

The Limits of Contextualism. Malagasy Heavy Metal, “Satanic” Aesthetics, and the Anthropological Study of Popular Music¹

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Abstract. During the last fifteen years or so, the study of popular music has increased in popularity within the field of anthropology. Theoretical approaches are however, only rarely concerned with aesthetics, with the ways in which music is experienced and with its relation to everyday life. Instead, explanations focus on the social, historical and political contexts in which popular music is performed, echoing the way in which popular music is dealt with in critical theory and cultural studies. Drawing on ethnographic research on heavy metal in the highlands of Madagascar, this article attempts to point out the shortcomings of these contextualist approaches by taking aesthetic experience as the point of departure for the study of popular music. Showing how during fieldwork in Madagascar’s capital Antananarivo, Satan emerged as an allegory that served both metal fans and musicians as a means to express their aesthetic experiences and to further reflect upon the music’s unique character, the article argues that the anthropological study of popular music needs to refocus on its own traditional methodologies – long-term participant observation, above all – in order to no longer neglect music’s most central aspect: its ability to deeply move us.

[anthropology of music, popular music, aesthetics, heavy metal, Madagascar]

If music is characterized by anything, it is the fact that it produces sounds: loud or tender, fast or slow, harmonious or dissonant, but always “enchanted” (Gell 1992) in a very unique kind of way. These sounds may bring happiness or sadness, make us dance or cry, they may irritate us, lift us up, romanticize, criticize, idealize. Music is an art that mediates sounds as well as experiences, and even if it is difficult to understand how music actually achieves this and what the true nature of these experiences is: The aesthetic experience of sound is music’s core aspect, and each and every approach to music, popular as well as classical, needs to acknowledge its quality if it does not want to risk missing what music is about in the first place. Without it, it is also impossible to understand why music holds so much significance in our lives – to understand, in other words, how music is able to inspire the fantasies and imaginations which guide us through our lives, and how it provides us with

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glimpses of adventure within the usual predictability and repetitiveness of our everyday worlds. As Thomas Turino recently put it:

“Much in our Actual lives is habit based and needs to be, but a strictly habitual life leads to stagnation and boredom. We also need the Possible – dreams, hopes, desires, ideals: these are the elements of life that add dynamism and challenge and that make us want to keep living. (...) The arts are founded on the interplay of the Possible and the Actual and can awaken us from habit.” (Turino 2008: 17)

When anthropologists consider popular music, a field they have increasingly engaged with in the last twenty years, these aesthetic experiences of music are however rarely taken into account. Of course, no one would question that popular music speaks to people and that it does so in very particular ways. Yet, in their texts, anthropologists are almost exclusively engaged with the social dimensions of music that do not relate to the music itself, but rather to the historical context in which it is played or heard. More often than not, these contexts are in one way or another related to the politics of identity construction: Some focus on the relationship between different generations, others are concerned with the formation of specific lifestyles, yet others again are interested in how music serves the construction of certain affiliations, be they ethnic, gendered, migrant, diasporic, or national in nature. Nevertheless, the actual meaning of the music is always located in its ability to create social spaces, based on the conviction that, due to its performative nature, music is especially well suited to produce and reproduce spheres of belonging on the one hand, and social differentiation on the other. The music itself, its sounds and experiences, are reduced within these approaches to merely a means to an end.²

Against this “contextualist” reading, I would like to advocate an approach to popular music that strongly reflects anthropology’s classical virtues. Such an approach puts music at the center and starts with by what it is fundamentally characterized from a phenomenological point of view: its sounds, its specific aesthetic *gestalt*, and the ways in which this *gestalt* is actually experienced by its listeners. In what follows, I will therefore first engage in some critical reflections regarding contextualist understandings of popular music, in order to then outline an approach that takes the aesthetic experience of popular music as its point of departure. With the example of my own research on heavy metal music in Madagascar’s capital city Antananarivo – ‘Tana’ as it is usually called by its inhabitants – I wish to show how and why the

² See Askew 2002, Coplan 2008[1985], Erlmann 1999, Kierkegaard & Palmberg [eds.] 2002, or White 2008, as only some examples concerned with the anthropological study of African popular music.

classical instrument of anthropological research, long-term participant observation, is particularly suitable for delving into the aesthetic dimensions of popular music.³

Popular Music, Identity and Aesthetics

To show how popular music serves to express or construct identities is of course important to the study of popular music. However, to reduce music to a tool for identity formation is one-sided and does not do justice to music's actual nature. The main problem with such a social, or socio-political, perspective on music is that it grants social processes priority over aesthetic ones. It assumes, even if mostly silently, that people do not listen to popular music because they feel this music speaks to them, a feeling that might eventually lead to identify with a certain cultural or subcultural style shared by those who feel about this music in a similar fashion. Rather, it is implied that people like certain kinds of music because it allows them to position themselves in certain ways within given social environments. At its core, thus, this 'society first' perspective applies a dichotomizing approach to the study of music reminiscent of nineteenth-century idealist conventions, granting aesthetic value only to 'serious' music, while considering popular music too trivial to allow for actual aesthetic experiences. For this reason, meaning is searched for not within the music itself, but rather in the specific contexts into which its consumption is embedded.⁴

There are, however, several reasons why the music is ignored within popular music studies. A decisive one, as just mentioned, is that until this day, many do not deem it appropriate to consider popular music in terms of music aesthetics. This elitism also exists within anthropology, even though it fundamentally contradicts the relativist ideal of the discipline. Most obviously, it is inherent to those positions subscribing to cultural critique, which interpret the global distribution of Western music as basically a destruction of local culture and ultimately a strategy of capitalist exploitation (Goodwin & Gore 1990). The enormous importance of this cultural imperialism approach to the anthropological study of popular music is best documented by the fact that anthropologists have neglected popular music for a long time, even though it had played crucial roles in the everyday lives of the people it studied (Agawu 2003: xv, 118).

