Voices of the Weak: Music and Minorities

Edited by Zuzana Jurková and Lee Bidgood

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National Heritage and the Norwegian Romanies

Mary Barthelym, Atle Lien Jenssen and Gjernmund Kollivit

ABSTRACT

There are calculated to be several thousand persons living in Norway today who identify themselves as Romani people (Taters/Travelers), the descendents of families whose ancestors brought them to the Nordic countries around 500 years ago. The music of these people is rarely found in collections and archives of traditional Norwegian music. They have not been accepted as a natural part of the nation's cultural heritage. Only during the last decade or so has there been some change in this situation. Romani and other national minorities are now recognized as a part of the national cultural heritage of Norway, at least officially. Recent various funding programs aimed at preserving and supporting minority cultures and multi-cultural activities have been established.

Our present project, concerned with documentation of musical expressions of the Romani people in Norway, was initiated as a part of this. However, as researchers paid by the state and in the interest of the nation (“Norwegian Collection of Folk Music”), we find that we are not in a position to present the Romani people, have never taken their culture seriously but rather systematically destroyed it. Several important issues arise from our position at the interface of the state and the minority. First, can we, as researchers, continue the Romani and other minority cultures that we share interests and basic ideas about preserving and cherishing their music and culture? Secondly, are they willing to see their music as a natural part of the cultural heritage of Norway?

If we look at history, it is only a qualified truth that the Romani people have not been a part of the Norwegian national culture. They have lived in Norway since the 16th century and spread music and other cultural impulses that are now adopted as Norwegian. Still, they have always insisted on their distinctness, as being apart from the established Norwegian culture, representing something foreign, sometimes also exotic. The Romani are “familiar strangers”. We should accept their right to identify with the Norwegian cultural heritage, at the same time as they deny identification with it.

INTRODUCTION

The Romani people have been in Norway for centuries and are in many ways well integrated into Norwegian culture. But still, do they fit into the Norwegian cultural heritage? In this paper we discuss the concept of cultural heritage in relation to the Romani in Norway. What does cultural heritage mean, and how has this concept changed?

While the Norwegian authorities in the past have discriminated and disrespected the culture of the Romani the situation today is different. The state now initiates projects aiming at preserving the culture and heritage of the national minorities. In this research project we participate in concerning the Norwegian Romani and their music is part of this new climate.
National Heritage and the Norwegian Romanies

The Norwegian Ministry of Labor and Social Inclusion currently defines several groups with long-standing attachment to the country as “national minorities.” Among these are the Roma, called Rom (sigøynere), and another group called Romanifolket (taters/travelers). The Norwegian Roma and the Norwegian Romanies may well be distant relatives, but it is clear that they see each other as different families/clans, with different traditions and language. The Norwegian Roma are “new” arrivals in the North. Their family names indicate Eastern European heritage. Most speak Norwegian with a “foreign” accent. Their language is called Romanés, and their music has little in common with Norwegian folk music. The Norwegian Romani people (Taters/Travelers), on the other hand, have traditions – for instance: names, language and music – that reflect a long-time association with Scandinavia. While they seem to “march to a different drummer” than most Norwegians, it is clear that they have been participating in life here for many generations.

NORWEGIAN ROMANIES – A BIT OF BACKGROUND

Norway has a population today of around 4.8 million. Of these, an estimated “several thousand” to “10,000–15,000” are Romani people (Taters/Travelers). Documents from the early 1500s contain references to dark-skinned foreigners traveling in family groups, dealing with horses and telling fortunes. The suspicion that these people continued a relationship with Scandinavia gains support from historical records that show kin-groups traveling in Scandinavia during the last three centuries (Lillehammer 2005). Villagers and farmers considered them “strangers,” but they often became “familiar strangers” who appeared seasonally with welcome services and commodities.

Today’s Norwegian Romani families have addresses. Their economies often involve buying and selling, and various crafts and trades. Their lifestyles may range from seasonal traveling to a completely sedentary life.

