Swinging Roles: An Ethnographic Account of Symbols, Challenges and Reflections Encountered While Discovering New Self Concepts through Music

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Cohen (1986) argues that as individuals we recognize our sense of identity as fundamental, as the *sine qua non* of all social interaction, and the loss of it as pathological. As humans, we are social animals, and our self-concept derives not only from our individuality but from the collectivity we belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Since part of our self-concept is derived from our social identity, the need of belonging becomes very important. Maslow (1943) identifies this need of belonging as being the most important after the basic physiological and safety needs are fulfilled. Social psychological studies have gone as far as to argue that social exclusion and physical pain share parts of the same underlying processing system (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). In other words, exclusion hurts, literally. In order to be part of a group and be an insider, there has to be a delimiting boundary from the outsiders. By declaring social identity, we mark similarities with some and differences from others. Cohen (1986) argues that symbolic boundaries are the best way one has of claiming belonging (or membership) without compromising each members' individuality. While Durkheim believed in collective representations (i.e. shared meaning of a symbol within a group), Cohen believes in an orthodoxy in forms of symbols but not in their content and meaning (1986:4). Symbolic boundaries can therefore have different meanings for those who belong to one side of the boundary, those who belong on the other side of the boundary, as well as differ in meaning within the same group.

Taking up Cohen's view, I will be using the shared form of words in order to provide you with my own interpretation, a meta-meaning, of symbols encountered in the field. Before this, however, I would like to mention my motivation do so as a response to Arturo Escobar's critique of the 'Writing Culture Era' (1993). He argues that the'Writing Culture Era' forgets that anthropology and ethnography are always embedded in a political and business context. I do have a self-interest motive to be writing this. Fieldwork is -and has been since the end of the 19th century- a landmark of the discipline of Social Anthropology. Jarvie argues that fieldwork is the 'rite de passage for entry to the club of social anthropology' (1964:2). I have now had two years of history and theory of anthropology, but some argue that knowledge is not possible to be communicated in this way, and that it is through doing and practicing that we attain real knowledge (see Coleman, 1988). This ethnography is thus my attempt to become an insider to anthropology. As stated above, the need of belonging is very important, the

group we belong to can add to the definition of self, and 'member of the club of social anthropology' is certainly a tag I want to incorporate into my definition of self.

The bar-- the place that in my life-narrative will from now on be recalled as 'my first fieldwork experience'-- is called the Jazzsí Club. It is tucked into a narrow street in one of the oldest neighborhoods of Barcelona. All surrounding places on the street are owned and used by the 'Taller de Músics' -a music school. Jazzsí Club was imagined to be the 'canteen' for the music students, and the place for them to experience the stage live, with a real audience. The space is still used for this purpose, but only on Wednesdays, when there is a 'Jam Session of Jazz'. The rest of the week, the space is used to provide different types of live music. I spent four nights there, and the program was: 'Jam Session of Pop/Blues/Rock' on Tuesday, 'JamSessionofJazz'onWednesday,'Cuban discharge' on Thursday and 'Flamenco' on Friday.

I walked into the rather small place, replete withphotographs stuck all around the brickwork walls, and bumped into a lady that must have been in her early fifties sitting down with a table in front of her and an open money box. She did not utter the price of the entrance; it seemed to be understood. I ordered a 'caña' (the word used in Spain to refer to a draught beer) and Joaquín, the boss and bartender, replied with an unexpected question: “Are you sure you know what you want?” I was, and must have looked, puzzled as he did not take long to add: “There are so many 'guiris' that come here ordering a 'caña' and then ask me for the bottle, without knowing what they ordered”. The word 'guiri' is a term carrying a negative connotation used throughout Spain to refer to tourists. Some people claim the word comes from the term 'gâvur' that Turks used to refer to non-Muslims in a degrading fashion. Joaquín was right, I thought to myself while taking a seat with a 'caña' in my hands, there were a lot of tourists, “most of them sitting at the back of the room” as I wrote down in my notebook, not knowing exactly why. The chairs were positioned in well defined rows facing a stage that was about one meter higher than the ground floor. The stage decor was simple. At the center of the wall there was a big yellow sign with 'Jazzsí' written in black characters, surrounded by three framed pictures of different Flamenco singers. While waiting for the place to fill up, five musicians were preparing the stage and joking around with each other. Whenever the lady at the door selling the tickets had a free moment, she made hand signs at the musicians on stage and with a group of

people that were standing, slowly agglomerating in the left hand side corner of the room, between the stage and the bar. This group of people seemed to know each other and acted as if they expected to see each other in that exact place.