³ The ethnographic fieldwork on which the following reflections are based was carried out between October 2009 and March 2010.

⁴ In this respect, Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of the "culture industry" (2002 [1944]) represents the *locus classicus*. In his 'Historisch-Philosophische Rekonstruktion einer Geringschätzung' Michael Fuhr describes the emergence and reasons of the dichotomy (Fuhr 2007: 33-65), a form of criticism that, in its overall orientation, benefits largely from Bourdieu's deconstruction of bourgeois art practices (Bourdieu 1987[1979]). For a general critique of 'critical' music studies and their ignorance in respect to the transcendental character of musical practice, as well as the implications this neglect has for the study of music, see Savage 2010.

A second reason for the contextualist reduction of popular music to non-musical aspects is that many of those doing research on popular music are social and cultural scientists, whose interests are, due to professional orientations, restricted to social and cultural aspects of musical practice. And finally, even those of us who would happily include aesthetic aspects of popular music in our research are actually not quite sure how to do it. Approaches that have been pursued in other disciplines engaged in the study of popular music – to focus on the music itself and find adequate ways for its description,⁵ or to deduce the aesthetic experience of certain genres of popular music from the ideologies and subcultural contexts to which they relate⁶ – definitely do not suit anthropology. Firstly, because most anthropologists are not trained to engage in music analysis anyway, and secondly, because, within anthropology, we know that we cannot find out about the reception of media by simply analyzing the media itself – just as we cannot find out about the meaning of certain practices by only interpreting ideologies, even less so if we are dealing with culturally foreign environments. For this reason, in anthropology a way must be found to study aesthetic experiences *empirically*; the question therefore is what anthropological fieldwork on popular music might look like if it tries to take into account that, to use Agawu’s words, even in Africa “popular music is finally music, not social text or history” (Agawu 2003: xx).

The Anthropology of Music: “Experience” and Reorientation through Cultural Studies

Just like anthropology proper, the anthropology of music struggles with clear methodologies as soon as it comes to what is actually most essential to it: to understand others, their ideologies, practices, and how both play into each other.

⁵ Musicological analyses of rock and metal music can be found, for example, in Covach & Boone [eds.] 1997 or Everett [ed.] 2008[2000]. These attempts to understand certain forms of pop and rock music as ‘art music’ and to analyze them accordingly are however heavily criticized. On the one hand, they are accused of engaging in devaluing popular music themselves, because by declaring certain forms of popular music as art, they implicitly deny this status to others; on the other hand, they are criticized for not doing justice to the special character of popular music by using the methods of traditional musicology for its analysis. Others have therefore tried to establish a specific aesthetic of popular music; milestones in this respect are Frith 1987, McClary & Walser 1990[1988], Tagg 2000[1982], Walser 1993, and Wicke (1989, 1992). For current attempts to establish an aesthetic of popular music from phenomenological and philosophical orientations, see Berger 1999 or Gracyk 2007.

⁶ As Berger aptly put it: “If past ethnomusicology had reduced the variety of local musical meanings to a typified norm” – the simplifications of functionalism and structuralism – “the method of much of the 1980s British popular music studies seem to suggest that a sufficiently sophisticated scholarly reading of subcultural style is all that is needed to unearth local meaning – or even that participant perspectives are unimportant.” (Berger 1999:15) For a comparable and comparably sharp critique of ethnomusicological studies which echo the approaches of popular music studies, also informed by anthropological perspectives, see Taylor 2007.

Textbooks extensively deal with data collection and handling, but how these data are finally rendered meaningful, e.g. how deep insight into the nature of “the other” is finally gained, ultimately remains in the dark⁷ – and necessarily so, because at this point, distinct methods are essentially insufficient. Instead, there is need for inspiration and creativity in order to meet anthropology’s final goal of making sense of cultural difference. This lack of precision is echoed by the fact that participant observation, still anthropology’s core method, consists of much more than just the collection of data. It is rather the attempt to systematically use an experience that could neither be more fundamental, nor more diffuse: to share a foreign way of life, in at least most of its respects, as deeply as possible, and for a very considerable time span.

