

Can the Theory and Practice of Language Planning Help the Maintenance of Dance and Music Traditions?

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Abstract

Traditional music and dances are disappearing throughout the world. This paper explores the possibility of adopting methodology that has been developed for protecting endangered languages and using it for the maintenance of traditional music and dances.

Background

Languages, music and dances share many traits: they are all used for self-expression and can convey messages of different sorts. Most importantly, they often have a symbolic and identity value and reflect socioeconomic and political changes in society. With regard to small languages – minority or regional languages – and traditional music and dances, the similarity between them is even more striking, as they belong to the same cultural ecosystem and they are affected in the same way by socio-economic pressures coming from outside the community. Moreover, changes taking place in one are likely to extend to the others as well.

The socioeconomic and political changes that have taken place in the last two and a half centuries have greatly affected local languages, music and dances. The ideology of nationalism, with its demands for uniformity, has stigmatized local non-standardized languages, and they have now often been replaced, due partly to the prestige of the state language that was introduced in all ‘high’ domains.

In sociolinguistic terms, the phenomenon of *language shift* towards the dominant language was set in motion. As people learnt the official language, they started to emigrate to the big towns and cities and to absorb many aspects of the ‘official’ culture expressed through the dominant language, and this included music and dances. The old music and dances, together with the local languages, started to be perceived as things belonging to a past that people wanted to forget, aspects of a culture seen as poor and backward-looking. In addition, new technological developments made communication much easier and quicker, so that little by little the language, music and dances coming from the big cities or from abroad began to replace the local ones. As far as Europe is concerned, classical, opera and light opera songs started to be listened to and sung instead of local ballads, and polkas, and waltzes and mazurkas gradually took over from local folk dances (Leydi, 1990; Coluzzi, 2006). In the case of Brunei, it is music and songs from the English-speaking world, from Malaysia and from Indonesia that have replaced most of the local musical traditions.

Obviously the musical and dancing repertoires of a community are not static traditions: new elements have always been imported from the outside. For example, before ballroom dancing, in most areas of Europe, French contradances – deriving from English country dances – were all the rage (Sachs, 1963). Even the Bruneian traditional *joget* and *jipin* (*zapin*) dances originally came from West Malaysia (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2004). The difference is that before the industrial revolution and the age of nationalisms these changes occurred so slowly that the external influences had time to be absorbed gradually and to

adapt to the local style and taste, whereas from the 19th century onwards the changes have been swift and much more ‘standardized’.

The result of all this is before our eyes. If we consider the situation in Brunei, many old songs are no longer known by young people. The areas where the old dances are still alive in a traditional setting are becoming fewer and fewer, and in most places only older people in the community have a good competence in the old dances. Some of the dances are still alive only thanks to groups made up of young people who perform them in cultural shows; however, they are often danced in a style that is quite different from that of these young people’s parents and grandparents. In some cases the dances are learnt not from the older people but from YouTube, in a style belonging to another community. Also, the influence of Western pop music on a traditional style of music such as that of the *gambus* group has been very strong, leading to the dances that were traditionally associated with it being replaced by disco-style dancing (Muhd Saifullah, 2009, cited in Walker, 2011, pp. 30–32).

Although the demise of local languages may have been slower, nonetheless it is quite plain: just sixty years ago, almost all of the population of Brunei must still have been fluent in at least one local language (Noor Azam, 2005), whereas nowadays less than half of the population can speak them (excluding Brunei Malay, which is known by nearly everyone) (Coluzzi, 2010). There are no figures for the actual number of speakers of these languages, as official censuses use the single cover term ‘Malay’ to refer to members of all the *puak jati*, the seven ethnic groups, Belait, Bisaya, Brunei Malay, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut (Lun Bawang) and Tutong, that are officially recognized as indigenous groups of the Malay race (1961 Nationality Act of Brunei). However, we can get an idea of the percentage of the people who can speak the eleven minority languages of Brunei by looking at some of the estimates that have been made. According to Martin (1995) and Niew (1991), out of a population of 284,653 inhabitants in 1994 (CIA, 1995), there might have been as many as 137,000 (47% of the population) speakers of languages other than Brunei Malay, as Kedayan, Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Bisaya, Murut, Iban, Penan, Mukah were spoken by a total of 77,000 people, whereas various Chinese dialects and/or Mandarin were spoken by about 60,000 people.

The situation today is serious, as these and other aspects of traditional culture are highly endangered. Diversity is of vital importance for the well-being of humanity, and this includes cultural diversity (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Therefore I believe that efforts should be made so that the aspects of traditional culture discussed in this article could be maintained in some way. After all, songs and dances have been carefully selected by the community over the centuries so that only the ‘best’ would be passed on. They are vitally important markers of identity, so they have an important social role to fulfill. But can the cultural shift outlined above be slowed down or even reversed? In short, can endangered local languages be spoken again, endangered local songs sung again, and endangered local dances danced again?

I believe this may be possible, even though this may entail refunctionalizing them so that they may fulfill the same important role in modern society as they did in the old. Now the problem is how we go about that. As far as traditional dances and music are concerned, this has already been attempted and has led to what is known as *folk revival* in the Western world (Leydi, 1973). However, whereas linguistics has developed a scientific discipline known as *language planning* with the aim of revitalizing endangered local languages, the efforts carried out for the revival of folk music and dances have not been sustained by an appropriate discipline and by experimented strategies. This article would like to show briefly how language planning works and propose the establishment of a new discipline that could deal with the revival of traditional music and dances in a more rational, scientific and coordinated way than has been done so far.

