

Experiencing Rhythm

Experiencing Rhythm:
Contemporary Malagasy Music and Identity

By

Jenny Fuhr

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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Contemporary Malagasy Music and Identity,
by Jenny Fuhr

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Fisaorana mitafotafa no atolotro an' ireo mpitendry sy mpanankanto gasy izay nahafoy andro sy fotoana ary nanampy ahy be dia be, nahafahako nanantotosa ity boky sarobidy amiko ity.

NY MOZIKAN' i GASIKARA no MAMPIVAZO ny FOKO!

Sitraka ho enti-matory tompoko!

Jenny Fuhr

CHAPTER ONE

MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY MADAGASCAR

Introduction

This book centres upon experiences of “rhythm” in “Contemporary Malagasy music” (Randrianary 2001). My study is fundamentally based on my own experiences as a practising musician regularly learning, playing and performing with musicians from Madagascar. Challenging the long-established and still-existing boundary between those who make music and those who write about it, I try to present the story of a profound intercultural (musical) dialogue that I have shared, experienced, and lived with Malagasy musicians over the past seven years in both Madagascar and Europe. I am going to tell a story about falling in love with a music whose combined familiarity and strangeness have captured me from the first moment I heard it on CD and with which I have engaged ever since—as both researcher and musician. It is a story about posing and tackling questions of sameness and difference that draw on my dual role as musician-researcher and therewith also challenge other boundaries, such as that between researcher and researched. Despite the fact that many ethnomusicologists are musicians—and many musicians are involved in research—experiences gained through “musicking”¹ (Small 1998) and the way we talk about music and express our experiences of music-making are almost always described as two separate worlds between which translation seems difficult if not impossible (e.g. Titon 1997, Rice 1997). In my analysis, however, I have made particular use of the connections I see between the ways in which we discuss and talk about music and our actual

¹ Small (1998) proposes the new verb “to music” (with its present participle or gerund “musicking”), as music should, in his opinion, be understood as an activity rather than as 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: 9).

experiences of playing and performing the music, arguing that both constantly inform each other.

British music journalist Ian Anderson once wrote that to him, music from Madagascar sounded “like everywhere and nowhere else at the same time” (Anderson 1994). Due to the island’s shape and its particular location off the Mozambican coast, Madagascar is often referred to as the “footprint between Africa and Asia.”² The effects of the many waves of migration over the centuries (cf. Deschamps 1972) can be seen, heard, and experienced today in the diverse musical practices of the island’s artists. The sounds of Mexican street bands, songs of the Alps³ and a “tropical version of Irish music”⁴ are only a few examples of the diverse associations that appear when Malagasy music meets Western ears. With regard to the island’s history, these associations are not surprising. The balancing act between new and familiar sounds, between unity and diversity, and between difference and sameness characterises Western experiences of Malagasy music. But the islands’ musicians themselves also talk constantly about these seemingly contradictory associations and experiences—a fact which turns music from Madagascar into an exceptionally rich area for research into questions of identity. What makes music sound “Malagasy”? Or: What is Malagasy music? The musician Samy (alias: Samuelson Rabenirainy)⁵ once explained to me that he believed Madagascar to be a “successful melting pot” where all civilisations met. And in this, he sees the reason for both the ease with which everyone can relate to (or even identify with) the music and the adaptability of Malagasy people to new situations or other musics.⁶

However, despite these intriguing contradictory issues and the entanglement of diverse cultural encounters, Madagascar’s music has hardly been researched so far and very little has been written on the island’s musical traditions, particularly concerning contemporary and popular musical styles.

A good overview of existing works on the music of Madagascar is the “Archives Virtuelles de la Musique Malgache (AVMM)” (the virtual archive of Malagasy music), initiated by Vienna Professor August Schmidhofer in

² An expression also used by some of the Malagasy musicians I met during my research.

³ Ian Anderson (1994).

⁴ Interview with Paddy Bush, London, 2.3.2006.

⁵ Due to their extremely long family names, most Malagasy musicians have nicknames/stage names. I give complete names in the first appearance of each musician, and then use their nicknames or stage names thereafter.

⁶ Interview with Samy, Antananarivo, 7.12.2007.

1998.⁷ This virtual platform provides bibliographic and discographic references and gives access to a considerable number of pictures and music samples. The country's musical instruments have been described by several researchers, most importantly by Curt Sachs (1938), Gilbert Rouget (1946), Norma McLeod (1977) and in Silvestre Randafison's (1980) book on organology. With regard to musical genres, the *hira gasy*, a peasant's music and theatre tradition from the High Plateaux region has been dealt with in three relatively recent works by Ingela Edkvist (1997), Didier Mauro (2001) and Géraldine Vatan (2004). August Schmidhofer (1995) has written a study on xylophone traditions in Madagascar with a particular focus on African musical influences, whereas Marie Aimé Joël Harison (2005) has focused on European influences on Malagasy music. Other scholars have conducted research on particular regional music styles. For example, Ron Emoff (2002) has analysed the possession music of Madagascar's East coast (*tromba*) and French ethnomusicologist Julien Mallet has published a number of articles and a book on *tsapiky* music (Mallet 2000, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009). More general works are Nora McLeod's article on the status of musical specialists in Madagascar (McLeod 1964) and a bibliography concerning ethnomusicological works on Malagasy music that has been published by Mireille Mialy Rakotomalala (1986) for the Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie in Antananarivo. The same author in 2003 published the *Madagascar. La musique dans l'histoire*, a book that aims to describe the island's music within its historical and socio-cultural contexts, emphasising for example the close relationship between music and everyday life. Another Malagasy scholar, Victor Randrianary, in 2001 published *Madagascar. Les chants d'une île*, a book that gives an overview of the musical traditions of the different regions, focusing on the origins of each and aiming to understand the music as embedded in its cultural contexts.

