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*Le reggae, remède contre la marginalisation ? Construction de la jeunesse urbaine à travers la musique (Port-Vila)*

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/7852>  
DOI: 10.4000/jso.7852  
ISSN: 1760-7256

**Publisher**

Société des océanistes

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 15 December 2017  
Number of pages: 117-130  
ISSN: 0300-953x

**Electronic reference**

Monika Stern, « Is Music a “Safe Place”? The Creative and Reactive Construction of Urban Youth through Reggae Music (Port Vila, Vanuatu) », *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* [Online], 144-145 | 2017, Online since 15 December 2019, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/7852> ; DOI : 10.4000/jso.7852

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# Is Music a “Safe Place”? The Creative and Reactive Construction of Urban Youth through Reggae Music (Port Vila, Vanuatu)

*Le reggae, remède contre la marginalisation ? Construction de la jeunesse urbaine à travers la musique (Port-Vila)*

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*I would like to thank Christine Jourdan and Lamont Lindstrom for launching this special issue on Urban Melanesia and for their patience and guidance. More generally I am very grateful to my colleagues present in November 2014 at the Melanesian Research Seminar at the British Museum devoted to urban Vanuatu. Many of their comments were very helpful for the progress of my work on music and the city. My gratitude also goes to Marie Durand, Thomas Dick and Stéphanie Geneix-Rabault who very kindly read drafts of my paper that helped me in the writing of it. I would like to thank Deborah Pope for her English language corrections and patience.*

For more than a decade, the growth of economic and industrial development in Port Vila has been widening the gap between the capital and rural parts of the Vanuatu archipelago. Despite the fact that it is in town, among Port Vila's 45,000<sup>1</sup> or so inhabitants, that the greatest economic inequalities and signs of poverty are found (Simeoni, 2009: 290), the city continues to attract young people from rural areas of Vanuatu.

The capital's inhabitants are predominantly Melanesian, ni-Vanuatu.<sup>2</sup> Less than 10% of the population is of foreign origin, but the majority of private sector investments are in the hands of foreigners (National Population and Housing Census, 2009: 27). However, in recent years, with the emergence of a certain local middle-class, ni-Vanuatu have been embarking on their own private enterprise projects. Since the early 2000s,<sup>3</sup> the technological development of the city has provided attractive musical activities such as concerts, festivals, nightclubs, and organisational structures for young people thus

enabling new musical practices to emerge. Reggae, rock, and rap are historically urban creations. In Vanuatu reggae music, while also very popular in rural areas, has developed mainly in the two largest urban centres, Port Vila and Luganville (also, until very recently, the only places with a permanent electricity supply).

In addition, the digital technologies recently introduced in the archipelago have brought new means for the distribution and exchange of music. However, though music has thus become very accessible, there are still very few jobs or economic opportunities for young people in the capital. As the number of young people in Port Vila has increased, so too has the precariousness of their existence and their sense of marginalization from the mainstream socio-economic community.

Almost 10 years apart, Mitchell and Kraemer conducted analyses of how the young in Port Vila have reacted to this marginalization. Mitchell analysed the visual aspects of ways of "killing time" (spending time),<sup>4</sup> like watching videos, observing tourists or "eye-shopping" (window-shopping), as new practices in response to their urban, unemployed state. 10 years later, Kraemer (2013: 30) described how some young people seemed to be searching for their own productive and creative ways to improve their lives, refusing marginalization. As Bolton notes:

"[...] young men sought out arenas where they could effect some form of agency. The arenas where this is possible are sport, especially competitive sport; church life and its antithesis, the practice of sorcery; and the making of music." (Bolton, 2010: 8)

The urban music scene in Port Vila is predominantly masculine. The construction of musical masculinity is a very specific yet pervasive arena of agency. The ways in which these spheres of agency are constructed and the particular forms of agency they afford the young men involved in these domains need to be analysed.

Therefore, drawing upon these previous studies, I will focus on the musical practices of Port Vila's marginalized young men,<sup>5</sup> especially on reggae for, along with string band, it is the most popular musical genre in urban Vanuatu. What are the different roles of music for Port Vila's inhabitants today? What does music mean for the young men of this capital? How do they use it? How is music involved in urban changes and networks? What can music teach us about a city?

In addition to these questions significant for urban studies, music and music-related practices appear to be an important element in the ongoing construction of cities.

While some researchers see music as a metaphor for the city (Cohen, 2007: 227) reflecting its nature and changes, I prefer to see music in Port Vila, as Wacquant (1998: 227) did boxing in Chicago, as "a world in itself" with its own mechanisms and logic, without however considering it as a total social fact. I was able to understand this internal logic of the musical world of Vanuatu's capital thanks to a long immersion period, living there and being a part of a Port Vila local band for six years.<sup>6</sup> However, in this paper, I would like to move on to a more general stage of analysis: to study how music is used by musicians to cope with emerging urban issues. Indeed, as Wittersheim (2014: 57) has shown with regard to football supporters, their lives like those of musicians, are not confined solely to these activities. They have families, sometimes a job. They may be training in sectors other than music and pursuing other occupations. While music is an integral part of the city, embracing its dynamics and specificities, it is also, as Wittersheim (2014: 140) has stressed concerning football, only "one component of a given society". I will therefore try to show here how music allows reggae musicians to resist

marginalization by creating what they see as safe spaces with very moral discourses, while at the same time enabling them in a way to espouse this marginalization through the construction of a discourse and image of the “rebel, artist *maudit*” in the face of emerging political issues. I will also attempt to demonstrate how musical practices provide them with a space which affords them the possibility of moral as well as political agency.

