

“6/8 rhythm” Meets “lova-tsofina”: Experiencing Malagasy Music

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the importance of integrating musical practices into ethnomusicological research. Despite an ongoing debate about the need for a more performative approach (*e.g.*, Baily, 2008), there are still only very few ethnomusicologists who include experiences gained through “musicking” (Small, 1998)¹ in their analysis of musical phenomena, which would challenge Western analytical perspectives and prevalent academic discourses (see Agawu, 2003). This paper is the result of my field research and musical collaborations with musicians from Madagascar in Madagascar itself and in Europe. Following the approach of a “subject-centred ethnography” that encompasses the researcher and the researched (Rice, 2003) and Agawu’s demand for a “presumption of sameness” (Agawu, 2003), I have integrated both, the analyses of discourses and of my own experiences of learning and playing Malagasy music.

Within all discourses on Malagasy music, the topic of rhythm is constantly present. More precisely, the term “6/8 rhythm” is persistently used whilst at the same time contested, especially by the musicians themselves. The usage of a particular metre is striking in as far as the concept of metre itself is profoundly based on the idea of notating music. However, all musicians I work with neither read nor write music and emphasize the importance of the Malagasy concept of oral tradition, referred to as “lova-tsofina” (“lova” = heritage, “sofina” = ear).

Based on a selection of interviews and shared music-making with Malagasy musicians my paper challenges the perspective of seeing musical experiences as untranslatable with musicking and talking about experiences divided into two different and separated “worlds”. Rather, it shows that it is necessary to perceive and analyse discourses and musical experiences in a constant interrelation.

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¹ Small (1998) proposes the verb “to music” (with its present participle or gerund “musicking”) as music in his opinion should be understood as an activity rather than a thing. He explains that his definition of “to music” goes beyond the meanings of “to perform” or “to make music”: “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (Small, 1998, p. 9).

INTRODUCTION

The history of Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island situated in the Indian Ocean off the Mozambican coast, is always also a history of migration, a topic which in relation to music has become an important research area (*e.g.*, Kiwan and Meinhof, 2011). The different waves of migration over the centuries have formed what is often referred to as a “cultural melting pot”, a term also used by many of the Malagasy musicians. The musical cultures of the island are equally diverse, and the variety of musical influences, the traces of musical instruments or styles, or the mixture and fusion of different musical elements within Malagasy music have raised the interest of researchers (*e.g.*, Harison, 2005; Mallet, 2009; Schmidhofer, 1995). The diversity within the island’s music cultures is also emphasized by many of the Malagasy musicians themselves, often described as “cultural wealth” and something they consider an asset. Yet, all the musicians I worked with claim at the same time, that despite the regional varieties within Malagasy musics there was one unifying element: a shared rhythmical structure that could be found in all the musics of the island.

“6/8 RHYTHM” MEETS “LOVA-TSOFINA”

The topic of rhythm persistently appears in the musicians’ discourses: more precisely it is the term “6/8 rhythm” that is constantly used, but contested at the same time. Some musicians apply this term without further commenting on it. However, the majority use it, stating at the same time that it was a foreign concept and that it was not properly suitable for the understanding of their own music.

Guitar and electric bass player Hajazz (alias Haja Mbolatiana Tovo Rasolomahatratra) argues that it is always music experts or music teachers who use that particular term, emphasising that he personally does not feel very comfortable using such terms (*i.e.*, metres), and implying that there is no such terminology for Malagasy music:

[1] Hajazz : En général, ce sont des profs de musique qui disent 6/8. Mais c’est un peu mélangé, on peut dire aussi même 4/4. (Il montre) 1, 2, 3, 4 [...] Ou 6/8 ou 12/8, je sais pas. C’est entre les trois.

Jenny : Mais, par exemple, si tu répètes avec des autres musiciens malgaches et vous parlez... si jamais ça arrive que vous parlez...

Hajazz : Non non, c’est rare de trouver des... des... Ce sont des musiciens connaisseurs qui disent toujours 6/8 comme ça. (Interview Hajazz, 12.8.2008)

[1] ² Hajazz: In general, it is the music teachers who call it 6/8. But it’s a bit mixed, you can also say 4/4. (He demonstrates) 1, 2, 3, 4 [...] Or 6/8 or 12/8, I don’t know. It’s between the three.

Jenny: But, for example, when you rehearse with other Malagasy musicians and you talk...if ever it happens that you talk...

² Please note that my translations into English are verbatim, rendering the text as closely as possible to the original rather than attempting to achieve stylistic perfection

Hajazz: No no, it's rare to find the...the...it is the connoisseur musicians who always call it 6/8 like this. (Interview Hajazz, 12.8.2008)

The term and concept of a “6/8 rhythm” as understood in Western musicology is rooted in the idea of musical notation. Measuring music and grouping it into entities, such as for example 3/4 or 6/8, implies a distinction and alternation of strong and weak beats that until today forms part of the basis of all definitions in dictionaries and of education at music schools and conservatories (Arom, 1991, p. 180). As Dudley (1996) explains, the notion of measure in music lets Western musicians and music listeners assume a consistent accentuation of metric pulses, such as the first note in a 3/4 metre or the first and fourth note in a 6/8 metre (Dudley, 1996, p. 272). A very well-known piece in a “6/8 rhythm” in Western classical music, for example, is the “Andante graziose” in the piano sonata in A major by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

In the music score, the 6/8 metre is indicated at the beginning of each line. The phrasing curves grouping together the first three eights in each of the first two bars make the already assumed accentuation on the first and fourth eights even more obvious:

Köchel-Verz. 331 (300i)

Andante grazioso

The image shows a musical score for the second movement of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Piano Sonata in A major, Köchel-Verzeichnis 331. The score is in 6/8 time and consists of two systems. The first system shows the first four measures, with phrasing slurs over the first three eighth notes of the first two measures. The second system shows the next four measures, also with phrasing slurs. The score includes dynamic markings (p, f) and fingering numbers (1-5).

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, piano sonata A major, Köchel-Verzeichnis 331.

In Mozart, *Klaviersonaten Band 2* (p. 160), Urtext-Ausgabe von Walther Lampe, München-Duisburg: Henle-Verlag 1955.

