

# **World Music: a medium for unity and difference?**

Carsten Wergin\*

Paper presented to the EASA Media Anthropology e-Seminar,  
22-29 May 2007  
<http://media-anthropology.net/>

## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to discuss the existence of World Music both within and beyond its economic dimension. It focuses on the question of how such a musical space in which various actors intonate their visions of transcultural unity and difference is produced and can be analysed ethnographically. Central to this is my assumption that World Music is not only the marketing concept it was invented as.<sup>1</sup> I set out to examine World Music as an artistic genre, a special form of musical practice and a musical style with characteristic features of its own. For certain musicians, their local musical styles function as forms of expression and representation of their ideas about culture and identity. Music here becomes a medium through which people articulate opinions, discuss problems and reach out to enter into contact with other regions. On these transregional levels, music has characteristic qualities that set it apart from language and demand different forms of ethnographic enquiry.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "World Music" was developed in 1987 in a pub in North London at a meeting of representatives of record companies with journalists and music producers. They were mostly interested in generating a commercial category by which they "sought new means for marketing 'our kind of material' through a unified, generic name" (Connell and Gibson 2004: 349).

Central to this analysis is a band from La Réunion, a small island in the Indian Ocean. La Réunion is an Overseas Department of France, with a bewildering mixture of the Euro as its currency, EU stars on license plates, a subtropical climate, snow in July and August, and an active volcano that erupts from time to time, spilling its lava into the ocean. There is a lot to say about this Creole island, but for present purposes I will mainly concentrate on a Réunionese band called Bastèr ([www.baster.com](http://www.baster.com)), who, on their album *Raskok* (Bastèr 2001), released a version of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" (Marley 1981). Bastèr's interpretation of this well-known tune demonstrates those other World Music characteristics which this paper aims to draw attention to: music as an alternative medium to language and a different way of crisscrossing between numerous cultural imaginaries.

Before being colonised, La Réunion was uninhabited. Traditions here are not original or rooted, but are indicators of cultural transition and *routedness* (Clifford 1997). Musical actors employ and mix specific sounds in order to be recognisable as different from others active within World Music contexts. Rhythm, instrumentation, or a singer's voice in which melodies are intonated enable them to offer their audiences their own particular ways of seeing the world. Such 'world musicians' mediate local images of authenticity for global audiences, using musical traditions in order to (re)territorialise themselves within a World Music scene in which La Réunion becomes one of many points of reference. Bastèr's version of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" exemplifies this in a unique way, by making numerous references to other cultural settings: metropolitan France and Europe, La Réunion, the Caribbean, and other Creole worlds. Central to it is the aspect of following various *routes* as a fundamental root of originality.

I begin by describing the Réunionese part of the roots from which Bastèr and its music originate (Part 2). A brief historical introduction to the last fifty years of music-making on La Réunion, with a focus on the musical style of maloya and its use as a political tool, leads into a description of how, at the end of the 1970s, a group of musicians emerged on the island, the *militants culturels*. The third part of the paper provides more details about this group of musicians, explains to what extent the band Bastèr belongs to it, and, with reference to them, proclaims as one of their central issues the preservation of a Réunionese cultural heritage. The fourth part first focuses on Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" and its relation to numerous cultural settings,

notably the oratorical traditions of the West Indies (Hodges 2005). This then leads into a roughly three-page “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of Bastèr’s interpretation of the song, an ethnography used as a

“...multi-dimensional exercise, a co-production of social fact and sociological imagining, a delicate engagement of the inductive with the deductive, of the real with the virtual, of the already-known with the surprising, of verbs with nouns, processes with products, of the phenomenological with the political.”

(Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 172)

Interestingly, in this case it is not only an “engagement of verbs with nouns” that is involved, but also of nouns with sounds. I will evoke images of some of the musical spaces articulated within Bastèr’s version of the “Redemption Song”. These are derived from personal fieldwork experiences and perceptions of the socio-cultural, political and geographical regions that I, as a listener, am led into by it. My aim here is to show how Bastèr’s version evokes various imaginary pictures of places and connects these to form a *transmusical space* in which one can locate oneself, the music and its references. In conclusion (Part 5), I elaborate on this idea of a transmusical space, a vague but unifying whole that is based on cultural differences and only functions as such if these differences are made audible.

Within such a transmusical space, numerous narratives are intoned, including discourses on slavery, violence and resistance, but also ideas of exoticism, or what else might evoke the beautiful image of an active volcano and snow in July on a subtropical island. Analysing the musical reproduction of such narratives represents an alternative and fruitful way of looking at and talking about what ‘world music’ is.

## **2. The roots: *maloya*, *métissage* and *militants culturels***

The French Overseas Department of La Réunion was unpopulated when Portuguese sailors discovered it in 1507 (Chane-Kune 1993). First, it was mainly used by pirates as their hideout while waiting for merchant ships entering and trying to cross the Indian Ocean via the Cape of Good Hope. La Réunion was ‘paradise’: no dangerous animals or fatal diseases, only clear skies, blue waters and seemingly endless amounts of fish, birds and other animals to eat.

