

Description of the main S&T results/foregrounds (extended)

General statement

Since ethnographic fieldwork was already carried out before the Marie Curie action started, this project was closely related to the conceptualization and writing of a habilitation thesis/book, the chapters of which were used as benchmarks to measure the progress of the work. However, as I got deeper into the topic and better understood the inner coherence of the different discourses with which I dealt, I needed to readjust the general outline of the habilitation thesis/book, and thus needed to rearrange the benchmarks. This need is the consequence of both, an ongoing process of reading and reflection, and intense discussions of my project with American and German colleagues in very different settings. Generally speaking, the outline of the habilitation/book reflects much better the overall aim of the project and the theoretical framework developed in the first part of the book. Thus, the discussions and interactions made possible by the Marie Curie IOF action contributed considerably to the consistency of both the project's foregrounds, the habilitation/book which will result from it, as well as numerous articles which will be published in 2013. However, as the achieved results diverge considerably from the original outline and the benchmarks which had been defined, I will, in the following, put much effort in explaining the main S&T results in respect to the adjustments which have become necessary.

Benchmark Chapter 1

“Existential anthropology, aesthetics, and popular music in Africa”

Work plan

I was planning to develop and write down the conceptual framework for the “existential” study of popular music during the first seven months. The aim was to engage in:

- theoretical work (e.g. literary reviews, close and critical readings, intensive discussions and reflections) on the relation of anthropology, existentialism, and musical aesthetics
- historical work on the history of, and crucial paradigms in, ethnomusicology; a special focus was to be laid on popular music in Africa
- a critique of the “political” paradigm dominating the anthropology of popular music in Africa

All these should be combined into a single argument, resulting in a first part of the book (about 85 pages) on

Realization

The goal of developing a consistent single argument by way of combining these various approaches and critiques was fully met. After an extended period of reading and (re)structuring of arguments, I started writing in March 2011 / month 5. I finished with the part in month 9. However, due to discussions with colleagues, I eventually realized that the chapter would gain in cohesiveness if I included the aspects originally considered as “benchmark 2” into the “benchmark 1” section.

Besides, I did not deal with popular music in Africa, but kept the chapter general, as far as the argument is concerned. Only the introduction still refers to “popular music in Africa”, in order to make an empirical point about the general structure and shortcomings of anthropological approaches to popular music; Africa would be the focus of chapter 2.

The reason for these changes is to provide in each chapter one single line of argument, in order to keep the external structure as clear as possible. Also, I was encouraged to keep the theoretical framework shorter than I initially planned, to leave out sideways and focus on the main argument, in order to make it both more accessible and more convincing. So, the delay of two months relates only to the structure of the initial work plan; in respect to the topics I was going to deal with, I was in fact faster than initially planned. As a result, I could accept an offer for the publication of a book chapter and pursue the publication of a peer reviewed journal article on my methodological approach (see below).

The chapter consists of roughly 80 written pages and is composed of four different sections, which however follow one single line of argument.

History of the relation of anthropology and music; first, I delve into the history of anthropology and comparative musicology / ethnomusicology, in order to trace the relation of both disciplines in regard to how musicological and anthropological approaches were combined. I am able to show that, while there has been an ongoing debate on the need to fuse both approaches into a single one, a really integrated approach has only very rarely been pursued. As far as the study of music is concerned, both approaches are in fact far from being combined. Only in very rare cases is the aesthetic quality of the music taken care of, and even if it is, this does not play any role as soon as it comes to theory: Here, socio-political or economic interpretations prevail, in line with the still prevailing dominance of critical theory and cultural studies on the field of popular music studies.

Aesthetics and popular music; in order to overcome this one-sided understanding of popular music in Africa and elsewhere, I develop, in a second part, an argument for the need to consider aesthetics and aesthetic experience in the study of popular music. Drawing on cutting edge debates within the study of popular music in Europe, philosophy/aesthetics, and (“new”) musicology, I first develop an historical argument that explains why popular music is, within anthropology/ethnomusicology, not approached from an aesthetic point of view. Then, I argue against the persistent idea that popular music is aesthetically worthless and can thus be understood only from a social/sociological perspective. Finally, I show that popular music does in fact have an aesthetic dimension, ask for its specific character, and deal with the implications for the anthropological / ethnomusicological study of popular music.