At the same time, throughout different academic disciplines the term and concept of “rhythm” is highly contested and also understood in many different ways (see for example Kolinski, 1973, p. 494). However, what is striking here is the paradox that on the one hand, the concept of a metre, such as “6/8 rhythm” is profoundly linked with the idea of notating music and yet on the other, that the great majority of the musicians I worked with neither read, nor write music. To the contrary, all musicians regularly talk about their experiences of learning to play, make, and compose music using only their ears, listening to the radio or to fellow musicians playing, to name

two very common examples. They emphasize the Malagasy concept of oral tradition, “lova-tsofina” (composed of the two words “lova” = heritage and “sofina” = ear), which they consider the base for Malagasy music making.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSICAL PARTICIPATION

The existence of this very specific Western term and concept of “6/8 rhythm” within the musicians’ discourses raises many important questions. Possible reasons for the musicians’ use of this term and concept could, for example, touch upon the particular research context, my role as a Western researcher and classically trained musician conducting the interviews, the musicians’ bond and relation to the capital Antananarivo and their aim to reach the international world music market and advertise or explain their music to a Western audience.

Almost all musicians I have worked with have already performed outside Madagascar, have participated in international music festivals or intercultural music projects, and many of those based in Europe also frequently travel back to Madagascar for concerts or joined musical collaborations with their fellow musicians at home. Within this field, marked by transnational exchanges and movements, it is perhaps not surprising to witness that different concepts and discourses about music also “migrate” to different places, such as the term and concept of “6/8 rhythm”.

However, rather than focussing on “travelling concepts” and investigating *why* the musicians make use of this particular term and concept, I would like to focus on possible ways of going beyond the supposed contradiction that appears if one understands the Western concept of “6/8 rhythm” and the Malagasy concept of “lova-tsofina” as if they were in opposition to one another. Going beyond the statement of difference and contradiction I have decided to investigate this phenomenon further by bringing in musical practices as a means to explore new ways of understanding. The theoretical framework that I use to support my argument here is mainly based on two methodological propositions.

“PRESUMPTION OF SAMENESS” (AGAWU, 2003) AND “SUBJECT-CENTERED ETHNOGRAPHY” (RICE, 2003)

“*Representing African Music. Postcolonial notes, Queries, Positions*” by Kofi Agawu was published in 2003 with the main aim of producing a critique of the discourse about African music. Agawu (2003, p. xii) argues that Western academic work on African music has been in a constant search for difference and has produced a persistent emphasis on “the Other.” Agawu does not propose any concrete methodological instructions of how to undermine dominant Western discourses which engage in a process of “othering” African music. He does however point to the need for a change within the researcher’s attitude by adopting a stance which he describes as a “*presumption of sameness*” (Agawu, 2003, p. 171). He writes:

There is no method for attending to sameness, only a presence of mind, an attitude, a way of seeing the world. For fieldworkers who presume sameness rather than difference, the challenge of constructing an ethnographic report would be construed

as developing a theory of translation that aims to show how the materiality of culture constrains musical practice in specific ways. The idea would be to unearth the impulses that motivate acts of performance and to seek to interpret them in terms of broader, perhaps even generic cultural impulses. (Agawu, 2003, p. 169)

I have taken this theoretical proposition onto a more concrete level by following some central aspects of Timothy Rice's approach of a "subject-centred ethnography" (Rice, 2003). Rice's model incorporates the main theoretical aspects of what ethnomusicologists refer to as the "new fieldwork" (Hellier-Tinoco, 2003) in ethnomusicology, namely research that reconfigures "the field" as an *experience* rather than a place. Rice argues that ethnomusicological studies today should focus on individuals or small groups of individuals that share certain beliefs, social status, behaviours, tastes, or experiences. Subject-centred musical ethnography challenges cultures and societies as "traditionally understood", *i.e.*, as fixed entities, often merely defined by ethnicity. It is a move towards studying individuals and more precisely, the individuals' experiences. Further and most importantly, it proposes a *shared* space of musical experience and ethnography that encompasses the researcher and the researched alike (Rice, 2005, p. 152).

Agawu has given the issue of power much attention. He criticizes that the constant search for difference within Western academic works has produced an ideologically one-sided and politically disadvantageous representation of African musics. A "*presumption* of sameness" however, would allow for a cross-cultural vision through which we would be able to also focus on the specificity of local practices (Agawu, 2003, p. 169).³

In that he mirrors aspects of Rice's model. Firstly, the idea of Rice's model is to study the experiences of individuals and to create a *shared* space of musical experience. Rice does not in any way deny the issue of power that is inherent for instance in the fact that discourses are controlled and dominated (Rice, 2003, p. 174). However, he argues that his model helps to study issues of contestation by looking at the positions of individuals within this space of musical experiences. What Rice describes as his "preconditions" for subject-centred ethnography, namely to understand the individual as a "thoroughly social and self-reflexive being" (Rice, 2003, p.157) and to understand experience as something that "begins with interaction with a world and with others" (Rice, 2003, p. 157) already guards against Agawu's main critique on the consistent emphasis on difference: Rice's model not only embraces informants, but encompasses the researcher in the same way. The "*presumption* of sameness" is therefore inherent in the *shared* space of musical experiences where individual positions are analysed in equal measure.⁴

³ Another scholar who has given the issue of power much attention is ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman. In his article "Musicology as a political act" (Bohlman, 1993) he argues that musicology (including so-called sub-disciplines) is going through a "political crisis" and "profound moral panic," criticising most the discipline's constant attempt to essentialize music (Bohlman, 1993, p. 419). Bohlman sees notation as the most wide-spread form of essentialising, saying that "[b]y making and essentializing its object, musicology situates itself in a particularly Western position of wielding power. Notation, for example, becomes a convenient way of collapsing time and space, thereby removing all sorts of Others – Western and non-Western – to the plane of the universal. By rendering all musics in Western notation, one creates a universe of music and then succeeds in controlling it (Bohlman, 1993, p. 424). Bohlman further emphasizes the danger of power when it comes to oral tradition and notating music: "By transcribing and notating music from oral tradition, we demonstrate our power and knowledge, but ipso facto keep the transmitters of oral tradition from acquiring the same measure of power" (Bohlman, 1993, p. 424).