From 1665 the French began to turn this sub-tropical paradise into a colony, gave it the name Île Bourbon and brought slaves from different regions of Africa to the island. In the Indian Ocean region, Madagascar was a central place where people from various ethnic groups in Africa were accommodated together and shipped on to other destinations. When they arrived on Île Bourbon, they mainly had to work on coffee plantations. Another product, whose artificial pollination method was invented by one of the workers enslaved on the island at the time, was the famous *Bourbon vanille*, without which, still today, no proper vanilla ice will do. In 1793, during the French Revolution, Île Bourbon was given its current name, La Réunion. By the early nineteenth century, plantation owners began to turn from coffee crops to sugarcane. Slavery was officially abolished in 1848. Meanwhile, other workers from India, mainly the region of Tamil Nadu, had been arriving.<sup>2</sup> They were among the most skilled in sugarcane planting. From the many factories that were set up at that time, only two have survived. But the crop remains one of the main sources of income on the island, apart from tourism, fishing and large-scale social benefits from metropolitan France.

In 1946 La Réunion became an official French *département outre-mer* (DOM) and part of what in EU terminology is now named the *European ultraperiphery*.<sup>3</sup> As already mentioned above, the island has no native population. It could thus be advertised as a role model for the EU motto *In varietate concordia*, “United in Diversity”. Its Creole population reflects a mix of various cultural influences from Europe, Africa, India and Southeast Asia. More recently, new migrants have also come from the Comoro Islands and metropolitan France, all looking for better living conditions in their own right. What this image tends to overshadow, however, is that the origins of Réunionese culture and identity are not only derived from peaceful migration, but to a large extent from slavery and semi-forced labour.

Within this cultural mix, *maloya* is commonly referred to as one of its most ‘authentic’ musical styles. Because of its rhythm, instrumentation, harmony and musical structure, local musicians

---

<sup>2</sup> This relates to the general discussion of the issue of semi-forced migration of workers from India to numerous islands in the Indian Ocean, who can also be found on La Réunion’s neighbouring island state of Mauritius. They were attracted by the argument that they would be able to make a good living for themselves and after a few years return home as richer men. But these were only two of the promises that were hardly ever kept (Ghasarian 1990, Mann 2004).

<sup>3</sup> La Réunion’s status as a *Région Ultrapériphérique Européenne* (RUP) derives from article 299.2 of the *Amsterdam Treaty*. More information is accessible under the URL: [http://www.regionreunion.com/fr/spip/modelerup.php?id\\_article=942](http://www.regionreunion.com/fr/spip/modelerup.php?id_article=942) (last accessed: 14.05.2007).

use this style to construct different imaginaries of an original Réunionese heritage. This is contrasted with a French neo-colonial power and cultural identity partly generated some 11,000 kilometres away.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the first decisive moment for musical production on La Réunion was the official introduction of *maloya* as a symbol of Réunionese cultural difference fostered by the island's Communist Party, the Parti Communist Réunionnais (PCR), in the early 1950s. When the PCR's campaign to achieve political autonomy for the island failed, it also put an end to this official use of local music tradition as a political tool. From then on, musicians had to find their own means to support themselves and their musical enactments of Réunionese culture and identity.

By the end of the 1970s, they had become so called *militants culturels*, a name I have adopted from local musicians and other interview partners, who nowadays use it to refer to this generation of musical actors (Wergin 2007). Their music was the first to be discovered by the then still emerging World Music industry, at a time when any sort of apparently authentic, exotic or even revolutionary music was becoming attractive to foreign musicians, producers and festival organisers. Their image as *militants culturels* who fought for the recognition of a local culture therefore enhanced their attractiveness. Their struggle continues, if only to the extent that its imaginary remains a useful way of supporting the successful musical enactments of uniqueness and authenticity for World Music audiences.

In this sense, the growing importance of the World Music label has set new standards for local music performance. Réunionese musicians now have to enact their island as a source of creativity and authenticity to an even greater extent. Their task is no longer only to demonstrate the uniqueness of a Réunionese cultural heritage in contrast to France on the local level: they also have to present themselves and their music as unique and special on a global scale in order to be visible and successful. This has broader consequences for the perception of their local culture. It leads musicians to perform transformations creatively and in doing so actively to manipulate and invent new local traditions. As Martin Stokes argues in this context:

---

<sup>4</sup> French colonial power has been dominant on the island for more than 350 years, and to this extent one cannot, of course, speak of an isolated situation. French administration and administrators form part of the local population. Still, there remain certain paradoxes, for example, within the local school system, which is like the French one. As a result, the official curriculum still expects Réunionese children to be taught that they are all Gallic in origin.

“The romance of resistance in world music discourse leads world music celebrities to stress their antiestablishment credentials, feeding a variety of misleading views of how specific genres emerged and circulated.”

(Stokes 2004: 61)

Misleading or not, *maloya* is one way in which musicians enact and stage an image of something uniquely Réunionese, something traditional, exotic and folkloristic. Plus, instead of peacefully mixing, in the World Music context they draw attention to the audibility of cultural difference. This will be seen in Bastèr’s version of “Redemption Song”, with which the band makes a deliberate reference to Jamaican *reggae*, a musical setting that relates them to another history of musical empowerment (Zips 2006).