Ulrike H. Meinhof (2005a), and Meinhof in collaboration with Zafimahaleo Rasolofondraosolo (2003, 2005b) have published articles that deal with the experience of Malagasy popular artists in the diaspora. Following on from this, Meinhof continued to research Malagasy musicians' transnational networks and in collaboration with Nadia Kiwan published a book on *Cultural Globalization and Music*, looking at artists from both Madagascar and North Africa (Kiwan and Meinhof 2011).

At present, more and more Malagasy musicians are transnationally connected (Kiwan and Meinhof 2011) and more and more intercultural music projects take place. This not only sheds new light on the role the

⁷ AVMM (2013).

metropolitan centres of the South, such as Madagascar's capital Antananarivo, play as hubs for the musicians and their musical careers (Kiwan and Meinhof 2011: chapter 2) but is also a wake-up call for researchers to think outside fixed cultural boundaries and conduct self-reflexive research that focuses on both the individual experiences of those we work with and our own (e.g. Rice 2003). Music from far-away countries directly affects our lives in numerous ways (e.g. Aubert 2007) and so-called "world music" has become part of our everyday experience. This also means that ethnomusicological research is not only happening in far-away places, but needs to follow the trajectories and experiences of the individuals involved. These thoughts gain particular importance with regard to a place like Madagascar whose name already epitomises for many people remoteness and distance, a fact that the musicians themselves reflect on. We only need think about Hitler's absurd "Madagascar plan" of relocating all Jews to Madagascar; or about the German saying "Geh dahin wo der Pfeffer wächst" ("Go to the place where the pepper grows!"), a phrase expressing the wish to send someone away as far as possible; or about the three Dreamworks *Madagascar* films about a group of funny and likable animals—that do not exist in real on the island. The latter appears particularly ironic as hardly a month passes in the international media without the announcement of the discovery of a new animal or plant species on the Big Island in the Indian Ocean, known for its microclimates and its fauna and flora, of which 90 % is said to be endemic.⁸

In 2011, the BBC produced a three-part series called *Madagascar. The Land Where Evolution Ran Wild*, narrated by David Attenborough. Its advertising text summarises well the immense fascination that Madagascar's wildlife creates and the extraordinary attention that it receives:

Lying just off the coast of Africa, Madagascar is a land of misty mountains, tropical rainforests and weird spiny desert scrub. Here the wildlife has evolved in splendid isolation to become strange and totally unique. (...) one of the few places left on Earth where there are still wildlife mysteries, waiting to be discovered.⁹

Far fewer people know that the country is currently suffering from a severe political crisis, as news coverage by Western media has been lacking. The political tensions and power struggle at the present time mirror former crises in the country since its independence from France in

⁸ WWF (2013).

⁹ Gray and Summerill (2011).

1960 (such as in 1972, 1992, and 2002).¹⁰ Since the beginning of 2009 when opposition leader Andry Rajoelina started protests against President Marc Ravalomanana, the country has been in turmoil, causing severe social and economic hardship. At the point of writing, the political situation has not been resolved and remains subject to unexpected change. Despite the fragmentary news coverage, the crisis has destroyed the island's image as a "safe tropical paradise." Private tourism operators reported an almost-100% cancellation rate at the beginning of 2009 and the crisis has hit foreign investment and battered the tourism sector.¹¹

Obviously, this situation has also affected the musicians and thus, indirectly, the island's music. The island's capital Antananarivo is described as a "place of fear and desire, jealousy and triumph—and the passage obligé for all but a few musicians en route for transnational migration" (Kiwan and Meinhof 2011: 23). The reason for the important position that the capital holds appears to be the steadily growing facilities of the music industry. Further, international cultural institutions and embassies are often domiciled in capitals and, especially in Antananarivo, it is these institutions that remain the main supporters for local artists (Kiwan and Meinhof 2011: chapter 3; Fuhr 2006). However, without denying that most artists have experienced Antananarivo as a possible gateway and have somehow profited from the capital's infrastructure, the on-going political crisis is shaping and changing this picture in a dramatic way; Malagasy musicians based abroad have been and to some extent are still restricted in their ability to return home to give concerts, a crucial impact as many express their need to return "home" from time to time to gain inspiration and to "re-source."¹² Further, rising criminality brings not only mistrust and fear as a result of increasing attacks and robberies—also recently more and more experienced by musicians with whom I work—but also turns the organisation of cultural events, especially at evening times, into a challenging, if not impossible, business. Finally, the enduring crisis has led to international sanctions, with development money frozen and political relations becoming tense, which knocks support for local artists and the promotion of cultural events quickly off the institutions' agenda.

The immense attention that Madagascar's natural wealth receives in comparison to political, social or cultural developments in the country is also something that musicians there recognise. Although they value this

¹⁰ For a detailed account of the former political crises, see for example Randrianja and Ellis (2009).

¹¹ For further information on the present crisis, see Randrianja (2012).

