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Celebration**

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Celebration may be defined as the activity of engaging in festivity with the intention of marking a social occasion as special and important. Festivity can include combinations of feast, drugs, music, dance, drama, masquerade, poetry, speech, acrobatics, magic arts, sports, and games, among many others; depending on cultural context and analytical perspective, the same activities might also be conceived of as consumption, performance, ritual, play, or entertainment. Next to the specific activities carried out, there may also be a specifically festive mood or atmosphere contributing to what makes celebration special. This mood would often tend toward pleasure and euphoria, yet it also can lean toward the serious and solemn, or toward mixed emotions or ambivalent states such as being moved or in a trance. Celebration typically involves high degrees of sensory stimulation and collective arousal affording powerful aesthetic, affective, and emotional experiences.

Occasions for celebration range from individual or family events—such as rites of passage at birth or name-giving, transition to adulthood, initiation or graduation, marriage, or death, among others—to seasonal, cultural, religious, or political events which can concern smaller or larger social groups. While some occasions recur periodically, as when thanksgiving follows harvest or when youths go out for party every weekend, others occur less predictably, such as the unforeseen arrival of a guest, a victory in violent conflict, or a successful hunt. Festivity can appear sacred or profane, old or new, rural or urban, past or present, such as religious initiation and university graduation, spirit possession and techno parties, the birth of a nation or of an infant next door. Many types of celebration are staged and represent official *cultural performances*, for instance in the context of modern states, where festivities often serve hegemonic interests, for example nationalism, and reinforce asymmetrical power relations. However, spontaneous, unofficial, small-scale, and local variants of festive action can equally constitute culturally relevant celebratory events. Festivities can also transcend such apparent oppositions between, for instance, the sacred and profane, as when religious commemoration merges with commercialized consumerism in Euro-American traditions of the Christmas celebration.

Although occasions are mostly positively valued, negative or stressful events also prompt festivity, as is the case with funerals. It appears characteristic of the notion of celebration that festivity on sad occasions would nevertheless often include joyous, pleasurable activities such as feast and dance. In sum, celebration can be characterized as a widespread, perhaps universal, yet complex and diverse cultural concept. Before exploring the role of music in celebration, this entry reviews celebration as impetus for gathering and considers the objects as well as the concepts and theories of celebration.

Gathering

Celebration requires and makes people gather. The meanings of the Latin word *celebrare* included *assemble to honor* and *attend in great numbers*, from *celeber*, well frequented, populous, and crowded. The seminal sociologist Émile Durkheim emphasized that crowds of people tend to involve in collective arousal and euphoria (*effervescence*), which would underlie many forms of community spirit and religion. Communication technology and mass media certainly have led to an explosion of the possible outreach of interaction beyond face-to-face encounter during the 20th century, which among many other things involves broadcasting of celebrations, such as the opening of Olympic Games or New Year fireworks. However, an incredibly diverse range of celebratory gatherings from small parties to huge mass events, including iconic representations of both open societies (Woodstock) and totalitarian statehood, have continued to be prominent until today. This suggests that bodily attendance and physical copresence may be indispensable for the fundamental social activity of festivity to work.

Objects of Celebration

Celebration typically means to celebrate *something*; festivity then communicates to the gathered community (and perhaps also to some wider public) the fact and importance of the event on the occasion of which it is

organized. The occasion of a celebration thus may be conceived of as its cause or object, that is, as external to the festivity itself. This notion can be complicated and compromised quickly, however, and in several ways. To begin with, celebrations often are culturally understood as a reactualization of some past or mythological event; such time-lagged feedback would tend to blur the distinction between the activity of celebration *itself* and its allegedly external object. Moreover, festive activity and causal event often appear closely intertwined or overlapping, such as when religious ceremonies, administrative acts, symbolic rites, and social festivity all make integral part of what is considered, for instance, a proper wedding celebration. Finally, festivities may also occur simply because people wish to gather and socialize. The modern Euro-American concept of having a party is a case in point. However, it is commonly assumed that the very activities of gathering and festive interaction for the participants would often involve an immediate feeling of belonging together. One may thus propose that festivity in and by itself tends to celebrate the facts and experiences of human sociability and sociality, irrespective of whether or not it is in celebration of a discrete object.