⁴ Within recent debates in ethnomusicology, the role of the researcher, his/her impact on the field research (situation),

THE IMPORTANCE OF ANALYSING DISCOURSES AND MUSICAL EXPERIENCES IN A CONSTANT INTERRELATION

Participating musically and introducing yourself not only as a researcher, but as a musician at the same time, can not only have (positive) effects on the research situation and your relations within the field (see for example Baily, 2008; Mallet, 2009), but it allows you to gain shared musical experiences with the musicians.

Many scholars have argued for a more performative approach, starting in 1960 with Mantle Hood, who more or less institutionalized the performance approach by introducing the idea of “bi-musicality” within ethnomusicology (Hood, 1960).⁵ However, in 2008 Baily continued to argue that not many researchers have actually followed this approach and put this aim into action which to Baily seems to be a problem of academic “outcome” (Baily, 2008, p. 135) as to how knowledge and research is supposed to be (re-)presented in academic contexts.⁶ He argues that, in addition to scholarly writings, multimedia or documented recordings, live performances would be required as well (Baily, 2008, p.131). Recent works by scholars discuss significant aspects of “performance” and how it could be theorized within ethnomusicological research, such as Turino (2008) who develops the concept of “participatory performance” (Turino, 2008, p. 23-65).⁷ Yet, the issue that has come to the fore within researchers’ debates on the integration of musical experiences into their own works is the obstacle (if not impossibility) that many feel and face when trying to put into words, and narrate what they have experienced through musicking.

Scholarly discussions and theories across disciplines have for several decades directed their attention to narratives as the “narrativization of lived experience is one of the most fundamental processes of making sense of our lives [...]” (Meinhof and Galasinski, 2005, p. 101). It is through narratives that we also structure and interpret our experiences (Cheshire and Ziebland, 2005, p. 17). What is often referred to as the “narrative turn” in sciences – not only throughout humanities and social science, but also in natural sciences - goes back a long way in history to Nietzsche’s observation that “there are no facts but only interpretations” (Nietzsche, 1956/1844-1900, p. 903, cited in Meinhof and Galasinski, 2005, p. 72). Meinhof and Galasinski

the nature of relationships during research, and other aspects relating to field research and the researcher remain current and important issues discussed and ethnomusicologists keep pointing at the importance of self-reflexivity within our research. See for example Barz and Cooley (2008).

⁵ There is a considerable amount of literature on the ethnography of ‘performance’, with research in this field also relating to musical performance. ‘Performance studies’ are often intertwined or integrated with other academic disciplines, such as ethnomusicology and anthropology. However, it has also become an independent discipline and is taught as such at many universities. Prominent scholars are, for example, Conquergood (1985), Turner (1986), and more recently Denzin (2003) and Schechner (2006).

⁶ A good example of, and reflection upon knowledge representation in Western academic disciplines comes from Bohlman (1993) within his critique on acts of “essentializing music” in the discipline of musicology where he writes: “I should even go so far as to say that there are times when musicology is driven by the fear that someone is “not really talking about ‘the music.’” or, even more ludicrously, that an article or book does not use sufficient musical examples to be about ‘the music.’ Musicology students struggle under the prerequisite of finding enough ‘music’ to make their dissertations valid. Would that validity were only a matter of evidence about the domains in which musical practice takes place, for enough music inevitably means notated or notatable examples” (Bohlman, 1993, pp. 422-423).

⁷ Turino (2008) describes this concept as one out of four fields of music making that he defines. It describes musical practices in which there are no artist-audience distinctions and where there are only participants. This stands in contrast to ‘presentational performance’ where artists provide music for an audience that is listening. For further detail on these concepts, please refer to Turino (2008, particularly p. 23-65).

(2005) argue that it is through narratives that we also order our experiences in a “tellable” form which is interpretative and evaluative at the same time” (Meinhof and Galasinski, 2005, pp. 72, 102).

Rice (1997) who has been researching Bulgarian music both as an ethnomusicological researcher *and* as a participating musician writes that talking to musicians from Bulgaria had already directed him towards an emic understanding of the music. When he tried to understand the Bulgarian insider perspectives through the musicians' discourses about their music, he first thought that he could be satisfied with the results. However, once he started to gain experience by participating musically and was capable of playing this musical tradition himself, he realized that he “ran into the limits of this language-based method and its associated theory of culture” (Rice, 1997, p. 109). He therefore argues that “acting musically” adds yet another dimension:

Although the linguistic methods of cognitive anthropology had helped me narrow the gap between emic and etic perspectives, I could not in the end close that gap completely. When, on the other hand, I abandoned those methods and acted musically, it seemed as if I fell right into the gap between insider and outsider, into a theoretical “no place” that felt very exciting, if not exactly a utopia. I was neither insider nor an outsider. (Rice, 1997, p. 110)

Other scholars have experienced similar and have described musical experiences almost as a separated, very emotional world that is hard to translate into words. Titon (1997) for example has coined the term “musical being-in-the-world” that already suggests understanding musical experiences as a special condition. At the same time he argues that the aim for the researcher and the researched should be to discover what it is to make and to know music as a lived experience (Titon, 1997, p. 87). He therefore writes that

[...] ethnography becomes an experience weighted genre in which narrative includes background information, interpretation and analysis, and above all one in which insights emerge from experience: one shows how one comes to understand. (Titon, 1997, p. 96)

I would argue that this is not a one-way directional phenomenon. Our narratives do not only show how we come to understand our experiences of musicking, moreover our musical experiences likewise show us how we come to understand discourses about music and about our experiences gained through musicking. Our discourses are informed by our musical experiences as our musical experiences are informed by our discourses.

In order to make this argument clearer, I will now give concrete examples from my own research with Malagasy musicians, showing that it is useful to look at both directions and demonstrate the ways in which discourses and musical practices are linked interdependently.

THE INTERRELATION OF DISCOURSES AND MUSICAL PRACTICES

1.) HOW DISCOURSES INFORMED MY MUSICAL EXPERIENCES

The experiences described below are based on my field research with Malagasy musicians over the last six years in which I have also had many opportunities to play and to musick with them. I started to learn the Malagasy zither “valiha”⁸ from scratch in Antananarivo, Madagascar, but over the last two years have mainly played Malagasy music with my violin and my recorder. Recently I have also begun to sing. I regularly perform with singer and guitarist Erick Manana (alias Erick Rafilipomanana) and his fellow musicians. Erick Manana is based in France, but with his different formations performs all around Europe, Canada, and also in Madagascar. He is also a member of the groups “Madagascar AllStars”, “Lolo sy ny tariny”, and “Feo Gasy”.