¹² Various discussions with Bordeaux-based singer and guitarist Erick Manana. See also Meinhof and Triandafyllidou (2006).

attention, they are also critical. Many bring up the topic of the island's environment in their music and songs. They praise the natural wealth, but very often they also point at the dangers of human beings destroying the environment they live in and often live off. Ricky (alias Ricky Randimbiarison) is a singer and percussionist based in Antananarivo, where he founded the "Rarihasina Cultural centre," a base for workshops for students as well as other cultural activities (see Fuhr 2006). He regularly performs in Madagascar (but also in Europe) as a solo artist and in different small groupings. He often joins the group "Madagascar AllStars," who have as one of their permanent members the singer and guitarist (alias Zafimahaleo Rasolofondraosolo). Dama Mahaleo also performs solo and with other groups, and as a duo with singer and guitarist Erick Manana (alias Erick Rafilipomanana) in Madagascar, Europe, and Canada. However, Dama Mahaleo is especially known as a member of Madagascar's legendary group "Mahaleo", that was born out of the island's 1972 rebellion against the neo-colonial regime and that still performs regularly, in Madagascar and also for Malagasy communities abroad.¹³ Dama Mahaleo and Ricky, for example, have created a project called "Voajanahary" ("natural"), which features both artists in musical performances and also aims to create environmental awareness in Madagascar. Both artists have also participated in a campaign supporting the environmental policy of former President Ravalomanana of enlarging protected areas of Madagascar, a policy he presented at the "World Park Congress" in Durban in 2003.¹⁴ I have also realised that it is not only through songs but also through announcements and discussions during concerts that musicians try to create more awareness for the Malagasy people and their culture, explaining (to foreign and Malagasy audience alike) that Madagascar is not only about flora and fauna; the people living of the island, their culture, language, customs etc., and their problems and needs also need attention.¹⁵ This observation made by the musicians also applies to the priorities of academic literature. Compared to research

¹³ For more information on the group "Mahaleo," please see Meinhof (2005a); Rasolofondraosolo and Meinhof (2003). There is also a film about the group "Mahaleo" that was produced in 2005 by Marie-Clémence Paes, Cesar Paes, and Raymond Rajaonarivelo, see Rajaonarivelo and Paes (2005).

¹⁴ Following this congress a film was produced by USAID called "Madagascar: a New Vision/Madagasikara: *fijery vaovao*." Subsequently two big concerts were performed on the same theme starring Ricky and Dama Mahaleo. Both, the film and the concerts finally were put together on the DVD "*Ny dian'I Mananilatany*."

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Meinhof (2005a).

undertaken on the island's natural environs, there is far less literature on Madagascar's people, culture, and society.

There is a vast body of French-language colonial literature as well as literature in English, Norwegian, and Malagasy from the same period. The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, University of London), for example, holds the "Hardyman Madagascar Collection," the largest personal collection on books about Madagascar in existence, donated by Mr. J.T. Hardyman whose parents worked for the London Missionary Society (now called the Council for World Mission), who himself lived in Madagascar from 1946-1973.¹⁶ Within colonial and missionary literature, Malagasy music only appears as a side topic, if at all.

The island's history has been discussed and analysed by different authors, the most important being Hubert Deschamps (1972), Mervyn Brown (1979), and with their most recent publication, *Madagascar: a Short History*, Randrianja and Ellis (2009). Some political events and periods have received academic attention; during colonial times, the influence of Protestant Missionaries (e.g. Bonar A. Gow 1980) and the Malagasy revolt against French colonial power in the 1890s (e.g. Stephen D.K. Ellis 1985); the country's socialist period under president Didier Ratsiraka from 1975-1993 (e.g. Ferdinand Deleris 1986; Roger Rabetafika 1990); but also political developments since 2001 (e.g. Jean-Loup Vivier 2007). The most recent publication analyses the current political crisis that started in February 2009 (Randrianja 2012). In general, there is far more relevant literature, anthropological studies included, in French than in English.

With regard to Anglophone anthropological studies on Madagascar, a very prominent scholar is Maurice Bloch who has, since the late 1960s, published a considerable number of books and articles. Whereas his earlier works mainly concern the High Plateaux region and the Merina culture (Bloch 1968, 1971, 1986), more recent works by him focus on the *Zafimaniry*, a population living in the Eastern forest area of Madagascar (Bloch 1999, 2006).

Scholars have focused on topics such as gender and social structure (e.g. Richard Huntington 1987); identity in connection with spirit possession (Lesley A. Sharp 1993); authority and fertility (Oliver Woolley 2002); the remembrance of colonialism (Jennifer Cole 2001), or power and "development disconnect" (Ritu Verma 2009). A significant publication is *Ancestors, Power and History in Madagascar*, edited by Karen Middleton

¹⁶ Turfan (2013).

(1999). It is a collection of articles by scholars expert in different geographic regions, each of whom reassesses the importance of ancestors for changing relations of power, emerging identities and local historical consciousness. In the introduction, Middleton writes that almost all ethnographic works published between 1970 and the early 1990s state that the relationship between the living and the dead is a key to power, fertility, and blessing in Malagasy culture (Middleton 1999:1). Looking at publications since then, the importance of the ancestors continues to be emphasised (e.g. Sophie Blanchy et al. 2001, Raymond-William Rabemamananjara 2001, Robert Dubois 2002). This includes connections with both the *famadihana*, the reburial of the ancestors (e.g. Pierre-Loïc Picaud 2003) where music plays an important role, and with *tsapiky* music, a genre from the South-West of Madagascar (Julien Mallet 2008 and 2009).

