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THERE ISN'T AN ATMOSPHERE WITHOUT TALLAVA: STIRRING SOUND, SPACE, AND RACE IN KOSOVO

Abstract

Along with Fatima El-Tayeb's *European Others* in 2010, many other studies have increasingly focused to see how communities across Europe use vernacular strategies of language, sound, and sexuality to not only subvert and confront coherent notions of Euro-nationalist belonging but also move beyond the need to respond to the Eurocentric white gaze. While in western Europe these debates have mostly revolved around the supposed 'native' white European and the 'migrant' other, in Southern and Eastern Europe, these binary differences are more complex given the regions' complex race-relations, much of which remain underexamined. This article is a modest attempt to probe the intersections of race, space and spirituality in Kosovo through the debates that have emerged on tallava music. Specifically, I examine the ways in which tallava music generates complex racial and religious anxieties among the Albanian mainstream in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia, where the genre is associated with Albanian speaking Ashkali and Roma communities. The first section of the article deals with the pejorative words used in relation to the Roma people in regard to tallava, and how what is perceived to be European is seen as more prestigious. The second half of this article deals with the origins of tallava and how it is valued. Finally, in the conclusion, remarks are offered on the nature of race-relations, spirituality, and space in the context of weddings, which are the main forum in which tallava music is enjoyed.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Music, Tallava, Kosovo, Roma, Race

Introduction

Summers in Kosovo are characterized mostly by weddings and weddings by music. People start counting how many family weddings will happen this summer and out of a sudden you hear someone asking “Is there *tallava* music”? Even if there is no wedding, many Albanians play *tallava* to set the atmosphere. “Nuk ka atmosferë pa *tallava*” (There isn’t an atmosphere without *tallava*) are expressions that many say when expressing their desire to have a good time by attending family gatherings, parties and engaging in dancing. Besides having many fans, this music has many others who strongly dislike it. To understand the hatred towards *tallava* as music, it is necessary to evaluate the historical background of its birth and why some feel great anxiety towards, despite the fact that a great majority likes it.

The greatest complex that is often faced among our peers, friends, family is related to the notion of physically appearing European as asset of good sounding culture. Unfortunately, this “western branding” has produced conflicts inside a country with many ethnic groups. Understanding local issues without the submission of this European secular identity needs elaboration of certain historical issues. In *Unmapping Islam in Eastern Europe: Periodization and Muslim Subjectivities in the Balkans*, Piro Rexhepi argues that cleaning Muslims from Europe after the fall of the Ottoman Empire was a colonial plan (Rexhepi, 2017, p.54). Furthermore, he argues that the “politics of elimination, separation, and assimilation of Muslims, at the basis of the interwar politics of Balkan nation-states, resulted in a wave of policies enacted by the Yugoslav Kingdom to colonize the Muslim-populated areas in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo” (p.59). By 1988, many attempts were made not to let Balkan Muslims be together by using “pre-existing European Islamophobia” (p.62). A separation from the rest of the *ummah* as Muslims has resulted in the treatment of Balkan-Muslims as “secular nation-state subjects” (p.66). The white secular European for Albanians is forwarding a secular history by erasing Islam, which Rexhepi argues above, but simultaneously denying any cross-cultural connection to racialized communities such as the Roma. In *Faith and Politics in Kosovo*, Jeton Mehmeti argues the same. The secularization process does not date since Kosovo entered a new political era in 1999 but instead it was a plan during Yugoslavia upon some Muslim populated parts. This brought to life a more atheistic “political and intellectual elite” by reducing Islam to the private sphere only (Mehmeti, 2015, p.68). In addition to a secular life, this particular distinction is what guarantees a white European Albanian identity. In this regard, Roma people hitherto remain the most discriminated group in society. Discrimination does not only happen in their public and private life but in institutions as well (Nimani, p. 6). In the same report, it is estimated that Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians are the most discriminated groups in Kosovo (p.7). A clear separation of what is a good life is constantly drawn by what the elite considers good culture. To understand the secular aspect and the binary oppositions of culture, it is important to observe historically of how *tallava* as a musical genre has evolved and why has the Kosovar elite emerged with a distinction of what is good culture and who should be part of the public sphere. This article aims to amplify the voices of a minority of academicians who are trying to write about other discriminated minorities when one is judged because of the music they listen to, or cultural activity they engage in, based on western-oriented vectors resulting in complexities of any kind that also lead to racism. Culture in itself is not static, but a flowing phenomenon. This article focuses not only on issues of diversity only, but also raises a serious issue concerning Roma people in Kosovo. Methodologically, this article is based on critical

analysis towards discourses of East vs West, white vs not white, Albanian vs Roma, elite vs popular culture binary oppositions.

