



Maloya Music as World Cultural Heritage: The Cultural, Political, and Ethical Fallout of Labeling

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Preface by the author (June 2015)

I wrote this article three years after the inscription of *maloya* on the representative list of the UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Since the original publication of the article, the relevance of this inscription has continued to be discussed in the Réunion cultural world by mobilizing the kind of arguments that I present in this paper. The debate was recently extended to the Indian Ocean with the inscription of the Mauritian *séga tipik* on ICH and the Seychelles’ steps to make the *moutya* a candidate. These inscriptions demonstrate a logic of cultural competition that takes place between territories around ICH. Following this logic, the inscription tends to hide regional musical diversity (comprised of historical affinities and contemporary circulations) in favor of a monolithic approach of stereotyped musical identities. In this new context, the cultural competition that I observed on Réunion Island in the aftermath of the registration of *maloya* has been recently revived on an international scale.

Abstract

In October 2009, the *maloya* musical style of Réunion Island was enshrined as part of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (ICH). Locally, this labeling is now part of an ongoing cultural and political struggle that has characterized the island's music scene for forty years. Participating in its change of status and thus participating in its "emblemisation" the enhancement of *maloya* by UNESCO has unleashed an occasionally brutal debate about the collective identity of Réunion Island. The debate challenges the conceptual framework and ethical principles of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH. After describing the various dimensions of the problem and the shifts in the island's cultural balance of power that followed *maloya's* ICH designation, this essay offers a critical analysis of the scientific and institutional positions underlying the processes involved in the application of such labels.

Questioning the "integrity of traditional cultures" (Abeles in Appadurai 2005) is a direct consequence of globalization¹ and one of the most important factors driving contemporary efforts to preserve the world's diverse cultural practices. This mission to preserve or safeguard informs the current policies behind the UNESCO ICH program. In response to the imperative to "maintain cultural diversity" and foster "inter-cultural dialogue," safeguarding "inherited traditions and living expression" is intended as a means of resisting newer forms of cultural domination and alienation. It is ultimately seen as a means of encouraging peace and "social cohesion."²

The goal is to enable the survival of the oldest and most local cultural heritages in the midst of the new global culture. This is in turn grounded in the assumption that the "groups" through which these cultures and practices exist consider their heritage to be a key aspect of their identity. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguard of the Intangible Cultural Heritage³ and the various public pedagogical documents concerning the ICH and its application specifically emphasize the pivotal role of "communities," which must participate in promotional events as stakeholders: "The Convention focuses on living expressions of the intangible cultural heritage seen as significant by the communities. These

¹ Some of the research material discussed in this article comes from research conducted as part of the ANR Musmond project. I wish to thank Laurent Hoarau and Bertrand Le Mener for their assistance while I was writing this article.

² *What is Intangible Cultural Heritage*, UNESCO, accessed January 25, 2011: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/01851-FR.pdf>.

³ *Convention for the Safeguard of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, UNESCO, accessed January 25, 2011: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/01852-FR.pdf>.

expressions produce a sense of identity and continuity.”⁴

“Communities” are considered to play a central role in guaranteeing the relevance, effectiveness and morality of activities surrounding the ICH, based on the assumption that the groups that transmit cultures become the actual instigators and key actors in the preservation process. On paper, this guiding principle appears unassailable. It stands as a bulwark against cultural misunderstandings and the risks of misappropriation, at the threat of reducing the bearers of the culture to becoming neglected instruments (Aubert 2010).

If the “community” and “group” are considered the primary, if not the only, frame of reference for identifying and promoting heritage cultural practices, the question is whether the convention commits a mistake by unilaterally siding with culturalism? The idea that there is a correspondence between a particular form of cultural expression and the community or group that sustains it – and whose aspirations, linked to identity, are limited to culture – is the principle underlying the ICH. This position has the potential to yield an impoverished vision of the political, cultural, social, or economic stakes that are inherent in the construction and negotiation of group identities in the contemporary world. The tenets of the ICH offer an idealized image of a harmonious cluster of relatively homogeneous communities working together to preserve a shared ancestral culture. Applying this set of beliefs to the Réunion context raises the question of whether it should be applied to “works of the imagination” (Appadurai 2005, 32–42) or to the questions of identity that are associated with them.

