
H-France Review Vol. 10 (December 2010), No. 210

Ron Emoff, *Music and the Performance of Identity on Marie-Galante, French Antilles*. Farnham, England/Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009. 210 pp. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0754665658.

Review by Julian Gerstin, Keene State College.

Ethnomusicology can be defined loosely as the study of music in culture and culture in music. Over the past few decades, ethnomusicologists have argued more and more forcefully for the "culture in music" part of the equation. Music is not just decoration atop the nitty-gritty stuff of life; when people make music they also express ethical values and intellectual ideas, they participate in social events, they take part in history, they relate to political and economic forces, and they respond creatively to other artists. Summed up in one phrase, when people make and respond to music they are "performing identity."

This intellectual position developed from late twentieth-century currents in cultural anthropology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, linguistics, and even Marxism. It has become the mainstream position in ethnomusicology, and as such anchors Ron Emoff's study of dance and music on Marie-Galante. Marie-Galante is a tiny island (population 12,000) where Emoff nonetheless finds a surprising range of music and dance styles: *kadril*, directly descended from French quadrille yet undeniably Antillean; *gwo ka* drumming of a decidedly African flavor; the stick-fight *mayoleur*; touristic festival performance. Each form represents, for its practitioners, a different take on Marie-Galantais identity. Even within each form, practitioners take range of attitudes and interpretation towards its meaning.

Readers familiar with other parts of the French Antilles, such as Martinique and Guadeloupe, will recognize many of the identity issues that are present on Marie-Galante. Martinique and Guadeloupe are *départements d'outre mer* with an ambiguous relation to mainland France, and a history of racial and economic oppression that departmental status and French citizenship (since 1946) have yet to overcome. Marie-Galante is administratively part of the nearby and much larger island of Guadeloupe, and Marie-Galantais feel an extra layer of marginalization in relation to Guadeloupe. As Emoff puts it, Marie-Galantais find themselves a "non-nation," with distinct differences from France and subtler ones from their neighbor.

Emoff's first chapter, "An Out-of-the-way Island," gives a general picture of this situation. Chapter two, "Tradition and Official Versions of History," gives an overview of the ideologically dominant view of local performance traditions, and hints at alternative positions. If Marie-Galante is famous for anything it is *kadril*, the island's *de facto* official folklore. Emoff contrasts *kadril*'s status with that of *gwo ka* drumming. In the dominant view *gwo ka* is not Marie-Galantais at all, and exists there only because it was recently brought from Guadeloupe. An alternative version of history maintains that *gwo ka* is authentically Marie-Galantais and has always existed there. The two views are racially positioned as well: the official version of history emphasizes the Frenchness of *kadril* and downplays *gwo ka* as more African.

In chapter three, "Aimé Césaire, Language, and the Surreal," Emoff jumps to a new and puzzling topic. The French Antilles enjoy a fascinating intellectual history, and Aimé Césaire is crucial to it; nonetheless I'm not sure how this chapter relates to music or dance or, indeed, everyday Antillean life. If I understand Emoff, Césaire's poetry combines reality and the imaginative in a way that parallels an Antillean sense of identity, which simultaneously exists in and questions the world as given—it is "surreal" rather than entirely surreal. However, this notion is not well fleshed out and not well related to the rest of the book.

Indeed, at first glance it seems peculiar that Emoff concentrates on Césaire at all, because there is a more recent philosophy of identity in the Antilles that explains the islands better. Césaire was, of course, a major proponent of *negritude*, which upheld blackness and decried whiteness—a necessary corrective in its day, but intellectually reductive. In contrast the newer school of *créolité*, or creoleness, celebrates mixture. It embraces the European as well as African roots of Antillean culture; it recognizes that Antilleans partake simultaneously in local, national, and global culture. Art forms such as Marie-Galantais *kadril*, built of intertwined heritages, would seem better explained by *créolité* than *negritude*.

However, Emoff's focus on Césaire does reflect the local sense of intellectual history. As one of the twentieth century's premier black intellectuals, as a master of French literature and language, and as the Antilles' major politician for over fifty years, Césaire is a folk hero. During his heyday he traveled throughout the French Antilles, speaking about the importance of black identity. This may have been years ago, but his legend remains strong. People identify with the man's ideas even if they've never read a word of his poetry. In contrast, *créolité* remains largely an intellectual movement. So I am not surprised that Marie-Galantais talk about Césaire rather than *créolité*. *Créolité* has enjoyed a literary success in France and has been an intellectual vogue in both the French and the United States academy over the past few decades, but on the ground in the Antilles the picture is different.