Relation of aesthetics and existential anthropology; in the third part, I show how an “aesthetic” approach to popular music in fact implies an “existential” approach to its understanding. Drawing on the “existential” anthropologies of Nigel Rapport and Michael Jackson, I show how popular music must be understood in relation to actual life, as both are interdependent: According to existential thought, people need ideas and imaginations in order to give directions to their lives, and popular music is crucial in providing these kinds of imaginations; on the other hand, the aesthetic imaginations of popular music can only be understood in their content and relevance if they are related to the ways in which those who listen to it conduct and construct their lives.

Methodology: ethnographic research on aesthetic experience; following this theoretical part of the book, a chapter on methodology explains how an anthropological approach to the study of popular music needs to look like if it wants to take the aesthetics of the music seriously. In it, I argue for the need for long-term in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, which I combine with a critique of interview centered approaches current in the field. Due to the nature of music and its aesthetic experience, it is hard to find words that describe this experience; a difficulty that usually leads to speaking about aesthetic experience in rather shallow phrases that mostly do not get to the point of the actual meaning of the experience (“I liked it”, “it has a cool groove” etc.). As a result, what music and its experience really means for those involved must be interpreted by a “thick” reading of various kinds of fieldwork data: data about the music, but also about practices related to the music (as different as, for example, concert behavior, dressing styles, or recording ideologies), as well as on relevant personal, social, and cultural environments.

This critique also extends to my original aim to approach aesthetic experience by way of biographical interviews. As it turned out after only some interviews, the biographies followed a “metal conversion narrative” which made all biographies sound very much alike. Of course, this narrative echoes actual experiences. But it is also strongly shaped by discursive stereotypes, the need for which is again derived by the abovementioned problem: that it is very difficult to find word that describe aesthetic experiences.

These methodological reflections, exemplified by ethnographic aspects which are part of the “darkness” chapter (see below), will be published separately in two different variants:

— on an advanced level as a peer reviewed article, in the _____, the
journal of the _____ (German Society for
Anthropology):

Verne, Markus (in print, will be published in Dec. 2012) Madagassischer Heavy
Metal, „satanische“ Ästhetik, und die Grenzen des Kontextualismus;
_____, Bd. 137 [Translation of title: Malagasy Metal, „Satanic“
aesthetics, and the Limits of Contextualism]

— on an introductory level, as a chapter in a textbook/ edited volume on ethnography
and media, aiming at introducing students on how to do fieldwork on media-related
topics:

Verne, Markus (in print; will be published June 2013): Populäre Musik als
Medium ästhetischer Erfahrung. Heavy Metal, Satan, und die Notwendigkeit
„klassischer“ Feldforschung auch in neuen Feldern; in: Bender, Cora und
Martin Zillinger (eds.): _____; Berlin: Reimer.
[Translation of title: Popular Music and the mediation of aesthetic experience:
Heavy Metal, Satan, and the need for “classical” fieldwork even in new fields”]

Benchmark Chapter 2:

“Rock and Metal as Art, Rock and Metal as Culture”

Work plan

Originally, in this section I was planning to combine theoretical work on the aesthetics of popular music in general with theoretical and historical work on the aesthetics and the subculture of rock and metal music, in order to present a general overview of the topic against which my empirical data from Madagascar would be read.

Realization

As already indicated above (benchmark 1), the changes that became necessary in order to readjust the text to my intellectual advancements needed to be even more radical in the benchmark 2 section. Again, this decision was based on the realization that, in its original form, this chapter would have departed too much from the actual topic of the book. Moreover, these general aspects have been dealt with extensively in other volumes, so that the chapter would mostly have been a review of already existing literature. This, as it turned out, would no longer match with the composition and the general aim of the book. As indicated before, discussions with colleagues from UCLA, most prominently Prof. Tim Taylor and Prof. Antony Seeger, helped me in sharpening both my thoughts and the structure of the habilitation/ book.

