



Cultural Politics of the (Pied) Pipers, Drummers and Paraders:

A Visual Ethnography of a Band Parade in Ballymena, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom

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Parades and band marches form part of the “contentious rituals” (Blake, 2019) or “rituals of resistance” (Bell, 1990) of the symbolic landscape of Northern Ireland which is mired in a history of violence and unrest for what Cohen calls “nationalism of the neighbourhood”.ⁱ As a cultural practice, parading and marches involve issues of human rights and freedom of (cultural) expression which embody and reproduce politico-ethnic identity as “Ulster Protestants” or “Irish Catholics”. However, despite its ‘cultural wars’, societal cleavages and riotous history, band parades and marches continue to grow in size and strength, and are celebrated with great fanfare across Northern Ireland. This visual essay is an ethnographic tour aimed at exploring the cultural spectacle of band parades in Northern Ireland which are held in Ballymena, County Antrim, on 23rd May 2012. This essay deals with a brief history of parades, its cultural and political overtones, symbolisms and social ghettoization. It also looks at the cultural and spatial politics besides the social ordering and representation of the Protestant community through ‘Lodges’ and ‘Orders’. It also tries to analyse the ‘sign vehicles’ (Goffman, 1956) of the pride and protest which get reflected through iconic costumes and music as well as banners and bunting. This essay attempts to depict how parades have become a ‘field of cultural production’, a performativity and a ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman,

1956) that exhibit masculinity and power contestations along with the ‘double articulation’ of political ethno-religiosity and territoriality.

Keywords: parades, Northern Ireland, Protestantism, masculinity, cultural production

History, Significance and Symbolism of Parades

Band parades as a form of ‘shared aesthetic’ and ‘communal musicking’ (Ramsey, 2011a: 153) is a way of ‘knowing the world’ (Ramsey, 2011a: 39) or ‘being in it’ (*dasein*). They are celebrated for cultural, historical as well as political and religious reasons. According to Bryan and Jarman (1997: 4), parades are used to give a sense of cohesion and coherence to the group themselves, to make public displays of power, wealth, strength and authority, to offer challenges or warning to other sectors of society, and as celebrations and entertainment. The history of band parades dates back to the year 1690 when either the Protestant King Edwards or William of Orange (William III) of England defeated King James II of Scotland, a Catholic, in the Battle of Boyne near Dublin.ⁱⁱ In popular imaginaries, this event was seen as a victory of Protestants over Catholics. To this day, Protestants in Northern Ireland, also referred to as *Orangemen*, joyously celebrate

the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne on July 12th, also known as *Twelfth Parades* or *Orangefest*.ⁱⁱⁱ Celebrations begin on the Eleventh night, also referred to as the “bonfire night”, to commemorate the Glorious Revolution of 1688. On the eve of *Orangefest*, towering bonfires made up of wooden pallets and tyres are lit, accompanied by street parties and loyalist marching bands. The bonfires and band parades are viewed by many as an expression of anti-Catholicism and sectarianism, and they flaunt loyalist paramilitarism through traditional symbols like flags, banners, displays of aggressive stance and abusive slogans.^{iv} Various studies indicate that in the last few years, antagonism between these two groups has led to growing sectarian ghettoization (Bell, 1990) and increased political polarisation of working-class sensibilities especially among teenagers in Northern Ireland.

Opposing political factions, made up of Unionists and Nationalists, typically associate themselves with contrasting ethnic ancestry. Protestants are typically Unionists, a political designation for those who wish to remain part of Britain while Catholics are staunch Nationalists who wish to unite all of Ireland. According to Bryan (2000), parades are complex events which draw diverse Protestant groups with equally diverse political and economic interests together. Many observe that these performances aim to resist political agendas such as attempts to remove “Britishness” from Northern Ireland to achieve the larger goal of uniting Ireland. The parades highlight the changing ways in which parade rituals have been exploited or co-opted by specific groups and politicians at different periods. They also reflect the development of a Protestant ethnic identity in a community divided by both denomination and class. In popular Catholic perception, marchers are viewed as paramilitaries and thugs. Through the 1970s and 1980s, Orange parades became an assertive expression of militant loyalism as ‘blood and thunder’ flute bands increasingly appeared at these events. Many of these bands display flags, instruments, and uniforms carrying symbols of allegiance to loyalist paramilitary groups like the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). Bell (2011) gives an interesting ac-

count of the genesis of ‘flute bands’. According to Bell, flute bands comprised of unemployed youth from loyalist communities in the 1970s who were reeling under rapid de-industrialization, urban deprivation and ethnic divisions. The accumulation of these socio-economic tensions led to factional violence. In response to the violence in 1970s, the unemployed youth from loyalist communities developed a youth gang culture known as *Tartan Gangs* in Northern Ireland. However, this counter-culture (Ramsey, 2011) caved in under police and community pressure, and metamorphosed into flute bands^v, thus heralding band massification that continue to persist throughout ‘the Troubles’ period and even after.