In my experience, tourist guidebooks about Madagascar and tourism discourses sometimes treat the island almost as though unpopulated, praising the unique natural environments and advising everyone to quickly leave the capital to discover the rural countryside and “the real Madagascar.” While the island’s nature and wildlife is declared amongst the richest in the world, the current political crisis has reinforced Madagascar’s ranking as one of the world’s poorest countries and worst economies.¹⁷ While different waves of migrations have brought a broad palette of diverse influences, the same language—Malagasy—is spoken everywhere on the island, albeit with various dialects.¹⁸ While geographically Madagascar forms part of the African continent, a large part of the people living on the island, especially in the region of the High Plateaux do not think of themselves as African.¹⁹ The list would be easy to continue. It is this unique environment of an island entangled in somehow contradictory stories and developments that we also encounter in its music. Within my study on Contemporary Malagasy music, it is the existence of seemingly contradictory and competing discourses on the music and music making that has become the crux of my research:

¹⁷ The World Bank (2013).

¹⁸ 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: 130)

¹⁹ Various discussions with musicians from the High Plateau region. See also chapter 4-6.

“Contemporary Malagasy Music” (Randrianary 2001): “6/8 rhythm” meets *Lova-tsofina*

In 2005, I conducted research on the strategies and personal experiences of a number of musicians working in and around the “Rarihasina cultural centre” in Madagascar’s capital Antananarivo. The centre was founded in the mid-1990s by a group of Malagasy artists, most prominently singer and percussionist Ricky, to create a Malagasy forum for artistic exchange and the preservation of the country’s heritage. The artists’ main aim was and still is to become more independent from the dominant foreign institutions in a situation marked by almost complete absence of a state cultural policy (Fuhr 2006). What surprised me at the time was the enormous variety of musical styles I encountered; it was impossible to define this group of individual artists solely by the musical styles they perform. Even the musicians themselves—and this is true for almost all musicians that I met throughout the last seven years—have difficulties explaining their music, or do not consider terms or categories such as “traditional” or “popular” appropriate for their own music. However, through my ethnographic research, in which I focused on the music itself and especially engaged in musical practices myself, I came to understand the significance of the Malagasy concept of *lova-tsofina* that the musicians very often describe as the base of Malagasy music-making. It consists of the two words *lova*, meaning “heritage” and *sofina*, meaning “ear.” With one or two exceptions, none of the musicians I worked with could read or write music. The idea of *lova-tsofina* (see chapter 5 for a more detailed account) is oral transmission; it is not only described as a method to learn, play, and compose Malagasy music by many of the musicians. It is more: a frame of mind (“*état d’esprit*”); a way of living, seeing and experiencing the world; a way of using one’s own ears as a means for self-assurance and yet at the same time, a gateway and instrument for intercultural exchange and encounters. With regard to the significance the *lova-tsofina* holds for the musicians I work with, I argue that the music they play and create could best be understood and defined by the notion of “contemporary music” (“*la musique contemporaine*”) used by Malagasy ethnomusicologist Victor Randrianary (2001). He describes “contemporary music” in the Malagasy context not as a style, but as an attitude of the musicians who embrace new musical forms and create musical syntheses while keeping and using their own tradition. He emphasises that “tradition” here needs to be understood as inseparable from the notions of “creation” and “openness” (Randrianary 2001: 128).

Following Rice's principle aims of a "subject-centred ethnography" (Rice 2003; see also chapter 3) I have worked with a group of individual musicians who share some elements and experiences in spite of their significant differences across musical styles, genres, and practices. The music they play and perform is made for consumption, performed on stages and often produced on recordings. It is produced with the aim of selling it to the international music market (where it is often labelled as "world music"). In other words, it is not the kind of music that is played in functional or ceremonial contexts, such as music played at funerals, in churches or specific music such as trance music (cf. Emoff 2002, Schmidhofer 2013). Closely related to the musicians' strategies to reach the "world music market" is another aspect that unites them all: their relation and bond to the capital Antananarivo, whose significant role I have already mentioned above. Most musicians I work with are based in Antananarivo or are frequent visitors. Of the Malagasy musicians based in Europe, many come from Antananarivo and for all of them the capital has definitely been a place of great importance, a sort of "trampoline" for their musical career (Kiwan and Meinhof 2011).

One of my first observations when I started to focus more on the music itself was that the musicians constantly talk about a rhythmic structure they all share despite an enormous variety of regional musical particularities. Within their discussions about this rhythmical structure, the specific term and concept of "6/8 rhythm" is constantly used and contested. "Rhythm" seems to be the starting point for the musicians' search for a collective musical identity and this is where the challenge of competing discourses becomes obvious: the concept of "6/8 rhythm" in Western music theory has grown out of and is based on the idea of musical notation (Arom 1991, Dudley 1996). The fact that the "6/8 rhythm" is so deeply rooted in the idea of musical notation seems at first glance to contradict the indigenous concept of oral transmission, the *lova-tsofina* that the musicians also emphasise in discourse about their own music and their experiences of music making.

However, in this study I argue that we need to go beyond the study of competing discourses in search of other relevant criteria, for which shared music-making and the analysis of the constant interrelation of musical experiences and discourses holds the key.

With regard to African music studies, much research since the 1950s has been dedicated to the topic of "rhythm" (e.g. Brandel 1959, Chernoff 1979, Kauffmann 1980, Arom 1991, Temperly 2000)—a fact that has caused much debate and criticism, most prominently from Kofi Agawu (2003). He argues that research on African music so far has been marked

by a constant search for difference, ignoring indigenous theories and understandings of music (Agawu 2003). My own study challenges these dominating Western analytical perspectives on music, and in particular the prevailing use of Western music notation as the main analytical tool. It substantiates topical methodological needs and aims expressed within the so-called “new fieldwork” and the “new ethnomusicology” (e.g. Hellier-Tinoco 2003). Self-reflexivity and the focus on relationships are highly debated issues and have been essential to scholarly debates on ethnographic fieldwork across disciplines even as researchers have realised that their implementation and practical application remain difficult. In short: there is still a gap between theory and practice (e.g. Cooley 2003, Hellier-Tinoco 2003).