Engaging in discussions with the musicians and listening to their discourses about the music has given me much inspiration and help for learning and playing Malagasy music. It has made me become aware of topics, ideas, and also methods that otherwise I would have never thought about, never used, or never felt and experienced.

A maybe rather obvious, but very crucial example - and starting point for many other examples - is the musicians' constant emphasis on the importance of the “lova-tsofina”, explained above. If they had not talked so much about their own experiences of learning and playing Malagasy music using only their ears, I would have never tried to learn and play the music the same way. Until now I have never notated any of the music I have learned or played, nor have I learned any music from any written source. No musical piece that I have played with Malagasy musicians remained exactly the same during our performances. For example, depending on the instrumentation, the concert atmosphere, nervousness, excitement or spontaneous reactions from the audience, the guitar tuning, technical problems or lyric memorisation the same song or tune will differ on each occasion. If I used musical notation to memorize and learn the music, I would easily get lost when musicking and performing on stage.

Accepting the “lova-tsofina” as the base of Malagasy music has further helped me to become aware of other important aspects to be discussed below. The debate on the “6/8 rhythm” has played a crucial role within these experiences.

Similar to guitarist Hajazz, “salegy”⁹ singer Jaojoby (alias Eusèbe Jaojoby) emphasizes that he is not a theoretician, and that for him, everything depends on the musical practice. He argues that the term “6/8 rhythm” as such is already European and that

⁸ The valiha is a tube zither, in the High Plateaux region. It is made out of bamboo with strings attached all around. For detailed information on the valiha, see Rakotomalala (2003), Randafison (1980), or Randrianary (2001).

⁹ Salegy is the name of a musical style originating from the North of Madagascar. Interestingly, the word salegy is also often used to name the dance or the rhythm of this style. It is also often used as a synonym for '6/8 rhythm' by the musicians, calling for example “vakodrazana” music from the High Plateaux region the “6/8 rhythm of the High Plateaux region”.

it is also the Europeans who teach music theory, but that musicians from Madagascar do not notate their music:

[2] Moi, je ne suis pas théoricien, juste quelques notion de solfège quand j'étais jeune. Moi je joue comme ça. C'est dans la pratique. Alors, je crois que c'est un peu difficile pour moi d'expliquer. [...] le terme 6/8, déjà c'est européen. Nous, on n'écrit pas la musique. Mais comme il y a un mélange, le solfège, c'est les Européens qui nous enseignent le solfège. (Interview Jaojoby, 21.8.2008)

[2] Me, I am not a theoretician, just some idea about music theory when I was young. I am playing like that. It is in the practice. So, I think it is a bit difficult for me to explain. [...] the term 6/8 is already European. We, we don't write music. But as there is a mix, the music theory, it is the Europeans who teach us music theory. (Interview Jaojoby, 21.8.2008)

Many other examples of musicians' discourses equally show that although most of the musicians know the concept of a metre, they tend to consider it as foreign and of no great importance to them.

The term "6/8 rhythm" also appears in many Western discourses on Malagasy music, such as in articles in music magazines (see for example Eyre, 2002). Often, the topic of rhythm is emphasized as the asset of Malagasy music and at the same time as possibly the most confusing element for Western listeners. Personally, as soon as I started to learn and play Malagasy music, I quickly realized that for me, any attempt to count to the music or keep the (accentuation) pattern of a particular metre in mind while playing would confuse rather than help me. In fact, the question and the urge to define the metre has become irrelevant to me as I have found other references – again by listening to and using the musicians' discourses and our shared musical experiences as interdependent sources. I will return to these references later.

Agawu's demand to focus on the musicians' own indigenous concepts and ideas (Agawu, 2003, p. 170), but also the confusion inherent in the debate on rhythm in Malagasy music, has inspired me to listen even more carefully to exactly how the musicians individually use and understand the term. Listening to their discourses has made me question my own understanding of rhythm as a *separable* element within music. In my former classical musical training, I have often followed the task to define the rhythm (or metre) of a music piece and to think of (or notate) a music piece according to its different elements, such as melody or rhythm. However, when talking about the origin and meaning of rhythm for Malagasy music the musicians relate rhythm to what I would refer to as different *topoi*, such as the environment or Malagasy everyday life. Here, despite controversy about the extent of which one can speak of regional differences, all musicians see a deep relationship between the lived environment, everyday activities within the environment and musicking experiences.

Singer and percussionist Ricky (alias Ricky Randimbiarison) argues that the environment of the different regions in Madagascar form the music differently. Interestingly, he uses the term "groove" in order to explain differences, but also in order to underline the shared rhythmical base:

[3] Si un Antandroy joue quelque chose rythmiquement et mélodie et harmoniquement, c'est pas la même chose même de Fianarantsoa, juste à coté de Tuléar et Fort Dauphin, parce que là-bas l'environnement c'est un peu...un peu vaste et grand, tu vois ? Donc, eux ils ont la possibilité de faire des différents rythmes...rythmes...et au même temps de créer quelques mélodies avec les rythmes. [...] C'est pas le même groove. Là bas c'est (il montre), quand t'as vu...tu vois...quand t'as vu des zébus, des trucs comme ça derrière toi et le rythme ça symbolise les bêtes comme les zébus quoi. Mais ici c'est plutôt calme et très ondulé. Donc, à mon avis, c'est par rapport à tous les montagnes, les escaliers, des trucs comme ça. [...] Tous les Malgaches : (il montre). Et ça, ça fait bouger tout le monde, même...même groove, même sensibilité. Mais si on va rentrer dans la spécificité d'environnement, là tu verras que ça c'est plutôt Antanosy, même si eux ils font de kalalaka, même chose, mais il y a une expression différente par rapport à la sensibilité et à l'environnement. (Interview Ricky, 18.7.2008)

