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Ireland

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# THE FIELDWORKER AS PERFORMER FIELDWORK OBJECTIVES AND SOCIAL ROLES IN COUNTY CLARE, IRELAND

# Jos. Koning

any years have passed since Mantle Hood formulated the concept of bi-musicality, the basic musicianship of a researcher with regard both to his own music culture and to a different music culture which is the subject of his investigations (Hood 1960:58; 1971:35). A growing number of ethnomusicologists have participated both musically and socially within the culture on which they concentrate. More recently, John Blacking has stressed the importance of musical performance as a research technique, while reporting some of his successful applications of this technique (1973:181).

While other forms of social participant observation may be as fruitful as active musical performance by the fieldworker, and should support the latter technique, musical performance is emphasized in many ethnomusicological curricula as a most important research tool for fieldwork.

When applied in the field, the use of this technique of musical performance forces both the researcher and the members of the culture under investigation to select an acceptable social role for the musically active ethnomusicologist. In every society a number of roles will be available, such as pupil, member of a particular ensemble, teacher, etc. If possible, the researcher should decide which role is the most profitable in terms of opportunities to collect useful data; he also must know which roles are open to him on the basis of his competence. Whether he will know this, depends on his preparation and on his policy in the field.

The selection of a particular role may limit the researcher's access to specific information. Moreover, because of role expectations existing within a particular culture, the researcher's behavior may have consequences for the behavior of his informants. Such consequences are not always understood by the researcher as being results of his interference with the culture and its role structure. Of course such biases in collected data and subsequent analysis may result from any fieldwork technique. The sheer presence of an ethnomusicologist within a community will interfere with his informants' behavior. Yet since I consider musical par-

ticipation to be a powerful research technique, which may be both highly profitable and highly biasing, I want to discuss some of my field experiences as a case study of problems it can cause. Such problems have included: biased information both on norms regarding musical structure and on norms regarding the social use made of the music concerned, as well as difficulty of access to certain data.

My fieldwork took place in east County Clare, Ireland, during four months in 1975, followed by short periods in 1976 and 1977. Part of the preparation was a pilot trip early in 1975. Although I had participated in small-scale anthropological field projects before, this east Clare research was my first prolonged field experience. The observations presented here are not intended to cover the results of this fieldwork (these are dealt with in Koning 1976 and 1977); they deal only with the social role I played as a musically active person, and with the consequences of my behavior in relation to the objectives of the fieldwork.

At present I am applying several of the techniques previously used in east Clare in a study that concentrates on the Dutch "folk revival." This project was started in 1978 and will be finished in 1981. In the near future I hope to report on the methodological design of this study, one aspect of which is a more conscious and more objective use of the techniques discussed here. The present paper, therefore, should be considered as a re-evaluation of the effects of techniques used in my earlier research, seen in the perspective of their present use.

### TRADITIONAL DANCE MUSIC IN EAST CLARE

Clare is one of the west coast counties of Ireland, and it shares the general economic and social patterns of these counties. Agriculture, and above all dairying and cattle raising, is the most important source of income. The soil is of a rather bad quality, with poor drainage, many outcrops of rock, and large stretches of bog, making tillage unprofitable. After the prolonged famines of the 1840's the population has declined dramatically through starvation and emigration. Hugh Brody (1973) has painted a detailed and poignant picture of the resulting social life in west Clare. Since for decade after decade most members of the younger generations left, and the one son of a family who was entitled to inherit the family farm (Arensberg and Kimball 1968) had no chance of marrying in case the farm was not profitable, most farms are used by older, isolated bachelors or couples. With the absence of a dense population and of a large younger generation, local social structure has nearly fallen to pieces.

Up to 1965 east Clare has shared this process of social deterioration

(by no means a steady, continuous process, but rather a recurring cycle of events). After 1965, however, local welfare has increased slowly, due both to increased viability of farms in the more fertile eastern parts of the area through the combination of farmlands that formerly belonged to different owners, and to the additional employment offered in nearby regional centers such as Scariff, Ennis, and Shannon. Fewer people have emigrated since, and at present considerably more children and young couples are found here than in most other parts of the Irish west.

