Roundtable: Exorcising the Ancestors

Praisesong to the Ancestors and the Post-new Nuclear Family

Caroline Bithell
University of Manchester, UK

NOTE: This is a post-print (Author’s Accepted Manuscript) for:

Identifying the ancestors

The ancestors: those who have gone before; our forefathers, our predecessors, our people; figureheads of our heritage, our traditions, our roots. Who must we count among the ancestors in our discipline and in our field? First generation anthropologists and comparative musicologists, including the ‘armchair’ branch of the family with their training in the natural sciences, would seem the most obvious candidates. But there are also those miscellaneous early ‘pioneers’ in encounters with ‘other’ cultures - explorers and discoverers, colonial officials, missionaries, speculators and treasure-hunters, fresh-faced travellers in search of the exotic (plenty to exorcise there). Among our closer relatives are the scholars who have worked our particular fields (both geographical and theoretical) before us and whose stories we have taken up and run with in new directions. And our present day extended family might have to include more contemporary ‘others’ who have also left their shadows in the field and with whom those we work among might see a family likeness - record company scouts and TV crews, now joined by all manner of musical tourists brought up on the gospel of the Rough Guide.

Embracing the ancestors
Exorcise (1): to expel, drive out. I’m happy, of course, to have shaken off the prejudices and complexes of certain of our more scholarly ancestors - their obsession with purity and the patina of age, their fear of contamination by the winds of change, their zeal to protect the melodies of primitive man from Soviet agents and American oil drillers (Sachs 1962: 3), their phobia of anything that might be considered ‘bourgeois’, their allergy to music that might have been ‘cooked’.

But our ancestors, by definition, lived in a different age, ‘knew’ different truths, incubated different complexes, learnt from different mistakes. And while the past may indeed have many of the attributes of a foreign country (Lowenthal 1985), some, at least, of those who wore ‘the lost robes of the sages and prophets’ (Inglis 1993: 6) were pretty radical in their own time. An anachronism does not have to be discredited. We don’t have to throw out the grandfathers with the bathwater. How quaint might our carefully formulated pronouncements sound to our own grandchildren? On what account or charge might we be exorcised in our turn? And what would we say in our defence?

There is, of course, no denying that we have lost our innocence. Culture, once so easily assumed and ingenuously described, has become the subject of exhaustive interpretation (Geertz 1973), turns out to have been an invention (Wagner 1975), and has got itself into an unenviable predicament (Clifford 1983). Yet for my part, I’ll always have a soft spot for Malinowski, forever associated with the smells and textures of the Bodleian reading rooms where my younger self marvelled at the sexual proclivities of those savage Trobriand Islanders - even if much of what he actually said and, more to the point, how he said it, is lost to me now in the mists of my own personal dreamtime.

Exorcise (2): to set free; to lay to rest. Exorcism doesn’t have to be an excommunication, a cutting of ties, a conquest. It also carries connotations of communicating with, making our peace with. It’s time we set our ancestors free, perhaps, of our values, our expectations, our judgements. By the same token we might also make a bid to be released from any categorisation and judgement of our discipline as a whole by an outside gaze that takes in only the landmarks of the past. Like the pyramids, they should be visited, but not taken as indicative of the landscape of the present, the nearby city conveniently ignored.
At the same time, is our methodology not - like the very music we study - subject to a continuous cycle of change and renewal, rediscovery and revival? It doesn’t simply bid farewell to the past, never to return. Surely we are not going to fall for the simple dualism of new and old, or the assumption of an evolutionary progress whereby the past is always outgrown, transcended?

‘New’ directions and their contingencies

Some of us might fret about some of the musicians we work with being only too eager to cut the ties with their ancestors and jump in at the deep end of a brave new world where anything is possible and anything goes. We in our turn are faced with the challenge of constantly re-evaluating and reclarifying our vision both of the ancestors and of the brave new world that might be beckoning to us and find a happy marriage between them - so that we can say, like the Corsican musicians whose words spangle my field, that we are respecting our heritage while also striving to be true to the spirit of our own times. The death of objectivity, like the ‘death of God’, allows us to move on into a more complex, challenging and relevant future, but without the need to relinquish our intrinsic belief in the values of the old religion or our urge to strive for a better understanding of its best intentions.