[3] If an Antandroy plays something rhythmically and melodically and harmonically, it is not the same as from Fianarantsoa, just next to Tuléar and Fort Dauphin. Because there the environment is a bit...a bit vast and big, you see? So, they are able to make different rhythms...rhythms...and at the same time to create some melodies with the rhythms. [...] It is not the same groove. There, it is (he demonstrates), as you saw...you see...when you watch the zebus, things like that behind you and the rhythm that symbolizes the cattle and the zebus. But here it is rather calm and very wavy. So, in my opinion, it is in relation to the mountains, the stairs, things like that. [...] All Malagasy people (he demonstrates). And this, this makes everybody move, same...same groove, same sensibility. But if we enter into the specificity of the environment, there you see that it is rather Antanosy, even if they play kalalaka, same thing, but there is a different expression in relation to the sensibility and the environment. (Interview Ricky, 18.7.2008)

Another topos that persistently appears with regard to the topic of rhythm is that of the Malagasy language. Malagasies very often stress the unity of the Malagasy language and the fact that it is the only African country with one language that all Malagasies speak, albeit with various dialects.¹⁰ The idea that all Malagasy people can understand each other wherever they come from is of crucial importance to the musicians as many of them regard language as the base and foundation of common musical structures within the music.

Hajazz, for example, speaks of a “marriage between the tempo and Malagasy language”.¹¹ Guitarist and “valiha” player Rakotomavo (alias Germain Rakotomavo), speaks of the relationship between the unity of the language and the music, arguing that Malagasy music is always about singing:

[4] Bon, comme nous avons la langue d'un côté, l'unicité de la langue, on peut parler également de l'unicité de la musique malgache. Il faut pas oublier que la musique malgache, est toujours chantée. Donc, on utilise la langue dedans. On réplique la langue dans la musique. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

¹⁰ The spread of Malagasy throughout the island can be described as a “continuum of dialects [...] with mutual comprehensibility [...] estimated at no less than 60% of the lexicon even at the extreme ends of the continuum” (Rasolofondraosolo and Meinhof, 2003, p. 130).

¹¹ Interview Hajazz, 12.8.2008.

[4] Well, as we have the language on the one hand, the unity of the language, one can equally speak of the unity of the Malagasy music. One shouldn't forget that Malagasy music is always singing. So, we use the language in it. The language is replicated in the music. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

When I then asked him about instrumental Malagasy music, he said that instrumental music could best be understood as “songs that are no longer sung” and that in fact, even if not audibly present as song lyrics, the language was always inherent in the music:

[5] Rakotomavo : La plupart de la musique instrumentale, ce sont des chansons qu'on ne chante plus. Moi, ce que...

Jenny : Ca veut dire que la langue est toujours là, même si...

Rakotomavo : Elle est toujours là. Elle est toujours là. Et tu arrives à bien jouer cette musique instrumentale quand tu connais...quand tu as dans ta tête les paroles. Tu chantes pas, mais tu les as dans ta tête. C'est mieux. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

[5] Rakotomavo: The majority of instrumental music is songs that are no longer sung. What I...

Jenny: That means that the language is always there, even if...

Rakotomavo: It is always there. It is always there. And you manage well to play this music if you know...if you have the lyrics in your head. You don't sing them, but you have them in your head. That's better. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

He further explains why he considers it so important to have the lyrics in mind when playing the music. He has developed his own hypothesis about this, arguing that it is actually the accentuation of the language that determines the accentuation in music,¹² and that there are therefore no strong and weak beats as within a particular metre:

[6] Bon...moi, j'avance une hypothèse, mais c'est une hypothèse qui est à moi-là. Ça part de la langue. La plupart des mots-là, surtout pour nous, les gens des Hauts Plateaux, c'est des mots trisyllabiques. Tanana, tongotra...ce sont des mots trisyllabiques. Et ce sont ces mots, donc, une fois intégrés dans la musique, on doit encore garder l'accent, c'est pourquoi il n'y a pas des temps forts ou des temps faibles. C'est l'accent des mots même, l'accent qu'on...parce que deux mots, je prends un exemple de tånana et tanàna. Tånana, c'est la main et l'autre c'est la ville, le village. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

[6] Well...I propose a hypothesis, but it's my own hypothesis. It concerns the language. The majority of words, especially for us, the people of the High Plateaux, are three syllabic words. Tanana, tongotra...these are three syllabic words. And these are words, once they are integrated into the music, you still have to keep the accentuation, that's why there are no strong and weak beats. It's the accentuation of

¹² In 2000, Henry Stobart and Ian Cross published a paper as a result of their studies on “Easter songs” and rhythmic structure and perception in the Bolivian Andes. They argue that language is significant for the understanding of rhythmic perception in this music. Having performed listening and clapping exercises with subjects from different cultural and language backgrounds, they found out that Bolivian subjects who all spoke Quechua or Aymara as their mother tongue, even though many did not know this specific music before, clapped in time with the performer's footfalls – in contrast to all European subjects (Stobart and Cross, 2000, p. 81). They see a possible explanation for this in the prosodic structure of both languages, Quechua and Aymara, in which the “Easter songs” are sung (Stobart and Cross, 2000, pp. 83-84).

the words themselves, the accentuation that you...because two words, I give an example of tànana and tanàna. Tànana means hand and the other one town, or village. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

Many musicians argued that the relation between the language and the music is also something that they reflect upon and also exploit when composing. For example sometimes musicians composed the music and then searched for the right lyrics, sometimes vice versa, and for some, both were always and necessarily developed simultaneously. The different topoi that I mentioned above that came to the fore within the musicians' discourses on the origin and meaning of rhythm in Madagascar, are all interrelated. Considering, for example, that speaking forms part of our everyday activities, the topic of language closely interrelates and is even inherent in many examples in which the musicians talk about their everyday life.

Listening to these different topoi has helped me to learn and play the music. If the topic of language had not appeared so persistently in the musicians' discourses, I would probably have never tried to use my knowledge of Malagasy for my own experiences of musicking. I have learned the lyrics of new songs and have tried to keep the sound of these lyrics in my mind even when I am not singing myself, but playing my instruments. This has not only helped me to capture the story, emotion, or idea told within the song, but on a more concrete level, and mirroring Rakotomavo's idea above, it has helped me to find the correct tempo in addition to placing accentuations appropriately. With my violin and my recorder, I often play an introduction to a song, mirroring the melody that will be sung afterwards. In this way I am able to imagine the singing and 'hear' the words in my mind while playing my instrument. Similarly, when I play the counter-melody while the song is being sung, I carefully listen to the lyrics, and therefore to the accentuation and tempo, and it feels as if I am responding or engaging in a dialogue.

