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Shaping identities in choir competitions in Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Choir competitions are popular events in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), as well as in other Christian denominations in the country. Competitive musical events, though, are not restricted only to choirs, or to the church context; they exist in many forms throughout East Africa (see e.g. Gunderson & Barz 2000). In this article, I explore choir competitions as sites for building, strengthening, and expressing identities in one diocese of the ELCT, approached through interviews with ten choir conductors from this diocese. In addition to being events where the musical skills of the choirs and conductors can be demonstrated, these competitions are occasions in which sameness and difference become accentuated.

The ELCT is one of the world's largest Lutheran churches, with approximately 7.6 million members throughout Tanzania (LWF 2020), currently divided into twenty-six dioceses (ELCT 2020). Choral singing is a popular activity among the church members of all ages. The church choir tradition in Tanzania dates back to the nineteenth century, to the time when European missionaries first came to East Africa. Kelly Askew (2002, 70) calls choirs, or *kwaya* in Swahili language, “the musical consequence of Christian evangelism and African churches that traces its roots to European choir music.” Church choirs exist in many different forms and use different kinds of musical styles, which all play an important role within the choir music scene of the church. The different repertoires provide both singers and listeners with a range of choices and identifications.

Choir competitions are organised in many Lutheran dioceses, and some dioceses organise joint competitions for their best performing choirs, but a single event that would gather together the best choirs from the entire ELCT does not exist. The forms of competition differ, and the model presented here is the one that is used in the North Central Diocese (see e.g. Barz 2000 and Kameli 2010 for discussions concerning choir competitions in some other Lutheran dioceses in Tanzania). The North Central Diocese is located in the northern part of Tanzania near the Kenyan border, with Arusha being the largest city in the area.

My interest in Tanzanian church choirs arises from personal experiences with them; I lived in Arusha town in northern Tanzania for five years, between 2010 and

2015. My educational background is in church music, and I was sent to Tanzania by a Finnish missionary organisation to teach music at a local Lutheran university. However, most importantly for my research, throughout that time I was also a member of a local Lutheran church choir in Arusha. I also sometimes taught music outside the university, in music seminars and workshops that were aimed at choir conductors and organised by the Lutheran church. I was also invited several times during those years to judge the church's choir competitions at the parish, district, and diocesan levels.

THEORISING IDENTITY

Identities are about searching for answers to questions such as “Who am I?” or “Who are we?” They are about belonging to and bonding with certain people or groups of people and about distinguishing oneself from some other people or groups. Identities are about sameness and differences that are marked out both at the individual and the group levels (Hammack 2014, 12; Woodward 2002, 74). According to Stuart Hall (1996, 4), difference is the setting through which identities are constructed. While identifying ourselves, for instance, with a group with which we share features, ideas, or interests in common, we simultaneously exclude other groups or people. Identity formation often involves drawing lines between us/me and them, or us/me and others; it is a way of making sense of where and with whom we belong (Woodward 2002, viii–ix). Elements such as history, language, and culture are all influential in this process (Hall 1996, 4).

In terms of group formation and functioning, choirs are like any other groups. They possess their own individual group or choral identities, which are transformable and are shaped over time, in a similar way as other kinds of identities (Bower & Swart 2016, 1, 4). My understanding about group identities follows that of sociologist Stephen Worchel (1998, 65), who states that:

I would suggest that groups are engaged in struggle with other groups and with individual members to establish and maintain a group identity. – Groups strive for their independence from other groups, and they struggle with group members to keep the identity of the group equal to, if not more important than, individual identity.

After it is created, a group focuses on forming its identity, a process which includes defining the boundaries of the group in relation to other groups and the relationships between the members of the group (ibid., 58–59). In my research context, choir competitions are one important site for this negotiation of identity.

