

Singing Like A Sailor.
Some Theoretical and Methodological Remarks on Studying a Dutch Shanty Choir.¹

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In a small village in the province of Groningen, at around half past seven on a Tuesday night, men start to gather in the back room of the local cafeteria for the rehearsal of their shanty choir. Half of them come from the village, the other half from surrounding places. On average their age is around 70. At eight o'clock precisely, after some announcements of the chairman of the choir board, the conductor/accordionist announces the first song by its number. In rapid order and only interrupted by a coffee break, about 20 songs are rehearsed. In some of the songs, various choir members act as soloist. The 40-or-so choir members sing their parts (songs range from unison to four-part harmony) from memory; only the lyrics are in front of them. At exactly a quarter to ten the rehearsal ends. Music stands and amplifiers are quickly stowed away. Many of the choir members then depart to their homes; some 10 or 15 of them will stay for a while, drinking soft drinks, beer, or strong liquor, discussing all kinds of topics in the local dialect.

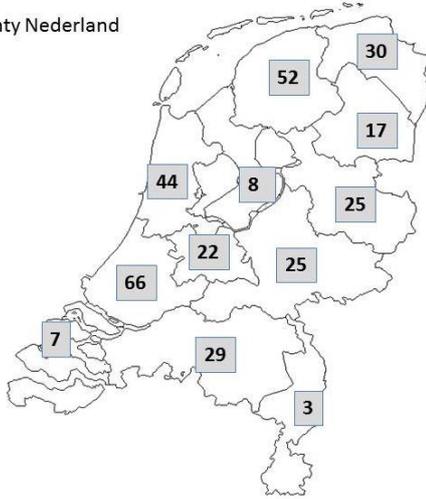
At present, I am conducting an ethnographic study of this shanty choir, near to where I live in the North of the Netherlands. The shanty choir is a common phenomenon in the Netherlands and the North of Germany, also appearing in various forms in other Western-European countries as well as in the USA. Most choirs in The Netherlands are exclusively male, although female and mixed choirs exist. They sing an international repertoire connected – mostly - to the history of seafaring, the identity of the sailor, or the sea in general. Shanty choirs are a relatively recent phenomenon in the Netherlands. The *Scheldeloodsenkoor* from Flushing (Dutch: Vlissingen) claims to be the oldest shanty-choir in the Netherlands; it was established, after the model of a German choir from Kiel, in 1971. The Magellan Singers were the first shanty choir in the North of the Netherlands, based in Delfzijl and established in 1983. At present Shanty Nederland, the Dutch shanty music organization,

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has 328 members, most of which are shanty choirs; 99 of them reside in the three Northern provinces of the Netherlands, Friesland (52), Groningen (30) and Drenthe (17). In spite of the amount of choirs and their history of over 50 years now, no serious study of Dutch shanty choirs is currently available, nor do I know of any serious studies from other countries.

Members Shanty Nederland
per province
(8/7/2015)



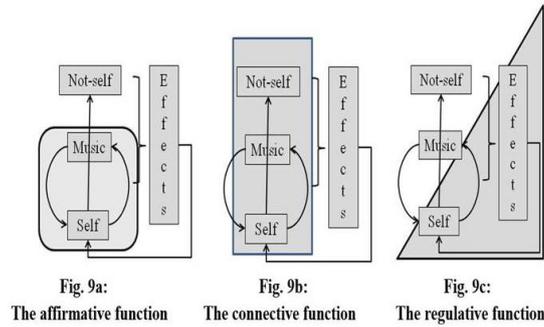
The purpose of my study is not to study ‘the shanty choir phenomenon’, let alone ‘the shanty’ as a musical repertoire. Such type of studies would include me in an all-too-well known discourse in which the study of musical life is done. I see such studies about imagined groups of ‘musickers’ or equally imagined musical repertoires as the less interesting stories to tell about musical life in late-modern societies, because concrete idiosyncratic individuals and their ‘messy’ individual lives too often disappear out of sight – and it is the concerted activity of all those idiosyncratic musical individuals that make up that musical life. My goal at present is to write an ethnographic study of precisely this unique shanty choir at this moment

of time. What concerns me is a study of music as social practice through the study of a particular shanty choir; or more generally, to answer Clifford Geertz’ famous question: “What the hell is going on here?”.