Defining Tallava

According to Mikaela Minga, tallava is related to the ethnic group known as Ashkalije, which are the Albanian speaking Roma people in Kosovo (Minga, 2016, p. 130). Under the initials RAE in Kosovo three ethnic groups enter: Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians. It is argued that this division happened during the 1990 as a “self-identifying” division. The group who spoke Albanian identified themselves as Ashkali (Baldwin, 2016, p. 8-9). According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2011 census) in total, there are 15,436 Ashkalije living in Kosovo (p. 60).

For Kafu Kinolli the head of the musical band *Gypsy Groove* tallava is a musical style which uses improvisation to talk about the life of a person or family member through a song (Kika, 2018). Studies about tallava include western researchers as well. On the other hand, Jim Samson argues that tallava “is minimalist in idiom, with a single repetitive rhythm applied to very simple, largely unchanging, harmonies in a manner akin to some disco idioms. Over this background, the soloist improvises (and for very long periods) in a distinctly oriental, nasal toned manner, but with a melismatic idiom that is often more akin to Indian than to Arabic traditions” (p.78). Like Minga, Samson argues that tallava is related to Roma specifically Ashkalije. Considered low music, tallava mainly was played at wedding ceremonies and rarely on official channels (Samson, 2013, p.78-9). Today, unlike what Samson has found out, tallava is broadcasted on many channels, because the singers are not compromised by the Roma people only, many of them are Albanians as well.

Carol Silverman (2012) on the other hand, remarks that the word “*tallava*” derives from the Romani word “*tel o vas*, ‘literally under the hand, referring to the solo women’s Romani dance čoček (chochek) where the hands are waved delicately” (p.35). Tallava during the 1980s was mainly played by people who assumed to be gay male musicians performing for female meetings. During the 90s, Mikaela Minga explains that tallava moved from the private sphere to the public one as a genre for the masses (Minga, 2016, p.130). Because of its roots, and all non-gypsy ethnic groups in Kosovo are seen lower in status, these musicians avoided any type of nationalistic lyrics but performed “songs that call for homogenization within a specific ethnic group, gypsies are introducing improvised praise songs with lyrics addressing the individuals” (Pettan, 1996, p.38-39).

According to Minga, tallava has come to be known in Albania around 2007-2008 when two tallava singers Muharrem Ahmeti and Amza Tairov were invited in Top Show of Top Channel. She points out that the rules of the show were broken because of the atmosphere created by the singers. She mentions this particular show because the interviews she had with musicians and non-musicians said that this is the time they remember the first tallava to be performed in Albania (Minga, 2016, p.134-135).

Why do some people react with anxiety towards *tallava* and some love it

Throughout history we have witnessed that music plays a fundamental role in the lives of Roma people. Their talent both in singing and instruments has been a means of elevation towards local struggle. Following Paul Gilroy in *Rhythm in the Forces of Forces* he describes music “as organized sound confronts critical theory as a test of the limits and the character of