Chapter four, "Gwo Ka Drumming and Claiming a Sound Place," returns to the alternative history of *gwo ka*. It details the views of a single drummer, Roland Ceraphe-Ardens, who along with a few acolytes represents the entirety of Marie-Galante's *gwo ka* scene. *Gwo ka* is an African-derived performance art featuring several large drums and a *chacha* shaker supporting a solo lead drum, call-and-response singing, and (on Guadeloupe, but not Marie-Galante) virtuostic dancing. Ceraphe-Ardens maintains that *gwo ka* is authentically Marie-Galantais, with a continuous historical presence there. The real issue is not, of course, the drum's history, but the degree to which the protagonists identify with an African heritage.

Chapter five, "Being/Not Being French: Kadril" explores Marie-Galante's quadrille tradition. Quadrille and contredanse traditions are relatively widespread in the Caribbean, particularly the creolophone and Anglophone islands (Manuel 2009).^[1] Based in colonial dances, these styles have been adapted into dozens of local versions, each exhibiting a combination of European and African inheritances yet each distinctly Antillean. Musical ensembles tend to be a combination of accordion, fiddle, banjo or guitar with light percussion such as triangle, metal or bamboo rasps and shakers, or frame drum. The European-identified melodic instruments may be played with an African sensibility, in that many tunes consist chiefly of a repeating *ostinato*. The frame drums are quite possibly of European origin but are often played with an African feel. Dancing both emulates and parodies European style, as did black cakewalk and ragtime dancing in the late nineteenth-century United States. In this sense the dancing represents both assimilation and resistance. Like their European ancestors, Antillean quadrilles feature long complex choreographies. Moreover, individual dances are strung together in "sets" of four or five, each dance in the set having its own choreographic figures and music. To get through these long sets (up to an hour!) dancers often rely on a caller, but even so the dancing takes a lot of practice, and

prestige attaches to its mastery—as it did in French high society. In the old days, Caribbean sets were danced as a mark of social status, often by people who considered themselves racially creole as distinct from, and superior to, black. Today, with fewer and mainly older practitioners, the dances tend to be less racially identified and to have less social status. But they are still avidly preserved within families, or small groups of closely linked families.

Although Emoff does not make comparisons to other islands, his detailed depiction of Marie-Galantais *kadril* fits squarely into this larger Antillean continuum. Emoff does a good job bringing out the intertwined European, African, and locally invented aspects of the art (p. 129). Once again it seems clear that the applicable intellectual paradigm could be *créolité*, and the identity the dances express could be Antillean. But for the practitioners the European side seems to dominate; they "commonly lay claim to their Frenchness" (p. 116) albeit with the reservations and feelings of marginalization common on Marie-Galante.

The final substantive chapter, "Mayoleur, the Festival Stage, Rastafarianism" discusses other quasi-local traditions in context of Marie-Galante's relation to Guadeloupe and the Caribbean. *Mayoleur* is an African-derived stick-fighting dance and is another example of a Guadeloupean tradition transported to the island. (On Guadeloupe, the art is called *mayolé* and its practitioners *mayoleurs*, but apparently one word serves both purposes on Marie-Galante.) Like *gwo ka*, *mayoleur* in Marie-Galante rests in the hands of a sole practitioner, this time an aging man. However, Emoff makes little of this parallel, perhaps because, unlike Ceraphe-Ardens, the aged *mayoleur* does not have an ideological bone to pick.

Festival presentation is a fascinating topic to me, since I have seen many of Emoff's observations paralleled in Martinique. In both places, municipal and departmental governments stage festivals for tourists and locals. These become sites where officialdom, which ordinarily ignores local performance, scrapes together a few euros to hire artists. Who gets hired, and how are they presented? At festivals on Marie-Galante, quadrille and *gwo ka* groups are likely to be brought over from Guadeloupe; a sad commentary. Emoff concludes the chapter with a few pages on yet another alternative identity in Marie-Galante, Rastafarianism. (Talk about being marginalized!) This gives him the chance to present another music-maker with another idiosyncratic approach to forging identity: a rasta who invents his own music on a kora (West African harp), invoking Africa without connecting to an actual African tradition.