My study is based in practice theory as formulated by German cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz. Practice theory turns attention first to the concrete socio-musical situations in which individuals interact, and then to the more abstract bodily-mental routines behind that – to our “shared and contested ways of doing and saying”, or even our shared and contested ways of ‘musicking’ which lie at the basis of what we might term culture. I understand culture as an inherently ambiguous, hybrid and dynamic phenomenon. A description of ‘culture’ should lead to what Tim Rice called ‘subject-centered ethnographies’ focusing on self-identity in late-modernity. At the background for me always lie powerful ideas expressed in the social theory called ethnomethodology as developed by Harold Garfinkel, whose project it was to shed light on “the socially standardized and standardizing, ‘seen but unnoticed’, expected, background features of everyday scenes” – for example on, in ethnomethodological terms, ‘doing being shanty choir’.

Eventually I hope that my ethnography will shed some light on one of the main topics of ethnomusicological research: the uses and functions of music. The question of ‘what people do with music and what music does for people’ has, since Alan Merriam put it on the agenda with his famous 1964-list of the functions of music, been answered in many ways. For my research, I base myself on an integration of many previously developed models in a model in which the three main functions of music in late modernity are: affirmation of the self; connection of the self to the world; and regulation of self and others.

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I am still in the early phases of research in this project. I have become a member of the choir and done participant observation, producing field notes, for two years now. What I would like to share with you in this paper, which is a sort of ‘interim report’, is some thoughts on the value of a metaphor which forced itself into my attention. I would like to make some comments on the value of this metaphor: is it already an early analysis – a ‘proto-analysis’ - of the data, or has this metaphor a different status?

The metaphor is the metaphor of the ship. After two or three rehearsals I wrote this entry in my fieldwork notebook:

19/9/2013

“Maybe the following plays a role: we are no singers, we are members of a shanty choir. On a ship there were no singers, but sailors.

Everybody did everything together, everybody made a contribution in his own way. And it’s about power, not beauty.”

I took this up a couple of months later:

3/12/2013

“It’s a male community. Are stories about cancer of the prostate shared in this way on birthdays and parties, or is the shanty choir a distinct occasion? Precisely because it has a ‘male’ character? Is this the place where men share their sorrow? One step further: is the idea of the ‘male society’ part of the attraction on the choir members? Is this – sharing life’s joys and sorrows between men – what they are looking for? (...)

Note: not a woman in sight at rehearsals – apart from the Chinese barkeeper. Is it a happy coincidence that she is Chinese (and therefore less ‘woman’)? Women do attend the performances – is the essence of the choir the rehearsal? Is the rehearsal room a ship? Is the bus on the way to a performance a ship?”

The metaphor of the ship has taken a persistent place in my mind over the past two years. Of course because I am studying a choir singing songs about the three S’s: Seas, Ships and Sailors. But also because the ship, in a more general sense, seems a fitting metaphor for any well-demarcated socio-musical situation such as a choral rehearsal. For a ship journey, sailors coming from all kinds of places flock together for a limited time (the duration of the voyage) in a limited place (the ship). There is some sort of general goal that unites them (reaching the next harbor; or, more basic, making sure the crew survives and the ship does not sink), and at the same time each sailor has his personal goals, motives, or ex-post-facto explanations: being on a ship; earning money; being away from the family; seeing foreign coasts and harbors; acquiring a professional identity as ‘a sailor’; doing a job one is particularly good in; et cetera et cetera.

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It is this what I see when I park my car in front of the rehearsal building and sit for a couple of minutes, watching my fellow members enter the building. They flock together from different directions, coming from different homes, having done different things in the hours before the rehearsal, each bearing his own biography within himself. They unite for a period of two hours to 'perform' the shanty-choir; together they are tentatively 'doing-being-shanty-choir' for two hours, after which they dissolve and will start 'doing-being-something-else'. And figuring out how this 'doing-being-shanty-choir' works, and what it brings the individual members of the choir, is my project.

A good example of this 'doing-being-shanty-choir' is the way it is organized. The choir formally is a Society according to Dutch law – a very specific legal organizational form characterized by the fact that a society has members, the members choose a board which takes care of daily affairs, but members decide about all more fundamental affairs. Of course, any number of people wanting to sing together can in principle do so; but for some reason this choir – and many other choirs – chose to be a society, and as a consequence will behave like what they think is adequate behavior within a society. So not only are there the – legally required – Statutes of the society and the yearly Society Members' Meeting, but for that meeting documents are written and rewritten, speeches are prepared and practised, the rehearsal room is rearranged to demarcate the board members from the ordinary members – a distinction not very important in the weekly rehearsals itself - , and ordinary members may only speak out if they have asked to speak – a phenomenon completely absent in the weekly rehearsals, where an interesting continuous friendly communicational struggle between the conductor and the choir members enrolls, which includes the occasional interruption of the rehearsal for the telling of a dirty joke by the conductor.