representation. It manifests the will of its creators, and, as I have already said, it has supplied a means to summon our utopias and, as Bloch and Said would have it, to bring that elusive “not yet” nearer so we can sample it and see whether it is, after all, what we desire” (Gilroy, 2019, p.382). This particular definition brings us to the critique that is pointed towards *tallava*. Beyond critical theory, *tallava* has developed as a way of creating and sharing social experiences outside political life. This cultural resistance proves that people welcomed this musical genre and that *tallava* is something more than to be criticized. The anxiety towards the music is closely related to the inferiority and hatred that many Albanians have for Roma people. The discourse of ‘the other’ especially in regard to culture is strongly emphasized in Kosovo. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) argues how the Westerners created the ‘Orient’ “as the ultimate Other in history, literature, art, music, and popular culture” (Burney, 2012, p. 23). According to Said “...without examining Orientalism as discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, military, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (Said, 1987, p.3). In light of that, that the Balkans have been considered the ‘other’ of Europe does not need evidence, is what Maria Todorova argues (Todorova, 2009, p.3). Her statement is thus challenged. Regarding her views, Adem Ferizaj (2019) writes that “Although Maria Todorova highlights in her influential 1997 book *Imagining the Balkans* that the Balkans are depicted in an Orientalist manner, she distances herself from Said’s Orientalism concept by refraining from considering the Balkans from a postcolonial perspective since the region is “predominantly Christian” and is lacking “colonial legacies” (Todorova 2009, 20). It is worth noting that Enis Sulstarova does explicitly refer to Said’s Orientalism claiming that “the binary West vs Orient/East in political and intellectual Albanian discourses is imported from the European demeaning perspectives and concepts linked to the Orient which became part of Western culture, especially during the colonial era” (Sulstarova 2013, 10). When he addresses Todorova’s concept of Balkanism, he argues that the different forms of Orientalisms “should not be seen as separated from each other, but as a continuity in which the differences between the West and the Orient/East, or Europe and Asia are used in order to create social and cultural differences between and within states” (Sulstarova 2013, 26). Referring inter alia to Maria Todorova’s work, Isa Blumi notes that “many scholars from the region, sensing their marginalized position within Western academic circles, have made efforts to distinguish the Balkans from the Ottoman Empire, arguing that they conform more closely to a Central European or Russian trajectory than to an Ottoman one (read: Islamic and un-Western past)” (Blumi 1998, 528). Piro Rexhepi also distances himself from the concept of Balkanism for the following reasons: “[f]irst, the erasure of Muslim histories undertaken by post-Ottoman nation-building historiographies in the Balkans has naturalized the “Christian” [...] past. [...] Finally, the third and perhaps more important reason relates to the narrow focus of colonial/postcolonial studies as well as its limited application in studies of contemporary politics and international relations” (Rexhepi 2018b, 23 cited in Ferizaj 2019, p. 73-4). The entire narrative of the ‘other’ inside Kosovo, lays more or less in the concepts discussed above. Albanian vs Roma, Muslim vs Secular, Elite vs Popular. That there is a chronology of ‘the other’ does not need proof. The hatred towards Roma people and their music is strongly connected to these binary oppositions. Homogenous narratives created by Europe that Albanians of Kosovo applied in different aspects, specifically towards Roma people. To get back to the root of this article, which is the musical genre *tallava*, the Kosovar elite considers *tallava* as cheap, tasteless music which

contains no meaningful worth and above all, they deny the experiences of those who experience tallava as popular culture. But what is popular culture?

Popular Culture

Throughout the history of culture, there existed two distinctions: 'elite' and 'low' culture. Many have raised the question whether popular culture should be considered serious, an idea challenged by the Birmingham School where Cultural Studies was born. The founder of Cultural Studies is considered Richard Hoggart at the University of Birmingham (Storey, 2009, p.57). The concept of culture has been widely discussed. Raymond Williams (1983) outlines three main definitions. First, culture can refer to 'a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development', a 'particular way of life', and third "culture as signifying practices" (Storey, 2009, p.2). According to Williams, although culture is a very difficult theoretical concept, it refers to artistic and intellectual effort but to also other things that are not intellectual but contain meaning and value, by which Williams refers to a 'way of life' (Williams, 2018, p.904). On the other hand, popular culture is a difficult concept as well, but what has been perpetuated in regard to popular culture it is considered as '*the other*.' The theoretical paradigms towards popular culture as the culture that does not trigger intellectual activity, its participants are passive and above all the Frankfurt school considered ordinary people as fools (Easthope, 1991, p.77). The division of 'high' and 'low' happened during the nineteenth century, England. Theoretical discussions evolved as a result of class relations following changes in technology and especially in cultural technology (Williams, 2018, p.904). The most common opposition that is made is the contrast between 'popular' and 'elite' (Hall, 2018, p. 930). The binary oppositions between 'high' and 'low' or often described as 'mass culture' refers to practices that reach many people unlike 'high' belongs to individuals (Williams, p. 904). It was difficult to define popular culture, but even more problematic for industrial societies. Along definitions of popular culture, it is considered as "hopelessly commercial culture" (Storey, 2009, p.8) Thus, John Fiske argues that despite the argument that popular culture is industrialized, popular culture is a culture from which meaning and pleasure derives. In regard to that, there is more except the divisions of buying and selling. In light of Fiske, he argued that culture "is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without above" (Fiske, 1987, p.23). A great anxiety arose among mass culture theorist, who feared homogenous produced culture. Thus, a great example such as Shakespeare brings down this argument. Until the late nineteenth century he was considered part of the popular theater, unlike today part of high culture. Dwight Macdonald notes that popular culture is imposed from above and its participants are passive (Macdonald, 1953, p.2). Thus, for Fiske, "popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry" (Fiske, 1987, p.23-24).