It is not new for dominated classes to seek a better life, social recognition, or increased self-esteem through activities usually considered merely as pastimes, such as sport or music (Wacquant, 1998: 225). However for musicians in Port Vila, this is also a way to participate in society, a form of agency that enables them to be involved in the life of the city, to claim a certain power, express themselves freely, and take their lives into their own hands.

To study this, I first establish why music today is increasingly significant for many young men in Port Vila considered both by themselves and society as underprivileged. What is it that music provides which they cannot find elsewhere? I then analyse how music is involved in the process of building new communities and networks where other “traditional” social structures have lost their value for youth. Finally, I will concentrate on the way in which musicians use music as a vehicle for self-expression and political commitment.<sup>7</sup>

## Music as a “way out”?

Today in Port Vila, music plays a crucial role for many young men. It is one of the most readily available tools for them to cope with the lived experience of marginalization and keep themselves “safe” (to use their expression).

“[...] all the boys we play music with, decided to make music because there were more and more problems in our community. We were always watched by the police so we tried to do something to keep all of us safe, out of trouble. [...] so we thought that we needed to have an activity to protect ourselves (*stap sef*), that was when we decided to form a band. [...] So we think music is a safe place (*sef ples*) where we should stay. (Interview with Wamillee Masing and Sam Nangof, Masamp Crew Band, 5 November 2012)<sup>9</sup>

As we can see in this interview with musicians from the Ohlen district, young people from the poorest parts of Port Vila have daily experience of and a tendency towards self-marginalization: they apparently think that without any activity, they will necessarily become delinquents.<sup>10</sup> For their own safety then, they have imagined activities that could protect them from this. Often, the musicians told me, music is a leisure activity, a way of escaping boredom or delinquency, but also a strategy for becoming a “good person”, someone the community can respect. Wamillee frames music in terms of *sef ples* (“safe place”) and in doing so clearly evokes the idea of an arena of agency inhabited by musical practices and musicians themselves: making music can make people and the place safe.

To understand how this powerful agency is developed through music and the role it plays for young people in Port Vila’s most deprived settlements<sup>11</sup> and to place Wamillee’s statement in its context, it is first necessary to describe the soundscape of young urban people’s lives.

## The life of young people in the settlements and their marginalization

The population of the Melanesian archipelago of Vanuatu is currently very young. According to the last national census of 2009, 66% of the population was under 30 (National Census, 2009). However, as Bucholtz has pointed out, youth is not a clear, nor a universal category. It depends not on age criteria but on context:

"In a given culture, pre-adolescent individuals may count as youth, while those in their 30s or 40s may also be included in this category. And youth as a cultural stage often marks the beginning of a long-term, even lifelong, engagement in particular cultural practices, whether its practitioners continue to be included in the youth category or not." (Bucholtz, 2002: 526)

Thus, today in Port Vila, "youth" cannot be defined by age or family situation (marriage, children). My observations show that if a person spends time with groups of peers who consider themselves "young people" and participates in their activities and networks, he or she is regarded as such.<sup>12</sup> Thus, though musicians are often described as "young", in fact, they may be of very different ages. As one of my friends (at the time he was around 30) told me, music is the activity of his youth, when he is older, he will have to find a different occupation because "music is for youth". More than ten years later, in his 40s, he is still a famous musician and seems to have no desire to stop (though he is also a celebrated author, visual artist and curator). Although music is seen mainly as an activity for youth, for some people it is their main activity (even though it is not lucrative) throughout their life.

Unlike in rural areas where life is structured around a subsistence economy,<sup>13</sup> the rapidly growing development of the capital Port Vila<sup>14</sup> has given rise to such social changes as unemployment, increases in school fees and the cost of living, insalubrious and overcrowded housing, etc. These common consequences of urban development have in recent decades led to the appearance of a certain precariousness characterized by forms of poverty and social fragility in part of the urban population (Mitchell, 2004; Kraemer, 2013).

However, unlike in more "developed" countries (according to capitalist economic norms), poverty in Vanuatu is a highly nuanced concept. Indeed, whether it be the politician Ralph Regenvanu, the writer Paul Tavo or young musicians, many ni-Vanuatu refute the label of "poor country" established by foreign criteria. They base this on an assumption of abundance, asserting that in their country there are no homeless people thanks to family support structures, no famine and constitutionally inalienable access to ancestral lands that anyone can use should their urban situation become too precarious. Kraemer (2013: 81-86) however calls into question this notion of universal rights to family land in the everyday life of second or third generations residing in town, particularly in the case of the young who express their marginalization not only with regard to the urban elites but also concerning this access to their ancestral lands.

The young people concerned in this paper are mostly males (because the urban music scene in Port Vila is predominantly masculine) and most of them are from second and sometimes even third generations of migrants from the rural areas of Vanuatu islands. Many of them have no fixed income, although they have access to other kinds of activities paid for in various forms (cash, services, meals, cigarettes, kava, alcohol, cannabis, etc.). Most of them live off the incomes of their extended families with whom they live, often without such basic services as water, electricity, sanitation, and paved roads. However

there are a very small number of musicians who are from emerging middle-class families and/or have a steady paid job.