Since the PCR first used *maloya* for socio-political purposes, the music has been considered a symbol of Réunionese cultural independence. Its roots are irretrievable, because, in the absence of any native population on the island, La Réunion’s cultural heritage is rooted in creolisation. The term ‘creolisation’ is not meant here to proclaim an idyllic imaginary of peaceful mixing as the basis for a local Réunionese culture. The island’s population is rooted in a *métissage* of cultures fundamental to which is a violent history of slavery, semi-forced labour from India, socio-cultural suppression and ongoing neo-colonial domination from metropolitan France (Vergès 1999). Creolisation on La Réunion remains a process in which the idea of a Réunionese culture and community continues to be negotiated. Music is one medium through which these negotiations become audible. On La Réunion and for Réunionese *militants culturels*, to which the band Bastèr belongs, it is the preferred one. They are continuing the search for imagined roots.

Analytically, local music-making can be related to various traditions, from the *griots* to *porte-plainte* to *servis kabaré*. The *griots* of West Africa carry news and stories wrapped in music from town to town. *Porte-plainte* relates to one of the Malagasy translations of the term *maloya*, which is “to spit out”. Similar to HipHop battles, people meet, sing *maloya* and give each other reasons why, for example, their village is more beautiful than the others. *Servis kabaré* also has Malagasy origins, being a ceremony still held by numerous Réunionese families in November. In it, the spirits of dead ancestors are summoned, and if they are in a good mood and enjoy the *maloya* music, which is played continuously from six o’clock in the evening until

six in the morning, they take possession of the bodies of one or other participant and dance along with them.

*Maloya* music here is a medium into the past. It connects parts of a Réunionese population with the various traditions of a multitude of regions, but always in relation to a history of slavery and deportation. *Maloya* does not cater for the image of a solely peaceful mixing of cultures and peoples. When it is performed it continues to be a musical reference to the “violence, brutality and exile” of the island’s creolisation process (Vergès 2006: 36). This is the socio-political and cultural background on which the music of Bastèr is based.

### 3. The mission: preserving and proclaiming Réunionese cultural heritage

In the 1950s, when it became clear for parts of the Réunionese population that political equality with metropolitan France did not equal a recognition of cultural differences, the PCR began to organise get-togethers of their different political antennas, the *fêtes de témoignages*. These were held in Le Port, the island’s main harbour city and traditionally the place where the PCR collects most of its votes. Their affiliated daily newspaper, *Le Témoignages* ([www.temoignages.re](http://www.temoignages.re)), also has its headquarters in this city.

Firmin Viry, one of the most famous *maloya* musicians, for the first time publicly performed his music at these *fêtes de témoignages* and in doing so influenced a large number of young musicians. Some of them based their careers on his version of the *maloya* tradition, a mixture of political agenda and pride in a characteristic Réunionese musical heritage. Viry has always lived in the south of La Réunion, in a small village on the outskirts of St. Pierre, La Réunion’s alternative capital. This is worth noting, because the island seems structured as a microcosm of global political agendas. Its capital in the north, St. Denis, the largest city on the island with more than 200,000 inhabitants, is dominated by the French political administration, colonial buildings, the military administration, old Creole villas and an impressive sea front, the Barachois, which is aligned by cannon pointing towards imagined enemies somewhere beyond the sea. On the other hand, St. Pierre in the south was twice mooted as the capital of a bi-departmentalised La Réunion. This project was supported by the PCR and the Socialist Party but failed twice because it was thought that it might lead La Réunion to adopt complete independence from its *mère-*

*patrie*, metropolitan France. However, the majority of the Réunionese population never wanted independence from France. A striking negative example for them has remained the neighbouring island-state of Mauritius. After it gained independence from Britain in 1968, Mauritius faced great economic difficulties. Since then, the national economy has been profoundly restructured from agricultural monocrop production to a variety of goods and services. Nevertheless, the economy remains vulnerable to the ups and downs of the world market and the island's social hierarchy has remained surprisingly untouched by periods of economic decline and ascent (Neveling 2006). Overall living standards remain below those of La Réunion, which are practically in line with the European continent and therefore unique to the region of the Indian Ocean. To gain political independence would have meant having traded this in for social and economic uncertainty.

Striving for cultural independence, however, is different from giving up certain rights necessary to guarantee political and economic stability. Therefore, as a result of the first *fêtes de témoignages*, Réunionese cultural independence began to be mediated, first locally, and then on a transregional level. The *militants culturels* generation, which took over this kind of musical mediation in the early 1980s, was the ideological offspring of musicians such as Firmin Viry. Many of these younger musicians had seen him for the first time on stage at the *fêtes de témoignages*, and these performances left a great impact on them. But there is also a link between the *militants culturels* and political developments in metropolitan France. In 1981, around the time that this new generation of musicians was becoming increasingly visible, audible and identified within a Réunionese music scene, François Mitterrand became president. He increased decentralisation, giving more freedom and financial support for independently run socio-political and cultural projects in the various regions of France.