Celebration, Festivity, and Ritual

Celebration is theorized from the perspectives of diverse disciplines, including cultural history, folklore studies, sociology, religious studies, psychoanalysis, and social/cultural anthropology; the concept has gained particular prominence in continental European, for example, French and German, discourses. Many approaches start by discussing celebration as being distinct from everyday life: It's marking a special kind of time, space, and frame of social interaction. Alessandro Falassi claims that people in the context of festivity do things that they normally would not: They behave differently, feel differently, and see themselves differently. Falassi defines reversal, intensification, trespassing, and abstinence as the cardinal aspects of what makes festive behavior special. Carnival is the quintessential example of ritualized role reversal, such as when a member of a subaltern class takes on royal or religious regalia and power for a limited time defined by/as celebration. Role reversal or role muting in the context of celebrations also occurs in less drastic forms, such as when a company's annual picnic brings together management and cleaning personnel in alcoholic drink and informal talk. Scholarly discourse about carnivalesque and burlesque strategies of subverting stylistic authority in literature and performance has been influenced by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Another thrust of festive behavior is pushing to the extremes what in the everyday would typically appear constrained and measured; it has been emphasized in continental philosophy, sociology, and psychoanalysis (e.g., by Sigmund Freud) that celebration tends to come with excess. Having fun would thus typically grow into exaltation in festive contexts; nutrition would come as prodigality, ornament and costume as extravagance and masquerade; intoxication with psychoactive drugs would be practiced beyond everyday norms, and devotion would lead to trance more frequently and cultivated in celebration than elsewhere. Yet it is important to note that celebration often also involves contemplation, fasting, seriousness, and solemnity.

In French and German discourses, celebration tends to be discussed under the terms of *fête* and *Fest*, respectively, drawing on the same Latin root *festum* (public joy) as do festivity, festival, and feast. François-André Isambert in his entry on *fête* to the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* understands joyful excess and ceremonial commemoration to represent two poles within a range of possible realizations of festivity. Winfried Gebhardt goes as far as proposing that festivity (German *Fest*) and celebration (German *Feier*, from Latin *feriae*, holiday) be distinguished as two distinct ideal types of institutionalized non-everyday behavior. Gebhardt proposes that festivity is an affective, excessive, and transgressive behavior that temporarily suspends everyday social reality; by contrast, he regards celebration as controlled ceremonial behavior that positively affirms everyday social norms and institutions through symbolic representations. From a functionalist perspective, both festivity and celebration would concern the same issue in this line of thinking, namely, helping people to go on with the everyday routines required to maintain culture and society; yet whereas festivity would go about this task by temporarily freeing people from their daily burden, celebration would work by reminding them of the value of this very burden.

Some types of celebration seem to integrate joyful excess with serious ceremony so closely that their ideal-typical opposition as suggested by Gebhardt can appear unrealistic. For instance, many religious and healing rituals in sub-Saharan Africa also have greatly pleasurable, entertaining, playful, and recreational aspects. In Mali and Guinea, Islamic holidays such as Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha are often celebrated with drumming and dance that could not be more fiery and more fun at any purely recreational event. The San people of Namibia, Botswana, and Angola perform their iconic repertoire of trance dance music (*medicine song/dance*) not only on the indication of some sick person being in the need of psychosomatic cure but also in celebration of the arrival of a guest to the village, a successful hunt, or simply when people feel like it. The joyfully exuberant and seriously spiritual elements here seem inseparable and appear to have the power to revitalize cultural practice and social order exactly through their combination.

The concepts of celebration and ritual display close ties and overlap. Rituals such as rites of passage or religious ceremonies often represent the occasions for celebration. Then, celebratory activities such as song and dance share some characteristics with ritual, namely, being highly formalized, tending toward interpersonal temporal coordination, and being capable of conveying symbolic information. Not least, the abovementioned characteristics of festive gatherings—their contrast to everyday life, inciting a mood of collective exaltation, and enhancing immediate experiences of belonging together—largely converge with anthropologist Victor Turner's concepts of *liminality* and *communitas*, which he theorized to represent core elements of ritual. One may thus argue that celebration not only represents a prominent, perhaps culturally universal social context for ritual action, but also in itself is a prototypical form of ritual behavior.

Celebration Music

Celebration arguably counts among the more prominent social contexts of music performance across times, places, and cultures. However, practices that may potentially be understood as celebration music often are discussed in different terminologies. For instance, music for dance festivities in Africa tends to be discussed as celebration music when performed on the occasion of, for instance, weddings, but as ritual music when performed on the occasion of spirit possession and healing ceremonies. In contrast to the theoretical considerations discussed above, where ritual and celebration were proposed to mutually embrace each other, discursive habits still tend to separate the two according to a potentially problematic division between the sacred and the profane, or related oppositions.