Parading to music is a ‘way of life’, with bandmen constituting a ‘community of practice’ (Ramsey, 2011a). These inform Protestants’ worldviews and loyalist identities in Ulster. Moreover, the music practices and tradition of the marching band share common roots with Ireland’s traditional music, and are considered central to the recreation of Protestant and loyalist identities in Ulster. (Ramsey 2011a: 4). The band parades help foster a sense of “shared flow”, “*communitas*” (Ramsey 2011a: 155), and a shared history that provide rootedness and “social and emotional pleasure of participation” (Blake 2019: 89).

Ramsey (2011b) adds though that nationalists used to be part of the parades. However, unfortunate incidents like the Great War, the guerrilla conflict in Ireland, and the partition of the island in 1921, weaned nationalists away from parading as a form of cultural expression. As a result, it came to be seen as a ‘Protestant’ practice. Ramsey (2011a) maintains that while parading is dominated by the ‘loyal orders’^{vi} since 2010, there is also a distinct nationalist parading calendar which became part of the wider culture of parading.^{vii}

Every year, thousands of parades are held by Protestant and Unionist groups. In recent times, the phenomenal growth in the frequency, size, and strength of bands and band membership reflects its multivocality and polysemy^{viii} (Blake, 2019). The increased frequency of band parades can also be attributed to their participation in traditional celebrations determined by the Loyal Orders. These include

performances in various indoor contests and contests throughout the year (Ramsey, 2011b). Moreover, the surge of smaller parades (Jarman, 1997), emergence of new types of parades independent of the Loyal Orders, and fundraising activities also account for the surge in the number of parades. All these herald what is now known as the marching season, which stretches between March to October each year.

The profusion of marches and parades arguably manifest the power struggle between the Catholics (Nationalists / Republicans) and Protestants (Unionists / Loyalists). These events amplify issues of identity and ethnicity, spatial and social ordering, and territoriality and zoning. Catholics view these conflicts and tensions as triumphalist, supremacist, and have the tendency to incite violence. For Blake (2019), parades are a major political problem and a source of disruption for Northern Ireland as old disputes linger and new ones appear. According to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission report for 2012/13, the Parades Commission had received notifications of 4,449 parades and protests, where only 225 were described as 'sensitive' or 'contentious'. However, concern was raised whether there could be further disturbance as result of groups' dissatisfaction with the Parades Commission's ruling.^{ix}

As mentioned above, parading is often claimed to be a specific feature of Orange or loyalist culture. From its inception, the Orange order was an overtly political organization wedded to British unionism. The Orange order supported continued unity with the United Kingdom and opposed the unification of Ireland and the independence of Scotland.^x The belief among Catholics that marchers are paramilitaries and thugs, with the Orange order composing of militant loyalists, can be traced back to the formation of the Orange Order in 1975. Since its establishment, the Orange Order has been responsible for numerous confrontations, some of which even resulted in deaths. Their active participation in political demonstrations related to the Orange parades in Duncree and elsewhere during the 1990s had also resulted in confrontations with nationalists and state security forces.

Protests, Public, and Politics of Parades

Parades and marching bands reflects how a community is imagined and how ethnicity is constructed around symbol like insignias, bunting, banners and flags. These symbols speak a certain language and convey a specific meaning. The bright and colourful costumes of the marching bands give a hint of sartorial politics while repertoires like the band tune, banners and flags become markers of distinction for the two ethnic communities. The parades are known to have a political, religious, cultural, and social character and the Orange parades remain a crucial element in defining control of public space. Cultural and familial traditions remain to be major reasons for loyalists' participation in parade bands. Men and women of all ages including children can become band members and partake in the parades. In thinking about the role of public and civic spaces in negotiating political identities within the city, Bryan (2009) remarks that there have been important changes in the nature of civic space. Bryan further asserts that access to and control of public space is more equal than it was in the 1960s, reflecting the types of sharing that are taking place.