While the difficult living conditions of these young people have already been noted (Mitchell, 2004; Lindstrom, 2011; Kraemer, 2013; Wittersheim and Dussy, 2013), in recent years an important new factor has appeared: a particular kind of hunger influenced by contemporary perspectives of masculinity. This hunger is closely connected to urbanization, its monetary system, social organization and marginalization of youth - particularly young boys because of the public nature of their everyday lives. Urban girls and children are not affected by this phenomenon to the same extent, as their lives are structured more domestically, in and around the home and the preparation of food. For young urban boys, finding food is difficult. Marcel Melthérorong, musician and writer, stresses this emerging problem:

"Some young boys have no food to eat. Because there are too many of them in the house, some come from the islands to live with families in the city, and then often only one person is working to feed everyone, so they only manage to feed those they can and afterwards the cooking pot is empty [...]and when the cooking pot is empty, those that come later know that all they can do is go to the ghetto [...] go and check out friends, so sometimes it's food someone's brought or bought in the store or even stolen in the store." (Interview with Marcel Melthérorong, XX Squad and Kalja Riddim Klan bands, 13 October 2012)

These young people are unfamiliar with the new urban forms of making a living (wage labour) and the new interfaces of money (credit, banks, cash) which shape contemporary masculine livelihoods. Thus expectations of masculinity such as meeting their own needs, those of their families and even their community are often too difficult for young men to live up to.

More and more, increasingly younger boys are taking daily refuge in the streets, among their peers and in the "ghetto", often returning home very late at night. Thus, young boys in different areas of the town are building special places for themselves where they can gather together, *storian* (talk), eat and find refuge if they encounter problems. They call these makeshift shelters (an abandoned house, a shed built from local natural materials or sheets of corrugated iron), "ghettos", a name probably taken from reggae songs even if its meaning is totally different from that of the Jamaican ghettos called shanty towns or those of big American cities like New York:

"ahhh, ghetto is, today in Vanuatu...for me, ghetto is a little house or a place where boys, boys and girls get together, everyday to smoke or chat (*stori*). To enjoy their day in the ghetto." (Interview with Tio Masing, Koncerners Band, 1 November 2012)

Young boys have thus created their own spaces. Though Tio speaks about ghettos as mixed spaces, for boys and girls, in reality, they are mostly used by young boys. According to testimonies gathered, many districts have their own ghettos visited by the local young. Though some of them have names like *Ohlen Hole*, *95 Colombia*, *Dark Kona* ("Dark Corner"), *Waet Kona* ("White Corner"), *74 Dark Street*, *Cornwall Street*, or *Grass House*, most of them are just called the "ghetto". Although they are not frequented only by "artists", these are privileged places to meet, talk, and exchange. They are sites of mutual inspiration and influences, places in which to create something together. It is also here that they often articulate their experience of marginalization.

As early as the beginning of 2000, Mitchell noted that the settlements on the outskirts of Port Vila were being marginalized in the media. She referred among other things to a recurrent discourse in public opinion stating that unemployed young people should

return to their villages of origin (even those born in the city, implying that everybody in Vanuatu has land) instead of doing nothing and hanging around the city:

"[...] [e]veryone has ground – why don't they go home?" This is a good question."  
(Mitchell, 2000: 192).

A decade later, nothing has changed and her observations confirm an ongoing mistrust of youth:

"Urban settlements in Port Vila are becoming pathologized as sources and sites of youth transgression and crime in everyday discourse, documents and media. These discourses are informed by a colonial logic that discouraged Islanders' migration to town and the longstanding idea that urban settlements are an anathema to the modern nation." (Mitchell, 2011: 38)

Influenced by these public discourses, young people from these areas have themselves a negative vision of their city, an idea of increased criminality and violence involving youth itself, as stated in these testimonies from the musician Maurice Philip and the singer Bela Espel:

"Ah yes, yes, the problems today are fights. Walking at night isn't safe anymore. Groups of young boys might jump out on you and beat you up, that's what's happening today in our country. There's a lot of theft too. Youths are stealing in stores, banks,<sup>15</sup> the *Bonmarché*<sup>16</sup>, anywhere, so things are getting worse and worse at the moment." (Interview with Maurice Philip, Shanty Town band, 30 October 2012)  
"Too much, heee... yes, too much corruption, yes, too much ... domestic violence, people are stealing everywhere, yes, crime has increased (...)" (Interview with Bela Espel, Shanty Town band, 6 November 2012)

#### Photo 1. – Musicians, Port-Vila, 2013

From left to right: Eddy Bulu, James Langdale, Steve Williams, Moses Cakau



(© Eddy Bulu)

Without a good school education or paid employment, young boys spend most of their time in the streets and are strongly criticized for this by other generations and those who

are successful in their lives. At the end of the 90s, this street lifestyle gave rise to the term SPR (*Sperem Pablik Rod Kampani*: "Hitting the Road Company"), which means the group of young people whose occupation is hanging around the streets to *kilim taem* (kill time) (Mitchell, 2011: 38; Kraemer, 2013: 98, 99). This expression is used by the young as well as by the rest of society. A decade later, the term SPR was replaced by "white page":

"I am just a white page that's all' (*mi jes waet page nomo*) to describe their lives by ironically referring to the empty pages of their non-existent agendas or appointment books." (Mitchell, 2011: 39).

However Kraemer sees this change in terminology as more positive:

"I suggest that unlike SPR and 'killing time', which reflected youth disempowerment, disappointment, loss and restlessness, the idiom 'white page', which likens youth to blank pieces of paper, encompasses notions about being ready to be given a chance - a blank page is a page ready to be filled." (Kraemer, 2013: 101, 102).

In his recent novel, the ni-Vanuatu francophone writer Paul Tavo also mentions the expression SPR, but quite differently, an explanation that I had already heard among my musician friends who use music to improve their image and status. The term SPR is employed here to describe artists (musicians, poets, painters, writers) who keep their freedom outside the capitalist system they denounce (Tavo, 2015: 127-128) by deliberately choosing not to have paid employment in order to remain free and "out of the system". I will return to this later.

So in a life of boredom and passivity, without adequate education or work, to fill this "white page" young people engage in the different unpaid activities accessible to them. Sport and music are more active occupations than the passive visual ones (watching videos and "window-shopping") observed by Mitchell in the 90s (2004).