The questions that I have raised here regarding the elevation of *maloya* as part of the ICH, center on two key concepts that the labeling process adversely affected intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. My intention is ultimately to interrogate my own role in the labeling process in order to argue that the entire role of scientific research in promoting cultural heritages needs to be re-examined.

“*Nout maloya lé mondial!*”⁵: *maloya* in UNESCO

On October 1, 2009, *maloya* was added to the ICH list. The dossier was submitted to UNESCO by the French government after being initiated and drafted in 2008 by the scientific team of the MCUR (*Maison des*

⁴ *Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, UNESCO, accessed January 25, 2011: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/01853-FR.pdf>.

⁵ “Our *maloya* is global!” is an expression used in the media after the listing of *maloya* with the ICH was announced.

civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise, a museum and cultural institution financed at the time by the Regional Council of Réunion Island) and the PRMA (Regional Pole of Contemporary Music) in Réunion. In May 2008, in my capacity as staff member of the PMRA, I was asked to document some of the dossier's scientific information that was included in the dossier. I happily agreed to examine the information before continuing my own research. Others members of the team in charge of heritage at the PRMA also contributed to the study and the final version was re-read and corrected by the MCUR team.

A year later, when I heard that *maloya* had been selected for recognition by UNESCO, I felt a certain sense of satisfaction that I had contributed, however modestly, to the successful application and the recognition of this important element of the musical heritage of Réunion Island. In the light of the fallout of this recognition on the island, however, and the virulent debates that have surrounded it, I began to question myself about the potential impact of such high profile labels on the musical diversity and cultural life of the island. These questions understandably dampened my initial enthusiasm.

In re-considering some of the cultural, political, and ethical aspects of *maloya's* newfound status as part of the world's cultural heritage, I am not in any way attempting to distance myself from a process in which I was involved or to condemn after the fact a form of cultural recognition that seems entirely legitimate. My purpose is instead to call attention to certain problematic aspects of musical labeling, while also re-considering the role of research organizations in this kind of "study."

Political rivalries and conflict in musical representation: The divide between *séga* and *maloya*

The conflicts that surfaced after *maloya* was listed in the ICH crystallized an entire array of identity-based resentments that were contiguous with the delicate political and cultural balance after Réunion Island was designated as a French Department in 1946. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed significant political divisions surrounding the question of the island's territorial status.

The right-wing party in power supported the idea of Réunion Island as a French department. They were opposed by a cluster of pro-autonomy, far-left, and pro-independence groups that included the *Parti Communiste Réunionnais* (Réunion Communist Party – RCP), as well as a number of other organizations (including the *Front de la Jeunesse Autonomiste de La Réunion* (Réunion Island Youth Autonomist Front – FJAR) and also the *Organisation Communiste Marxiste-Léniniste de la Réunion* (The Réunion Island Marxist-Leninist Communist Organi-

zation – OCMLR). This opposition between right and left masked deeper disagreements about how the island should be governed; discord that in turn revolved around a range of cultural attitudes (Samson 2006).

Along with the Creole language, music was one of the components of this political polarization. Until the 1960s, Réunion music had essentially been represented in the media and official discourse by *séga* (Creole songs played on modern instruments) and by a folk dance repertoire. The more significant media profile of *séga* continues to this day. As *séga* lacks any true ethnic or community associations, it was perceived as consistent with a series of practices, particularly balls and talent shows, which were able to reach every segment of the island's population. *Maloya*, on the other hand, was more openly linked to sugar plantation workers who were descendants of slaves and other laborers of African or Malagasy origin and to a lesser extent, from India. *Maloya* was not particularly prominent in the media, occupying only a very indirect and anecdotal public profile. At the time, *maloya* essentially existed within communities and families, and through the diverse practices that it was known for, including *maloya balls*, ancestor worship, and *moringue*, held only a minor position in the island's overall cultural hierarchy. In its most "archetypical" musical form – vocals alternating with soloists and choral groups, drums, improvised rattles, and idiophones –, *maloya* differed considerably from *séga*, although both forms share significant rhythmic and melodic similarities.