It is this 'doing-being-A-Legal-Society' which is apparently part of the 'doing-being-shanty-choir'. So is the 'doing-being-a-rehearsing-choir'. Rehearsals are well-structured and governed by all kinds of more or less implicit rules: for example, the end of the break and therefore the beginning of the second part of the rehearsal seems to be announced by the initiative of one particular choir member who will be the first to leave his seat and walk to his music stand. The decisions on solo singing seem to be made by the conductor alone but informal talks with him reveal that choices are neither random nor based on musical criteria alone; there is a fine line to be walked here, songs are in a sense 'owned' by their soloists, and other shanty choirs are rumored to have split because not enough attention was paid to the way soloists were chosen. And singing three- or four-part harmony equally has its own implicit rules, of which 'parallel motion in thirds and sixths is preferred' seems to be one, and 'it shouldn't sound too rehearsed' may be another one. It is this intricate play of explicit and implicit 'ways of doing and talking' that defines the reality of this choir. And the ship metaphor seems, for now, to be helpful to explain some of the characteristics of this choir.

As I said, the metaphor of the ship came to me early on and is very persistent. At the same time I soon started feeling uncomfortable with it. After having toyed around with it for some time I wrote in my field notes:

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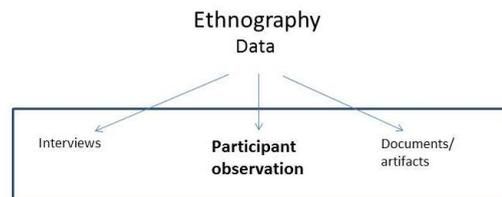
“‘To be in the same boat’. And also: disappointment – is that it? Is that the explanation? So fast? Does this not exclude the possibility of other interpretations?
‘Methodological reserve.’”

‘Methodological reserve’, I wrote in my field notes, and I would like to linger on that for some moments. Why this reserve? And why is it ‘methodological’? To answer that question, we have to take a few steps back.

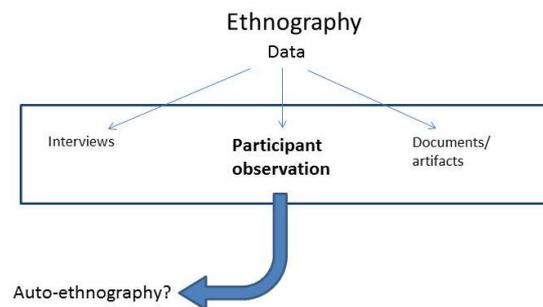
Let me start with stating the obvious: my research is an example of what is called ‘ethnomusicology-at-home’. Ethnomusicology-at-home is a not-so-intensively discussed concept in ethnomusicology, and methodological questions are either ignored or dismissed as grossly irrelevant because participant observation is the first-and-foremost research method in ethnomusicology anyway, no matter where you are working and who you are.

The matter is of course more complex than that. Participant observation exists thanks to the idea that it “exploits the capacity that any social actor possesses for learning new culture, and the objectivity to which that process gives rise”. But when in ethnomusicology-at-home I study the music in my own backyard, the question is not how to learn a new culture; rather, the question is how to look at a rather well-known culture with fresh eyes and, in our case, to listen to it with fresh ears.

In earlier research, I therefor decided to exclude participant observation as a method of data gathering. However, in the present study I wanted consciously to include participant observation again, because I was curious how this would work for me. I therefore made a research design in which I would, in a first phase, join the choir and focus on participant observation, later on – I am precisely at that moment now – combining it with narrative interviews and document study. A classical ethnographic approach.



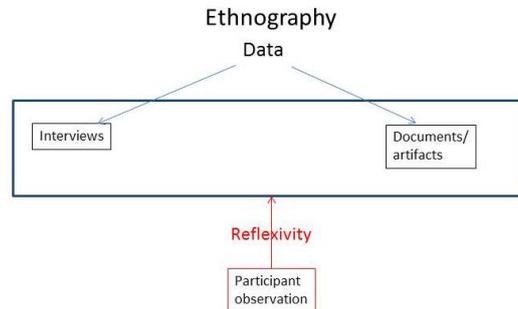
What gradually became clear in the result of the participant observation, my field notes, is that right from the start I was very present in my notes. This presence soon become more than just the methodological reflexivity necessary to uncover the implicit presumptions of the researcher which – especially in ethnomusicology-at-home – may provide one of the pitfalls of ethnographic data analysis. What took me by surprise is that over the months, my more reflexive field notes kind of ‘took over’ the more descriptive ones, up to the point where I found myself writing about myself most of the times.