The music started. The first couple of songs were sung by those who had prepared the stage. The singer, a very energetic and smiling woman, made some sort of mistake and did not try to hide it. The drummer and pianist behind her could not stop laughing. She smiled with them, forgetting for a moment about the audience before her. They seemed comfortable. We, as audience, were also enjoying ourselves, singing along to the rather well known Pop and Rock songs they had chosen to play. The group on the left hand side was the loudest cheerers. After the singer's performance, she announced that the Jam Session was about to start. Anyone who wanted to sing or play was to put down their name on a list that would be on the counter. Some of the musicians stepped down, greeted and joined the cheerers group. Once this statement was made, the conversations taking place in the audience took a higher tone and the movement around the room increased. A man standing beside my chair sent, with hand gestures, a kiss to a woman across the room. She responded in a playful and overacted, flattered way. They both laughed. In the meantime, two musicians stayed on stage waiting for the first audience members who wanted to join them. A pianist, a member of the audience, decided to exchange his audience seat for a stage position and a hoped-for-membership amongst the musicians. The pianist tried very hard to catch the attention that was being lost from the audience, which must have seemed too forced in the other musicians' opinions, as they rolled eyes at each other in a semi-discreet way. For the rest of the night, musicians from the audience went back and forth from the list to inscribe their names. The non-musicians went back and forth from the bar to their seat.

On the following night, during the Jam Session of Jazz, there was a group of girls sitting next to me celebrating the birthday party of one of them. Two invited friends were asking one another why the birthday party girl liked this bar so much. One of the girls put into words what I had constantly felt on the previous night: “es un bar de la misma gente” (“it is a bar of the same people”). The divide between regulars/non regulars was hence stated. Amongst this divide coexisted other ones: musicians/non musicians and locals/'guiris'. All of these divides were drawn with symbolic boundaries, with more or less explicitness and resentfulness. On Friday, Flamenco night, Joaquín went on stage

and asked everyone to turn off our telephones and added “sobretodo si está en otro idioma” (“especially if it [the ringtone] is in a different language”). These boundaries, since symbolic, were regarded, interpreted, bent and used in different ways.

Since the first moment I stepped into Jazzsí, I felt I was being tested: tested by myself wondering if and how I could face my first fieldwork experience, and tested by the staff of the Bar. By not stating the price of the entrance (thus implicitly with non-words), I was being tested on my 'regularity'. And there I was, a non-regular that would try for the rest of the week to belong. It seemed as if someone was allocating the space that was assigned to each person depending on our category as a regular or a non-regular. If regular: stand up and go to the left hand side of the room; if non-regular: take a seat and enjoy the show. This of course was not explicitly stated and probably not even intended. The well defined rows of chairs, however, did seem to provide an ideal structure for the non-regulars to feel confident about fulfilling what was expected from them. Once seated, we, the waiting-for-the-show audience, sipped ours drinks, looked around, adjusted our sitting position, said a few words to our companion/s, and sipped our drinks a few more times, letting time pass by and awaiting the show. The regulars, on the other hand, were making the pub their village and home, and using it as such. They were not in a waiting-for-anything mode, but moved around the place free from any constraint feels when entering someone else's territory or home.

The next testing I felt I had gone through was the testing for 'localness.' While 'regularness' was tested through non-words, my 'localness' was tested through words. It seemed that Joaquín did not want anyone utilizing the word 'caña' if they did not know what they were talking about. This overtly expressed annoyance he had towards those to whom he had to explain that 'caña' was not the word for 'beer' but more specifically for 'draught beer', and who made him change their order, could have been instrumental. It could also be due to having to share his territory with outsiders. This word-test was one that I could pass because of the period of time in my life that I had lived in Barcelona, and by doing so Joaquín distinguished me from the 'guiris'. Even though I was not a regular, I could claim my belonging to Jazzsí through my 'localness'. And I felt good about it. I have experienced word-testing many times before in Barcelona, which is not surprising in a place where two languages (Spanish and Catalan) try to coexist. The testing in the past, however, was usually about Catalan. In Jazzsí, although