In the 1970s, the RCP designated *maloya* as its official music, recording two *maloya* albums during the Party Congress in 1976. This moment marks when the competition for representation between *séga* and *maloya* became more and more intense, as the political influence of the RCP increased and *maloya* garnered a correspondingly wider public. In speeches by leftist activists, *séga* became the symbol of cultural assimilation, urbanity, and even collusion with "departmentalist" power (as well as the neo-colonial ideology associated with it), while *maloya* symbolized cultural resistance, a rural lifestyle, the voice of the poor and the rebirth of the "Réunion Island people." Although this binary opposition was somewhat rooted in reality, it was primarily tied to activist and cultural discourses that promoted an exclusivist view of musical representation. The strident political struggles made it impossible to imagine cohabitation between *séga* and *maloya* (although this was true of the island's entire music scene). To a certain extent, *maloya* was seeking to supplant *séga* as the "national" music. Despite the adoption of *maloya* by folk groups closer to the right wing in the late 1970s, the polarization of the two forms deeply influenced the Réunion music scene in the ensuing decades (Desrosiers 1996). Today, both forms are part of an alternative form of culture and identity which were revived when *maloya* was listed as part of the ICH.

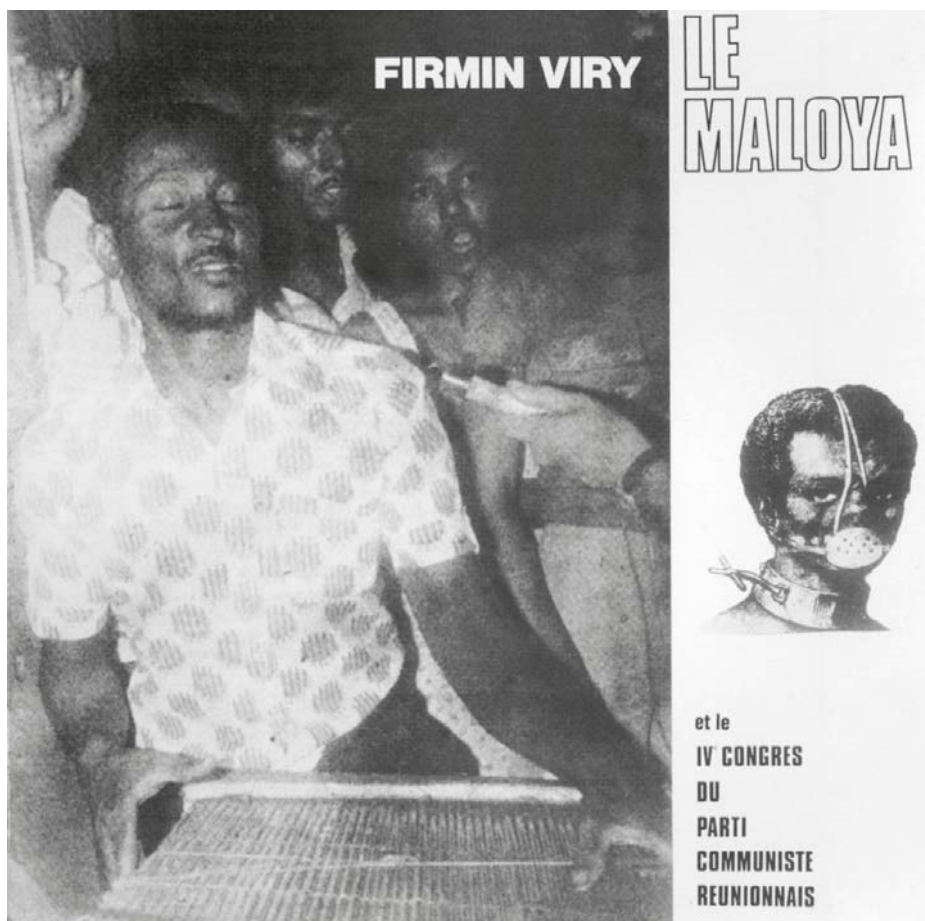


Fig. 1. Cover of the first *maloya* LP, recorded in 1976 for the 4th Congress of the Réunion Communist Party.