A major contribution to the explicit study of celebration music is ethnomusicologist Bernard Lortat-Jacob's research in the organization and usage of celebration music as community music in peasant societies. In mountainous southern Morocco, large portions of the male residents of Berber villages jointly play drum ensemble music for dance events attended by potentially near complete gatherings of the local population. The drummers are organized in several associations of about 20 people, who take turns in performance in the course of an event. Within the drumming groups, there are different roles such as playing accompaniment and solo parts, and again the soloists' role is rotated among participants. Turn-taking thus emerges as a core strategy for the participatory element in the coordination of this form of collective, nonspecialist instrumental music performance. The ultimate mode of participatory performance, however, is dance; the constraints on the playing of instruments (not everybody can participate in the drumming performance) are accepted under the premise of affording maximum participation in collective dance. The artistic expression and generation of community spirit in this framework can provide overwhelming aesthetic and emotional experiences when successful, yet also—counter to romantic ideas of community life as idyllic—runs great risks of failure due to personal and social conflicts. Problems in the community would immediately drop the quality or even bring the flow of performance to a total halt. The performance of pleasurable, entertaining community music thus—counter to romantic ideas of community life as simple—emerges as a seriously laborious and complicated endeavor, in which the community invests considerable amounts of time and energy, despite high risks of failure.

In contrast to the collective community music practice of mountainous southern Morocco, Lortat-Jacob describes major portions of music performance in rural lowland Morocco, Sardinia, and Romania as being carried out by specialists, who might be gifted individuals from a neighboring village, itinerant individual professionals, or members of a hereditary socioprofessional group of musical experts, as in the case of the Gypsy (Rom) ethnic minority in Romania. The fact that performers and audiences represent distinct groups requires a system of exchange beyond community institutions, for example, a market for musical labor. While the ties between music production and reception thus become abstracted, Sardinian village festivals and Romanian wedding celebrations are still participatory in which major portions of the gathered locals are directly involved in performance practice, particularly as dancers. While certainly limiting options for collective participation, the processes and institutions of specialization and professionalization according to Lortat-Jacob's findings do *not automatically* mute the power of music performance to generate identity and community in the context of rural peasant societies.

Lortat-Jacob as well as some proponents of sociological celebration theory discussed above shared the critical and pessimistic view that in contemporary plural societies and urban milieus in particular, festivity has lost its capacity for framing community. According to this view, the overwhelming degrees of contingency and lack of social ties between participants would work against the possibility of community experiences and their enhancement of stable collective identities. Correspondingly, the respective artistic processes and products would lose much of their cultural value from this critical perspective. There are counterexamples, however. For instance, Gerd Baumann proposes that the reinvention of the Punjab folk music style *bhangra* in a series of popular music styles in England since the 1980s (*bhangra beat*, *bhangra rock*, and *bhangra house*), which took place in the contexts of both family celebrations and youths' party culture, contributed to the constitution of what today is the *Asian* identity in Great Britain.

There is a boom of DJ-centered electronic dance music cultures in Euro-American contexts of clubbing, rave, free parties, and alternative festivals, which historically is rooted in 1970s disco, 1980s hip-hop and dub, and since the 1990s has been associated with substyles of techno and house. Graham St John proposes this cluster of phenomena to represent a contemporary variant of ritual celebration culture, where practitioners actively seek spiritual experiences of trance and communion or liminality and *communitas*, in Victor Turner's terms. However, the celebration cultures that St John calls these *weekend societies* are connected with the participants' everyday life to only limited extents. Tammy Anderson emphasizes that feelings of authenticity and subcultural ethos can be questioned by several factors, including commercialism, the fact that popular musical genres undergo rapid change and (sub)stylistic fragmentation, and the cultural milieu's conspicuous deviance and potentially self-destructive drug usage. In the relative absence of cohesive everyday structures of, for instance, locality, ethnicity, or economy, it thus appears unlikely that emerging urban or cosmopolitan celebration music cultures—communities of party style—would socially stabilize beyond a single generation.

See also [Commemoration](#); [Community](#); [Dance Events](#); [Festivals](#); [Religion, Music in](#); [Ritual](#); [Trance](#); [Weddings](#)

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