I suggest that we often underestimate the significance of the mutual integration of musical experiences and ethnomusicological research. Despite the long-standing claim of the importance of a performance-based approach in ethnomusicological research (e.g. Hood 1960), not many scholars have actually pursued this aim on a practical level (Baily 2008). Following the principle ideas of Rice’s “subject-centred ethnography” (Rice 2003), I propose that it is only through shared experiences and shared music-making that we can fully integrate the voices of the people we work with and hence, conduct research “with” rather than just “on” people and “their music.” Throughout the last seven years, I have worked with Malagasy musicians both in Antananarivo, Madagascar and in Europe and further afield. Outside of Madagascar itself, this has mainly meant France, which has the biggest Malagasy diaspora community, but also Germany, Switzerland, the UK and Canada. As I am currently still involved in musical projects and performing with Malagasy musicians in Europe and Madagascar, this study should be understood as a “snapshot” of on-going research.

Fieldwork Experiences

My very first experience of “musicking” Malagasy music was listening to a CD that I had found by chance, part of my father’s CD collection in the family home, a recording from the 1990s of various Malagasy artists in Germany that formed part of the “World Music Network series” produced by German radio station WDR.²⁰ Listening to this CD sparked the greatest emotional response to music I had ever felt, combined with an insatiable curiosity to understand this music and why it had this strong effect on me.

²⁰ World Network 18 (1993).

It was a kind of “initial experience” (cf. Rice 1994), which was followed by the immediate urge: to find more recordings of Malagasy music; to get to know musicians from Madagascar; to attend concerts and rehearsals; to many attempts to learn from and play along with recordings at home. This led, perhaps inevitably, to my very first research trip to Madagascar in spring 2005, followed by several more extended stays in Antananarivo and very many shorter trips within Europe over the last years.

Many ethnomusicologists talk about field research situations which have raised questions of “reciprocity” (e.g. Hellier-Tinoco 2003, Titon 1997). French scholar Mallet, who has worked in South-western Madagascar on *tsapiky* music for a long time, writes that a foreigner who is interested in the music is directly regarded by musicians there as a producer (Mallet 2009: 25). Mallet therefore describes how he tried to create a relationship with the musicians that was different to the musicians’ a priori expectations and hopes:

Il fallait que je leur fasse comprendre et accepter une relation à l’autre, par le biais de leur musique, différente de celle qu’ils connaissent et pour laquelle ils ont des outils, des repères construits sur la base d’argent, repères qui constituent aussi des formes de défenses, de protections. Il fallait que j’atténue progressivement cette double extériorité du producteur vazaha, cet a priori qui m’était naturellement assigné. J’ai tenté d’effacer les « Monsieur Julien » et de dépasser les discours tout faits, liés aux opportunités que je pouvais représenter, l’ambiguïté d’un rapport fondé à la fois sur la méfiance des musiciens et sur leur espoir de voir leurs parcours se prolonger jusqu’andafy (à l’extérieur, à l’étranger) (Mallet 2009 : 25).²¹

Field research is part of real life; we are often taken by surprise or even pulled into some sort of “field politics” by our fieldwork participants (Hellier-Tinoco 2003: 24, 32). I have definitely been taken by surprise many times, especially during my first stays in Antananarivo. Here is an example: A musician, who invited me to come to a rehearsal at his house, picked me up with a taxi. While driving in the taxi, I realised that we were

²¹ “I had to make them understand and accept a new form of relationship based on their music. This relationship was different to what they knew and to the rules they were used to, e.g. rules based on money which also worked as a form of protection. I had to gradually weaken the double exteriority of a vazaha producer that had been naturally assigned to me. I tried to stop them calling me “Mister Julien” and to go beyond both the already fixed discourses that were linked to what I could offer them and the ambiguity of our relationship based on their combined mistrust and hope that I would help them find their way to andafy (abroad)” (my translation).

going a completely different way (which I could only tell as I had been to his house before). I therefore asked where we were going and he said that he needed to pick up something from a friend. We parked just in front of the Ministry of Culture. When I proposed to wait in the car, he persuaded me to come with him as it would not take long and we could have a chat while waiting. I suddenly found myself in a big black leather chair, facing this “friend”—an official from the Ministry. Although I did not say a word, my Malagasy was good enough to understand that the musician was begging money for himself—though in my name—as my research definitely would prove his music to be worth supporting. It worked. Although I cannot know for sure, I had the feeling the official understood exactly what was going on.

However, in contrast to Mallet, who argues that being a musician himself also created some kind of mistrust among the *tsapiky* musicians, in particular with regard to the “stealing of songs” (Mallet 2009: 29), I found that my being a musician added a merely positive dimension to my research.