Like Wamillee quoted at the beginning of this article, Tio, another musician, also mentions music as a response to boredom and unemployment:

"Aah, like most of the time, we just hang around like that, there's nothing to do. Our usual routine is just to smoke, smoke tobacco, smoke weed. That's our usual daily routine, that's what we did. We had plans to look for work, maybe a full day, or for a few days a week, we went to the Chinese<sup>17</sup> shops to ask for work, or elsewhere, but we never had any luck. So we came up with this idea of forming a band, at least like that we'll have something to do, so..." (Interview with Tio Masing, Koncerners Band, 1 November 2012)

## Music as a "safe place"

Music as a "way out" (Cohen, 2007: 44-47) is a widespread dream or myth. It gives most young people hope in a "way out" of trouble in everyday life through the skills they acquire playing music, gaining experience, building up networks, etc. Of course, many of them dream of a national or international career, of making a living from music, but there are few possibilities in Vanuatu. Music at least provides these young people with a means for expressing themselves and for developing self-esteem.

In sociological studies, musical creation is often seen as connected to precarious conditions and, according to Cohen, in the Liverpool of the 80s the increase in rock bands ran parallel with the rise in unemployment. Music thus replaces a boring daily routine, providing a means of communication, a meaning to life, friendship, etc. (Cohen, 2007: 46).



Wacquant (1998: 230) notes that music, like sport, is a sphere from which nobody is excluded due to a lack of education or money, or their social class. In fact, these domains seem to have functionalities that extend beyond (or perhaps lie in between) Bourdieu's notions of cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, music affords alternative ways for young urban people to construct an identity and navigate the constraints of capital as formulated by Bourdieu. Music is both a tool for, and an arena of, multilateral engagement with forces of marginalization. It offers work (although rarely lucrative) and a path towards expression and agency allowing both resistance to and embrace of the margins of society.

Thus, music is not only a leisure activity enabling young people to spend time together, but also a creative way of providing possibilities for public expression, sometimes even the opportunity to criticize. It permits young people to be heard in spaces where they are neither audible nor visible. It makes them known, gains them esteem, and allows them to imagine alternative futures. Finally, music is also a passion, like competitive sport. Performing music is a way of creating sense and emotions (Wittersheim, 2014: 54). A lot of musicians told me that their musical vocation was awakened during the Fest'Napuan festival, while watching musicians on stage and dreaming of being in their place.

For Wamilee and Tio, music not only protects them from their own supposed danger of delinquency and saves them from boredom, it also provides them with the possibility to raise their self-confidence and the esteem the community has for them, and to fulfil a dream of a musical career and become involved in social life by expressing themselves. This possibility of self-expression through music is unique in so far as they have no other opportunity to speak in public. They thus become active and positive actors in the social life of their city:

"What we have seen is that our band has really changed our lives. [...] We've created songs about different situations in our country, what is happening there, we have composed songs about that. So when we sing them, we really believe we shouldn't do this kind of thing. We're not going to steal, we shouldn't ... fight or drink or that kind of thing. We sing about a lot of topics, good topics which use music to get a message over. So we've written a lot of songs about diseases, that kind of thing. When we perform them, it helps us to talk about all that, the messages we want to get over so we have to practise what we preach. So it helps us, it helps us not to do some things that a lot of young people do today and then end up in jail." (Interview with Tio Masing, Koncerners Band, 1 November 2012)

In contrast with widely accepted ideas, which consider the populations of developing countries as "passive victims of capitalist exploitation", Goddard (2005) shows that the ways people from Port Moresby behave are creative social responses to this system. In the same vein, Kraemer (2013: 32) states that through the different activities in which they are involved, young boys from the Freswota area of Port Vila transform "their lives in creative ways".

Following these views, music can be considered as one of these creative means for the young to construct themselves as urban inhabitants of Melanesia. Despite certain negative images that sometimes stick to musicians as lazy, party people, cannabis smokers, drinkers, etc., reggae musicians from Port Vila, have in fact very moral discourses. They consider that when they start to become musicians and perform in public, they must be respectful and behave "well" in order to set an example.

They believe music helps them to make their place (urban areas) safe and protects them against their own delinquency. Reggae, unlike dance hall, rock or rap,<sup>18</sup> through its

history and symbols, has a universal reputation as music concerned with peaceful and moral political messages. But to have power, music needs to become a group phenomenon. It has the capacity to bring people together and create musical "communities".

## The building of new "communities": networks

Music is closely involved in the construction of the city due to its power to create imaginary identities and communities. Born (2011: 381, 382) evokes this power of music:

"[...] musically imagined communities [...] may reproduce or memorialize extant identity formations, generate purely fantasized identifications, or prefigure emergent identity formations by forging novel social alliances [...] it is clear that music can become a primary vehicle of collective identification – even if this is traversed by other vectors of identity (race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality)."

Whether it be through informal meeting spots, shared activities and tastes, communication using digital technology or official associations, the building of a music community undoubtedly plays an important role today in Port Vila's new alliances and networks.