Throughout the book, Emoff makes sure the reader is aware that while most Marie-Galantais struggle with similar questions about identity, there is no single response. Not only does each musical style represent a different general answer, but even within styles practitioners take multiple positions. So, for example, while everyone seems to see *kadril* as mainly (if uncomfortably) Eurocentric, Emoff presents *kadril* through the words of many individuals, each of whom brings a slightly different coloring to the picture. Portraits of musicians such as Ceraphe-Ardens the *gwo ka* drummer, the aging *mayoleur*, the rasta kora player, and (back in chapter two) the island's sole jazz musician allow Emoff to bring in additional views. (These portraits also allow him to examine individual creativity, always a welcome topic in books on music.) Emoff is clearly more interested in people than theory; where he discusses theoretical concepts directly, he says no more than he needs to and uses a minimum of jargon.

But ethnography is not always about individuals, and Emoff's choice to focus on them leads to some aspects of the book that, for me, are unsatisfying. Take the question of *gwo ka*'s provenance: is it a recent Guadeloupean import, or an older Marie-Galantais tradition? Emoff avoids taking sides; he simply presents one version of history/identity juxtaposed to another. The important thing for him is how identity is created through multiple interpretations, not which interpretation is "correct." I find this a bit ingenuous, particularly regarding Ceraphe-

Ardens and *gwo ka*. If you want to examine someone's identity, you should be willing to say when that person is fooling himself. The weight of evidence is that *gwo ka* is indeed a recent import from Guadeloupe to Marie-Galante. There is no societal memory of its presence on the smaller island. Ceraphe-Ardens' corpus of rhythms is the same as on Guadeloupe—if there were a separate Marie-Galantais tradition, it would probably have its own rhythms. More important, there is the recent history of *gwo ka* itself. On Guadeloupe, *gwo ka* drumming has enjoyed a revival there since the 1970s, especially among people having a strong identification with Africa. The revival has spread to Martinique as well, also because of an interest in African heritage. To me, it seems highly likely that Ceraphe-Ardens has been influenced by the *gwo ka* revival, but in order to claim his African heritage as a Marie-Galantais he rejects the Guadeloupean connection and invents a local history. It seems a textbook case of "invented tradition."^[2]

Emoff's narrowed focus on individuals also means he does not connect Marie-Galante's kadril to the larger Caribbean quadrille tradition. True, Emoff has not done fieldwork on quadrille elsewhere and there is little published on the subject as a whole (the Manuel book cited here appeared after Emoff's). But to understand quadrille even in one place requires at least some discussion of its larger history.

Finally, there is a big, obvious unanswered question: Why *should* Marie-Galante have its own identity? Does every polity, no matter how small, need a fully separate sense of self? I live in a village of perhaps 500 souls, near a town of 15,000. We have our own little community, but we also feel part of the "big" town, as well as our state as a whole. We are happy with these nested identities. Why should Marie-Galantais meet a similar situation with resentment?

I suspect that a large part of the answer lies in economic oppression. Emoff does not look much at economic causes of Marie-Galante's malaise. My little village is a vital part of our regional economy; none of the French Antilles have a vital economy, and all are marginalized in this sense. Another part of the answer is probably the history of racial oppression. Prejudice does not just disappear through goodwill. Modern France officially promotes a celebration of difference, but as David Murray has shown (1996), France's universalist ideology—the notion that French values are universal human values—reduces the "celebration of difference" into the message "everyone is really French."^[3] Official French culture ends up minimizing and glossing over the very differences it promotes. If Marie-Galantais feel marginalized, perhaps that is because, despite having been French citizens a long time, they remain invisible.

Furthermore, Emoff offers no answer to the question of why Marie-Galantais should resent Guadeloupeans, who are black and creole like them and in a nearly identical political and economic position. Perhaps the feeling of invisibility in relation to France simply spreads to include Guadeloupe. Perhaps the poison of racism seeps into all relationships.

With these limitations, I find *Music and the Performance of Identity* a good description of a number of interesting topics. People interested in France should read this book, if only to get a sense of the diversity that really is there.

NOTES

[1] Peter Manuel, ed., *Creolizing Contradance in the Caribbean*. Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 2009.

[2] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, editors. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

[3] David A. B. Murray, "Homosexuality, Society and the State: An Ethnography of Sublime Resistance in Martinique," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 2 (3/1996): 249-272.

Julian Gerstin
Keene State College
julian@zabamusic.com

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172