In this article, I examine choral identity through elements identified by Rudy Bower and Jan-Erik Swart (2016, 7–12). In their study concerning three children's

choirs in South Africa, Bower and Swart divide the elements that influence the process of choral identity construction into four categories, which include both musical and extra-musical components. The first category is *musical identity elements*, which contain choral repertoires and the use of instrumental accompaniment. Second, there are *visual identity elements* such as uniform or costume, body movements and choreography. *National, cultural and ethnic identity elements* form the third category. The fourth category includes *organisational identity elements*, which in the research by Bower and Swart (2016) refer to the affiliation of the identities of particular schools and/or choirs as private organisations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODS, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to contextualise the identity formation evolving in and through choir competitions, I first ask what kind of organisational frames the competitions maintain, and what are the goals and aspirations of the choir conductors when taking part in the competitions. The main research question is: What kinds of components are involved in shaping identities in choir competitions in the North Central Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania? My focus is on the group identities of the choirs, and the topic is approached through interviews with choir conductors. I look for both musical and non-musical elements that arise from either within or outside of the choirs.

This article forms a part of my ongoing doctoral research, which incorporates both survey and interview materials. However, this article is based only on interviews with ten choir conductors within the North Central Diocese of the ELCT. In addition, I make use of my own experiences with Tanzanian church choirs. In order to conduct research in Tanzania, I received a research permit from the local authority, the Tanzania Commission of Science and Technology (COSTECH). The choir conductors were informed about the research aims and procedures and about the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any time during the research process.

The ten interviewees, of which three were women and seven men, were selected among the survey respondents who had expressed their willingness to be interviewed. My intention in the selection process was to find choir conductors that were differentiated in terms of education, experience, geographical location, repertoire, and choir type. The interviews consisted of predetermined themes that were based on the survey materials and my preconceptions of the topic, with choir competitions being one of those themes.

I conducted the semi-structured thematic interviews in Swahili language, which produced a little bit over nine hours of recorded material, and then transcribed them

verbatim. The excerpts used in this article are my translations. Nine interviews out of ten have been anonymised: names, places of residence, and other personal information have been removed. In the text, they are referred to by numbers. One interviewee is presented by name with his permission, since his professional status would have made anonymisation very challenging, if not impossible. In addition to the formal interviews, I recorded informal discussions with Seth Sululu (Int. 11) – a pastor, choir conductor, and the Head of the Music Department at Tumaini University Makumira in Arusha – who is actively involved in many musical activities within the North Central Diocese. These discussions provided useful information concerning some of my research themes, especially choir competitions. The approach that I used for analysing the interviews is thematic analysis (e.g. Braun & Clarke 2006), and the themes that I used as a starting point for the analysis in this article arose from the categories provided by Bower and Swart (2016).

During this research process, I have often needed to ponder my various roles in relation to the research context and the research participants. Due to my background and experiences in Tanzania, I have had to consider the extent to which I am an “insider” or “outsider”, and how to address this issue. As a researcher, I place myself somewhere “in between,” when it comes to my position in this research context; “I am neither insider nor outsider”, to use the expression by Marcia Herndon (1993, 77) and Timothy Rice (2008, 51). To some extent, I am familiar with the cultural context of this study. However, my personal experience is that the longer you live in another culture the better you see how little you actually understand it.

I realise that my many roles, and my connections to these people and to various institutions such as the ELCT and Tumaini University Makumira – the university in which I worked – have influenced my research in its different phases. During the generation of research materials, I stressed the importance of voluntary participation. However, in a culture where hierarchy is a quite important feature, and authority is respected, it is doubtful that people would say no to a university teacher who asks them to fill in a questionnaire, or would like to know if they are available for an interview. It is easy for me to agree with the following observation made by Anne Ryen (2007, 226): “Being asked to participate is, for many reasons, very difficult to refuse face to face in a local East African setting.”

