labajo illustrates how contemporary female flamenco singers of Spanish “cante” (deep song) have come to symbolize women’s authority and empowerment in Spanish society by breaking away from their silent condition on the margins of a male-dominated genre. The archetype of good “cante” singing favoured a thick, raspy, low voice, qualities believed to express virility and, therefore, from the perspective of those defending masculinity, only completely attainable by men. These vocal qualities were also important because they demonstrated that a singer led a “masculine” lifestyle involving for example, smoking and drinking at men’s bars. Labajo states, “Thus while the artist’s social life is irrelevant to his audience during his performance, the type of voice he possesses can certainly codify a whole set of imaginary associations with a particular type of behaviour and habits” (71). In contrast, women’s raucous and low-pitched voices in flamenco have resulted in a different set of moral meanings often laden with negative connotations. Historically, female flamenco singers, as with other female performers, have been associated with courtesans. However, Labajo argues that in today’s changing society women in flamenco no longer fear what their voices might mean. She states, “Nowadays the low voice in flamenco has no negative connotations, and in fact has come to symbolise women’s right of expression beyond conventional gender roles” (71).

Styles of singing can communicate the extent to which individuals have refused or accepted cultural norms. Thinking of the throat as an orifice through which culture might penetrate and occupy the body and thus shape its potential for expressivity (Cusick 39) reveals the complex relationship between the vocaliser and the vocaliser’s culture. My feelings of empowerment and liberation while singing with a straight toned and more forced timbre in Sveti Ivan illuminates the influence Western classical ideals of vocal production have had on my own singing and how this has shaped the social meanings I have attached to different musical sounds.



Physical movement, although often overshadowed by linguistic and musical analysis, is another aspect of performance invested with social meanings and therefore an important form of knowledge (Kapchan 127). To illustrate this I will look at how a specific hands-on-hip posture choreographed into our performance led to different constructions of female Balkan identity. When we walked on stage single file with our hands on our hips, and with only the sound of our footsteps as accompaniment, we projected an image of solidarity, strength and confidence, reflecting the feelings of strength and power many of us were experiencing internally. For Sol Porta, this posture initially felt strange and inappropriate, but became very meaningful for her in terms of Balkan female identity. Remembering when Kati first instructed us to put our hands on our hips, Sol said "...it felt really weird for me and I was one of the first to say "no...we are like angry or something"...but then I realized it was something about attitude."<sup>7</sup> For Alina Stetco, this attitude could be summed up by the word "zdrahoaie," which is a word used in her region of Romania to describe a "very solid woman...very stable woman which will tell you what to do."<sup>8</sup> This image of a "zdrahoaie" woman is something she associates with Balkan female identity and is an aspect of the singing and dancing that she has always been drawn to.

In contrast, this same posture had a completely different meaning for Iliana Dimitrova. Rather than having any aggressive or powerful implications, Iliana associated this posture with a resting state that people would assume after working on their land for long hours in a bent over position. "It's just people will work, work, work the land which is very hard work. You are always bent over and you kind of...stretch, you'll put your hands like that and have a rest and that's it...It has a completely different meaning. It's not aggressive...it's resting."<sup>9</sup> These different interpretations of a single hands-on-hip posture illustrate how physical movement is an important form of knowledge shaped by culture.

### **"Balkan-style" costuming**

The decisions we make each day about what to wear demonstrate our appreciation of the communicative power of clothing and dress. Long before we converse with one another through speech we have already announced our sex, age, and class through the language of dress. We also send out signals about our occupation, origin, personality, opinions, tastes, sexual desires, and current mood (Lurie 3). Therefore, as Goodrum states, the "body, together with the clothes that we dress it in, become meaningful products and representations" (97). It is for these reasons that clothing and dress have been likened to language and viewed as a non-verbal system of communication (Calefato 5). If cultural performances are intended as displays of identity and interpreted as such by an audience (Berger and Del Negro 149), then it is important to ask what role costumes<sup>10</sup> play in this process of communication.