These developments have strongly influenced local musical activities. Dancing to *jigs*, *reels* and other types of dance tunes used to be the most popular pastime activity in this initially densely populated area up to the 1930's. But after 1930, local interest in these activities has declined rapidly, due to the erosion of the local social structure, as well as to the activities of the church, which fought a determined battle against the popular *house dances*. With most younger people either abroad or preparing to leave, and with the priests sermoning against traditional pastimes, there was neither enough participation nor enough interest in the traditional dancing and the affiliated dance music. This threatened the local musicians with loss of employment as well as loss of status. Most of the musicians still active in 1975 had learned to play between 1910 and 1940. The common instruments learned in this period were the fiddle and the (anglo or German) concertina. Many others had already stopped playing altogether in 1975.

Why did some of the musicians continue to practice and play? Ever since the nationalist upsurges that started around 1800 (and still continue today), Irish traditional song and music has been granted a high status by various nationalist cultural organizations. Through the activities of scholarly collectors, musicians started to take pride in their skills, and eventually stimulated a revival of interest in traditional music. This revival was prepared in the 1930's and 1940's, and culminated in the 1950's and 1960's in radio programs, nationwide festivals and competitions, and efforts to teach young children. Though the most dedicated revivalists were a few established musicians from Dublin and some other towns. after 1965 followed by a growing number of young urban musicians and music enthusiasts, this revival also had a certain impact at the regional and local level. Local players from east Clare villages participated in festival and radio programs, they were visited and esteemed by young urban musicians and played with them in local pubs, and their status within the local community has risen.

With the increase in income in east Clare after 1965 some innkeepers saw opportunities to expand their activities by inviting local musicians to play for dances in local pubs. For these often weekly dance nights the players receive a small honorarium. This created new musical opportunities for local players. They usually belong to the class of smaller (though not smallest) full time farmers, who can not leave their farms in order to play at concerts in far-off cities; and they appreciate the additional income. More recently, however, these musical employment opportunities tend to become monopolized by players of *strong* instruments like button accordion, four-string banjo, concert flutes, and drums. These instruments are called *strong* since they are more powerful, and they are considered more suitable for dances. Players of these instruments are usually younger and often have off-farm employment, which gives them greater mobility. They form a successful minority among the regional musicians.

Playing in local pubs outside the context of dances has decreased after the enthusiasm of the sixties. Even within a small community many different types of music are available through radio and records, and only a small proportion of the local population appreciates listening to dance tunes played by their neighbors in local pubs. No public house within these communities can afford to specialize in traditional dance music, apart from the weekly dance in some of the bigger pubs. Only when musicians from the nationally and internationally successful young urban traditional music culture visit east Clare (usually in order to expand repertories of tunes and techniques) will Dublin and local players flock together and play in local pubs.

Within such occasional informal sessions outside the dance context, an attitude of combined shyness and pride prevails among local musicians, not only with regard to visiting musicians, but especially with regard to their local colleagues and the local audience. To understand this attitude the activities of scholarly collectors during the 19th century should be evaluated. Traditional musical skills have, ever since 1850, been thought of as rapidly dying out (Petrie 1855), while in fact local musical employment has dwindled much faster than the number of players. The activities of collectors, and the idea that traditional music was vanishing influenced the attitudes of the musicians. Many stories circulate about old musicians who were willing to play only when no other player was around, for fear that their tunes or skills might be copied. Their pride and suspicions rose. At the same time the vanishing interest of neighbors made the musicians more reluctant to play in public.

Irish dance music is basically played solo, and every musician specializes in particular tunes, variations, ornamentations, and phrasing. One who starts to play at a public occasion not only runs the risk of being accused of wanting to draw all attention to himself, but also of having his musical specialities copied by someone who might, later on, try to in-

crease his own status by using these specialities without acknowledging their origin.