It is said that members join the Orange Order for a combination of political, religious, social and cultural reasons and that Orange Halls is an important part of many Protestant communities' social life. Becoming a member of an Orange Lodge stipulates a 'rite of passage' whereby the initiate goes through several stages before being ordained as part of the member of the parading fraternity.

These parades not only reflect the state of contemporary politics but also expose key political cleavages within Unionism and the relationship of the Protestant community to the British state. Protestants see this subculture as providing political, religious, historical, and social focus, on top of a sense of belonging and rootedness to an otherwise fragmented community. However, not only are the band parades and marches seen as controversial but even the Irish flag has a contentious and disputable history.^{xi}

The Irish flag bears witness to its diverse political landscape through the three colour stripes represented

on the flag. The colour green symbolises the Nationalists, Catholics, and revolution while the orange represents the Unionists and Protestants. It is widely acknowledged that the green in the Irish flag is related with shamrocks and verdant landscapes, that symbolises revolution for the Irish Catholic nationalists. The white stripe in between the green and orange depicts hope for lasting peace between the “Orange” and the “Green”.

The politicisation of marching and parading relate to claims over public spaces across the province from April to September. These internal strife and abrasions run deep and since the Drumcree clashes between the two groups in 1989, authorities are kept alert to any possible altercations between the Protestants and Catholics. The Catholic residential areas, labelled as nationalist areas, are where the annual spectacle passes. It is believed that Orangeism is a significant force in the north.

I was excited to witness one of the smaller parades organised by the Loyal Orders, a popular event held at Ballymena, County Antrim on 23rd May 2012. The venue was about an hour away from my place of residence which was on the rear side of the Queen’s University. I was lucky to have Dr. Gordon Ramsey^{xiii} as my guide for this adventurous musical tour. Ramsey as he prefers to be called, was not only a faculty at the School of History and Ethnomusicology then, but was also a fifer and member of the flute band. He volunteered to introduce me to this annual fest at Londonderry and to explain the nuances and technicalities of the parades.

Dr. Ramsey was preparing for the event with his brown reed basket that carried his favourite musical instrument: the red flute, the musical piece, as well as other gears that completed the “man and his machine” (see Figs. 1 and 6). We arrived just as the marches were about to begin at Londonderry, a beautiful spot with nice buildings and pubs, when we saw the paraders putting on their band costumes as some practised the tunes. We also saw children who were part of the entourage juggling with child-friendly maces (Fig. 9). As compared to the hustle and bustle of South Asian cities and metros, Londonderry was tranquil. Supporters, fans, family members, and friends from all ages

and backgrounds were lining up along the cobbled streets flanked by beautiful houses (Figs. 3 and 4), near the bends where the streets melded into a big square. The band parade was carnivalesque and was a “theatre without footlights” (Bakhtin, 1984) and everyone was drawn to the immediacy of the musical fete. However, since ‘beering’ is an intrinsic and socio-cultural practice in this part of the world, the ritual began with many having a ‘go’ at the pubs while others were seen preparing for their turn to march. There were young and old ladies, along with children. Some of the children were part of the parade while others had come to cheer the paraders and the parading fraternity. It was an eclectic and charged atmosphere with an assemblage of musical instruments ranging from percussions like snare drums and cymbals to accordions, windpipes, flutes, fifes and bass drums. However, I did notice that the flute band was overwhelmingly bigger and well-represented in numbers. Some of these bands were led by women.

In Figures 7 and 8, one can see the bands lining up on the street. Most of them were warming up and practising their tunes. The marchers and bands who had arrived from different counties and districts were adorned in their finery and were dressed in neat uniforms. Each band is replete with fineries, the imperial regalia, maces, medals, and chest pins of the old band members (Fig. 12). The job of the bass drummers (Figs. 10 and 11) as I could guess was to provide a bass beat for others to keep time and to encourage other band members to play and perform with enthusiasm and vigour. From time to time, I could see the well-gloved band master hurling up their maces high up in the air, only to catch them in time, thus displaying their dexterity and athleticism.

The sound of the drum beatings and music drifting in the air enveloped and engulfed Ballymena area in a unique musical soiree. Some of the bands which participated in this parade included Sir George White Memorial, Steeple Defenders, Craigywarren, Crown Defenders, Pride of the Valley, Blackhill Accordion Band, Pride of the Maine, Ballyquin, Black Skull Orange and Blue, Macosquin, Sons of Loyal Benagh, among others.