This idea of using the ‘whole’ researcher as a medium to generate knowledge is related to the conviction that only in this way it is possible to actually interpret fieldwork data appropriately. Just recently, the ethnomusicologist Tim Rice has argued that fieldwork needs to be understood as being based on experience, because the discipline in fact lacks both the type of theory that can be confirmed or falsified and actual scientific methods (Rice 2008: 42). Rather, he argues, fieldwork needs to be understood as a process that aims at no less than the reconfiguration of the fieldworker’s personality:

“We believe in fieldwork. Fieldwork for what? Not apparently as a place to test and work out theory, an experimental place in other words, but a place to become an ethnomusicologist, an experiential place. ... In this credo we have the privileging of ontology (being there) over epistemology (knowing that), and the beginning of a potentially fruitful turn away from fieldwork methods toward fieldwork experience.” (Rice 2008: 46)

Wherever *popular* music is at stake, however, these experiences and the specific kinds of knowledge they generate are rarely considered. Regardless of whether researchers are anthropologists or ethnomusicologists,⁸ in the case of popular music, music is almost always understood as a means to the end of social construction within certain historical constellations. Again, there are different reasons for this, but a particular responsibility is held by the Cultural Studies, which in the 1990s

⁷ With respect to the anthropology of music, or ethnomusicology, see e.g. Myers 1992, Post, Bucknum & Sercombe 1994, Bartz & Cooley 2008[1997].

⁸ There is a long and ongoing debate about how the anthropology of music and ethnomusicology relate (see e.g. Merriam 1964), a debate that still continues (Stobart 2008). However, clear-cut differences have not been defined so far, a fact that finally underlines the transdisciplinary character of the discipline. When I separate ethnomusicological from anthropological approaches to popular music, this is mainly due to different institutional affiliations; with respect to the study of popular music, and as far as theory is concerned, I actually see no difference in how the topic is dealt with in both disciplines – even though ethnomusicologists generally have more developed ideas about how to deal with the music itself.

contributed considerably to the theoretical reorientation of both anthropology and ethnomusicology. It is true that anthropology managed to de-traditionalize its perspectives and relate the people it studies not only to their pasts, but also to their presents, only due to these influences (together with other important developments within and beyond the discipline). However, this new gaze on new topics, on local variants of jazz for example, on pop, Hip-Hop, or techno music, also brought in to anthropology and ethnomusicology the contextualist interpretations that are current within Cultural Studies. On the one hand, this meant that the anthropology of music, disregarded for decades, was now finally able to engage in theoretical discussions current within mainstream anthropology.⁹ On the other hand, the anthropology of music lost a sense of what actually makes music *music*. Therefore, anthropologists concerned with the study of popular music would be well advised to take the criticisms into account that musicologists and philosophers increasingly express towards Cultural Studies and to at least try “to augment the work”, as Timothy Taylor put it, “of those cultural studies scholars who talk about music without talking about music” (Taylor 1997: xvii; see for example also McClary 1994: 38, Walser 2003, Gracyk 2007).

In what follows, I would like to present an attempt to meet the requirements of a ‘genuine’ anthropology of popular music. Taking my own fieldwork experience as an example, I will proceed in two steps. First, I will deal with interviews and their methodological potential in respect to the study of aesthetic experience, mainly in order to show their limitations. Presenting the example of the Satanic dimension of Malagasy heavy metal, I will then demonstrate how, in contexts of participant observation, certain themes and topics emerge as if by themselves, and how these emerging themes may then contribute to understand in which ways a certain kind of music ‘speaks’ to its listeners, how it is experienced and rendered meaningful, and how it is finally made sense of in respect to everyday life. It is my general aim to show how appropriate the classical anthropological methodologies are even for modern research contexts and topics, and in fact want to claim their necessity. In this way, I will engage in a critique of the one-sidedness of those contextualist approaches that are currently en vogue within the anthropological study of popular music, as well as within many other anthropological subfields. *Of course, this does not mean that I am critical of contextualization per se.* Rather, my argument is that

⁹ This was one of the explicit goals of Kelly Askew, whose book title ‘Performing the Nation’ (Askew 2002) perfectly summarizes the way in which many anthropologists currently relate music to national politics. She writes: “[Musical] performance (...) is a vehicle for accessing the process of nation building because it was consciously exploited by the Tanzanian state for that very purpose. As such, it perfectly supports my ulterior objective to highlight the imbrication of culture and politics and to level a strong rejoinder at those scholars who view popular culture generally and the arts in particular as tangential, discredited social domains of little or no relevance for the study of politics and government.” (Askew 2002: 14). What this quote also highlights, however, is the means-to-an-end character ascribed to music, which only serves as a “vehicle” for a better understanding of extra-musical processes.

contextualist approaches tend to understand music only in respect to contextual aspects, and therefore neglect what listeners actually experience in music. Thus, they risk losing sight of what actually matters to those about whom they talk, as in the case of popular music the seemingly simple fact that its sounds speak to its listeners in very specific ways.

Interviews and the Limits of Verbalization

For a discipline whose methodological instruments were sharpened, if not developed, in a small village on a South Sea island (Malinowski 1984[1922]), cities present a challenge. The bigger the city, the bigger is this challenge, at least when the nature of the research does not permit one to concentrate on a street corner or neighborhood. The attempt to conduct anthropological fieldwork in a context in which researchers must constantly create their own field can quickly become a frustrating affair (see Powdermaker 1966), because it is difficult to obtain what Malinowski famously called the “imponderabilia of everyday life” (Malinowski 1932: 20-22, 24). These imponderabilia represent the most valuable kinds of information anthropological research can obtain, because only they allow to understand how people actually live their lives, what really occupies and truly moves them. Thus, to give in to the difficult circumstances, do without participant observation, and rely on interviews instead, can be no solution for anthropology, especially not in contexts in which research is concerned with those aspects of life that are partially reflected at best, and on which explicit knowledge is rather scant, as is the case in aesthetic experience. An example from my own fieldwork can serve to illustrate what I mean.