The interviews were the situations in which my various roles can be seen the most. Many of the interviewees referred to me as *mwalimu*, a teacher. They talked about seminars and workshops in which I had been one of the teachers, or told me that they have been working with their choirs “as you told us to do.” I was often referred to as one of the “experts” or one of “those who know.” Many interviewees positioned themselves in relation to me, for instance, in the following way: “[Y]ou can’t finish your thesis unless there are people that help you. – And those that help you are below you.” (Int. 10)

It has been important to keep this positioning in mind during the whole process, since, as Tarja Tolonen and Tarja Palmu (2007, 93) point out, recognising the power positions of the interview situations is important due to their influence on the situations themselves and on the materials generated during them.

Being known by the research participants should not be seen only as a negative thing, or as a challenge. For some participants, it may have been much easier to talk with someone they already knew, and we may have been able to go much deeper in our discussions than what it would have been in the case with a total foreigner. I had lived in their country, I knew the Swahili language well enough to conduct the interviews myself – although a translator was available in a couple of cases – and as a church musician and a choir member I was familiar with many aspects of their work.

This study covers one geographically and organisationally defined area of the church, namely the North Central Diocese of the ELCT, partly because, among all the dioceses, this was the most accessible and the most familiar to me. This article is not meant to, and it cannot describe the situation of the entire church; it is a picture from a particular period of time, as I encountered it in Tanzania during the years between 2010 and 2015.

RESULTS

The organisation and the goals of choir competitions

In the North Central Diocese of the ELCT, choir competitions are organised every other year. Each time, they start at the local level, in the parishes, and the best choirs continue up to the diocesan level. At the parish level, the choirs within a particular parish compete against each other regardless of the musical style they employ, but at the higher levels, choirs perform within four categories. In the first category, there are mixed choirs singing *a cappella*,¹ usually in four parts. The next category is women's choirs,² who usually sing in three parts (SSA), and *a cappella* as well. Choirs singing traditional music belong to the third category.³ This group is usually divided into two sub-categories: Maasai choirs (Photo 1), and choirs employing other traditional styles. In the fourth category, there are mixed choirs that use instrumental accompaniment.⁴ The instruments are electric: keyboards, guitars, and bass guitars, although sometimes other instruments may be added as well. Choreographed movements are an important part of the performance in this category, and the movements are well rehearsed in order to be as uniform as possible.

¹ The Swahili term for this category is *bila vyombo*, without instruments.

² *Kwaya za akina mama* in Swahili; literally translated "choirs of mothers".

³ *Kwaya za utamaduni* in Swahili; literally translated "choirs of culture".

⁴ *Kwaya za vyombo moto* in Swahili; *vyombo* = instrument, *moto* = hot, fire.



Photo 1. A Maasai choir performing in a choir competition.
(Photo: Gary Sperl. Used with permission.)

In competitions, each choir enters the performance area while singing a song of their choice. In the evaluation of the performance, this song does not get as much weight musically as the other songs; rather, the focus is on the organised entry and on unity. Each choir in its turn approaches the designated performance area, usually in a formation of two queues, singing and trying to make a good impression right from the beginning (Photo 2). My experience is that the organisation of a performance in a competition situation is quite strictly predefined; choirs need to follow certain pre-determined instructions.

In addition to the entry song, in each performance category there is a so-called set song, an obligatory piece for all the choirs of that particular category, and one song that is freely chosen by the choirs themselves. The set song is usually one of the most difficult and less commonly used hymns from the ELCT's hymnal, for instance one of the hymns using minor keys; the goal is to teach choirs, and through them the congregations (Int. 1). The freely chosen song is usually considered a possibility to display the choir's musical skills, as one interviewee pointed out: "[Y]ou are given a set song. But there is [a song of] choir's choice. Now, to the choir's choice you put all your skills." (Int. 8)

For instance, in the *a cappella* category the last song is often a Western (European) or Western style church music composition such as a piece composed by G. F. Handel, who appears to be the most popular Western classical music composer



Photo 2. A Choir entering the performance area. (Photo: Gary Sperl. Used with permission.)

in the repertoire of these choirs, while in the category of traditional style choirs the freely chosen song is based on a particular local tradition, performed with traditional instruments.