Recently regional and national organizations have stimulated local musical activities both for the sake of tourism (another source of local development and welfare) and for the sake of protecting Irish culture. The available funds allow one specialized musician per region to teach groups of young pupils from 5 to 15 years of age to play traditional dance music on traditional instruments.

From this brief overview one may deduce which roles are available to someone who enters an east Clare community and performs this music. He is either a pupil, a teacher, a visiting musician who belongs to the urban revival movement, an enterprising musician who plays for dances, or a musician who considers traditional dance music as valuable but rarely has an opportunity to play in public. Since a social role is a cognitive category based on prolonged social experience, the arrival of an ethnomusicologist who performs during his stay will hardly lead to the creation of some new social roles where so many roles already exist.

#### ROLE SELECTION

I stayed in east Clare from May until September 1975, after a preparatory stay in Dublin and Belfast some months earlier. My objective was to describe the various sets of occasions in which traditional dance music was used, and to account both for the musical structure (which differs slightly from one set of occasions to another) and for the various uses of the music from a historical as well as from a transactional viewpoint. The scope of the present paper limits the possibility to discuss the transactional approach, which is based on theories of Fredric Barth (1966) and Jeremy Boissevain (1974).

Apart from normal fieldwork preparation, I had specialized in traditional Irish fiddling. In the Netherlands there has been a growing appreciation of American and Northwest European traditional music since the early 1960's, and at present some 400 Dutch musicians perform folk music from these areas on a regular basis. This cultural process is currently being investigated by the departments of musicology and cultural anthropology of the University of Amsterdam. Irish traditional dance music has become one of the major sections of the repertory within this culture. Being an active member of this culture, and having a background in classical violin playing, I had started to learn Irish tunes and techniques with the help of records, field tapes, publications, and Irish musicians who occasionally visited Holland.

When I came to east Clare I was hardly aware of the various roles available to musicians. I was even less aware of the behavior associated with the various roles, not to speak of the limitations on data collection that could result from the behavior of a field worker performing traditional music. I visited local musicians, and explained to them my interest in their music as well as some of the fieldwork objectives. At first some people supposed I was some sort of radio official, but after a while it was decided that I was an urban musician. The east Clare people are quite familar with the phenomenon of young urban musicians with academic backgrounds who have a strong interest in traditional music. Musicians started to invite me to their homes or to local pubs where they made me play in their small informal sessions.

Considering the available roles for musicians in east Clare, I might have been expected to behave as a pupil, a visiting musician, some kind of colleague, or a teacher. Of course the last role was highly unlikely. I came to learn. Moreover, teachers must be Irish, and usually teach in the region where they were born. But neither did I appear to be a colleague. I did not look for opportunities to perform in public. The fact that I played a *sweet* instrument, fiddle, made it very unlikely that I wanted to play for dances anyway, since at present the *strong* instruments dominate the dances completely. More importantly, I was not familiar with playing for dances, which became apparent since I did not "time the music right." Both the overall speed and the inner rhythm of dance music should be related to the type of dance being performed. According to local musicians the young urban performers rarely time their music right, since they do not play at dances, and since they concentrate too much on ornamentation techniques.

The most likely, and most suitable, role for a fieldworker who wants to collect data on music and its functions with the help of the technique of performing, is the role of pupil. Traditionally two types of teachers existed in the Irish west: travelling teachers, who received a fee for their weekly lessons, and relatives of the pupil, usually the father, uncle, or brother. Also, much learning was done through sheer imitation outside of a formal teaching context. These practices were discontinued after 1940.

The present teacher is employed by a regional tourist and welfare organization. He also teaches in particular parishes without the help of this organization, since parents who want their children to be taught music have offered him a small fee. Lessons were started in 1971. Most pupils are between 5 and 15 years of age. While most of these leave after one or two years, without having mastered substantial competence, some continue for a few years. Usually lessons are finished when the pupil leaves primary school.