As a result, I decided that the theoretical aspects of “Metal as art, metal as culture” will be part of benchmark 1 (see above), while reflections on the aesthetics and culture of metal would be interlaced with ethnographies of metal (as art and culture) in Madagascar. To engage in these forms is the core of the second part of the book. So I defined a new chapter that basically consisted of what was originally (“Foreign influences on popular music in Antananarivo”). However, this chapter also needed, for the same reasons as indicated before, to be more clearly focused on metal in Madagascar than initially planned. This new chapter has been outlined, structured, and written between months 11 and 13 (Sept.-Nov 2011); it consists of roughly 30 pages. Its aim is to lay a historical the foundation for later considerations about why metal could develop into a considerable scene in the

highlands of Madagascar (other than in Madagascar's coastal regions, and other than most African countries South of the Sahara).

Again, the chapter consists of three parts:

— ***Western music in Madagascar before the advent of rock***; the first part explores the “prehistories of metal”, e.g. the history of Western music in Madagascar from roughly 1700 until the advent of rock in the 1960s, in order to provide a general context for the advent and appreciation of rock and metal music in Madagascar.

— ***History of rock and metal in Madagascar, with special reference to media***; the second part focuses on the history of rock and metal in Madagascar. Its aim is to relate developments within rock and metal in Madagascar to international ones, while also carving out the special character of Madagascar's rock and metal history in relation to its political history. Moreover, the chapter puts a special emphasis on the relatedness of rock/metal music and the development of media and technology (“cassette culture”, recording devices, the digitalization of music, and distribution via the internet).

— ***Meta-history: transcending the local***; the third passage is meta-historical. Its aim is to challenge the way in which anthropology / ethnomusicology has generally understood musical practice as being dominated by local aspects, whether cultural (“music in culture”) or, more recently, sociopolitical in nature. In the context of metal, I argue, this localizing paradigm misses the crucial point: That metal fans and musicians engage in this music because this music helps them to the local conditions.

Generally speaking, I managed to lay a more focused groundwork, both theoretically and historically, by reorganizing benchmarks 1 to 3. Leaving sideways and excursions aside, this first part of the book now introduces the reader into a single theoretical framework, and then provides a historical account that is clearly oriented toward the general aim of the book.

Besides working on the defined benchmarks, I was asked to contribute a book chapter on rock and metal in Antananarivo to an edited volume on the arts in Madagascar; here, I could pursue in the publication of a part of the history chapter in French. The volume is supposed to be published in 2013:

Verne, Markus (in print): Des arts global. Le rock et le metal à Madagascar; in
Randrianary, Victor (ed.): ; Ministère malgache de la
culture.

Benchmark Chapter 3

“Foreign influences on popular music in Antananarivo”

What was initially planned as “benchmark chapter 3” has finally become part of “benchmark chapter 2”; I have explained the reasons above in the “benchmark chapter 2” section.

Benchmarks Chapter 4 and Chapter 5

“Rock and Metal in Antananarivo: History and Present”

“The Meaning of Rock and Metal in Antananarivo”

General remark

In line with the theoretical adjustments, the ethnography needed to be completely rearranged. As the theoretical argument grew more coherent, it became increasingly clear that some core aesthetic principles of which the aesthetic experience of metal exists in Madagascar should be used to organize the empirical material. The approach would be twofold, according to the “existential” approach outlined in the theoretical chapter.

- (1) Core aesthetic principles should be established which characterize the aesthetic experience of metal music in Antananarivo.
- (2) The existential dimensions of these aesthetic principles would need to be explored, e.g. the ways in which these aesthetic principles/experiences inform the conduct of everyday life, or rather: how they inform the imaginations of both metal fans and musicians, and whether and how these influence the ways in which they live their lives, considering the specific contexts in which they are situated.