## Creating musicians' networks

Identity and community reconstruction through music is often described by researchers as imaginary or a kind of myth (Born, 2011; Frith, 1981). This "myth" and these "musically imagined communities" are important in sociological analysis:

"[...] the importance of the myth of rock community is that it is a myth. The sociological task is not to 'expose' this myth or to search for its 'real' foundations, but to explain why it is so important. Just as the ideology of folk tells us little about how folk music was actually made but much about the folk scholars' own needs and fancies, so rock myths 'resolve' real contradictions in class experiences of youth and leisure. The significance of magic is that people believe in it." (Frith, 1981: 168)

The young people of Port Vila, particularly those born in the city, are becoming increasingly detached from their parents' island of origin, customary life and sometimes even family networks (Kraemer, 2013). Young boys are building their own exchange networks around cigarettes, alcohol, cannabis, but also for some of them church activities, internet or associative activities and musical practices.<sup>19</sup>

Today in Port Vila there are many different kinds of music: Christian choirs, string bands with falsetto male voices accompanied by string instruments, "traditional" dance and music,<sup>20</sup> and pop music dominated by the reggae style. Each of these genres creates its own networks, as evidenced, for example, by the organization of Fest'Napuan in which separate days managed by different people from the festival committee are devoted to string band, pop and religious music respectively. Even if there may sometimes be bridges formed between different musical styles, music practices, like other leisure activities (Wittersheim, 2014: 140), have the power to generate a sense of belonging and differentiation.

I suggest that music is one of the ways through which young people in Vanuatu imagine their own new networks and communities. How important is this "reggae community" myth in Port Vila? If young people believe that reggae culture connects them to Jamaica and African reggae communities, does this help them to construct a local reggae

community across or beyond those more familiar Melanesian social norms such as family and island of origin?<sup>21</sup>

When islanders<sup>22</sup> first started migrating to Port Vila they chose to settle according to their island of origin. As the city expanded and after years of migrations, intermarriages took place and some settlements became increasingly mixed with people originating from different islands (Lindstrom, 2011: 257; Kraemer, 2013).

Today urban identifications appear to have altered. While Wittersheim (2006: 68) described a transfer of identification from *island* of origin to *province*<sup>23</sup> of origin, it would seem now that island or province of origin is not always a crucial factor. It can be replaced or enriched with that of the city area of residence (Kraemer, 2013) or, as we will see, regardless of origin or living place, by leisure or artistic practices. As Lind (2012: 23) states when analysing the case of the *Veanu* string band, this urban social mix is reflected by music in which can be read not only kinship relations, but also social relationships based on a sharing of the same musical taste. Thus, for instance, the most famous reggae band of the early 2000s, Naio, brought together young boys from the same island in the south of the archipelago, Tanna. By contrast, many members of today's reggae groups come from different islands of origin and, though they may sometimes be from the same city areas, this is not always the case.

In addition, Vanuatu is a Christian country and for a long time the church has also been a factor in community building. It is in the new churches that some people find answers, fill gaps or appease their dissatisfaction with how the country is governed by politicians (Eriksen, 2009: 78, 79). However, some young boys are very critical of the church. In my circle, some friends told me that their parents (in particular mothers) were deeply involved in church activities but neglected their role as parents, leaving their children with a feeling of abandonment. Some of these young people are therefore looking for new opportunities to develop networks outside their family and church membership, and music offers them this possibility.

For music enables the creation of new networks. A band is often experienced as a second family, with new networks of close or more distant friends: sound engineers, members of other bands and music associations. In my own experience of playing in the local band, we all became a family and were connected not only by the pleasure of playing music together, by obligations linked to our music activities (rehearsals, performances, organisation, etc.) but also by our presence and support in each other's important life events outside music: the birth of a baby, marriage and death ceremonies, illness, etc. While our band formed something like a close family, our own networks, friends and families, along with other musicians or local music activists became an extended family for all of us. Thus, family, island or even city district of origin and relations with neighbours can be replaced or enriched by social networks and friendships created through music activities.

In Port Vila, music is what connects musicians and the different actors of the music world and enables the exchange of various services. Musicians exchange performances and musical entertainment at fund-raising events, borrow each other's sound equipment and musical instruments, circulate digital recordings or share the stage at public shows. Musicians and music lovers form an active and reactive community with influence on the city. I have developed elsewhere the idea that, via digital technologies, music in Port Vila circulates through its own networks outside the official music industry market (Stern, 2014). Because most young people have no leisure budget, they acquire their music (in the

form of MP3 or MP4 files, mostly on their mobile phones) for free, through their networks, unaware of any copyright system.

Technologies such as mobile phones or Internet facilitate the creation and communication of these new networks. Mobile phones enable easy communication for gatherings (for example, rehearsals or meetings). The Internet is itself a space for exchanges and the creation of networks via different discussion groups or forums, which can then be extended even beyond the country. Thereby the "myth" of a musical community is continuously reactualized and is omnipresent in the construction and transformation of new forms of sociability in Port Vila. Other kinds of events allow the creation of more structured networks: music festivals, associations and youth centres.

## Institutionalizations: music festivals, studios, associations

Music is a leisure activity with educational aspects and a means of socialization. Leisure as a way to escape boredom, forget difficult material situations or acquire skills is not new. Frith (1981: 254, 255) reminds us that:

"In the nineteenth century the moral entrepreneurs saw leisure as a means to the end of self-improvement. Leisure was an educational institution; rational recreation was encouraged for its useful effects. [...] By the end of the nineteenth century the distinction between rational and irrational leisure was institutionally enforced: rational leisure was promoted in school, municipal parks, and libraries; irrational leisure was patrolled by the police."

It is precisely this difference between leisure considered as "rational" and that we could call "deviant" which poses a problem of control for the authorities. While "rational" leisure activities are often supported by official associations or, if they become commodities, are also controlled by the market (Frith, 1981), behaviour considered as deviant is sanctioned by the authorities and critical public opinion. The contradiction of popular forms of music like reggae, rock, rap, etc., is that while they have recognized qualities (they are arts requiring hard work, with educational aspects, and a means for self-expression, etc.), they have also attracted a negative reputation. This is due to the fact that they are part of the entertainment world rather than that of work (Wacquant, 1998: 225) and also to their festive side and excesses such as the overconsumption of substances like alcohol and drugs that can be seen as the cause of deviant behaviour. Musicians take advantage of both aspects.