located in the heart of one of the oldest neighborhoods of Barcelona, it seemed that 'localness' took the wider encompassing territory of Spain rather than specifically Catalunya. Although this choice of national identity can be highly political in Barcelona, the expression of the club attendee's choice was subtle and harmonious. Catalan was used reciprocally without any resentment if someone was to be firm about their choice in language; however, it was the non-use and non-imposition of Catalan in the first encounter that gave Joaquín's choice/position away. The three framed pictures of Flamenco singers placed in middle of the stage wall could also be seen as an identity expression. Flamenco is the Spanish music *par excellence*. That might have been the reason Joaquín decided on Friday, of all nights of the week, to leave the bar counter for a few minutes to step on stage and present the Flamenco singer that was to perform. He also felt it was necessary to state that although 'we' -referring to the regulars of Jazzsí- respect all different kinds of fusions with Flamenco (e.g 'Flamenquito'), what was to be performed in Jazzsí was pure Flamenco, and he was proud of it. He also asked for respect from the audience towards the artist by requesting we turn off our phones, especially the 'guiris' (who would have ring tones in different languages). This petition was made in Spanish, which could not have been instrumental, as the chances of the 'guiris' understanding were slim. He was claiming his co-membership with all of those who understood and therefore probably respected Flamenco music as much as he did. After his presentation, Joaquín stepped back down and went back to pouring beers at the bar, leaving the stage for the artists to perform. Throughout the night there seemed to have been a teaching-learning relationship between different members of the audience: those who knew when to clap and say 'olé' (i.e.'locals') and those who wanted to, and finally learned (i.e. 'guiris'). These implicit and learned rules about how an audience is to react to a Flamenco song (i.e. clapping and cheering) were acting as a mediator for inclusiveness: 'locals' and 'guiris' alike were all members of an audience reacting in the same and correct way towards the music, reinterpreting thus the symbolic boundary of the style of music that Joaquín wanted to strengthen.

Music was at the very heart of Jazzsí, it is what gave the place its existence and identity. Having stemmed from the idea of providing a space for music students to test the real stage and audience, it was not only all about music but about the production of music. I believed this to be a barrier for me not only in my 'socialisation' as a person, but as a neophyte anthropologist who could not fulfill the 'participant' requirement in fieldwork because of not playing an instrument. This, however, led me to

feel the divide between musicians and non-musicians. The word-test took form of a list, the list on which an aspired musician was to write down his or her name in order to be part of the stage. The list was thus a *rite de passage*. Whilst the divide between the audience and the musicians was clearly defined on Flamenco night and Cuban night, the Jam Sessions were a medium to blur the divide.

With symbols-- words and non-words -- the people I encountered seemed to be drawing before me symbolic boundaries, and with the same boundaries I was seeking acceptance from them and belonging to them. In order for a divide to exist, groups to be formed, and the need of belonging fulfilled, it is necessary as mentioned before to have an in-group and an out-group in much the same way that order loses its significance if it is not opposed to disorder. The 'in-group' is thus a condition created conceptually only in the mirror of the 'out-group'. They are interdependent. If someone was to go to Jazzsí and could not find inclusiveness in 'localness', 'regularness' nor in the category of 'musician', they would always have an open membership in the counter-balanced groups. This interdependence might be the reason the artists on the first night decided to sing rather well known Pop/Rock/Blues music, allowing the non-musicians to sing along. This needed interaction between musicians and non-musicians for both their membership tags to exist, was sought directly by the singer who pointed the microphone towards the audience, asking for our participation. We reciprocated, creating simultaneously the divide between musicians and audience (or non-musicians) and the groups themselves. I could not neglect the fact that Jazzsí is embedded in the streets of Barcelona, a modern urban city across which a lot of people draw symbolic boundaries in the hope of some day achieving the creation of a real boundary between Catalunya and Spain. Simmel (1950) argues that in urban and modern societies there is an important emphasis on the individual who celebrates and embraces 'independence' and rejects any interdependence with the exception of the economic sphere. I argue that this is a fallacy. I would suggest that the need for belonging still remains and that all the divides I encountered in Jazzsí were creating symbolic boundaries, and therefore creating groups to which different people could belong to. The want for independence in our modern society is a medium to blur our need for interdependence.

I have used the shared form of words in order to provide you with my meta-meaning of

symbols I encountered in the field. Contrarily to Jean Paul Sartre (1939 cited in Bloom, H 2001) who laments he has to use words to convey his own meaning and would have wanted his own words; I use these joyfully to celebrate our co-membership to a group that shares a symbol form. My intention is not to impose this meaning upon your own, even if it were possible. I present this idiosyncratic meaning as a mere plausibility of interpretation. I now have one more word-test to pass: it is your turn to test me with these written symbols I have organized for you in order to belong to the "club of social anthropology".

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