There were several goals in mind when these choir competitions were first initiated in this diocese: to raise the level of choirs' and conductors' musical skills, to teach hymns to the congregations through the choirs, to preserve and document traditional Tanzanian music, to build unity in the church, and to spread the Christian message (Int. 11). Since many of these themes were brought up several times by choir conductors during the research interviews, it could be said that the original goals have been successfully promoted, and that they have influenced the choir conductors' thinking at least to some extent. However, whether the goals have had wider implications, for example on teaching congregations or preserving traditional music, is a more arguable question (*ibid.*). These aforementioned goals can be defined on a more general level as musical, ethnic/national, and religious aspects, and can be seen as contributing to various processes of identity formation in the choir competitions.

Choral competitions have been organised in the North Central Diocese for several decades now. The concept was probably borrowed from other dioceses in which competitions had been initiated earlier. For instance, Jenitha Kameli (2010, 83) states that in the North Western Diocese of the ELCT, competitions had started in 1960s in order to foster "the process of evangelisation" in that diocese. Another

source of influence may have been from the government. During the first decades of its independence, Tanzania was a socialist state. Frank Gunderson (2010, 354) contends that, concerning the beginning of socialism in Tanzania, the policies of Tanzania's first president Julius Nyerere "had turned toward the use of music competitions to promote official cultural values." I see here some connections to what was stated earlier about the goals of the choir competitions: the idea of promoting values that are seen as important to the community is a feature common to both.

Common effort is a significant part of the preparation for and the actual performance in the competitions, and it strengthens the sense of togetherness within a group. Competitions bring together people with common interests, and togetherness can also be felt over the boundaries of one's own choir. The interviewees pointed out many advantages that participation in competitions can bring along. According to these choir conductors, the competitions are a way to improve the musical skills of the choirs and to learn new music, either in the form of the set-song or by listening to other choirs' performances. These viewpoints were expressed by interviewees as follows:

I think there isn't any other place where choir members meet, all from the entire diocese. Only in the competition. They build a vast network of music. (Int. 1)

Choir members grow musically. And learn new difficult songs. (Int. 10)

Choir competitions are also important at the individual level. The comparisons that are made between choir conductors can result in them seeking ways to improve their skills as conductors, as these interviewees pointed out:

There are reasons for choirs to participate. I don't think that it's just competition. But it is a way to show us the level we are at. – I go to measure my skills. (Int. 3)

I think I do well, but then I may meet with another conductor who does better. And I learn from him/her. (Int. 4)

Competitions are also a way to keep choirs active, since the challenge for some of them is what I call "seasonal singing:" choirs are busy with learning and working during the competition season, but at other times they do not invest much in musical development. One interviewee explained:

A big challenge in our competitions. You find that the diocese announces that there are these [set] songs, there are months, one month before participating in the competition at the parish level and that is when they start to learn a difficult song. – They should be learning difficult songs all the time, good songs, so that when it's announced that next month we'll participate in the competition, they will learn these songs easily and see that these are just ordinary things without panic. (Int. 3)

This “seasonal singing” is related to the use of guest conductors during the competitions. This means that experienced and/or educated conductors are invited to train choirs for competitions, and sometimes even to conduct the performances in the actual events as well, after which the choirs remain with their own conductors. These interactions can, of course, provide possibilities for learning, but they may also be regarded as temporary moments of activity without any further benefits. It is important to notice that the choir conductors in this context are usually volunteers; they are not paid for their work with the choirs, although it includes rehearsals several times each week and attending church services every Sunday. Additionally, only a few of them have received musical training, be it formal or informal.