The idea of using imagination while musicking has also been conveyed to me through yet another example of how the musicians' discourses influenced my musical experiences, an example which again is closely related, if not based on the "lova-sofina".

Many of the musicians are not only autodidacts, but have also built their own instruments. This might be one of the reasons why they often talk about how particular playing techniques of instruments, or the material or shape of an instrument influences or forms the music. For many, the playing technique forms part of the music, whether it's the percussion caused through the blowing technique of the "sodina" flute or the falling of the fingers onto the bamboo, wooden or plastic tube of the flute, or the rattling sound of the strings of the bamboo zither, to name but a few examples.

This is the reason why Rakotomavo was very critical about the most recent music project of Justin Vali (alias Justin Rakotondrasoa), one of the internationally best known valiha players. Justin has grouped together musicians from different regions of the island (often from very remote parts) in order to form the first ever national

orchestra of Madagascar (“Ny Malagasy orkestra”).¹³ Rakotomavo at the time saw difficulties for that project in as far as instruments were often very individual and personal in Madagascar:

[7] C’est un projet très difficile, parce que réunir des gens qui n’ont jamais quitté leur coin, avec des instruments très personnels qu’ils ont fabriqués eux-mêmes, donc...quand je fabrique un instrument, c’est pour moi. C’est moi qui va le jouer, c’est pas les autres. Et comme je vous ai dit tout à l’heure, entre deux valihas, ça ne passe pas. Il faut qu’il joue son instrument. Et c’est instrument là n’a pas été conçu d’être dans un orchestre. C’est pour jouer seul. Donc, c’est ça le problème pour ce genre des projets. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

[7] It’s a very difficult project, because bringing together people who have never left their places, with very personal instruments that they have built themselves, so... when I build an instrument, it is for me. It is me who will be playing it, it is not the others. And as I said to you earlier, between two valihas, it doesn’t work. You need to play your own instrument. And this instrument was not designed to be in an orchestra. It is for playing alone. So, that’s the problem for this kind of project. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

I started to learn valiha during my first research stay in Antananarivo, on an instrument that my teacher, Doné Andriambaliha (alias Dieudonné Randrianantoanina), had built himself. Although I am now playing Malagasy music mainly on my violin and recorder, my amateurish valiha playing has helped me in so far as so much in Malagasy music, for example in playing technique or ornamentation, has its origin in valiha music. The instrument is mostly tuned in a diatonic scale. It is played with both hands, the notes alternating left and right.

If I now play a typical valiha ornamentation on my violin, imagining and knowing the playing technique, shape and sound of the valiha helps me to place each note, the accentuation and also the tempo right.

These are a few examples of how engaging in discussions with the musicians and listening to their discourses has influenced my musical experiences of Malagasy music. I have argued above that this interrelation needs to be understood and used in both directions. Hence, I will explain how my musical practices have improved my understanding of the musicians’ discourses. The examples previously cited and the examples to follow should not be viewed chronologically, but rather as examples of a constant interplay in which one informs the other.

2.) HOW MUSICAL EXPERIENCES HELPED ME TO UNDERSTAND AND MAKE SENSE OF DISCOURSES

I will start again with the obvious and yet most important example, which is to some extent the counterpart of the first example given above. It is only through experiencing the music, through learning and playing it and therefore gaining *shared*

¹³ “Ny Malagasy orkestra” at present time is already quite successful on the international market with a considerable number of concerts and a recently released CD that sells well. For more information, see: <http://www.nymalagasyorkestra.com> (accessed 9.8.2010). In comparison to other African countries, so far Madagascar has been rather unrepresented on the international music market, an issue frequently raised and discussed by the musicians.

experiences with the musicians that I could understand the essential idea of the “lova-tsofina” as the base for Malagasy music making. Following the musicians’ ideas and their own experiences of learning and playing by ear has helped me to understand and play the music without searching for any kind of “authoritarian text” or any kind of written source behind the music. Rather, through my own musical practices I have found other musical references (*e.g.*, for tempi, accentuation etc) or playing techniques that in turn, also helped me to better understand or make sense of some of the musicians’ discourses. Engaging musically has made me realize that it is not so much about searching for any kind of exact musical “instructions” within the musicians’ discourses on their music. With regard to my theoretical framework, it is necessary to understand these discourses as ways of coming to understand one’s own individual experiences. Integrating musical practices thus offers a further layer of gaining *shared* experiences.

It is through musicking that I have come to understand the crux of the debate on the term and concept of “6/8 rhythm”. My own experiences of learning and playing Malagasy music by following the “lova-tsofina”, have made me understand that any attempt to count to the music or imagine a particular metre with any fixed accentuation would confuse or even disturb rather than help me. However, I have discovered another way for me personally which helps me to keep the tempo and yet be able to play around with accentuations and “keep the dialogue” with the other musicians. It is something I could describe as a kind of “inner dance”, a way of moving and using my body movements as a reference. I am speaking of an “inner” dance since I am not actually dancing, but moving in subtle ways, such as swaying my head or the upper part of my body just a little bit. It is also through finding and using this reference, that I have come to understand and see one element related to the “6/8 rhythm” differently to my former understanding, namely the structure of overlapping binaries and ternaries. This structure is crucial for Malagasy music, as other scholars also point out. Malagasy musicologist Rakotomalala (2003), for example, argues that the Malagasy rhythm is either in 2, but thought in 3, or it is in 3, but thought in 2 (Rakotomalala, 2003, pp. 43-44). According to my own experiences, I could best describe it as a constant *opportunity*, meaning that no accentuation is fixed through a particular metre, but rather that there is a constant opportunity for musicians to play with and put accents on both, binaries and ternaries. This implies that it is not always necessary for both to be audibly present. Using my body as a reference to follow this constant opportunity helps me not to fall into any particular metre with a determined accentuation, but rather helps me to follow other references for accentuation, such as the language, without getting rhythmically lost. The use of body movements as a reference and/or as a source for musicking is a well-known phenomenon. Rice (1994), for example, when discussing his personal discovery of ways of using hand motions when playing the Bulgarian bagpipe (Rice, 1994, p. 83) speaks of physical behaviour that becomes part of the conceptual source to generate musical ideas.