Language Planning

Even though language planning can be and is being carried out for the spread of majority languages, what interests us here is minority language planning, the discipline whose aim is the maintenance and promotion of endangered languages. It is normally divided up into three parts or phases: corpus, status and acquisition planning.

Corpus planning is the phase dealing with the description and standardization of the endangered language. Without this initial phase, the other two phases cannot be pursued.

Status planning is concerned with raising the prestige and the status of the language, trying to get it used for as many functions and in as many domains as possible.

Finally, acquisition planning deals with the teaching of the language, i.e. its purpose is to increase the number of speakers (Cooper, 1989; Coluzzi, 2007).

Now how can this scheme be modified so that it can cater for traditional music and dancing? Let us go through each of the phases mentioned above and try to adapt them to music and dance.

Corpus planning

Unlike the case with languages, which need a certain degree of standardization so that they can be used for publication, in the mass media and in schools, folk music and dances do not need to be modified. However, as is well known, a folk song may have dozens of different versions according to where it is found, and the same dance may have many different steps, styles and choreographic variants in different villages. Once we want to try to spread music and dances through publications, recordings or DVDs, we may be forced to make a selection, or, as far as dances are concerned, to include a range of variants normally used in different places in the same area under the same dance, to give would-be dancers a wider choice of steps and variants without confusing them. This would also allow people from different places to join in the same dances.

Another case where corpus planning may come into play is when a dance has to be reconstructed as it is no longer danced and all that is left of it is a more or less detailed description that needs to be interpreted. On the other hand, there might be cases where the dance is still remembered but not its music, in which case a new tune composed in the traditional style may be used. A similar case is when we have the lyrics of a song but not a tune. Another possibility is having the music of a dance that is not remembered any more; in such a case a similar dance from another area could be adapted to the local style if other dances have survived, particularly if the dance name is the same and the tune is similar.

In all these cases, experts in the area may want to carry out some sort of corpus planning that may increase the number of the dances, giving dancers a wider choice in areas where the repertoire is limited, avoiding too subtle distinctions between styles of nearby villages to avoid confusion (obviously these subtle differences need to be documented with as many details as possible).

Status Planning

Status planning for traditional dances and music means basically promoting them so that as many people as possible may appreciate and enjoy them. Many of the strategies used for promoting and raising the prestige of local languages can be adapted to promote folk music and dances. Among these, advertising (promotional campaigns), economic support to individuals, institutions, publishers, and record companies which deal with folk music and dancing, as well as such activities as organizing music and dance competitions, publication of CDs and DVDs, radio and TV programmes on folk traditions, specialized

magazines, sections on popular periodicals, t-shirts with images and phrases related to folk dances and music, and folk festivals (Coluzzi 2007, 133-134).

Specific to folk music and dances could be the organization of concerts and demonstrations even on a very small scale within other events and exhibitions (for example, of traditional musical instruments).

What in my view is important to convey is that folk music and dances are not necessarily something 'old', outmoded and devoid of any meaning, but something interesting, vibrant and lively. Unlike other genres of music and dance, folk music and dancing are close to our roots and can help us retain and strengthen our sense of identity; they are so varied and original and they can help socializing and interpersonal contact to a level unimaginable for other kinds of music and dances, with less emphasis on the individual and more on the group. In addition to this, folk music and dances can be within everybody's capabilities in terms of learning the steps of a dance or playing and singing the tunes.

Acquisition Planning

Anything that may lead to the learning of folk music and dances is within the scope of acquisition planning, particularly courses and workshops. Courses and workshops (together with such activities as festivals and exhibitions) organized in areas where the folk traditions are still alive may also help the local dances and music to be retained by the local population, because realizing that people from urban areas and 'important' people (like professors and researchers) are interested in them may help to raise their prestige.

The dances can also be taught to children at school, perhaps initially in a simplified form, while learning the tunes and songs and about the instruments that are used in the performances can be part of school-based musical education.

At a higher level, courses of ethnochoreology could be set up along those of ethnomusicology at university, and a subject on 'folk revival' or, perhaps, 'folk music and dancing planning' could be added to existing curricula. Dance academies and music conservatories should also be encouraged to open sections on traditional dances and instruments.

Conclusions

Traditional music and dances are in most cases outside the trends of the market and of popular consumerism, and if nothing or not enough is done, they will inevitably disappear, swallowed up by modernity and globalization, while a few of them are being readapted to suit a global market ever in search for new easily consumable products (see the popularity of Latin American dances like salsa or tango, for example).

Obviously the world we live in has changed dramatically from the one that saw the birth and the development of folk music and dancing, and this means that whatever is salvaged and promoted will not be the same as what used to be sung, played and danced in the past. Refunctionalizing this vast and varied repertoire in a different setting will inevitably lead to changes in the object of such an operation, as will the different modes of transmission and circulation of the repertoires.

The same is happening with minority languages, particularly when they have to develop new styles and registers and above all new terminology so that they can express the contents of today's modern life. However, I believe that some of the values and characteristics of folk music and dancing mentioned above can be retained and will make any attempt at preserving this invaluable repertoire worthwhile.

If we do not strive to preserve and promote folk music and dancing, we may end up facing a gloomy future where everybody in the world will only speak a few 'big' languages and spend their leisure time and celebrate their festivals listening to the same pop music and dancing the same disco dances as the rest of the world.

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