In the interviews that I carried out with Malagasy metal musicians and fans, I tried to find out about the aesthetic experience of heavy metal music in two different ways. On the one hand, I wanted to trace it in individual biographies, because I assumed that the experiences of heavy metal music (as well as reflections on these experiences) become manifest within biographies in highly specific ways. In reverse, I was hoping, these biographies would then allow me to better understand the specific configuration of the aesthetic experience of heavy metal music in Madagascar. On the other hand, I planned to directly confront my dialogue partners with my problem in a way that would stress Western clichés about the remoteness of Africa. More precisely, I wanted to explain to them how astonishing I found it that heavy metal also existed in Madagascar, so far from away from the genre’s countries of origin, and that I was now interested in understanding why and in which respect this was the case, in order to see how they would react to this naive and ethnocentric position thrown squarely into their faces.

In respect to the biographies, it turned out that first encounters with heavy metal usually took the shape of ‘epiphanies’, a form of initiation apparently typical

for this genre (Berger 1999: 66); at least, this was a common narrative used to make sense of what happened in retrospect. In fact, the stories about these first encounters strikingly resembled those concerned with religious conversion: people accidentally came across the hitherto completely unknown music, were immediately fascinated by the sound and what this sound did to them, and from that moment onward could no longer live without metal. Once ‘converted’, heavy metal began to play an increasingly important role in their lives: not only did their tastes in music, clothing styles and social contexts change, but so did their personalities, fantasies, and attitudes towards life. When inquiring about the concrete nature of these changes, e.g. about the actual ways in which their lives had changed through metal, in order to thus trace the “essences” of its experience, I was however provided with only a few rather shallow answers, all of which related to well-known phrases about how metal “provides power” or “makes those harder who listen to it”.

A comparable reaction resulted from my cliché-ridden question about the surprising existence of heavy metal in Madagascar. Familiar with these clichés themselves, most people to whom I talked in fact found it quite interesting to reflect about the importance of this music in Tana, whereas in other African countries with comparable Western histories – trade and slavery, mission and colonialism, pro-Western independence, socialism, nationalism, neoliberalism – heavy metal almost doesn’t exist.¹⁰ However, there were no clear statements about how this importance might relate to the fundamental nature of heavy metal music. However, forced by strategic silence, looks of expectation, an encouraging smile, and a running recording device, my interview partners, mostly small groups, began to search for answers. And, finally, they found some. Not in heavy metal and its essences, however: Just like anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, they rather turned to extrinsic factors, which in their case meant to invoke their cultural heritage. “You know”, began one interviewee for example – rather cautiously, because this type of explanation not only refers to feudal hierarchies supposed to have long been overcome, but also reconstructs an ethnic dichotomy between highlanders and coastal people, between those stressing their Southeast Asian roots and those they assume to be closer to Africa, which stands in clear opposition to the politically correct discourses of national unity – “here in the highlands, we do not have African ancestors; instead, we descended from Indonesians. And that makes quite a difference...”

¹⁰ Whether this statement is in fact true is not easy to assess, as the lack of literature on rock and metal music in Africa is also a result of the lack of interest in this research subject. The anthropological study on metal’s global dimension has just begun to emerge (see Wallach 2008, Berger, Green & Wallach 2012) and has so far omitted Africa South of the Sahara, as have popular books on the topic (see for e.g. LeVine 2008 and 2010) or the film “Global Metal” (McFayden & Dunn 2007). Fortunately, for my strategic purposes, it ultimately did not matter if the statement was true or not.

Perhaps I suggested this type of answer in my first interviews by comparing Madagascar with the rest of Africa. Even without my suggestions, though, this aspect of an ‘Indonesian’ identity came up again and again during the course of my research, when discussing the popularity of heavy metal, or of rock music more generally, within the Malagasy highlands. Yet, this reference does not explain anything, at least not in respect to the love of heavy metal. After all, identities can be constructed with various sorts of music, and in fact most highlanders use music other than heavy metal – folk music for example, music reminiscent of French *chansons*, or singer-songwriter styles – to construct an identity as ‘Indonesian’ Malagasy highlanders, if this is actually what they do. A similar problem arises if the argument is based on an essentialist notion of culture, as was undoubtedly the case in the interviews. Even if Malagasy highlanders would, due to some deep cultural imprint, have some kind of cultural affinity towards heavy metal, this would not yet be revealing. Only if it also become clear what aspects of the music this affinity refers to – in which essential respects, in other words, music and identity actually relate – would it become instructive to talk about how music and identity interact. But my dialogue partners remained silent on this; and even when some of them later became good friends, we never really got far on this issue.