It was late in the evening when the parades and

march subsided. The evening was followed by bouts of beers with my new friends in the taverns that were lined up on both sides of the street (Fig. 5). The conversations were ruptured intermittently by joyous singing by members of particular bands and we would sway to the boisterous rhythms of the young lads. Some were heard discussing the forthcoming parading event, the tunes that they should play, and how and

where to practise (since it required joint efforts and proper coordination by all the band members). Conversations would also veer into future plans made by families of the marchers and paraders, such as planning a vacation to some nearby place. The great spectacle and simulacra of a carnival had paved the way for fond memories of the evening that brimmed with music, signs and symbols.

Visuals:



Fig.1. Gordon's flutes kept in his reed bag.



Fig. 2. A snare drum.



Fig. 3. One of the colourful houses in Londonderry.



Fig. 4. The same house from the other side of the street.



Fig. 5. *Thatch Inn*, the pub where we drifted in after the band marches and parades came to an end for the bouts of conversations and beer.



Figs. 7 and 8. Bands rehearsing and waiting for their parade turn. Many of the “Protestant Boys” are actually girls suggesting changes in gender roles since the formation of the band in 1976.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 6. Dr. Gordon Ramsey sporting his band uniform



Fig. 9. Age and gender difference is no barrier for band membership nowadays. A young drum major trying his hand at juggling with his mace.



Fig. 10. A bass drummer from Sir George White Memorial Flute Band, Broughshane marching with his drum.



Fig. 11. A bass drummer from the Blackhill Accordion Band, Garvagh District.



Fig. 12. A Drum Major in his finery.



Fig. 13. An accordion band marching to the tune in unison.



Fig. 14. A line of snare drumming party



Fig. 15. Another snare drumming party.



Fig. 16. *Macosquin First Flute Band*, Londonderry.



Figs. 17 and 18 Accordion Bands led by female band members.



Fig. 18.



Fig. 19. *Sons of Loyal Benagh Band* being led by female members.



Fig. 20. *Blackskull Orange and Blue Flute Band*



Fig. 22. *Crown Defenders*, Cloughmills, County Antrim.



Fig 21. *Ballyquin Flute Band*, Limavady

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Mentioned in the foreword of Bell's book (1990).
- ⁱⁱ The colour 'orange' is associated with the Northern Irish Protestants precisely because it was King Edwards or William of Orange (William III) of England who had defeated King James II of Scotland who was a Catholic.
- ⁱⁱⁱ According to Bryan (2009), *Orangefest* was in part inspired by successful changes made to the Apprentice Boys' annual Siege of Derry parade in Londonderry in August. It is now called the Maiden City Festival and attracts some public funding from the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure of Northern Ireland.
- ^{iv} Because the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) supplied the IRA with explosives, Catholics often display Palestinian flags and Protestants respond by displaying Israeli flags. Both sides burn each other's flags on bonfires. On one occasion, following an attack by visiting Polish supporters on the Northern Ireland football supporters, Polish flags were also burnt.
- ^v For more on the history of the emergence of blood and thunder flute bands especially from a practitioner's perspective, see Ramsey (2011a; 2011b).
- ^{vi} According to Ramsey, "loyal orders" is an umbrella term for all Protestant parading fraternities.
- ^{vii} *The Parades Commission and Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act, 1998* (2005: 12) gives an account of the parades held by the Loyalists as well as the Nationalists including 'Other' from 1 April to 31 August in 2003 and 2004.
- ^{viii} See Ramsey (2011a: 93-94) for more on the increase in band parades as well as band membership.
- ^{ix} The sensitivity and contentious nature of the parade is defined by the Parades Commission as "having the potential of raising concerns and community tensions, and which consequently are considered in more detail by the Parades Commission" (Northern

Ireland Human Rights Commission, 2013)

^x The Orange Order is viewed by others as militant loyalists.

^{xi} See Nolan, P et al. (2014).

^{xii} Gordon received his Ph.D from the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University where he became a faculty later. Gordon's thesis focuses on the *Parading Culture of Northern Ireland* which was later converted into a book. Gordon himself is a practitioner whose expertise lies in flute bands (that he is also a member of). Gordon also has several insightful articles on the subject.

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