Sveti Ivan's costuming for the final concert involved two outfits. The Ražanac costume worn in the first half of the concert was very simple, consisting of a white

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<sup>7</sup> Author interview with Sol Porta, May 19, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Author interview with Alina Stetco, May 19, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Author interview with Iliana Dimitrova, April 23, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term "costume" to refer to clothing that is worn for performances while the term "dress" refers to the clothing worn everyday.

headscarf, a black or blue long-sleeved blouse, a black skirt, and black tights and shoes. This costume was meant to represent what women would wear while working on their farms from Monday to Saturday. In contrast to this, our Slavonia costume for the second half of the concert was colourful and more varied; representing what would be worn on Sundays, the day when people would go to the village for church and to socialize. For this costume, we stayed in our black skirts, tights and shoes but replaced our dark tops with a white or beige coloured long-sleeved blouse. Each of us also had a floral or solid coloured shawl draped around our shoulders, which we then crossed over the front of our bodies. The most interesting aspect of our Slavonia costumes was the variations in our headdress and jewellery since these items traditionally indicate a woman's eligibility or status as a wife as well as whether or not she is pregnant. Figure 1 is transcription of part of the costume demonstration given by Kati at the beginning of the second half of the concert highlighting the significance of these variations, and Figure 2 is a black and white version of the original colour group photograph (second half of the concert).

**Figure 1: Costume demonstration: Petro Canada Hall, Memorial University, St. John's, Saturday March 25, 2006.**

<i>Action</i>	<i>Narration</i>
<p><i>Kati walks backstage closer to the line of women.</i></p> <p><i>Julia shakes her head from side to side comically and mouths "I'm not". Audience laughs.</i></p>	<p>How a young man would know that a young woman was of eligible marrying age, well here we have Julia and Kellie who don't have scarves on their heads and, because they have no scarves on their heads, they are not of eligible age yet.</p>
<p><i>Evelyn tucks the scarf behind her ears.</i></p>	<p>Lovely Evelyn here does have a scarf and it is tucked behind her ears and so that means that she of marriageable age but not yet married.</p>
<p><i>Audience laughs, cheers and applauds.</i></p>	<p>Our beautiful Sol here has just recently tied the scarf in front of her ears which means that she has just been married and that she is expecting her first child and in fact Sol is expecting her first child in August.</p>
<p><i>Big laugh from audience and performers.</i></p> <p><i>Everyone laughs.</i></p>	<p>And then we have the married woman of the village, Iliana, who has her scarf over her ears. One other important thing are the necklaces that we're wearing which are ducats. Typically the unmarried or just-married women would wear these and, well in many cases they are for decoration. It is also an indication of your family's economic stability. So in other words the size of a girl's dowry is indicated by how many ducats she is wearing on her outfit.</p> <p>So as you can see and as you will see as all the other girls come on, we have a few girls who are eligible, so if there are any young men in the audience who wish to make an alliance, unfortunately it would be improper to talk directly to the girl but you can go get your grandma to go talk to her grandma and they'll make a deal. Thank you very much and we'll be just one minute.</p>

### “Trying on” new identities through costume

Clothing and dress have been described as one of the most basic methods through which humans place themselves and others in the social world. If the body is socialized into a cultural being through clothes, then the clothed body “may be viewed as a cultural product central not only to a sense of self, but also crucial in the creation of conformity, a feeling of shared belonging, and in fostering a national identity” (Goodrum 85). For many of the members in Sveti Ivan, our costumes helped to strengthen a sense of group identity. Without the costumes, a number of members felt they would have been more visible individually along with any of their personal mistakes. For those of us with a fear of being the sole focus of attention in performance, the costumes helped to ease these worries. As Patti Haynes commented, “It does make you feel part of a group and that is what you want because you are, I think, perhaps less self-conscious than if you were in your regular clothes because, you know, you’re disguised more or less.”<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 2: Slavonia Costume. Sveti Ivan’s final concert, March 25, 2006.** (*Back row left to right: Iliana Dimitrova, Sol Porta, Julia Dines, Isabella St. John, Heather Read, Alina Stetco, Evelyn Osborne, Fiona Rutherford, Kati Wiens. Front row left to right: Patti Haynes, Hannah Mills-Woolsey, Samantha Fletcher, Dana English, Nora Trask, Carolyn Chong, Kelly Best.*) Photo taken by Joanna Chong.