Many of the positive aspects that my interviewees expressed regarding the competitions are in line with what Markus Detterbeck (2002, 269) writes about choir competitions in South Africa: “The prospect of challenging other choirs motivates them. It is this goal that binds the members of a choir together socially. Competitions are also social events that provide choirs with the opportunity of observing and interacting with other choirs.” For many choirs and choir conductors, choir competitions are long-awaited events.

Shaping Identities

The need to belong to a group is a basic human feature, and belonging to a choir is one way of fulfilling it. Belonging to a certain group usually means detaching or distancing oneself from some other groups, and it thus brings along with it an idea of us versus them. It is natural for choirs to compare themselves with other choirs; this can happen in terms of musical aspects as well as in other matters. The comparisons are made, and identities are imposed, from the outside as well, and this can sometimes be difficult to accept; they may challenge a choir’s self-understanding. Choir competitions are an arena for these comparisons to take place.

I see the choir competition categories as one visible sign of marking sameness and difference between all the participating choirs, even before the singing starts. These demarcations are based on different musical styles that are performed in different categories. A musical genre can be an effective means in the creation and preservation of group identity; there are us, the insiders of a particular genre, and the others, the outsiders (see Dueck 2017, 127). The choice of the category in which to compete comes from within a choir, and is more generally related to the repertoire that a particular choir sings, with the choir conductor(s) usually being the person(s) responsible for the repertoire-related matters. In addition to the identification with a certain musical style or tradition, choosing a particular category can in some situations be seen as an expression of ethnic identity.

The last song of the competition performance, the freely chosen song, is a possibility to further differentiate oneself from other choirs within a given category through “putting all your skills” into it, as one interviewee explained earlier. It is most often the choir conductor or conductors that are responsible for the decisions concerning the songs to be sung by a particular choir. I consider these musical choices and demonstration of musical skills to be the choirs’ “musical identity elements” in the choir competition situations (Bower & Swart 2016, 7).

Although the emphasis here is on group identities, the competitions are important sites for shaping or maintaining personal musical identities as well. For instance, the freely chosen song is an opportunity for individual choir conductors to stand out from the others and to be profiled as a certain kind of musician, to show “this is who I am”. Many choir conductors compose songs for their choirs, so performing one’s own composition is also an opportunity to demonstrate skills in this area, and to be identified as a composer.

Music is an important component in the process of group identity formation in choir competitions, but there are other elements as well. Although wearing costumes or uniforms is often a part of choir’s performances, in choir competitions it is highlighted (Photo 3). One interviewee explained that “[I]n each competition at the district level we need to have new costumes.” (Int. 8)



Photo 3. In choir competitions, highly unified costumes are important in creating a sense of togetherness, and in showing others to which group one belongs. (Photo: Gary Sperl. Used with permission.)

In the choir of which I was a member, if there was a need for new costumes, a group of choir members were appointed the task of organising the whole process; this could include, for example, choosing the material, finding a tailor, and so on. However, the different options were discussed together with the entire choir before any decisions were made. This means that the members had an opportunity to express their opinions, and that the decision of “how we want to look like” was made together within the choir. During the interviews, the participants often used the words “choir” or “us” when explaining how certain things were done within their groups; the choir as a whole was considered the subject or the actor, which I see as reflecting communality.

In these competitions, wearing a uniform dress or costume is a visible and noticeable sign of togetherness and of belonging to a specific group of people.⁵ Bower and Swart (2016, 7) have labelled these kinds of components as being part of the “elements of visual identity.” A uniform can be understood as a symbol that for its part marks identity (Woodward 2002, ix; Nenola 2019, 220). I suggest that the emphasis on unity, at least partly, echoes past ties to the socialist period that started in Tanzania in the late 1960s. Askew (2002, 278) states that the socialist goals of that time were reflected in the musical performances, too; for instance, in dance performances, uniformity was a central feature of both movement and dress, together with synchronisation and the use of linear formations.