The French philosopher Antoine Hennion, after experiencing similar situations during his research, explains this persisting silence with the success of sociology (Hennion 2003). Not unlike academics, ‘amateurs’ would also ignore the aesthetic dimensions of music and turn to sociological explanations instead, for the reason that they have been inculcated into these sociological discourses for a long time, mediated by music journalism. The consequence he draws for research on popular music is that today, dialogue partners first need to become ‘de-sociologized’ by the researcher, before they will then be able to discuss the music and the experiences it brings about: the “strange paradox of a highly reflexive field” (Hennion 2003: 89f.). I strongly agree with Hennion. In Tana, the discourses that have accompanied heavy metal since the 1980s are very well known. However, I also believe that the problem even runs deeper, as it is generally extremely difficult to find a language that does justice to aesthetic experience. The experience of sound is beyond words, which is why it does not easily translate into language – even less so in the formal setting of an interview, where clear and straightforward answers are expected.¹¹

That it is difficult to talk about aesthetic experience does not mean that research on the experience of music is entirely dependent on nonverbal practices such as dance, movement, or gestures, however (Clayton 2008). It does mean though, that interviews do not really help at this point. It is better to look out for traces that the experience of music leaves, in bodily practices, of course, but also in language. And

¹¹ Since Baumgarten’s fundamental reformulation of aesthetics in 1750/58, the question of how aesthetic experience and language relate forms one of the discipline’s epicenters; for recent reflections about this relation within the field of music, see Wellmer 2009.

for this endeavor, the ‘classical’ anthropological approach is probably the most suitable: participant observation, the problem-driven but open, cautious and enormously self-critical method, in which sharing the lives of others, observing what they do, and listening to what they talk about not only helps identify at least some of these traces, but eventually even allows to read them.

In respect to Malagasy metal, the devil – or Satan – was one such trace. This may not come as a surprise, as Satan is in fact one of the oldest and most powerful images of heavy metal and has been associated with the genre since Black Sabbath appropriated anti-Christian symbolisms around 1970. In the course of my research, however, Satan’s nature turned out to be quite different to how it is usually portrayed. In the early days of heavy metal, Satanism was basically understood in religious terms, at least by its critics, as a heathen critique of Christianity and the Christian tradition. Political readings became prominent after some Norwegian stave churches were burnt down at the beginning of the 1990s, for which representatives of the Norwegian black metal scene declared themselves responsible and made use of fascist discourses to explain their motives (Moynihan & Söderlind 1998). In my research, however, Satan turned out to be neither a religious figure, nor a political leader, but rather an aesthetic allegory. In Tana, Satan emerged as one of the images that help people shape, articulate and reflect the aesthetic experience of metal, in order to make sense of this music both in respect to their general lifeworld and to their private lives. In turn, this meant that Satan could serve me as a methodological device for understanding exactly these processes.

Heavy Metal, Satan and Aesthetics

One morning, about two months after I started fieldwork, my cell phone buzzes: it is a text message from Nini. The singer and front man of the band Kiaka asks if I want to see a TV recording session that same afternoon. Obviously, I do. Kiaka is one of the first and most well known heavy metal bands in Madagascar. Founded in the mid-1980s, they quickly became famous with a song about a ‘Poor Man’ (*Ilay mahantra*). Since then, they hit the charts at regular intervals and became national stars; until today, they are winning radio prizes, appear in gazettes and supplements, and during the time of my fieldwork even performed their famous songs during the half time break of an international soccer game, broadcast live on national TV. Kiaka themselves are ardent heavy metal fans, their taste in metal ranges from heavy and glam metal (Iron Maiden, Van Halen) to thrash metal (Metallica, Sepultura), power metal (Helloween, Angra) and progressive metal (Dream Theater, Symphony X). However, the band pays tribute to its success and high media presence and plays with the dark aura of heavy metal more than it actually plays heavy metal music. As a result, Kiaka reaches an audience that goes far beyond the metal scene. “What is

the point”, Nini had rhetorically asked me in one of our first conversations, “of playing music that only a handful of people will ever listen to?”

Early in the afternoon, I arrive at the location where the TV show is supposed to take place, together with my friend and research assistant Njaka Rakotondramanana, himself a well-known world musician and virtuoso player of the Malagasy bamboo zither, but also a guitarist and avid metal musician. Upon our arrival, we are given a pleasant surprise: the band Green has also been invited, supposed to play their set immediately after Kiaka – or rather, to perform a set, as the entire music comes from a backing tape. Green had also formed in the mid-1980s, they are known at a national level too, and like Kiaka they clearly account for the needs of the market – otherwise, they wouldn’t be here now. Different to Kiaka, however, who are mainly known to the larger public for cheerful hard rock and romantic love songs, Green became famous due to their classic metal ballads. These ballads are characterized by slow rhythms, minor keys, sad melodies, lyrics dealing with the loss of love, a dramaturgy of “continual escalation” (Metzer 2012: 439-440) as well as by Poun’s virtuoso guitar technique, which he acquired by playing along to much of Deep Purple and Van Halen. For Green, this recording session even provided a special opportunity: after pondering with the problem for years, the band had finally separated from their longtime singer and was now able to introduce a new vocalist to the public: the seventeen year old, amazingly cool and confident winner of a Malagasy casting show.