In the 90s, two major events were created: *la Fête de la Musique* introduced in Vanuatu by the *Alliance Française* and *Fest'Napanuan*, an annual national music festival (which also made a public access rehearsal studio available). The same period saw the emergence of NGOs like *Wan Smolbag Theatre* (<http://visit.wansmolbag.org/>) and *Further Arts* (<http://www.furtherarts.org/>) that were closely involved in the development of musical practices. These associations provided musical instruments, classes and rehearsal studios, thus making music more accessible to young people. The number of local bands increased significantly during the 2000s, as did the development of digital technologies, recordings and home studios.

The Fest'Napanuan festival, which is generally a great success and has a very good public image, nevertheless at times provokes accusations of causing problems and violence.<sup>24</sup> The association's work is then to neutralize those aspects considered negative and to nurture those seen as positive. Fest'Napanuan thus has its own rules. For example, the association has forbidden the sale of alcohol on the festival site and provides its own

security service.<sup>25</sup> This desire of associations to neutralize the “bad” sides of youth through art is also reflected in the development of a discourse about musicians, or more generally artists, having a duty to set a good example.

For musicians, playing in big festivals like *Fest’Napan* or the *Fête de la Musique*, releasing an album or having the opportunity to go on an international tour affords them a certain power of expression and also enhances their image in the eyes of their community. Appearing in public gives musicians a sense of responsibility. A lot of musicians told me that they have to set an example because they appear in public and then everyone watches them in their everyday life. The creation of associations which support musical activities provides informal musicians’ networks with a space and the possibility to be more organized and structured and offers musicians the opportunity for their voices to be heard more widely.

## Music as the political voice of youth

According to several Port Vila reggae musicians, they see themselves as strongly committed to creating the country's future, unlike string band musicians whom they consider less committed because of their songs’ lyrics which are mostly about love and women.<sup>26</sup> For many of these musicians, music is the only form of expression for conveying messages.

“Music is a part of life [...] it’s a kind of civil resistance, you play music to get a message over. [...] When you preach by talking, it’s difficult to get people to listen to you, so it’s better to use music. And civil resistance comes mainly from young people who find it difficult to get into the official system. Our economic system excludes many young people because they don’t have sufficient school education, so when they need to assert themselves the only way to be heard by those inside the system is through music. So the young from outside the system, if they know how to play music, can make themselves heard by those inside the system.”  
(Interview with Lopez Adams, Ants in Tokyo band, 6 November 2012)

Here, Lopez’s statement shows that the problem of public disregard faced by most struggling young people can find some kind of solution in playing music. Music allows them to make their voices heard and to exercise their civil right of free expression.

## Musicians against the “system”

Today in Port Vila, gaining self-esteem and asserting one’s own freedom often go hand in hand with political criticism of the “system”. This “system” inherited from colonization, requiring education and a salaried job, is one that these young men see as contrary to the ni-Vanuatu values inherited from their ancestors. Young men find these ideas in the reggae music to which they listen and adopt this criticism of the “Babylon system.”<sup>27</sup> As Daniela Kraemer (2013: 37) also notes:

“The boys say that there are two types of people in Vanuatu: people who are part of the ‘Babylon System’, usually referred to as the ‘system’ (*sistim*), and people who are ‘Roots People’ (*Roots Pipol*), people more in touch with Melanesian lifestyles. The boys see themselves as part of this latter group and often refer to themselves as ‘Roots Men’ [...]”.

Most young people thus use their marginal condition to identify themselves with political ideas articulated in reggae roots music from Jamaica. Let us here return to Paul Tavo’s

idea (2015) quoted earlier. In his novel, he mentions the idea widespread among Port Vila's musicians that it is important to refuse to enter the capitalist monetary system inherited from colonization. The young use this discourse to transform their position of being unemployed and uneducated from a constraint into a choice. Music (and other arts) then becomes a factor enabling them to both refuse the official system (work, school, etc.) and acquire and express self-esteem. Hence, through music, young people from the city turn the behaviour considered deviant by the rest of society (doing nothing, hanging around the streets, smoking, drinking) into activities they do not consider so, because they see themselves as rebel "*artistes maudits*" fighting the official system and choosing another way of life. They claim that not working is their choice, justified by a refusal of the system and their status as artists.

Some of them also told me that they had already worked at times, but for different reasons - bad treatment by their employer, lack of respect, tiredness - they had voluntarily left their jobs. This group of people goes against the established norms accepted by the majority of the population. The number of cannabis smokers,<sup>28</sup> which has increased significantly, also symbolizes this opposition to authority. I then suggest, following Becker (1985), that this group of young people, whose behaviour may be seen by the rest of society as deviant or at least "strange" and who take their ideas from reggae culture and music, have in a way formed a Port Vila reggae entity:

"[...] there are a lot of young people, and they're all listening to reggae, reggae is the music of the young. Actually, Vanuatu youth has taken its flag, its colours, it's their revolution somehow. (Interview with Marcel Melthérorong, XX Squad and Kalja Riddim Klan bands, 13 October 2012)

Reggae, with its long tradition, also provides a pacific way of life, a pacific way to be involved in politics.