Being part of a certain locality, belonging to a certain place, is an important aspect of the choir competitions (Int. 11). Especially at the higher levels of competition, the domicile of a choir is underlined; the parishioners, other choirs, and pastor(s) of individual parishes support “their choir”, and the choir’s successes or setbacks are shared within this wider group.⁶ The choir becomes a kind of a symbol of the local parish, and the competition becomes a way of strengthening the local congregational identity. This could also be seen as contributing to the organisational identity elements suggested by Bower and Swart (2016, 7). Gunderson (2000, 16) notes about the identification between performers and their supporters in a competition context as follows: “[C]ompetitors and their fans identify at numerous levels with each other, a fact which signifies an interesting identity construction indicator; competitive performances are powerful magnets that can attract the like-minded and repel others.”

In addition to the actual competing, these events are thus a way of connecting with some people and distancing from others, and this is the case for both the competitors and the audience.

Choir competitions evoked strong feelings during the interviews such as frustration, anger, or disappointment, and attitudes towards these events varied signifi-

⁵ This sometimes even includes braiding women’s hair in a similar way.

⁶ This resonates with Nenola’s (2019, 223) statement saying that “winning a choral singing contest builds identity”, and that it “conveys something about the victorious community or the nation.”

cantly. Some participants said that competing is good and should be encouraged, while others think that there should not be competitions at all:

I don't like much this word "competition". Because you waste time, you waste money, and you don't get justice. – If it's singing to God, it is to give Him praise and glory. People should just sing without competing. (Int. 7)

It is not really a joy for choir members. And not even for conductors. They just don't say it. (Int. 9)

[I]t costs a lot, it's only this... but choir members enjoy. – They get good things, and they learn. And their singing improves. (Int. 8)

It is important to keep in mind that these are the thoughts and experiences of choir conductors. Interviewing choir members, for instance, would probably have provided differing viewpoints on the same topic.

Competitions are not just about strengthening identities; they are also occasions where identities may clash with each other. For some of those who oppose competitions, the challenge is possibly a religious one, as is the case with the interviewee in the first passage above (the interview number seven). The idea of competing may be in contrast with one's understanding of what a Christian should be like; humility is often seen as a Christian virtue, and it does not easily match with the concept of competing. Some interviewees considered competitions a waste of time and money. Injustice, lobbying, and corruption were terms related to many judges and their actions:

Only people who are fair should come [to act as judges]. – [people] who don't know any of the choirs. – Because there is lobbying too. (Int. 2)

There are judges who don't act fairly. (Int. 10)

Sometimes the identities that are imposed on choirs from the outside, for instance, by the judges of the competition, do not fit the image that a group has of itself. A choir may see itself as being at a certain level of skill, while the final results of the competition may indicate something different, which then causes disappointment or even anger: Why did the other choir get more points than we did? Some interviewees saw the organisation of the competitions as unfair, because both experienced and newly founded choirs compete in the same categories, and the winners of each category at the diocesan level are awarded with a direct entry to the next diocesan level competition, without starting again from the bottom as others do. This can certainly strengthen the winning choirs' understanding of themselves as groups that are invincible. One interviewee argued that if all choirs started at the same level each time, it would benefit all of them. The less experienced choirs would be motivated to work hard and to challenge the previous winners, while those who performed well in the competition would need to continue working in order to earn their place again next time:

If all the choirs started from scratch. Because it would motivate, even the choirs that don't have much competence, to practice and to work so that they themselves could become competent. If they knew that "we'll meet the winners of the diocese level", so, they would be motivated to work. – Even the choir that won can't become better because there's no challenge. – [J]ust to come and sing at the level of diocese. (Int. 2)

Thus, according to this interviewee, this kind of change in the organisation would challenge all choirs, even the previous winners, and make them reset their goals.