We hang around, chat and wait. As soon as it is time, the bands enter the backstage area, where soft drinks, photographers and journalists are waiting for them, while Njaka and I squeeze into the hall in order to watch the show. A stage has been set up, blazing lights and a lot of high-end technology dominate the scenery. The setting is kept in bright colors, quite unusual for a heavy metal performance, with huge green billboards hanging everywhere – clearly, a Kuwaiti telecommunications company is sponsoring the session. On the four or five rising echelons, crowded with young people, the vibe is already good; many girls have come to the event that was advertised at a couple of high schools. The rows have been arranged very close to the stage, in order to achieve an intimate atmosphere, the sound is good and very loud. Brilliance, a famous Malagasy pop star, is just about to take full advantage of this arrangement, together with her three dancers: as if it was an actual concert, the fans yell and scream, and definitely not just because they are supposed to.

The set change is quick, as neither must cables be reconnected, nor does the sound have to be readjusted. Then Kiaka are announced and enter the arena, greeted by at least two hundred screeching girls. Nini, very aware of his stage presence, immediately tries to commit the audience to heavy metal, with quite some success considering the radical switch in musical styles that Kiaka’s performance brings about. In line with the circumstances, he did not put on his full metal gear (at regular concerts, a black leather outfit is his trademark) but like most of the other

musicians, he is dressed in black. He walks the stage, greets the audience, then lowers his head and announces the first song, with a deep rumbling sound in his voice that is only to some part ironic. And while the song finally starts, he uses another powerful symbol: he raises the ‘metal horns’, that is he holds up his fist with the index finger and the little finger upright and the thumb placed in front of the two middle fingers. The audience reacts promptly and answers with the exact same gesture, a symbolized devil’s head, in order to greet the band back. Despite the highly inappropriate atmosphere – and the song that Kiaka has just began to perform is also not diabolical at all – something happens in that moment; the atmosphere becomes darker, secretive, ‘evil’.

This gesture could be dismissed as merely a gimmick, which of course it also is, or as evocative of a sense of community using the symbols of the genre. However, something also comes to the fore in this gesture that has to do with the music, its essence and aura. In using the horns, those present at the performance ally under the sign of the devil and thus begin to play with the idea of committing themselves to evil: some pushing, frowning, and a couple of flying plastic bottles underline this moment of anarchy, if always in an ironic mode. Besides, the gesture is used to spontaneously communicate about the music and its nature, which becomes obvious in the fact that it is often used in specific musical situations, such as when the song explodes into the chorus, or during a powerful guitar solo. Thus, the dark and diabolical aura which the metal horns represent is immediately related to the experience of the music; in other words: the raised horns mediate music and diabolical aura, and thus create a holistic experience to which they themselves lend a face.

After Kiaka’s performances have been successfully recorded, Green appear onstage. They also perform with great aplomb: Poun, whose flying fingers are constantly captured by a special camera, throws himself into the typical poses of a heavy metal guitarist, while the other musicians try to adjust their playing to the music, attempting not to appear too artificial in their movements. The new singer manages the situation perfectly, which is proven by the fact that he creates considerable turmoil among the girls in the front row. Some technical problems result in a few short breaks and force the band to start one of their songs thrice, but even that does no harm to the atmosphere. After Green are finished, we all meet again in front of the hall, drive to the parking lot of a nearby supermarket, choose a remote corner, get some sausage and cold drinks, and enjoy the sunny afternoon. Then I ask, as casually as possible, about the meaning of the metal horns. Clearly, this was not an original question, but it soon became clear that it also was not an easy one.

Madagascar is a Christian country. Its history of Christian mission dates back to the early seventeenth century, when French Jesuits began to settle at the North West coast of the island. For the highlands, however, the work of the British *London Missionary Society* was crucial, which started around 1820 and finally turned out to

be highly successful. Toward the end of the 1860s, the Queen of the Merina, then the ethnic group that controlled not only the central highlands, but almost the entire island, converted to Christianity, joined by her entire government. This step finally rendered Madagascar a Christian island, as from that moment on, Christianity developed into an important feature of Malagasy identity (Bechtloff 2002). Today, the existence and power of God are rarely questioned by anyone living on the island, which also holds true for the metal musicians in the parking lot. Obviously, this poses some problems to explain even playful embracements of the devil. Accordingly, the musicians squirm.

In its localizing design, the most original and passionate answer to my question appears almost anthropological. The symbol, one musician states, needs to be understood differently in Madagascar. Here, the horns do not represent a symbol for the devil, but rather for the Zebu, because within Malagasy culture – as indeed no one would doubt – this animal holds a special place in respect to both ritual practice and local cuisine. While this comment contributes considerably to the cheerful atmosphere, nobody actually agrees, since it remains widely unclear why heavy metal should relate to cattle. To read the horns not as a sign of Satan, but rather as a symbol for heavy metal in general, introduced to the community by the heavy metal legend Ronny James Dio, is a proposition received with far more appreciation. This is, again, an escape into social explanations, with the consequence – which does not go unnoticed – that the actual meaning of the gesture remains obscure. For example, this does not explain, as one of Kiaka's musicians points out, why the members of Green, all of them strong believers in God, hesitate to throw the horns and point to the sky with only their index fingers instead. While the general conversation moves on to other matters, we go on discussing the subject in a smaller group. In this more intimate context, it turns out that some of the musicians have been struggling with the gesture and what it represents for quite some time. It also turns out that they clearly connect this diabolical gesture – because, after all, that's how they understand it – to the aura of the music that they like and play, and that they feel somehow does not fit with the world of Sunday services, its ideologies and demands, suits and skirts, even though most Malagasy metal fans spend their lives living in both of these worlds. Stories of friends are told and considered who had moved away from metal, because they could no longer take what they increasingly experienced as a fundamental dichotomy. They were afraid, I am informed, not just of playing around with symbols of the devil, but finally *of the music itself* – a statement reminiscent of conservative Christian discourses that have for a long time been sensitive to exactly this issue (Nekola 2013). It is the very quality of metal music that calls the devil, these friends were convinced, because the music itself is intrinsically evil – a perspective that implies, without doubt, an interesting theory about the nature and the aesthetic experience of heavy metal music. The question we