During the 1980s, *maloya* gained increasing public recognition, due to an array of institutional and media changes. These changes included the creation of the Regional Council, local governance (the RCP was elected in 1983), the establishment of the Regional Direction of Cultural Affairs (DRAC) of Réunion Island, the opening of the airwaves to private radio and television stations, the reorganization of the local re-cording industry (linked to the emergence of retailing and mass consumerism) and the re-structuring of the music distribution network of concert halls and theaters. This changing atmosphere went hand in hand with an increasing tendency to re-examine the roles of “African-ness” and “Indian-ness” in Réunion cultural identity, which was trans-

lated into a powerful institutional impulse to commemorate cultural ties to the past.

Despite generations of institutional change and increasing openness, *maloya* continues to occupy an ambiguous position. In addition to being promoted in terms of cultural identity by island institutions, it also plays a prominent role in the musical export policies related to Réunion Island. Since the early 1980s, *maloya* has also deeply influenced other new musical styles that involve different forms of fusion, which include *malogué* (*maloya-reggae*), electric *maloya*, *raggaloya* (*ragga-maloya*), *jazzoya* (*jazz-maloya*), and *maloya rai*. A few neo-traditional *maloya* bands currently also enjoy considerable success on the island. Nevertheless, as is revealed by sales of the island's recording industry, the most popular local musical genre continues to be *séga* and, to a lesser extent, Réunion *ragga dance hall*. These genres dominate record sales as well as radio and television music channels. As I have argued elsewhere (Desroches and Samson 2008), *maloya* is a musical style that bears meanings related to identity and memory, while it continues to occupy a marginal position in the island's music industry. This marginality can partly explain its institutionalization and the fact that, despite local and international visibility, *maloya* continues to carry a message of resistance.

The commemorative and memorial project of the *Maison des Civilisations et de l'Unité Réunionnaise* (The House of Réunion Island Civilizations and Unity)

The MCUR grew out of a plan for a museum and cultural center that was completely consistent with the idea that the region's musics were associated with political and cultural messages. The official opening of the MCUR was scheduled for 2011 to form the cornerstone of the cultural policy of the Regional Council, which at the time was presided by Paul Vergès the historic RCP leader. The scientific team of the MCUR had several objectives, among them restoring the history and culture of Réunion Island by embracing cultural diversity and promoting a sense of unity. The museum's scientific directors, Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou, specified that the scientific and cultural program would "honor culture in its broadest sense as the culture of the people and not exclusively the culture of the state, the official one, or that of the elites" (Vergès and Marimoutou 2006, 54). In a speech in April 2009 at the Regional Council⁶, Paul Vergès pursued this idea, empha-

⁶ Filmed speech, Conseil Régional de La Réunion, accessed January 15, 2010: <http://www.regionRéunion.com/fr/spip/spip.php?article676>.

sizing the fact that the MCUR would combat the consequences of the colonial ideology based on cultural inequality by re-establishing equality among the civilizations and cultures that constituted Réunion Island's cultural plurality. Colonial ideology was seen as the cause of contemporary social inequality on Réunion Island, and, according to Paul Vergès and the MCUR, creating a new cultural equilibrium was a way to oppose the social and economic injustices suffered by the descendants of slaves and other African, Malagasy, and Indian laborers. In describing the MCUR's principal objective, Paul Vergès insisted that "decolonizing consciousness" and "eradicating racism and the roots of inequality" via this cultural project constituted "the prerequisite to achieve Réunion Island's unity".

Despite the fact that the program claimed that it would include every component of the island's cultural history, the priority, again according to Paul Vergès, was to pay tribute to "more than a century of generations of slaves". The building was intended as a place to house a museum that would serve as "a mausoleum for these martyrs" and as "the first great homage to those who were offended, humiliated for centuries". For Vergès, this was consistent with a historical duty to remember, which would help compensate for the historical injustices suffered by the majority of the people of Réunion Island.

These arguments underpinned the MCUR's commemorative policy, which embraced the view that unity was impossible without recognition of the traumas suffered by the majority of its ancestors. Unity also depended on the promotion of cultural production, most of which was intangible and was created by the oppressed majority. As a way to crown these efforts, in 2004 the Region and the MCUR created an honorific title that would acknowledge the "contribution of a man or woman from Réunion to the preservation, promotion, creation, or transmission of Réunion's intangible cultural heritage" (MCUR 2009). The title, which in Creole translates as *Zarboutan nout kiltir* (ZNK), is best expressed in English by the expression "Pillars of our culture." Between 2004 and 2005, five *maloya* musicians received the ZNK title, followed in 2009 by *Tamil ball*⁷ singers and *moringue*⁸ dancers.