Reorganized in this way, the ethnographic part would better serve to illustrate and support the theoretical framework developed in the first part of the habilitation/book. Also, again in order to achieve as much coherence as possible, the ethnographic part would now be concerned with metal music mainly.

Work plan “benchmark chapter 4”

Originally, it was planned to combine in this chapter an overview of the history of rock and metal music in Antananarivo with an ethnographic overview of the state of the art of rock and metal in Madagascar’s capital city.

Work plan “benchmark chapter 5”

In this chapter, the meaning of rock and metal music, as well as its significance, should have been traced in individual Malagasy biographies.

Realization

In order to meet the requirements outlined above, the ethnography on metal in Antananarivo was to be restructured entirely following aesthetic principles crucial for metal in Madagascar. According to this need, a new work plan was established and new benchmarks were defined (in order not to confuse the old and the new benchmarks, the new ones were labelled with letters, not numbers). However, both, the work plan and the new benchmarks, not only represent the requirement to reorganize and restructure the entire field material, to reinterpret it according to the new structure and to finally write the findings down. They were also supposed to take into account the participation in conferences and the need to accept invitations to present papers, in order to allow for first drafts of the new chapters/benchmarks to be presented to, and discussed by, a wider academic public.

New/adjusted work plan

— New Benchmark A: Restructuring the ethnographic data

Two months were considered sufficient to reorganize the entire field material into four chapters which follow core aesthetic principles of Malagasy metal, and restructure the material in respect to theoretical considerations and debates related to these aesthetic principles.

— New Benchmark B: First drafts on three topics as conference papers; paper on the relation popular music and “culture” in anthropology

Four months were considered necessary to write papers related to the topics of “skill”, “darkness”, and “sadness” and to present them at different conferences. Besides, a paper on “the study of popular music and the idea of culture in anthropology” had to be written and presented as an invited speaker in a lecture series on the state of culture in anthropology (Colloquium series, Dep. of Anthropology and African Studies, Univ. of Mainz/Germany); for details, see “dissemination activities” below.

— New Benchmark C: Writing of “Wildness” chapter

Two months were considered necessary to write the chapter concerned with the dynamics of “wildness” and the ways in which these dynamics are represented in Malagasy metal.

— New Benchmark D: Writing of “Darkness” chapter

Two months were considered necessary to write the chapter concerned with the dynamics of “darkness” and the ways in which these are characterizing Malagasy metal.

New Benchmark A

Restructuring the ethnographic data

In order to reorganize the empirical material, the ethnographic data collected during fieldwork in 2009/10 were restructured following a grounded theory approach. Thus, the aesthetic principles that should organize the ethnographic representation of metal in Antananarivo were developed in an bottom-up approach, e.g. by repeatedly grouping and categorizing the fieldwork material. Finally, four central categories were found which manage to grasp core aesthetic principles of Malagasy metal. These categories were labelled:

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| (1) “Wildness” | (2) “Darkness” |
| (3) “Sadness” | (4) ”Skill” |

These categories do in fact echo aesthetic principles typical for metal music and the respective metal culture not only in Madagascar, but worldwide. They do not cover the whole range of aesthetic principles which exists in the field of metal, however; rather, they represent a specific collection. Moreover, these existing aesthetic principles are realized in specific ways within Madagascar’s capital. The aim of the four chapters would be to discuss, in each chapter, ethnographic data in the light of debates on metal music specifically, as well as on popular music and music in general; not only in order to tease out the specificities of metal in Madagascar, however, but also to find out about ways in which Malagasy metal transcends its local context and conforms with the ideologies of metal worldwide.

Relating the four different aesthetic principles and the ethnographic data represented by them with theoretical debates current in the abovementioned fields, the following relations emerged:

- (1) The dynamics of “wildness” would need to be discussed in the light of ongoing debates about the impact of the “working class” and processes of deindustrialization on the emergence and persistence of metal music and its respective culture.
- (2) “Darkness”: Here, the role of Satan and Satanism within metal’s darker and more extreme genres (black metal, death metal) would need to be explored.