could not answer in our discussion at the parking lot was, however, how this theory actually works.

Instead, Tana's Satanists could provide me with some well thought through answers on this topic. Contrary to public rumors, these Satanists were in no way a group of people obsessed with graveyards and bloody rituals. The Satanists that I met were not even a group at all, but well-educated individuals who critically and in a surprisingly independent manner reflected on society, religion, life in general, as well as on the essences of heavy metal music. While the ways in which they conceptualized 'Satan' or 'Satanism' varied widely, what united them was the conviction that heavy metal music – in their case mainly the extreme metal genres death and black metal – encourages listeners to question established orders and thus also Christian hegemonies, not only through the way in which the music is staged, but through the very experience of heavy metal's specific sound. For the Satanists, the music, its experience, its allegories and evocations are inseparable, which is why they understand any attempt to reinterpret this relation only as a result of the fear to accept what is so clearly experienced, and much enjoyed, in the music. Thus, for the Satanists, listening to heavy metal, not to mention playing it, without openly admitting to it is inconsequential, a clear sign of cowardice, and finally a betrayal of everything the music is about. For them, heavy metal is a way of life, centering around the experience of music and demanding from those who engage in it to free themselves from exactly those commandments, hierarchies and principles which they all have experienced in their Christian upbringings; to free themselves from the idea of an absolute obedience not only to God, but also to the church, from doctrines and moral rules, and from self-conceptions as 'sinners' who should ask for forgiveness. According to their understanding, to listen to heavy metal necessarily results in turning away from God and the search for an own path – a big step in Christian Madagascar that may come with significant consequences in social and even professional respects. Satan, the rebellious fallen angel, too proud to bow to God, is their guiding figure in this respect, helping them to bring their convictions into shape – or a guiding metaphor, depending on the particular understanding of Satan's actual nature.

This discourse on sincerity towards the music and its aesthetic experience plays an important role in the global heavy metal world, the keyword in this respect being 'trueness'. To be 'true' to metal implies that fans of this music should somehow try to bring their lives into accordance with the convictions that metal music's power chords and blast beats, its melodies and growls, its speed, harmonic progressions and virtuosic solos seem to evoke. To take these evocations as explicit guidelines for the conduct of everyday life, as the Satanists demand it, is however far too extreme for most metal fans, even for those who maintain a very intimate relation to this music. This reluctance is clearly proven not only by the discussion with Kiaka and Green on the parking lot, but also by the way in which most Malagasy metal fans – as metal

fans worldwide – live their daily lives. For them, heavy metal allows for an intense aesthetic experience of worlds in which the rules and regulations of everyday life are suspended, and thus provides a space for exploring those dimensions of life that are usually negated: darkness and evil, violence and obscenity, death and aggression, resistance and disobedience. The unique quality of the music, in line with its allegorical representations, make sure that these moments of transcendence are not only reflected upon, but experienced, in the ambiguous and diffuse, though by no means arbitrary, ‘atmospheric’ or ‘auratic’ manner that is characteristic for the aesthetic experience of music, and finally of art in general.

How then do metal fans and musicians render these aesthetic experiences, allegories and imaginations meaningful in respect to actual life? As we have begun to understand in respect to metal’s dark attitude, heavy metal demands of its listeners to deal with the dark aspects of life, with its downsides, the ugly, the evil – with all that the figure of Satan is so perfectly able to represent within a Christian environment. The ways in which these dark worlds are finally made sense of, however, range as wide as they possibly could. In Madagascar, they vary from an ironic play with Satan, as was the case during the TV recording – pushing, screaming, angry looks, devilish gestures – to situational indulgences into the emotional force of the music, deep reflection, different levels of unsettledness (as they came to light on the parking lot), to attempts of understanding heavy metal’s powerful evocations as a philosophy of life. It is important to empirically trace these different forms in which musicians and listeners deal with heavy metal’s particular subjects – of which Satan is but one – in order to understand what this music and its imaginations are finally about. Otherwise, we risk to only reproduce the far too simplistic ‘discursive’ approach from which heavy metal has suffered again and again. This would be the approach that takes metal’s sounds, performances, metaphors and imaginaries at face value, misreads them as ideologies, and handles them as if they were social processes. Instead, they should be understood as what they really are: aesthetic constructs which, like any powerful art, create alternative worlds, offer imaginary escapes, invite for contemplation, and thus help to bring meaning into lives. Not in the way of guidebooks, but in a vague, indirect and largely abstract manner.¹²