I remember how confused and irritated I was when during one of my first research stays in Antananarivo I happened to be at a Christmas party where the song “Silent

night” was sung and people were tapping their feet differently: some in 2 (highlighting a binary structure), some in 3 (emphasising the ternary structure). Since then, I have come across many of these kinds of examples. Musicians such as Rakotomavo, for example, also discuss this phenomenon:

[8] Tu connais la chanson-là ? L'étoile de neige ? (Il chante) C'est une valse, mais ici (il chante et clappe à deux temps). Ça se joue à deux temps, ça c'est typiquement Malgache ça. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

[8] Do you know this song? 'L'étoile de neige' (He sings) It is a waltz, but here (he sings and claps in two). It is played in two; that is typical Malagasy. (Interview Rakotomavo, 1.8.2008)

Renowned valiha player and singer Rajery (alias Germain Randrianarisoa) explains that the coexistence of both, binaries and ternaries is often the major obstacle within Malagasy music for Europeans:

[9] La, le problème de la musique Malgache aussi avec les vazaha¹⁴, c'est l'existence de binaire et ternaire au même temps dans une chanson, c'est...tu vois (il rit). [...] Des fois si on fait des rencontres avec des musiciens étrangers, ils ont eu du mal. Parce que nous, on est capable aussi d'introduire des rythmes ternaires dans les rythmes binaires ou l'envers. (Interview Rajery, 17.12.2007)

[9] The problem with Malagasy and the vazaha is the existence of binaries and ternaries at the same time in a song; it is...you see (he laughs). [...] Sometimes when we meet foreign musicians, they have had difficulties. Because we, we are capable of integrating ternary rhythms in binary rhythms and vice versa. (Interview Rajery, 17.12.2007)

The idea that there is a constant opportunity of binaries and ternaries raises the following question: if there is no fixed indication in the music such as a metre, what is it that determines accentuation, or more generally the rhythmical structure of a piece? Again, my musical experiences have helped me a great deal to understand and make sense of the musicians' narratives, here especially concerning the shared rhythmical structure and its relation to regional differences, and also concerning the importance of individuality in Malagasy music - another topic that musicians themselves stress (as also witnessed in the example of the self-built instruments).

I have had the chance to learn musics from different regions of the island and I have also had the opportunity to learn songs that have been “malagasized” by musicians, such as standard jazz tunes and Brazilian “bossa” melodies that we played in a Malagasy version. Through these experiences, I have understood that there are many different factors or elements that cannot be regarded separately. As mentioned above, language plays a crucial role through the accentuation and pronunciation of words and phrases. This is closely related to different singing styles and also the use of regional dialects. How and where exactly the voice enters is one of the examples often given by musicians with regard to regional differences. This goes hand in hand with dancing styles to the music and how accentuations and movements of the dances determine accentuation and tempi in music (and vice versa). I have already

¹⁴ “Vazaha” is a Malagasy term for foreigner, more precisely European, literally meaning someone who is “well observed”.

mentioned the importance of playing techniques of particular instruments. From what I have understood through my own musical experiences and by listening to the musicians' discourses is that the shared rhythmic base of the constant opportunity of binaries and ternaries, mostly referred to as "6/8 rhythm", exists everywhere on the island and could be seen as the base. Differences in regional styles are then determined by the way this rhythmic base is "filled" by a combination and the interplay of these different factors. Singer and guitarist Erick Manana, for example, once explained to me that if you gave the same melody to the five members of the group "Madagascar All Stars," all from different regions of the island, and asked them to "malagasize" this melody, you would get five different and yet typically Malagasy versions. He argued that the rhythm would be the same, but that the "strong beats" of the melody would be placed differently. The accents and where the voice enters would be different and also the dancing style, all however closely related and interdependent.¹⁵ Justin Vali argues that with his "Ny Malagasy Orkestra" they are able to fuse the different regional styles and create a music that can represent the whole island. He speaks of the different "musical accents" of all the regions and that the shared rhythmic base allows them to let everyone express their own styles within the new music that they create:

[10] Bon, nous, notre idée, si vous avez écouté les morceaux tout à l'heure, c'est vrai que dans un morceau on a vu un petit peu de tous, mais c'est pour cela que pour moi, le rythme 6/8 ici à Madagascar, la même cadence, en fait avec la même cadence, on peut faire tous rentrer là-dedans, tous les accents de tsapiky, de salegy, de basesa etc. Donc, c'est ça qui est nous. C'est pour cela que tous dans un morceau, tous les musiciens de région, chaque région, peuvent exprimer leur style, au fait. (Interview Justin 23.11.2007)

[10] Well, we, our idea, if you have listened to the piece earlier, it is true that in one piece we have seen a bit of everything, but it is because of this that for me, the 6/8 rhythm here in Madagascar, the same cadence, in fact with the same cadence, you can integrate everything, all the accents of tsapiky, of salegy, of basesa etc. So, that is what is us. That's why in one piece, all the musicians from the regions, every region, can in fact express their style. (Interview Justin, 23.11.2007)

On a more abstract and metaphorical level, multi-instrumentalist Sammy (alias Samoela Andriamalalaharijaona) compares Malagasy music with a chameleon that represents the shared rhythmic base, but that changes its colour according to the region where it is.¹⁶ In a similar way, salegy musician Bilo (alias Dana Ramahaleo Bilo) argues that all the styles of all the regions have the same rhythm and actually speaks in plural of "6/8 rhythms", something that many musicians have suggested:

[11] Même au Sud jusqu'au Nord. Tu vois, il y a le kilalaka, c'est le 6/8. Il y a aussi le Hira Gasy de Tananarive, c'est le 6/8. Il y a aussi le kidogo de Fianarantsoa, c'est le 6/8. Il y a aussi le salegy, le malesa du Nord. Tout ça, ce sont des 6/8s. (Interview Bilo, 19.8.2008)

[11] Even in the South to the North. You see, there is the kilalaka, it is the 6/8. There is also the Hira Gasy from Tananarive which is the 6/8, there is also the

¹⁵ Erick Manana during a discussion at the 'Tnmundi' conference in Southampton, 15-17 October, 2009.