From the 19th century, the government developed strategies intended to solve problems of poverty, hygiene and disorder. In retrospect, we see that many strategies were destructive to minority peoples and cultures. Painful after-effects are currently being faced up to. In defining Norwegian Romanies as a national minority, the government found that research was needed into their history, culture, and language. Music is important in Romani culture, and it was natural for the Norwegian National Folk Music Collection to assume some responsibility. Our project is now underway (see also Kolltveit 2008). However, we find ourselves in an uncomfortable position as researchers paid by the state and in the interest of the nation. We represent the very powers that, in the memory of the Romani people, have never taken their culture seriously but rather systematically destroyed it.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NORWEGIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

Norwegian national consciousness was growing during the 19th century. This process led to the end of the Swedish-Norwegian Union in 1905, when Norway became an independent country.

As in other European countries, collectors went to rural areas to look for traditional, characteristic culture. They went to the most remote valleys and fjords, where they
assumed that the most genuine Norwegian culture was to be found (Hodne 2002). They found arcaic music played on instruments such as the Hardanger fiddle. They also found vocal traditions in many variations. All this music was found to have various styles and ways of performing in the different parts of the country.

According to the national romantic ideology of that time, such rural culture was considered an important part of the unique Norwegian national heritage. Rural culture was regarded as native and original, as if it had sprouted up from the stony ground in the valleys and along fjords here in the north.

**STATEMENT A: THE CULTURE OF NORWEGIAN ROMANIES SHOULD BE REGARDED AS A PART OF NORWEGIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Should the culture of Norwegian Romanies be regarded as a part of the Norwegian cultural heritage? In the following discussion, we will first present arguments in favor. Subsequently, we will argue against, and then summarize. Arguments supporting the view that the Romanies’ culture is part of Norwegian cultural heritage include the following points:

**THE MEANING OF “NORWEGIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE” HAS CHANGED**

In 1850 the Hardanger fiddle was a national symbol and its music was almost the only musical expression that was considered “national.” During the last 150 years, the terminology has changed. “National music” has gradually been replaced by other terms such as “folk music” and “traditional music.”

Over the years, different musical instruments and cultural expressions have been included, for example, vocal traditions, the regular fiddle/violin, the accordion and typical accordion music as waltz, polka, reinlender (Scottish). The acceptance of minority cultures in Norway, such as those of the Sámi, the Forest Finns and the Roma and Romaní, is a new step in this chain of changes in the content of the term “Norwegian cultural heritage.”

Some of the minority cultures in Norway are especially distinctive, for example, the Sámi and the Roma. Others, such as the Forest Finns and the Norwegian Romanies, manifest characteristic content and traits, but reflect close connections with regional rural Norwegian culture.

Considering this historical background and our understanding of the term today, it is natural to consider the culture of the Norwegian Romanies as part of “Norwegian Cultural Heritage.”

**NORWAY HAS BEEN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY FOR A LONG TIME**

Today we see that Norway has been a multicultural society for several hundred years (Brochmann and Kjeldstadli 2008). The Sámi, now a minority, were probably here first. During the 16th to 18th centuries, Finns from southeastern Finland migrated to central, southern Norway, and specialists from central Europe migrated to Norway to work in growing mining industries. People living on the long coastline have always had numerous connections with the rest of the world.
A national romantic ideology regarding Norway as a nation with only one ethnic culture set the standard for a long period of time. In this period of “national identity construction,” little attention was devoted to minorities. It is mainly during the last three decades that minorities and their cultures have been recognized and appreciated and given official status as so-called “national minorities.” However, they have been in the country for centuries and their culture is often closely related to Norwegian rural culture. The Norwegian Romani have been a genuine part of this multicultural variety for a long time.

Romani and Norwegian village musicians at a wedding in Brekken, Sør-Trøndelag. Unknown photographer. Courtesy of Brekken historielag.

THE ROMANI PEOPLE HAVE BEEN IN NORWAY FOR FIVE HUNDRED YEARS

The first records of Romaniies in Norway and Scandinavia are attested to in documents from the early 16th century (Minken, forthcoming). With such a long time in the country the Romaniies might be regarded as the kind of minorities that Gold (Gold 1984 in Slobin 1993:50) labels “nationals,” meaning “long-term residents of non-majority origin.” In spite of the fact that Romaniies have practiced endogamy, it is clear that genetic mixing with the sedentary population has occurred – a natural result of interaction over the centuries. Moreover, the Romani families have found social and economical niches and adapted to northern conditions. Their way of living has brought them in close contact with the majority population in various ways.
THE CULTURE OF THE ROMANIES IS INTEGRATED WITH NORWEGIAN CULTURE

The Norwegian Romanies manifest characteristic content and traits, but reflect close connections with regional rural Norwegian culture. Romani and Norwegian musicians use mainly the same songs and the same music. Some outstanding performers have been included and accepted as icons and heroes in the Norwegian traditional musical heritage.