The way is admittedly strewn with double-binds and ironies. We have (quite rightly) striven to exorcise the shame of our colonialist past. We have devoted ourselves to the task of ensuring that previously disparaged or exoticised traditions are recognised as proper music, real art - only to see them turned into the new objects of desire for the new ‘world’ consumer, forced to strut their stuff on the catwalks of the west together with ‘world hair’, or perhaps reappearing in dubious company in compilations like *World Chill: Laid Back Grooves for Global Minds*.

In this ‘new’ era of ecumenical endeavour and political correctness, aesthetic evaluations become taboo. Comparison is too easily confused with discrimination. I worry that ethics might be in danger of going the way of health and safety. I do not mean to suggest that we should be reckless - more than ever we need to keep our wits about us, to reflect on the implications of our actions,
and to stand by our principles - but we are surely grown-up enough to know that the water is hot. Meanwhile, political correctness, it seems, has already crossed over into censorship. Too many constraints - particularly those that are borrowed - will strangle our creativity, our individuality, our originality, our potential to make a singular contribution from within our own ranks.

How much of our recent concern with the politics of representation and the need for reflexivity might, in retrospect, appear to have been just another syndrome? Now we’re in danger of overcompensating, some would say. We’ve done enough beating of the breast and baring of the soul. We need to get out more. I have started to develop an allergy to polyphony, despite my natural liking for it. I remain sceptical about the possibility of keeping our consciences clear and our hands clean, no matter how much we allow all those other voices space on our pages. The polyphonic ploy does not ultimately let us off the hook.

If we really want to forefront the people we work with, promote their cause or, for that matter, engage them further in the debate they may already have entered into of their own volition, perhaps we need to be prepared to stick our necks out more after all. Why not risk controversy? In the arts world creating a hue and cry is, after all, recognised as one of the most effective marketing devices. In the context of ‘them’ reading what we write (Brettell 1993), making observations may be confused with criticism, exploration may be confused with exploitation (Beaudry 1997: 78), we may become a scapegoat for all manner of evil spirits. We can’t expect to control the outcomes. Are we brave enough to take the risks? Perhaps the biggest question in this whole debate is: what is the new integrity and how do we achieve it?

So what are the songlines we follow today and where are they leading us? We’ve done the post-objective, post-scientific, post-colonial, post-modern. We have been born again into the ‘new testament’ ethnography of Geertz (Kingsbury 1997: 245) and have come to terms with the notion of a career change from being objective scientific observers and analysts to being the directors of our own dramas, the authors of our own ‘findings’. We have survived a suspected epidemic of ‘symbolitis’ (Nattiez 1983: 461; cited in Shelemay 1996). In the process, we have undeniably learnt and contributed much of value, the best of which we will take with us to the next stage. Where are we heading now? We
have certainly come a long way since the 1960s when Merriam (1964: viii) bewailed the neglect of the anthropological side of our discipline: ‘questions concerning human behaviour and ideation in conjunction with music’ have since been asked by the lorry-load. Some (e.g. Shelemay 1996) deem us to have gone too far in the opposite direction to a point where the music is in danger of disappearing beneath a sea of discourse. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, voices are being raised anew with the plea that we should not forget the music itself. The concept of ‘performance ethnography’ has already taken hold. John Baily (this volume) has invoked the notion of ‘musicking music’ as well as speaking music, arguing for the achievement of a high standard of performance as a goal in its own right, not simply as a part of fieldwork methodology. Martin Clayton (this volume) has proposed an agenda for a phonocentric ethnomusicology. Others would argue that there is still a place for comparative musicology. At a broader methodological level, Suzel Reily (1998) has lamented the devaluation of ethnographic description and has called for a return to ‘obsessional empiricism’ as part of a more holistic approach to fieldwork. Philip Bohlman has repeated a new call for ‘activism’. Meanwhile, questions of meaning seem to me to have wind still in their sails as we embark on another ‘new’ millennium, in particular the issue of agency, the process whereby the musicians with whom we engage seek consciously to evolve and represent their own traditions, to find a new understanding of authenticity; the multiple meanings of music as both product and process in a world that is both converging and fragmenting; the role and meaning of music in peace and war.