### Music: a "peaceful revolution"?

The musical message is a peaceful one. In 2006, a group of young people from some outlying areas of Port Vila became angry with local politics and the severity of the police and politicians and formed the Vanuatu Roots association. These young "grass roots", as they referred themselves, came out onto the streets, demonstrated and organized political meetings, strongly criticizing politicians. Bringing together very different characters, some of them extremely angry, this group talked of revolution and ideas of revolt. Some of them even evoked the need to resort to violence. The government put down the movement, after the courthouse was burnt down, a crime of which two members of the Vanuatu Roots association were accused. Whatever the case, for Marcel Melthérorong this political awareness among the young was partly inspired by music:

"But music has woken this generation up, I think, by making them aware that they're human. We're human beings, we have human rights, we the ni-Vanuatu people who are we? Our laws, everything... all that is something that artists... because in a way they are like messengers of the people from the poor areas, ... and they've sent out this message [...] But afterwards, somehow music also helps people not to go beyond too dangerous a level. Music kind of helps to create this little revolution, but on the other hand, it also makes it possible not to light too fierce a fire, you know..." (Interview with Marcel Melthérorong, XX Squad and Kalja Riddim Klan bands, 13 October 2012).

Photo 2. – The music group Kalja Riddim Klan (KRRK) at Fest'Napuan, 2011



(© Sarah Doyle)

Musicians use songs to get positive messages over without violence. For Marcel Melthérorong, this peaceful power of musical expression to generate awareness of oneself, of one's rights and the possibility of becoming a creative actor in one's own life is very important. In 2011, the president of the Fest'Napuan association, who was also at the time the young Minister of Justice, Ralph Regenvanu, announced that anti-corruption would be the festival's theme. Each band was to perform at least one song on the subject. This was a huge success and, since then, many reggae songs in Vanuatu have been about politics and corruption. Reggae culture has always been connected to politics, peace, and in a sense to morality. In the Jamaica of the '70s, the phenomenon of "bad boys" emerged as young unemployed men from outlying districts of Kingston in Jamaica, influenced by Black Power and the Rastafari movement, helped to develop a certain "morality of ghetto culture" (Obika Gray quoted in Gaye) and mistrust of dominant political systems shaped by the reggae discourse (Gaye, 2010: 84).

Inspired by these old Jamaican ideologies,<sup>29</sup> most of Port Vila reggae musicians, while opposed to the official system and adopting an image of themselves as rebel "artistes *maudits*", have at the same time a moralizing discourse about behaving well in public, making their districts safe places, not becoming delinquent, etc. This morality, without doubt inspired by the omnipresence of Christianity in their lives but also by the public discourses of NGOs, the media and politicians, is interpreted here through reggae. For reggae culture is not only highly politicized, but also, contrary to what is sometimes the case for rap or dance hall, peaceful and moral even if cannabis and revolt are at times part of it. The love songs of string band music are seen as useless, individualistic and voyeuristic. Finally, following the opinions of Wamilee and Tio about music as a safe place, reggae music in Vanuatu is connected not only to politics but also to peace and a certain morality:

"[...] music is like that, it helps to avoid things getting too hot, burning down the whole house; it just keeps the fire alight. I think music is for that. Because festivals, concerts, music shows, Vanuatu people go to all these events to listen, watch, see like in church, you know, there's some music, a few words, so it's a bit the same. Many young people have understood that. But if you only speak in a parliamentary session, just a few people will go. If you talk about politics, very few will go. Because many of them have not yet really made peace with politics." (Interview with Marcel Melthérorong, XX Squad and Kalja Riddim Klan bands, 13 October 2012)

## Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed the different roles of reggae music in the city of Port Vila. In this analysis, three principal roles for music have emerged: valorization of the self and places (music as a tool for overcoming marginalization, making places safe and creating a better image of oneself), identification (music as a factor in the building of new social networks and alliances), and finally politicization (music as a means of public expression and political assertion.) In the same way as customary music, in the years surrounding independence (1980), symbolized an independent ni-Vanuatu identity set against the colonial Franco-British heritage, today's reggae music symbolizes an imagined community that opposes the oppressive monetary system ("Babylon System").

Music is a creative way for young men living in town without work and high school education to actively address the social problems from which they suffer today. Though it is not particular to Port Vila – in contemporary world history, music (reggae, rock, punk, rap, etc.) has often been a means for the underprivileged to make themselves heard – the interesting point here is the way in which youth from Port Vila handle this borrowing of reggae culture to construct their own agency amidst their own emergent urban problems. As Martin (2010: 168-169) states following Balandier's idea, music is a "social enlightener" that is able to reveal changes still in progress. The music played today reveals the will of young urban men from Port Vila to take charge of their lives in their own way, which differs from the system they have inherited from colonization. For each problem, they find a solution in their involvement in music.

In this music they are seeking an answer they have not found elsewhere: neither in their families and the communities of their island of origin, in their neighbourhoods, school education or paid work, nor in the church or politics. They are using music practices and musical alliances and opportunities for expression in order to construct their own town with its alliances, political opinions and districts. They also strongly believe that the world they are building will one day emerge from the underground of their marginal areas and make life easier for all. The phenomenal spread of the reggae music style with its messages, in many social spheres of Port Vila, is already a kind of victory for these "young" musicians.



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## NOTES

1. 44,039 inhabitants according to the National Population and Housing Census, Basic Tables, vol. 1, p.12, 2009.
2. Ni-Vanuatu has been the name of the archipelago's inhabitants since independence in 1980.
3. The pace of development, particularly in communications, has accelerated since 2008 when the arrival of the Digicel company put an end to the monopoly of TVL (Telecom Vanuatu Ltd) in telecommunications.
4. "Killing Time" (*kilim taem*) is, as Mitchell explains in her work (2004), a Bislama (national lingua franca) expression to describe how someone spends his/her time because he/she does not have work. Today we can still hear this expression along with others like *pasem taem* ("spend time"), *spel* ("rest"), *waet pej* ("white page"), etc.
5. In this paper, I will limit myself to a case study of the young men most marginalized, mainly because of their « unemployed » status. However, reggae is also played by young men with jobs from the emerging middle class. Even if their discourses may differ on certain points, I am unfortunately unable to address them in this article due to lack of space. I hope to treat these issues in future work.
6. The detailed analyses of the results of these observations are in the process of being analysed in my different current and coming works.
7. My research on urban music in Vanuatu consisted of field observations I made while living in Port Vila from 2005 to 2011. During these years, I was a full member of an urban band, Kalja Riddim Klan (KRR). These informal observations were subsequently followed up with formal interviews recorded and filmed between October / November 2012 and September/October 2016, conducted with some 40 musicians from KRR and other bands from different parts of Port Vila.
8. In Bislama, the lingua franca of Vanuatu.
9. All translations of interviews from Bislama to English are my own, revised by Deborah Pope.