The purpose of the commemoration was to highlight oral traditions and intangible heritage, which had not been officially recognized by state, regional, or departmental cultural institutions. As a consequence of this perspective, no *séga* musician received the ZNK title during the MCUR commemorative program.

However, over a period of approximately two decades a number of

⁷ Also called *Narglon*, the *Tamil ball* is a theatrical genre that includes dancing and music and involves the staging of scenes from the Mahābhārata.

⁸ A martial art/dance form with African and Malagasy origins. There is evidence that it has been performed on Réunion Island since the late 19th Century.

séga musicians were appointed as “*Chevalier dans l’ordre des Arts et des Lettres*” (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters) or “*Ordre national du mérite*” (National Order of Merit). Some also were awarded SACEM medals, and recordings that they had made between the 1950s and the 1970s have been re-recorded and published under the Takamba label, under the sponsorship of the Regional Pole of Contemporary Musics (PRMA). Due to their well-established reputation, *séga* musicians were excluded from the MCUR’s cultural rebalancing efforts. Although not currently as strident as it was in the past, the competition between *séga* and *maloya* was implicitly visible in the Regional Council project, which, despite its claims to embrace “ecumenical” cultural objectives continued to uphold communist cultural-activist positions dating from the 1970s.



Fig. 2. T-shirt distributed by the MCUR promoting the inclusion of *maloya* in the ICH. The Creole slogan *Maloya*. “*Zarlor tout demoun si la tèr*,” which literally means “*Maloya*. The treasure of everyone on the Earth,” is a metaphorical translation of the World Heritage.

The continuity between the institution's priorities and the cultural position of the RCP during the 1970s are visible through the MCUR's commemorative activities, in which *maloya* played a central role. The common thread running through this period stemmed from the MCUR's and Vergès' belief that the "Réunion Island people" needed to be unified and even reformed via a cultural and remembrance program. The first two *maloya* LPs were recorded during the fourth party congress and released by the RCP in 1976. The albums had already raised awareness of the link between *maloya* music and this imperative to remember; one album was even called "People of Réunion Island, People of Maloya."⁹ At a time when the public profile of *maloya* continued to be somewhat marginal, this title was perceived as an activist slogan or even a political call to arms.

Echoing this title, an article on the Regional Council's website announced the nomination of *maloya* by asserting, "*Maloya* becomes part of the UNESCO world heritage. An acknowledgement of Réunion Island culture."¹⁰ This title suggests that when *maloya* became part of the UNESCO world heritage, the distinction represented an acknowledgement not merely of the music but of Réunion Island culture as a whole *maloya*. As in the title of the RCP album, a synecdoche was transforming *maloya* into the musical symbol of Réunion Island. The headlines of *Témoignages* (a newspaper close to the RCP) similarly crowed "33 years after '*Peuple de la Réunion, peuple du Maloya*.' A new victory in Réunion Island struggle: Réunion Island *maloya* as part of the world heritage."¹¹

Debates and conflicts about collective musical identity: Perceptions and community resentment

The situation described thus far illustrates that the island's cultural and institutional response to the listing of *maloya* as part of the ICH did not elicit a measured response. On the contrary, international recognition of *maloya* fueled a contentious process that transformed a local musical style into a regional cultural symbol. As part of the local political and cultural power struggles, the debates that emerged directly questioned the contents of the island's collective musical identity. In fact, this identity is a complex composite of *maloya*, *séga*, and, to a lesser extent

⁹ "*Peuple de La Réunion. Peuple du Maloya*", Ediroi, Document 2, 1976.

¹⁰ Article accessed July 2010: <http://www.regionRéunion.com>.

¹¹ Article accessed January 20, 2010, *Témoignages*:
http://www.temoignages.re/nouvelle-victoire-d-un-combat,39185.html?id_document=11272.