The *militants culturels* benefited from these measures, one of the beneficiaries being the group Bastèr, which originated in a community-based project on the outskirts of St. Pierre, in a small village called Basse-Terre. St. Pierre has grown so much so that Basse-Terre can no longer be distinguished from it, but in the 1980s things were different, as Thierry Gauliris, lead singer and central figure of the band, explained to me:

“La ville va grandir, va manger tout ce qui reste en tant qu’habitations rurales! Comme je te disais dans ce quartier y’avait des *servis kabarés* et comme c’était un quartier agricole on était reveillés quand même au son naturel des animaux qui chantaient, des bœufs, des coqs le matin. Ça joue beaucoup!”

*“The city will grow, will eat up all that is left in terms of rural habitation! As I’ve told you, in this quarter there were the servis kabarés and since it was an agricultural area one woke up with the natural sounds of the animals that sang, the cows, the cocks in the morning. That means a lot!”*

Gauliris makes reference to the rural quarter in which he grew up, which grounds the music of Bastèr in *maloya* traditions and a related cultural setting of the past. The weekends saw families celebrating the *servis kabaré* to which the whole neighbourhood was invited. But as the village grew and parts of the *bidonville* gave way to social housing projects, this musical background began to change. The advantage in trading huts for three-room apartments might be clear, but the social structure of Basse-Terre was not derived from people living in three-storey houses on top of each other. There was no space left to raise cocks or pigs. Instead room was made to build garages for cars with large stereos that now blast *zouk luv* and *soca* instead of *maloya*. One of the missions that Gauliris proclaims for his band is therefore to preserve the memory of this Réunionese music tradition and in doing so the social life-world from which his own cultural background derives (Wergin forthcoming).

He explained this background to me while we sat in front of his house and drank coffee. He wore dreadlocks, trendy jeans and a shirt, and described himself as mixed, as a Creole with an identity, by which he makes highly various references to Europe, India, China and slavery: “J’ai de l’eupéen dans mes gènes, de l’esclave, de chinois, même de l’Inde un peu... je suis très melangé” (personal interview). This is what he told me in front of the house. Meanwhile, behind the house where Gauliris had fitted out his own musical studio, a sound engineer whom he had invited from Jamaica was busy mixing a new live album of Bastèr, recorded at their twentieth anniversary concert a few months before.

As Gauliris explained, Bastèr, which originated in initiatives for affirmative (musical) action, has become a guarantor for the preservation of a cultural heritage. The group remains attached to the origins of their musical career, as a group that belonged to a political movement, the Mouvement Kiltirel de Basse-Terre (MKBT). They have always fought for the recognition of a Réunionese

ionese *kréolité* that provides a unique cultural background for them and makes their neighbourhood distinct from others, especially other poor areas and *bidonvilles* throughout France. But, in order to earn a living as musicians, they also have to be visible and audible not only to a local but also a global music market. As a consequence, they look for new musical connections and have started to incorporate popular sounds from other places, which are linked to their own ideas about music-making. Their music is no longer solely a reference to La Réunion but is now produced within a translocal network of musicians, sounds and ideas, together with, for example, a sound engineer from Jamaica.

While Bastèr have become actors on the global level, they also remain attached to a local imaginary. The local remains important as it serves them in being recognisable to other musical actors. On a global scale, their musical difference caters for an image of uniqueness and adds to their artistic attractiveness. Here, World Music exists, but not as an idea of a united musical interest and enjoyment, not as a *mélange* of global love, peace and harmony, but as a *métissage* of economic dependence, will-power and complex criteria for artistic quality. How this sort of World Music is developed and what it sounds like becomes audible in Bastèr's interpretation of "Redemption Song".

#### 4. The sound: Bastèr's version of "Redemption Song"

"Redemption Song" was first recorded in a band version by Bob Marley in 1980 but never released as such until after his death in 1981. The song been re-recorded and performed by many artists ever since, for example, Manfred Mann's Earthband, U2, Johnny Cash, Stevie Wonder, Christy Moore, Chris Cornell, Ben Harper, Dave Matthews, Bob Marley's son Ziggy Marley together with Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean and recently by Ms. Dynamite at the 2006 World 8 concert in London. Such performances, while making reference to Marley and his musical tradition, have changed the song, its style and partly its lyrics:

"What is, or was, on the mind of Marley in those slow, ganjainspired, Jamaican complaints about Babylon and the march to an African Zion, is not on the minds of those who play him at parties in Chicago. Again, this is no argument against the alternative uses to which music can be put, but it does add

a note of clarity about the limits of hybridity in the widely advertised, but still somewhat dubious, emergence of a world culture.”  
(Brennan 2001: 49)

What is on the minds of an audience that listens to Marley’s music nowadays might not be to preserve its cultural content, and neither do the re-recordings of it. But they do add to the original versions, since other artists bring in new ideas, and in their interpretations make reference to their own musical backgrounds and histories. They change “Redemption Song” and its style, but also the story that is told, which is dependent on the form of musical storytelling chosen, often the one that is most likely to reach a wider audience.