Though I did not really fit into a role with these characteristics I participated in many lessons. However, I was not accepted in this role by the other local players. Most musicians strongly criticized the teacher's methods and playing style. He used collections of dance tunes printed in staff notation, like O Neill's Dance Music of Ireland. In using these notations, he paid no attention to rhythm and accidentals. Both the use of staff notation and especially the monotonic, unstructured melodies, which resulted from neglecting the rhythm symbols as well as from the lack of audible examples played by the teacher, were resented by others. The teacher's strong bowing technique was also detested: his strong right hand pressure on the bow, combined with continuously slurred notes are not favored by most east Clare players, who prefer the more common sweet technique. Of course such rejecting of the teacher's activities may have been caused by jealousy; yet it was clear that the results of his teaching were not acceptable, and his personal style was not representative of local traditional music.

I felt that I had to extend my role of pupil by asking other players to teach me. This they would not do, for fear that such activities would be considered offensive by the established teacher. This might have put me in an awkward position, were it not that most players did not regard me as a pupil at all. They agreed that my musical performances were not perfect, but both with regard to age and ability I had outgrown the role of pupil.

As explained before, the role of visiting musician was considered the most correct at first. I was invited to participate in informal sessions in pubs. During such sessions as well as during visits at their homes, the players often would teach me a particular tune in which I had shown interest. Such an exchange of tunes is very common between players who rarely meet. The tune is copied aurally and bit by bit, but in the correct tempo. The one who learns the tune imitates either by playing or by whistling or singing nonsense syllables (jigging). The other player continues until his tune has been copied exactly. Ornamentations, variation in melody, and phrasing are left out by both. Once a musician has learned the basic tune, he will add his own ornamentations, variations, and phrasing during the next few days. When the two players meet again the two versions of the original tunes may differ considerably, yet these differences are never discussed. One of the players may however say to the other: "I hear your tune (i.e. first part) or turn (i.e. second part of the melody) is different. How do you play that?" This may result in a new instant teaching situation during which a player copies a different version in exactly the same way in which a tune was learned before.

After some time I was transferred from the category of visiting musician to that of colleague. Though I remained an outsider, I was no visitor

since I stayed in east Clare much longer than visiting musicians usually do. Although the quality of my playing probably did not meet local standards, I was treated as a colleague and was expected to behave like one. No comments were made on my performances. Although standards of performance exist, with some variation between various informants, and although the quality of one's performances may be discussed by others, the code of politeness forbids open negative comments when the player or some of his friends are present.

The informal sessions that had marked the first period of fieldwork seemed to die away by this time. Instruments were put back into their cases and most players stayed away from pubs. They returned only after several months, when a group of young Dublin players stayed at a local hotel for a few days.

So eventually a suitable role was selected for me on the basis of my behavior and the available role patterns. It took me some time to become aware of this process. It has taken me even longer to become aware of the position this process had put me in, and of how this position affected the results of my fieldwork.

### ANALYSIS OF MUSICAL STRUCTURE

As a visiting musician (the most suitable role during the first stages of the field work) I had ample opportunities to learn new tunes. I would practice together with one of the musicians, either in his or my house or late at night in one of the pubs. While such exchange of tunes is done aurally the musicians dispose of a system of scales and *keys* (this latter concept indicates the first note of a tune rather than tonality), and they draw on this system during tune exchanges in order to assist in the process. Quite often I was asked to teach a player a particular tune, usually a tune that at the time of the fieldwork was fashionable in the urban revival, which acts as an important chain in musical communication between various parts of the country.

Though such situations yielded data on the musicians' ideas on scales and tunes, I encountered considerable difficulties when I wanted to study their ideas on ornamentation, variation, and phrasing. Although the young Dublin musicians spend much time discussing and practicing such techniques of performance the techniques were hardly if ever mentioned by the east Clare musicians. An exception should be made for elements of rhythm and tempo, which are occasionally mentioned in discussions.