(3) The aesthetic principle of “sadness”, springing from the omnipresence of metal ballads within the Malagasy metal context, would need to be concerned with the philosophies and psychologies of romance; besides, the dynamics of success and marketization would need to be discussed in this context.

(4) The impressive “skills” of metal musicians would need to be discussed in respect to the materialism of metal music and technologies of sound.

New Benchmark B

First drafts on three topics as conference papers; paper on the relation popular music and “culture” in anthropology

During five months, four papers were to be written and presented at conferences or lecture series. Three of them were supposed to represent first drafts of ethnographic chapters later to be written; one was supposed to realize the aim, claimed in the proposal, to rethink culture within the anthropology of popular culture, as well as current debates on culture within anthropology in general, from the point of view of metal in Madagascar, e.g. by taking as a starting point my critique of the “politicization” of popular music.

Paper 1: Heavy Conditions. Power Metal in Madagascar

presented at: Heavy Metal Generations; conference, May 9–11 2012, Prague / Czech Republic

published as: Verne, Markus (2012): Heavy Conditions. Power Metal in Madagascar; in: Brown, Andy & Kevin Fellesz (Hg.):
; Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press.

This paper represents a programmatic piece on the study of music and the interpretation of sound. Sound, I argue, not only mirrors the values and attitudes of

those who produce it, but also echoes the competencies of musicians and sound technicians, as well as the availability of technologies. Therefore, if trying to make sense of sound, the concrete circumstances in which the sound is produced needs to be taken into consideration, as the actual sound might not reflect the original intentions of those who produced it.

In the paper, I first argue that scholars who engage in the study of popular music, and specifically of heavy metal, need not only consider the social conditions in which this music is played, but must also engage in the study of the music's respective aesthetics, which basically is the study of sound.

I then briefly explore Antananarivo's considerable power metal fan community. For this community, I argue, listening to the music of their favorite bands and keeping up with the latest releases does not pose a major problem, thanks to the omnipresence of pirating. Playing the music oneself poses severe problems for those who try, however, not only because musicians are often lacking the necessary knowledge and skill, but also because they have to get by with poor technologies and generally suffer from inadequate material circumstances. To show the complexity of this problem, as well as how it affects both musical practice and the lives of the musicians, I describe the situations of two ambitious power metal musicians and their struggle to perform the music they love within the "heavy conditions" of Madagascar.

Taking these examples as points of departure, I finally argue that Malagasy metal musicians are, due to circumstance, generally unable to meet their own high standards of sound, and that it is important to keep in mind this boundedness of sound to its specific conditions of production if the sound of metal music is interpreted as an expression of value or attitude. “

(Verne 2012: Heavy

Conditions)

Paper 2: Picturing Sound? Aesthetics of Malagasy Heavy Metal Videos

presented at: African Music in the 21st Century – An Iconic Turn? An International Symposium Celebrating the 21st Anniversary of the African Music Archives Mainz (AMA); Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany, June 13–16 2012.

The contribution will be published in a volume edited by the organizers of the conference (Matthias Krings, Hauke Dorsch).

This paper explores the interrelation of metal, success, and the visual aesthetics of metal videos in Madagascar. Taking metal videos and their role in the musical consumption of heavy metal in the Malagasy highlands as an ethnographic point of departure, the paper argues that videos, shot almost exclusively for metal ballads, are a marketing device using metal's emotional power to sell the music to the masses. However, as a close ethnography of the uses of metal videos among metal fans and the wider Malagasy media culture shows, these videos, as well as the songs they accompany, also reflect a cultural reading of metal characteristic of the Malagasy highlands, which echoes the romanticism, melancholy and sentimentality people in the Malagasy highlands often ascribe to themselves.