From Marley’s own recordings, the acoustic version of the song is by far the best known one. It is the final track on his last studio album, *Uprising*. Hugh Hodges (2005) offers an interesting discussion of this album and the cultural trajectories it entails. He states that one of its central aspects is its reference to the oratorical traditions of the West Indies, and that

“...Redemption Song, the closing song on *Uprising*, affirms this power of speech in a complex way. [...] It begins with exile. But it ends with the triumphant trodding forward out of exile [...] a triumph made possible by the fact that the one thing the pirates could not take away from the slaves was their voices.”  
(Hodges 2005: 59)

Enacting oneself as a Réunionese *militant culturel* evokes a similar imaginary of “trodding forward out of exile”, this time the exile of neo-colonial cultural domination by metropolitan France. Bastèr’s musical history of over twenty years very much relates to this. Still using traditional *maloya* instruments, *triangle*, *roulèr* and *kayamb*,<sup>5</sup> in the early 1980s the band began to incorporate new styles and sounds into their version of the local music tradition. They accompanied older songs with drums, electric guitars and bass, in doing so turning themselves into researchers, inventors or (re)discoverers of local traditions (Hobsbawm 1983). The band continues this invention of Réunionese music traditions, and its bandleader, Thierry Gauliris continues to act as a *militant culturel*, as someone who openly says how and what Réunionese culture is and what it actually sounds like in comparison to other musical influences. He is very

---

<sup>5</sup> A *roulèr* is a large drum made out of a wooden barrel covered with a bull’s skin. The musician sits on its side and beats the rhythm with his hands while altering the sound with his feet. A *kayamb* is made out of sugarcane tied together in the form and size of a washboard. The body is then filled with dried seeds, and it is shaken to the rhythm of the music, making a sound similar to rain-sticks.

aware of the attractiveness of a unique Réunionese music for global audiences and nurtures it by contrasting it with other cultural settings, other artists and musical styles. As a close listening reveals, Bastèr's version of "Redemption Song" is indeed a strong and unique example of this.

Bob Marley "Redemption Song" (lyrics as in Hodges 2005: 58/9)

Old Pirates, yes, dey rob I  
 Sold I to the merchant ships  
 Minutes after dey took I  
 From the bottomless pit  
 But my hand was made strong  
 By the 'and of the Almighty  
 We forward in dis generation  
 Triumphantly....

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery  
 None but ourselves can free our minds  
 Have no fear for atomic energy  
 'Cause none of them can stop de time  
 How long shall dey kill our prophets  
 While we stand aside and look?  
 Ooh, Some say it's just a part of it  
 We've got to fulfill de book.

All I ever had:  
 Redemption songs;  
 These songs of freedom;  
 Songs of freedom.

In Bastèr's version of the song, it is the characteristic intro taken from the original band version that sets the stage. The rhythm section of bass and drums plays it together with harmonies from the guitar and piano. The sound of the instruments quickly becomes smoother when it starts to accompany the voice of Gauliris. He sings the original words of Marley's song in English. His French/Kréol-Réunionnais accent remains audible, which at first gives his performance a slightly irritating undertone. He also imitates the Jamaican patois on which the lyrics are based. These first bars make it clear already that a very Creole moment of musical interpretation is about to unfold. Like the language in which it is sung, the rhythm of the song is both similar to but different from the original, played not in a straight 4/4 but in a 2/4 against a 3/4. It thus becomes more difficult to pinpoint the 1 in each bar.

This makes the music sound more fluid, in constant movement and very danceable. The sound evokes images of couples in a larger group of people dancing together, maybe on a beach. They wear costumes blowing in the wind, the sun is setting somewhere over a lagoon, the water is calm. There are the musicians, all smiling, all dressed in comfortable clothes with their instruments plugged into amplifiers that do not need electricity. They just stand there in the sand, and not even Gauliris has a microphone to amplify his voice. Still the sound is balanced and smooth. This musical setting is in complete contrast to the lyrics of the song, which tell about deportation and violence, but also of a growth in strength and of a redemption that is yet to come. The musical image turns its story of slavery and the Middle Passage into part of a concrete historical past. The sound romanticises the history that is being told, thus allowing its performers to use it as a profitable commodity in the present.

The first few minutes pass, and the contrast between the lyrics and their musical embeddedness continues. This becomes even more apparent when the lyrics stop for a piano break. The piano has been present throughout the song, up to now mainly providing some harmony and fill-ins, which add an element of playfulness to the overall sound. I imagine the pianist in front of an electronic stage piano with thin soft hands and long fingers that glide over the keyboard, effortlessly colour-coding the song. The piano solo sounds like a conglomerate of this 'added colour'. It has a simple melodic structure, which is rehearsed but played in the style of an improvisation. This goes on for a minute or so, and you imagine yourself away from the beach and the dancing couples, and in front of some supermarket shelves or in a large and rather conservative clothing department store, where the music provides the soundscape for a comfortable shopping experience.

But then there is yet another break. All of a sudden the piano stops, and only the rhythm section comes back in. The soft sound of the electric bass is replaced by the deep voice of a voluminous drum played with the bare hands: "da dagadaga three and four da dagadaga three and four da dagadaga..." Along with a triangle that sounds like a best man banging a glass to announce his speech for the bride and groom, this *roulèr* beat becomes the basis of a third part of the song. Accompanied only by this rhythm, Gauliris again states the lyrics that send the listener off to yet another place.