<sup>11</sup> Author interview with Patti Haynes, April 15, 2006.

It has already been noted that clothing is like a language in that it conveys information. However, like speech, sartorial communication can also be used to deceive, and costumes used in performances are considered a special case of sartorial deception, “one in which the audience willingly co-operates, recognising that the clothes the actor wears, like the words he speaks, are not his own” (Lorie 25). The role of any performer is figuring out how to correctly “play the part” and clothing is used in subtle and not so subtle ways to enhance the performance of any role. Regarding the two costumes worn in Sveti Ivan’s final concert Julia Dines stated, “While wearing the costume, I felt almost like I was Balkan. It’s like acting...when you dress the part, it helps you become the part/person.”<sup>12</sup>

In comparing the costumed final performance of Sveti Ivan with the previous performances in which we wore street clothes, Alison Carter stated: “I guess when we did the coffee house it was like we were more our individual selves doing that performance, but when we were doing it in the hall...we were a group of people that were not necessarily the individuals that we really are in daily life; We became transformed.”<sup>13</sup> This feeling of transformation was also experienced by Iliana Dimitrova who said that the costumes made her feel like, “It’s not Iliana now...it’s not you and you’re free to do something different.”<sup>14</sup> This freedom to play with our real-life identities for a couple of hours was a great source of fun. For instance, in the second part of the performance Julia Dines’ head was not covered with a scarf which, according to Kati’s demonstration, indicated that she was a woman not yet of eligible marrying age. However, in real life, Julia is married with a thirteen-year-old son. The manipulations or playing with real life identities is common to many types of staged performances and is one of the most visual aspects distinguishing the performance as separate from everyday life and therefore out of the ordinary.

Our costumes forged a sense of group identity, helped us “feel Balkan,” and transformed us from our everyday selves. Nevertheless, our Balkan-style costumes, made up of a combination of personal items, vintage store finds and Patti’s converted table cloths, were far from what one might call “authentic.” However, recreating an “authentic” Croatian look was definitely not one of Kati’s goals; in her opinion, trying to do so would have been “totally pretentious and impossible”.<sup>15</sup> And yet, we should ask: if our goal was not to recreate an “authentic” Balkan look then what was the purpose behind our Balkan-style costumes? What were we trying to say about Balkan identity by wearing ducats or tying our scarves in different ways? Many members felt that the costumes contributed to the audience’s overall appreciation of the performance. A number of friends and family members told participants that the costumes were “one of the most interesting parts of the concert” because they helped them better understand what was going on. Julia Dines stated, “I think it definitely made a difference for the audience. It wouldn’t have had as much impact without the costumes.”<sup>16</sup>

Others are more ambivalent about using costumes in folklore ensembles, including David Locke an instructor of African music and dance at Tufts University. Although his African teachers argue that wearing the costumes shows the audience the

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<sup>12</sup> Email correspondence with Julia Dines, July 21, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with Alison Carter, April 17, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with Iliana Dimitrova, April 23, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Email correspondence with Kati Wiens, April 20, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Email Correspondence with Julia Dines, July 21, 2006.

“correct thing” and that “the dance’s gestures are designed to show off the costume’s movement” (178), for Locke, costumes trigger a negative response. He feels that costumes direct the audience’s attention away from the power of the music. Furthermore he feels the “unfamiliar garb” alienates his students and him from their normal selves, making them feel uncomfortable in their collegiate roles. He states, “If any of us imagine that we have achieved significant authenticity, the costume provides a reality check” (178). Clearly, Locke views costuming as an attempt to present oneself as an “authentic” other, which he rightfully claims is something they can never achieve. However, what is the difference between donning one’s self in the dress of the other and donning one’s self in the musical skin of the other?<sup>17</sup>

Some also argue that the use of so-called “traditional” costuming contributes to the myth that certain cultures, particularly non-Western cultures, represent “pure” traditions, “untouched” by modernity and therefore unchanged from their original form. Saliklis states that for early twentieth-century writers and artists, “romantic notions of the goodness and stability of village life in a rapidly changing world” were evoked by the images of young women in Lithuanian costume. Costumes thus encompassed the “myth of an idyllic peasant past” (211). I would argue that mass media is also a powerful medium through which this romanticized notion continues to be projected and the CBC program on Sveti Ivan provides an example of this.