The Norwegian Romanies’ traditional music as it appears today can be recognized with the same type of characteristics and differences in style that can be heard in other regional musical traditions in Norway. The most significant difference is probably that the Romani music has very few connections to geographical places because the Romanies are so to speak “placeless.”

STATEMENT B: THE CULTURE OF NORWEGIAN ROMANIES SHOULD NOT BE REGARDED AS A PART OF NORWEGIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

THE ROMANI PEOPLE INSIST ON THEIR DIFFERENCE

From another point of view, the Romanies should not be regarded as a part of Norwegian cultural heritage. They are immigrants and, despite their long history in Norway and contributions to Norwegian culture, they insist on their difference. They are proud of their Indian roots and feel that they have not much in common with Norwegian cultural heritage, which is too concerned with ethnic homogeneity and its roots from Viking times and the High Middle Ages.

Despite persistent attempts from the state to assimilate them, they still keep their distinctive culture. Today they are probably stronger as a group than ever. Most of the ethnic Norwegians too, consider the Romanies as different and exotic, not belonging to Norwegian cultural heritage.

In terms of musical style, the Romani people keep their differences that separate them from Norwegian music traditions. This is especially about the style of singing, which has much in common with Romanies in other places, especially Sweden and Finland, but also places in continental Europe.

THE ROMANI PEOPLE ARE “PLACELESS”

A central part of the Norwegian cultural heritage is the distinctiveness of the various districts, valleys and villages. To exemplify, a folk musician is expected to represent a local style in order to be taken seriously. In this “ideology” about place the peripatetic lifestyle of the Romanies is not appropriate. They traveled from village to village and consequently did not develop musical styles specifically connected to places.

DESPITE THEIR GOOD INTENTIONS, THE AUTHORITIES FAIL TO INCLUDE THE ROMANI PEOPLE IN THE NORWEGIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

After ratifying the Council of Europe’s “Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities,” Norway has particular responsibility for supporting actions aimed at caring for, strengthening and developing the culture of the Romanies.
National Heritage and the Norwegian Romanies

Through museums, archives, libraries and other institutions several projects have already begun. But do these initiatives contribute to inclusion of the Romanies' culture into Norwegian culture? Several museums and institutions have been selected to take responsibility for the minorities. A possible effect of this is that the minority cultures will appear as islands in Norwegian culture, rather than a natural part of the Norwegian national whole, at national and regional folk museums.

Family on the move, 1930s. Photo by Tollefsen. Courtesy of the Glomdal Museum.

NATIONALIDEOLOGY IS BASED ON HOMOGENEITY

The concept of nations is built on an ideology about a common culture and a homogenous cultural heritage. In Norway, the national pioneers employed a rather narrow understanding about the heritage on which the nation should be built. Peasants, especially those of the mountains, were considered the ideal for the entire nation. In a period of hundred years, this way of thinking has changed, of course, but still nationalism as an ideology has not changed.

The fact that the Norwegian archives of folk music still have no material collected from the Romani people illustrates that they are not considered as a part of Norwegian heritage.
THE ROMANIES MIGHT SUBSCRIBE TO TRANS-NATIONAL IDENTITIES

Cultural heritage is not always national. There is World Heritage, promoted by UNESCO, and there are several others that can be trans-national or local. Cultural heritage projects of the nations are increasingly being democratized, extended or abandoned, as the multi-cultural challenge is becoming more and more important. Also ritual performances are becoming increasingly regionalized and trans-nationalized. Religious identities are becoming part of a larger national discourse around cultural heritage, rights, and protection of culture. Regardless of decisions within Norway, the European Union or the United Nations, we have to listen to the voice of the Romanies themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

We seem to be in an interesting situation in a dynamic world: concerned with a deeply rooted, yet newly “officially” recognized, national minority that also has a trans-national history and identity. Norwegian Romanies are obviously Norwegian and Romani: They speak rural dialects and they know the country well. Families have clearly developed “Nordic” traditions. Vandriar, as many Romanies call themselves, have strong internal bonds, codes and customs. Within the home and among relatives, many speak Scando-Romani (or rotipa, as they call it), where Romani words are used in a matrix of Norwegian grammar.