One suddenly realises that this rhythm has been foundational throughout the song. It is what created the danceable mixture of 2/4 against 3/4 in the beginning. It is the rhythm to which my imaginary group of dancers moved. Now this rhythm stands alone, exposed, only accompanied by the voice and lyrics of the singer and the song. What becomes audible in this very moment is the way in which the original song has been transformed by adding something from somewhere else. Therefore, not only does the voice of the singer generate difference, but the music provides yet another setting. It directs the song and its story towards other places, notably La Réunion, because it is the *maloya* that suddenly appears underneath, now revealing itself as the basis of a familiar song that sounded different from the start, because from the start this *maloya* had been present. La Réunion is made audible as the foundation for the musicians, their local reference through which they transform Bob Marley's song, its sound and its message.

After the one-minute intermission of this enactment of 'pure Réunion style', the harmony instruments, the piano and the guitar, come back in together with the drums, again making the sound smoother, but this time one is not back on the beach, looking at the sunset. As a listener, one is now somewhere else and one has a choice where one would like this *other* to be. The discrepancies between the lyrics and the music make sense as it enables listeners to move between the different musical references that are made, to distinguish between what is sung and what is played, and independently to mix imaginaries, lyrics and personal mood. The music caters for different imaginaries, from slavery to supermarket music, from Jamaica to La Réunion, from the Middle Passage to High Street shopping centre. The song ends with the rhythm section again stating the rhythmic introduction, this time alongside the drumming of the *roulèr*. Its sound is loud and central to these concluding bars, in which Gauliris shouts out a few sounds of encouragement for the musicians to go on, play, let loose, announcing a *servis kabaré* with endless music played through the night that is about to begin.

In my understanding, this is the most Creole version of Marley's "Redemption Song" there is, not least, following Hodges, in terms of the power of the voice. It is sung in a form of English imitating a Jamaican patois with a French/Kréol-Réunionnais accent and played by a band rooted in the *maloya* rhythms of the Indian Ocean. In this performance, the lead singer, Thierry Gauliris, together with his band, draws various pictures. Metropolitan France stands next to Europe, represented by the piano, the harmonies and the French accent in his voice. La

Réunion forms a basis, with its *maloya* rhythms and instruments, the special use of the *triangle*, *kayamb* and *roulèr*. The electric guitar creates another imaginary, possibly reminding listeners of something between Hawaiian hula dancers and Dire Straits' "Brothers in Arms". Other trans-regional contexts are present, notably those of the West Indies, which give their own colour to the voicings; it is from them that Gauliris borrows the lyrics and the structure of the song, indeed, borrows its Creole story. Central is the aspect of mixing, of *métissage*. Bastèr's message to its audience is to understand this mixing as the root of something original. It forms their own Réunionese music tradition, whose musical enactment and audibility means the realisation of this message, which it transports. *Maloya* music is an unquestioned part of this.

In this song, Bastèr presents *maloya* as the foundation of its musical career on a global scale under the World Music label, where it makes them identifiable as an original band from La Réunion. To set the stage for this, already in 1992, Gauliris changed the direction of his band from the local Basse-Terre towards global markets:

“Après 10 ans d’existence, vers 92, c’est là qu’on – moi en tout cas, je me suis dit qu’il fallait même allier le côté musical et texte! Il fallait aller bosser: aller au conservatoire, prendre des cours. Ce que j’ai fait moi avec un des musiciens qui est resté jusqu’à maintenant! Sinon l’autre groupe: frères, sœurs, cousins, cousines, on s’est séparé comme ça. J’ai pris des nouveaux musiciens plus performants qui ont fait l’école à Paris ou même ici. Et c’est comme ça que le groupe a avancé.”

*“After ten years of existence, around 92, that’s when we – at least I said to myself that we had to align the musical and the lyrical side of things. We had to practice: go to the conservatory and take courses. That’s what I did together with one of the musicians with whom I have stayed until today! Apart from this, the rest of the group: brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces... we separated at that moment. I took new musicians, more trained, which had gone to music school in Paris or here. And this is how the group advanced.”*

Gauliris explains in this interview excerpt why the band Bastèr, as founded in the early 1980s, no longer exists. Back in 1992, he partly put the roots of his music aside, which used to be fixed in *maloya*, *métissage* and *militants culturels* in the quarter of Basse-Terre in the south of La Réunion. Instead he opens his style to a wider audience by adjusting it to the various criteria of the global music market. He inscribes himself into new traditions and takes new musical routes, no longer using local music, rhythms, instrumentation and singing to call for the formation of a

local Réunionese community. His visibility on the transcultural level remains rooted in his impersonation of a *militant culturel*, while, in a professionalised way, he also reinterprets local symbolisms from other regions in order to make himself audible outside the Réunionese context. Bob Marley's "Redemption Song", with its history and lyrics, is one of these symbolisms. When it is mixed with Réunionese styles, Gauliris conceptualises his life-world beyond the dichotomy of a French *métropole* versus a Réunionese *périphérie*. His music transports what Appadurai has called "forces from various metropolises ... [that] become indigenised in one way or another" (Appadurai 2002: 50). In this context Jamaica may not be an urban metropolis but, looking at the global importance of *reggae* music, it is at least a musical one. With it, Gauliris enters into a new referential space beyond a fixed neo-colonial setting, where he enacts his local tradition. He reinvents Marley's Creole version of redemption and also emphasises his own local music tradition. In doing so, he turns his band's music into a medium of continuous creolisation, of creolisation in flux, in which Gauliris, himself from a Creole background, re-arranges a music that is derived from yet another creolisation process, that of Jamaica.