One of the very first things I did in Antananarivo during my first research trip in 2005 was to find myself a teacher to start learning the most famous Malagasy instrument, the bamboo zither called *valiha*. Since the age of five, I had been trained in Western classical music (violin, recorder and piano) and had a particular interest in baroque music and historical performance practice. Doné Andriambaliha, my teacher at the Rarihasina Cultural Centre, insisted I learn by ear—we generally recorded every lesson—as well as teaching me a little of the *koritsana*, a Malagasy percussion instrument, in order to better understand the accentuation and underlying rhythmical patterns. I very much enjoyed starting a completely new instrument and building a small repertory of Malagasy songs from the High Plateaux region. However, learning the basic technical skills on a new instrument takes some time; sometimes I thought that I would like to feel more comfortable with the instrument’s technical side in order to concentrate on the actual moments of musicking. All the happier was I when in 2006 I got to know singer and guitarist Erick Manana who immediately encouraged me to try to use my violin, an instrument not foreign to Malagasy music.²² Erick Manana started to teach me many songs from his home region, the High Plateaux, and his own compositions. Again, I relied on learning by ear, using only recordings and no note-taking to memorise new tunes.

²² See Randrianary (2001) for information about the Malagasy traditional violin *lokanga* and Harison (2005) for information about the arrival and use of European instruments in Madagascar.

I had not played Malagasy music as part of a public concert until Erick Manana invited me to perform one song with him at his concert at the “Olympia” music hall in Paris in November 2009. He persuaded me because he was convinced the Malagasy audience²³ would be delighted to see a *vazaha*²⁴ musician performing on her violin in “proper Malagasy style.” During the last days of intensive rehearsals with all musicians somewhere in the outskirts of Paris, we took a spontaneous decision: I had brought one of my recorders, thinking that there might be an opportunity with so many musicians to experiment and play together. It was my Renaissance soprano recorder, favoured by me because its sound is strong but soft and easy to vary. I had never played any Malagasy music with my recorder before. However, the legendary Malagasy flutist Rakoto Frah (who died in 2001) was a long-time musical companion to Erick Manana; both were members of the group “Feo Gasy.” To my regret, I had not met Rakoto Frah in person. I know the few recordings of his work by heart, have seen a few rare video recordings of him and have listened to hundreds of stories about him by Malagasy people, especially musicians, who had played with him. I spontaneously tried to play the song “Bitika” that we had prepared with my violin on this Renaissance recorder the evening before the concert. It worked astonishingly well, so we decided I would change instruments during the song, taking the recorder out as a surprise in the second half of the song. Although I never properly learned Malagasy flute-playing before this particular event, I could say that I had done so indirectly and unconsciously by listening to recordings, watching videos, transferring already-learned knowledge and experiences from my violin and *valiha* playing onto the recorder and above all, remembering every little detail and re-listening again and again to stories and memories of Rakoto Frah to the extent that it almost felt like I actually knew him.

It’s no exaggeration to say the concert at the “Olympia” has become a turning point in my musical life. Since then, I have performed regularly with Erick Manana and a great variety of the musicians he continually works with, in France, the UK, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Canada and more recently also in Madagascar; the biggest highlights have been the concerts in the CCESCA in Antananarivo in June 2011 (the recording of which is now available on DVD²⁵) and the concert in May 2012 in the Palais du Sport, Madagascar’s biggest indoor venue, hosting more than

²³ As Erick Manana had expected, although there were *vazahas* in the audience (even from other European countries, such as Sweden, Germany, or Norway), the majority was Malagasy.

²⁴ Malagasy term for foreigner, literally meaning “well observed.”

²⁵ Erick Manana and Jenny (2011).

7000 people. I have also started to sing—a fact that had a very strong effect on Malagasy audiences (see chapter 6).

Erick Manana was born in Antananarivo but moved to France at the age of nineteen. As a child, he was particularly fascinated by the typical musical genre of the High Plateaux region, the *hira gasy*,²⁶ an influence that can be heard in many of his compositions. I have come across numerous descriptions of *hira gasy*—“peasant’s theatre,” “Malagasy street opera,” a “mixture of polyphonic singing, orchestra, and acrobatic” or “Malagasy theatre à la Brecht” to name but a few.²⁷ The variety of elements and influences that can be found in *hira gasy* performances has attracted researchers from different disciplines (see for example Edkvist 1997, Didier 2001 or Vatan 2004). Erick Manana argues that as an artist, his office was his heart and his main tool the *lova-tsofina*, which means that his experiences of living in a foreign country, meeting musicians from different backgrounds, or travelling to other countries can be heard and experienced in his own music. One of his projects in which I also participated, was the “malagasising” of standard jazz tunes and manouche tunes²⁸ that we performed at the Festival “Nuits Atypiques” in Langon²⁹ in July 2010.

Yet another experience—and with regard to Erick Manana’s musical background a complementary experience of musicking—was my encounter with the *hira gasy* group “Tarika Ra-jean Marie,” from Feonarivo, who came to Germany in March 2010.³⁰ In collaboration with the Theater an

²⁶ See Edkvist 1997, Didier 2001 or Vatan 2004 for more information on the *hira gasy*.

²⁷ See for example WDR3 Musikkulturen (2010).

²⁸ For a detailed account on manouche music and the legendary manouche guitar player Django Reinhardt, see Gelly and Fogg (2005) and Dregni (2006).

²⁹ The concert at the Festival Nuits Atypiques in Langon in July 2010 was in a way symbolic to me as it was exactly on that stage that legendary flute player Rakoto Frah performed with the group “Feo Gasy” shortly before he died and where the CD “Ramano”, one of my main sources of Malagasy flute music, was produced, see Feo Gasy (2000).