Therefore, as I write in the article, “

From a methodological point of view, however, the problem is that these aesthetic dimensions may not be difficult to trace, but hard to make sense of in respect to what “metal” actually means in Madagascar, if one does not already know, or at least have an idea about, how Malagasy metal fans actually feel about their music – because, as mentioned earlier, they are used for marketing music: “

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Paper 3: The Sound of Satan. Ambivalences of Heavy Metal in the Highlands of Madagascar

presented at: European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA),
biannual conference, Nanterre, Juli 09-15, 2012;

In this paper, I explore one of Metal most powerful symbols, the devil or “Satan”, in order to find out about the ways in which Malagasy musicians and fans come to grips with metal music’s “dark” aesthetics. The devil, I argue, is not primarily a religious symbol, helping Metal fans and musicians oppose Christianity, nor is it a political

symbol, used to shape a “Germanic” identity that relates to pre-Christian times and thus tends to involve fascist orientations; both ways in which the figure of “Satan” in metal is often made sense of by scholars as well as by “critical” journalists. Although relating to Christian imageries – if in a negative way – and thus evoking moments of political subversion or even rebellion, the devil, I argue, represents an symbol – or rather: an aesthetic – by which metal fans and musicians make sense of what they experience in heavy metal music. As I show in respect to an ethnographical study of a metal performance in the unusual setting of a TV telerecording, this allegory, as well as its multilayered religious, political, and other connotations, is by no means perceived as arbitrary. Rather, the devil is experienced as somehow being present in the sound of the music itself; a perspective that renders music the agent of the symbolic forms in which both its listeners and its performers make sense of the way in which they experience it. “

” (Verne, The Sound of Satan)

Paper 4:

presented at: Ethnologisches Kolloquium, University of Mainz; lecture series:
“Was ist heute an der Ethnologie?” (What is “ in
today’s sociocultural anthropology); May 15, 2012

presented, in a reworked version, at Ethnologisches Kolloquium, Universität
Bayreuth; Nov 20, 2012

This paper represents a programmatic piece on the anthropological study of popular music and what can be learned from it in respect to the actual state of the art of anthropology. In it, I show that the way in which German anthropology today thinks

about culture is deeply influenced by the rise of the British Cultural Studies and the success of its “critical” ideas, which led to an over-emphasis of historical context, political processes and socioeconomic circumstances for the interpretation of cultural practice. Cultural practices and attitudes, however, cannot be derived from these or other contexts, I argue. Rather, what is in need is to critically re-examine questions of the “essences” of culture, e.g. the actual contents or substances of culture, in order not to blur cultural with social, political, or economic dimensions. In order to do so, a return to “classical” long-term ethnographic research even on modern topics would be necessary, in order to actually find out about cultural orientations instead of only deducing them from socio-political context.

— **New Benchmark C: Writing of “Wildness” chapter**

In the following two months, I wrote the habilitation/book chapter on “wildness”, the last of the aesthetic principles that I had, at this point, not been dealing with. The aim of the chapter was to explore the aesthetics and dynamics of wildness inherent in the consumption of metal music in Madagascar, and to critically engage in its main explanation – again, at least in its core, a purely contextual one. From the outset, and until today, the wildness of metal is made sense of in relation to the anger and frustration that processes of deindustrialization bring about. Based both on ethnographical research among Malagasy metal fans and a deconstruction of the theoretical discourse on the reasons of Metal’s wild and aggressive attitude, I argue in this chapter that, as an aesthetic experience, wildness is in metal rather than : thus, metal is not based on psychological processes rooted in social “working class” situations, and therefore also not causally linked to economic processes of industrialization and deindustrialization. Rather, the music allows its listeners to explore dimensions of anger and wildness, which people may enjoy for very different reasons. Therefore, metal music and its culture may be historically linked to working class environments – even though this might also be disputed – but there is no inherent logic connecting the two, as the case of Madagascar (as well as others from the global metal ecomene; Green 2012) clearly shows, where the metal community represents an elite rather than a working class.

(Verne, excerpts from the wilderness chapter)

— **New Benchmark D: Writing of “Darkness” chapter**

At this time, the chapter is almost finished; it consists of an enlarged, theoretically more ambitious and ethnographically enriched version of what was presented in paper 3. The general argument is, however, the same (see above,