In contrast to this idea of constant change, flux and flow generated by the music, *maloya* elements in Bastèr's "Redemption Song" simultaneously make clear reference to a Réunionese music tradition. They do not need to be explained: they appear fixed and, as I have said, remain unquestioned. But there is more to it than this: Gauliris's second move is the introduction of *reggae* music into his own musical style. He incorporates these elements into his musical image as a *militant culturel* advocating the uniqueness and importance of creolisation and *métissage*. However, while Gauliris calls for the idea of a mixture as the root of his music, this mix also draws new musical boundaries. On the one hand, *maloya* represents one if not the most acknowledged Réunionese music tradition and cultural reference. In contrast to other musical styles, it is a fixed musical statement. On the other hand, looking at Réunionese history, one can argue that the music itself was only invented as such roughly fifty years ago, at the first *fêtes de témoignages*. To that extent one has to wonder what, in a few years time, a so-called 'fixed musical tradition of La Réunion' will sound like, both on the island and beyond.

## 5. Conclusion: World Music à La Réunion

“Le réel est trop complexe, alors il faut changer les imaginaires.”  
(Édouard Glissant)<sup>6</sup>

One central aspect of Bastèr’s “Redemption Song” is that it is the mixing of a mixing of a mixing turned into something original by its artistic quality. It is similar to the oratorical traditions of the West Indies that Marley’s version makes reference to and in which “a truth presented without skill is hardly the truth at all” (Hodges 2005: 43).

Bastèr unites different real and imagined places in its music. Gauliris and his musicians chose *maloya*, as a cultural reference unique to La Réunion, to give their version an original sound. They also added jazz elements, notably the piano fill-ins, which make the song more accessible for audiences unfamiliar with Réunionese music. On a more abstract level, the Réunionese form of redemption they created mediates their understanding of unity and difference. It offers the possibility to describe and follow up various routes between La Réunion, Europe, Jamaica and Africa. As *militants culturels*, Gauliris and others play with these references, using them to present themselves in relation to a local culture and simultaneously as part of a complex field of cultural differences. This is another form of World Music, more than simply a ‘global village’, 70% of which are dominated by Western music industries (Mitchell 1996: 263). Although under the pressure of various political and economic restrictions, it remains an open space in constant movement and change.

Réunionese musicians have been fighting for cultural recognition for many generations. They have been forced to explore new possibilities to (re)locate their identity constructions away from French cultural and political supremacy. Now some of these *militants culturels*, such as Thierry Gauliris, are making active use of this postcolonial competence by connecting with other cultural settings and in doing so changing the imaginaries that are carried within their local music tradition. At the same time, local references, notably to *maloya*, are not lost but gain in use-value as a guarantee of the uniqueness of Bastèr’s performances. They are the basis

---

<sup>6</sup> “The real is too complex, which means that one has to change the imaginaries” (translation C.W.). The quotation comes from a public discussion between Édouard Glissant and Jean-Claude Crespy, which took place at the Internationale Literaturfestival Berlin on 07.09.2006 at the Maison de France in Berlin.

for the band's success on the global scale, in a World Music context whose target is an audience interested in musical heterogeneity. Here, their musical enactments become a form of *capital culturel* (Bourdieu 1979), whose value reduces the differences between the centre and the periphery because it draws attention to a multitude of traditional settings separated from the supremacy of one over the other.

Bastèr, in this context, oriented its music away from metropolitan France. Searching for new cultural references, Thierry Gauliris turned towards the Caribbean, another Creole culture whose roots rest in a violent colonial past. On the historical level, there are numerous similarities between these regions, which, from an ethnographic perspective, have only recently begun to be explored (Murray et al. 2006). Central to this comparison remains not its unifying credentials but their heterogeneity. Bastèr improves its image of uniqueness and authenticity not by combining but by contrasting *reggae* and other musical styles with *maloya* rhythms. The band does a form of "boundary-work" (Gieryn 1983) and in doing so 'manipulates' the past in order to influence the emotions of its audience, as well as the perception and ongoing historical (re)writing of Réunionese traditions. It proclaims its local culture not only in relation to fixed dichotomies of inside and outside, Réunion and metropolitan France, or *mélange* and *métissage*. Instead, Bastèr musically continues the creolisation process.

When Édouard Glissant defines creolisation as producing *cultures composites* (Glissant 1997), what Bastèr intonates can be described as a *musique composite*. Its musical tradition is based on the acceptance of originating in a multitude of socio-cultural influences. It is not an attempt to return to one or the other place of origin that is central to the production of these transcultural spaces, but the conscious working through and adding of new differences. In this respect, music outlines different perspectives towards the local, being a medium in which to articulate conflicting ideas of domination and marginality, and it creates borders as well as communities in newly emerging translocal spaces. Cultural references become loose and at the same time accessible in different contexts, forming pieces of a puzzle put together with ever-new images of transcultural connectivity.