In describing Sveti Ivan’s repertoire, Nicholson claims, “These songs and dances are a centuries-old tradition for Balkan women, a weekly rite that brought them together from far flung farms.” However, “Lađarke,” the first piece on the program, was composed by Emil Cossetto in 1950 for “LADO,” Croatia’s national folklore ensemble, and its first performance was given in 1951 in Zagreb (Forry). The discrepancies between this information about “Lađarke” and Nicholson’s statement that Sveti Ivan’s repertoire was “several centuries” old, raises interesting questions about how certain cultures are presented as being “traditional” as opposed to “modern.” Specifically, what is the significance of describing a cultural performance as being a “centuries-old tradition” rather than one that is newly composed? By presenting Sveti Ivan’s repertoire as being traditional I would argue that Nicholson appeals to the imagined ideals of a quaint, timeless, and well-preserved peasant past, one that is in complete contrast with the ever-changing modern world in which the viewers of CBC’s “Here and Now” live (Laušević 62).

## Conclusion

By viewing Sveti Ivan through the analytical lens of identity, my aim has been to show how cultural performances of music and dance play an important role in how individuals perceive themselves and others in profound and meaningful ways. The notion that identities are fixed and predetermined is problematic, as an individual’s perception of her- or himself and others is never stable and is always potentially being reinforced, challenged, and/or reinvented. Furthermore, the experiences and thoughts of Sveti Ivan’s members reveal that the realities of the social world do not fit into clear-cut black and white dichotomies such as emic/etic or insider/outsider.

I also focussed on ways in which musical sound and physical movement contribute to constructions of identity and, in the context of Sveti Ivan, a Balkan female identity in which power, strength, and confidence are defining characteristics. Costuming was also seen as an important factor in the presentation of a Balkan female identity and

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<sup>17</sup> This is also sometimes referred to as “musical transvestism” or “ethno-drag”. See Gage Averill, “Where’s ‘One’?”: Musical Encounters of the Ensemble Kind,” in Ted Solis, ed., *Performing Ethnomusicology: Teaching and Representation in World Music Ensembles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 100.

specifically, that of a hardworking peasant woman whose sexual and reproductive roles in relation to men were central. Costumes foster a sense of group identity in performance while also giving members the opportunity to experience a personal transformation and the chance to manipulate and play with their own everyday identities. The implications of presenting a culture as traditional versus modern is exemplified in the television program on Sveti Ivan, and I proposed that projecting certain aspects of a culture as being traditional appealed to notions of an idyllic and untouched peasant past.

However, what is the value in thinking about how our voices and movements may be culturally constructed? Why bother considering the visual impact costuming has on our performances of other cultures? Does thinking about music and dance in terms of identity take away from the joy of these ensembles? Our ability to question what forces influence the different elements of our cultural performances (including vocal production, physical movement and costuming) gives us the power to consciously choose whether we want to perform in ways that reinforce certain cultural conventions and institutions or, alternatively, challenge and reinvent them. This allows us to take responsibility for our performances and appreciate the potential impact our performances can have within a larger social context. More generally, it also reveals how our own multiple identities have been enculturated. It is only once we acknowledge the myriad ways in which our multiple identities have been shaped by our cultural surroundings (for example, notions of ethnicity, gender and sexuality) that we are able to consciously accept, reject, or play with these cultural norms.

One of the consequences of grappling with the way culture has shaped our multiple identities, and how this influences our relationship to music and dance, is that we can no longer view music and dance as being purely vehicles for pleasure, entertainment, self-enrichment and cross-cultural understanding. Music and dance thus become politicized, and part of a controversial and complex social world in which expressive culture, issues of power, segregation, oppression, violence, and domination can be spoken about in the same breath. So what do we gain? I would argue that by recognizing music and dance as media through which identities are interpreted and performed, we can take pleasure in creatively remaking our world through sound and movement in ways that can both reinforce and challenge existing cultural norms.

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