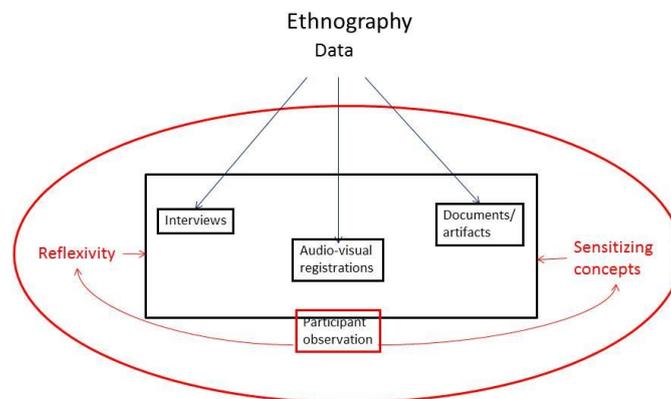
My attempt at participant observation in ethnomusicology-at-home soon turned partly into a form of auto-ethnographical writing I did, and do, not feel at ease with. My research personality does not match with it. I favor the idea of ethnography which reflexively takes into account the researcher’s biographical motives and sources, yes, but without making research into a personal form of self-interpretation. I want to keep up the presumption that ethnographic research is “imaginative writing about real people in real places at real times”, as Geertz puts it.

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It was only gradually that I could untangle the knot I had knitted myself. First I feared that field notes turning into a form of reflexive writing would be a dead end for me. But at some point, I reversed my feelings: as reflexive writing is so important in ethnomusicology-at-home, why not granting the field notes precisely that value?



What supported me greatly was a central idea I encountered in ethnomethodology, ‘the unique adequacy requirement’. This requirement suggests that “analysts be, or become, competent at performing the practices they set out to study” – an idea straightforward for any ethnomusicologist. The idea consists of two elements: ethnographers study an external reality, namely the practices of others. And secondly: to do so, they must develop an adequate interpretation framework for those practices. And then the status of participant observation shifts from a primary data source to a means to fulfill ‘the unique adequacy requirement’; or, in Grounded Theory–terms, to generate ‘sensitizing concepts’ to use in subsequent data analysis.



The fact that participant observation acquires a different function does not mean that concrete practices disappear as data. Of course, in the times of classical fieldwork à la Malinowski researchers could only rely on participant observation, but we now live in the times of ‘neo-classical fieldwork’ (as German anthropologists Meyer and Schareika put it), where audio-visual recordings enable us – with all restrictions – to ‘capture’ practices and make them available for a distanced, in a sense ‘objectifying’ and precise micro-ethnographic analysis. Summing up, in my thinking the ship metaphor is not a result of first – implicit – data analysis anymore; rather, it has become a sensitizing concept prior to any serious analysis of data.

When my choir begins a performance, they always sing the first song in the songbook. It is called ‘Het Raaitvinkenlaid’ – the song of the Eurasian Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus Scirpaceus*). This little bird is the nickname for the inhabitants of the village where the choir is seated. The club anthem, written in the local dialect by one of the very senior choir members, explains that “we sail on big ships”, “our crew listens to a beautiful name”, “we have to keep on sailing always”, and “when we become older

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(...) we will still gather to tell about seas and beaches; yes, we will always be there for each other". And as I stand between my choir mates and sing this song, I realize that it is no more than logical that the metaphor of the ship pops up.

But what I now suspect to happen is that eventually the metaphor of the ship will vanish, or at least will fragmentize. Because 'the shanty choir' in general does not exist, nor does 'this particular shanty choir'. What exists is this bunch of idiosyncratic individuals, me included, 'doing-being-shanty-choir'. If my ethnography, in a couple of years' time, will be able to explain how this bunch of individuals, me included, is able to coordinate their actions in such a way that they act, for some time every week, as a shanty choir, and if I am able to explain what this brings the individual members, I will be more than happy. And if that contributes to our understanding of the Dutch world of music as a world in which idiosyncratic individuals in thousands of individual ways for thousands of good reasons affirm themselves as musical persons, connect themselves in musical ways to the world, and regulate themselves and others through music, and if that may be the contribution of ethnomusicology-at-home in Dutch academia, I will be even happier.