The interviewees had suggestions concerning what should or could be done regarding the choir competitions. The thoughts of several conductors could be summarised as follows: Let's continue these gatherings, let's keep the set-song and the possibility for feedback at the end of the event, but let's leave out the assessment scores; let's call it a concert or something else instead.

As occasions for meeting and sharing, choir competitions appear to be a firmly established institution in the North Central Diocese of the ELCT, and they do not show signs of decline. These are exciting and intriguing events, and they offer opportunities to perform in front of a large audience (Photo 4). In addition to choirs and their conductors, competitions bring together other people as well. According to my own experiences, the pastors of the diocese, for instance, seem to be eager to follow the success of "their choirs", the choirs from their respective parishes, especially in the district and diocesan level competitions.



Photo 4. Choir competitions gather many people together, and are important occasions for meeting and sharing. (Photo: Gary Sperl. Used with permission.)

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this article was to identify elements that are involved in shaping identities in choir competitions in the North Central Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Musical components play a major role in the choirs' process of identity construction in this particular setting. These include decisions concerning which competition category to enter and which songs to perform. Since choir conductors often bear a great responsibility for their choir's musical choices, they also have a large impact on the group identities of their choirs. The identification with certain musical styles that becomes visible in the choice of the competition category also creates connections and feelings of togetherness between individual choirs, thus forming a larger group of "us" belonging to the same category and performing similar kinds of music. Although the focus here has been on group identities, it is important to note that the musical choices made for choir competitions and the musical performances in them are also opportunities for individual choir conductors to present themselves as certain kinds of musicians, choir conductors, and/or composers.

Among the visual elements that contribute to choral identities, there are various components. Choreographed movements form an important part of the performances in the competition category in which choirs sing with the accompaniment of electric instruments; movements are thus essential to the choirs' being in this particular category. Another category in which the importance of dancing and other bodily movements is highlighted, and contributes to shaping identities, is that with choirs singing music from local traditions. I consider it especially meaningful when people are performing music of their own ethnic traditions. From the visual point of view, unified costumes are important in creating the feeling of togetherness within a particular choir. In the case of choirs that sing music based on local ethnic cultures, the costumes may carry a deeper meaning as a sign of one's own cultural background.

The local congregational identity is especially accentuated at the higher levels of the choir competitions, such as the one at the diocesan level. The domicile of a choir is emphasized; choirs are representatives of certain communities and the people of those communities – pastors, evangelists, other choirs, or ordinary congregants – some of whom are present to support their choir. Since these events are related to and organised by a religious organisation, the Lutheran church, their basis is religious, and one of the original goals of the competitions was to spread the Christian message. In the light of this, participating in choir competitions is a public act of demonstrating one's membership in a specific Christian group, which, for its part, enhances one's religious identity.

Choir competitions are thus events in which various identities related to both groups and individuals are active. As has been shown, these include musical, religious,

and ethnic components, among others. Competitions are sites for strengthening and expressing these identities, and the higher the level of the competition, the more significant this becomes. However, competitions also create a space for conflicts between the various aspects of identities. Although competing in itself may not always be the most inspiring or rewarding part of these events, I see the associated excitement and feeling of togetherness, in addition to the musical aspects, as some of the reasons that individuals participate in the competitions again and again. I still remember very clearly what it felt like to be present at a diocesan level competition for the first time in 2011. Upon arriving in the morning, I could already see hundreds of people gathered outside in a square surrounded by large trees. There were men and women of different ages, talking, smiling, and laughing. There were groups of people in similar costumes, excited but also a bit nervous about what was coming, enjoying the atmosphere. After a church service, one choir after another came to the stage, to the open space under the trees. The first choirs got the chance to relax and to enjoy the music of the other groups after their own work was done, while the last ones waited patiently for several hours for their turn to perform. The audience cheerfully listened to all of them. Finally, just before sunset, it was time to hear the feedback, to reveal the results and to let the emotions flow. At this point, I understood that something important and meaningful had taken place there in the square under the trees.

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