¹² In contrast to most anthropological studies of popular music, the question of the effects not only of popular music *per se*, but of certain types of popular music and their specific configurations is posed in other contexts, in respect to metal mostly from conservative, ‘critical’, or firmly religious points of view (for an overview, see Weinstein 2000[1991]: 237-275; LeVine 2010). Generally, however, these approaches are not based on ethnographic research. Rather, the effect of the music is deduced from the music itself, or from the (alleged) ideologies of the specific scenes (cf. Berger’s critique in footnote 6). As a consequence, the images and symbols of heavy metal are taken literally, while in fact they need to be understood figuratively and demand further interpretation (see Walser 1993: 152-159; for critiques of heavy metal’s ‘over-politicized’ readings, see also Phillipov 2012, Purcell 2003; for an interpretative approach see Irwin [ed.] 2007, even if the volume concentrates on the exegesis of song lyrics).

“Classic” fieldwork in new fields

Of course, aesthetic experiences are not only important to heavy metal. Each type of music, whether popular or not, enables such experiences, which is basically the reason why we listen to music in the first place. And just as in metal music, these experiences have a particular relevance to life, as they offer possibilities to contemplate about its pleasures and constraints, possibilities or unattainabilities.¹³ Because musical styles and what they evoke are different from each other, these processes of contemplation however differ in substance; in which way they do is an empirical question that requires fieldwork, even though the structure and sound of the music will probably be important, as will be the lyrics and even surrounding discourses, histories, or ideologies. It also demands fieldwork to find out as to by whom, in which situations, and in which ways these aesthetic experiences are translated into everyday life, when and under which circumstances they actually change lives, and when they rather provide those “moments of freedom” (Fabian 1998) that only last as long as a song, an album, or a concert. To answer these questions, interview-based research, as it is currently on the rise within anthropology – perhaps due to increasingly heterogeneous fields, but perhaps also due to a lack of time, passion, and patience (Howell 2011) – is in any case not enough. Different to the circumstances in which music is created, performed, exchanged, or listened to, aesthetic experiences are difficult to articulate. Whoever tries needs to be skilled in the “productive use of language” (Wellmer 2009: 121), which is why so many and often quite colorful metaphors, symbols and allegories are used when it comes to dealing with these experiences – and why, finally, expressions of aesthetic experience often make use of rather “flat and stereotypical” figures (Wellmer 2009: 121), as is undoubtedly also true for Satan in heavy metal. As a consequence, however, we need to look out for the ways in which the experiences of musical sound are actually considered, wherever possible in close cooperation with the subjects of our research. Otherwise, we risk to reduce music to what is easy to discuss: its social, political, historical, or economic contexts.

To the contextualist approaches, what remains to be discovered is that music is first of all listened to, that it is experienced in deep and quite complex ways, and that everything else it can do – create identities for example, support escapist attitudes, or generate protest – is necessarily based on this experience. To really understand what popular music is therefore demands putting the music and the essences of its experience at the center and ask for the ways in which these are rendered meaningful in relation to actual practice. In terms of method, this requires looking for those externalizations in which the experience of music is expressed, and through which it is created. And this is best done through patient and painstaking anthropological fieldwork, while sharing one’s life for an extended period of time with those people

¹³ For reflections on ‘serious’ music as a form of existential experience, see Wellmer 2006.

in the experiences of which one is interested – through participant observation, that is, quite in the spirit and style of Malinowski. Here, the most valuable insights will be gained by witnessing ‘thick’ incidents, by being present in spontaneous conversations, and – probably most often – through mutual interferences of small snippets of meaning. These include gestures such as people raising their fists with two fingers pointing upwards, which at some point will become meaningful, contribute to a general picture, and at the same time indicate the complexity and ambiguity of whatever is at stake – that Satan, to stick with our example, first and foremost provides an allegory that helps to articulate the experience of heavy metal music; that one can engage with him in an aesthetic mode, even though he is clearly disapproved of ideologically; that he can be dealt with seriously, but also naively or ironically; and that he nonetheless represents an effective symbol that may exert considerable power. To study these nuances of aesthetic experience empirically, and in this way trace the relevance of popular music for the conduct of actual life, does not just demand effort and time. Such a study also risks becoming a disturbing and worrying process, because it will take considerable time to even find out where the research will finally lead to – completely opposite to the contextualist approaches, which in their self-confident manner, as Rapport so fittingly put it, are constantly in control of their results:

“(...) the process of contextualization – seeing the figure always in terms of an explanatory ground, which circumscribes and conditions the nature of that figure’s being (...) – is always promissory of a more considered, inclusive, and fundamental analysis (whether the context is provided by history, society, language, class, culture or the unconscious).” (Rapport 2003: 65f.)

Nevertheless, if we do not want to just use the experiences and practices of our research subjects to prove our own theoretical presumptions over and over again, a circular approach that Rapport, putting it bluntly, described as “modern-day astrology” (Rapport 2003: 66), there is simply no alternative to engaging in this type of research. After all, it is the only way of confronting our subjects with the kind of openness (Ingold 2006) that may finally render the anthropological study of popular music an *anthropological* study of popular music.

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