Hindu music, and the struggles and rivalries between them have revealed and aggravated the lack of consensus over memory. In a multicultural context, labeling a single genre as representative of an entire musical culture, an interpretation that some institutions openly advocated at the time of the ICH designation¹², stems from of an approach to institutional action that completely neglects popular experience.

One intrinsic element of political action, voluntarism, quickly became a target for opponents of the cultural and remembrance positioning of the region and of the MCUR.¹³ The first argument for opposing the designation of *maloya* as ICH was specifically related to the prominence ensured by the ICH label in comparison to the many other musical forms present on the island. Indeed, a number of opponents wondered why among all the local musical styles present on the island, *maloya*, should be singled out for such a distinction.

I attended a *Tamil ball* in October 2009 in a Hindu temple on the western part of the island. The priest who was in charge of the temple and known for his cultural activism in favor of recognition of popular Hinduism on Réunion Island in the 1970s, lamented the fact that the audience that attended the performance was not larger. In his speech, he unhesitatingly broached the question of *maloya*, calling out to Danyèl Waro, a famous *maloya* musician in the crowd that evening:

I want to say something. You have heard that, in the media, they have announced that *maloya* is the Réunion Island culture, the whole of the Réunion Island culture. We cannot blame those who do *maloya*. Look at Danyèl Waro who is with us this evening, he is the king of *maloya* in the Réunion Island and he is with us to bring this *Tamil Ball* to life. If the State does not recognize the *Tamil Ball* today, it is because of us, the people of Indian descent, who reject our own culture.

We are lazy, we sent out two thousand invitations for this ball and almost nobody has come. Whereas when the *maloya* people hold their parties, people go and listen. We, the Malabar people, wait passively for the State to recognize us. But we do not realize that when the State recognizes only *maloya* as Réunion Island culture, tomorrow, and whatever the political power at the head of the country, the Malabar will be treated like nobodies. Whereas if the Malabar were brave and came to listen to the *Tamil balls*, the

¹² In the discourse of the cultural administration of the regional majority that was in power until March 2010, *maloya* was often characterized as "*poto mitan*", meaning the central support of the island's musical culture.

¹³ As a demonstration, I present the opposition's arguments against the listing of *maloya* in the ICH. It is important to consider that this designation had many supporters who voiced the full argumentation described here, just as supporters adhered to the arguments of the MCUR.

politicians in power would have recognized us, just as they recognized *maloya*.¹⁴

The priest's views reveal the way in which the labeling of *maloya* has taken on unintended local implications. Two important points are made in this speech that reveal a process of reinterpretation whose effects appear to contradict the stated objectives of the ICH, including intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. The first issue concerns the priest's statement that recognition by national and international organizations has lent a form of cultural exclusivity to *maloya*, despite the fact that other musical heritages also deserve to be promoted. The second issue is a direct consequence of the first and involves the connection between music and *collective cultural representation*. From the priest's perspective, *maloya's* recognition by UNESCO made it into the symbol of "the entire Réunion Island culture," in turn endangering the cultural heritage of his own community (the descendants of Indians) unless the community promotes itself more successfully. *Maloya's* coronation makes it appear to have been formally recognized by the entire island's musical culture. It is noteworthy that this same priest was awarded the ZNK title by the MCUR in 2008 and that it was also awarded to *Tamil ball* musicians in 2009. But the UNESCO label, which the priest considered analagous to the government in his speech, is clearly more symbolically powerful than local or regional honorary titles from the MCUR or the Regional Council. For this reason, the ICH label is seen by the priest as part of a cultural and sectarian competition in which he is a participant because of his role in seeking to the Malabar community's attitude towards their own heritage.

On a more controversial level, Ladauge, a historical member of the Réunion folklore movement, publicly complained about *maloya's* new-found status which had been exploited ideologically through the use of arguments surrounding its "emblematic" role and its ICH designation:

What always surprises me is seeing only *maloya* and not *séga* in the UNESCO heritage. *Maloya*, historically, is a form of *séga* [...]. That is the name we gave to slave dances. It was a shout of support for all the people of Africa [...]. It was the basic rhythm of our different styles of music and the only difference between them is the tempo. It is a shame that for political reasons *maloya* was made into an instrument of hate, violence and racism that continues to lay waste to Creole culture.¹⁵

¹⁴ D. Saingany in a public speech on November 2009, Chapelle la misère, Saint-Gilles les Hautes, recorded and translated by the author.