To go back to the main discussion, by referring to Williams' observation, the "whole way of life" indicates that not only one cultural activity, in this case a genre of music defines someone's aesthetic reasons. But for Williams, it is important to understand the "selectivity of cultural traditions" (Storey, 2009, p.46). According to him, (1996:313) 'this process of selection to be related to and even governed by the interests of the class that is dominant' (Storey,2009, p. 47). This continual selection of culture, in the Kosovar case has resulted in dismissing tallava as a musical genre by not taking into account its historical moment, to contemporary interpretation. In endorsing William's definition of culture, he takes a firm stand that culture as a definition is "of 'the lived experience' of 'ordinary' men and women" (Storey,2009, p. 48). The tendency of

shaping aesthetics by only one form, this paper answers many questions towards the shared values of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious society of Kosovo.

Following Raymond Williams (1983:237), the term popular is all the time related to the 'well-liked by the people'; 'inferior kinds of work' (Storey, 2009, p.5). Another definition of popular culture, is the culture that fails to meet the standards to be considered as high culture. In this regard, many people dislike tallava because it entails nothing to ponder upon, as to cultivate real culture it has to be difficult. The cultural elite of Kosovo has long considered tallava as 'low' culture. Correspondingly, popular culture is mass culture, commercial culture that belongs only to uneducated social strata (Storey, 2009, p.6). In tallava's case, as viewed from the perspective of the elite, only uneducated people listen to it. Many people are made fun of when expressing themselves as fans of tallava music. Because, tallava is seen as the backward and the démodé musical genre denoting the concept of the 'other'. Considered as the such *tallava* is seen as the unwelcome music of the Albanian national decline

Tallava as a negative metaphor

In the same interview for Prishtina Insight, Kinolli declared that the word *tallava* is used as a derogatory term, referring to Roma living people of Kosovo by expressing that *tallava* is 'created by madjups and is not ours' (Kika, 2018). Tatomir Vukanovic's (1996:82) two distinctions indicating Gypsies of Kosovo as "Madjupi" and "Gabelji" claimed that are both of Albanian origin (Pettan, 1996, p. 36). On the other hand, two well-known scientists of the Albanian language Eqrem Çabej and Aleksander Xhuvani claim that the word "madjup" derives from the Greek word *Aegjiptius* as a result by adding the prefix MA we have the word "madjup" (Gjurmëve të Identitetit Egjiptian, 2011).