³⁰ The initial idea of bringing a *hira gasy* group to Germany was born during one of many meetings with a Malagasy friend of mine, Hasina Samoelinanja, who works as Malagasy teacher, tourist guide, translator and is also a professional *kabary* (speaker) in Madagascar (*kabary* forms also part of a *hira gasy* performance). This idea made me contact Rolf Hemke who is working at the Theater an der Ruhr, which organises many Africa-related music and theatre projects. The project with the *hira gasy* group “Rajeau-Marie” from Feonarivo was then organised by the Theater an der Ruhr (Mülheim an der Ruhr) within their series *Klanglandschaften Afrika* (“Soundscapes Africa”) in collaboration with the

der Ruhr (Theatre in Mülheim, Germany), the German radio station WDR and the cultural secretariat of the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia we invited for the first time ever a *hira gasy* group to perform on a German stage. This project allowed me to spend a very intensive time with these artists. Despite a strict and dense timetable, we found moments to play together and I profited from attending all rehearsals, recording sessions and live performances. A reunion with these musicians took place when I invited them to watch our concert in the CCESCA in Antananarivo in June 2011, which for many of them had been the first experience in their home country of going to and listening to a concert in an indoor venue with a fixed starting time, a seated audience and entry tickets.

As will become clear, my research over the past years has been geographically scattered across different places. But it has also been shaped by the increasing intensity of my own learning, playing and performing of Malagasy music, from the first few *valiha* lessons to a semi-professional position as a regularly performing violinist, flutist and singer. External factors, such as the enduring political crisis, have also had an effect on my research, such as preventing me from going to Antananarivo for a relatively long period of time: between autumn of 2008 and the summer of 2011.

A steady element throughout these years has been and still is my effort to concentrate on the interrelation of discourses and musical practices: I have never regarded or experienced different field research activities, such as interviews, rehearsals, informal meetings or musical performances, as separated from one another. Rather, regardless of the timespan that sometimes lies between these different activities, I have always searched for and made use of the connections between them. I often refer back to my interviews, and have realised that my musical experiences often help me to better understand and analyse discourses. In turn, reading, listening to, re-discussing or reflecting upon discourses also helps me to further develop my musical skills.

All ethnographic interviews I conducted have been open and explorative; they did not follow any prefixed questions or questionnaires. Further, numerous informal conversations before and after concerts and

German radio WDR3 (Cologne) and the Kultursekretariat NRW (Cultural Secretariat of the Federal State of North-Rhine Westphalia). It included two days of studio recording and three live performances, with the performances particularly adapted to a German-speaking audience. For more information, please see WDR3 Musikkulturen (2010). I was in charge of supporting the artists throughout their stay in Germany (the very first trip ever outside Madagascar for all members of the ensemble), so I was involved in the project from beginning to end.

rehearsals, when visiting people at their homes, when meeting someone by chance in a café, in the streets, in a CD shop or at market stalls, or during taxi drives³¹ have added significantly to my research ideas and results.

I conducted almost all interviews in French, a second language for me as well as most interviewees. Informal conversations, meetings, or discussions during rehearsal have more often been held in Malagasy. My knowledge of the Malagasy language is still basic, but it helped me gain valuable knowledge, as for example through my asking for specific definitions, terms, and concepts, or for meanings and interpretations of Malagasy proverbs and sayings; and most importantly, through my learning of Malagasy song lyrics.

During this process, I did not feel any sort of language barrier during my research. Rather to the contrary, the fact that I am not a French native speaker is often perceived with a kind of benevolence, if not relief, and therefore much facilitated conversation and exchange. The attitude of many Malagasy people towards France and French people is in general still very much shaped by the colonial history of the island. The political crisis of 2009 only boosted this tension, showing once more that the ex-colonial power is still highly influential.

The topic of “rhythm” was not planned at all from my side; I hit on it only during my field research. There are a few important circumstances that I would like to consider: the main conversation language has been French, which might have increased the emphasis on the “6/8 rhythm,” considering that this is a concept that has grown out of Western music theory. Having said this, there is discord among the musicians whether a term for “rhythm” actually exists in the Malagasy language. When I asked for a translation of “6/8 rhythm” I was told either that there was not a word for it or that it was mainly foreigners who called it “6/8 rhythm” (see chapter 4). A much bigger effect on my research and our discourses in my eyes has been my double role as musician and researcher. The musicians’ knowledge about my own Western musicological training, for example, certainly had an impact on their choice of words. My musical background

³¹ Antananarivo taxi drivers have turned out to be a particularly illuminating source of information. I have had the chance to express my gratitude to all the Antananarivo taxi drivers: In 2011 Erick Manana composed “2CV an-dRandria,” a song dedicated to the taxi drivers of Antananarivo, praising their knowledge and expertise of the old but still working 2CVs. We recorded the song in April 2011 and the video clip was broadcast as publicity for our concert tour in Madagascar in June 2011. Ever since, people keep relating me to that song; taxi drivers in particular, show their gratitude for our appreciation of their job. See video example 1 (“*Ny 2CV an-dRandria*”) on DVD.

also occasionally led to a situation in which someone asked me to explain the rhythmical structure of Malagasy music with the help of Western notation (“Jenny, you should be able to explain the 6/8 correctly”). I usually said that I would be happy to explain how the “6/8 rhythm” was understood and used in Western music theory, but that I personally felt that it was difficult to use it for describing Malagasy music. In fact, I realised that when I mentioned the *lova-tsofina* in any kind of conversation and explained that it was through this concept and approach (i.e. not using any kind of notation) that I have been learning and performing Malagasy music, Malagasy people seemed to immediately agree and often showed their sympathy that I recognise and appreciate this indigenous concept. However, some also seemed to be surprised, if not slightly disappointed, often arguing that someone was needed who was capable of explaining Malagasy music to Western listeners and musicians in “their” language, i.e. using Western notation.