10. This idea of the importance of being active was probably influenced by NGOs which are developing numerous activities for the young in Port Vila, like for example Wan Smol Bag Theatre. This discourse is also present today in the media and politics.
11. These areas are often built on the outskirts of the town, away from the centre and residential areas inhabited mostly by expatriates from Australia, France, New Zealand, the US, etc. Although not very far from the centre (about 1 to 6 km), they are inhabited by ni-Vanuatu (the name the indigenous people of Vanuatu have taken since independence) with limited financial resources. It is in these areas that socio-economic disparities are most pronounced.
12. Sometimes however, if they have children for example, they can be criticized for that attitude.
13. Although some needs like school fees are starting to make the cash economy increasingly important.
14. In 2009, according to the National Census, the capital of Port Vila had a population of 44,039, which represents an increase of 50% since 1999.
15. Though some people mentioned bank robbery, in reality there has never been an armed bank robbery in Port Vila, though there have been several cases of fraud and 'white-collar' and administrative theft through banks.
16. Name of a chain of large supermarkets in Port Vila.
17. Most shops in town belong to people of Asian origin.
18. During my interviews in 2016, some musicians told me that a hip-hop group of very young musicians had composed a song in which they confront the boys of another district. It was strongly criticized by a lot of musicians who feared it would harm the good reputation of music and musicians. The same type of story was told on the local pages of *facebook* in 2017. Customary leaders had to be called in to resolve the issue.
19. For different creative ways of being a young man in Port Vila see also Mitchell (2004) and Kraemer (2013).
20. *Kastom musik* is that people believe to be of ancient origin (including old repertoires or recently composed songs in the original ancient style). It was an important identity factor of in the early days of independence (end of 1970s -1980s) that circulated, among other ways, through radio programmes. This phenomenon has been described in detail by Bolton (Bolton 1999). Today, these musical repertoires are still played in rural areas at ceremonial occasions and in daily life and, more and more, at festivals and cultural and tourist events in Port Vila.
21. Because it is another very large theme, this identification to reggae is beyond the scope of this paper and will be the subject of another article.
22. People in Vanuatu are used to speaking about people from outside cities as « islanders » as opposed to urban dwellers.
23. The current structure of six provinces was created by the Vanuatu government in 1994.
24. Almost every year it is possible to find these kinds of complaints in the public sections of local newspapers, on radio programmes or on Facebook, where people can express their opinion.
25. When I was doing fieldwork while writing this article in 2016, I was surprised to see the local police and a private security company ensuring security on the festival site, although the festival's policy of ensuring its own security had been in place for many years.
26. Even if today we hear a few committed songs in string band music too, they remain a minority.
27. The *Babylon System* is the name given by Rastafari from Jamaica to the Western capitalist system it sees as unequal. This is often mentioned in reggae songs.
28. Cannabis is officially forbidden in Vanuatu.
29. Ni-Vanuatu musicians, with a passion for reggae music, find out about their reggae idols and ideas mostly on the Internet but also in some videos or written documents in circulation.

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## ABSTRACTS

With the increasing urbanization and rapid industrial development of Port-Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, certain forms of poverty and social fragility have emerged. These changes are also reflected in urban music practices, which play a crucial role in the lives of many young people. Music is one of the ways in which youth can address marginalization. With the possibilities afforded by a number of associations, which provide musical instruments, classes and rehearsal studios, music has become more accessible to the young. It is a leisure activity with educational aspects, a means of socialization beyond social and cultural borders. It also cements networks between musicians that enrich or replace former family and community ties. Finally music offers opportunities for public expression, peaceful political demands, dreams of freedom, etc. Studying these roles of music as forms of agency for young people can shed light on many aspects of their lives in the city of Port-Vila today.

Une urbanisation et un développement industriel rapides de Port-Vila, capitale du Vanuatu, ont fait émerger certaines formes de pauvreté et de fragilité sociale. Ces changements se reflètent dans les pratiques musicales urbaines, devenues essentielles dans la vie de nombreux jeunes. Ils utilisent la musique pour faire face à leur propre marginalisation. Plusieurs associations procurent l'accès facile à des instruments, à des cours et à des studios de répétition. La musique comporte des aspects éducatifs et est un moyen de socialisation au-delà des frontières sociales et culturelles. Elle crée des liens entre les musiciens, qui enrichissent ou remplacent d'anciens liens communautaires et de parenté. Enfin, la musique offre la possibilité d'une expression publique, de revendications pacifiques, de rêves de liberté, etc. Étudier ces rôles musicaux comme une forme d'action de la jeunesse peut éclairer de nombreux aspects de la vie de ces jeunes dans la ville de Port-Vila d'aujourd'hui.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Vanuatu, Port-Vila, reggae du Pacifique, musique et politique, marginalisation, musique et ville

**Keywords:** Vanuatu, Port-Vila, Pacific reggae, music and politics, marginalization, music and the city

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