¹⁵ B. Ladauge, in *Journal de l'île*, October 2, 2009.

This speech is further evidence of how the labeling of *maloya* is interpreted inside the framework of musical representativeness and the cohabitation of the island's musical cultures. By gaining international recognition, *maloya* automatically became a symbol of the entire community at the explicit expense of *séga*. Like the priest's perspective, the problem that Ladauge sees with this interpretive frame is the exclusivity that it attributes to *maloya*. According to what criteria should one form – *maloya* – be specifically valued against another – *séga*? The person who expressed these views was revisiting one of the sensitive points in the conflict between *séga* and *maloya*. She believes that *maloya* and *séga* belong to the same musical culture, and further, that *maloya* represents to some extent an outgrowth of *séga*. In fact, until the early twentieth century, the word *séga* was used to describe both the music of the descendants of African and Malagasy laborers, currently called *maloya*, and Creole songs, which today are known as *séga*. Only in the twentieth century, beginning in the 1930s, did the terms begin to be applied as they are today.¹⁶ Ladauge is thus using the history of these categories and the rhythmic similarities between *maloya* and *séga* as a means of questioning the distinction between the two genres. By reasserting the historical primacy of *séga* (of which *maloya* is a variation in her view), she is implying that *séga* has a more legitimate claim to a more elevated status. Despite its partisan character – Ladauge is a fierce opponent of the RCP – this position helps reveal the problems associated with the high-profile labeling of cultural objects. Her perspective is particularly helpful in signaling the fact that it is not always clear how the actual “communities” themselves view and define their own “musical cultures”.

One final strand of negative reactions to the ascension of *maloya* to ICH status deserves mention. I had the opportunity to engage in a conversation with a locally famous *séga* composer and musician who performed at balls and recorded in studios in the 1960s and 1970s. He was named a *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* in 2007 and was an important member of the SACEM in the Réunion Island. For this reason, he was in attendance at the ZNK awards ceremony in October 2009, which was held at the Saint Benoît Music Conservatory and organized by the Regional Council of the island and the MCUR. *Maloya* (which had just been awarded the ICH label) was obviously in the spotlight during the ceremony, but *Tamil balls* and *meringue* were also featured. The awards ceremony featured speeches by Paul Vergès and Françoise Vergès, who focused on the philosophical underpinnings of the MCUR project using words like “reparation,” “decolonizing consciousness,” and

¹⁶ The cultural and political conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s that led to *maloya*'s revival have played an important part in confirming the differences between *séga* and *maloya* (Samson 2008).

"acknowledging the remembrance of slavery". There were also musical and choreographic performances (*maloya*, *Tamil ball*, and *moringue*) during the event. After the ceremony, our conversation became more solemn, and the *ségatier*¹⁷ expressed his personal opinions and, after some hesitation, said: "All of this is fine... but why always dwell on these stories of slavery and suffering?" By revealing his discomfort over constant references to slavery and reparations, my interlocutor was also sharing his reluctance to constantly answer the call to honor the "duty of remembrance." His views are common on Réunion Island and are often referred to as a way of distancing oneself from certain kinds of cultural activism that are seen as focused exclusively on the past or tied to particular political ideologies.

Heritage ethics, the duty of remembrance, and a drift towards narrow, community-based values: What part can be played by scientific knowledge?

Following the results of the 2010 regional elections, which unseated Paul Vergès and the RCP party, the new rightist majority quickly voted to end the MCUR project, which also ended the tradition of the ZNK awards. In parallel with celebrations of the anniversary of *maloya*'s designation as part of the UNESCO world heritage, the Regional Council declared a clean break with the previous administration's cultural policies. Promoting the island's touristic assets took precedence over remembrance and cultural rebalancing. Tourism became the regional priority. In his first televised address, the new president, Didier Robert, questioned the symbolic role of *maloya* as the representative expression of the island's musics. After he announced the termination of the MCUR and accused the project of "rewriting history," he restored *séga* to its place as an emblem of Réunion culture: "We will reassert the value of our Réunion Island culture! Our *séga*! And also our *maloya*..."