Ethnomusicologists with research experience in different music cultures and countries have emphasised the positive effect that shared music making have had on their fieldwork situations and relationships (e.g. Rice 1994, Baily 2008, Mallet 2009; see chapter 3 for a detailed discussion). My own research experience lines up with this; although it is true that with regard to the missing cultural infrastructure and support for artists, music-making in Madagascar is an environment often dominated by jealousy and rivalry, the fact that I presented myself not only as an academic researcher but also as a musician facilitated and opened conversations.

My double role as musician and researcher especially helped to loosen or even cross the boundary between the “researcher” and the “researched.” I can recall quite a few situations in which I felt like the one being “observed,” “researched” and the one raising attention and causing curiosity. When in summer 2008 I did not take my own violin with me, as I was afraid at the time that tropical weather could damage the instrument, I had the idea of borrowing an instrument in Antananarivo. This idea turned into a three days’ search with numerous phone calls and endless taxi and bus journeys, through which I got to know new parts of Antananarivo, including many new people, musicians, music shops and instrument-makers. Even more importantly, people got to know me as well. I received phone calls from people I did not know who had heard I was looking for a violin. The whole process of searching for a violin propelled interest in me to a new level. When I finally found a violin, the bridge broke after a few days (probably because of the sultry tropical weather!), which took me on another two days’ journey through Antananarivo trying to find a replacement. Again with the help of many

people, I finally found one in a small music shop. When I sat down in the corner of this shop to try to affix the bridge to the violin, I was soon surrounded by a group of people observing me and taking pictures of me “at work,” and I became the one telling my story and answering questions.

Ever since, I always bring my own violin with me. The more concerts I play, especially in Madagascar, but also within Malagasy communities in Europe, Canada and the US, the more I ask myself to what extent the boundary between the “researcher” and the “researched” still exists, if at all. Already after the concert at the Olympia in Paris in November 2009, but even more so with the concerts in Madagascar in June 2011 and May 2012, there has been significant media interest in me as a German-born musician performing Malagasy music. Numerous newspaper articles, TV broadcasts, concert critiques, discussions in Internet forums, comments on videos available online, reactions of concert audiences, or personal information I receive testify to this attention, curiosity, and amazement that my engagement in Malagasy music making has created so far.³² In my home country, Germany, my engagement in Malgasy music-making also attracts attention,³³ raises questions and creates curiosity; during a concert with our “Compagnie Erick Manana–Jenny” that we played at the Philharmonic of Berlin in May 2013, for example, well-known German journalist Roger Willemsen interviewed me on stage and asked me to reveal and explain “my story,” the story of a German-born musician with classical music training singing and playing Malagasy music to German audiences.³⁴

Within this development, a few aspects are of particular interest as they directly relate to questions of identity, a key topic of this book. Malagasy audiences often compare my own flute playing to Rakoto Frah, sometimes to such an extent that they see a kind of incarnation of him in me. Comments on my violin-playing usually emphasise amazement that a foreigner plays like *mpihira gasy* (Malagasy term for musician playing in the *hira gasy*), much as to my singing style is often compared to the particular usage of the voice in the olden High Plateaux songs called “*Kalon'ny fahiny*.”³⁵ All these responses, surprisingly, draw on a

³² For examples of newspaper articles see: Ratsara (2011a, 2011b), Rado (2011) or Heimer (2012). For examples of comments on internet videos, see Youtube Madatsara (2013).

³³ See for example Heimer (2013).

³⁴ The philharmonic of Berlin in 2011 initiated the concert serie “Unterwegs” (“on the way”) featuring word music ensembles from around the globe. See Berliner Philharmoniker (2013).

³⁵ See for example Ratsara (2011b).

connection to the past, projecting something onto me that might carry the risk of being lost and forgotten (see chapter 6 for a detailed discussion on these and more examples).

Finding myself in the position where people start to know and recognise me, becoming extremely curious about everything in my life and myself as a personality, has become another challenge to my continuing research. Especially in Madagascar itself, a negative effect is that it becomes ever more difficult to observe situations quietly or take part in any kind of event without attracting attention. However, a very positive effect, I feel, is that this level of recognition has helped to create a deep exchange of musical experiences that questions Western-dominated discourses on music and music-making and goes beyond cultural boundaries, a profound intercultural dialogue that I hope to present and explain with this book.

Outline

I understand the video and audio samples on the book's DVD not as accompanying material but as an integral part of the book, so would encourage every reader to make use of them where mentioned in footnotes. As much as I have tried to make the musicians' own voices heard by providing original interview material (sometimes at great length), these samples also form part of my argument about the importance of analysing experiences of "musicking" and discourses about music interdependently.

Chapter 2 focuses on the concept of "rhythm," giving a state-of-the-art account of theoretical discussions of the topic. What is "rhythm" and how is it understood, explained, and explored in academic research? By analysing the different themes that have caused controversy and critique across different academic disciplines, this chapter sheds new light on "rhythm" and challenges long-established and Western-dominated theories, in particular regarding the historiography of scholarship on African rhythm.

Chapter 3 argues for participatory research and the need for the intersection and mutual integration of musical practices and ethnomusicological research. It thereby depicts and challenges different boundaries that are often created and experienced, such as the boundary between the "researcher" and the "researched," or differently said, between those who make the music and those who write about it. This