Both names today are used to indicate filthiness and dirtiness. In the same fashion *tallava* as a word has been used in the colloquial as a pejorative word by not describing a musical genre, but beyond it (Kika, 2018). We often hear "*Mos na kallxo muhabet tallava*" (Do not tell us tallava conversations), or more often, "Our politicians are doing *tallava* politics," which is used in derogatory connotation to point out the lack of quality, culture and class, all of which are consequently generally held opinions about tallava and the communities from which it originated from. Phrases such as '*Do not get dressed like a madjup, or madjup*' are used to insult other Albanians. But '*mos u bon maxhupe*' (do not become a madjup usually addressed to women) is the phrase used mostly when a woman raises her voice for a certain issue, be that in a family discussion or in public sphere. This aligns with many other aspects, but again its root stands that Roma women are ill-behaved unlike Albanian ones are educated and should not behave like that. In other cases, tallava often is used when 'shacis' are mentioned. A 'shaci' is a member of the Kosovar diaspora who visits its homeland every summer. There is a notion that 'shacis' and tallava go hand in hand. In '*Shaci*' as *Another Product of Albanian Orientalism* Adem Ferizaj explains how this expression has come to be used for people who listen to cheap music such as tallava. According to Ferizaj Albanians among other foreigners are seen as the other, where only few can "break- through" in the entertainment industry. Although the word 'schatz' in its literal translation means treasure in German, it is used by Germans as sweetheart. During their stay in Kosovo, Albanians used 'shac' a lot which resulted in indicating to Albanian Diaspora and the construction of this other Ferizaj argues is racist by indicating "the European 'other' itself" (Ferizaj, 2018).

For these reasons, it is impossible to accommodate cultural diversity in Kosovo. In this case, there is an emphasized white identity pronounced against *tallava*.

Tallava and Roma people

Tallava is the bridge to understanding Roma people and other communities that have embraced the genre such as Ashkali and Egyptians. It is peculiar because it represents their culture. Hisham Aidi author of the book "*Rebel Music*" claims that such music is created as "to show that this minority community can transcend its local isolation and be part of a global majority" (Aidi, p.53). For these reasons, there is a need for a narrative of social justice to overcome local injustices. As an example of such rebel music can be considered the group "Gypsy Groove" from Kosovo, which is a multi-ethnic group founded in 2010. This group reflects the neighborhood and compositions in English and Romani, reflect both the global and the local. The local characteristics mainly refer to discrimination and social injustice which according to Baldwin, RAE are the most discriminated groups in Kosovo, including low chances for education following also with a high unemployment rate (Baldwin, 2016, p.9).

Tallava, on the other hand, stands for its peculiarity, naked just as it is, unashamed and not scared of critics. It is a powerful lens through which Roma people and other communities cherish their identity. Besides, tallava singers are composed of Albanians as well, which shows balance, acceptance, and solidarity with Roma culture. Kosovo is a country of cultural pluralism, and tallava, in this case, reflects the identity of Roma people. The question must surely be asked as to why are people so anxious about it?

Aidi explains how French people were worried about the spread of hip-hop and black culture by "bringing social ills associated with the American ghetto to France, including 'belligerent Afro-American lifestyles,' and the 'African-Americanization' of the speech patterns of French youth" (p.56-57). In the same way, the Kosovar elite are worried that tallava is harming traditional Albanian music and that any ill-behavior is associated with Roma people. On the other hand, this is not the case in Macedonia. Samson's study of music in the Balkans, in this case, *tallava*, shows that in Macedonia *tallava*, although originated in Kosovo is associated with non-Albanian speaking Roma people who live in the district called Sutka outside Skopje and the music is performed in their Romani language. In contrast with Kosovo, mainly looked down as a musical genre, in Macedonia *tallava* "has been a means of forging and consolidating the identities of ethnoreligious minorities within a society whose aim is precisely to transcend such categories" (Samson, 2013, p.79), unlike in Kosovo, the race is an Albanian dilemma.

Weddings

The message is in dancing. Albanian weddings are characterized by traditional Albanian music, but of course, that *tallava* is played as well. Sometimes it's through a DJ and sometimes live. Throughout the wedding, while calm music is played or sung, not many people dance, unlike when *tallava* is played. At this point, it is important to know what this music does to the body that one cannot help but dance. In the same show (Top Show), mentioned above where Minga explains that tallava in Albania started at that time, in addition to the people that were dancing there is a part during the show when the lady who plays the violin cannot handle herself while sitting but joins the others in dancing.