The world musicians I have described enact their identity constructions in an individualised manner. On the one hand, these enactments are used to proclaim ideologies of, for example,

socio-political institutions such as the PCR. On the other hand, they bear witness to personal strategies to localise oneself in a Creole cultural setting. Through music, individual actors try to give their identity constructions a momentary order, which afterwards dissolves in another sound, another musical imaginary, an improvisation. These musicians are therefore always “Dazwischen” (Dracklé 2005: 4), in a space *between*. Meanwhile, between this and the next enactment of their local culture, they remain uncertain, but continue to challenge apparently fixed ideas about diversity, *métissage*, *kréolité* and other transcultural entanglements.

Bastèr, in its version of Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song”, describes unity as something imaginable, maybe a goal, a concept sustainable in the past and the future, but not in the present. As one among other characteristic intonations of a World Music, its meaning remains based within constantly changing musical enactments of identities, some of which can be heard right now, somewhere at a concert.

### References

- Appadurai, Arjun (2002). Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. In: Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo (eds.). *The Anthropology of Globalization*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 46-63.
- Bastèr (2001). *Raskok*. Discorama.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1979). Les trois états du capital culturel. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 30: 3-6.
- Brennan, Timothy (2001). World Music Does Not Exist. *Discourse* 23/1: 44-62.
- Chane-Kune, Sonia (1993). *Aux Origines de l'Identité Réunionnaise*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Clifford, James (1997). *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Comaroff, Joan and John Comaroff (2003). Ethnography on an Awkward Scale: Postcolonial Anthropology and the Violence of Abstraction. *Ethnography* 4/2: 147-179.

- Connell, John and Chris Gibson (2004). World Music: Deterritorializing Place and Identity. *Progress in Human Geography* 28/3: 342-361.
- Dracklé, Dorle (2005). *Die Rhetorik der Krise: Politik, Bürokratie und virtuelle Ökonomie in Südpotugal*. Münster: LIT.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ghasarian, Christian (1990). Indianité à La Réunion: gestion d'une double identité. In: J. L. Albert (ed.). *Vivre au pluriel: Production sociale des identités à l'île Maurice et à l'île de La Réunion*. St. Denis: Université de La Réunion/URA 1041 du CNRS, p. 99-107.
- Gieryn, Thomas F. (1983). Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists. *American Sociological Review* 48: 781-95.
- Glissant, Édouard (1997). *Traité du tout-monde*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1983). Introduction: Inventing Traditions. In: Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hodges, Hugh (2005). Walk Good: West Indian Oratorical Traditions in Bob Marley's Uprising. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40/2: 43-63.
- Mann, Michael (2004). How many people were crying oceans... - Südasiatische Migranten im Indischen Ozean. In: Dietmar Rothermund and Susanne Weigelin-Schwidrzik (eds.). *Der Indische Ozean: Das afro-asiatische Mittelmeer als Kultur- und Wirtschaftsraum*. Wien: Promedia, p. 123-144.
- Marley, Bob (1981). *Uprising*. Island.
- Mitchell, Tony (1996). *Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop and Rap in Europe and Oceania*. London: Leicester University Press.
- Murray, David A. B., Tom Boellstorff and Kathryn Robinson (2006). East Indies/West Indies: Comparative Archipelagos. *Anthropological Forum* 16/3.
- Neveling, Patrick (2006). Spirits of Capitalism and the De-alienation of Workers: a Historical Perspective on the Mauritian Garment Industry. *Online Paper Series GSAA* No. 2. Accessible under the URL:  
<http://www.gzaa.uni-halle.de/deu/gzaa/onlinepapers.php>. (last accessed 14.05.07)
- Stokes, Martin (2004). Music and the Global Order. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 47-72.
- Vergès, Françoise (1999). *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- – (2006). Creolization and the Maison de civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise. *Journal of Visual Culture* 5/1: 29-51.
- Wergin, Carsten (2007). *Kréol Blouz: zur musikalischen Inszenierung von Identität und Kultur auf der Insel Réunion*. University of Bremen: PhD thesis.
- – (forthcoming). T'shéga, Shéga, Séga...: Music, Identity and Creolisation on Réunion Island. In: Ralph Ludwig and Burkhard Schnepel (eds.) *Multiple Identities in Action*. Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang.
- Zips, Werner (2006). *Schwarze Rebellen: afrikanisch-karibischer Freiheitskampf in Jamaica*. Münster: LIT.

---

\*Carsten Wergin lives in Berlin and currently teaches at the Institutes for Social and Cultural Anthropology at Free University Berlin and the University of Halle-Wittenberg. Earlier this year he defended his PhD thesis at the University of Bremen. Its title is *Kréol Blouz: on the musical enactment of identity and culture on Réunion Island* and it is based on a one-year fieldwork among musicians and other cultural actors on La Réunion. His general research interests are: interdisciplinarity, multi-sited ethnography and postcolonial theory applied to the fields of popular culture, music and tourism.

Contact: carsten.wergin@gmail.com