Music also contains strong cultural coding, and has been a positive and profitable area of expression for Norwegian Romanies. Among themselves and in their interface with others, music performance has been especially important. The repertoire of Romani musicians and singers is typically large, including traditional and popular music/songs that are common among non-Romanies. Outstanding Romani performers have been adopted into the history of Norwegian traditional and popular music. In recent years, several musicians of Romani ancestry have been awarded royal medals in recognition of their cultural contributions.

Personal interpretation and improvisation reflecting a variety of genres are common. There are several voices, and there is no single, easy answer to the question of which cultural heritage they identify with most. There are different strategies. It is a matter of choice. In performance, for example, some musicians and singers tend to accentuate typical Romani style elements, while others deliberately avoid these.

Norway has had an image of itself as a homogeneous nation, and has recently realized that this is a myth. Interestingly enough, when we examine the work of those who helped create the myth, we find that they were not unaware of minorities. One of the collectors in the early 1800s who sought after ancient cultural relics in rural Norway was a man named Peter Christen Asbjørnsen. In the summer of 1847 he happened upon a musical Romani family in the mountains and collected several songs and ballads from them (Asbjørnsen 1964). Today, we find this material absorbed into the treasure chest of Norwegian heritage.

In Norway, aspects of national identity have been expressed in various ways, like on road signs or in their travels. Language, traditions, and songs are the focus. They have been developed and distributed. Everywhere one goes, they find strong connections to rural Norway, which is understood as the current identity of the nation.

The meaning of these changes extends to the national decades. Today, the Romanies see a change of this concept, yet it is not possible for them too. Some might say that two identities now adopted.

The scent of a new identity is in the air, dynamic and changing. A new way of life is emerging, and is in a process of changing as well. Now there is a new identity, a national identity. The government has its own plans for this.

There is a need for the distribution of national identity and a new way of life for all Romanies. There is a need for the distribution of national identity and a new way of life for all Romanies.

Music and its role in the interface between the two identities is apparent. What is happening today? How are the performers being distributed? How are the archives helping to preserve these identities and present them in a new way?

Can we preserve and develop new identities—also to the Romanies?
In Norway, as in other agricultural nations, identity and tradition are largely expressed in association with place. Norwegian Romani families have been communities on the move, carrying baggage of old traditions and capacity for creativity everywhere their travels have taken them. Norwegian Romani are also more than Norwegian. Language, traditions, and a shared history of “outsider status” contribute to internal bonds, and to bonds between them and their distant “cousins” elsewhere in the world. They have been transnational for centuries and their culture is a reflection of this. Everywhere they have traveled they have contributed cultural impulses and often vibrancy and inspiration. In the 1800s, they brought popular European waltz music to rural Norway (Barthelemy 2007). And today we see that they are participating in current international trends such as hip-hop and other popular expressions.

THE WORLD CHANGES, AND WE CHANGE WITH IT

The meaning of the concept cultural heritage has changed significantly during the last decades. Today the tendency is to employ a broad inclusive and heterogeneous view of this concept. Accordingly, perspectives concerning traditional music have changed too. Some music that earlier was considered neither “national” nor worth preserving is now adopted as part of the Norwegian cultural heritage.

The scenario of Norwegian-Romani culture and identity at present is rather dynamic and dramatic: The Norwegian “state” and “majority,” with its ideals concerning human rights, is realizing some truths about its own multicultural history and is in a period of “reconciliation” after many years of prejudice and discrimination. Now there is funding available to illuminate this minority and its history and culture. The government has also allotted a huge cultural fund to the Romani people to be distributed and used by the minority group itself.

There is a growing jungle of Romani web sites, organizations and Christian congregations. Romani individuals and families react in different ways. Cultural identity and heritage, along with pride, respect and honor are in the ring, and there is potential for money and attention.

Music and musical expression seem to be quite important and interesting at the interface between the majority and minority in this atmosphere of reconciliation. What is happening with folk music and national heritage here? What are non-Romani performers and students of folk music discovering? Can “place-based” folk music archives help Romanies preserve some of the cherished musical treasures of their past and present for their coming generations?

Can we convince the Romanies that we share interests and basic ideas about preserving music culture? Can we work together? Music is very close to their hearts—and also to our hearts. Respect, trust and friendship may go a long way.

REFERENCES