In *A Synopsis of "Egyptian Soundscapes: Music Sound and Built Environments Conference"*, McGee points to Dr. Michael Frishkopf's lecture, in which he mentions the

concept of 'resonance.' Resonance according to Dr. Frishkopf is 'the collective ecstasy binding participants together in performance, and together with a worldview, providing a basis for a more durable, local spiritual social fabric' (Mcgee, 2019). To expand, *tallava* unites, is community building, an essential element of people's lives. An interesting thing during the wedding is when the guests ask the singer to sing a song for them while they handle money. Dr. Frishkopf, cited in McGee (2019) argues that the audience and the participants interact with each other, by saying the words, different gestures made and giving money is part of the communication that indicates to the singer with what kind of speed should the program move. Put forward, the Arabic word 'taraab' which indicates emotional intensity was used by Dr. Frishkopf to point out the connection of the guests and the environment they are (Mcgee, 2019).

The unique thing about *tallava* is not that it was born as a musical genre, rather its expansion, meaning that people welcomed it. *Tallava* broke in through its popularity to revolt against inferiority that was brought by the ones who dislike *tallava*, a remake of two cultures within the territory of Kosova. *Tallava* opened two doors: Roma emancipation and further discrimination, belittling and 'othering' among those with strong sentiments against *tallava*. The latter's hateful narrative has very much to do with race as a result of life in Kosovo being mixed but separated, with ethnic and racial groups living next to each other but not with each other. To grasp this complex interaction it is of utmost importance to look at the narratives stemming from Roma community as well as to be able to understand how discourses of cultural otherness are built in Kosovo, *otherness* here being an imperative word.

To understand the Roma discourse on the cultural otherness in the context of Kosovo, let's turn to Fatima el Tayeb, author of *European Others*, who claims that "these groups of "foreigners," and any individual that through looks or residence is assumed to belong to them, are thus subjected to a particular kind of policing: their access to the European public space is shaped by numerous qualifications, they must be constantly ready to prove, through a variety of papers and permits, that their presence in a particular nation, city, neighborhood, street, is legitimate—a situation that makes it certainly difficult to feel at home or accepted" (Tayeb, 2011, p.23). In similar way, cafes serve as a public sphere in Kosovo where the elite or the "proper people" of the country have set rules of selecting people for entrance. Unfortunately, this access to these public places is almost impossible for Roma people. In most cases they are seen as thieves and problematic individuals. But to be qualified for a seat in such places you have to be white which relates to the argument that El Tayeb makes in linking "the access to full human rights to being Western and white" (p.24) and very much to the Said's argument of the 'other.'

Making comparison to the situation of minorities in Europe, who through hip-hop intend to break stereotypes and build communities, Fatima observes that "Hip-Hop's appropriation in Europe allowed for the creation of a remarkably fluent movement that has engaged in the process of building a community that avoids the seemingly unavoidable retreat to an essentialism differentiating between "us" and "them"—not by denying that there are fundamental differences running through European societies, but by insisting that these differences can be names and dismantled" (p.35). Likewise, *tallava* is a bridge of interpersonal conflict for communities who share history of discrimination. This merging of "us" and "them" has been made through emancipation, appreciation and collaborations of Albanian singers with Roma ones, and example of which is Flori Mumajesi, a very famous singer from Albania, who

has collaborated with Roma singers and musicians on several occasions using tallava bits in his songs. Flori is among great examples for multi-ethnic coexistence peers. Other Albanian singers who embraced Roma musicians are Aurela Gace and Silva Gunbardhi. Silva's collaboration with Mandi, a Roma singer broke records of viewers on Youtube with the song "Te Ka Lali Shpirt." Additionally, the very famous singer and songwriter Rona Nishliu who represented Albania in Eurovision Song Contest 2012 (but is a native of Kosovo) has collaborated with the group "Pëllumb Elmazi" in the song "*Kasnagjesa tu Naxhije*" as a "Tribute to Roma culture in Albania", which can be found on her channel on Youtube. These collaborations remain the battleground on integrating minorities by articulating their culture through music.

Conclusion

Historically, music has invited for understanding, acceptance and above all reflection. The case of *tallava* and Roma people in Kosovo, the racial anxiety most of the time is not straightforward but defined by class and place. That is to say, poorer Albanians are less concerned with racial purity and secularism because they have nothing to gain or lose from such associations – unlike wealthy and urban Albanians whose secularism and Europeaness opens doors to access and privilege. To understand how race is produced, sustained and deployed in and through music, it is important to note that this particular *othering* helps sustain Albanian's fragile sense of whiteness, modernity and secularism.

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