¹⁶ Interview Sammy, 23.11.2007.

kidogo from Fianarantsoa, it is the 6/8. There is also the salegy, the malese from the North. All these are 6/8s. (Interview Bilo, 19.8.2008)

Learning and playing the music has further helped me to understand another “problem” that I did not think of when first listening to the musicians’ discussions. Many musicians actually claim that it is practically impossible for non-Malagasy people to learn and understand the music properly and that one needed a “Malagasy soul” to do so and that it was about a certain “esprit”.

Singer Bebey (alias Mathurin Rakotomanga) once tried to tease me during a discussion that we had with several musicians by saying that it was basically impossible for me to play Malagasy music:

[12] Nous, on a notre truc. Et en fait, nous, on a tous les temps des accents sur le 6/8. En fait c’est ce que...elle, elle cherche ça. Et moi, je lui dis Tu peux pas faire ça, Jenny (tout le monde rit) Parce que c’est Malgache et c’est un esprit en fait. Et là, elle me tire la langue quand je dis ça. Mais en fait, ça doit être vrai dans quelque part. (Interview Bebey, 21.7.2008)

[12] We, we have our thing. And in fact, we, all the time we have our accents on the 6/8. In fact that’s...that’s what she is searching for. And I, I tell her ‘You can’t do this, Jenny’ (everyone laughs) ‘Because that’s Malagasy, in fact, it’s an esprit’. And then, she sticks her tongue out at me when I say this. But in fact, it must be true, somehow. (Interview Bebey, 21.7.2008)

These arguments could have easily scared me off from trying to venture into musicking myself. However, the more musical experiences I have gained and the more I have then listened and re-listened to the musicians, the more I have understood that the “lova-tsofina” is always also already very individual and personal. Many musicians argue that using your own ears as source for musicking already suggests something very individual. Musicians’ comments on the music often include comments on the musician playing that music, for example that the musician’s playing style resembled the musicians’ way of talking or that in general the musicians’ character could be heard in the music.¹⁷ These narratives again point at the important role that music plays for the musicians in everyday life.

Ricky, who also often plays with the group “Madagascar All Stars” says, for example, that one of the singer and guitarist of the group, Dama Mahaleo (alias Zafimahaleo Rasolofondraosolo), has his very own strong beats or accentuation. For Ricky, there is no right or wrong, but it depends on each person’s sensibility, education and inner feelings:

[13] Parce qu’avec Dama, lui, le temps fort de Dama, quand il joue, c’est vraiment différent de nous ! Et ça c’est lui. C’est lui et là, tu ne peux pas dire Dama, ça c’est faux, non ! Mais vraiment c’est comme ça. C’est une question de sensibilité par

¹⁷ Erick Manana, who was a life-long companion of legendary flute player Rakoto Frah who died in 2001, told me many times that if you watched Rakoto Frah eating his daily rice with his own special technique of dividing the rice into small portions on his spoon and chewing the rice in his own peculiar way, you would see him playing the flute. If you listened to Rakoto Frah speaking to his friends, flirting with girls, or arguing during a discussion, you would hear the sound of his flute. People would even applaud when he spoke as his way of speaking and telling stories was like he was playing the flute. (Various discussions with Erick Manana)

rapport d'environnement, d'éducation, la forme de la musique à l'intérieur de lui-même. (Interview Ricky, 18.7.2008)

[13] Because with Dama, Dama's strong beats, when he plays, it's really different to us! And that's him. It's him and here you can't say: 'Dama, that's wrong, no!' But really, it's like that. It's a question of sensibility with regard to the environment, education, one's inner music. (Interview Ricky, 18.7.2008)

Personally, I think that the aim is not in any way to become Malagasy in order to be able to play and understand the music. I have even realized that engaging in musical performances, especially for Malagasy audiences, works best if I try to express my own musical personality through the music (including small details such as continuing to play my Renaissance recorder and holding my violin in the Western way), whilst following the Malagasy "lova-tsofina". I would even suggest that Malagasy music could best be understood as a particular way of musicking with the "lova-tsofina" being the base. I would describe the rhythmical base in Malagasy music as constant opportunity of binaries and ternaries which is filled by the combination and the interplay of different musical elements that then for example determine particularities of regional styles or particularities of individual musicians, instruments or performances. Violinist Samy (alias Samuelson Rabenirainy), describes the "6/8 rhythm" as a "universal measure" and explains that everyone can easily identify with it. He further sees the "6/8 rhythm" as the synthesis of the Malagasy people's ability to easily adapt to any situations, praising their "musical ear" and therefore indirectly the "lova-tsofina":

[14] Les Malgaches ont une facilité étonnante d'oreille musicale, de s'adapter à tous les types de musique et à toutes les situations. C'est ça. Et le 6/8 c'est justement la synthèse de tout ça. (Interview Samy, 7.12.2007)

[14] The Malagasies have an astonishing ability of a musical ear to adapt to all sorts of music and to all situations. That's it. And the 6/8 is exactly the synthesis of all this. (Interview Samy, 7.12.2007)

CONCLUSION

As the examples above have shown, the musicians' discourses and our discussions have informed my musical practices, as much as my musical experiences have informed my analyses and understanding of the discourses. It is only through the integration of both and through analysing both in constant interrelation that I could gain crucial experiences and knowledge, such as following and accepting the "lova-tsofina" as base for Malagasy music making. I have stressed that this interrelation is not based on any chronological order, but that it needs to be understood as a constant flow of information and inspiration in both directions.

By following Agawu's proposition of a "presumption of sameness" (Agawu, 2003) and Rice's attempt for a "subject-centred ethnography" (Rice, 2003), I have focused on the experiences of individuals, including the musicians' experience as much as my own. I have further shown that musical practices and musicking together allow for a *shared* space of experiences that makes it a crucial element and tool for ethnomusicological research today as it encompasses the researcher and the

researched alike. Hence, integrating musical experiences not only gives us the opportunity to carefully listen to and integrate the voices of the people we work with, but offers new paths of understanding that prevent us from relying merely upon Western analytical perspectives.

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