The labeling of *maloya* revealed a number of problems inherent in the conceptual and ethical frameworks of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguard of the Intangible Cultural Heritage that created the ICH, particularly with respect to the post-colonial and multicultural context of Réunion Island. First, it seems obvious that promoting a specific, long-under-appreciated facet of a cultural and musical whole at a particular moment risked being perceived as negating the importance of other components of regional culture. As a consequence, the sectarian reactions on the part of other cultural groups and forms of expression that were triggered by the ICH label are completely understandable.

¹⁷ *Séga* musician.

The impression that they had been left out of the process led every community to proclaim its own cultural supremacy. The obvious danger in such a case is that instead of helping to ease cultural tensions, the labeling process can potentially heighten partisan resentments that, in specific contradiction of its intended purpose, foment rivalries instead of promoting dialogue. The designation of a single style of music as *the* musical culture runs the risk of impoverishing the entire cultural spectrum; it is just one among many possible access points to this multivariate culture.

Another obvious risk in the case of *maloya* relates to the relationship between remembrance and community-specific values. With *maloya*, it seems legitimate to ask the community that represents it and proclaims its importance whether it is representative of all of the inhabitants and groups of the Réunion Island, including those who identify themselves as descendants of slaves and activists. In other words, is a clearly identifiable group associated with *maloya*? If so, what are its boundaries and distinctive traits – Color? Social status? Cultural practices? Political affiliation? A shared sense of territorial belonging? In light of the uncertain position of *maloya* in the island's cultural field and the complex and even violent debates surrounding its position, a categorical but judicious answer to these questions is very unlikely. Whether in speeches tinged by negationisms or amnesia, or by historical revenge, the mobilization – for sectarian or political purposes – of group- and community-based identities opens the way to possible abuse of remembrance (Todorov 2004). In a similar way, the objectification and exploitation of memory mirrors the positions of persecutors and victims in colonial times, positions that are readily apparent in these cultural conflicts on Réunion Island. Objectification provides fertile ground for essentialist positions and discourses, which in turn gravely endanger cultural dialogue.

Although the reflections contained in this essay should prompt the various actors to reconsider their positions, my perspectives are absolutely not intended to cast doubt on the rank of *maloya* as part of the ICH or, more generally, on the promotion of the island's musical heritage. My remarks are instead directed towards the contexts and the conditions under which labels such as the ICH are decided and the potential – and often unpredictable or undesired – consequences of such designations. Efforts to restore cultural balance, which were and remain entirely legitimate in the context of Réunion Island, inevitably engender conflicts and confrontations. It is quite possible that critical re-assessments such as the present essay are a secondary benefit of efforts to establish a cultural balance, promote cultural remembrance, and revitalize heritages. If, rather than being denied or exploited, the energies generated by critical reflection could be turned to constructive uses, the negative cultural backlash of labeling might eventually

have more positive outcomes than if they merely fuel partisan speeches and commemorations, as is currently the case on Réunion Island.

The researchers, collectors, and bureaucrats who participate in efforts to restore cultural balance could play a positive role in the labeling process. Their perspectives on the contemporary cultural, political, and sociological dimensions of a music scene could better inform selection processes such as the ICH. A more inclusive selection process might also anticipate the unintended “drift,” exploitation and layered misinterpretations such as those that were triggered by UNESCO’s labeling of *maloya*. Local research programs can provide a kind of “sociological monitoring” and provide grounded observations about the impact of labels on specific cultural domains. Helping them to anticipate and understand these secondary consequences of labeling would enable cultural institutions to more effectively manage the aftermath and direct their energies in constructive ways.

It seems both appropriate and important for science – particularly ethnomusicology – to contribute to commemoration processes as well as to the struggle against cultural and social inequalities. The involvement of science in the quest for improved knowledge and greater recognition of the diversity of humanity’s musical culture is indeed an exceptionally high calling. It also makes sense for science to support and inform UNESCO’s general orientations regarding diversity and cultural dialogue. As this critical review of the fallout of *maloya*’s ICH designation has shown, however, social scientists should be highly vigilant about our own roles in these processes and about the ways in which the knowledge that we create is used. It is also clear that we must remain attentive to the institutional and political environments in which we conduct our research.

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