Before the 1940's players and aspirant musicians were submerged in local styles to such an extent that they had no problem using ornamenta-

tion techniques in the context of newly learned tunes. The abundance of local music making made a concentrated study of such techniques superfluous. But during the last decades the opportunities to hear regional players have decreased strongly. Seen in this light it is not at all surprising that pupils of the established teacher hardly ever make the step from playing chains of notes to performing dance tunes in a style acceptable to local musicians. And yet the teaching methods of this teacher are much more traditional than the comments of other players suggest, since these methods concentrate on the notes only, albeit with the help of staff notation. But when this method is not combined with intensive aural experience by the pupils, teaching results will be poor. The only local youngster proficient in playing dance music was a 12-year-old fiddler taught by his father, the fiddle leader of the famous Tulla Ceila Band, in which the young player often participates.

The problems I had in gathering information on the reasons or ideas behind choices concerning ornamentation, variation, and phrasing were, therefore, caused not so much by my role as by changes within the music culture itself. Yet I assumed that certain standards concerning ornamentation, variation, etc., did exist, and I put considerable pressure on local musicians to comment on my application of such techniques. But the code of politeness regarding the behavior of colleagues forbids interference with what are considered to be personal, individual playing styles. When urged to comment, a player would at first say that my performance was all right. Yes, it differed from his own performance, and indeed from other east Clare performances, but he never saw two players with the same style. This is an adage often quoted by players, but it is certainly not a denial of the existence of aesthetic limits to personal freedom in performance style. The comments of local players on the performances of the established teacher and his pupils pointed at the existence of such norms. Furthermore, during a follow-up study the performance styles of Dublin players who had recently visited the parish of Feakle were commented upon by the musicians of the Feakle area; it became clear to me that each player has a quite concrete set of ideas with regard to stylistic technique. The local players could comment on the visitors' performances since the latter musicians were not present and did not belong to the local community. Unfortunately their etiquette did not allow the east Clare players to criticize my playing in a similar way, let alone to give me more concrete indications of their norms or preferences with regard to playing style.

After this discovery, I tried for a while to elicit comments on performances recorded on tape. These efforts were met with reluctance or even suspicion, and did not yield much information. Informants feared that one day they might be confronted with unpleasant consequences of their judgments on unknown players. Slightly more successful was asking for comments on the style of musicians featured on commercial records, especially when these musicians played in what the east Clare players call Sligo, Donegal, or Kerry styles. Personally, I think it is ethically the most correct to ask for comments on one's own playing. I have, however, pointed out why such a policy was not fruitful.

## ANALYSIS OF USE AND FUNCTION

Another objective of the fieldwork was the study of the various sets of occasions in which traditional dance music is used, and of the reasons behind these uses. Correlations exist between aspects of musical structure (such as tempo, ornamentation, instrumentation) and social use of traditional dance music.

During my pilot trip early in 1975 many urban musicians had mentioned the considerable number of sessions at local pubs in Clare. This picture is also presented by the national and regional tourist boards. Indeed when I came to east Clare I observed many informal sessions. Usually some musicians would invite me to a particular pub where other musicians would be present. So I would come, fiddle case in hand, only to discover that the musicians who were present had not brought their instruments. Then, after a few drinks, someone would ask me to play a tune, which I did, first as a matter of courtesy, but later on with increasing reluctance. Local musicians then would bring in instruments which they had left outside the pub, at neighbors' houses, or in the trunks of their cars. The resulting session might go on for an hour or more. This pattern of events occurred several times each week.

After a while I became suspicious. Hardly any session occurred when I was not present. It seemed that my presence was used to start such sessions. I was nearly always induced to play the first tune. I observed that other players would refuse to play, even when asked to by several members of the audience; and when they did play they only started after long hesitation. When I eventually copied this behavior the number of sessions dropped drastically. I must add that I had great difficulties in copying this behavior since such a stubborn refusal to play when asked to would be taken as an offense by a Dutch audience within a folk revival context, and of course a fieldworker should not offend his hosts.