**Embracing the nuclear family**

Thus far I have argued for embracing rather than exorcising the ancestors, for opening doors rather than closing them, for debate and controversy rather than either definitive judgement or skirting of issues, for learning to recognise and negotiate shifting sands, for knowing deep water when we see it but taking the plunge nonetheless. Where does all this leave us in terms of the ethnomusicology/musicology divide?

Our grandfather Charles Seeger argued long ago that we were all musicologists. Our cousin Nicholas Cook (this volume) comes to the same conclusion, albeit via the argument that we are all ethnomusicologists now. Bruno Nettl wonders
whether the apparent closing of the gap and mutual crossing of boundaries between the two disciplines is in fact ‘a definitive closing of ranks or a faddish diversion’ (1999: 309). The extent to which musicology might be seen to have rediscovered many of the tenets of ethnomusicology surely remains somewhat restricted. The gulf between the ‘how’ of musicology and ethnomusicology has undoubtedly been narrowed and we have long since argued ourselves out of a distinction based on the ‘where’. But the fact remains that musicology has made fewer inroads into ‘the Rest’ beyond the West than ethnomusicology has into, say, popular music studies.

Would it even make sense, I wonder, to ask the question: Are we all anthropologists now? Yet I, for one, would be sad to part company with my anthropological half-siblings. And there does remain that little thing called fieldwork that makes me think we still have to mind the gap. When I contemplated my ancestors at the start of this piece, figures such as Berlioz, Riemann, Schenker or Hindemith did not immediately spring to mind. My thoughts went straight to the field, the central focus of my work. On the musical side of the divide, I am clearly indebted to those who have taught me the skills of the trade - notation, analysis and so on - but I have not come up with a roll call of ‘grand masters’ without whom I would not have become an ethnomusicologist. I came to ethnomusicology as a musician (rather than a non-musician) and it was admittedly in a department of music that I first engaged properly with the ethnomusicological canon, but it was anthropology more than music that showed me the way, and I realise that it is anthropology that has furnished me with many of my present metaphors. The discovery of ethnomusicology as a discipline in its own right answered the question as to what my future direction should be precisely because it offered a marriage between my two great passions. In being reincarnated as an ethnomusicologist, I entered into a two-parent family. Of course, some of us take after our mothers more, some our fathers. But I am not yet ready to be forced to choose between my parents; I would sincerely like to keep them both.

**Eating at the same table**

My plea, then, is that the ancestors - as defined in terms of both discipline and history - should be allowed to retain their positions in the family tree, viewed
from a different angle, perhaps, or through a different lens, but not toppled. My answer to Kingsbury’s question (which for him embodies his ambivalence about ethnomusicology) as to whether he can ‘eat the cake and avoid some of its carcinogenic properties through a process of enhanced mastication’ (1997: 248) has to be a resounding ‘yes’ (with a modification of the said properties to something more benign). Meanwhile, the future is yet to be claimed.

In some Corsican villages, on the eve of All Souls’, the door is left unlocked and a place is set at the table for the ancestors who will return to their family homes that night. There will always be a place at my table for Malinowski. There will also be a place for all of you. I will offer you an entrée of ancestral salad, followed by a wholesome portion of polyphonic pickle possibly nearing its sell-by date. I wonder what you’ll bring for dessert?

References