The east Clare observations can be explained historically. During the 1960's the esteem for traditional dance music had increased, due to the revival, and local musicians playing in pubs could expect an interested audience. After some years, however, local interest dropped again. Each

public house caters to a diverse group of customers, and not everyone likes to be confronted with traditional dance music played by the fellow next to him, while drinking and talking. Local musicians therefore prefer to play in the larger pubs where, as they say, they find more liberty. Here other people may continue their talking without being hindered too much by the music. If some customers would like to dance there is space available. Another reason for the popularity of larger pubs among musicians may be that these places are frequented not only by older men, but also by younger people and women. Since traditional dance music in former days was danced to mainly by younger people of both sexes, their presence is probably associated with this music. Yet especially the young people prefer to play darts or other games in pubs, or watch television, and occasionally they will leave as a group as soon as a music session lasts longer than two or three minutes. They prefer to dance to rock and country & western music in centers like Scariff and Ennis rather than listen or dance to traditional music, which in their experience embodies social control effected by the generation of their parents.

The success of the weekly dance nights has also contributed to the decline of interest in informal sessions. For local people the music concerned is basically dance music, and as such it is less suited for listening to only.

A musician will only play if he knows that the whole audience respects his music and is genuinely interested. He must be urged to play many times before he will start, preferably by all present. The presence of other players among the audience is very important, since players usually will support each other by continuing the session, and by playing together. It is customary for a musician to take an invitation to play as a polite compliment rather than a sign of sincere interest. Even when many people invite a player repeatedly this may be nothing more than politeness, and the player will refuse.

The presence of visiting musicians changes this picture. These visitors have come to meet local players and to learn from them. The visitors are respected outsiders who increase the status of the local musicians. Visitors and locals will come to a particular pub and start long sessions. Even at such occasions local players may be hesitant to start. Usually one of the visitors is induced to start. Since he is not a part of the local community he is less vulnerable while playing for an audience of local people. Moreover, local audiences appreciate the style of east Clare musicians more than the style of many urban players, which gives the local musicians a high status relative to that of the visitors (this status of course also results from the fact that the visitors have come to learn from the east Clare players). And usually musicians with a high status will wait

long before they start to play. While common all over Ireland, at sessions with visitors this attitude makes it even more preferable for local players to wait until the visitors have started the session.

The role of visiting musician was given to me during the first phase of the fieldwork, since it seemed to fit my background and behavior best. So I was made to start off various sessions, in this way increasing the status of local players. Initially these sessions were met with great enthusiasm by the audiences. After several weeks, however, the customers had become accustomed to these events, and started to return to their usual pub behavior.

I decided that I influenced local musical practice too much by letting others persuade me to play. I started to behave like other players. Less informal sessions and less status for local musicians were the results of this decision. The abundance of informal sessions in east Clare, as reported by my Dublin informants and the various cultural organizations and tourist boards is a result of the interference of visiting musicians with local music culture rather than a feature of this culture itself. In order to arrive at this conclusion I had to switch roles within this culture. In a later phase of the fieldwork, and during later follow-up visits, I travelled with local musicians to specific pubs where sessions were arranged by musicians from various parishes. Some of these pubs were at a considerable distance from east Clare. Such activities are still common among musicians, yet much less frequent than I had expected. At these sessions there was virtually no audience except for the musicians themselves.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The research technique of musical participation induces informants to apply to the fieldworker those roles with which they are familiar and which seem to suit the fieldworker's behavior best. Therefore, the fieldworker's behavior is experienced by his informants as role behavior, and as such has consequences for the behavior of others. I have presented some examples of biased or incomplete observations resulting from this process. Though the reported events may be typical for the music culture of east Clare, or for my own fieldwork behavior, I believe that the principle is much more general, and that fieldworkers should be aware of observational and analytical biases and lacunae that may result.

Yet I believe that both the overall completeness and the efficiency of any ethnomusicological research into a music culture will nevertheless benefit greatly when the researcher is thoroughly, actively involved musically within that culture. Participant observation may yield a large amount of structured data, and active musical participation may yield data that probably cannot be collected with the use of any other technique. It is the fieldworker's responsibility to analyze the possible distortion that may result from the active use of bi-musicality as a research tool.

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